

Heidegger and the Critique of the Understanding of Evil as Privatio Boni

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Abstract

[175] Despite the efforts of such notable thinkers as Sartre, Camus, and Ricoeur to affirm philosophically the being of evil, a systematic critique of the traditional metaphysical understanding of evil as **privation of being** has not yet been fully worked out. The task of this paper is to sketch out just such a critique and to suggest a more adequate philosophical reflection on the being of evil by turning to the thought of Heidegger. Part I examines Heidegger's commentary on Aristotle's remarks on **steresis**. Aristotle is our teacher, Heidegger argues, in learning "to hold on to the wonder" of the **steresis**-dimension of Being (**physis**), and, thus, to hold on to the wonder that "lack," "loss," "absence" - **is**. Part II considers Heidegger's recognition that the k-not at the very heart of our existence is yet much more complex. He turns to the fragments of Parmenides and Heraclitus to bring to light a dissembling-dimension of Being.

Introduction

Affirming the "reality" of evil has been a central concern of twentieth century reflection. Literature, film, painting, sculpture, music, psychology, and even physics have all attempted to take into account a disordered dimension of being. Philosophers have been no less concerned with this issue. Existentialists such as Sartre and Camus made this a principal concern in their literary/philosophical work; Paul Ricoeur has examined the problem through an analysis of myth in his important study **The Symbolism of Evil**; and William Barrett wrote passionately about this issue in the book **Irrational Man**. Yet, despite such efforts to affirm philosophically the being of evil, a systematic critique of the traditional metaphysical understanding of evil as **privation of being** has not yet been fully worked out. Consequently, I suggest that by turning to the [176] thought of Heidegger, just such a critique may be sketched out and a more adequate philosophical reflection on the being of evil suggested.

Returning to Aristotle and the Notion of *steresis*

A discussion of the history of the development of the philosophical position that evil is intelligible only as a “lack” or “deficiency” **of being** lies beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, we need only note that it was principally Augustine who consolidated this position and moved it to the center of philosophical reflection.

Heidegger’s difficulty with the traditional metaphysical position appears early on in **Being and Time**. In section 58, he observes that the classical metaphysical discussion of evil is rooted in a particular understanding of **being**. “Least of all,” he observes, “can we come any closer to the existential phenomenon of guilt by taking our orientation from the idea of evil, the **malum** as **privatio boni**. . . . [for] the **bonum** and its **privatio** [have their] ontological origin in the ontology of the **present-at-hand**, . . .” [BT, 332]. Although he adds no further remarks, still, the main lines of his thinking emerge quite clearly: only with the de-construction of the traditional metaphysical understanding of being as presence-at-hand or constant presentness can the traditional understanding of evil as privation of being be decisively overcome and a more adequate understanding of evil worked out.

In the summer semester of 1936, Heidegger gave a lecture course at the University of Freiburg on Schelling’s treatise **On Human Freedom**.¹ Schelling dealt at length with working out an understanding of the possibility of evil in the Ground of beings, and in his commentary, Heidegger praises Schelling for radically re-thinking the understanding of evil as the “lack” which is “non-being.” In Heidegger’s view, Schelling boldly attempted to think the “being” of evil precisely as “lack” or “non-presence” [ST, 96-103, esp. 101]. Yet, as important as the Schelling commentary is, in the present essay I would like to confine my discussion to Heidegger’s 1940 commentary on key sections of Aristotle’s **Physics**, and on Aristotle’s remarks on **steresis** in particular [OBC].² Aristotle’s statements on **steresis** (the term was translated into Latin as **privatio**) figure largely in the [177] medieval elucidation of the position that evil is privation of being. Consequently, his commentary on Aristotle’s understanding of **steresis** strikes at the very heart of the traditional metaphysical position on evil, even though this issue is not explicitly raised by Heidegger in the course of the discussion. Thus, a distinctively Heideggerian critique of the metaphysical understanding of evil as **privatio boni** may be systematically worked out on the basis of this one critical text.

According to Heidegger, Aristotle's fundamental insight was this: "being-moved" (**kinesis**) is the basic mode of being.³ Further, Aristotle clearly understood that the central philosophical task was to articulate the different dimensions of "being-moved" that is **physis**, Being, the process by which beings appear or presence. Thus, three notions, in particular, are central in understanding the fullness of this process: **morphe**, **hyle**, and **steresis**. **Morphe** describes the fullness of a being's appearing or becoming-present or standing in its place. Yet, as Heidegger cautions, stating that a being presences fully (**morphe**) does not mean that such a being has ceased **being-moved**. What is fully present continues to move as it "abides" or "whiles" in its appearance. Thus, he observes that ". . . **morphe** is 'appearance,' more exactly, the act of standing in and placing itself into the appearance, in general: placing into the appearance. . . . We call it the 'being at the time' because as an individual it 'spends time' in the appearance and preserves the 'time' (the becoming-present) of this appearance, and by preserving the appearance it stands forth in it and out of it - that is, for the Greeks, it **is**" [OBC, 250; Heidegger's emphasis].

[178] In another place, he more explicitly presses the point that Aristotle was fundamentally misconstrued by later metaphysical thinkers on this issue: ". . . the 'rest' that we think of as the opposite of 'movement' also has its being as being-moved. The purest manifestation of being-moved is to be sought where rest does not mean the breaking off and stopping of movement, but rather where being-moved gathers itself up into **standing still**, and where this ingathering, far from excluding being-moved, includes and for the first time discloses it. . . . 'End' [**telos**] is not the result of stopping the movement, but is the beginning of being-moved as the ingathering and storing up of movement" [OBC, 256; Heidegger's emphasis].

In addition to **morphe**, **hyle** is integral to **physis**, the presencing process. **Hyle** (**dynamis**), according to Heidegger, characterizes the "not-yet" dimension of the presenting of a being. If **morphe** characterizes the fullness of becoming-present, **hyle** characterizes presencing precisely as incomplete, on the way, or "not-yet." Yet, he appears to be careful to distinguish two different aspects of this dimension of "not-yet-ness." On the one hand, it may be said that the full presencing of a being "leaves behind" all "not-yet-ness." This characterizes "motion" in the narrow sense; that is, "motion"

which has been traditionally opposed to “rest” [OBC, 257].

On the other hand, though, it may be said that a being, even as it has become fully present, retains an aspect of “not-yet-ness.” In other words, even as a being “spends time” in the appearance, it “holds itself back and within itself” [OBC, 258]. Presence (**morphe**) always retains an hyletic dimension. As he puts it: “**morphe** and **hyle** in their inherent togetherness” [OBC, 254]. Thus, in both these senses, **hyle** characterizes an integral dimension of **physis**, Being, the presencing process. For Heidegger, **hyle** is “a mode of becoming-present;” that is, **hyle** “is” precisely as the presencing of “not-yet-ness” [OBC, esp. 258].

Finally, he notes that for Aristotle **steresis**, too, is an integral dimension of the presencing process (**physis**), and his commentary on this point brings us to the central concern of this paper. He highlights Aristotle's remark at 193b 20 that “**he steresis eidos pos estin**,” which is generally translated along the lines of “privation too is in a way form” [4, Vol. II]. Heidegger, reading as he does **eidos** as “appearance,” translates the line this way: “for privation too is something like appearance” [OBC, 264].⁴ And he understands Aristotle to be maintaining that privation, as a unique mode of becoming-present, “is.” Yet precisely how **steresis** presences, precisely how **steresis** “is,” needs to be clarified, and Heidegger takes up this task.

He asks us to consider, for example, that when a blossom “buds forth, the leaves that prepared for the blossom fall off” [OBC, 266]. What presences to us is not simply the appearance of the blossom but also the loss or absence of the leaves. Similarly, he notes that “when the fruit comes to light, [and] the blossom disappears,” what presences to us is not only the appearance of the fruit, but also the lack or absence of the beautiful blossom [OBC, 266]. In general, then, every [179] attainment of a new **morphe** entails an “absence.” Heidegger sums up Aristotle's position in this way: “[every] placing into the appearance always lets something become present in such a way that **in** the becoming-present a becoming-absent simultaneously becomes present” [OBC, 266]. Thus, in this way, “lack” or “absence,” what Aristotle called **steresis**, **presences**, and the presencing of **steresis** is an integral and crucial dimension of the presencing process that is **physis** (Being).

He uses another example drawn from everyday experience to underscore this point:

When we say today, for example, “My bicycle is gone!” we do not mean simply that it is somewhere else; we mean that it is missing. When something is missing, the missing **thing** is gone, to be sure, but the **goneness** itself, the lack itself, is what irritates and upsets us, and the “lack” can do this only if the lack itself is “there,” i.e., constitutes a mode of Being. **Steresis** as becoming-absent is not simply absentness, but rather is a **becoming-present**, the kind in which the **becoming-absent** becomes present. **Steresis** is **eidōs**, but **eidōs pos**, an appearance and becoming-present of sorts. [OBC, 266; Heidegger’s emphasis.]

In introducing this example, Heidegger refers parenthetically to the **Metaphysics** (Delta 22, 1022b 22) which suggests that he was aware that a discussion of the human experience of this kind of “lack” takes Aristotle’s discussion of **steresis** in the **Physics** a step further. The “lack” cited in this example is not the “lack” which is **intrinsic** to the presencing process: the “lack” or “loss” of one’s bicycle is comparatively **incident-al** to the presencing process. I suspect that in the seminar, he had argued that Aristotle also spoke of this kind of privation as a dimension of **physis** and the key text is **Metaphysics** Delta 22 where Aristotle delineates the many ways in which privation ‘presences,’ including the “taking away of something by force” [1].⁵ We might also note that in Heidegger’s example, he observes that the “lack” which presences “irritates and upsets” us. There is an existential dimension to his commentary which is not present—at least explicitly—in Aristotle’s analysis in either the **Physics** or the **Metaphysics**.

[180] Yet, even with these qualifications in mind, we should not miss Heidegger’s central point: For Aristotle, the notion of **steresis**, no less than the notions of **morphe** and **hyle**, is necessary to characterize the process of the presencing of beings. Aristotle is our teacher, Heidegger insists, in learning to “hold on to the wonder” of the **steresis**—dimension of Being (**physis**) and, thus, to hold on to the wonder that the presencing of “lack,” “loss,” “absence” — is [OBC, 266].⁶

Heidegger’s understanding of the devolution of Western philosophical thinking about Being from the time of the Greeks is generally well-known. Even in Aristotle’s thinking, he admits, there is to be found the tendency to narrow thinking about Being to thinking about beings. That is, Aristotle, following Plato, was especially fascinated by

what appears, **morphe**, **eidos**, **idea**, and, thus, evinced the tendency to think Being exclusively in these terms. Yet, what remained a tendency in Aristotle's thinking became philosophical orthodoxy in the thought of later thinkers, including Augustine and Aquinas. One result is that neither Augustine nor Aquinas could "hold on to the wonder" of the **steresis**-dimension of **physis**, of Being.

In speaking about evil, Aquinas often cited the example of blindness. Blindness in an adult human being is the lack or privation of a good that ought to be present - sight. According to Aquinas, such a privation is nothing existent in reality; it is not an **ens reale**: "In one sense, being (**ens**) signifies the entity of a thing, according as it is divided by the ten predicaments, and is thus convertible with thing. In this sense, no privation is a being, and therefore no evil either" [6, I, 48, 2, ad 2]. Indeed, privation is a kind of **non-being**: "Non-being, understood as simple negation, does not require a subject. Privation, however, is a negation in a subject . . . and evil is that kind of non-being" [6, I, 48, 3, ad 2].

There is only one sense in which Aquinas allows that privation, and therefore evil, may be said to **be** — as a being of reason, an **ens rationis**: "In another sense, being (**ens**) signifies the truth of a proposition which consists in composition whose mark is this word 'is'. In this sense, being is what answers to the question, is it?, and thus we speak of blindness as being in the eye, or of any other privation being in its subject. In this way even evil can be called a being" [6, I, 48, 2, ad 2].⁷ [181] In **De Malo** I, 1, ad 20, he is more explicit: "Evil is indeed to be found in things but as privation and not as something real. But evil exists in reason as something understood; and, thus, it can be said that evil is a being of reason and not a real being because it is something in the intellect but not in reality."⁸ Thus, for Aquinas, every evil, physical and moral, is understandable as a "privation" of being, a kind of non-being, which, strictly speaking, "**is**" only as a being of reason. I emphasize that this conclusion does not deny that, for Thomas, evil is somehow "found in things." The decisive point is that for Thomas evil may be said to **be** only as a being of reason: what is at issue here is the **being** of evil.

Aquinas' reasoning is impeccable, but it all turns on an understanding of being (**physis**) which, following Heidegger's reading of Aristotle, represents a narrowing of Aristotle's position. In the less nuanced understanding of being (**physis**) of Aquinas,

“**modus, species, and ordo**” characterize “anything whatever” that “is” [6, I-II, 85, 4; see also I, 5, 5], and, thus, Aquinas can find no way to speak of what presences to us as **lacking** measure, form, and order (privation) as **be-ing**. Aristotle’s insight that **steresis**, “lack,” “privation” constitutes a mode of being (**physis**) is lost.

Of course, we must keep in mind that Aristotle did not comment on the presencing (be-ing) of “lack” precisely **as evil**. And, too, as I noted at the outset, Heidegger did not explicitly deal with this issue in his commentary on Aristotle. Even so, his interpretation of Aristotle’s understanding of **steresis** lays the groundwork for a critique of the metaphysical understanding of evil as a “deficiency” of being **from within Aristotle’s own thinking** and, thus, from within the very core of Western metaphysical thought.

Thus: a person loses his or her sight. Such a person is terribly pained, possibly devastated. Yet what pains so? It is the “loss,” the “lack” itself, to re-work Heidegger’s words, which so grieves this person, and the “lack” can do this only if the lack itself is “there,” that is, constitutes a mode of Being. Thus, this **steresis** surely a **malum**, is **eidos**, but **eidos pos**, an appearance and becoming-present of sorts.⁹

[182] In his commentary on Schelling’s treatise, Heidegger addresses this very example: “As a lack, it is true that a lack is a not-being-present. Nevertheless, this absence is not nothing. The blind man who has lost his sight will argue vigorously against the statement that blindness is nothing existent and nothing depressing and nothing burdensome. Thus, nothingness is not nugatory; but, rather, something awesome, the most awesome aspect of the unfolding of Being” [ST, 101; slightly modified].

Consider another example. A friend has promised to pick me up at a certain hour so I may get to work. My friend, however, arrives a half-hour late, and I am late for work. I relate this episode to a colleague, and she remarks that my friend “showed a lack of consideration.” Precisely so. And my friend’s “showing” a “lack” of consideration annoyed and hurt me only because the becoming-present of “lack” constitutes a mode of Being. Such a “lack” **is**.

Other examples could be cited, but I do not wish to lose sight of the central issue. As important as affirming the “existential” reality of evil is, still, such testimony cannot be given its proper weight in philosophy until the traditional philosophical understanding

of evil as lack of being is attacked at its metaphysical roots. At least indirectly, this Heidegger has done **by returning to Aristotle**, and by virtue of this effort, philosophy in the present day can find its own voice in affirming the being of evil.

The Complexity of the K-not in Being

The philosophical task of reflecting on the being of evil is not yet complete, however, for, surely, our experience of evil is not confined solely to the experience of “lack” or “absence.” As William Barrett observed some time ago, it is Augustine himself who so vividly and chillingly described the human encounter with evil, not simply as an encounter with “lack,” but also as an encounter with a kind of **positive** malignancy, distortion, and twistedness [2, 96-97].¹⁰ In part, Augustine remains such a fascinating figure precisely because he so passionately defended a philosophical position on evil which so pointedly belied his own poignant experience of the monstrous **k-not** in being.

[183] But how shall we speak philosophically about this experience of a positive or active distortedness at the heart of reality? Heidegger admits that already in Aristotle’s thinking this dimension of the presencing process (Being) had fallen out of philosophical sight. Only by reaching further back to the origins of Greek thinking, he suggests, may we dis-cover thinking about this dimension of Being. Thus, Heidegger often turned to a commentary on the fragments of Parmenides and Heraclitus.

In **An Introduction to Metaphysics**, he sets out the position that the essence[-ing] of Being is **physis** and the essence[-ing] of **physis** is appearing. And he proceeds to discuss the manifold dimensions of “appearing” along the lines that we have discussed. Yet, in **IM**, in the context of a consideration of Parmenides’ poem, he reflects on another dimension of the presencing process which he names “seeming-to-be” (**Anschein**) [IM, esp. 104-113]. The earliest Greek thinkers, he argues, attempted to articulate their experience that Being, the presencing process, bears within it a dimension of distortion. Every appearing is simultaneously a disguising of sorts; every appearing is in some way distorted, and this distortion is two-fold. First, that which appears also appears “as what it actually is not” [IM, 109]. Second, the presencing of “seeming-to-be,” which is intrinsic to every presencing, itself presences as hidden, cloaked, concealed [IM, 109]. Thus, the

presencing of a two-fold distortedness, in addition to the presencing of “lack,” is an integral dimension of Being. As he puts it, a two-fold distortedness constitutes “a definite mode of emerging self-manifestation [and thus] belongs necessarily to Being” [IM, 109].

He admits, then, that there is a sense in which Being may be said to deceive: “Because appearance thus essentially distorts itself in its cloaking and dissembling, we rightly say that appearance deceives. This deception lies in the appearance itself” [IM, 109]. It is arguable that this dissembling-dimension of Being is the very condition of the possibility of the particularly cruel physical distortions and deviations which haunt this mortal realm. In the commentary on Schelling’s treatise, Heidegger gives a phenomenological account of illness which speaks to this point — and which also inevitably calls to mind Augustine’s descriptive accounts:

In the case of sickness, there is not just something lacking, but something wrong. “Wrong” not in the sense of something only incorrect, but in the genuine sense of falsification, distortion, and reversal. This falsification is at the same time false in the sense of what is sly. We speak of malignant disease. Disease is not only [184] a disruption, but a reversal of the whole existence which takes over the total condition and dominates it. [ST, 143-144]

In **IM**, Heidegger more explicitly raises another consideration: he cites this dissembling-dimension of Being as a crucial condition of the possibility of all concrete instances of human going astray - including, presumably, human moral evil. He regrets, however, that we, unlike the earliest Greek thinkers, have ceased to “recognize” the “power” [IM, 109] of this k-not in Being which contributes to the k-notting of our judgment in matters both great and small.¹¹

We need not examine how he articulates a fundamentally similar position in other places in his work. Even so, it is worth noting that one of Heidegger’s favorite approaches to this issue is by way of a discussion of a fragment of Heraclitus: **physis kryptesthai philei**. Even in his commentary on Aristotle, he concludes the discussion with a brief reflection on this fragment. “Being loves to hide itself,” he translates Heraclitus’ words, and he understands Heraclitus to mean that Being has a “pre-dilection” for “self-hiding.” Concealing, covering-over, disguising is an integral dimension of **physis**, Being, the presencing of beings. “And therefore,” he concludes, “the **kryptesthai** of **physis** is not to be overcome [once and for all], not to be stripped

from **physis**. Rather, the task [for thought] is the much more difficult one of allowing to **physis**, in all the purity of its becoming-present, the **kryptesthai** that belongs to it” [OBC, 269].

Conclusion

Thus, for Heidegger, positive dissembling, in addition to the unfolding of “lack,” constitutes a mode of Being. No doubt, then, he does provide a way for us to begin to articulate philosophically our experience of the powerful and terrible reality of the distortions, deviations, and deceptions which permeate our lives and our world and which we recognize to be evil. But I emphasize that Heidegger offers us only a beginning because I am not sure that even his reflections on the dissembling-dimension of Being are adequate to the task of articulating philosophically the complexity of the k-not at the very heart of our existence. Yet, even so, what is clear is that by virtue of Heidegger’s philosophical efforts, the philosophical scandal of understanding evil as a lack **of [185] being** has been put to rest. We must now get on with the task of heeding Plato’s advice: “But if we will truly tell of the way in which the work [of the creation of the world] was accomplished, we must include the errant cause as well, and explain its influence” [Timaeus, 48b].

Notes

1. Schelling’s treatise first appeared in 1809. Joan Stambaugh recommends the translation by James Gutmann: **Schelling: Of Human Freedom** (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1936).
2. Consider also [3, 309-313] and [5, 146-155].
3. As will become clear in what follows, Heidegger understands **kinesis** to name the essence[-ing] of both “movement” (“motion”) and “rest.” Consequently, he does not translate **kinesis** as **Bewegung** but chooses the word **Bewegtheit**. Sheehan translates **Bewegtheit** as “being-moved” and Richardson offers “moved-ness.”
4. The German text reads: “denn auch die ‘Beraubung’ ist so etwas wie Aussehen.”
5. In [4 Vol. VIII] the line is translated: “the violent taking away of anything is called privation.”
6. For Heidegger, then, Aristotle understood very well that Being unfolds with “lacks,” “gaps,” and “holes.” This suggests an interesting genealogy: Derrida via Heidegger - via Aristotle.
7. See also **De Ente et Essentia**, Ch. 1, 2; **Summa contra gentiles** III, 9; **De Malo I**, 1, ad 19.
8. The Latin text reads: Ad vicesimum dicendum, quod malum quidem est in rebus, sed ut privatio, non autem ut aliquid reale; sed in ratione est ut aliquid intellectum: et ideo potest dici, quod malum est ens rationis et non rei, quia in intellectu est aliquid, non autem in re; . . .
9. Citing the example of blindness, William Barrett made an “existential” protest against the Thomist

position in [2, 289].

10. For Augustine's impassioned account, see esp. **City of God**, Bk. 19 and Bk. 22, ch. 22.

11. Heidegger no doubt overstates his case here. Surely, Freud, to name but one recent thinker, profoundly appreciated the "power" of this terrible k-not in reality.

Works by Heidegger

[BT] **Being and Time**. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

[IM] **Introduction to Metaphysics**. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

[OBC] "On the Being and Conception of **physis** in Aristotle's **Physics B**, 1," trans. Thomas Sheehan, **Man and World** 9:3 (August 1976), 219-270.

[ST] **Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom**. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985.

Other Works Cited

[1] Apostle, H.G. **Aristotle's Metaphysics**. Grinnell, Iowa: The Peripatetic Press, 1979.

[2] Barrett, William. **Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy**. New York: Doubleday, 1962.

[3] Richardson, William J. **Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought**. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1963.

[4] Ross, W.D., ed. **The Works of Aristotle**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

[5] Sheehan, Thomas. "On the Way to **Ereignis**: Heidegger's Interpretation of **physis**," in **Continental Philosophy in America**, ed. Silverman, et. al. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983, 131-164.

[6] Thomas Aquinas. **Summa theologiae**.

[End p. 185]