

Heidegger and the Gods: On the Appropriation of a Religious Tradition

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[183] Twentieth century philosophical discourse has been much concerned with the problem of myth. Ernst Cassirer, Karl Jaspers, and Paul Ricoeur are only the most notable philosophers who have attempted to discuss philosophically the myths—including the properly religious myths—of different peoples. Interestingly, though, Heidegger, perhaps the twentieth century's most seminal thinker, had little to say about myth, and, perhaps even more surprisingly, virtually no scholarly attention has been paid to the few places in his work where he does, directly or indirectly, address this issue. The task of this paper is to shed some light on Heidegger's understanding of myth and, further, to suggest a distinctively Heideggerian perspective on the appropriation of the mythology which is at the foundation of a religious tradition.

In the essay, “*Logos* (Heraclitus, Fragment B 50),” Heidegger approaches the problem of mythical language indirectly, yet his position appears to emerge quite clearly.¹ In the general discussion, he meditates on the Being-process as the *Logos*, “the Laying that gathers.” His position is that the original meaning of the Greek word *legein* is “to lay and gather” or “to gatheringly let-lie-forth.” By the name *Logos*, then, the Greeks named Being as the primordial *legein* which gatheringly lets-lie-forth all beings (including human beings). At one point in the essay, he pauses to consider and comment on another and, in his view, related Heraclitean fragment: “The One, which alone is wise, does not want and yet does want to be called by the name *Zeus*.” (Diels-Kranz, B 32)²

[184] He begins by giving a highly novel interpretation of what the Greeks meant by the expression *Hen-Panta*, the One and the Many. According to Heidegger, *Hen-Panta* names Being as the *Logos* as the primordial laying-that-gathers. “*Hen-Panta* is not what the *Logos* pronounces,” he states, “rather, *Hen-Panta* suggests the way in which

Logos essentially occurs.” In other words, *Hen-Panta* names Being as the finite, temporal/historical process which lets all beings be: *Hen* names the One as Being as the process itself by which all beings are let be, and *Panta* names the ensemble of beings which are let be by the One as the unifying, gathering, assembling process.

This clarified, he proceeds to discuss the meaning of the fragment. The fragment reads: “The One ... does not want to be called by the name of Zeus.” His reading is that the Being-process, the *Hen*, the *Logos*, “is not in its innermost essence ready to appear under the name ‘Zeus.’” The reason for this is that the name “Zeus” names “one present being among others,” albeit “the highest of present beings,” but Being cannot, in the first place, be named as a *being*, even as the *highest being*. “Zeus is not himself the *Hen*,” Heidegger insists, because the *Hen* names not a being but the finite, temporalizing Being-process which lets all beings be, including “Zeus,” the highest being. Thus, the originary *Hen*, the primordial *Logos*, Being, resists, in the first place, being named as *a being, even as the highest being*.

But the fragment also states that the One “yet does want to be called by the name of Zeus.” Heidegger understands this to mean that if we regard Being, not as the presencing process as such, but as *what* has emerged-into-presence, the ensemble of *beings*, the *Panta*, then it is appropriate to name the One as Zeus as the highest being which presences. He puts it quite clearly: “if Being is considered as the *Panta*, then and only then does the totality of present beings show itself under the direction of the highest present being as one totality under this One. The totality of present beings is under its highest aspect the *Hen* as Zeus.” Thus, the name Zeus names the One, not as the presencing/unifying process, but as the highest present being among the total ensemble of beings which have come-to-presence (*Panta*). Although the name Zeus is unique insofar as it names the highest present being to which all other beings are ordered, still, the name Zeus does not name Being as such, for Being, the *Logos*, the *Hen* is the very process by which Zeus, the highest present being, comes-to-presence.

Heidegger's discussion suggests several conclusions. First, implicit in his argument is the position that the emergent highest present being has many different names; the highest being may be named Zeus or Allah—or Yahweh. Every people names this presencing supreme being uniquely.

Second, the name of this supreme being, including the name Yahweh, does *not* name Being as such. Indeed, his discussion seems to suggest that such *mythical naming* tends to hide or conceal or cover over the presencing [185] process as such. The powerful beauty and brilliance of mythical names may seduce us into forgetting the finite, temporalizing Being-process which is the very condition of the possibility of the presencing of the “gods.” And it is this forgetfulness of Being that leads us to speak of the presencing supreme being as “infinite” and “timeless.” Yet, to remain mindful of Being is to remain mindful that the name of the supreme being is limited to a particular historical showing of Being and that the highest present being itself, far from a timelessly enduring entity, is only a relatively more “abiding” presence or *phenomenon* among the *phenomena*.³

The third point follows from this. It seems that for Heidegger mythical utterance is not foundational utterance about Being. Mythical utterance names the gods—beings—and not Being, the presencing process. What is more, the very resonance and power of the names of the gods tends to hold us fast and inclines us to forgetfulness of the temporal/historical presencing of all beings, including the gods.

His most explicit and extended discussion of the nature of myth may be found in his 1942/43 lecture course on Parmenides, which has only recently been published in German (1982) and which has not yet been translated into English. For our purposes, the critical text is Part I, section 6, part 2(f).⁴ Here, he observes that there is more than simply a “phonetic designation” between the Greek words *theion*, “the divine” (*das Gotthafte*), and *theaon*, “the looking-beholding and shining-within” (*das Blickende and Hereinscheinende*). He reminds us that “the name as the first word is that which lets shine forth that which is to be named as it comes-to-presence in an originary way.” Thus, insofar as by the naming, a being is nominated as what it is, the similarity of the words *theion* and *theaon* suggests to Heidegger that what has been made manifest by the name in each case is fundamentally related.

Before pointing out what that fundamental relation is, he re-states another basic position. It is *Dasein* “who has the word.” That is, it is human There-being who, through the word, through naming, allows to come-to-presence what emerges-into-presence. Being needs its There; the disclosure of Being is brought to fulfillment by human There-

being “who has the word.”

This said, he makes clear what the fundamental relation is between the Greek words *theion* and *theaon*: Being, as it “looks-in and shines forth” (*theaon*),⁵ was named by the Greeks *to theion*, or as he says, “the gods” (*die Götter*). In other words, Being “looks-in and shines-forth” *as beings*, and such presencing beings (the “highest” beings) were named by the Greeks “the gods.” This particular manner of naming beings which presence he calls *mythos*: “The word, as the naming of Being, *mythos*, names Being in its originary looking-in and shining-forth— it names *to [186] theion*, that is, the gods.” Thus, the word *to theion*, which he alternately translates as “the divine” and “the gods,” is the properly *mythical* word with which human There-being makes manifest what emerges into manifestation.

This mythical naming, the naming of the gods, he characterizes as “the appropriate mode of the relation [of human There-being] to Being as it shines-forth.” I understand him to mean that *mythos*, the naming of the gods, is a *necessary* correspondence of human There-being to Being as it shines forth. Indeed, unlike in the essay on the *Logos*, he goes on to suggest in this section that *mythos* is, at least in one respect, foundational utterance. The *Gottsager*, the one who names the gods, experiences the gods presencing in all their resplendence and awe-fulness, and, thus, the *Gottsager* at least implicitly recognizes Being as the process of emergence-into-presence.⁶

Only when Being is no longer experienced as *aletheia*, the process of emergence-into-unconcealment, he continues, does the naming of the gods, *mythos*, become unnecessary and irrelevant. In typically brilliant fashion, he argues that the loss of the gods (*Götter-losigkeit*) in the present century—a-theism (*A-theismus*)—is not to be traced to the proud and irresponsible thinking of modern philosophers. The principal source of the prevailing god(s)-lessness is metaphysics. The gods already ceased to “shine-forth” in the metaphysics of the tradition which conceived them to be beings among beings which are present-at-hand; already in classical metaphysics which no longer thought Being as the process of emergence-into-unconcealment, *mythos*, the task of *naming* the gods, became essentially unnecessary and irrelevant.

At any rate, in the Parmenides text, Heidegger is very clear that *mythos* is an appropriate—and indeed necessary—mode of cor-relation of human There-being with

Being. Consequently, *mythos* is a more foundational or originary utterance than metaphysical expression. Even so, in this same section, he adds the crucial observation that even “the essence of the divinity” is “dominated from the very beginning” by Being as *aletheia*. This remark cautions us: The naming of the gods, *mythos*, is unique and privileged utterance insofar as it “shines-forth” Being “*in its originary looking-in and shining-forth*,” that is, insofar as it makes manifest beings (the highest beings) which come-to-presence and abide. Yet, such naming, strictly speaking, does *not* name Being itself, the finite, temporalizing, presencing process.

It seems, then, that he also wishes to maintain that mythical utterance is not foundational utterance in the fullest sense because it makes manifest principally beings (even the highest beings) and not Being, the process [187] by which all beings—including the “gods”—come-to-presence. Finally, then, the Parmenides text and the essay on the *Logos* appear to converge on this point: *mythos* calls forth principally the gods—beings—which presence and, thus, leaves essentially unilluminated the very process by which such beings emerge-into-presence. And since Heidegger's singular concern was precisely with the *presencing* of beings, it becomes more clear why he was not so very much concerned with the issue of *mythos* in his writings.

Thus, these two texts, which were conceived at approximately the same time, tell us a great deal about Heidegger's fundamental understanding of the nature of mythical utterance. For Heidegger, the god(s) and the stories of the god(s)—which form the basis of every religious tradition—must be understood in the light of the understanding of Being as the finite, temporalizing, presencing process. Concretely, this means that the being of the god may be thought only within the horizon of time and history. In the first place, the god, the supreme being, is thinkable, not as an immutable and timeless entity, but, rather, as a relatively perduring presence[-ing]; the god “abides” or “whiles” within the realm of unconcealment. Secondly, the “abiding” or “whiling” god is named differently in different epochs. The “abiding” god has many different names.

Apparently, then, Heidegger leaves open only this possibility for the appropriation of a religious tradition—and specifically, it would seem that he leaves open only this possibility for the appropriation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, in the Parmenides text, he explicitly criticizes Christian belief for its forgetfulness of the

presenting process.⁷ He argues that the Greeks remained mindful of the presenting of the gods to the extent that they acknowledged that the gods—and even the highest god, Zeus—were subject to *moira*. Yet this mindfulness of the presenting of the gods—present in some way in the time of the Greeks—was lost in the epoch of Christianity. The Christian God, he ruefully observes, is the master of being, but the “gods of the Greeks,” he continues, “are not ‘personalities’ and ‘persons’ who master being, but are beings through which Being itself looks-in.”

Thus, as Heidegger appears to see it, the traditional Christian understanding of man's relationship to God must be re-interpreted in the light of the re-trieval of the pre-metaphysical understanding of Being. The Judeo-Christian *mythos*—powerful and resonant in itself—must, nevertheless, be *re-appropriated* in accordance with the understanding of Being as the finite, temporal/historical, presenting process. In essence, this means that one is called upon to remain mindful that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, [188] no less than the supreme deity of every religious tradition, is not the master of being, but a being, albeit the highest being, through which Being itself looks-in and shines-forth.

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NOTES

1. “*Logos* (Heraclitus, Fragment B 50),” in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1984). The essay was published in 1951, but Heidegger had discussed the same issues in a lecture course on Logic in 1944. I follow the translation of Krell and Capuzzi.
2. *Ibid.*, the discussion covers pp. 72-74.
3. An important text in this regard is Heidegger's commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*. He finds fault with the “Hellenistic” and “Christian” translation of the ancient Greek word *aei* as “eternal.” He writes, “. . . *aei* means not only ‘all the time’ and ‘incessant,’ but first of all ‘at any given time.’ *ho aei basileuon* = the one who is ruler *at the time*—not the ‘eternal ruler.’ With the word *aei* what one has in view is ‘being there for a while,’ specifically in the sense of becoming-present.” (Heidegger's emphasis). See “On the Being and Conception of *physis* in Aristotle's *Physics* B, 1,” trans. Thomas J. Sheehan, *Man and World*, 9, No. 3 (August 1976), pp. 244-245.
4. *Gesamtausgabe, Parmenides*, Band 54 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982), pp. 162-167. Translations are my own.
5. Here the German is *hereinblicken* and *scheinen*.
6. It is interesting to note that Heidegger qualifies this by adding that the *Gottsager* is only the “human being of the Greek experience.”
7. *Parmenides*, same section, p. 164.