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One Way up through the Way back into the Out of Ontotheology

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A few weeks ago, as I scanned the Heidegger section of my bookshelf to prepare to write this talk, I confess I felt a familiar dread surround me; here we go, back to Heidegger. *Why* did I say I’d talk about Heidegger? Couldn’t I have volunteered to do anyone else? See the thing is, I’ve spent a lot of time with the man, but I still find him totally baffling. Not any proposition in particular, not the near-insanity of his neologisms, not the mystery surrounding his disastrous politics—just the whole thing; the whole Heidegger. And I think the source of the bafflement is the *universal* character of his thinking—and by this I don’t mean that his thinking holds for everyone; what I mean is that it functions as its own universe: the Heidiverse, a self-enclosed, holographic system in which everything swirls around the everything else it already presumes and the whole thing is covered in a thick shell of impregnable syntax. “Existence,” he tells us, “is the Being of those beings who stand open for the openness of Being in which they stand, by standing it.” (W, 214). What.
So we read and our eyes glaze and we read more because that didn’t make sense so maybe this one will, but no, it won’t, until finally, days or months or years later, something does. Something—makes—sense. You sense you get what’s going on and in your exuberance race to explain it to yourself, to a friend, to the parent who’s been asking what you’re planning to do with that certificate in theory and you say, “I’m learning the truth of my existence, Uncle Bill; that’s important,” and he, reaching for another Miller Lite at the barbecue, says “but what do you mean ‘your existence,’” and you find yourself saying, “what I mean by existence is the Being of those beings who stand open for the openness of Being in which they stand…by standing it.” And your exhilaration collides with total despair as you realize you’re trapped. You’re trapped inside the very holographic Heideverse you’ve spent so long locked out of. How did you get in? Where was the door? And now it makes sense, but it makes his sense; you can say it in his language and feel, somehow, that you get it, but you can’t translate because everything requires everything else and you’re scared that if you step out of the syntactical resonance machine you might not make it back in. So you stay there, standing the openness of the open in
which you stand while your roommates plot to lock you out on the roof of your woodframe house the next time you say *dasein*.

My hope today is to find one way into a particular patch of the Heideverse—one way that might allow us to glimpse this world from the inside, to catch sight of a few wormholes we can throw ourselves into later on, and even to play around in this bizarre world, without losing sight of things like historical context, philosophical precedents, and words that make sense. By standing between worlds in this way, I realize that I risk losing hold of Heidegger altogether. But it could be that maintaining a certain betweenness is the very task of thinking for Heidegger: holding oneself between the sensible and the senseless, the thought and the unthought, the ordinary and the very strange. It is, at the very least, where I will try to stay, mindful that the alternative might well be spending the night on the Downey House roof.

I’ll be calling my talk today (*slide*) “One Way up through the Way Back into the Out of Ontotheology.”

At issue in the Heideversal patch we’ll be exploring this afternoon is the critique of metaphysics as ontotheological. I’ll be asking what that means and why it matters, calling upon two
relatively short texts. The first is the 1949 preface to Heidegger’s *What is Metaphysics* entitled, “The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics,” which I will refer to, for the sake of shorter sentences, as the “WB.” The second is the concluding installment to his lecture series in 1956–57 on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, a piece that Heidegger calls “On the Ontotheological Constitution of Metaphysics,” which I will clearly have to call “the OC.” I’ll be putting the longer quotations up on the screen so you can read along, and the page numbers will refer to the readings Professor Fitzpatrick has distributed to the students in the theory class, readings that I’m happy to send as .pdfs to anyone who’d like to spend some more time with them.

“To those who can read,” Heidegger writes in the OC, “metaphysics is onto-theology” (*OC*, 54). So right from the outset, we know this is important because the sentence is far shorter and more declarative than Heidegger’s usually are, and because he’s channeling Jesus (he who has ears to hear, let him hear). *(slide)* “To those who can read,” he writes, “metaphysics is onto-theology.” But what on earth does that mean, metaphysics is onto-theology? What’s metaphysics, what’s onto-theology, and perhaps most pressingly, what’s “is”? 
Happily, the term “metaphysics” has a fairly straightforward meaning for Heidegger. In ordinary usage, we tend to call “metaphysics” the branch of philosophy that deals with notions of ultimate reality—that is, with the stuff above or beyond the order of nature. Metaphysics dukes it out over what being is, or whether or not God is, or where the real is located, while ethicists and logicians and theory of mind people get on with the more sober work of proper philosophy. (As someone who spends a good deal of time with metaphysicians, I tend to think of them as playing in the ball pit at IKEA while their parents go shopping; they’re tumbling around in multicolored groundlessness while the grownups find the tables, flooring, and storage structures that will make the house work).

But this isn’t what Heidegger means by the term. When Heidegger says “metaphysics,” he means the whole history of western philosophy—all the way from Plato, or in his more dismal moods, the presocratics—through Hegel. He means that calculative kind of thinking in which a thinking subject represents beings as objects, a thinking which furthermore maps this subjective/objective split onto a host of other dualisms: substance versus accident, eternal versus
temporal, form versus matter, etc. Now Heidegger says that this tradition was overturned by Friedrich Nietzsche, who revealed the so-called intelligible realm as an unstable product of the sensible realm. This, Heidegger says, is what Nietzsche’s madman means when he cries through the marketplace that “God is Dead.” (slide) “The pronouncement ‘God is dead’ means: the suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics, i.e. for Nietzsche, Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end.” (WN, 61). So Nietzsche proclaimed the end of Platonism, and he overturned it, but he didn’t overcome it, says Heidegger. Nietzsche still remains within the confines of metaphysics because (in Heidegger’s often strained interpretation of him), in order to free himself from God and the Forms as the site of ultimate value, he consolidated the human subject as the site of ultimate value. “God is dead,” the madman says, “and we have killed him.” This theocidal human subject becomes, for Heidegger’s Nietzsche, “the executor of unconditional will to power” (N, 95): the one who ultimately determines the value of being in the absence of transcendence, and for that reason, the human subject
becomes the master of being itself. (slide) “Man enters into insurrection,” Heidegger writes in this same essay on Nietzsche,

The world changes into object. In this revolutionary objectifying of everything that is, the earth...moves into the midst of human positing and analyzing. The earth can show itself only as the object of assault, an assault that, in human willing, establishes itself as unconditional objectification. Nature appears everywhere...as the object of technology (N, 100).

This totally technologized world is the culmination for Heidegger of the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato: an objectifying way of thinking that has gradually turned the whole earth into an object of assault. For this reason, the task of thinking for Heidegger will be not just to overturn metaphysics, by reversing its traditional privileges (humans over God, darkness over light, etc.), but rather to overcome it—to find a way to get thinking on a totally different course. And for Heidegger, this will require overhauling our sense of what it means for a human—or anything else, for that matter—to be.

This is the reason that Heidegger opens his OC lecture by saying he's doing precisely the opposite of what Hegel did. (Always dangerous to oppose Hegel; it’s very likely there’s a place for your no in his yes, but this is nevertheless the way Heidegger announces the
first part of the project: he’s saying, “I’m doing exactly the reverse of what Hegel did”). For Hegel, as Professor Rouse taught us last week, the course of history enacts a series of progressive formations of consciousness, from objective consciousness to self-consciousness to reason to Spirit. And once consciousness becomes conscious of itself as Spirit, it realizes Spirit was there all along, working its way through the long run of history. The Hegelian task, then, is first to put these formations of consciousness in order, to tell the story of the gradual unfolding of Spirit in and as human consciousness, and to begin, thereby, the work of actualizing it. Spirit, one can say, is real-ized (or made real) as it is realized (or brought to human consciousness). In Heidegger’s language, what this means is that the history of being for Hegel—the history of what is—is equivalent to the history of thinking. What is, is what has come to consciousness. In this light, looking back over the past 2500 years of post-Parmenidean thought allows Hegel to see being progressively unfolding in philosophy until it culminates in the idea of the Idea, which is to say, the absolute coincidence between knower and known. And it’s here that Heidegger announces his reversal of Hegel: if the task for Hegel is to think what has been
thought in western philosophy, the task for Heidegger is to think what has not been thought in western philosophy. If Hegel is looking to consummate metaphysics, Heidegger is looking to overcome it. And strikingly, what has been thought for Hegel and what’s not been thought for Heidegger are the same thing, which is to say being itself. Philosophy for Heidegger has never been able to think being.

“Oh pah,” says the philosophy student, ducking out of the Heideverse and dusting herself off, “philosophy talks about being all the time. Parmenides says it’s one, Heraclitus says it’s many, Plato puts it in Forms, Anselm puts it in God, Maimonides splits it apart, Aquinas glues it together, Leibniz splinters it in Monads, Hegel unites it in spirit: all these guys ever talk about is being!” To which Heidegger might reply, “Not so, deluded dasein. Philosophy says it talks about being; it thinks it thinks about being, but it really only thinks about beings. It asks, ‘what is a table? What is the good? What is a human being?’ and it thinks about tables and goodness and human beings, but in asking what any of these things is, it never thinks to ask what is is. So philosophy thinks about beings all the time, but not about being itself.”
Now of course, the crazy thing about this philosophic forgetting of being, is that being is what allows beings to be in the first place. It’s what allows *philosophy* to be in the first place: what would philosophy be without asking, “what *is*?” Being is the condition of possibility of metaphysics—metaphysics can’t get off the ground without it—and yet metaphysics has never been able to think it. The illustration in the WB essay is that metaphysics sees the beings it sees in the light of being, but it can’t see the light itself. Metaphysics grows like a tree from the ground of being, but the leaves of this tree can’t reach the soil—the leaves of logic and ethics, physics and psychology, forget the element that allows the tree to be in the first place. The language shifts a bit in the OC lecture eight years later: here, it’s not so much *being* that metaphysics can’t think, but rather the difference between being and beings (OC, 62). It’s difference, in this essay, that gives rise to the distinctions within which metaphysics operates (matter/form, good/evil, eternal/temporal), and therefore difference as such that metaphysics cannot think. This is one place where Heidegger begins to blend into the early Derrida, to look ahead to Professor Kleinberg’s lecture. *Différance*, although Derrida might balk at the suggestion,
arguably operates in the placeless place of what Heidegger first called being. *Différance* IS not—Derrida tries here to push back even behind ontology—but it operates prior to the distinctions of metaphysics, as the spatio-temporal condition of their opening, and this sense can be heard as irreducibly Heideggerian. Turning back to Heidegger, this language of the light, or the ground, or being, or “difference as difference”—it’s refined as the years go on, but each of these terms marks the same problem, which is to say metaphysics’ inability to think that which sets it in motion.

But as critical as Heidegger is of this tradition, he also acknowledges that it’s not exactly metaphysics’ *fault* that it can’t think that which sets it in motion. After all, to remain with the term “being” for the sake of convenience, if being *conditions* thinking, if being gets thinking going in the first place, then the moment you go to think at all, you’re already presupposing being. Even if we manage to make it to the point of asking, “what is being,” we’re assuming we already know what the is is—what it would *mean* for being to be—and so we can’t ever ask what being is, because we can’t get back behind that by means of which the questioning already operates, which is to say
being, which is the thing we’re trying to investigate. So philosophy functions, as Heidegger puts it in the WB, by means of a “prior conception of Being” (W, 210). A relentlessly prior, maddeningly anterior conception of Being that, the moment we go looking for it, springs up like the hedgehog in his race against the hare to proclaim, “I’m already here!” (OCM, 63).

But again, this isn’t so much a failure of metaphysics as it is the condition of possibility of metaphysics itself. As Heidegger explains it in another register, being doesn’t ever just present itself. Being presents itself in beings, which is to say being conceals itself as being even as it reveals itself in beings. The soil enables the tree to grow, but it hides itself as soil (W, 208). Or, in Heidegger’s increasingly delphic prose, (slide) the ground of metaphysics “eludes it because in the rise of unconcealedness its very core, namely concealedness, stays away in favor of the unconcealed, which appears in the form of beings” (W, 211). Being hides itself as being (that’s the concealedness) in order to show itself in beings (that’s the unconcealed). So when metaphysics attunes itself to these beings, it misses that which conceals itself in order to unconceal beings as such. In philosophy’s frenzy to calculate,
represent, and catalogue everything that is, philosophy misses isness itself.

**SLIDE:** “What is at stake here,” Heidegger explains, “is therefore not a series of misunderstandings of a book but our abandonment by Being” (W, 217). Our abandonment by being. Being turns us over to the frenzied objectification of beings, turns beings over to us as objects, turns all of us over to one another, precisely by withholding itself from us. Beings have been abandoned by being. “Forsaken,” he says at one point (W, 211). And what better sign we’ve been abandoned by being than the rise of modern technology?

According to Heidegger, the effect of metaphysics’ attention to beings at the expense of being has been the objectification of those beings, the representation of beings only insofar as they are useful to human consumption. And so a river becomes a resource for energy, a cow becomes a commodity, and a mountaintop becomes an obstacle between us and the coal it contains—coal, which of course, is a resource. This sum of resources, this stockpile for technological advancement, is the sum of what “is” in Heidegger’s atomic age. All that is has been calculated in advance in terms of its usefulness to the
manic advancement of “functionalization, systematic improvement, automation, bureaucratization, communications” (O, 51-2). And this endless technocratic advancement, supposedly undertaken for the sake of the advancement of man, culminates in the thingification of “man” himself, who at this point has become just another part of the technological stockpile. This is why we’re going to need a new beginning for thinking: another thinking that might think being itself—or as Heidegger begins to say in his later writings—a thinking that might let being be.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

In order to find a new beginning for thinking, Heidegger insists we first have to think the first beginning of thinking—that which philosophy has never been able to think. And in order to think the first beginning, we have to get clear about what it is that’s been preventing us from thinking the first being in the first place. Which means that even before we can see why we haven’t thought the first beginning, we first have to realize that we haven’t been able to think it. We first of all need to face up to our oblivion of being, a function of our having been abandoned by being. This recognition, Heidegger says, can only instill
in us a “genuine horror” (W, 211). Because if being has withdrawn from beings, ourselves included, then beings, strictly speaking, cannot be. And yet, they are. So beings neither are nor are not; their existence in the “modern age” is a shadowy, forsaken kind of half-existing. It is this horror we have to face up to first of all. And then we can begin to figure out how we got here.

From the outset, Heidegger tells us, metaphysics has been “ontotheologically” constituted. What on earth does this mean? Although Heidegger can be said to have “popularized” the term, if one can even speak that way (you know, all that buzz in Entertainment Weekly about ontotheology), he actually borrows the word from Immanuel Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant uses the term “ontotheology” to designate the philosophical effort to prove God’s existence *a priori*. One might think here of St. Anselm’s famous demonstration: as you may recall, Anselm says that what we mean by “God” is “that than which a greater cannot be thought.” And since it’s *greater* to exist than not to exist, that than which a greater cannot be thought must, in fact, exist. This is the sort of reasoning that Kant dismisses as ontotheology, as distinct from “cosmotheology,”—and
cosmotheology is the line of argumentation that says that every effect must have a cause, and of course that cause must have a cause, which must have a cause, and unless we want to carry on this way to infinity, there must be a self-caused cause at the beginning of things, a \textit{causa sui}, which, of course, is what everyone means by “God.”

As is well known, Kant accepted the validity neither of ontotheology nor of cosmotheology, dismantling the ontological, cosmological, and teleological proofs of God in fairly rapid succession—a feat for which he earned the title \textit{Der Allzermalmende} (the All-Destroyer, the crusher-of-everything). But between the “necessary postulates” of Kant’s second Critique and the “moral proof” of God’s existence in his \textit{Religion within the Limits of Reason alone}, Kant does reinstall God as a morally helpful presupposition—as the working hypothesis we need in order to follow the moral law. One could therefore argue that in order to guarantee the integrity of practical reason, Kant resorts to an ontotheological conception of God.

Heidegger would \textit{certainly} argue as much, not because of the way that Kant postulates a God (it’s not an ontological proof), but because of the kind of God he postulates: an empty cosmic lawgiver, flown in
when the philosopher needs to close up some gaps in his system. One imagines Kant in his study, thinking, “I’ve done all this—maxims, dispositional choice; now I just need someone to give us the moral law in the first place...someone to get us going...ah! God! Great that you could come. Yes, stand here, please, holding the moral law, and could you also stand over there? There’s a pesky gap between what we can do and what we know we ought to, so if you could just fill in that space there, and...brilliant. No, nothing else; just beginning and end; thanks so much, God; off you trot....” You get the idea.

And as far as Heidegger is concerned, it’s not only Kant who capitulates to ontotheology; rather, the whole edifice of western metaphysics is constituted onto-theologically. By this, he means two specific things: first, that the metaphysical concept of “being” is nothing more than a fuzzily-conceived property that is supposedly common to all beings, the way “fruit” is common to apples, pears, cherries and grapes (O, 66). Being as the being of beings. This is the “onto” part of ontotheology; as he puts it in the OC, SLIDE: “metaphysics thinks of beings as such, that is, in general...as a whole....as the ground-giving unity of what is most general, what is
indifferently valid everywhere.” (O, 58). And this is bad. Because again, metaphysics doesn’t think being itself, or the difference between being and beings, but just beings, smooshed together into an indistinct, fruity compound that it then calls “being.”

Second, to say that metaphysics is ontotheological is to say that this fruity substratum of pseudo-being is furthermore equated with a presumed “highest being,” which metaphysics calls “God.” As Heidegger encapsulates it in the OC, SLIDE “the essential constitution of metaphysics is based on the unity of beings as such in the universal and that which is highest” (O, 61). Or, as he puts it in the WB, SLIDE: “because metaphysics represents beings as beings, it is, two-in-one, the truth of beings in their universality and in the highest being. According to its nature, it is at the same time ontology in the narrower sense [that is, the wrong sense] and theology” (W, 218).

Now Heidegger doesn’t offer a diagram, but I thought it might be helpful to make one: SLIDE (describe) In short, the issue is that metaphysics as ontotheology conflates being, beings, and the highest being to such a baffling extent that it has no idea what it’s talking about. SLIDE. And so we’re back to the Heideggerian refrain: because
it is ontotheologically constituted, metaphysics cannot think the being that sets it in motion.

What Heidegger argues less often, but no less insistently, is that by equating being with the general run of beings and then identifying the whole mess with God, ontotheology does just as much disservice to God as it does to being. Unlike the God who delivers her people from slavery or proclaims good news to the poor, the “God” of metaphysics is merely the first being in a causal chain, the self-caused cause that prevents some dreaded infinite regress. All told, Heidegger laments, this is a bloodless and boring God, before whom “man” can neither pray nor dance, to whom he would never feel compelled to make a sacrifice. And the reason that “man” would not be inclined to give anything over to the causa sui is that this “God” is nothing more than a narcissistic projection of “man” in the first place (OC, 60). The human subject creates a conceptual God, gives him his lines, and pushes him on stage at just the right time—to secure, for example, the integrity of clear and distinct ideas. Or the possibility of being a perfect moral agent. As Heidegger puts it, \textbf{SLIDE} “the deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by
its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it” (O, 56). Ontotheology, in short, is bad ontology and bad theology: it is a mirror game in which the human subject and its objectified God secure one another’s conceptual integrity: each of them becoming in the mirror of the other a self-caused, self-identical, self-enclosed substance. Held in place by his divine prototype, the human subject-as-substance then goes on to turn the whole world into the object of his omnipotent thought.

Now Heidegger himself, at least if we take him at his word, is strictly concerned with rehabilitating the ontological component of thinking. He’s working toward ontology after ontotheology. Theology after ontotheology will have to wait for differently stalwart souls like Jean-Luc Marion, Jack Caputo, and arguably Luce Irigaray, whose work Professor Weil will address toward the end of the term. In very different ways, all these thinkers try to imagine what a God after the death of God might look like. But not Heidegger—as he insists throughout his lectures and essays, being is not God; God is not being; and so insofar as he’s concerned with being (have you heard? Heidegger is concerned with being), he is not writing a theology; he
has not written a theology; he has no intention to write a theology; but, as he told an audience in 1951, if he ever were to write a theology, “the word ‘being’ ought not to appear there.” (in HTAS, 127). Because, again, who dances or sings or falls on her knees in the presence of that than which a greater cannot be thought? Who would ever write a hymn to the self-caused cause? (I tried. The best I could come up with was “a self-caused cause is A-quinas’s God…” it went downhill from there. “all other causes are cau-sed by him.”) Something like this level of ridiculousness lies behind that strange moment in the WB essay when Heidegger suddenly asks (and one wonders whom he is asking), will Christian theology ever decide to listen to the Apostle Paul and declare that philosophy is foolishness? (W, 218). In other words, will anyone ever realize that theology has no business wedding itself to Greek ontology? That God is not being? Anyone other than me? Because, have I made it clear, I’m not writing a theology?

Again, the primary concern for Heidegger is to clear God away from being rather than to clear being away from God. The issue is to think being without conflating it with philosophy’s “highest being.” And yet, Heidegger admits, SLIDE: “the godless thinking which must
abandon the god of philosophy, god as \textit{causa sui}, is…perhaps closer to the divine God. Here this means only: \textit{[only! that] god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theo-logic would like to admit}” (O, 72).

Notice this language of openness. Godless thinking is open to God. Godless thinking doesn’t try to prove the existence of God; it doesn’t calculate God; it doesn’t represent God; godless thinking doesn’t even think about God—and precisely in relinquishing its conceptual grasp on God, it remains strangely open to God—as something that might break into it from outside itself. Or which might not.

And it’s a similar story with being. God is not being; God has nothing to do with being. But the God beyond the God of the philosophers and the being beneath the being of beings are similarly concealed from the metaphysical tradition that conflates them. And so just as remaining open to God is a matter of giving up the philosophical grasp on God, thinking the truth of being requires relinquishing calculation and representation, which is to say relinquishing the philosophical subject who calculates and represents in the first place. \textbf{SLIDE} “If our thinking should succeed in its efforts to go back into the ground of metaphysics,” Heidegger writes, “it
might well help to bring about a change in human nature, accompanied by a transformation of metaphysics” (WB, 209). It is to this change in human nature that we now turn.

As we have already seen, the metaphysical effort to amass knowledge of beings occludes their condition of possibility. By reducing beings to items in a catalogue or to resources for technological advancement, metaphysics misses and even obstructs the being that bes them to begin with. The upshot of this is that metaphysics itself ends up conferring the status of “being” upon beings, and of course the only stuff that is, as far as metaphysics is concerned, is that which is useful, manipulable, and calculable. All that is for metaphysics is that which can be represented as an object to the thinking subject, and everything else is nothing (W, 220–1). What this means is that from the standpoint of metaphysics, being itself is nothing, because being is not a being. Being cannot be objectified or calculated, so it looks to metaphysics like nothing. And so the effect of metaphysics’ determination of the being of beings is that metaphysics effectively refuses to let beings be. It reduces being to nothing, cutting
beings off from their condition of possibility and adding to the technological stockpile.

If, then, another kind of thinking were to emerge, it would have to plunge into what looks like nothing from the standpoint of metaphysics (this is what’s so horrifying). This sort of thinking would have to recall philosophy’s forgotten ground, and find a way to experience being as such rather than being as metaphysically conferred. So the way out of metaphysics is the way down. Notice the topographic difference here from Plato’s allegory of the Cave. We can talk more about this later if you’d like, but the work of philosophy for Heidegger is not for the thinker to make his way out of the dark cave into the bright sun, but rather to move from the brightness of beings down into the dark ground—at which point, he says, thinking itself will be transformed. This is what Heidegger means when he writes that

Insofar as a thinker sets out to experience the ground of metaphysics, insofar as [he] attempts to recall the truth of being itself instead of merely representing beings as beings, his thinking has in a sense left metaphysics. From the point of view of metaphysics, such thinking goes back into the ground of metaphysics. But what still appears as ground from this point of view is presumably something else, once it is experienced in its own terms—something as
yet unsaid, according to which the essence of metaphysics, too, is something else and not metaphysics….When we think of the truth of being, metaphysics is overcome. (WB, 208-9).

So again, the way out is the way down; recalling the truth at the root of metaphysics would displace us beyond metaphysics. Heidegger is careful to say that this other kind of thinking wouldn’t oppose metaphysics (after all, oppositions belong to metaphysics); rather, it goes back into its ground in order to leave it. And look here at the way he tries to wiggle his way out of Hegel: “from the point of view of metaphysics,” he says, it looks like this is just a reversal. Just an inversion of the same old terms. But from the point of view of the ground itself, things look completely different. And this is ingenious, because the moment you say, “your Way Back into the Ground is still metaphysical, Heidegger,” he can say “well, if it looks that way to you, then you’re still metaphysical”). It’s like the counter-trick to Hegel’s trick. At any rate, this new kind of thinking for Heidegger would be one that has dived all the way down into the essence of metaphysics, into the truth of being itself. And once being is finally experienced in its own terms, he tells us, we’re doing something else; metaphysics is overcome. Great; looking forward to it. But how do we get back to
this ground? To return to our initial questions, how is thinking to think that without which thinking cannot think? How can we “experience” being in its own terms when the only terms we have are metaphysical? When being persistently slips away from whatever it brings into being?

Perhaps an easier way to frame this difficulty would be to point out that being isn’t an object. And this is precisely why philosophy can’t get at it. Being precedes the distinction of subject and object as such, and therefore does not present itself as an object to the representing subject. So it’s not as though being lies there in the ground under the metaphysical tree, waiting for some stalwart Heideggerian to go dig it up. Being isn’t an object; to the contrary, being takes place. Being occurs. And being occurs as the process of what Heidegger calls “unconcealment” (W, 210) which is to say, the bringing of beings into the light of being. Being occurs as the revealing of the concealed, but notice that “of” is a funny word. “The revealing of the concealed” means both the revealing of that which was concealed and the revealing that concealment itself does, by remaining concealed. And so being never presents itself as such;
rather, it takes place as a ceaseless double movement of revelation and concealment. And this is what Heidegger geeks mean when they say things like “revealing is reveiling”: whatever appears, appears by means of the withdrawal of that which enables its appearance.

So even as it unconceals beings, being “keeps itself concealed” as being (OC, 65). And insofar as it keeps itself concealed, insofar as being never presents itself, thinking cannot represent it. Not being an object, being cannot be grasped by a subject. So the task of thinking, in short, is to dislocate the subject. If thinking is to recall the self-concealing event of being, the thinker herself must be displaced—transported out of herself and into what looks like nothing, into the terrifying withdrawal of being. (“Socrates,” Heidegger writes in another essay, “did nothing else than place himself into this draft, this current, and maintain himself in it” [“What is Called Thinking, 17.”])

Conceived as substance (W, 215), the metaphysical subject stands under himself, grounds himself, represents beings as objects of his self-established gaze. Displaced as dasein (oh God, I’ve said it), the thinker stands outside of herself in the opening of the being that both “yields itself and withdraws” (WB, 213). And Heidegger calls this dis-
position—here we go—an ecstatic instanding: ecstasy literally means standing outside oneself, and standing-in means remaining with the incalculable, keeping oneself open to the self-concealing event of being, even though or precisely because it won’t just present itself.

So there is a kind of restraint here: a refusal to get the self together into a subject and a refusal to collapse beings into objects. Thinking, in short, requires a commitment to withstanding the indeterminacy of both thinker and thought. And Heidegger tells us that this withstanding, like being itself, takes place as a double movement. Just as being happens as a revealing and a reveiling, or as he puts it more tediously in the OC, “the perdurance of unconcealing overcoming and of self-keeping arrival” (OC, 67); just as being is both given and withdrawn, dasein takes place as an ecstatic standing-in (a movement out and back), which the WB maps onto being-toward-death on the one hand (that’s the ecstasis) and care on the other (that’s the instasis). Out, on the one hand, to finitude and singularity, in, on the other, to worldliness and relationships. Maintaining itself in this irreducible between (out and back, self and world, singular and multiple), thinking holds itself in the placeless place behind, beyond,
or beneath the oppositions of metaphysics. It stands in the very opening that metaphysics closes down into subject versus object, dark versus light, ground versus consequent, and even being versus beings.

This is the reason the OC calls this placeless place not light or ground or being, because these are already bound up with their metaphysical opposites, but difference itself. Thinking for Heidegger holds itself in this opening in the hopes of opening a new beginning for thinking: a thinking that, rather than amassing and instrumentalizing beings, might let being be. And it is in this particular sense that thinking would become the work of existing itself, of standing open for the openness in which we stand, by standing it. Thank you.