EVER SINCE MARTIN HEIDEGGER initiated the destruction of the Western philosophical tradition, we have heard that philosophy has come to an end, that metaphysics has exhausted all of its possibilities, that the history of philosophy terminates in nihilism, that we require “another beginning” and a return to the tradition of first philosophy and the question of being. 1 Thinking in our postmetaphysical epoch must therefore begin with thinking about being, with the consequence that whatever ethical or political conclusions we may legitimately hold must pay their adequate respects to whatever is turned up by the inquiry into the meaning of being. In the following pages, I want to call this methodological presupposition into question, with emphasis on the sense in which the inquiry into the meaning of being is “first.” My aim is critical rather than constructive. I want to show how the primacy that Heidegger gives to the question of being has served only to intensify the crisis of modern philosophical nihilism, and I want to demonstrate the specific sense in which this crisis has its legacy in René Descartes, while at the same time exposing what is required for a renewed inquiry into the possibility of philosophy.

My thesis is that philosophy legitimates itself, indeed it is required to legitimate itself, through a confrontation with nihilism. Along these lines, our conception of the possibility of philosophy, by which I mean the possibility of philosophical experience, hangs on its reflexive capacity to account for its own possibility. Philosophical nihilism, as I

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1 For “another beginning,” see Heidegger, Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) in Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975–), 65:§91 / Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning), trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Hereafter CtP. References to the Gesamtausgabe (hereafter GA) are by volume and section or page. All citations in the present essay are first to the original, followed by reference to the English translation when available, for example, GA, 65:§91 / CtP. These translations are sometimes modified, but only with comment when necessary.
shall elaborate, is accordingly the most severe consequence of our failure to account for the possibility of philosophy. Where Heidegger’s destruction of the metaphysical tradition is concerned, we shall therefore require a rational justification for the turn to the question of being, that is, if the question of being is in some sense foundational for the future of philosophy in a postmetaphysical epoch.

The importance of Heidegger to a contemporary inquiry into the possibility of philosophy may be framed in terms of two opposing, yet closely related responses to the question concerning the genuine foundations of philosophy. These responses consist in the attempt to found philosophy on thoroughgoing insight into the meaning of being on the one hand, and, on the other, a critique of that very same attempt to reduce the genuine foundations of philosophy to an interpretation of the meaning of being. There are, then, two fundamental versions of the initial, ontocentric, response. First: the version exemplified by the method of Cartesian science, which models itself on the paradigm of mathematical certainty and makes of the philosophical foundations an abstract theoretical artifact; in Descartes, a res cogitans or thinking thing. Second: the version that attempts to retain what is thought to be the high level of certainty produced by the Cartesian method, while at the same time radicalizing the end toward which that method aims. To name but two of the most important late modern examples: in Husserl this would be the standpoint of transcendental subjectivity in its constitution of the lifeworld; in Heidegger, the ontological priority of being-here (Dasein), the clearing (Lichtung), or, per Heidegger’s later formulation, the event (Ereignis). Common to all of these responses, however, is the subordination of ethics to ontology (or being-thinking, in a properly qualified sense), which has the effect of stripping away any conception of the good or the human relation to an idea of the good, from the foundations of philosophy. They are thus each tasked with retroactively building an account of the human relation to the good back into their philosophical systems or else conceding philosophy’s inability to speak intelligibly about the good, or the human relation to an idea of the good. The latter is precisely the situation in Heidegger, who is at once the most extreme and the most influential late modern example, meaning (so I shall argue) that despite his protestations to the contrary, fundamental ontology and its subsequent permutations—with its stated aim of putting Forschung,
that is, “research” or philosophy and the sciences in general—does not in fact “twist free” from Cartesian rationalism, but is rather a continuation of the Cartesian legacy.

I want to emphasize a deep elective affinity between two important features of the Cartesian legacy in late modern philosophy. The first concerns what I have called, with some degree of latitude, the subordination of ethics to ontology at the foundations of philosophy. The second concerns the sense in which the subordination of ethics to ontology follows directly from the systematic attempt to respond to an immediate or imminent moral crisis. In every such instance, we find that the effort to put philosophy on new foundations takes its bearings from the perception of moral inquiétude, which in turn results in the radical exclusion of ethical questioning from the very foundations on which the proposed solution is to be assembled. In the case of Descartes, his inspiration can, of course, be traced to the Platonic dialogues, which exhibit the thesis that a life conducted in accordance with knowledge is better than one that is blindly obedient to opinion or convention. But having thus “compared the moral writings of the ancient pagans to very proud and magnificent palaces built only on sand and mud,” Descartes thereby resolved to replace the “many diverse opinions” that had taken hold through the centuries with a

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more solid foundation: one secured by a *mathesis universalis* or universal science.¹

There is, however, a fundamental disconnect between Descartes’s perception of a moral crisis, which motivated his philosophical questioning in the direction of universal reason and the solid foundation of the *cogito*, from which he intended to rebuild the philosophical edifice. This is because Descartes does not enter into the method of doubt from within the perspective of the *cogito*, meaning that neither the search for a scientific first principle nor its result in the *cogito* can account for the erotic character of Descartes’s investigation. The source of philosophical eros is thus excluded from the foundation of philosophy or science. Yet, what we require is precisely this account, that is, an account of the genesis of philosophical eros, or an account of how the natural desire for knowledge, as Aristotle called it, is transformed into the pursuit of rigorous science. That is to say, we require an account of the possibility of philosophy. Yet this is just what Cartesian science renders impossible. Instead, philosophy appears simply as an act of the will. It is purely a decision made by the philosopher, and so it cannot account for its own possibility.

Modern philosophy, we might say, is founded with Descartes on a crisis, in the exact sense indicated by the ancient Greek noun κρίσις: a decision; a power of distinguishing, separating, judging, or selecting. What has been selected, in the case of Descartes, is the idea that a practical philosophy aimed at enhancing and prolonging physical life is valuable and that in order for it to be effective, its methodology must be directed by a first principle that chooses certainty for the sake of utility.⁵ But the ground of this principle—namely, the decision for “the maintenance of health, which is unquestionably the first good and the foundation of all the other goods of this world”⁶—is effectively

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dissolved by the method of doubt, which inaugurates a substance dualism that cannot, in the last analysis, produce apodictic knowledge about the living body it is supposed to benefit; and this because the will to master nature by means of mathematical physics transforms the body and soul into purely formal, hence, inert substances that, once broken apart—literally, analyzed—cannot be sutured back together again, except by means of a mythical pineal gland. Having thus been emptied of life, or the traditional unity of body and soul that, ever since Aristotle, was thought to sustain life, the “first good” becomes unintelligible or at best a fable much like Descartes’s autobiography in the *Discourse on Method*. This is a direct consequence of Descartes’s founding of philosophy on the paradigm of mathematical rationality, which produces not only a dualism between thought and extension, but, more fundamentally, a dualism between facts and values, or formal structure and knowledge of the good. The result, again, is not only a philosophy or science that cannot account for its own possibility, but a method of inquiry that cannot justify itself, that cannot tell us what is “in fact” good about modern science. Cartesianism thus renders itself literally groundless, having sundered the very idea of the good that it is supposed to secure.

Is it a wonder that since Descartes modern philosophy, indeed the whole modern situation, is rife with talk about alienation, anxiety, disenchantment, and death? I don’t think so. In its essence, the modern crisis is one that leaves human happiness behind. No one understood this better than Nietzsche, for whom the modern situation takes hold through a radicalization of Cartesian decisionism, what Nietzsche called the “will to power.” Or in Zarathustra’s words, “I have long ceased to be concerned with happiness; I am concerned with my work (*Werke*).” Of course, the decision for Nietzsche is not in

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favor of modern science—itself a moral valuation that ends, paradoxically, in the obliteration of morality. Nietzsche concerned himself, rather, with the fundamental question of how our values come to matter for us, the way our commitments make our lives worth living, and the ways in which our values have failed us in this endeavor. Indeed, the modern situation is for Nietzsche an acute expression of the latter. In the *Twilight of the Idols*, he asks rhetorically, “Is the nineteenth century, especially in its closing decades, not merely a strengthened, brutalized, eighteenth century, that is to say a century of décadence?” Already, we have seen the antecedents of this modern decadence in the seventeenth century of Descartes, itself traceable to the sixteenth century decision for mastery over wisdom in the influential thought of Machiavelli and Bacon. Nietzsche calls this decadence a physiological condition, which he describes in the *Nachlass* of 1887 as passive nihilism: a “decline and recession of the power of spirit.” This withdrawal of spirit, we might say, the enervating failure of our values to make life meaningful and therefore loveable, is then distinguished from active nihilism: “a sign of increased power of spirit,” namely, the value-creating, yes-saying will to power.\(^9\)

I note that where spirit (*Geist*) is concerned, what is for Hegel the source and expression of historical progress, becomes for Nietzsche something “ambiguous” (*zweideutig*), that is to say, evidence of a decline that requires purification by an even more destructive, noble nihilism. So writes Nietzsche, “It is the value of such a crisis that it purifies.”\(^10\) And:

> We must be destroyers!—I perceived that the state of dissolution, in which individual natures can perfect themselves as never before—is an image and isolated example of existence in general. To the paralyzing sense of general dissolution and incompleteness I opposed the eternal return,\(^12\)

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\(^12\) Nietzsche, *KSA*, 10:661–2 / *WP*, §417.
which he calls in a separate entry, “the most extreme form of nihilism: the nothing (the ‘meaninglessness’), eternally!” 13 Where human perfection is concerned, Nietzsche quite candidly trades the classical, that is, Socratic, notion of happiness (or in Hegel’s case, spirit’s historical self-satisfaction) for nihilism. Yet, where Nietzsche saw in nihilism the possibility of a more spirited future (rather than its historical necessity), perhaps no one captured the despair of the modern situation better than Max Weber, in whose works one finds a hardboiled sociology of the last man (as I am wont to call it), with its vision of a bureaucratically structured modern commercial society in which the promises of bourgeois freedom have devolved into the routinized machinations of “specialists without spirit and voluptuaries without heart.” 14 However liberal, democratic, revolutionary, or utopian our hopes for the Enlightenment may have been, they have all found the same result: having turned “we moderns” into clerks and pinhead makers of one sort or another. “We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink.” 15

There is much one could say about the decline of the modern West into a culture of self-satisfied illusion. But my remarks here are intended to be incisive and synoptic. My aim has been to identify a singular problem that makes immediately visible the urgency of the question concerning the possibility of philosophy. And that urgency, I argue, comes as a result of the persistence of Descartes’s influence throughout the history of modern philosophy, most notably in the way that Descartes and his epigones have severed ethical questioning from the foundations of philosophy. In the last instance concerning Nietzsche, the radicalization of Cartesian decisionism in the will to power reveals the vast nihil over which our valuations are suspended. This problem applies equally to Hobbes’ decision to deduce natural right from the principle of self-preservation, as it does to Kant’s


15 Nietzsche, KSA, 4:19, 20 / TSZ, 17, 18. Weber’s debt to Nietzsche is well apparent in his “Science as a Vocation.”
decision to fasten moral reasoning to the principle of noncontradiction, as it does to Hegel’s decision to embed the rationality of ethical and political life in modern social institutions, as it does to Heidegger’s decision to destroy the history of metaphysics in order to put philosophy and the sciences on “new foundations” (a point I shall return to in a moment). Yet the problem becomes most clearly visible, in all its intensity, with Nietzsche. So long as the possibility of philosophy is understood purely as an act of the will, the Nietzschean doctrine of the will to power shall remain attractive as an answer to the most fundamental questions concerning the human condition. Provided this observation, however, something more must be said about Nietzsche’s relevance to the question concerning the genuine foundations of philosophy.

We have seen that with Nietzsche the primacy of the will gives way to decadence. If there is anything that can be called “redeeming,” or perhaps “cheerful,” about the situation of modern decadence, it is that it reveals ever more clearly the valuelessness of modern values, but with the result that the primacy of the will gives way, finally, to the primacy of chaos. So we read in *The Gay Science*:

The total character of the world . . . is in all eternity chaos, not in the sense of a lack of necessity, but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms. There are, then, only two possible responses to chaos: capitulation or domination. This is the difference between the enervating, passive nihilism of the blinking last men, and the creative, active nihilism of the supermen, referred to in the *Genealogy* as the great birds of prey that snatch up tasty little lambs according to their strength and their whim. That there are such responses to chaos is to say that there is something—that there is will to power, or strength and weakness of spirit. But with a view to the eternal return, which perpetually returns the world of genesis into nothing, both of the available responses appear equally futile, which confirms at once that “everything is

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16 See note 3 above.
There are, we might say, two kinds of masks: one base, the other noble. But behind these masks, the depths reveal nothing. Spiritedness returns inevitably to worthlessness. Even the greatest nobility is illusory. This is, at any rate, the most extreme interpretation of the doctrine of the will to power, which is not to say the most decadent. We are therefore confronted with a question: What does the revelation of nihilism mean for the possibility of philosophy? Where I have spoken about the subordination of ethics to ontology (or being-thinking, broadly construed as what is foundational for philosophy), being or the logos of the being of beings is accordingly transformed into nothingness. There is consequently no ontological foundation of philosophy because there is no foundation whatsoever. Instead, Nietzsche replaces philosophy with psychology, with the result that philosophy, or the erotic striving for the truth about the whole, is rendered impossible. Let me now clarify this remark.

In §23 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, we read: “psychology shall be recognized again as the queen of the sciences, for whose service and preparation the sciences exist. For psychology is now again the path to the fundamental problems.” I want to comment on the sense in which psychology is “now” and “again” the way to the “fundamental problems,” with a view to how this claim bears on the meaning of a genuinely first philosophy. I am not concerned here with developing a comprehensive genealogy of the “queen of the sciences” (*regina scientiarum*). For my present purpose it will suffice to say that by at least the fourth century the original identity of first philosophy and

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22 The most extensive treatment of this topic is, to my knowledge, in Robert B. Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010). I agree with Pippin that Nietzschean psychology is meant to “replace” philosophy or metaphysics as the “path to the most fundamental problems” (1–2). But Pippin does not in my view give sufficient attention to the implications of this replacement for the possibility of philosophy.
theology in Aristotle\textsuperscript{23} had been revised, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, such that metaphysics was now afforded the dignity of handmaid to theology (\textit{ancilla theologiae}), as evinced by the Alexandrian theologians, the Cappadocian Fathers, and St. Augustine.\textsuperscript{24} With Nietzsche, however, neither metaphysics nor theology could withstand the death of God, which has “now” brought psychology “again” to light as the first science for the sake of which all others serve.

To say that psychology is “again” first or queen of the sciences is to suggest that it had occupied this position once before, and that metaphysics, née theology, had concealed or “kept silent” its original priority.\textsuperscript{25} Psychology will “now” regain its priority by exposing the fundamental problems for what they are: pure products of the will. To name the crucial example, psychology replaces first philosophy by revealing the priority of the inquiry into being qua being as itself a valuation or prejudice about what is fundamental, with the result that what counts as fundamental is but a function of history or the “health” of the soul or the spirit, which changes according to times and places. Indeed, psychology reveals the deposed queens as having barred access to the greatest depths precisely, as Nietzsche says, because they were symptomatic of great fear concerning those depths. I add that where the depths are for Nietzsche synonymous with chaos, the eternal return, and nihilism, this claim has the effect of making Parmenides’ injunction against pronouncing “the altogether not” into the speech of a coward. This means: the assertion that intelligible speech must avoid the logical contradiction of saying “nothing is” in order to remain coherent, or in order to avoid saying what cannot be said, is for Nietzsche a fiction, which is to say again that logical form is

\textsuperscript{23} Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, 6.1.1026a.


\textsuperscript{25} Nietzsche, \textit{KSA}, 5:38 / \textit{BGE}, §23. “insofar as it is permissible to recognize in what has been written so far a symptom of what has so far been kept silent.”
a mask for unyielding chaos. So Nietzsche writes in the opening lines of §23 of *Beyond Good and Evil*,

All psychology so far has got stuck in moral prejudices and fears: it has not dared to descend into the depths. To understand it as morphology and the doctrine of the development of the will to power, as I do—nobody has yet come close to this, even in thought.

Psychology, here observable in its close association with genealogy, reveals our valuations and normative commitments as morphology, that is to say, as masked expressions of the will to power. As for whether Heraclitus may be thought as an exception—as one who has at least “come close” to recognizing the priority of psychology, I note that the Heraclitean doctrine whereby being is becoming, or everything is in motion, is still but a mask for even greater depths, namely, *psychological* rather than strictly cosmological or ontological depths.

If, however, psychology is the way to the fundamental problems, and the fundamental problems are themselves produced by the will to power (that is, questions about being, truth, justice, beauty, freedom, happiness, and the like), does this not mean (1) that the will to power is itself the most fundamental of the fundamental problems and (2) that the doctrine of the will to power dissimulates itself as the attempt to convince human beings that there are such things as fundamental problems? I believe we must answer in the affirmative, but with the consequence that the fundamental problem qua will to power is without foundation. The assertion of the doctrine of the will to power amounts to a pure decision *ex nihilo*. This means that psychology, or the assessment of the strength and weakness of spirit, cannot certify the results of its inquiry because the standards of strength and weakness are themselves perspectival constructions of the will and so functions of chaos. If psychology does in fact replace philosophy or

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26 See Nietzsche, KSA, 13:332 / WP, §539. Parmenides’ injunction is stated by the Eleatic Stranger in Plato’s *Sophist* in *Works* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1921–), 237a. All citations to Plato are from The Loeb Classical Library. I note that by formulating “the altogether not” as a proposition, Parmenides does not so much contradict himself, as he “points” in the Wittgensteinian sense to the limit that any syntactical reference to the *nihil absolutum* inevitably runs up against.
metaphysics as the way to the fundamental problems, it also renders
the possibility of philosophy a noble lie that philosophers or poet-
philosophers tell in an attempt to make life meaningful. Noble
illusion, or neediness of noble illusion (which Nietzsche sometimes
calls “style”), may therefore be the unum necessarium, the one thing
needed to make life worth living. But the assertion that life should
be meaningful or lovable is already the expression of a value, which
serves only to confirm the priority of psychology as the path to the
most fundamental problem, that is, the appearance of the will to
power. Where the possibility of philosophy is concerned, Nietzsche
must answer that philosophy is a decision, a pure invention of the will,
and so a decision without reason. The Socratic doctrine whereby
philosophy begins in wonder is consequently replaced by the doctrine
of the will to power. Moreover, if the task of genuine philosophy is
value-creation (or illusion-creation, or style-creation), it is a task that
emerges out of nothing, as a sheer expression of the will to power. It
is consequently impossible to account for the possibility of philosophy
as anything other than a spontaneous expression of the will. I

\[\text{See, for example, Nietzsche, KSA, 11:146 / WP, §602.}\]

\[\text{Nietzsche is explicit: art is more valuable than the truth for life. See KSA, 13:227, 500 / WP, §§853, 822. See also KSA, 3:530–1, 418–9 / GS, §§290, 56 and KSA, 12:40 / WP, §593. Despite Nietzsche’s characterization of his own thought as “inverted Platonism,” his attachment to Platonic political philosophy is here clearly visible. See KSA, 7:199.}\]

\[\text{Consider KSA, 5:147–9 / BGE §213. “What a philosopher is, that is hard to learn because it cannot be taught: one must ‘know’ it from experience—or one should have the pride not to know it. . . . For every high world one must be born; or to speak more clearly, one must be cultivated (gezüchtet) for it: a right to philosophy—taking that word in its great sense—one has thanks only to one’s origin; one’s ancestors, one’s ‘blood’ decides here too.” Last emphasis added. See also KSA, 5:144 / BGE, §211.}\]

For “decisions” in Nietzsche, consider the following: “For just as
common people separate the lightening from its flash and take the latter as a
doing, as an effect of a subject called lightening, so popular morality
separates strength from the expressions of strength as if there were behind
the strong an indifferent substratum that is free to express strength—or not
to. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind the doing,
effecting, becoming; the doer is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing
is everything.” KSA, 5:279 / GM, 1, §13. Metaphorical language
notwithstanding, these passages indicate that the only effective decision is the
one that takes hold by virtue of its strength. The doer is defined by the deed,
behind which there is no alternative but to express itself as such, according to
the strength or weakness of its spirit.
emphasize that we do not have to go so far as to say that philosophy is impossible for Nietzsche. Its meaning is rather an interpretation, verified only by the force of the will that makes it take hold. But the doctrine of the will to power cannot explain why philosophers or potential philosophers enter into philosophy, nor can it explain what distinguishes philosophical desire from, say, the desire of a poet, or a warrior, or a commander, or a legislator.\(^{30}\) And this is because the meaning of philosophy is subject to change according to fluctuations in the strength of spirit. Hence finally, yet again, we recur to the same: primordial chaos and nihilism.

To summarize my argument thus far, we might say that Nietzsche is Descartes unmasked. Both initiate philosophy by an act of the will, and so cannot account for the possibility of philosophy as anything but an arbitrary resolution. Where there are differences, they are differences of degree. Whereas Descartes severs ethical questioning from the foundations of philosophy, with the result that philosophy can no longer comprehend the human good or the human relation to the good, Nietzsche makes the confrontation with nihilism the fundamental imperative of the will to power, but with the result that all expressions of value are rendered ultimately valueless. Likewise, whereas the Cartesian effort to found philosophy on the model of mathematics comes to a “stylized” expression of the will to power, a Nietzschean search for the genuine foundations of philosophy comes to nothing. Ontocentrism gives way to nihilism, or what amounts to the same: the impossibility of metaphysics or first philosophy. First philosophy is thus shown to be itself in need of “new foundations.” And it is here that Heidegger’s teaching begins to hold sway, for Heidegger’s fundamental ontology is addressed to precisely this demand.

The importance of Heidegger for understanding the contemporary situation of philosophy cannot be underestimated. Heidegger is without doubt the most influential European philosopher of the

\(^{30}\) Nietzsche consistently blurs these lines, as evidenced by his conception of philosophical “knowing” as creating, and creating as commanding or legislating. One finds similar blurring in Nietzsche’s praise of the \textit{gai saber} (gay science) of the fourteenth century Provençal knight-poets. That such blurring exhibits a chaotic image of chaos seems to me no naïve insight. See \textit{KSA}, 5: 144–5, 212, 236 / \textit{BGE}, §§211, 260, 293.
twentieth century, matched only by Wittgenstein in the Anglo-American tradition. However, it is Heidegger’s specific engagement with the history of first philosophy, his intended *Destruktion* of that history, and the critical response that his teaching elicited from some of his best students, which underlines Heidegger’s significance to the question concerning the possibility of philosophy. Moreover, where the progress of modern philosophical nihilism may be viewed as coinciding with the subordination of ethics to ontology and a steady forgetting of the question of human happiness in the history of modern philosophy, it is Heidegger’s explicit condemnation of happiness as “the greatest nihilism” that certifies his status as the philosopher in whom the forgetting of happiness culminates, if even he only repeats Nietzsche’s original insight at the level of the *Seinsfrage*, that is, the question of being.\(^{31}\) To state the difference between Heidegger and Nietzsche as briefly as possible: whereas Zarathustra descends from the mountains in order to demonstrate and perhaps indoctrinate his love of humanity,\(^{32}\) Heidegger abandons the noble illusion that humanity is in any way lovable in order to confront with “an impassioned freedom towards death” the question of the meaning of being, which underlies any future inquiry or research and, likewise, any possibility of overcoming nihilism.\(^{33}\)

Unfortunately for Heidegger, he poses the confrontation with nihilism in such a way that results in its intensification rather than its overcoming. This is due, I argue, to the specific sense in which Heidegger’s turn to the question of being does not permit him to twist free from the Western philosophical tradition, but instead represents the most radical expression of the Cartesian legacy as it is manifest in the subordination of ethics to ontology at the foundations of philosophy. I quote from Heidegger’s 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

> But where is the real nihilism at work? Where one clings to current beings and believes it is enough to take beings, as before, just as the beings that they are. But with this, one rejects the question of being

\(^{31}\) Heidegger, *GA*, 65:§72 / *CtP*.

\(^{32}\) Nietzsche, *KSA*, 4:13 / *TSZ*, 11. While it is appropriate to distinguish between Zarathustra and Nietzsche, the teachings of Zarathustra are not incompatible with those found in the later *Nachlass*.

\(^{33}\) Heidegger, *SZ*, 266.
and treats being as a nothing (nihil), which in a certain way it even "is," insofar as it essentially unfolds. Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of being—that is nihilism. Nihilism thus understood is the ground for the nihilism that Nietzsche exposed in the first book of The Will to Power.

In contrast, to go expressly up to the limit of nothing in the question about being, and to take nothing into the question of being—this is the first and only fruitful step toward the true overcoming (Überwindung) of nihilism. 34

We cannot expect to arrive in the space of this essay at a comprehensive exegesis of Heidegger’s seminal interpretation of Nietzsche. The most that can be hoped for is an indication of the direction of Heidegger’s thought on this matter and its implications for the meaning of a genuinely first philosophy. I want to concentrate, therefore, on the sense in which it can be said that Nietzsche “treats being as a nothing,” for this is surely the sticking point in Heidegger’s interpretation as it relates to the intention of fundamental ontology and the intended destruction of the history of Western metaphysics.

Contrary to Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche as the “last metaphysician,” and hence the philosopher who most closely anticipates Heidegger’s attempt to free himself from the Western tradition, I have suggested that Nietzsche is not at all a metaphysician or an ontologist, but rather the thinker for whom ontology is ultimately impossible because being is ultimately chaos. 35 This assertion runs in the absolutely opposite direction from Heidegger’s interpretation wherein “Nietzsche’s thought of the will to power is the fundamental thought of his metaphysics and the last thought of Western metaphysics.” 36 By this, Heidegger means that the will to power projects the world as a continuum of ever-shifting historical

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34 Heidegger, Einführung in die Metaphysik in GA, 40:155 / Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). Hereafter IM. All citations to this volume follow the marginal pagination given in both the Gesamtausgabe and the English translation, for example, GA, 40:155 / IM.


perspectives.\textsuperscript{37} But in doing so, the doctrine whereby “all the world is will to power”\textsuperscript{38} conceals the difference between being (Sein) and beings (Seienden). It is thus the concealment of the archaic Greek revelation of being as alêtheia, truth or unconcealment, which binds for Heidegger the epochal crisis of Western nihilism to the degenerate history of first philosophy. No doubt this is why Heidegger says, “Nihilism thus understood is the ground for the nihilism that Nietzsche exposed in the first book of The Will to Power.”\textsuperscript{39} Heidegger does not go on to clarify this statement with a specific textual reference, and indeed he leaves it open as to exactly how the “remembering” of the question of being shall rescue us from the epoch of metaphysical nihilism. But if by “the nihilism that Nietzsche exposed in the first book of The Will to Power” is meant the identity-within-difference of active and passive nihilism, it is the covering over of the question of being by the will to power (in its various expressions as active and passive nihilism) that constitutes for Heidegger the “ground” of genuine nihilism, which sends the question of being into oblivion.

Overcoming nihilism therefore requires a renewed orientation toward the question of being. This, to say the least, is Heidegger’s resolution. However, the more fundamental question must concern what legitimates Heidegger’s resolve, especially as it relates to the claim that overcoming nihilism requires the destruction of the Western philosophical tradition, and the founding of a new historical destiny on the question of the meaning of being. Crucial for Heidegger in this regard is his assertion that Nietzsche has forgotten to address the question of being. Yet we have seen that Nietzsche does address the question. For Nietzsche, being is chaos, and there can be no explanation of chaos that is not itself chaotic. What we require, perhaps, is an explanation of how the will to power imposes order of a type onto chaos, but this is the work that Nietzsche reserves for

\textsuperscript{37} This is indicated by Heidegger’s effort to think the completion of metaphysics through the “self-sameness” of the will to power and the eternal return of the same. Through the primacy of the will to power (which says “what the being is”), history or the “truth of being” is projected as a function of chaos (which says of being as a whole “that it is”). See \textit{N}, 2:16–7 / 3:170–1. See also \textit{N}, 2:235–40 / 4:178–82.


\textsuperscript{39} See note 34 above.
psychology; and as we have also seen, the order that is imposed upon the world by the will to power is itself an illusory perspective of what eternally returns to the same, namely, chaos. Otherwise stated, from the Nietzschean perspective there is no difference between being and beings. The becoming process is all there is. The difference between the surface and the depths is itself an illusion. Or as Nietzsche says, “The doing is everything.”

I am tempted to say that Heidegger has invented the question of being in order to interrogate the ontological depths that Nietzsche calls chaos. However, I shall resist that temptation and instead say that Heidegger does not so much invent the question of being as he attempts to make it foundational for the future of philosophy or what amounts to the same in a postmetaphysical epoch. That is to say, Heidegger wishes to deny that being is chaos or ultimately meaningless. Heidegger’s point of departure, then, is Dasein, which he defines at the outset of Being and Time as that being for which its being is at issue. By this, Heidegger means that Dasein reveals itself to itself as a kind of striving to make sense of itself: a striving that in Heidegger’s terms is expressed by the temporal structure of care (Sorge). We may say along these lines that fundamental ontology is concerned with the way in which being makes sense and thus the way it strives to make sense of itself by directing itself to its ownmost possibility, namely, its death. And of course, herein lies the distinction between Dasein’s authentic and inauthentic modes of being-in-the-world. In its inauthentic (uneigentlich) mode, the question of being is covered over by Dasein’s falling into the everyday palaver of das Man. In its authentic (eigentlich) mode, Dasein is concerned with itself as the primordial site from which it discloses its manner of being-in-the-world—a mode of disclosure that is fundamentally circumscribed by Dasein’s temporal finitude. Hence, Heidegger writes, “only with Dasein’s disclosedness is the most primordial phenomenon of truth attained.”

All of this is to say, however concisely, that Heidegger wishes to wrest being from chaos by finding in the moment of Dasein’s authentic disclosure of the world the most primordial phenomenon of

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41 Heidegger, SZ, 12.
42 Heidegger, SZ, 326–7.
43 Heidegger, SZ, 220–1. Italics preserved.
truth as *alētheia* or unconcealment. It is, in other words, by virtue of the timeliness of “being-here” (*Da-sein*) that something is revealed to *Dasein*. And what reveals itself most primordially to *Dasein* is the question of being, that is, the question of how beings are ultimately revealed to *Dasein* as the primordial site where being (qua truth) happens.

To be sure, this is a highly condensed account of Heidegger’s existential ontology. But it is enough for my present purpose to see that Heidegger wishes to replace Nietzschean chaos with the truth of being. The question I now want to address concerns the sense in which fundamental ontology is alleged to be foundational for the future of philosophy. We have seen that for Heidegger the future of philosophy is hinged directly to the possibility of overcoming the epoch of metaphysical nihilism. These are in fact two parts of a single problem, for the foundational character of fundamental ontology rests on Heidegger’s effort to make being something meaningful. And Heidegger attempts to accomplish this by accounting for the temporal structure of *Dasein* in terms of care. What interests me here is not whether Heidegger has provided us with a correct analysis of the temporality of lived experience. I am, rather, more interested in the way that Heidegger’s account of care and its realization in the doctrine of resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*) combine to intensify the problem of nihilism by rendering being indifferent to love, in the sense that eros according to the Platonic doctrine is in need of beauty and the good, and finally happiness.\(^4^4\)

That Heidegger transforms happiness, classically understood as the completion of human nature, into the anxiety of being-towards-death may be deduced from the fact that it is death which signifies *Dasein*’s “authentic potentiality-for-being-a-whole,”\(^4^5\) with the consequence that ethical virtue is replaced by *Dasein*’s pure resolve in the face of nothing. That Heidegger’s conception of care may likewise be construed as an impoverished version of the Platonic doctrine of eros is plainly evident by its purely formal structure, which renders it devoid of any capacity to rank-order objects of desire.\(^4^6\) By way of

\(^{4^4}\) Plato, *Symposium*, 201c, 205d.

\(^{4^5}\) Heidegger, *SZ*, 308.

\(^{4^6}\) For the purely formal structure of care, see *SZ*, 192: “The formally existential totality of *Dasein*’s ontological structural whole therefore must be
contrast, Platonic eros moves hierarchically between the human and the divine (that is to say, between the base and the noble), whereas Heideggerian care moves horizontally, we should even say “horizontally,” in the sense that “the ontological meaning of care is temporality,” and “the existential-temporal condition of the possibility of the world lies in the fact that temporality, as an ecstatical unity [of future, past, and, present], has something like a horizon.”

That horizon is circumscribed by Dasein’s thrownness into the future, and Dasein’s ownmost future is, of course, its death. Hence we read, “The primary phenomenon of primordial and authentic temporality is the future,” and “The ecstatical character of the primordial future lies precisely in the fact that the future closes one’s potentiality-for-being.”

It is therefore through Dasein’s resolute anticipation of its death that the meaning of being reveals itself as the “temporalizing of temporality.”

But temporality reduced to itself is stripped of all love, beauty, and value. It means simply the opening up of one’s future possibilities, which is to say that the authentic meaning of being is without value, and being without value is meaningless, which is finally to say that the meaning of being terminates in nihilism.

Heideggerian fundamental ontology does not therefore escape from Nietzschean chaos. Rather, it returns us to it, only without the noble illusion that

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47 Heidegger, SZ, 364–5.
49 Heidegger, SZ, 304.
50 This holds regardless of whether we are talking about Dasein (being-here), Mitsein (being-with), Mitdasein (being-there-with), or Miteinandersein (being-with-one-another). At the level of fundamental ontology, the only “ethical” possibility offered up by Dasein’s historicity is (so far as I can tell) a mode of being-in-the-world that might be branded “existential fascism.” Nevertheless, considerable effort has been made in the direction of developing a Heideggerian ground of ethics, very often by modifying Heideggerian Mitsein in light of the Hegelian doctrine of recognition (Anerkennung). Among the leading efforts, I cite Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996) and Frederick A. Olafson, *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics: A Study of Mitsein* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), esp. 1:16-23.
life requires us to make it lovable.\textsuperscript{51} And this remains the case no matter whether we prefer the early language of “resoluteness” or Heidegger’s later “turn” into \textit{Gelassenheit} or “releasement.” For insofar as Heidegger’s turn (\textit{Kehre}) is meant to free the meaning of being from its attachment to any notion of active or passive willing, for example, of the kind indicated by the language of resolution, it releases us ever deeper into the nullity within which the world comes to presence.\textsuperscript{52}

So much for the meaning of being. Despite his revolutionary proclamations, Heidegger holds us in a double bind. On the one hand, the history of metaphysics (and its completion in the era of modern technology)\textsuperscript{53} grips us in a nihilistic forgetting of the question of being. On the other hand, fundamental ontology empties the meaning of being of value, and this too is nihilism.\textsuperscript{54} What matters in the last

\textsuperscript{51}See Heidegger, \textit{SZ}, 196. “The urge (\textit{Drang}) ‘to live’ is not to be annihilated; the addiction (\textit{Hang}) to becoming ‘lived’ by the world is not to be rooted out. But because these are both grounded ontologically in care, and only because of this, they are both to be modified in an ontical and existentiell manner by care—by care as something authentic.” Again, fundamental ontology requires us to disband with that which makes life lovable, as that which “crowds out” (\textit{verdrängt}) Dasein’s authentic potentiality-for-being.


\textsuperscript{53}See, for example, Heidegger, “\textit{Überwindung der Metaphysik}” in \textit{GA}, 7:78–9 / “Overcoming Metaphysics” in \textit{The End of Philosophy}, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 93. The completion (\textit{Vollendung}) of metaphysics in the essence of technology (that is, \textit{Ge-stell}) means the triumph of the will to will and the domination of being by the technological ordering of the world.

\textsuperscript{54}Stanley Rosen has called this a “double nihilism.” See Rosen, \textit{The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger} (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), 273. First published 1993 by Yale University Press. I note that immediately subsequent to this point, Rosen writes: “Heidegger never succeeds in explaining why anyone would wish to engage in philosophical thinking. No doubt this is because he wishes to honor Aristotle’s assertion that philosophy is not for the sake of anything else but only for its own sake.” I shall address this observation below. However, I note here that contrary to Rosen’s suggestion, Heidegger’s failure to give a rational justification for the philosophical life is not on my reading simply
analysis, however, is not whether Heidegger is a nihilist, but whether his teaching is the true teaching. And if, as Leo Strauss once said, our capacity to evaluate Heidegger’s teaching comes down to a question of competence, our measure of competence depends on our capacity for valuation, or more accurately, for prudential judgment or a capacity to discern what makes it right. Yet, on the basis of Heidegger’s existential analysis, there can be no such ground of legitimation apart from the pure instance of resolution (Entschluss). And this is because fundamental ontology cannot tell us on the basis of its questioning into being why such questioning should be desirable, or why we should want to invoke a spiritual revolution that founds itself on the abstract question of being. Instead, there must be some more primordial notion of the good that first directs us to the question of being—as Nietzsche would say, to the question of being as a value. In saying this, however, I do not wish to suggest that there must be some objective or quasi-objective standard of the good that is somehow “out there” waiting to be discovered, as if it were a vein of gold embedded in the rock. Yet it is plainly evident that a more primordial access to the good must underlie any capacity for rank-ordering values or existential possibilities, and it is precisely this feature of human experience that fundamental ontology abandons or occludes by abstracting the question of being from the so-called ontic or inauthentic dimension of ordinary experience.

Stated simply, there is no reason why the question of being should be foundational for the future of philosophy. Yet it must be said that Heidegger never relinquished his revolutionary aspirations for bringing metaphysics to its end. For as clearly as the text of 1927 stated the evidence of his wish to honor Aristotle’s claim that philosophy—and above all, first philosophy—is only for its own sake. Rather, it seems clear that Heidegger breaks from Aristotle on precisely this point by endowing the question of being with a revolutionary potential that is absent from Aristotle’s original inquiry. In this very specific sense, Heidegger shows himself to be a Platonist who dreams a unity of theory and practice; but it is a dream in which the call of being replaces a vision of the good. See Rosen, Question of Being, xxiii.

need to put the future of philosophy on “new foundations” (neue Fundamente), Heidegger persisted up to and through 1959 in the hope that the turn to the question of being would promise a “new ground and foundation” (neuen Grund und Boden) upon which it might be possible to confront the epoch of metaphysical nihilism. Of course, it may be entirely true that our release into the mystery of being grants us “the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way.” The question is why this should be at all desirable, especially if the thinking of being expires in nihilism. And it is here that we find Heidegger without argument. As we read in a relevant passage from the “Letter on Humanism” of 1949:

Whether the realm of the truth of being is a blind alley or whether it is the free space in which freedom conserves its essence is something each one may judge after he himself has tried to go the designated way, or even better, after he has gone a better way, that is, a way befitting the question. I note in passing that we shall also have to judge whether the essence of freedom is itself a blind alley. But this just affirms my larger point. Heidegger returns us to the question of competence. But since fundamental ontology cannot stand the question of competence, we are left simply with a decision that leaves the future of philosophy hanging on the angst-ridden resolve that affirms itself in the face of death. And this is Cartesianism all over again, in the sense that

56 Heidegger, SZ, 9.
57 Heidegger, Gelassenheit, 26 / DoT, 55. The full import of Heidegger’s Kehre is indicated by his intention to open up a new way to thinking. See especially GA, 14:90 / EPTT, 449. “The task of thinking would then be the surrender of previous thinking to the determination of the matter of thinking.”
58 Heidegger, Gelassenheit, 26 / DoT, 55.
Heidegger’s subordination of ethics to ontology—the decisive severing of the human relation to the good from the foundations of philosophy—amounts to the most radical late modern expression of the Cartesian legacy. Rather than saving us from our fall into modern decadence, Heidegger’s thought results finally in a deepening of the modern crisis.

I am, of course, well aware that talk of Heidegger’s Cartesianism rubs against the grain of the common line: that Being and Time inaugurated a new era of the “death of the subject,” and with it a sweeping destruction of the humanism on which such concepts as “reason,” “knowledge,” “consciousness,” “freedom,” and “rights” were founded. I am also aware that significant work has been done to show that Heidegger did not simply wish to destroy the Cartesian cogito, but instead intended to advance the “positive possibilities” of Descartes’s philosophical project, beginning with the interrogation of the Cartesian sum (“der Seinssinn des ‘sum’”). But the line of questioning I am attempting to pursue digs more radically than a debate about whether Heidegger moved beyond or merely intensified Descartes’s ontocentric vices. At stake is the value of a philosophical methodology that abstracts the good, or the human relation to the good, from the foundations of philosophy. Such a methodology cannot possibly give us an intrinsically coherent, intellectually satisfying account of the order and intelligibility of human experience. Foremost, it cannot

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account for how the idea of the good enters into our lives. It is thus for this reason that Heidegger most severely calls into question the possibility of philosophy; not because the history of metaphysics has exhausted all of its possibilities, but because after Heidegger, no less than Descartes, philosophy is at a loss to account for its own possibility. It is at a loss to account for the love of wisdom.

If philosophy legitimates itself, indeed if philosophy is required to legitimate itself, through a confrontation with nihilism, it must do so by giving an account of the genesis of philosophical eros. It must be able to tell us why we desire philosophy. But even more fundamentally, it must be able to tell us how we come to such a desire, and why we experience this desire as something valuable or good. It must, in the end, be able to tell us how the good, or an idea of the good, enters into our lives. Yet such is the failure of Heidegger’s Cartesian legacy.

Let me now conclude this essay with a comment on what is at stake in a genuinely first philosophy. As we know, the tradition of first philosophy begins officially with Aristotle, according to whom the question of being ranks first because it is concerned with that which comes first in the order of knowledge (*gnôsis*), specifically, the first principles (*archai*) or the highest causes (*aitiai*). Because being is that which is most universal and most unchangeable with respect to the intelligible order of the cosmos, it is necessarily prior to the division of being into kinds; and since what is prior to division is absolutely first (qua *archê* or *aitia*), the study of being qua being deserves the name “first philosophy” (*prôtê philosophia*). Stated simply, and all too generally, first philosophy concerns the structure of intelligibility underlying the presence (*parousia*) of beings, as what is prior to any subsequent theoretical or practical inquiry. It is, then, this notion of first philosophy as the science of being qua being that has determined the historical fate of metaphysics from Aristotle to Heidegger.

In our own time, it is Heidegger who continues to bring the call for a defense of philosophy most urgently into view as a crisis in the

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64 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4.2.1004a2–9; 4.1.1003a33.
foundational character of first philosophy. Yet Heidegger shares with Descartes in the intention to make a specialized interpretation of the meaning of being foundational for the future of philosophy. Of course, Descartes concerned himself with a defense of modern scientific rationalism, whereas Heidegger was concerned with our fall into technological nihilism. But Heidegger and Descartes both wished to make foundational what was, for Aristotle, “the highest of the sciences.”

It bears noting, therefore, that what was highest for Aristotle is lowest for philosophers operating in the Cartesian mode. To be more specific, while the study of being is “first” for Aristotle because it is most general, and therefore prior in the order of knowledge, Aristotle does not make the study of being qua being first in the order of philosophical questioning. In this, he is consistent with the teaching in Plato’s dialogues: that philosophy begins in wonder at the order of nature and the cosmos. Heidegger likewise acknowledges that the question of being is not chronologically first in the order of questioning. But he also ranks the question of being first as “the question of all true questions.” Hence, he argues: “No questioning, and consequently no single scientific ‘problem’ either, understands itself if it does not grasp the question of all questions.” What Heidegger shares most crucially with Descartes is thus the attempt to understand the whole of reality on the basis of a return to the archê—that is, the first principle or the origin—which is cast in terms of an interpretation of the meaning of being. Unfortunately, to his detriment and to ours, it is precisely this intention that proves suspect for the attempt to account for the possibility of philosophy.

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70 The spirit of this essay is deeply indebted to Stanley Rosen.