

## REVIEW ARTICLE

Santiago Zabala, *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics*

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In this concise but rich book, Santiago Zabala takes stock of the current situation of philosophy, which he takes to be inescapably affected by Heidegger's thought. Heidegger brought the ancient topic of Being to life precisely by pointing to Being's decay: Being, at least as traditionally (mis)understood, is diseased, moribund, or mummified. But this alarming state does not, for Heidegger, give us cause to abandon Being; to the contrary, we are challenged to dwell on the decay, wrestle with the tradition, and seek a new beginning. We cannot simply overcome (überwinden) the tradition; we can only "get over" (*verwinden*) it (5), in the sense of "incorporating (learning to live with it)" (45).

In order to express this condition, Zabala develops an effective language of "remains": what we have left are only the remnants of the potent presence that once provided the founding sense of Being for the West. But in these remnants, Being remains: Being happens, Being is given to us today, precisely as leftover fragments that call for thought. This thought must take the form of hermeneutics (5, 14). For hermeneutics, interpretation is not a means to an end—a path to a promised land of final truth and complete correctness—but a process that is to be extended indefinitely. As long as interpreting continues, we continue to respond to the challenge and gift of Being in the most appropriate way possible for finite beings. But what exactly are we to interpret? As historical beings who understand through language, we cannot have an "original experience of Being" apart from the history of its articulations (53). The philosopher's first duty, then, is to interpret philosophical texts, and Zabala proceeds accordingly. He reviews the main achievements of Heidegger's writings in Chapter 1 and turns in Chapter 2 to post-Heideggerian texts, before presenting a brief program for hermeneutic ontology in Chapter 3.

"How is it going with Being?"—that is the question Heidegger demands that we ask. Or at least, that is Zabala's rendering of Heidegger's question in *Introduction to Metaphysics: Wie steht es mit dem Sein?* (50). Zabala's translation

is appropriate: it suggests the open-endedness of Heidegger's question and its reference to an event that, in Heidegger's view, runs throughout Western history yet is particularly urgent for us today. Because of its provocative questioning, *Introduction to Metaphysics* is, for Zabala, "the most significant of Heidegger's texts after *Being and Time*" (49). There is at least one rival, though: the *Contributions to Philosophy*, written in the later '30s, where Heidegger's question becomes *Wie west das Seyn?*—"How does Be-ing essentially happen?" or "How is Be-ing essencing?"—and the word *Ereignis*, "event," comes to the center of his thought as a response to this question.

Chapter 2 focuses on six post-Heideggerian thinkers who have struggled with Heidegger's questions. Reiner Schürmann interprets Being "as the mere epochal sequence of representations" (60), a "flux" without principles (66). Derrida seeks an alternative to presence in the "trace," a remnant that is not subordinate to some primal, self-sufficient original (71). Jean-Luc Nancy thinks of Being as always already "born" into the shared human world (74); presence is always a plural "copresence" (77). Gadamer, emphasizing the finitude and situatedness of human understanding, calls for "conversation" as a process that should take precedence over whatever answers might emerge from it (81). Gianni Vattimo, Zabala's teacher, has developed a "weak thought" that stresses the contingency of Being, its "eventual" and historical character (94).

While there is a recognizable "family resemblance" among these five postmetaphysical thinkers (111), Ernst Tugendhat is the black sheep in Zabala's survey of recent continental thought. This student of Heidegger directly contravened his teacher's central views by taking language primarily as assertoric sentences (92), and investigating Being by way of a formal analysis of sentence structure (86). The Heideggerian question of Nothing then becomes a question about the use of the word "not" (89). (This is not an original idea, as Zabala suggests, but goes back to Carnap's classic criticism of Heidegger's 1929 lecture "What is Metaphysics?") For Tugendhat, Heidegger's thought suffers from the lack of a "criterion of verifiability" (89). Zabala has presented a thoroughgoing interpretation in *The Hermeneutic Nature of Analytic Philosophy: A Study of Ernst Tugendhat* (Columbia, 2008), showing that Tugendhat straddles the analytic-continental divide. However, within the limits of Zabala's treatment of Tugendhat in the present book, it is hard to see why he is grouped with the other, distinctly non-analytic thinkers Zabala favors.

In his third and final chapter, Zabala sketches a logic of hermeneutics that is suited to the ontology of remnants. Hermeneutics, in Zabala's terms, "generates Being" (99). This is not to be understood as a celebration of will or of the sovereign subject, but as a call to respond gratefully to the gift of Being (101); to "generate" here means "to take up [metaphysics] consciously as our own, to shape what we see it to have been" (xiv). Since the gift of Being is a remnant, "*not what is but what remains is essential for philosophy*" (103). This approach calls for a "logic of discursive continuities" (106)—an understanding of the "experience of speech" that carries on the conversational interpretation of Being (107).

We might ask, though, once again: what exactly are we to interpret, if we have weaned ourselves from the myth of a Being in itself, if "the space in which philosophy finds itself inscribed is nothing other than its own discursive continuity" (115)? Why should we feel a particular obligation to participate in this discourse, or to prefer one interpretation of Being over another, if the conversation is not to be judged in terms of its correspondence to a Being that can be distinguished from the discourse? One does not have to insist, with Tugendhat, on a criterion of verifiability in order to sense the risk here of vacuousness and arbitrariness. Zabala, recognizing the risk, concludes with a rejection of the charge of relativism: he argues that "preferring one description to another is justified as a response to the description's own historical constellations" (119). This strikes me as a very vague reply that does not sufficiently address the relativistic threat. Surely the "historical constellations" do not determine our interpretations in a quasi-astrological manner, even if they limit our horizon. We can still ask, then, what ought to guide our preference for one interpretation over another within that horizon. This question is unanswerable, it seems to me, unless we see ontology as more than just a play of interpretations and allow it also to have applications in experience and practice—an idea that Zabala rejects rather abruptly (111).

While Zabala's style is relatively clear, some unnecessary ambiguities creep in when he does not maintain his usual convention of using "being" for an entity (something that is) and "Being" for what it means to be. (See p. 48 for some confusion.) Is the most fundamental question, "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" (29-30, 48) or is it, "Why *is* Being, and why *is* there not rather nothing?" (7). Strictly speaking, Being "is" not, since it is not an entity. Nevertheless, as Heidegger shows us in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the question about beings can provoke us to ask the question about Being. Even if Being is not, it is given; and we can be provoked by the sheer wonder of beings to appreciate the gift of Being.

On the whole, *The Remains of Being* is an effective reminder of some of the most important developments in twentieth-century continental philosophy, and a thought-provoking call to continue our pursuit of the question of Being in the twenty-first.

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