

## THE TOPOLOGY OF BEING

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To offer a word on the topic of the title of this paper is a manifestly circular undertaking. Yet how seldom do interpretations of Heidegger appear to learn from the topology of Heidegger's own considered style—from the essay, from that which ventures forward yet holds back.

For no matter how necessary it might be that we read Heidegger carefully, that we follow his writings to the letter, we should keep in mind that the venter of comparative criticism and the apparatus of philology with which so much philosophical interpretation seems compelled to present itself is a manifestation of the metaphysics or technics of research, and answers to the demand that philosophical thinking find its support and justification in grounding or guiding statements, in the *logoi* of metaphysical or technical-scientific thinking. Whatever we may have to say *about* Heidegger's topology, the *topos* of our own interpretation, faced with that same demand, always risks reverting to a meta-topo-logic of the essence of place, or else collapsing into philology—into biography, chronology, doxography—a twofold danger seemingly averted only by a well-intentioned faith in our own hermeneutical openness to the meaning of Heidegger's text.

Criticism and scholarship alone cannot ask where Heidegger's thinking is to be found, where it comes from and where it goes—they remain closed off, in other words, from its topology. For the *topos* of a way of thinking is decided not on its own terms but only in relation to another way, to one that would follow it, though to do so is neither to assimilate its content nor to practise its method. To follow a way is rather to encounter it in one's own way. But that means that one who would follow the way of another ought have some sense of where it is that such an encounter might take place. And if philosophical interpretation is not simply to happen but also to have some sense of its own situation, of its openness to a possible encounter with Heidegger, then another relation to and experience of language is needed, a relation other than trust in the well-foundedness or effectiveness of propositions.

The following is the exposition of a series of propositions. That difference, between proposition and exposition, between saying forth and thinking back—a difference that opens the possibility for the metaphysical and

technical positing of being—is itself, I suggest, the topology of being. The propositions that are here proposed may be understood as presenting Heidegger’s topology. Yet not one of the propositions is to be found in Heidegger’s works, nor is their interpretation justified with reference to or quotation from his writings, and so the whole, from the point of view of scholarly propriety, can only have the appearance of a string of groundless assertions.



### PROPOSITION 1. TOPOLOGY IS THE *LOGOS* OF *TOPOS*

Topology is a saying and thinking of the place of being. But it is not an ontology of place, a discourse on the being of place. Topology is not the grounding of a concept or an experience of place in a series of explanatory and justificatory statements. On the contrary, it is language—by language I mean the interrelation of saying and thinking—which first opens a place. The saying and thinking of being *is* the event of place—granting to the word in italics its properly enigmatic character.

We need one day to heed Heidegger’s critique of logic and let go of the metaphysical understanding of language as *logos*—as the statement that grounds and gives measure, as the utterance and communication of thought—an understanding that nevertheless continues to determine the style of philosophical statements, including those that claim to concur with Heidegger’s critique of logic. And we need more than ever to be alert to the strictly cybernetic demand that calls for the provision of technical-scientific information, for recourse to a mode of language whose purpose is to control the field of inquiry, to forestall questioning with the supply of an answer, to install its truths to the greatest effect. Neither is simply or primarily a possible way of writing and thinking about place. Each is nothing less than the opening of a place in and through language. The first is the traversal of a difference toward the otherworldliness of a presentation that would give grounds. The second is the reversal of the same difference toward the unearthliness of a manifest yet unacknowledged devastation of our relation to the demonstrative word.

### PROPOSITION 2. THE *TOPOS* IS THE COUNTRY WHERE AN ENCOUNTER OF COUNTERPARTS TAKES PLACE

It is important that this word be translated literally. That country (*Gegend*) is no essentially hospitable region, no idyllic countryside. The countering of the country is the opening of a rift; it is the differing of the earthly and the unearthly, a difference that is not identical with the distinction of the worldly and the otherworldly. The latter distinction is a measured transition from non-being to being. The former difference is the sudden and measureless event of the one or the other, or the persistent confusion of the one and the other, and there are no grounds on which we might decide, for example, whether we continue to follow the paths of habitual thoughtlessness about being or whether we have finally come to that place where we can think for ourselves.

And the counterparts (*Gegenden*) of that country—those whose parts, in the sense of places, are counter to one another—do not conform to a typological distinction of the human and the divine. The latter are not types of individuals but the contrary ways essential to the event of encounter, an encounter (*Begegnung*) that has the character of a correspondence. Though each is essentially different, and indeed self-differentiating, that difference is in turn sheltered in and by each of the two, which is why humanity can mistake its servitude for freedom or may aspire to replace the departed gods.

### PROPOSITION 3. THE COUNTRY OF THAT ENCOUNTER IS LANGUAGE

Our essence is *echein logon*, to hold to language, to be its interpreters. Of course it is true that all experience is interpretive and all experience eventuates in and through language. But to interpret is, in different ways, the particular vocation of the poet and the thinker, which means that the vocation of humanity is at once poetic

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and thoughtful. Poetizing and thinking: these are not particular professions or talents but the preeminent ways in which humanity responds to its place; as such they are ways in which it dwells outside the commonplace. The poetic calling is to be a sign, to show what needs to be shown. The thoughtful calling is in turn to let such signs be read, to let show itself what needs to be shown. Thinking alone is incapable of deciding what needs to be thought, it needs some indication of what is worthy of thought, which is borne by the poetic statement. Yet to say poetically what is worthy of thought is not yet to think through it.

And neither the poetic nor the thoughtful vocation, nor even both in concert, can decide for itself what needs to be shown. For interpretation to take place another is needed, one whose essence is essentially other, one who might give a sign, who might look in upon the mundane and point out what is worthy of thought. What is also called for, in other words, is a god.

### PROPOSITION 4. THE ESSENCE OF LANGUAGE IS THE DIFFERENCE OF SAYING AND THINKING

Saying precedes and enables thinking; it says what needs to be thought. Thinking follows saying; it tries to think what needs to be thought in what has already been said. Saying, as poetizing, as creativity *per se*, is an establishing. It establishes poetically where it is that humanity might reside. Thinking, as a thinking back to the difference—the crisis—which calls it forth, to its essential difference from saying, is as such necessarily criticism, which is to say, deconstruction, *echte Kritik*. It critically distinguishes another way of dwelling, one other than that of established habitude.

Of course saying forth and thinking back are not distinct events. All saying is in some measure thoughtful and all thinking is always also a saying. Yet saying is essentially older than thinking, which is why it precedes thinking historically. *Muthos*, the telling statement, the saying of what needs thinking, is older than and originally indistinguishable from *logos*, the grounding statement, the subjugation and arraignment of saying by thinking. Indeed, axiomatic logic is itself a poetizing—for what is an *axiōma* originally and literally if not a telling statement?—and the recent suggestion that Heidegger sutures philosophy to poetry is not only blind to its own poetic and mythic condition, it misses what is essential here, that a suture is the joining of a rift.

### PROPOSITION 5. THE INSTANCE OF LANGUAGE IS THE SIGN

Yet a sign is not a signification, the reference of a sensible signifier to its supersensible concept. Not only is our comprehension of the meaning of a signifier incapable of deciding the thought-worthiness of what it signifies, that thought-worthiness has already been decided whenever its meaning has been pointed out to us. Nor can any logical measure assure us that our preoccupation with the analysis of meaning in any given instance is not expended in the pursuit of what is unworthy of thought. Logic, we might say, never gets the hint.

The instancy (*Inständigkeit*) of the sign is not the particular occurrence of a general feature of language, of denotation, but a singular need or demand, in each case the same though never identical, which relates not to an extrinsic reality but to language itself. The instance of the sign is a sign that its interpretation is wanting.

A sign is an instance of the freedom of language, which frees us to think what it wants to say precisely by falling silent. It is not a sign for something else, for a meaning that might explain it, and so there can be no concept of a sign as such, in which we might discover the essence of language and the basic character of words. To interpret a sign is always to release a definite word from the thoughtless circulation of everyday talk and to suggest what that word—what the word ‘country’ for example—might still have to say.

But thoughtful interpretation can have no recourse to the telling image either, to that which poetizing establishes in imagination. Indeed the metaphysics of language is itself essentially a poetizing, the establishment of meaning on the basis of the *idea* or *Bild*, and the apparently radical discovery of the abstractions of formal-mathematical

language is simply the exchange of one type of grounding presentation for another, of the physical image for the geometrical. For what are the ways of syllogistic or dialectical thinking if not their conformity to a geometrical image? Yet the way of thought itself is the interminable yet not unrewarding search for the word without image.

All that remains to thinking, to the extent that it is free both of metaphysical ground-positing and of poetic world-creation, is the verb and the letter of language, is what its words literally say. The truth of language, in other words, lies in etymology. But thoughtful etymology is not a concern with what a word is supposed either originally or correctly to signify. That preconception itself arises from the metaphysics of language, from the assumption that words comprise a linguistic form and a conceptual content, for which etymology is merely the interpretation of the historical word on the basis of its syntactic and semantic morphology. Etymology: this is just the attempt to think through the historical withdrawal of sense, to think through the obfuscation and depletion of language in its everyday or technical-metaphysical usage.

#### PROPOSITION 6. THE *TOPOS* OF SAYING AND THINKING IS FOURFOLD, BUT THAT FOURFOLD IS IN EACH CASE DIFFERENT

The fourfold of poetizing saying is that familiar to us from the reading of Hölderlin. Saying strives with the concealing familiarity of what has already been said, in order that it might openly say what needs to be said, and it counters the self-manifestation or self-refusal of a sign that would point out what needs to be said with the self-defining interpretation of that sign. To the topology of *Sein und Zeit*, to the thesis that a world (and *a fortiori* the world of a text) is a relational totality of significance, we must add that the difference in which a world comes to be is in part the openness of the worldly horizon to the manifestation or absence of a sign, including such signs that might be given but not read, which might withdraw from the totality of worldly significance.

The fourfold of thinking, on the other hand, is obtained not from Hölderlin but from Heraclitus, and it is a crisis that is first thought through by Nietzsche. Thinking is called upon to decide not only whether its task is to interpret or to dictate such signs, to decide whether or not it may presume to aspire to divinity, but also whether it freely acquiesces to the originality and unavoidability of the differing of saying and thinking, to the essential unmasterability in thought of what has been said, or whether it is destined to remain enslaved not merely by familiar significations but by a relationship to saying, and so by a philosophy of language, which exhausts itself in the attempted mastery of significance.

#### PROPOSITION 7. THE WANT OF A SIGN IS ITSELF A SIGN

But that most unearthly sign, the sign that a sign is wanting, is from the beginning mistaken for the mere absence of a sign, and every fundamentalism, including those that arise from philosophy itself, is an arrogation to humanity of what was essentially divine, namely the dictation of what needs to be thought. Not only is the refusal of a sign itself a sign, of the passing by or passing away of the divinities, it is even the first thing that is said philosophically, but also the last thing to be thought through. The manifest refusal of a sign (the so-called death of god) is the original rupture of poetry and philosophy, and onto-theo-logic, which confuses want and absence, which brings the unearthly presence of the withheld sign to earth in the form of the axiom, is the still poetic and not yet thoughtful interpretation that has yet to think its own origin—that has yet to think through the openness of that refusal, of the falling silent of language.

If the statement of that refusal is the inception of philosophy, the decision that it poses for thought is the end of philosophy. That decision concerns whether the fourfold *topos* that sustains thinking might finally be heeded or whether it is destined to collapse into the twofold of hubristic diktat and enslavement to the onto-theo-craic demand for mastery. For what happens when the refusal of a sign prevails but goes unthought is not widespread ignorance, the disintegration of significance into blind intuitions and empty concepts, but something quite the opposite, namely the dedication of reason to the increasingly thoughtless project of the arrangement and

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security of what is well-known.

### PROPOSITION 8. THE RELATIVE UNTIMELINESS OF SAYING AND THINKING IS THE EVENT OF HISTORY

To say—but that also means to create, to administer, to love, to experiment, indeed to pursue any other career opportunity that might emerge from the current metaphysical economy—is to venture forth, to go ahead, and it is to do so to a degree thoughtlessly, just because creative saying opens the possibility for ways of thinking that it itself cannot recollect. To think—to perceive, to criticize, to question—on the other hand, is destined always to be too late, to no longer have the words that originally called it forth, since thinking may begin only when saying falls silent.

And if the difference of saying and thinking is essentially historical, then to try to think through Heidegger's topology is itself an historical act, however modest. Every act of thought is an epoch of being, even the most humble. So to follow Heidegger's statements about the topology of being, if we are also to be mindful of our own situation, is to give neither an unhistorical phenomenological interpretation of being in the world nor an historiological and philological account of what Heidegger might or ought to have said and thought. To think historically is to acknowledge that one's own thinking is essentially groundless yet not without precedent. To avoid historiography and comparative critique is to bear in mind that genuine critique, exposition, is not the dismantling of the position of another thinker but the attempt to free oneself for what needs to be thought; it is the exposure of one's own enduring thoughtlessness in the face of what demands thinking.

And though we are of course responsible for our statements, for our activity and creativity as such, our thinking, on the other hand, is neither our possession nor our achievement. Though they must answer for it, the inescapable fate of the creator, in the end, is to be disowned by their creation. But not even that possibility is available to the thinker, who is never more than the caretaker of thought.

### PROPOSITION 9. TOPOLOGY IS A THINKING BACK FROM THE END

The way through the country of language goes back to and through its inception, it tries to think more originally than hitherto. Thinking may only think back; its experience of its situation is other than that of saying, which must speak forth. Because thinking essentially turns back from its end in a return to its inception, because it tries to heed the event of its emergence from and collapse into thoughtlessness, and concedes the possibility that it itself might err in thoughtless confusion about its own situation, the topology of being is an eschatology. But that is just to say that thinking is genuine critique, that its vocation is to respond decisively to the crisis that sustains it, a critique that nevertheless must also grant that there is no measure that might decide whether it too still thinks, whether it alone finally thinks.

Of course to think back is not a reversal to and repetition of the thinking of an earlier epoch. To think back from the end of philosophy, which means to try to think its inception in a more original way, is even finally to allow thinking its due, if it is the case that philosophy has so far remained oblivious to its own poetic essence. To think back to the inception, to what is said but unthought in it, is even the only way of allowing thinking a future.

### PROPOSITION 10. THE TOPOLOGY OF BEING IS THE TAUTOLOGY OF BEING

What remains true of phenomenology, which we should understand not as a particular school of thought but as the perceptive critique of what presents itself to thought and so the way of thinking of philosophy as such, is that the matter of thought is the matter itself (*die Sache selbst*). The matter is the selfsame matter (to exploit the original homology of 'self' and 'same'), *to auto*. It is the very matter, the matter of *veritas*—sometimes the Latin

makes Heidegger's point more plainly than does the Greek. It is, in a word, it-itself!

The selfsame is not the self-identical, because self-identity is a basic (though of course disputed) trait of the being of beings, whereas *to auto* (Parmenides), *to pragma auto* (Plato), first allows being to come to light as the matter of philosophy. For Parmenides, it is the selfsameness of 'being to-be' (*eon emmenai*); for Plato, it is the selfsameness of 'being most in being' (*ontōs on*). But it is also that which allows saying and thinking to correspond with the instancy of being—with presence presencing, with the selfsame matter such that it demands to be said and thought.

But then the selfsame is precisely the difference itself. It is the so-called ontological and metaphysical difference of being and beings, but it is also the critical and historical difference that allows the crisis of saying and thinking to come to pass. It is the 'topic' of philosophy, to recover a word from the province of rhetoric, where it has languished since Aristotle. If the topology of being is the said but unthought difference that sustains the logic of truth (*alētheia*), if it is the open clearing (*Lichtung*) of self-concealing sheltering, then the tautology of being is the said—with the word *auto*, which is why 'authenticity' will always be the most suitable translation of *Eigentlichkeit*—but unthought event (*Ereignis*) of that matter, of it-itself in its self-withholding. And if Heidegger's topology is essentially also a tautology, then we need to free ourselves of the tendency to think the topology of being from the aesthetics and metaphysics and even poetics of time-space. The derivation goes rather the other way, from the unthought correlation of *Lichtung* and *Ereignis*, a correlation not thought through even by Heidegger himself.



Heidegger's own topology follows the way of an essay, and the style of the essay is that of restraint. Style is not to be confused with the concept of form—the essay is not to be distinguished from the aphorism, the dialogue, the treatise, the research paper. Style is rather, to speak topologically, the mode (the mood) of a way of thought; it is, to speak tautologically, the way of thought itself, its self-presence. The style of restraint is the thoughtful acknowledgment that all thinking is essentially also a saying, and the precedence of saying before thinking confronts thought with the inevitability of its own end, as something merely said, with the necessity, in Heidegger's own words, that it will be understood differently than it thought it understood itself. Restraint is the acceptance that every attempt to dictate terms, in say the commanding form of a decalogue, simply opens up the opportunity for the critical interpretation of those terms.

Thinking, which thinks back to the difference of what has already been said and what has not yet been thought—to its origin in silence—nevertheless must also speak forth. But to speak forth is to speak poetically, to establish a world, which in essence means to interpret the divine. If Heidegger's style is self-consciously one of restraint, if moreover it has the appearance of a passage through solitude outside all community of thought, is that not because it aspires once more to prophesy? Yet to speak forth may also mean to speak openly, indeed to speak openly of the open itself. The style of such a way of thinking is not prophetic but parrhesic, for if one wants to speak openly of the silent origin of language, one must also seek forgiveness for so doing, because in speak openly of the open one seemingly closes it off. But then what is the topology of being if not the apology of language?

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