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Ainbinder, Bernardo

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# COMMENTS TO “METONTOLOGY AND HEIDEGGER’S CONCERN FOR THE ONTIC AFTER BEING AND TIME: CHALLENGING THE A PRIORI”: SOME REMARKS ON ‘THE ONTIC’


Bernardo Ainbinder<sup>1</sup>

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In her deep and thought-provoking examination of the significance of Heidegger’s metontological considerations to understand the *Kehre*, Cristina Crichton (2022) focuses on Heidegger’s concern for the ontic as presented in the famous Appendix to section 10 of GA26, and suggests that it is precisely because of a radicalisation – rather than an abandonment – of such concern that Heidegger moves beyond metontology in the late 1920’s.

I disagree with Crichton’s claim that taking the ontic seriously requires abandoning not only metontology but also the fundamental ontological project more generally and with it the notion of *a priori* that shapes Heidegger’s reflection in the 1920’s. There is a sense, I will surmise, in which we can only take the ontic seriously by engaging in the kind of transcendental ontological project that Heidegger – following Husserl and Kant – endorses at least until 1929. That is precisely what the metontological project aims to bring to the fore.

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, School of Liberal Arts, University of Wollongong (UOW), Wollongong – Australia.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6630-458X>. Email: [bernardo@uow.edu.au](mailto:bernardo@uow.edu.au).

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I think, however, that Crichton (2022) is right in attributing to Heidegger from 1930 onwards the view that fundamental ontology needs to be abandoned and with it the associated notion of *a priori*. I think that the textual evidence speaks in her favour. In what follows, I will not engage in a discussion of Crichton's reading of Heidegger – which I take to be correct, although one-sided, for reasons I shall specify in a moment. Rather, I will draw my attention to a possible alternative way of understanding Heidegger's use of the expression 'the ontic', a way that would allow to take the ontic seriously within the project of fundamental ontology and only within it. Heidegger delineates this meaning in his late 1920's lectures and writings, although he seems to abandon it later. By exploring it, I hope to suggest a way of considering metontology under a positive light without committing to an abandonment of the project of fundamental ontology. In this way, I expect to contribute to the debate that Crichton's paper opens up.

The key passage where Heidegger presents the problem of metontology, in the Heim's translation that Crichton (2022) quotes, is the following:

Since being is there only insofar as beings are already there [*im Da*], fundamental ontology has in it the latent tendency toward a primordial, metaphysical transformation which becomes possible only when being is understood in its whole problematic. The intrinsic necessity for ontology to turn back to its point of origin can be clarified by reference to the primal phenomenon of human existence: the being 'man' understands being; understanding-of-being effects a distinction between being and beings; being is there only when Dasein understands being. *In other words, the possibility that being is there in the understanding presupposes the factual existence of Dasein, and this in turn presupposes the factual extantness of nature.* Right within the horizon of the problem of being, when posed radically, it appears that all this is visible and can become understood as being, only if a possible totality of being is already there. As a result, we need a special problematic which has for its proper theme beings as a whole. (HEIDEGGER, 1992, p.156-157/199, my emphasis).

Some authors seem to read in this passage a departure from the ontological project of *Being and Time* and the early lecture courses. Crowell (2000, p. 310) for instance expresses deep suspicions about Heidegger's quest for an "ontic ground' of ontology", which in his view amounts to conflating two distinct methodological approaches that need to be kept separated, "phenomenology" and "metaphysics" or, as he more decisively puts it in Crowell (2014) "transcendental philosophy" and "metaphysics". Very bluntly, the former

assumes that anything we can say about the world depends on the specific kind of inquiry being conducted about it and the inquirer so involved. Therefore, “[...] it will not be possible to treat the inquirer simply as part of a whole – ‘nature’, ‘life’ – that is defined *independently* of the inquiry.” (CROWELL, 2014, p. 22). This is precisely what metaphysics aim to do. In the light of these considerations, it is easy to see why Crowell sees Heidegger’s metontological turn as a flagrant violation of the principles of transcendental philosophy: grounding the understanding of being in the factual constitution of Dasein conceived *naturaliter* is exactly what the transcendental way deems impossible.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, Crichton (2022) – and Freeman, whom she follows in this respect – while disagreeing with Crowell’s bleak diagnostics of Heidegger’s metontological turn, share the assumption that metontology is indeed a departure from Heidegger’s previous transcendental-phenomenological fundamental ontology.

It is precisely this assumption that I would like to challenge. The first and obvious consideration is that Heidegger’s concern for the ontic – and this claim that fundamental ontology has ontic roots – is pervasive in the second half of the 1920’s and in all preparatory work for *Being and Time*. In a letter exchange with Löwith from 1927, Heidegger even praises himself for being the first to have acknowledged the necessity for ontology to refer back to an ontical ground (HEIDEGGER, 1990, p. 36).

If we restrict ourselves to *Being and Time*, and to its very introductory section, we find at least three ways in which such ontical ground is presented. The first one is that being can only be made accessible in and through beings. This is just the result of taking seriously the phenomenological method as a tool to conduct ontological inquiry. As Heidegger famously puts it, if “[...] being is the being of entities, then entities themselves turn out to be what is interrogated [*das Befragte*].” (BT, 26). This turning the gaze to entities – and not to pure concepts or to the basic assumptions of our common understanding of the world, the prejudices about being against which the opening section 1 warns us – is precisely the first indication of a ‘concern for the ontic’ in BT, and a recognition of the ontical grounds of ontology. Let us call this thesis OG1.

The other way in which the question about the ontic grounds of ontology appears in BT is in terms of the ontico-ontological priority of *Dasein*

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the limits of Crowell’s distinction and the possibility of a philosophical naturalism without metaphysical commitments, see Satne and Ainbinder (2019).

as the specific entity on which the inquiry will be focused. Now, Heidegger provides two *independent* reasons for this choice. The first one is that Dasein is the entity that can inquire about the question of being (BT 27). This is Heidegger's endorsement of the transcendental perspective as Crowell defines it: if the inquiry about being is a specific kind of inquiry based on a specific way of experiencing the world, then the mode of being of the inquirer cannot be bracketed. The second one is what is known as the 'pre-ontological' character of Dasein itself, that is, the fact that its own being is at stake or at issue for Dasein in its very existence (e.g. BT 32). The latter is independent from the former (although the possibility of asking is of course partially enabled by the mode of being characteristic of Dasein) and is linked to the fact that Dasein's mode of being makes it easier to see through its ontical determinations towards its mode of being. That is why in section 7 Heidegger speaks of a certain 'transparency' of Dasein. Whereas in the case of, e.g., triangles, it is difficult to distinguish its mode of being from ontical determinations such as having three sides, in the case of Dasein such determinations can be easily bracketed. Let us now call the inevitability of assuming the perspective of the being that we are OG2 and the methodological advantages that the ontological makeup of such being for ontological inquiry OG3.

Now, if we examine the relation between OG1, OG2 and OG3, we note that:

OG1 is independent and prior to OG2 and OG3. Accepting that being is the being of entities does not require any reference to Dasein.

OG2 is independent from OG3. We may assume the transcendental perspective in Crowell's sense without requiring us to focus on *Dasein* as an entity as the *via regia* for an account of being in general.

Now, let us analyse what Heidegger is exactly suggesting in that appendix to paragraph 10 of the lecture course on Leibniz. In the first place, he is clearly endorsing OG1. There is no *Umschlag*, no *metabole* in this respect. More importantly, he is also endorsing OG2. Contrary to what Crowell thinks, there is no abandonment of the transcendental perspective in this sense. Heidegger explicitly states that "[t]he intrinsic necessity for ontology to turn back to its point of origin can be clarified by reference to the primal phenomenon of human existence: the being 'man' understands being; understanding-of-being effects a distinction between being and beings; being is there only when Dasein understands being".

What he is dropping is OG3. This is the natural upshot of the pessimistic diagnostic in the concluding section of BT, where Heidegger notes that his analysis there cannot go beyond the specific mode of being of Dasein and has fallen short of addressing the fundamental ontological question about the meaning of being in general. Looking at the totality of being means then broadening the scope of the ontological question and taking the plurality of modes of being seriously. It also assumes that the kind of radical contingency that shapes our factual experience of the world is also constitutive of our understanding of it.

This does not imply, *per se*, abandoning the transcendental character of the inquiry, as Crowell thinks. That would only be the case if we assumed, as Kant seems to do, that any statement about the factual constitution of concrete subjectivity draws us back onto the realm of the constituted and therefore cannot play any role in the conditions of possibility for our experience of the world. But this is precisely what phenomenology contests.<sup>3</sup> Metontology is precisely Heidegger's attempt to overcome such difficulty, by examining how being is exhibited in the situated factual experience of nature, including our own nature. That is why only within metontology questions about Dasein embodiment can come to the fore. And it is also why Heidegger's reflections on life and the animal in 1929/30 are to be read within the metontological project.

Now, it is true that, as Freeman and Crichton note, metontology disappears shortly afterwards. Crichton (2022, p. 53) argues that the "[...] disappearance of metontology is due to the fact that it cannot properly account for Heidegger's increasing concern for the ontic." I have tried to suggest that this is not the only possible reading. The disappearance of metontology coincides, I would suggest, with Heidegger's rejection of OG2, which is not at all the result of an increasing concern with the ontic (i.e. OG1). As I have shown, OG1 and OG2 are perfectly compatible. Taking a serious look at the totality of being to disclose the factual conditions for our understanding of being is at least a possible path to both focus on the ontic and keep fundamental ontology alive. Heidegger's abandonment of metontology is not necessitated by any internal tension between the two. His reasons need to be looked for elsewhere.

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<sup>3</sup> Husserl for example deems Kant's notion of subjectivity no more than a "mythical construction;" it is "[...] his own sort of mythical talk, whose literal meaning points to something subjective, but a mode of the subjective which we are in principle unable to make intuitive to ourselves, whether through factual examples or through genuine analogy." (HUSSERL 1976, p. 116). See Ainbinder (2020) for a detailed examination of how Husserl transforms transcendental philosophy to overcome this problem. The same applies to my reading of Heidegger here.

Metontology, in its turn, is still a sensible project that can be pursued, the project of reconciling the contingency of our natural makeup and the inquiry about natural *a priori* conditions for our experience of the world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a way in which such project can be pursued, taking a cue from Husserl and Heidegger, see Ainbinder (2020) and Ainbinder and Stanciu (2020).

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