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Lobos Zuzunaga, Miguel

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The main themes of the “Last God” in Heidegger’s unpublished treatises (1930s and 1940s)

Os principais temas do “Último Deus” nos tratados inéditos de Heidegger (anos 30 e 40)

Miguel Lobos Zuzunaga [a][b] miguel.lobos@uniba.it
University of Bari Aldo Moro, Italia

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Abstract: In this study we expose and develop the core and principal themes of the philosophy of the last God in Martin Heidegger’s treatises written between 1930 and 1940. With this historical reconstruction it’s possible to observe and determine how his ontological research involves the subject of Godhood and how they evolve together in the period of time in which being is discovered and interpreted as Ereignis and as Anfang, but most importantly, when this idea becomes the object of an insistent philosophical work that advances towards a more precise formulation and completion of the horizon of its problems, in a group of initially secret writings that aimed to provide an answer to the “question of being”.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger, Last God, Phenomenology, Metaphysics, German Philosophy.

Resumo: Neste estudo, expomos e desenvolvemos os temas centrais e principais da filosofia do último Deus nos tratados de Martin Heidegger sobre o evento, escritos entre 1930 e 1940. Com esta reconstrução histórica é possível observar e determinar objetivamente como sua pesquisa ontológica envolve o tema da divindade e como eles evoluem juntos no período de tempo em que o ser é descoberto e interpretado como Ereignis e como Anfang, mas o mais importante, quando esta idéia se torna objeto de um trabalho filosófico insistente que avança em direção a uma formulação mais precisa e a uma conclusão do horizonte de seus problemas, em um grupo de escritos inicialmente secretos que visavam dar uma resposta à “questão do ser”.

Palavras-chave: Martin Heidegger, Último Deus, Fenomenologia, Metafísica, Filosofia alemã.

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Introduction: the structure of being and the ontological topic of the Last God

When between the 1940s and 1950s the German philosopher Martin Heidegger began to publish and republish some of his writings after a long public absence (some of them known for years, others were known only by an elected group of listeners, students, and pupils), the response of the critics was partly a question addressed to the author himself. “Why

Heidegger keep silence?” (*Warumschweigt Heidegger?*) (KORN, 1953, p. 6) ^[3] became, so to speak, one of the questions of those who reread, after a long public silence, the results of the philosophy of *Sein und Zeit*. On the one hand, his followers wondered how even possible Heidegger’s persistent silence about the latest catastrophic events in Europe was. But on the other hand, people wondered what had actually happened in his philosophical research from the 1930s onwards, pointing out to a thought that has now (then) become “strange”, on which in 1949 someone wrote (my translation): “we ask Heidegger to get out of his long reluctance and... to present his further philosophical developments... in a detailed, systematic and philosophical justification” (BOLLNOW, 1949, p. 128). These public statements allow us to enter the peculiarity of these years of silence: they are in fact the years of Heidegger’s hand-to-hand struggle with his own philosophical problem, the years of unpublished and deliberately private research of a new essential thought, and the years of a radical confrontation with the history of metaphysics.

Heidegger’s silence during the thirties and forties is actually a period of rich philosophical production; in fact, it’s only there that we can see in Heidegger an attempt to exhaust the question of being almost systematically. While the 1920s, for example, can be read as philosophical research made and out of references (Husserl, St. Paul/Augustine, Aristotle’s physics) (ESPOSITO, 2017, p. 35-54), that of the 1930s and 1940s is a *layered* research. From the public point of view, there are lectures and university courses. From a private point of view, there are the *Black Notebooks* (the first one available today begins in 1931). But there is another layer of philosophical production, even *the layer* that Heidegger has been trying to build since the early 1930s, and which emerges as a first attempt only in 1936 ^[4]. The development of this unpublished, unique, and *solely* in this sense “esoteric” philosophy was inaugurated with the famous treatise *Contributions to philosophy* and reached up to 1944 with *Die Stege des Anfangs*, thus tracing a common thread along these decades (VALLEGA-NEU, 2018, p. 1-17).

By now, Heideggerian scholars call it the *philosophy of the event* (*Ereignis-denken*), or the historical-ontological thought (*seinsgeschichtlichen Denken*), and the related works are usually designated as the writings of the *history of Being* or of *the second beginning* of philosophy (v. HERRMANN, 1989). It is also thought that these Treatises mark the “turning point” (the renown *Kehre*) of Heidegger’s thought, or that they are writings of a philosophy in transition (for a reconstruction of this, see STRUMMIELLO, 1995, p. 5-30). But beyond the philosophical denominations, our main goal here is to grasp the general attempt and the intention of these writings. And to facilitate the comprehensibility of this attempt, let’s start by stating that that attempt is to *say* and *to go over* the structure of being in itself – *das Seyn selbst*.

We say structure, and Heidegger would first say “history”, and even first of all “event” (*Ereignis*). In reality, the premise is actually the same (see HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 3-32 [5-27]; 405-419 [321-330]) ^[5]: Being

(with capital B, in German *Seyn* ^[6]), for Heidegger, is never a simply present object, whose objective features we can define. It is not . being. And yet, he writes in *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, “when a being is, Being [*Seyn*] must give itself”, i.e. it has already happened and decided on what *is* (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 7 [8], tr. mod.). For this reason, Being is not any type of singular being, it is not a product of man, and it is not any type of simple happening; rather Being is, to put it straightforwardly, the happening par excellence, the real and proper *event*: an event of something rather strange, that is to say, *that* that allows beings to be presented as such, *but in the same* presentation of beings.

This priority of “Being” as *the event* is not actually any chronological priority as if there were Being first and then the single beings. Indeed, Being, in addition to giving itself as an event, is itself an event in the midst of being: it can be lost, forgotten, and also intellectually retrieved. And when we say *being*, Heidegger actually means being and all the possibilities that derive from it, that is, everything that happens within a relationship with present things, with what manifests itself from being: calculation, use, machinations, the different concepts of science, history, theology, poetry, man, etc. The other dimension of Being, its founding concealment, can also manifest itself. This constitutes its history: its constitution as an original phenomenon – its *truth*, in Heidegger-lexicon –, and this happens as the natural decay of it, and its retrieval. The interpretations of Metaphysics and its history correspond to the first, that is, to the dominion of simple beings lacking Being. The second dimension corresponds to the task of retracing this double-happening within the event and to the task of returning what is more immediate and ordinary, what man ordinarily encounters (everything that happens at the mere level of beings) to its true dimensions and measures, to its true essence, thus redefining all phenomena and all the problems of ontology. But for Being to be able to reveal the truth of ontology, that is, to restore to reality its true dimensions in relation to it, it is necessary for there to be someone who can bear and found this discovery of the event: man, precisely, *the one that’s there*, or in Heidegger’s German: *Da-sein*. Man, discovering his maximum and radical possibility of being, can return to his being-there, to his own *existence*, and his own freedom (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 412, 414 [326-328]; HEIDEGGER, 1997, p. 229 [203-204], 236 [209]). In this way, the event has the potential to return everything – including man – to its *proprium* (this is why *Ereignis* is sometimes translated as *event of appropriation* or even *enowning*), to what has always really been, to the ultimate essence of what appears and in which we live, but whose truth is lost when it becomes necessarily and inevitably dominant, so to speak, what happens *inside* the event: the dominion of simple beings, of objects, of experiences, of subjects, races, etc. – what Heidegger calls the “*Unwesen*” (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 453 [357]).

For Heidegger, carrying out this task is what only thinkers can do. But in practice, this is what Heidegger himself tries to accomplish in the unpublished treatises of the 1930s and 1940s. While in the first esoteric writings the structure of Being is rather delineated by the motifs

and themes available to the human beings (again, *Dasein*) to reflect the articulation of Being itself, in the latter Heidegger tries to reconstruct this same articulation per se – although in the last available treatises (*Das Ereignis* and *Über den Anfang*) this is only achieved partially: each treatise has its own kind of discontinuity and lack of overall uniformity. Among the themes in which the reader can grasp the extreme consequences of this ontological approach we find, precisely, what Heidegger calls the *last God*.

Now, that the history of man and peoples, and therefore also the history of their metaphysics, has its roots in a determined experience of the event, implies for the same reason that something can happen in history itself that causes us to ask about its most original truth. And this is precisely what Heidegger wrote in a letter to Elizabeth Blochmann in 1934, anticipating a certain style of the esoteric thought and one of the traits of the philosophy of the *last God*. He writes:

Hölderlin pre-established the misery... of our historical being.... And our misery is the misery of the lack of misery, the powerlessness of an original experience of the problematic nature of being-there [or existence, *Dasein*]. ...Only the misery of today's mourning for the death of the gods... illuminates and prepares for the new institution of being (HEIDEGGER; BLOCHMANN, 1989, p. 83).

The misery that escapes from today's man, according to Heidegger, is the misery proper to man and phenomena: to be abandoned by Being (*Seinsverlassenheit*). Returning to this, which he will later call *indigence* and the *need* (*Not*) of *being* in general, is to re-found – to institute – Being itself, in other words: to return to question beings (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 416 [329-330]), its limits, its possibilities. And it is precisely the death of God, as a historical sign, that places us, according to Heidegger, in the midst of this possibility.

Passing by and the indecision of the Last God

The challenge re-proposed by Heidegger that crosses the thought of the last God is to see in his absence and his concrete non-participation in Being his most essential “closeness” (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 411-412 [325-326]). Let's go back on our tracks for a moment. The root and foundation of *what is* (of ontic reality) is Being, not a God. Of course, beings and ontic reality are freed and unhooked from the event into all of its possibilities within the event (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 413 [327], 417 [330]). Every gaze on beings, every interpretation of beings, even if they proceed to its highest generalities, principles, and infinite explanations, belong, despite everything, to the domain of beings. This domain is what metaphysics is based on, and it is also the reason why, Heidegger says, “every metaphysics is theological”. It is in fact from the sphere of beings that the explanations of their cause can arise through another being – a “supreme” one –, a “first original cause” (HEIDEGGER, 1999, p. 92). This means that all possible gods and all *theisms* are “subordinated”, as a matter of fact, to what Being itself has opened and to the degree to which this origin is forgotten and experienced (see HEIDEGGER, 1989,

p. 411 [325-326]; 1997, p. 235 [208-209], 240 [212-213]). But it means, beyond the correctness or otherwise of the interpretation that Heidegger makes of it, that in the sphere of the possibilities opened by beings and by man's machinations, "metaphysics itself" and therefore also its theological essence "is not even in the slightest position to *formulate*, let alone make a decision about God" (HEIDEGGER, 1999, p. 92), precisely because metaphysics necessarily and inexorably conveys this outcome.

Every possible God is nothing more than a result and obedience to the powers of being, a result that has always already been decided and determined. This leads to the paradox that even though metaphysics is the *thinking core* of every faith and religion (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 411 [325-326]) – even the mythical, pagan, and primitive ones (see HEIDEGGER, 1997, p. 237 [210]; 2009, p. 229-230 [197]) –, this long history of "divinization" *of* being and *from* being is nothing more than a long history of atheism, nihilism, and loss of God (*Gott-losigkeit*) (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 88 [74-75]). The experience of being cannot do other than relate fatally to God in terms of a "divinization" ^[7] of some aspect of the being – for example, the divinization of "being [as a] cause" (HEIDEGGER, 1997, p. 239-242 [211-214]). And *the more* ontic and theoretical explanations and constructions try to find solutions to the domain of ontic being, *the more* it conveys its own annihilation and the hidden declaration of its atheist and radical deprivation (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 88 [74]). This is, for Heidegger, the important discovery of Nietzsche in his *death of God* (see HEIDEGGER, 1999, p. 177-183).

The end, however, of this history of accumulation of ontic and therefore *theological* inventions and machinations insistently accused by the same original "indigence" of beings, is at the same time the beginning of "another", "higher" story (HEIDEGGER, 1999, p. 180). This new history is not another part of the historiography of ontology. Since beings and everything that happens cannot do anything other than find themselves already within the givenness of Being, it happens that if and only if man "extended" his essence towards the only and proper fundament of beings and ontic reality (that is, Being) (HEIDEGGER, 1998, p. 105 [89]; 2009, p. 210 [179-180]), this forgotten origin would return to appropriate (to itself) what is, in fact, possible only by it. The very dominion of beings, then, carries with it the trace and, indeed, the need for its *beginning* ^[8], its foundation, almost as a hidden request or call, inscribed wherever there's being. This is what Heidegger calls the "hints" of Being.

For this reason, in the articulation of Being itself, there is a sort of "flight" of the so-called Gods who are nothing but a derivation of (and that belong to) the sole domain of beings and things. But given that Being is the fundament and the only real reference of the order of beings, even if there was no foundation of Being – according to Heidegger – by humans (by *Dasein*, the one that can retrieve the truth of the whole of being, establishing and founding this truth), and if everything should fall in its unleashed machination, there would remain ultimately, however,

the profound truth according to which no God and no *divinization* has a decisive role and a fundamental place in the explanation of being. In addition to metaphysics which is, as we've discussed, a theology, there's the truth of Being that escapes every possible calculation and interpretation to which beings – and a part of man, if we remember the descriptions of factual life in *Sein und Zeit* (as in the paragraphs 35-38) but also in the whole research of the young Heidegger – are necessarily abandoned.

The gods flee and with them the greatest pretension of reality: to be founded and determined from itself – accepting willingly some kind of God under its own terms –, not allowing its true foundation. With the conclusion that there are no true divinities within Being, or rather, what can be called “God” or “gods” are excluded from an “unconditional relationship with Being” (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 161 [138], tr. mod.), namely, that what can be called *God* has to deal with the true aspect of reality. Philosophical profit by philosophical destruction.

And yet, the true outcome of this conclusion is that, concretely and surprisingly, Being itself does not cancel and does not make impossible the occurrence of something like a *God*. On the basis of Being it is put in motion the flight of all the “Gods” which will necessarily come to existence within metaphysics and which do not, however, correspond in any true way to the givenness and refusal of Being. But, conversely, the dominion of these Gods within the event constitutes at the same time the flight of the real “domain of the divine” (*Gottschaff*). What is instituted by Being itself is, as Heidegger says in the first esoteric writing, “the sphere of decision, as a whole, of the flight or the coming of the gods” (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 405 [321], tr. mod.). Nothing else: “the occurrence of the event offers only the domain of the appearance [of the last God]” (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 229 [197], tr. mod.). It offers its givenness and happening to an extreme and last possibility, beyond which there is no greater nor bigger possible distinction: the “indigence of the indecision about the proximity and distance of the gods” as the preparation of “a space for decision” (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 91 [72-73]; 2009, p. 229 [197]). A decision, however, that can never be resolved. This same *indecision* is what leads Heidegger to speak of both “God” and “gods”. The domain of “God” is, thus, an ultimate domain. It is, precisely, *the last God* in Heidegger's system of the event.

Being as event is thus finite in itself (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 410 [325]), none of the entities that metaphysics would consider a “divinity” are responsible for it. And once that, through man's rediscovery of Being, beings and ontic reality show themselves as what they essentially truly are, it would be evident – always according to Heidegger – that no deified being can come to grips with all the ontological richness of Being that, in fact, allowed *that same divinization* which, as we recalled, conveys its essential atheism (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 88 [74-75]) because at its base and on its horizon there are only “beings” and what already *is*. “The last” of which Heidegger speaks is all in this finitude of Being, in the impossibility to lead him back to any particular thing or even to Being

itself. Indeed, it is precisely the foundation and re-foundation of Being, finite in itself, that allows at the same time the true question of where a “God” could be (HEIDEGGER, 1998, p. 105 [89]), even if this question threatens to relapse into the domain of our closest and more natural possibilities (beings and ontic reality). It’s this refusal to Being itself – and therefore, the refusal beyond the refusal which is Being, a difference beyond difference (HEIDEGGER, 1997, p. 255; 2006, p. 224-225) – what our sole experience of things and objects could not offer: in other words, a true encounter and a space of decision regarding the “gods”, a face to face between man and “God” (*Ent-gegnung*). Reality itself finds a redefinition of itself through God, that is, through the negation of the dominion of reality.

In this standoff, according to Heidegger, what really *stands* is nothing else but Being. Since its “truth” (that is, what Being really is) restores and illuminates what happens inside it, i.e., it appropriates it to its essence, Being is required so that the realm of the divine can come back to itself (HEIDEGGER, 1997, p. 255 [224-225]). And perhaps this is one of the most important lexical problems of these private treatises: even if up to the last esoteric writing we find the expression “last God”, often and more and more insistently Heidegger will prefer not the words “God” or “gods”, but the simple and supreme sphere of indecision: *Gottschaft*, the deity, or *Gotthaft*^[9]. For this reason, we can still discuss if “the last God” should not be identified with this same sphere^[10].

Last remarks: the beginning of God

From the moment that the very essence of divinity as disengagement from the givenness and occurrence of Being (*Anfang*, GA 70, 131) depends, paradoxically, on the same event of Being as beginning and origin of every possible singular occurrence, this “deity” – “the last God” – is, according to Heidegger, the most “ancient” and *beginnal* (*anfänglich*), decided and put into motion, since ever – exactly: since the beginning (see CORIANDO, 1998, p. 196-197) –, by the event (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 229 [197], tr. mod.). Where one happens, the other happens. But the event, while giving and allowing (not giving itself as such, since it is different from particular beings) all the possibilities of being, and being itself the possibility of restoring to its essence what happens “inside” it (if we can allow ourselves this kind of non-Heideggerian figure of speech), the event, again, is precisely, for this reason, a “fatal” or “wretched” event (*unselig*), always *to be realized*, but never permanently or actually realized (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 41 [329], tr. mod.).

Only human beings, in their very existence, can return from time to time to their essential belongingness to Being and preserve and found this truth, attuning themselves towards it (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 161 [137-138]). Of course, the domain of the gods do not *needs* man, but Being (HEIDEGGER, 1997, p. 255 [224-225]); and *in* Being there is a need for *Dasein*, the *Dasein* that makes the experience of being and that

can put it and himself into question. It seems that within the event there is this sort of *call* and *need*, a game always put in motion and open as a possibility: the possibility that the finitude of Being and the extremeness of “God” are necessarily to be found not within the reach of our usual schemes, but rather in the amplitude of a question and in the open paths of our history as if a new beginning could be found in every existence: “Ask Being! And in its stillness, as the beginning of the word, the god answers. You may wander through all beings, yet nowhere does the trace of the god show itself” (HEIDEGGER, 1998, p. 105 [89], tr. mod.)^[11].

As a critical remark, we can ask ourselves whether there is a concrete reason why the “divine”, “God”, etc., continue to be part of Heidegger's language, if actually what is, so to speak, opened by being itself as its own and *sui generis* “outside” no longer belongs to any concept and category of being, and whether there are limits of the effective relationship between what is here called the Gods “of metaphysics” and “the last God”, because precisely the former is ultimately the gods of man, of our faiths, while the latter – briefly said – is the deity discovered by the existence of man (the Heideggerian man, that is to say). Two necessities within an objective (assumedly) state of affairs, double meaning of faith, a philosophical perspective against dogmatisms and ideologies (be it philosophical or theological)? The Heidegger of these writings provokes us into taking into consideration all these questions in their most extreme foundations, to fully understand the dominions of human experience in their most pure form. This is in fact what we can perceive in the strategy of the esoteric Heidegger: pushing God, Being, the World and man into their own places, only that God seems to be pushed right into the neighborhood of Being as a whole, its sense (or *his* or *their* sense) only to be found in the event that is Being, that is, in our innermost reality. A God whose divinity seems to equal, for Heidegger, purity, and uncertainty in its true closeness to us, always there to be found as long as there's being. It's not a matter of believing, it's a matter of ontology. Company of being and man, we can now understand at the end of this historical reconstruction some of Heidegger's soliloquies and private remarks on godhood in the history of man – and the history *that is* man –, returning to the last subject mentioned, namely, the questionability of the own *Seinsfrage* when it opens the way to a *Gottesfrage*:

Godhood - The gods [in the history of philosophy:]. Deus - creator - redeptor. / Deus as substantia prima. / Deus as omnitude realitatis. / Deus as an idea of reason. / Deus as identity - absolute. / Deus as absolute Spirit. / Deus - God is dead. / [Now] God as fundament and measure of Being (not only of singular things but a Lord of Being) - although also and alternatively the other way around. What kind of God it has, what kind of people it is. *What are we - who are we - where do we belong[?]* (HEIDEGGER, 2013, p. 593-594).

The open question corresponds also to the open possibilities and future paths of our history (we see in that passage also a metamorphosis of God as our maker, in the sense that it has a part and helps us in the definition of ourselves – maybe another form of Christianity-Hebraism?). But it also conveys the discovery of a structural matrix of every possible history, as a

cornerstone in every possible experience of being. And thus, the *Grenze* (the frontiers, borders, or edges) of Kantian Reason (see KrV B XX-XXI; see also Esposito, 2020, p. 559-570) become the *Grenze* of being itself (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 96 [81]; 2013, p. 565), and the finitude of existence acquires a deeper measure in front of the *last* and *ultimatespace* of confrontation. Does this religious finding resonate harmoniously with the core of today’s religions, could have been even found without them (COURTINE, 1994, p. 530-536), and is it the last shining stone found amidst the earthquakes awakened by nihilism? This kind of turning himself endlessly around (*umkehren*) a few radical phenomena in order to illuminate them and their surroundings is what constitutes Heidegger’s penetrating force of interpretation put into action in his esoteric treatises, or what some could consider one of the philosophical “tricks” of his own making (ARENDT, 2005, p. 361-362) ^[12].

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Notes

[3]Korn's article is actually an apology, answering to Habermas's article of 1953, entitled *Mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger denken*.

[4]Heidegger's research during the 1930s and 1940s as a layered research is a characteristic that only recently has been noticed and articulated, and in a first attempt to grasp it - to my knowledge - by C. Esposito (2021, p. 231-235). I've personally shown how this plays a role in Heidegger's life and work during the 1930s and 1940s in my Ph.D. thesis, *Martin Heidegger: i trattati degli anni Trenta e Quaranta sull'evento*.

[5]For what we explain here and in the next paragraph. I'll quote Heidegger's texts, for space and for a confrontation with the translated works, adding in square parenthesis the pages of the English translations indicated in the bibliography, where the full details of the references are provided. The translations of works that are only available in German are my own, and the modified translations, when needed, are indicated as "tr. mod".

[6]In today's English literature authors use sometimes the term *being*. Here, just the use of capital B might suffice the theoretical requirements of this translation, in order to avoid unnecessary hermeneutical complications from the reader's point of view.

[7]A deification that is at the same time an “un-deification”: making something divine out of the domain of simple beings is, at the same time, a progressive loss of what is to be considered – according to Heidegger – God. God – it might be worth to try to understand the origin of this idea – has no direct relation to beings, and this negativity constitutes its own positivity.

[8]We translate the German word *Anfang* simply as *Beginning*. The opposite of this, from Heidegger’s perspective, is the simple start of something. *Anfang* is also translated with *Incipience*. Here we prefer *Beginning* merely for the sake of comprehensibility.

[9]Already in *Besinnung* (see HEIDEGGER, 1997, p. 228); for this idea we should also have in mind *Über den Anfang* (see HEIDEGGER, 2005, pp. 130-132) and *Das Ereignis* (see HEIDEGGER, 2009, pp. 88-90, 160-161, 210, 229-230).

[10]Even in some early texts, Gods, god, and here – in the context of *Beiträge – Last God*, seem to point out to a “unique” phenomenon (see for instance HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 408).

[11]But see also *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (HEIDEGGER, 1989, p. 439).

[12]For a recent political-critical reading of this, see for instance, Espinoza, 2019, pp. 91-93.

Notas de autor

[a] MLZ is PhD in Philosophy. Department of Humanities (DISUM/DIRIUM);
e-mail: miguel.lobos@students.uni-freiburg.de

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