HEIDEGGER ON (IN)FINITUDE AND THE GRECO-LATIN GRAMMAR OF BEING

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ABSTRACT

Heideggerian thought is routinely understood to involve an insistence on finitude, and a rejection of the metaphysical priority of the infinite. As a general rule, this characterization is adequate, but it risks a significant oversimplification of a complex theme in Heidegger's thinking. After an initial discussion of his dominant position on (in)finitude, the paper focuses on a number of largely neglected and some recently published texts concerning Heidegger's retrieval of the inheritance of the Greek and Latin grammar of Being, as well as the origins of the idea of the infinite in Anaximander's ἄπειρον. These texts reveal some important tensions in Heideggerian thought on the status of infinitude in its relation to *die Sache selbst* of that thought.

Joan Stambaugh programmatically opened her influential text, *The Finitude of Being*, by insisting that "[t]hroughout a lifetime of writings, despite some fairly radical changes of perspective, Heidegger always consistently maintained that being is finite."[1] As a general starting point such a characterization is broadly justified, for (as the first section of this essay will survey) it points to a key theme in the basic orientation of Heideggerian thought. Nevertheless, the situation is far from straightforward, and in what follows I argue that Stambaugh's claim needs to be nuanced in two significant ways. One of these necessary qualifications has been noted previously in the scholarly literature, though the other has not received the attention it deserves.

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[1] Joan Stambaugh, *The Finitude of Being* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 1; hereafter cited as *Finitude*.

The first of these qualifications is one that Henri Birault famously pointed out decades ago,[2] and that Stambaugh herself eventually indicates in her book's conclusion.[3] This concerns Heidegger's insistence that the finitude of *Sein*[4] needs to be understood in the context of a radical project to overcome the whole metaphysical polarity of finitude/infinitude[5] as such. As will be seen, this aspect of Heideggerian thought (which becomes more explicit in his later work, even if Birault is right that it is present from the start) involves a rejection of *both* infinitude *and* finitude as they have been traditionally understood. Some key Heideggerian texts on this theme will be surveyed in section II, below.

However, the major contention of this essay (developed in sections III and IV) is that a second important qualification needs to be made, one that is continuous with but separate from the first, and which is perhaps only explicable on the basis of a full appreciation of the first. This concerns the striking counter-narrative evident in several later Heideggerian texts—dealing with the grammar of the word *Sein* and Anaximander's notion of ἄπειρον—that involves a qualified openness to, and even an embrace of, a certain sense of *in*finitude. What these infrequently attested texts reveal are some telling tensions and ambiguities in Heidegger's position on this question, as

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[2] Henri Birault, "Heidegger et la pensee de la finitude," *Revue internationale de Philosophie*, 52 (1960): 135-162; hereafter cited as *"Pensee de la finitude."*

[3] Stambaugh, *Finitude*, 164-69.

[4] In an essay in which careful and specific use of grammatical forms are of such importance, the rendering of Heidegger's *das Sein*, is a particular problem. Notwithstanding the title, in this essay I have chosen to avoid the problematic English gerund form of the verb to be (with or without capitalization), as well as attempts to use the grammatically correct but syntactically awkward English infinitive form, preferring to simply leave Heidegger's *Sein* untranslated. As contrived as this approach may appear, its benefits will become clearer as the essay progresses, especially in the third section that deals with the grammar of *Sein*.

[5] Finitude and infinitude are polysemous terms, as will be explored in various ways in this paper. However, suffice to indicate at the outset that my usage of these terms (and their cognates) in this essay relate primarily to their philosophical—as distinct from their mathematical—senses, even if this very distinction is a porous one.

well as moments in which Heidegger—contrary to received scholarly wisdom—
enthusiastically frames his own thought as *a thinking of the infinite*, understood in an
Anaximanderian sense. Taken together, these texts suggest that Heidegger's mature
understanding of (in)finitude is more complex and textured than is generally
appreciated.

I

A Philosopher of Finitude: Before the major argument can get underway, it is first
important to clearly acknowledge Heidegger's most widely attested position on the
matter at hand—his embrace of finitude and general suspicion of infinity—and to
clarify his reasons for this stance. In doing so, I seek to name some of the major pillars
of his approach against which the discussions that follow will be oriented.[6]

Most generally, Heidegger's position is a function of his programmatic rejection of
metaphysical grounds or founding absolutes. This lack of absolute grounds itself
flows from the parameters of his fundamentally 'alethiological' approach to the
question of *Sein*. When Heidegger rejected much of western metaphysics, he thereby
bracketed the whole complex of questions and concerns within which the quest for
such a ground made sense. In focusing instead on *Sein* qua the happening of ἀ–
λήθεια, finitude comes to the fore. Beings are never fully or simply disclosed, for the
process of unconcealment is always and everywhere accompanied by concealment. If

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[6] This survey is limited, of course, to Heidegger's views on this matter. As such, little can be said here
concerning the vast context within which Heidegger's thought sits in terms of the complex history and
evolution of the idea of the (in)finite in western philosophy. Of the various studies of this theme, two
classic papers stand out in their brief but penetrating sketches of this history: Birault's "*Pensee de la
finitude*" (to which I will turn later in the paper); and W. Norris Clarke, "The Limitation of Act by
Potency in St. Thomas: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?" *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952): 167-194. See
also two more recent studies by Rein Undusk: "Infinity on the Threshold of Christianity: The
Emergence of a Positive Concept out of Negativity," *Trames* 13 (2009): 307–340; and "Faith and Reason:
Charting the Medieval Concept of the Infinite," *Trames* 16 (2012): 3–45.

this is a ubiquitous theme in Heideggerian thought early and late, so too is the constant emphasis on the belonging together of *Sein* and Dasein, *Ereignis* and man, and of their keynote interdependency. There is no unimpeded noontime light within infinite horizons in Heideggerian thought, only varying clearings in the forest. Shadows, ambiguity, finitude.

In Heidegger's early works, the theme of ontological finitude is linked largely to his thinking about facticity and temporality. In *Being and Time*, Dasein, as being-towards-death, is finite not simply in that it will reach a point at which it "just stops"—that is, it is chronologically finite—but rather insofar as it "*exists finitely*."[7] As thrown, Dasein is finite through and through. Consequently, Heidegger labels the idea of infinite time as "*in*authentic temporality" that is only possible on the basis of "finite authentic temporality." In other words, "[o]nly because primordial time is *finite* can the 'derived' time temporalize itself as *infinite;*"[8] or as he puts it elsewhere, "the endlessness of common time" emerges only through *Dasein's* "forget[ting of] its own essential finitude."[9]

For Heidegger, this forgetting of finitude is closely linked to a confusion concerning human participation in divine infinitude in Romantic and Idealist doctrines of human infinitude, and this is a theme he takes up in a variety of ways in the 1920s and 1930s. It is seen in his reading of Schleiermacher's use of the vocabulary of the infinite in

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[7] Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2001), 330, hereafter cited as *SZ*; translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 378, hereafter cited as *BT*. Italicization is Heidegger's.

[8] *SZ*, 331; *BT*, 379. Italicization is Heidegger's. Note, however, Thomas Sheehan's observation concerning the "paradox" that in *Sein und Zeit* "the *finitude* of exsistence guarantees the *in*finitude of ex-sistence's reach. Our structural engagement with meaning is radically open-ended and in principle without closure." *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 192.

[9] Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme Der Phänomenologie*. ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 24 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1975), 386; translated by Albert Hofstadter as *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 273.

1920-21,[10] but, it can be traced back at least as far as his essay on Karl Jaspers's psychology of worldviews (1919/20). Even as he draws deeply on Jasper's thematization of death and other "limit situations," Heidegger takes issue with the way in which Jaspers's focus on limitation can only be understood "with reference to the infinite whole of life." Accordingly, "[w]hen we attempt to understand life," Heidegger paraphrases Jaspers, "we find only the finite and the particular. But we can see that behind all this something is astir as its driving force, namely, a movement that is oriented in the direction of the infinite."[11] In a critique that anticipates his debates a decade later with Ernst Cassirer, Heidegger complains that the idea of the infinite operating here is "not sufficiently explained." Indeed there seems to be more than one such sense of the word in play, "each of which is already vague on its own, [and which] are made to reflect each other in a muddled fashion."[12] A year later, Heidegger goes on to suggest that the "life-philosophy" of his day characteristically conflates "the always more" of life with such a vague conception of the infinite.[13]

In his *Kantbuch*, Heidegger argues for the decisiveness of Kant's insistence on the finitude of human cognition which is made in the course of the distinction between human finite sensory intuition and the divine originary intuition. Unlike the idea of

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[10] Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*. ed. Matthias Jung, et al, vol. 60 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1995), 321; translated by Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei as *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 243.

[11] Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*. ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 9 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2004), 16, hereafter cited as *GA9*; translated by John van Buren in William McNeill. ed. *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14, hereafter cited as *PM*.

[12] *GA9*, 18; *PM*, 15. Heidegger goes on to diagnose Jaspers' conception of the infinite as being a vague "syncretism" involving elements of Kant's doctrine of antinomies and the influence of "Bergsonian lines of argument" and Kierkegaard's concept of the absolute … 'cleansed' of its Lutheran religious sense." *GA9*, 19, 27; *PM*, 16, 23.

[13] Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles*. ed. W. von Bröcker, vol. 61 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1994), 108; translated by Richard Rojcewicz as *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 80.

infinite divine knowledge which in principle grasps things immediately and as a whole, human knowledge is essentially reliant on finite intuition and requires thinking. Consequently, "[t]hinking as such is thus already the mark of finitude."[14] In his summer 1930 lectures on human freedom, Heidegger concludes: "it is just blindness and lack of understanding to enthuse over a pure absolute reason, overlooking the fact that what Kant's concept of reason announces is precisely the deepest finitude of man."[15] Of course, Heidegger pushes well beyond Kant in terms of the significance of intuitional finitude qua the first step in grasping Dasein's thrownness. (Such an account of radical sense-making has no place for Kant's pure intuitions of sensibility and fixed categories of understanding.) Nonetheless, Heidegger's enlistment of Kant as a key ally for his emphasis on human finitude was an important move in the struggle over the contested Kantian legacy, as seen in his famous 1929 debate with Cassirer at Davos. Much has already been written of Heidegger's firm opposition there to Cassirer's notion of an immanent infinitude by which the human symbolic faculty raises it beyond the merely finite.[16]

It was with his engagements with Hegel that Heidegger confronted the metaphysics of infinitude in perhaps its most systematic modern form. In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger simply attacked Hegel's "common [*vulgären*]" metaphysical conception of time as an infinite sequence of discrete "Nows," and he sharply contrasts it with his own account

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[14] Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*. ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 3 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2010), 25, hereafter cited as *GA*3; translated by Richard Taft as *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 17. More generally, see §4-5 and his response to Odebrecht in appendix V. See also GA 25, §5.

[15] Martin Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*. ed. Hartmut Tietjen, vol. 31 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1994), 211, hereafter cited as *GA*31; translated by Ted Sadler as *The Essence of Human Freedom* (London: Continuum, 2002), 145-46, hereafter cited as *EHF*.

[16] See *GA*3, appendix IV. See also Peter Gordon's fine discussion in *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

of the ecstatic temporality of Dasein.[17] A more developed critique of Hegel's purported dialectical sublimation of subjective finitude followed in his 1930/31 lecture series on the opening chapters of the *Phenomenology*. Here Heidegger rejects Hegel's systematic project of overcoming the relativity of finite consciousness in its object-dependency through the absolute knowledge of speculative reason. To be sure, Hegel's notion of infinitude is not to be confused with "a continuous alignment of determinations, endlessly going forward from one to the other," but rather "the reflection of the determinate back into itself."[18] Yet the most telling issue for Heidegger is that Hegel's entire edifice of thought is utterly *founded* on the idea of the absolute. The *Phenomenology* "begins absolutely with the absolute"; and "this absoluteness and infinity never became a problem for [Hegel] because they *could* never become a problem." After all, if "the infinity of absolute knowledge determine[s] the truth of being … sublat[ing] everything that is finite into itself … [then] all philosophizing moves only in this sublation."[19]

Heidegger's sharp critique of Rainer Maria Rilke's conception of "the Open" a decade later in *Parmenides*, provides a further noteworthy case of Heidegger's staunch opposition to metaphysical infinitude. Heidegger is anxious here to point out vast differences between his own usage of this term and Rilke's. He speaks of "a gaping abyss between what Rilke names the open and 'the open' in the sense of the unconcealment of beings." In contrast to his own usage, Heidegger reads Rilke's Open

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[17] *SZ*, 431; *BT*, 483. (Macquarrie and Robinson translate this more gently as "the way time is ordinarily understood"). More generally, see *SZ* §82.

[18] Martin Heidegger, *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes*. ed. Ingtraud Görland, vol. 32 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1997), 114, hereafter cited as *GA*32; translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly as *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 80, hereafter cited as *HPS*. Heidegger here distinguishes between logical and subjective groundings for Hegel's concept of infinity, as developed respectively in the *Science of Logic* and the *Phenomenology*.

[19] *GA*32, 54 and 105-06; *HPS*, 37 and 74-75. Earlier, Heidegger quoted Hegel (in the *Differenzschrift*) who himself makes effectively (and programmatically) the same point: *GA*32, 52; *HPS*, 36.

as indicating simply the limitless and unbounded—literally, the wide open whole—"in the sense in which we speak of 'open water' when we are on the high seas and all borders of land disappear."[20] For Heidegger, such a "bad infinity" is utterly distinct from his own conception of the cleared illuminated sheltering space of *Sein*.

Heidegger's insistence on the ineluctable truth of human finitude comes with a determined protest that finitude should never be viewed as some kind of failure to rise to the heights of infinitude. "For a long time," he laments, "the greatness of finitude has been downgraded through a false and deceptive infinity, such that we are no longer able to reconcile finitude and greatness."[21] The point is not to "turn away from an uncomprehended finitude toward a comforting infinitude,"[22] as he puts it elsewhere, but rather to understand the nobility of our place as the shepherd of *Sein*.

Of course, as a consummate Greek thinker, Heidegger's rejection of the infinite is also in keeping with the ancient Greeks's deep suspicion of what they associated with the indeterminate, the chaotic, the unlimited, that which lacks the completion brought by form and limit. On this account, the infinite is—by definition—nothing in particular, and thus the antithesis of οὐσία. The reflections of this suspicion are seen throughout Greek philosophy, mathematics and literature. Parmenides describes the "it is" as "a ball, well rounded," held by necessity "in bonds of a limit … on all sides" as opposed to the unspeakable unlimited "is not."[23] The dualism of the Pythagoreans associated

[20] Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*. ed. Manfred S. Frings, vol. 54 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1992), 237 and 226; translated by André Schuwe and Richard Rojcewicz as *Parmenides* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 159 and 152. See also Stambaugh, *Finitude*, 37-39, 47-49 and 93-95.

[21] *GA*31, 136; *EHF*, 94.

[22] Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*. ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 29/30 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1983), 306; translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 209.

[23] From the poem of Parmenides, fragment 8, ll. 30-34, 43. Translation from S. Marc Cohen, et al, *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), 44-45.

limit (πέρας) with (among other things) unity, the good, light, oddness, as opposed to the unlimited (ἄπειρον) that was associated plurality, evil, darkness, evenness, and so on.[24] The ontological primacy of limitation remains central in Platonic and Aristotelian thought insofar as it is inseparable from ιδέα and μορφή that bring form and intelligibility to what is otherwise unknowable.[25] Or as Aristotle famously puts it, tellingly punning on τέλος (end) and τέλειος (complete/perfect): "nature … avoids what is infinite [ἄπειρον], because the infinite lacks completion and finality [ἀτελές], whereas nature ever seeks an end [τέλος].[26] Some of the lasting contributions of Greek mathematicians (such as Eudoxus and Euclid) came through their struggles to come to terms with the threat of infinity as presented by new discoveries in the field.[27] In literature, one needs only to think of the tragedies of figures such as Sisyphus, Prometheus and Tantalus, all of whom endured endless suffering marked by absurdity and infinite repetition.

Heidegger's several readings of the ancient Greeks (and Aristotle in particular) in the early 1920s are consistent with this general Greek sense of the chaotic indeterminacy

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[24] See Heidegger's representation of this dualism in Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der antiken Philosophie*. ed. Franz-Karl Blust, vol. 22 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2004), 41-42, hereafter cited as *GA*22; translated by Richard Rojcewicz as *Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 32-33, hereafter cited as *BAP*; as well as *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie*. ed. Mark Michalski, vol. 18 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2002), 319, hereafter cited as *GA*18; translated by Robert Metcalf and Mark Tanzer as *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 216, hereafter cited as *BArP*.

[25] See, for example, Aristotle: "the unlimited … qua unlimited is unknowable, since 'material,' as such, is formless.": *Physics*, III, VI, 207a 30-37, translated by P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford, Loeb Classical Library, Vol 228 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 255. Heidegger notes that for the Greeks, πέρας meant "not only εἶδος but also τέλος." *GA*18, 38-39; *BArP*, 28.

[26] "ἡ δὲ φεύγει τὸ ἄπειρον τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἄπειρον ἀτελές ἡ δὲ φύσις ἀεὶ ζητεῖ τέλος." *Generation of Animals*, I, 715b, translated by A.L. Peck, Loeb Classical Library, Vol 366 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 7. [Translation amended]

[27] This includes irrational numbers, the discovery of which by Hippasus of Metapontum allegedly put him disastrously out of favor with his fellow Pythagoreans! On the problem of infinity in ancient Greek mathematics, see Thomas Heath, *A History of Greek Mathematics, Vol. 1: From Thales to Euclid* (New York: Dover, 1981).

of infinitude. For Aristotle, Heidegger approvingly observes, "Being-there is being-limited [*Dasein is Begrenztsein*]," and indeed "the ἀγαθών of human being-there [*menschlichen Daseins*] must be a πέρας because every being is determined as a limit-being [*Grenze-Sein*]."[28] If πέρας is associated with εἶδος and τέλος, then ὕλη is the ἄπειρον, for it is only once matter is in-formed that it becomes something real, determinate.[29] Almost two decades later, Heidegger insists that the Greek philosophical πέρας refers not to outer boundaries limiting endless progression, but to what "defines, gives footing and stability, that by which and in which something begins and is."[30]

II

Overcoming the Polarity: What the preceding condensed survey aimed to underline is the sustained nature of Heidegger's opposition to the traditional metaphysics of infinitude. Nevertheless—and here we come to the first important qualification to the idea that Heidegger is a consummate philosopher of finitude—this ubiquitous theme needs to be set in the context of another insistence in Heideggerian though that is less often developed explicitly. This is that he is less intent on championing finitude and rejecting infinitude, as much as developing a radically new way of thinking that moves beyond any opposition between the two. This qualification is made in both less and more radical ways across the *Gesamtausgabe*.

The less radical sense of the overcoming of the finite/infinite polarity is indicated in passages in which Heidegger simply cancels out one whole side of the familiar

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28 *GA*18, 72, 93; *BArP*, 51, 64.

29 Martin Heidegger, *Aristoteles: Metaphysik IX, 1-3*. ed. Heinrich Hüni, vol. 33 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2006), §14, hereafter cited as *GA*33; translated by Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek as *Aristotle's* Metaphysics θ 1-3 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), hereafter cited as *AM*.

30 *GA*9, 339; *PM*, 206.

polarity in insisting on the *intrinsic* (effectively unipolar) finitude of *Sein*; that is, of finitude without any inherent reference to an Absolute beyond itself that it somehow lacks within itself. Such an approach, is seen, for example, in the 1962 *Protokoll* to his seminar on *Zeit und Sein*. Here Heidegger states that the finitude of *Sein* (in fact, the finitude "*des Ereignisses, des Seins, des Gevierts*") that is spoken about in the seminar is quite different from that which is spoken about in the *Kantbuch* "in that it is no longer thought in terms of the relationship to infinity, but rather as finitude in itself … in terms of *Ereignis*."[31] Accordingly, *Sein* is finite intrinsically by virtue of its belonging together with finite human being. *Sein* is *Ereignis*: the belonging together of *Sein/Seyn* and Dasein/man. Insofar as it needs Dasein/man as its 'there', *Sein* is not absolute. In his *Zähringen* seminar, he comments:

> [T]he human necessarily belongs to, and has his place in, the openness (and currently in the forgetfulness) of being. Being, however, for its opening, needs man as the there of its manifestation. For this reason the letter to Jean Beaufret speaks of man as the shepherd of being … If being needs something of the human's kind in order to be, then a finitude of being must accordingly be assumed."[32]

Notwithstanding Heidegger's own comment in the *Zeit und Sein Protokoll* concerning the development in his thinking of finitude since the *Kantbuch*, the extent of this change can be overstated. True, the claim about the finitude of *Sein* as such (and not

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[31] Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*. ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 14 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2007), 58; translated by Joan Stambaugh as *On Time and Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 54. Stambaugh quotes this passage in the conclusion of her *Finitude* (164).

[32] Martin Heidegger, *Le Thor 1966, 1968, 1969 – Zähringen 1973*, edited by Curd Ochwadt. (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 108-09; translated by Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul as *Four Seminars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 63.

simply Dasein), is not found in the *Kantbuch*.[33] However, the motif of the singularity

of finitude—its irreducibility to the infinite—is in some senses simply a radicalization

of the rejection of infinite time qua inauthentic temporality in *Sein und Zeit* (see

above).

It is perhaps this recognition that led Henri Birault to claim (in his famous 1960 essay),

that "Heidegger's theory of *Endlichkeit*, being-finite [*l'etre-fini*], is precisely not a theory

of finitude."[34] For Birault, what Christian metaphysics and twentieth century atheistic

philosophies ironically share in common is a "fundamentally theological" conception

of metaphysical infinitude, and of a framing of finitude in relation to it. In his view, it

was precisely Heidegger's attempt to overcome such an onto-theological conception

of finitude – an endeavor that characterized his work going back at least as far as *Sein*

und Zeit – that eventually led him to drop the whole language of *Endlichkeit*, given its

complicity with the familiar polarity by which it was understood. However, argues

Birault, this move "should not be interpreted as a reversal or conversion (*Kehre*) in

favor of some opposite of *Endlichkeit*, but rather as the deepening of this concept that

sought to speak in a language still inadequate."[35] Instructively, Birault goes on to

identify Heidegger's language of "the nothing [*das Nichts*]" as the way in which he

sought to speak in a new and more radical way of the finitude of *Sein* without being

drawn into the old metaphysical polarity: "the ontico-theological concept of being-

finite is dropped in favor of a Nothingness [*Néantir*] which for the first time is the

Nothingness of *Sein* [*l'Etre*]."[36] Significantly (in light of the discussion to come),

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[33] It is, however, stated towards the end of *Was ist Metaphysik?*: "being [*Sein*] itself is essentially finite, and manifests itself only in the transcendence of a Dasein that is held out into the nothing." (GA9, 17; PM, 95)

[34] *Pensee de la finitude*, 149. This and subsequent translations from Birault's essay are my own.

[35] *Pensee de la finitude*, 158.

[36] *ibid*. Birault refers here to Heidegger's claims in *Was ist Metaphysik?* (only a year or two after the publication of the *Kantbuch*) that *Sein* itself is finite in its essence; as well as to the famous passage in *Brief uber den 'Humanismus*: "*das Sein nichtet—als das Sein.*"

Birault links this nothingness or "veiling" of *Sein* to the later motif of *Sein*'s "withdrawal [*Entzug*],"[37] by which *Sein* (in its nothingness) recedes behind all beings.

Birault's reading is already pointing toward what I would suggest is the more radical sense of the overcoming of the finite-infinite polarity that appears in the being-historical treatises (published for the first time long after Birault's essay appeared). In *Beiträge*, for example, Heidegger goes as far as to deny that the language of *either* infinitude *or finitude* is appropriately applied to *Seyn*. "Ultimately," he writes, "the question of the essential occurrence of Beyng [*der Wesung des Seyns*] stands outside of the conflict between those propositions." In fact, the insistence on the finitude of *Seyn* was only ever a strategic move in order to avoid "every sort of 'idealism';"[38] or as he puts it in a related section in *Besinnung*, it was "merely a preventative attempt that was articulated in the language of metaphysics in order to overcome the ἀεί in the sense of 'making presencing constant'."[39]

This claim that both infinitude and finitude, in the usual metaphysical sense of these terms, might be ascribed to *Seyn* is enormously significant, for it cuts both ways. On one hand, one might say that *Seyn* is finite, so long as "its abyssal character is affirmed,"[40] and it is not understood to be "a finished, assertible 'property' of *Seyn* and of Dasein."[41] But on the other hand, and more strikingly, Heidegger makes a similar move in relation to infinitude: thus, one might also say that *Seyn* is infinite, so long as

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[37] *Pensee de la finitude*, 161.

[38] Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*. ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 65 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2003), 268, hereafter cited as *GA*65; translated by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu as *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 211, hereafter cited as *CP*.

[39] Martin Heidegger, *Besinnung*. ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 66 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1997), 394, hereafter cited as *GA*66; translated by Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary as *Mindfulness* (London: Continuum, 2006), 348, hereafter cited as *MD*.

[40] *GA*65, 268; *CP*, 211.

[41] *GA*66, 89; *MD*, 74.

it is also affirmed as "*determinate,*" and so is not confused with a metaphysical Absolute. How is this seemingly oxymoronic notion of a 'determinate infinitude' to be interpreted? Heidegger says only that it cannot mean an "endless flowing" that goes on forever, but instead "a closed *circle!*" [42] It is not difficult to hear here a clear anticipation of Heidegger's Nietzsche lectures on the eternal recurrence (given several years later) in which he maintains that even given the idea of an "infinitude of actual time, the only possible kind of occurrence for a finite world that is now still 'becoming' is recurrence—the cycle." [43]

However, while there can be little doubt about Heidegger's life-long opposition to metaphysical systems that enshrine an infinite absolute, and while acknowledging his toying with a Nietzschean sense of closed determinate cyclical infinitude, it is important to note that these are not his only conceptions of the in-finite. Indeed, there are several Heideggerian texts—all of which deal in different ways with the legacy of ancient Greek thought—in which a striking counter-narrative emerges to the standard view that would regard Heidegger as a 'philosopher of finitude' without second thought, and in which a striking further sense emerges right out of the heart of his mature thinking of *Sein*. In one case (related to the Greco-Latin grammar of *Sein*), his reasoning strains toward an ambiguous recognition of the indeterminate originative primacy of *Sein*. However, in a second case (two texts composed a decade apart, each dealing with Anaximander's notion of τὸ ἄπειρον), Heidegger explicitly embraces a

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[42] *GA*65, 269; *CP*, 211. The exclamation point is Heidegger's.

[43] Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*. ed. Brigitte Schillbach, vol. 6.1 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1996), 365, hereafter cited as *GA*6.1; translated by David Farrell Krell as *Nietzsche, Vol 2* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 147, hereafter cited as *N*. In fact, these Nietzsche lectures also provide a helpful elaboration of the weaker sense of the overcoming of the metaphysics of finitude/ infinitude (namely, intrinsic finitude). Accordingly, Heidegger notes that for Nietzsche, the world was finite (since *Kraft* is finite), though not in the sense of the world "colliding against something else that the world is not;" for finitude rather "emerges from the world itself." (*GA*6.1, 308; *N*, 88.)

strong and specific sense of abyssal infinitude qua indeterminate plentitude. The following sections examine these two sets of texts in turn.

<p style="text-align:center">**III**</p>

The Infinitive and the Grammar of **Sein:** I turn first, then, to a critical analysis of Heidegger's strikingly neglected discussion of the grammar of *Sein* in his essay "On the Grammar and Etymology of the Word, '*Sein*'" (chapter two of *Einführung in die Metaphysik*).[44] Far from a bland traditional grammatical overview of the language of ontology, this text confronts the problem of infinitude in an unusual but telling way, and in so doing delves to the heart of the complex relationship in Heideggerian thought between *Sein* and the human ability to think and name it in language.[45]

Despite the paucity of attention it has received from scholars, this short but exceedingly dense and rich discussion is highly significant for two main reasons. First, the essay allows the reader of Heidegger the opportunity to revisit the conceptual starting point—the beginnings—of his formidable body of work; it provides an opportunity to get behind and examine what was only implicit at the outset concerning the finitude of *Sein*. What Socrates says to Glaucon in *Politeia* about the training of children, can be said in many respects equally of the founding

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[44] Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in Die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998); hereafter cited as *EM*; translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt as *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), hereafter cited as *IM*.

[45] The neglect of this essay in the scholarly literature is striking. It is entirely overlooked even in the fine monographs that have appeared over the past few decades deal with the theme of finitude in Heidegger: for example, David Farrell Krell, *Intimations of Mortality* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1986); Dennis Schmidt, *The Ubiquity of the Finite* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); and Stambaugh's *Finitude*. One of the very few serious engagements with the essay in English is Gregory Fried's short study, "What's in a Word?: Heidegger's Grammar and Etymology of 'Being'" in Richard Polt and Gregory Fried (eds), *A Companion to Heidegger's 'Introduction to Metaphysics'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). Further, in focusing on the first and longest section of the essay—namely, the part concerning the grammar *rather than* the etymology of *Sein*—the following deals with its least discussed aspects.

moments of any philosophical train of thought: namely, "the beginning [ἀϱχή] of any process is most important … It's at that time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern that one wishes to impress on it."[46] Beginnings are crucial, for what is determined at this stage provides the horizon within which the project subsequently moves.

Accordingly, the discussion of the grammar of the word *Sein* in Heidegger's essay deals explicitly with fundamental considerations that inform the basic linguistic/ conceptual framing of his programmatic question concerning the meaning of *Sein*, a framing that was to set the scene for his pursuit of the *Seinsfrage* through the many decades of his career. Further, this discussion is relatively unique: Heidegger's early work contains no comparable presentation at any length in which the *Seinsfrage* is examined in view of what might be called its 'grammatical archaeology'. Such matters are at best only gestured towards in §1 of *Sein und Zeit*, at which point Heidegger provides the context and motivation for the question in the broadest of brushstrokes before then rushing on immediately to the formal structure of the question (§2) and then to matters of ontological and ontic priority (§§3-4). This claim that Heidegger's little essay fills in some essential ground that is otherwise passed over in his early work is supported by Heidegger's own statement in the preface to the seventh (1953) edition of *Sein und Zeit*, in which he advises that "[f]or the elucidation of this question [of *Sein*] the reader may refer to my *Einführung in die Metaphysik*," the text of which was published simultaneously, and for the first time, with the new *Sein und Zeit* edition.[47] In what follows I suggest that this discussion of the grammar of *Sein* does indeed provide a crucial and telling revisiting of these origins. That the argument Heidegger provides for the framing of his key question

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[46] Plato, "The Republic," 377a-b, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1016.
[47] *SZ*, vii; *BT*, 17.

raises at least as many questions as it answers (as will be seen), only adds to the significance of the essay.

Yet second, while lying at the *conceptual* beginnings of Heideggerian thinking, "On the Grammar and Etymology of the Word, *Sein*" lies *chronologically* a fair way along in his historical path of thought, and at a unique moment along this way. Heidegger gave the lecture course *Einführung in die Metaphysik* at Freiburg in the summer semester of 1935, around the same time as the commencement of the *Beiträge* manuscript. This places the essay at a crucial stage in the development of Heidegger's thinking, as he fills out the origins of his project and the terms within which it is pursued, even as he strives to find new language with which to deepen his interrogation of the *Seinsfrage*.[48] Indeed, as will be seen, while the term is never mentioned in the essay at issue, the sense of *Ereignis* is palpable at key points throughout.

Central to Heidegger's text is his pervasive emphasis on what might be called the 'einaiological' nature of language: that is to say, his focus is programmatically on the εἶναι of ὄν. (In his essay on Anaximander in *Holzwege*, Heidegger unhesitatingly affirms the link between the neuter participle, ὄν, and his own terms, '*ontisch*' and '*ontologisch*' which "are formed from" it;[49] and elsewhere, he explicitly equates τὸ ὄν with *das Seiendes* and τὸ εἶναι with *das Sein*.[50]) In turning to the question of language, the focus is correspondingly on the infinitive form of the verb (*Sein*) and its relation to

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[48] One is reminded here of Heidegger's comment in his letter to William Richardson concerning the latter's Heidegger I/ Heidegger II distinction: "Only by way of what Heidegger I has thought, does one gain access to what is to be thought by Heidegger II. But Heidegger I only becomes possible if it is contained in Heidegger II." Translation by Jerome Veith, in Günther Figal (ed) *The Heidegger Reader*. (Indiana University Press, 2009), 304. Cf: Richardson's own translation in *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), xxii, hereafter cited as *TPhT*.
[49] *Holzwege*, ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 5 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt aM.: Klostermann, 2003), 344, hereafter cited as *GA*5; translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes as *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 259, hereafter cited as *OBT*.
[50] *GA*33, *AM*, §3.

its various inflections. To this extent, the *Seinsfrage* is essentially intertwined with, and inseparable from, the *Sprachfrage*, for as he will famously put it around a decade later, "language is the house of *Sein*."[51] Language is not a separate thing that can be studied alongside other beings, but rather that which provides access to beings in the first place. Only when language is again opened to thought can its unique significance for the question of *Sein* be appreciated anew. All meaning, all understanding is constituted by language, and *Sein* itself essentially unfolds in language. When Heidegger says, for example, that a word *is* a word "to the extent that it lets shine forth,"[52] he is quite deliberately presenting 'word' as φαινόμενον and in this way is highlighting the function of language as the medium of revelation; of ἀ–λήθεια. So insofar as language uncovers and reveals *what is*, language and *Sein* (understood alethiologically) are one. What this means then, is that any serious new beginning in the thinking of *Sein* requires a fundamental revival in thinking about language. Heidegger's focus is therefore on the need to completely rethink language—and in particular, einaiological language—in terms of the grammatical dimension. In this way, the ontological difference is revealed – or perhaps more accurately, it is *enacted* – in its linguistic phase.

Heidegger begins by problematizing what seems, at first glance, quite banal: namely, the terminology of grammar. Grammar, he insists, is not an eternal science, but rather an historical phenomenon that has grown "out of a very definite interpretation of the Greek and Latin languages."[53] In this way, he gives the seemingly unremarkable categories of 'noun' and 'verb' a history, resituating them in the fluid context of ancient Greek thinking about the nature of language and metaphysics. Thus,

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[51] In *Brief uber den 'Humanismus'*: *GA*9, 145; *PM*, 239.

[52] *EM*: 70/51. Ralph Manheim translates: "insofar as it causes to appear" [*Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 55.

[53] *EM*, 41; *IM*, 56.

meditations on language are understood as simultaneously explorations into the problem of *Sein*.[54] It is no accident, Heidegger maintains, that the distinction between noun (ὄνομα) and verb (ῥῆμα) was worked out specifically in Plato's *Sophist* in the context of wrestling with the problem of *Sein*.[55] In our own time, however, the terminology of grammar has become fixed and calcified; it is used to manipulate language, but rarely to open us to the mystery of its showings. Heidegger stands opposed to this mechanistic treatment of language that uses grammatical categories as technical instruments for the quasi-scientific dissection of language; as if language was simply one being among others. (In this sense, modern grammar, like modern logic, are drawn into Heidegger's later critique of technology.) Since grammar is contingent upon language, and in all senses comes after it, it is not possible to understand the essence of language merely by subjecting it to grammatical analysis. The upshot is clear: it is only through studying the ancient Greek and Latin treatment of language that we can get a sense of their understanding of *Sein*, and their legacy on our own understanding; and it is only through such a revisitation of the origins of the question of *Sein*, that its meaning can be revived in the present.

Given the einaiological nature of his focus on grammar, it is no surprise that Heidegger's brief discussion of grammar has a particular interest in the nature and role of the infinitive. Central to his concern is his opposition to contemporary dismissive attitudes toward the infinitive form of verbs on the basis of their semantic neutrality, even poverty, in comparison to the determinate 'content' of their conjugated forms. According to this attitude, the infinitive is the most abstract and vacuous form of the verb, and as such is virtually superfluous. Obviously, the most telling example of this attitude is the infinitive form of the verb 'to be', which has

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[54] *EM*, 49; *IM*, 67.

[55] *EM*, 43-44; *IM*, 60.

suffered a similar fate in contemporary metaphysics: *Sein* as an empty concept or
"evanescent vapor."[56]

True to form, Heidegger has a story to tell here in terms of the transition from Greek
to Latin vocabulary. Accordingly, the Greek term, ἔγκλισις ἀπαρεμφατικός is
translated by the Latins as *modus infinitivus verbi*, from which our own term 'infinitive'
is derived. There are, for Heidegger, two problems with this rendering. First, the
notion of the infinite tends to connote indefiniteness and indeterminacy: something
that is nothing in particular; something abstract, merely formal and vacuous.
Heidegger clearly rejects the interpretation of those grammarians who in following
the Latin rendering see the infinitive as a deficient, merely abstract, and vacuous form;
a 'failed' verb, so to speak, that "no longer makes manifest what the verb otherwise
reveals."[57] His view is quite the opposite: the infinitive, he says, "has a preeminent
significance in language as a whole."[58] The problem we are left with, however, is the
calcifying legacy of the Latin mind which robs it of its dynamism, a tendency which is
made still worse by the innovation (that emerges as early as ancient Greek itself) to
turn the pure infinitive form of the verb (εἶναι; *esse*; *sein*) into the infinitival
substantive via the imposition of a definitive article before it: τὸ εἶναι; *das Sein*.[59] Here
the verbal form par excellence is robbed of its dynamism and is potentially
transformed into a quasi-noun form, with all the disastrous implications this implies.

Second, Heidegger takes issue with the term '*modus*' that he describes as a "bland"
rendering of the Greek term ἔγκλισις that more vividly indicates "a falling, a tipping,

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[56] *EM*, 38; *IM*, 53.

[57] *EM*, 52; *IM*, 71.

[58] *EM*, 52; *IM*, 72.

[59] *EM*, 52; *IM*, 72-73.

or inclining … a dropping-off from an upright straight stance."[60] This motif of 'uprightness' vis-a-vis 'inclining' or 'falling away' is central to Heidegger's text, both in terms of the grammatical analysis itself, but also its relevance to Greek (and thereafter, the Latin) metaphysics. Heidegger observes that the "taking and maintaining of a *stand* [is] ... what the Greeks understood as *Sein*."[61] This taking a stand involves "necessarily running up against the necessity of its limit (πέρας)," and indeed that it is precisely this limitation that "makes a being be a being."[62] Heidegger associates this notion of limit with τέλος which he insists does not so much mean goal or purpose but rather end or completion "in the sense of coming to fulfilment," and thus ἐντελέχηεια: "something's holding- (or maintaining)-itself-in-its-completion-(or limit)."[63] From here he draws a straight line through a series of other Greek metaphysical terms that are constelled in a very familiar Heideggerian ways: (a) whatever enacts its limit in this way has form (μορφή); (b) it puts itself forward *as* something in particular, with a particular look (εἶδος) that is the coming-forth of its essence; (c) that this is what the Greeks meant by οὐσία, or "or more fully παρουσία" (a term with an exact correlate in the German *Anwesen*), a coming-to-presence that is a dynamic emerging coming to a stand; (d) that this dynamic emergent sense is also the key to understanding the Greek sense of φύσις (as opposed to the more static and flattened Latin notion of *natura*); and finally (e) that in this emergence things are freed from concealment (ἀλήθεια), struggling forth as a world (κόσμος; *Welt*).

If the transition from Greek to Latin grammatical vocabulary brings with it the loss of the motifs of 'uprightness' vis-a-vis 'inclining' or 'falling away,' Heidegger's text

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[60] *EM*, 45-46; *IM*, 62-63. Heidegger speaks more generally of two Greek terms here: ἔγκλισις and πτῶσις. However, since ἔγκλισις refers more specifically to the inflection of the verb, the focus rests there.

[61] *ibid.*

[62] *ibid.*

[63] *ibid.*

labors to recover and redeploy these senses. But it is here that the Gordian complexity of the argument to come starts to emerge, a complexity by which his text strains to coherently control the many metaphors by which it is driven. However, before turning to these complexities, I will first sketch what I take to be the main lines of Heidegger's account, albeit in an initially overly-streamlined fashion. It is on this basis that the complexities can then be placed in clearer relief.

This 'streamlined' account proceeds as follows. Everyday language makes use of words that are the carriers of coherent content or meaning, and they do so via the use of standardized rules of inflection involving case, tense, conjugation, et cetera (and this is even before matters of syntax arise). On the other hand, there is the infinitive that stands there contentless and of little practical use, and yet is the indeterminate but semantically rich origin of all verb-al determinacy. Such a reading is supported by Heidegger's characterization of the infinitive as "[naming] something that lies at the foundation of all inflections of the verb."[64] Notwithstanding two crucial complexities to be considered below, I suggest that this grammatical motif maps directly onto the terms of the ontological difference, for it perfectly matches the distinction between *Seienden* (the *given* determinate beings among whom we live and move) and *Sein* (the *giving* through which beings come-to-presence, but which is not itself a being). Just as the infinitive grants the fullness of the verb's meaning to inflected forms of the verb while itself lacking determinacy, *Sein* grants meaning by which beings are revealed, while itself withdrawing from presence.

This notion of the infinitive as the *originative* form of the verb is intensified by Heidegger's brief allusion to Plato's analysis of becoming in *Timaeus* in which he draws attention to one of three senses of becoming in this text: that is, that *within*

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[64] *EM*, 52; *IM*, 72.

which that-which-becomes does so; "the medium in which something builds itself up while it is becoming, and from which it then stands forth once it has become."[65] Noting that the Greek χώρα here is not to be understood in the sense of positive empty extended space, Heidegger emphasizes the way in which the becoming thing is "set forth" into and from this place, with the χώρα receding behind. Needless to say, this language of granting and withdrawing is highly suggestive of the dynamic imagery of *Ereignis*. This point is accentuated in a gloss to the 1953 edition of *Einführung in Die Metaphysik* in which he suggests, "[m]ight not *chōra* mean: that which separates itself from every particular, that which withdraws, and in this way admits and 'makes room' precisely for something else?"[66]

This issue might be also developed from the point of view of the participle, a perspective conspicuously absent from Heidegger's essay. This is to introduce the linguistic-ontological motif of 'participation'. Etymologically, the German '*partizip*' and the English 'participle' derive from the Latin, *participium*, from *participo*: to 'partake' of, or to 'participate' in,[67] and as such the Latin translates the Greek μετοχή. In this sense, the participle is a derivative form that 'participates' in the reservoir of meaning provided by the verb in its most basic form. This sense of the participle— that Heidegger elsewhere acknowledges [68]—points precisely to the sense of 'infinitive' just sketched. Such a sense of the infinitive-participle relationship points clearly toward the idea of beings 'participating' in *Sein*. On this understanding, *Sein* would be what all cases of determinate being (all beings; *Seienden*) have in common; or in other words, beings participate in *Sein* as their indeterminate (and, insofar as the

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[65] *EM*, 50; *IM*, 69.

[66] *EM*: 70/51.

[67] Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds. *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 1308.

[68] See *GA*5, 344; *OBT*, 259.

range of possible meanings is unlimited, infinite) origin.[69]   And nor is this too far from what Heidegger himself acknowledges in chapter three of *Einführung in Die Metaphysik* when he says: "*Sein* pertains to every being [*Seiende*] whatsoever and thus disperses itself into what is most commonplace";[70] it is the "something going on" in "what we have taken up to now merely as a fact";[71] it "opens up to us in a manifold way."[72]

Seen in this light, Heidegger's essay has *seemingly* set the scene for an entirely coherent ontology (or more correctly, *einai*ology) of language; or alternatively, for a linguistically mediated account of *Sein*. Just as the infinitive form of the verb has been misunderstood by Latin-influenced grammarians who in focusing on its lack of determinacy have forgotten its primordial function as that which grants all verbal meaning, so too *Sein* has been misunderstood by Latin-influenced metaphysicians who in focusing on its lack of determinacy have forgotten that *Sein* is the abundant source that grants (uncovers) all beings. However, such an account does not eventually emerge with such clarity. Instead, in looking to mediate the vast complexities and contingencies of Greek grammar, Heidegger's essay threatens to run against the grain of its own argument. Two major complexities arise.

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[69] In a different context, William Vallicella has made the same point: "For the early Heidegger at least, Being is always the Being of beings. Being is that which determines beings as beings (*SZ* 6). Thus despite the "ontological difference" of Being from beings, beings *are* only in virtue of their "participation" in Being ... Talk of the participation of beings in Being [seems] … justified on Heideggerian grounds since 'the being' (*das Seiende*) is, grammatically considered, the substantive form of the participle 'being' (*seiend*), which in turn refers back to the infinitive 'to be' (*sein*), the noun form of which is Being (*Sein*). *Das Seiende* 'participates' in *Sein* insofar as the former is derived from a *participial* modification of the latter." Vallicella, William F. "The Problem of Being in the Early Heidegger," *The Thomist* 45 (1981): 399 fn.

[70] *EM*, 60; *IM*, 83.

[71] *EM*, 62; *IM*, 86.

[72] *EM*, 68; *IM*, 95. See also: "While it goes against the essence of the matter to extract a common meaning as a universal generic concept under which these modes of the 'is' could be classified as species," it is nonetheless true that "a definite unitary trait runs through all these meanings" (*EM*, 69; *IM*, 96).

The first complexity concerns the relative priority accorded in classical Greek grammar to the infinitive vis-à-vis the so-called "basic position of the verb": that is, the first person present indicative. The issue emerges when Heidegger draws attention to the Greek name for what the Latins referred to as the infinitive: the ἔγκλισις ἀπαρεμφατικός. In this Greek term, the infinitive is named not as the basic position of the verb that stands upright and from which inflected forms fall away. Rather: "The basic position of the verb is the first person present indicative: for example, λεγω, I say. The infinitive, in contrast, is a particular *modus verbi*, an ἔγκλισις."[73] This is a highly significant move. Following the Greek naming, the infinitive is not the basic form of the verb, but is itself an inflected form derived from the first person present indicative. But having said that, the infinitive is an inflected form of a very unusual kind. Generally speaking, to inflect the verb is to make manifest such particular and determinate factors as person, number, voice, tense and mood.[74] But the Greek terminology makes clear that there are two quite distinct kinds of inflection: (a) ἔγκλισις παρεμφατικός: an inclining that makes oneself manifest *in addition to* something else; and (b) ἔγκλισις ἀπαρεμφατικός: an inclining that – as indicted by the *alpha* prefix – makes *nothing* else manifest in addition.[75] So the infinitive is an inflected form of the verb that is nonetheless empty of determinate content.

There is no question that this interpretation is supported by the meaning of the Greek terms (even if, as Heidegger indicates, the picture is still more complicated by multiple types of Greek infinitives[76]). The question is rather of how this state of affairs

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[73] *EM*, 49; *IM*, 68.

[74] *ibid.*

[75] *EM*, 50-51; *IM*, 68-71.

[76] *EM*, 51; *IM*, 71.

relates to the other main structures of Heidegger's account. Certainly, anomalies arise. For within the terms of Heidegger's discussion, what sense can be made of the notion of an abstract inflected verb? How can a form of the verb that is *already* inflected – εἰμι: the first person present indicative form of the verb 'to be', that makes manifest person (first), number (singular), tense (present) and mood (indicative) – also double as the upright form of the verb from which all inflected forms fall away?

Heidegger's essay never resolves these tensions; it rather moves on, both in the latter parts of the chapter (that considers the related but different question of the etymology of *Sein*), and from there to Heidegger's broader agenda. I suggest, however, that the substantial point made in the essay concerning the role of the infinitive as the semantic source of all verb-al determinacy is not impugned by grammatical conventions such as the anomalous technical status of the ἔγκλισις ἀπαρεμφατικός. To allow the analysis to be sidelined by such difficulties would amount *precisely* to permitting the contingencies of grammar to determine the essential matters at stake concerning language as such. Indeed, such a conclusion seems warranted by Heidegger's conclusions in the third chapter of *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, where he declares that while language remains central to the question of *Sein*, it is "not a matter of grammar and etymology … [for] as long as we dwell solely on the word form and its meaning, our question of Being [*Sein*] has not reached the thing, has not gotten to the point."[77] Even given Heidegger's deference to the Greek language, unexamined adherence to lexical orthodoxies is hardly in keeping with the essay's drive toward a radical confrontation with the language of western metaphysics, let alone with the *Seinsfrage* itself.[78]

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[77] *EM,* 66; *IM,* 91-92.

[78] Further, the grammatical quirk Heidegger identifies is not encountered (at least in the same way) in contemporary German, French or English grammar. Nor, more ambiguously, does it apply in Latin, where the infinitive *can* be taken as the basic form of the verb (albeit alongside other basic forms – like

The second complexity that threatens to subvert the argumentative strategy of Heidegger's essay concerns to the precise relationship intended between the infinitive and limitation. This issue is raised most clearly by recalling a problematic passage from the essay in which Heidegger appears to associate the infinitive with limitation as such:

> [T]his taking and maintaining a stand … is what the Greeks understood as Being [*Sein*]. Whatever takes such a stand becomes constant in itself and thereby … runs up against the necessity of its limit, *peras*. This *peras* … is the Being of beings; it is what first makes a being be a being as opposed to a nonbeing.[79]

This passage requires careful interpretation, for on one reading it involves the direct association of *Sein* with limitation, which might then be seen to offer support to the view that *Sein* is for Heidegger intrinsically finite without further ado. I would maintain, however, that such a reading is not justified by the context. What emerges instead is the notion of *Sein* as the *granting source* of all limitation and determinacy (πέρας, τέλος, εἶδος, μορφή, (παρ)ουσία, ἀλήθεια). What is marked by limitation, πέρας, is not *Sein* as such, but rather the to-be *of the being*, which is granted its to-be *as* limited. This limitation is what enables it to be. But what grants the being its determinacy—*Sein*—is itself unmarked by determinacy in its withdrawal from all presencing. Indeed, is this not a perfect demonstration of the *difference* between *Sein* and *Seiendes*? *Sein* is not 'a being' marked by limitation or determinacy; it is rather that

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the first person singular indicative and the perfect passive participle – from which verbs may also be conjugated).

[79] *EM,* 46; *IM*, 63.

through which limited beings *are*, in their limitation and determinacy. It is the principle of limitation that is not itself limited; of determinacy that is not itself determinate.

In the final analysis, though, Heidegger's presentation of this paradoxical insight comes through very unevenly in his essay on the grammar of *Sein*. William Richardson concludes that the results of the chapter are "meager"; that it is "interesting enough in its way, but when all is said and done, it does not take us very far."[80] My own assessment is rather different. On one hand, I would suggest that Heidegger's little essay is of enormous importance for the reasons detailed above. But, on the other hand, Richardson is right that its achievements are hardly clear-cut and explicit. But if that is so, I suggest the problem is in the way that its argumentative trajectory is curiously compromised by what appears to be a reluctance on Heidegger's part to endorse the tacit and natural conclusion of his own account. This reluctance can only be understood, I would further suggest, as a reflex to the perceived 'specter' of onto-theology.[81] The antidote to such a reflex is the absolute insistence on finitude, and in this way the Greek sense of the infinitive as itself an ἔγκλισις form has its obvious attractions. The result is a *Holzweg* that is nonetheless literally revelatory in its uncovering of the underlying tensions in Heidegger's project.

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[80] TPhT, 4; and 260. However, Richardson goes on to suggest that the analysis of chapters 2 and 3 of *Einführung in Die Metaphysik* is a *Holzweg* that bears fruit only in chapter four. But nowhere does he show how this is the case. In fact, Heidegger's keynote piece there on "*Sein* and Thinking" is in no sense a direct taking-forward of the einaiological-linguistic issues dealt with in the earlier chapter. As such, chapter two remains a fascinating but frustratingly incomplete experiment in thinking that poses as many questions about Heidegger's framing of the question as it answers.

[81] Heidegger's concerns are not difficult to understand. One need think (perhaps with a slightly anachronistic bent) of the obvious potential for an existential Thomist interpretation to take hold here, according to which the created being (*ens*) has its to-be insofar as it participates in God who, qua *ipsum esse subsistens*, is the infinite source of all that is. On this account, see W. Norris Clarke's famous essay, "The Limitation of Act by Potency in St. Thomas," cited earlier.

For all its early promise, Heidegger's essay eventually fails to provide a coherent presentation of the linguistic grounds of his framing of the *Seinsfrage,* nor of *Sein* as the principle of limitation that is not itself limited. To see this notion developed more vividly and explicitly, it is necessary to look elsewhere. I turn, then, to some key passages within Heidegger's readings of the Anaximander fragments that circumvent these complexities in developing precisely this notion of *Sein* as the indeterminate abyssal principle of all determinacy and finitude.

IV

Sein *as* Ἄπειρον: If Heidegger's reflection on *Sein* and (in)finitude through the lens of the Greco-Latin grammatical inheritance is strikingly ambiguous, his writings on Anaximander's notion of ἄπειρον are quite unequivocal about the einaiological significance of infinite. Indeed, these texts show Heidegger embracing a deep and radical sense of originary indeterminacy as the fount of all finitude; in short, of a non-metaphysical sense of the infinite. Such texts are a crucial key, I suggest, for clarifying the complexities and ambiguities of the grammar of *Sein* account in *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, thereby releasing its extraordinary potential. Not only is the account that emerges far richer than the infinitude of endless space and time (Heidegger's many criticisms of which were surveyed in section I), but it also greatly surpasses in explanatory force the Nietzschean notion of a closed circle of endless recurrence, the 'determinate infinity', with which he flirts in *Beiträge* (as noted in section II.)

Echoing what he took to be Aristotle's own esteem for "the genuinely philosophical thinker among the Milesian[s],"[82] Heidegger showed considerable interest in, and respect for, Anaximander from early in his career. In 1926 (even as he was revising *Sein und Zeit* for publication) Heidegger spoke approvingly of Anaximander's

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[82] *GA*22, 211; *BAP*, 181: Morchen transcription, 22.

conception of ἄπειρον as ἀρχή, noting that Aristotle understood this idea as a possible precursor to his own conceptions of δύναμις and πρώτη ὕλη.[83] For Heidegger, Anaximander's "philosophical understanding" is shown in the fact that his notion of ἄπειρον "seeks to penetrate beyond every determinate being … [in] mak[ing] the ἀρχή indeterminate."[84] Such a positive initial appraisal of the very idea of indeterminacy provides a telling contrast to Nietzsche's more standard 'Greek' *horror infiniti*.[85]

In light of Heidegger's dominant attitude towards infinitude (surveyed above), the detailed discussions of Anaximander in his summer 1932 lecture course devoted to the "beginnings of western philosophy" contain some extraordinary passages. In §6 of this text, Heidegger considers the Anaximanderian fragment: "ἀρχή τῶν ὄτων τὸ ἄπειρον." His translation of the fragment is in itself revealing: "[t]he source of beings [*Ausgang des Seienden*], and precisely of beings as such: i.e., with respect to their Being [*Sein*], is the limitless [*Grenzenlose*]." So too is the section title which refers to ἄπειρον as "the sovereign source of beings [*der herrschaftliche Seienden*]."[86] Of course,

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[83] *GA*22, 53-54; *BAP*, 45. Also, *GA*22, 211; *BAP*, 181: Morchen transcription, 22.

[84] *GA*22, 211; *BAP*, 181: Morchen transcription, 22.

[85] In one place, Nietzsche channels the figure of Anaximander to powerfully and ironically anticipate the dread wisdom of his madman in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* insofar as the idea of ἄπειρον highlights the utter contingency and vulnerability of all becoming. Nietzsche here links the familiar Anaximanderian themes of ultimate indeterminacy and reparation in claiming that for him all coming-to-be is as though it was "an illegitimate emancipation from eternal being [that is, ἄπειρον], a wrong for which destruction is the only penance." He thus has Anaximander mouth a question to all creatures (that mimics his own infinite circle of eternal recurrence referred to above): "What is your existence worth? … Look how your earth is withering, how your seas are diminishing and drying up … Even now, fire is destroying your world … But ever and anew, another such world of ephemerality will construct itself. Who is there that could redeem you from the curse of coming-to-be?" [translated by Marianne Cowan as *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 1962), 46, 48.] Cf: the words of the madman about the murder of God: "Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? … Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us?" [translated by Thomas Common as *The Gay Science* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006), 90.]

[86] Martin Heidegger, *Der Anfang der abendländischen Philosophie*. ed. Peter Trawny, vol. 35 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2012), 27, hereafter cited as *GA*35; translated by Richard

Heidegger is very clear that the ἄπειρον is to be understood as a phenomenological (not a metaphysical) source; it is not to be construed as a *vorhanden* highest being from which flows all other beings. Any such interpretation, he asserts, would "radically mistake the genuine intent of the pronouncements," since after all, "[t]he intent is to speak about *Being* [*das Sein*] – and *not about beings* [*das Seiende*]."[87] Accordingly, what is at stake is the "beginning of *Sein* [*Anfang des Seins*], of appearance [*des Erscheinens*]."[88]

In Heidegger's rendering, Anaximander's ἄπειρον is "the contourless [*Umriß-lose*]" that precedes appearance qua the "entrance into contours [*Umriß*]"; it is what "shows itself first and last in all appearance and disappearance."[89] To have contours is to be limited via determination: it is to be a real something, marked by εἶδος, and "compliant" to it. The ἄπειρον, on the other hand, is the unlimited, the indeterminate, the "non-compliant." To be real, to appear, is to "forsake limitlessness and [to] persist in contours," and "[as] what appears disappears, it gives compliance back to the non-compliant," receding back into the ἄπειρον.[90] Further, it is this giving and taking that provides the context for correctly understanding what has previously been "falsely translated" as the payment of retribution. What this instead refers to is the compliance of beings vis-à-vis "the superior power of the ἄπειρον."[91] This vast power "is also the frightful – insofar as it compels giving away and disappearing."[92]

Rojcewicz as *The Beginning of Western Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 22, hereafter cited as *BWP*.

[87] *GA*35, 32; *BWP*, 26. Heidegger's italicization.

[88] *GA*35, 27; *BWP*, 22.

[89] *GA*35, 27; *BWP*, 22-23.

[90] GA35, 29-30; *BWP*, 24.

[91] GA35, 30; *BWP*, 25.

[92] GA35, Appendix (draft plans for the lecture course), 225; *BWP*, 175.

Heidegger's explicit and enthusiastic linking of this interpretation of the Anaximander fragment to his own fundamental concerns, is striking. Accordingly, *Sein* is to be understood *as* ἄπειρον; as the self-concealing, indeterminate in-finite outflow of all determinate finite beings in their appearing:

> Being [*Sein*] is no longer merely 'appearance'. The essence of Being [*Wesen des Seins*] is τὸ ἄπειρον, as the empowering power of appearance and disappearance ... We must now no longer be content with the introductory characterization that Being is appearance. That is not wrong, but it is insufficient: the essence of Being is to be understood on the basis of the ἄπειρον."[93]

This is an extraordinary development. Indeed, it is underlined in Heidegger's published notes on this work where he comments that beings "essentially occur [*west*] in *Sein* (ἄπειρον)."[94] Further, Heidegger denies that the ἄπειρον should be understood merely as the limit*less*: that is, as that which *lacks* determinacy in the sense of a defect. To the contrary, the non-compliant indeterminacy of the ἄπειρον "has the sense of disdaining and dismissing on account of super-abundance [*Über-fluß*] , superiority over everything formed, everything enclosed in contours." Far from being a *vorhanden* void which 'lacks' determinacy, the ἄπειρον is a bottomless reservoir that makes possible all appearing of beings.

It scarcely needs to be pointed out that this notion of ἄπειρον (*Sein*) as "*Über-fluß*" is extremely suggestive of exactly the idea of *Sein* about which Heidegger vacillated a handful of years later in the second chapter of *Einführung in die Metaphysik*. The motif

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[93] GA35, 31; *BWP*, 25.
[94] GA35, Appendix (draft plans), 231; *BWP*, 180.

of an abundant but indeterminate giving source for all determinacy was seen in the case of the ἔγκλισις ἀπαρεμφατικός that grants the fullness of the verb's determinate meaning to inflected forms of the verb while itself lacking determinacy. More generally, this idea of gratuitous bestowing of finite determinacy out of infinite indeterminacy maps directly onto the understanding of *Sein* as granting the opening of meaningful appearing (presencing) by which beings are revealed, while itself withdrawing from presence. Of course, even here, Heidegger is determined to nip in the bud any onto-theological interpretation of his account: "ἄπειρον does not mean infinity," he insists, if this means that we "slip into this work some sort of later, Christian notion."[95] But so long as that is understood, *Sein* remains the *nichts* that lets beings be, even as it withdraws from all determinacy.

Indeed, this is precisely the sense that is further developed almost a decade later, in *Grundbegriffe* (winter semester, 1941). In §23 of this work (in the context of pursuing the meaning of Anaximander's τὸ χρεών), Heidegger takes a brief "excursus" by considering again the Anaximanderian fragment he examined in 1931: ἀρχή τῶν ὄτων τὸ ἄπειρον. His line of investigation has evolved, however, and he begins (appropriately enough!) with the word ἀρχή. "To be sure," he says, "ἀρχή is that from which something emerges," but it is important to note that it is not thereby "a beginning left behind." To the contrary, "the ἀρχή releases emergence and what emerges, such that what is released is first retained in the ἀρχή as enjoinment [*Verfügung*]. The ἀρχή is an enjoining egress [*verfügende Ausgang*]"[96] As such, the

[95] GA35, 30; *BWP*, 25.
[96] Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe*, ed. Petra Jaeger, vol. 51 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2003), 108, hereafter cited as *GA*51; translated by Gary Aylesworth as *Basic Concepts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 93, hereafter cited as *BC*. Incidentally, I take this point to be basic to Socrates' observation in Plato's *Republic* about beginnings that was quoted earlier: "the beginning [ἀρχή] of any process is most important … It's at that time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern that one wishes to impress on it."

ἀρχή is a transition: it is "between emerging and evading."[97] In the parallel section in *Das Ereignis* that was being composed around the same time, Heidegger makes a similar point: "*Sein* is infinitely distinct from beings, and yet not χωρισμός."[98] *Sein* (qua ἄπειρον) is not separate from *Seiende* precisely because it *is* in the alethiological coming forth of beings into determinacy. It is (to borrow from *Grundbegriffe*) this "enjoining egress." Or, to come full circle back to *Einführung in Die Metaphysik*: *Sein* "pertains to every being [*Seiende*] whatsoever and thus disperses itself into what is most commonplace."[99]

However, the focus of this section from *Grundbegriffe* quickly comes to rest on the paradox that the ἀρχή qua enjoinment is ἄπειρον, which is, by definition, the refusal or denial [*Verwehrung*] of limit.[100] Thus: "τὸ ἄπειρον is the ἀρχή of being [*des Seins*] … Enjoinment is being itself [*ist das Sein Selbst*], and enjoinment is ἄπειρον." But this means that "[e]njoinment is refusal."[101] Of course, another way of putting this paradox is simply that the ἄπειρον primordially and hyperbolically gives what in another sense it does not have: namely, determinacy and limitation. Here Heidegger turns to the inadequacy of the α- prefix which says privation (lack, absence) but which is wholly inadequate for doing justice to what is at stake not only in the word ἄ-πειρον, but also in the case of ἀ–λήθεια. (Poignantly, in the context of the preceding discussion of the essay on the grammar of *Sein*, Heidegger here comments that it is

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[97] *GA*51, 108; *BC*, 93. I leave to one side other aspects of Heidegger's rich analysis of the primordial meaning of ἀρχή in this section.

[98] Martin Heidegger, *Das Ereignis*, ed. F.-W. von Herrmann, vol. 71 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2009), 42; translated by Richard Rojcewicz as *The Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 32.

[99] *EM*, 60; *IM*, 83. See section III, above.

[100] Heidegger's choice of the term *Verwehrung* (refusal or denial) to refer to the absence of limit is odd insofar as it seems to imply a sense in which the ἄπειρον needs to 'hold back' the tide of limitation. But as more primordial than limitation, this seems to misplace the emphasis. Aylesworth's rendering of *Verwehrung* as "repelling" only accentuates this peculiarity.

[101] *GA*51, 110-111; *BC*, 95. Amended translation: Aylesworth has: "Enjoinment is repelling."

now necessary to "mistrust grammar and stick to the matter"! [102]) Of course, Heidegger's mention of ἀλήθεια in this context is no accident, and he seizes the moment to suggest an "incipient relationship between the privative essence of being [*Wesen des Seins*] as ἄ-πειρον and the privative essence of truth as ἀ–λήθεια."[103]

Space precludes a more thorough analysis of this rich passage, but the essential points relevant to this essay have been already indicated. Unlike the contortions and vacillations of the *Einführung in die Metaphysik* chapter, Heidegger is entirely comfortable here to characterize *Sein* as τὸ ἄπειρον in the specific sense indicated. In this space—and only in such a space, in which the threat of onto-theological infinitude has been banished—Heidegger is revealed to be a thinker of the infinite profusion of *Sein*.

V

Conclusion: When taken as a whole, the complex and striking threads surveyed here challenge the standard received wisdom concerning Heidegger's purported absolute insistence on the finitude of *Sein*. The scope for the development of such a reading has been enhanced greatly by new volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe* published over the past decade, even if other textual evidence to this effect has been available for some time.[104] However, its implications are profound for a vast range of other core Heideggerian tropes, including (but certainly not limited to) appropriation (*Ereignis*),

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[102] *GA*51, 111; *BC*, 95.

[103] *GA*51, 112; *BC*, 96.

[104] In preparing their major published studies of the theme in the 1980s and 1990s (identified earlier), scholars such as David Krell, Dennis Schmidt and Joan Stambaugh presumably had little or no access to texts such as those eventually published as *GA*35 (published 2011) and *GA*71 (published 2009). However, this cannot be said to provide a full explanation for the lack of attention to these complexities, given that *Grundbegriffe* had been available since at least 1981, and *Einführung in die Metaphysik* since the 1950s.

the 'It gives' (*Es gibt*), the clearing (*die Lichtung*), world, ontological difference, and the nothing.

While it is clear that Heidegger was exceptionally keen to avoid any conflation between *Sein* and traditional metaphysical understandings of the infinite, it is not the case that he rejects the idea of the infinite *tout court*. To the contrary, it would seem that the motif of an indeterminate super-abundant giving 'source' for the appearing of all determinate beings provides a compelling way of understanding Heidegger's mature thinking of *Sein*.

That Heidegger would move in this direction is far less surprising once the full implications of his radical rejection of the traditional metaphysical polarity of finite/infinite are appreciated. What Heidegger always stood opposed to is a relegation of the finite in its relation to an infinite and absolute point of reference. To this extent, he is indeed a philosopher of finitude par excellence. However, in looking to overcome the finite/infinite metaphysical polarity as such (and consequently the onto-theological basis of western metaphysics), Heidegger is left not so much with finitude over and against a rejected infinite, but with the mystery of *Sein* simpliciter. In this way, and only on this basis, infinitude returns in a transformed sense as the indeterminate super-abundant giving no-thing that is the origin of all determinacy, behind which this *nihil* infinitely withdraws.

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