

Heidegger and Aquinas on the Self as Substance

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The thought of Martin Heidegger has been influential in postmodernist discussions concerning the “death of the subject” and the “deconstruction” of the metaphysics of presence. In this paper, I shall examine Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein in terms of care and temporality, and his corresponding critique of the metaphysics of presence, especially as this critique applies to one’s understanding of the human knower. I shall then seek to determine whether Aquinas’s thought concerning the human knower falls prey to the Heideggerian critique. My purpose in elucidating the Heideggerian and Thomistic conceptions of the human knower is to begin opening up some possible spaces for further dialogue between students of these two thinkers.

I.

The central task of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, and of his thought in general, is to unfold “the question of the meaning of Being.”¹ According to Heidegger, the meaning of something is “that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself” (SZ 151, BT 193). Thus to ask about the meaning of Being is to ask about that wherein the intelligibility of Being maintains itself; it is to ask about the horizon wherein something like Being can be intelligible to us in the first place. Accordingly, the uncovering of the meaning of Being “... is tantamount to clarifying the

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 16. Auflage (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), 1. The English translation is taken from Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), 19. All subsequent references to *Sein und Zeit* and to the English translation will appear parenthetically in the text in abbreviated form, for example: (SZ 1, BT 19). All subsequent quotations are taken from the English translation by Macquarrie and Robinson; however, I have made slight modifications in some instances.

possibility of having any understanding of Being at all—an understanding which itself belongs to the constitution of the being called Dasein” (*SZ* 231, *BT* 274). The question concerning the meaning of Being thus seeks to illuminate the possibility of our having any understanding of Being at all.

For Heidegger, an understanding of Being belongs intimately to Dasein, the being which each of us is. In fact, “Being ‘is’ only in the understanding of those beings to whose Being something like an understanding of Being belongs.... There is a necessary connection between Being and understanding...” (*SZ* 183, *BT* 228; see also *SZ* 212, *BT* 255, and *SZ* 230, *BT* 272). Because Being and Dasein belong together, it is possible to ask about the meaning of Being (the horizon within which Being is intelligible), only if one also asks about Dasein, the being to whom an understanding of Being belongs. Thus: “The very possibility of ontology is referred back to a being: Dasein, i.e., it is referred back ontically.”²

According to Heidegger, “Dasein’s Being reveals itself as *care*” (*SZ* 182, *BT*, 227). The structure of care, in turn, is rooted in temporality. Thus, for Heidegger, Dasein’s understanding of Being must be explained ultimately in terms of temporality:

If an understanding of Being belongs to the Existenz of Dasein, then this understanding of Being must also be grounded in temporality. The ontological condition of the possibility of the understanding of Being is temporality itself. Thus that out of which we understand something like Being must be taken from time. (GA, vol. 24, 323; italics in original)

In the first section of this paper, I seek to explain how Heidegger characterizes Dasein’s Being in terms of care, and how care, in turn, is rooted in temporality.

Care, for Heidegger, is not a simple phenomenon, but is characterized by the threefold structure of: existentiality, facticity, and fallenness. According to Heidegger, the structure of care is complex, but it is not composite; that is to say, it is not a structure built up out of elements. The fundamental ontological characteristics of Dasein’s Being—existentiality, facticity, and fallenness—“are not pieces belonging to something

² Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 24, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975), 26. All subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically in the text in abbreviated form, for example: (*GA*, vol. 24, 26). All English translations from this work are mine.

composite, one of which might sometimes be missing"; instead, these characteristics are "woven together" in a "primordial context" which constitutes the totality of Dasein's Being (SZ 191, BT 235-236). For Heidegger, the structural unity of care is not something which is "constructed" from within experience, but is in fact an "existential-*apriori*" unity which precedes, and even makes possible, all of Dasein's compartments within experience: "... care lies existentially-*apriori* 'before' every factual 'compartment' and 'position' of Dasein..." (SZ 193, BT 238).

Given the aims of Heidegger's "fundamental ontology," it is no wonder that the unitary structure of care must be demonstrated as an "existential-*apriori*" unity, in contrast to any kind of unity which is "constructed" out of elements derived from experience. After all, Heidegger intends to show how Dasein's understanding of the Being of beings—an understanding which belongs essentially to Dasein—is rooted in temporality. Thus if Heidegger's investigation is not to be viciously circular, he cannot begin by articulating the unity of Dasein's Being simply in terms of those "categories" which are derived from our experience of beings; Heidegger's aim is to illuminate the horizon of time insofar as it makes possible our experience of beings as beings in the first place. This also explains why Heidegger's fundamental ontology is different from any empirical investigation of the human knower. From the point of view of fundamental ontology, any appeal to the empirical characteristics of the human being would be essentially question-begging. Unlike all empirical investigations, fundamental ontology does not seek to explain one kind of being, or ontic presence, in terms of another. Fundamental ontology seeks rather to articulate the *apriori* conditions of the possibility of our understanding of beings as beings in the first place. Fundamental ontology seeks to articulate the non-empirical or non-present horizon for the presencing of beings as such.

Since Dasein is the kind of being that has an understanding of Being, it follows that our own kind of Being affords us access to the question of the meaning of Being itself. Conversely, a failure to understand our own unique kind of Being as Dasein can block access to the question of the meaning of Being. For this reason, Heidegger objects to any kind of characterization of Dasein in terms of "substance" or "reality." For Heidegger, these terms are borrowed from beings which have the character of presence-at-hand or ontic presence. By contrast, Dasein's Being is nothing like presence-at-hand or ontic presence. Dasein's Being, as characterized by temporality, must be understood in terms of a kind of non-presence which allows for the presencing of ontic presences in the first place. Thus "... beings with Dasein's kind of Being cannot be conceived in terms of reality and substantiality" (SZ 212, BT 255). As Heidegger later tries to show, Dasein's tendency to misinterpret its own

Being in terms of categories (such as “substantiality” and “reality”) borrowed from beings other than itself is perfectly explicable on the basis of its own unique kind of Being as care. We now turn to the three-fold structure of Dasein’s Being as care: existentiality, facticity, and fallenness.

The meaning of Dasein’s existentiality is indicated by the claim that Dasein is a being for which its very own Being is always an issue. Because of this, Dasein is fundamentally “projective”: all of Dasein’s “factual” activities and involvements are what they are only as self-projections of Dasein upon its own potentiality-for-Being. It is by virtue of this kind of projection that Dasein is always “ahead-of-itself”:

The phrase “is an issue” has been made plain in the state-of-Being of understanding—of understanding as self-projective Being-towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being.... But ontologically, Being towards one’s ownmost potentiality-for-Being means that in each case Dasein is already *ahead* of itself in its Being. Dasein is always “beyond itself,” not as a way of behaving towards other beings which it is *not*, but as Being towards the potentiality-for-Being which it is itself. (SZ 191-192, BT 236)

A crucial point here is that Dasein’s Being-ahead-of-itself is not merely an empirical or factual kind of Being-ahead-of-itself. All empirical or factual kinds of Being-ahead are grounded in a more primordial, “existential-*apriori*” kind of Being-ahead. According to this more primordial notion of Being-ahead, Dasein is not merely “ahead” or “out towards” actualities which are other than itself, or which may even be identified with itself (for example, some future, yet-to-be-actualized factual state which one can imagine about oneself). Dasein’s Being-ahead-of-itself is not a Being-ahead towards anything “actual” at all (whether other than oneself or identifiable with oneself); Dasein is existentially-*apriori* ahead of itself towards nothing other than its own potentiality-for-Being. This is what is meant when Heidegger tells us that Dasein’s very Being is always an issue for it. Finally, Dasein’s existentiality—indicated by terms such as “is an issue”, projection, understanding, and Being-ahead—is not an isolated feature or characteristic of Dasein which arises only from time to time. Rather, “this structure pertains to the whole of Dasein’s constitution” (SZ 192, BT 236).

An equally primordial and essential structural characteristic of the Being of Dasein is its facticity; Dasein’s facticity means that Dasein “has in each case already been thrown *into a world*” (SZ 192, BT 236). As Heidegger continually emphasizes, the “world” into which Dasein is “thrown” does not refer to a collection of things (no matter how “complete”) or to a factual state of affairs. Accordingly, Dasein’s primordial

thrownness does not mean that Dasein is thrown into a factual state of affairs; it means rather that Dasein is thrown into its own "state" of having a world where its own Being is an issue for it. One might say that all of Dasein's factual compartments and involvements are instances of its own self-projection; but the one thing that cannot be a result of Dasein's self-projection is the fact *that* all of its factual compartments and involvements are such self-projections, that is, the fact that its very own Being is always an issue for it. Just as Dasein's Being-ahead-of-itself is not a Being-ahead towards anything "actual" but only towards its own potentiality-for-Being, so too Dasein's primordial thrownness is not a thrownness into any "factual" state of affairs but only into its own way of Being.

On the basis of this, one can see already that the projective character of Dasein, Dasein's Being-ahead-of-itself, bears an intrinsic relation to its thrownness: "Being-ahead-of-itself" means, if we grasp it more fully, '*ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in-a-world*'" (SZ 192, BT 236). Accordingly,

the constitution of Dasein, whose totality is now brought out explicitly as ahead-of-itself-in-Being-already-in ... is primordially a whole. To put it otherwise, existing is always factual. Existentiality is essentially determined by facticity. (SZ 192, BT 236)

It would be wrong to think of Dasein as something which is first of all projective and which then looks to the "world" as some kind of arena within which it can exercise its projective capacity (for example, an arena where its projections can be either satisfied or frustrated). In this misconception of Dasein, facticity, or thrownness, is understood as an empirical determination which can offer resistance to an otherwise unlimited projective capacity. In this misconception, the ontological or *a priori* unity of existentiality and facticity is overlooked in favor of a merely factual or empirical relatedness. Contrary to this, Heidegger wants to argue that even if there is no resistance at all from things within the "world", Dasein remains fundamentally "thrown" in the ontological sense. Thrownness into a world does not refer to the possibility of factual resistance or coercion, but rather to fact that—regardless of the factual state of affairs which surrounds Dasein—Dasein is thrown into its own kind of Being such that it must always take up its own Being as an issue.

This brings us to the third structural feature of Dasein's Being as care: fallenness. Dasein's existentiality and facticity belong together in a manner which is qualified as "fallen":

Dasein's factual existing is not only generally and without

further differentiation a thrown potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world; it is always also absorbed in the world of its concerns. (SZ 192, BT 236-237)

Because Dasein's own Being is always an issue for it, Dasein is always involved with things in the world, things which Dasein projects against its own potentiality-for-Being and for the sake of its potentiality-for-Being:

That very potentiality-for-Being for the sake of which Dasein is, has Being-in-the-world as its kind of Being. Thus it implies ontologically a relation to beings within-the-world. (SZ 194, BT 238)

Far from hovering above the things in the world, Dasein is so involved with them that for the most part it interprets itself in terms of the things in the world. To the extent that Dasein understands itself not out of its own [*eigen*] self, but out of things in the world, it is fallen or inauthentic [*uneigentlich*]. Dasein's fallenness or inauthenticity, however, is not something which happens to Dasein through an external state of affairs, or which afflicts Dasein only from time to time. Dasein's fallenness is itself a primordial structural characteristic of care.

Dasein's Being is articulated in terms of the three-fold structural unity of care. In turn, the meaning of (or that which makes possible) Dasein's Being as care is temporality. This thesis has been implicit already in the preceding discussion; for Dasein's existentiality (its Being-ahead-of-itself) bears an implicit reference to futurity, and its facticity (its Being-already-thrown) bears an implicit reference to pastness. From the unity of the future and the past there can emerge something like the present, and it is only through the present that Dasein can be alongside the beings which it encounters within the world. In other words, the presencing of beings becomes possible only by way of the *apriori* unity of the temporality which constitutes Dasein's Being. These claims now have to be set forth in more detail.

The meaning of—that is, that which makes possible—Dasein's existentiality or Being-ahead-of-itself is the future. Dasein's existentiality is nothing other than its

... *Being towards* its ownmost, distinctive potentiality-for-Being. This sort of thing is possible only in that Dasein *can, indeed, come towards* itself in its ownmost possibility, and that it can put up with this possibility as a possibility in thus letting itself come towards itself—in other words, that it exists. This letting-itself-come-towards-itself in that distinctive possibility which it puts up with, is the primordial

phenomenon of the *future as coming towards*. (SZ 325, BT 372)

Thus "... *the primary meaning of existentiality is the future*" (SZ 327, BT 376). As Heidegger emphasizes, the "future" as it is meant here can have nothing to do with the coming-towards us of now-moments which have not yet "transpired" (or the coming-towards us of actualities which are qualified by such now-moments). The "future" here means a coming-toward in which Dasein comes towards its own self. Dasein's coming-towards itself, however, is a coming-towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being; accordingly, that which Dasein approaches primordially in its futurity is nothing "actual" at all.

The meaning of—that which makes possible—Dasein's facticity or Being-thrown is the past. Thus "the primary existential meaning of facticity lies in the character of 'having been'" (SZ 328, BT 376). Once again, the past here is not to be understood as any kind of now-moment which is no longer present (or any actual state of affairs which might be qualified by such a now-moment). To take over one's thrownness authentically means to "choose" one's own Being as a burden which cannot be lightened by, or blamed on, anything "actual."

Dasein can take over its facticity or thrownness authentically only in virtue of Dasein's existentiality or Being-ahead-of-itself, and this is for two related reasons. First of all, Dasein can be related authentically to itself only to the extent that it is related to itself as to its own potentiality-for-Being; and Dasein's relatedness to its own potentiality-for-Being is possible only insofar as Dasein is ahead of itself, or futural: "Taking over thrownness is possible only in such a way that the futural Dasein can be its ownmost 'as-it-already-was'—that is to say, its 'been'" (SZ 325-326, BT 373). Thus Dasein is able to "choose" itself authentically only by being ahead of itself or futural. Secondly, that which is chosen in this kind of authenticity is not any actual thing which one simply is or was, but rather one's thrownness into potentiality-for-Being, that is, one's thrownness into futurity. Thus Dasein can be authentically related to its pastness only insofar as Dasein is futural.

Conversely, Dasein can come authentically towards itself futurally only in coming back to itself as having been; once again, this coming back to itself is not to be understood as a coming back to any past event or state of affairs; this coming back is simply Dasein's coming back to itself as having-been thrown into existentiality: "Dasein can come towards itself futurally in such a way that it comes *back*, only insofar as Dasein is as an 'I-am-as-having-been'" (SZ 325-326, BT 373). To be authentically futural is to be authentically as having-been, and *vice versa*; both "moments" of authentic temporality mutually imply and require one another. By contrast, Dasein is inauthentic to the extent

that it takes refuge in interpreting itself in terms of actual things encountered within the world, whether these be actualities approaching from the "future" or disappearing into the "past."

Although not defined in terms of anything "actual," Dasein's futural pastness or past futurity is not a free-floating structure which somehow hovers above the "actual" world. The structural unity of Dasein's futurity and pastness makes sense only as the structural unity of Dasein's caring Being-in-the-world. Because Dasein's Being is always already an issue for it (because of Dasein's futural pastness), Dasein is fundamentally involved with beings within the world. In fact, Dasein "needs" beings for the sake of its own Being, that is, for the sake of the Being which is always the "*apriori*" issue for itself:

Dasein exists for the sake of a potentiality-for-Being of itself. In existing, it has been thrown, and as something thrown, it has been delivered over to beings which it needs *in order to* be able to be as it is—namely, *for the sake of itself*. (SZ 364, BT 416)

Moreover, Dasein as thrown projection (past futurity) is not only necessarily related to beings (as present) within the world; the very structure of Dasein's past futurity makes possible the presencing of beings within the world in the first place:

the present arises in the unity of the temporalizing of temporality out of the future and having been.... Insofar as Dasein temporalizes itself, a world *is* too. In temporalizing itself with regard to its Being as temporality, Dasein *is* essentially "in a world." (SZ 365, BT 417)

This is not to say that Dasein's temporal structure creates the beings themselves; but Dasein's temporality is the horizon which makes possible Dasein's openness to the presencing, or the Being, of the beings. As Heidegger writes, "There is [*es gibt*] Being—not beings—only insofar as there is truth. And truth *is* only insofar as and as long as Dasein is" (SZ 230, BT 272). Thus the presencing, the Being, of the beings is given only through the futural pastness of Dasein:

The character of "having been" arises from the future, and in such a way that the future which "has been" (or better, which "is in the process of having been") releases from itself the present. (SZ 326, BT 374)

With this, Heidegger shows not only that temporality is the meaning of care, but also that it is the horizon which makes possible the presenc-

ing of beings; temporality is "the unity of a future which makes present in the process of having been" (SZ 326, BT 374). Beings can be made present as beings only through temporality: "the present is rooted in the future and in having been" (SZ 360, BT 411). More specifically, something can be encountered as a being only in the unity of Dasein's temporality, through Dasein's futural pastness and past futurity. That which "gives" us our understanding of Being is nothing other than temporality. As Heidegger explains in a lecture course of 1927-28, however, primordial temporality is not "ontically creative": it does not create the beings themselves. Nevertheless, it is in a sense "ontologically creative": it provides the horizon for our *a priori* understanding of Being, without which there could not be beings as beings.³

That which allows us to encounter beings as beings is our primordial temporality, our futural pastness. In other words, "primordial and authentic temporality temporalizes itself in terms of the authentic future and in such a way that in having been futurally, it first of all awakens the present" (SZ 329, BT 378). Dasein's primordial temporality means that Dasein is always in a world and open to beings within the world. In fact, one can say that Dasein, in its thrown projection, or in its futural pastness, is for the most part delivered over to the world:

In seeking shelter, sustenance, livelihood, we do so "for the sake of" constant possibilities of Dasein which are very close to it; upon these the being for which its own Being is an issue has already projected itself. Thrown into its "there" every Dasein has been factually submitted to a definite "world"—its "world." (SZ 297, BT 344)

Although Dasein is essentially delivered over to its world, the crucial point is that Dasein is fundamentally different from those beings which it encounters within the world. Dasein's Being is not to be understood on the basis of those beings which are present to it; on the contrary, the presencing of these beings must be understood in light of the fact that Dasein's Being must always already "first" be an issue for it, that is, in light of Dasein's past futurity. It is Dasein's unique concern about its own Being which "first" makes possible its Being-encountered-by beings which are other than itself.

The aim of fundamental ontology is to show how the presencing of

³ Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen von Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 25, 2. Auflage, ed. Ingrid Gölrand (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1987), 417. The English translation is mine.

beings is possible. Thus Heidegger cannot simply begin with Dasein as something "present", but must seek to show the conditions of the possibility of any presencing whatsoever. As it turns out, Dasein is not the kind of being which can be made present at all; indeed, it is precisely in virtue of its non-presence (its caring Being-outside-of-itself) that Dasein is the "there" ["*Da*"] for the presencing of any beings whatsoever. The temporality which constitutes Dasein's Being "is not a being at all" (SZ 328, BT 377), but is rather "the primordial 'outside of itself'" (SZ 329, BT 377) which makes possible the presencing of beings.

II.

By virtue of its existentiality, Dasein is always ahead of itself, projecting itself upon its own potentiality-for-Being; and as factual, Dasein is always thrown into the kind of Being (potentiality-for-Being) that it is. It is through its thrown projection, or past futurity, that Dasein is always an issue for itself; and it is because it is an issue for itself that Dasein can be open to, and concerned with, the Being of beings other than itself. In being concerned with other beings for the sake of itself, Dasein tends to become absorbed in such beings and thus tends to forget its own Being-an-issue for itself.

Dasein is not any kind of ontic presence, but is rather the non-present locus or transparency for the presencing of ontic presences. In its fallen self-forgetfulness, however, Dasein tends to interpret itself as a kind of ontic presence among others. According to Heidegger, it is this tendency towards self-forgetful fallenness that underlies traditional metaphysical interpretations of the human knower in terms of substantiality, reality, causality, form and matter, and so forth. For Heidegger, the problem with traditional metaphysics is not simply that one tries to conceive of Dasein, or the human discloser, as an object-like or thing-like kind of being. The problem is that one tries to conceive of Dasein in terms of *any* kind of presence or actuality:

Even if one rejects the "soul substance" and the thinghood of consciousness, or denies that the person is an object, ontologically one is still positing something whose Being retains the meaning of what's present-at-hand, whether it does so explicitly or not. (SZ 114, BT 150)

As we have seen, the Heideggerian unfolding of the question of the meaning of Being required an *a priori*-existential analysis of Dasein's authentic Being (in terms of care and temporality) as the non-present locus for the presencing of ontic presences. For Heidegger, then, the traditional metaphysical interpretation of Dasein in terms of ontic

presence (for example, in terms of substance, reality, or something else) essentially blocks access to a proper unfolding of the question of the meaning of Being.

In addition to blocking access to the question of the meaning of Being, the traditional metaphysics of presence also has other deleterious ramifications, according to Heidegger. For example, the traditional metaphysics of presence also stands in the way of a proper understanding of Dasein's own finite freedom. This can be seen if we first consider what is implied by the Heideggerian understanding of Dasein's "thrown projection." Insofar as Dasein is projective, or ahead-of-itself towards nothing other than its own potentiality-for-Being, it is free; in other words, Dasein is "free" insofar as Dasein's Being does not receive its definition or determination from any pre-given presences or actualities. But Dasein is finite in this freedom insofar as Dasein does not choose its own freedom, but is rather "thrown" into it. To say that Dasein is characterized by thrown projection is tantamount to saying that Dasein is characterized by finite freedom. As we have already seen, Dasein's projection makes sense only as thrown (and *vice versa*), and so Dasein's freedom makes sense only as finite. The key here is that Dasein is finite, but not because it comes upon some empirical limit which it discovers as an obstacle within experience. Dasein is finite, but not because it is limited by any being or ontic presence outside of it. Rather, Dasein's finitude is written into its very ontological constitution, even "before" Dasein can experience any beings which can ostensibly limit its activities.

In contrast to this existential-*apriori* determination of Dasein's finite freedom, the inauthentic metaphysics of presence sees Dasein as one kind of ontic presence among others. According to the metaphysics of presence, the finitude of Dasein's freedom consists in the fact that there are empirical limits to Dasein's otherwise unimpeded activity; Dasein is finite to the extent that, in its self-assertion, it must contend with resistances or limits imposed upon it by the beings, or ontic presences, surrounding it. According to this view, of course, Dasein's freedom is potentially infinite; on this view, Dasein's finitude can be overcome through the progressive removal of obstacles to Dasein's willing. By contrast, Heidegger wants to argue that Dasein is delivered over to its own potentiality-for-Being in a non-empirical manner; and thus Dasein remains finite through and through, whether or not it experiences obstacles to its self-assertion.

In addition to blocking access to the question of the meaning of Being and misconstruing Dasein's finite freedom, the traditional metaphysics of presence also falls prey to what for Heidegger is perhaps the greatest threat to Western thinking; this is the threat of nihilism, whereby the highest values become devalued and "nothing is sacred" anymore. In-

deed for Heidegger, the traditional metaphysics of presence plays right into the hands of nihilism (in spite of its own anti-nihilistic intentions). This can be seen if we consider the typical anti-nihilistic strategies employed by the metaphysics of presence. Typically, the metaphysics of presence seeks to combat nihilism by appealing to some kind of ontic presence or actuality which is supposed to serve as an obstacle to the otherwise limitless and arbitrary power of human willing. For Heidegger, this appeal to ontic presences is doomed to fail. After all, the putative limit provided by an ontic presence is, in principle, always surmountable, both in theory and in practice. In theory, we can always explain one ontic presence in terms of some further ontic presence: secondary qualities may be explained in terms of primary qualities; and these supposedly "primary" qualities, in turn, can always be explained in terms of some further, more fundamental, primary qualities. In the realm of theoretical inquiry, then, there is no *prima facie* reason why we should respect the immediate limits imposed upon us by beings as ontic presences. The progress of science has shown us that such ontic limits in the realm of theory are always only temporary and relative to our ever-expanding disclosive power as inquirers. This has potentially disastrous implications, since, as Nietzsche pointed out, to explain is to de-mystify, and to de-mystify is to de-sanctify.

The same kind of trend is at work in the area of practice. Modern technology has shown us that any ontic presence or resistance can, in principle, be overcome by more powerful and efficient technology. Ontic presences or beings which we encounter within the world can in themselves never provide an adequate boundary or limit to the seemingly limitless practical orientation of the human being. In principle—though perhaps not yet in actuality—human beings can bring any given being or ontic presence within their control.

For Heidegger, the problem with the metaphysics of presence is not that it tries to identify limits to the seemingly unlimited manipulative power of the human being; the problem is that it seeks such limits in the *ontic* givenness of beings. Insofar as such ontic, or empirical, limits are surmountable in principle, the metaphysics of presence plays into the hands of nihilism; as long as the limits are located on the ever-receding ground of ontic presence, the metaphysics of presence is vulnerable to the nihilistic counter-claim that there really are no limits at all. Like the metaphysics of presence, Heidegger wants to argue that there are limits to the power of human willing and that the human being is finite in its knowing and doing; but unlike the metaphysics of presence, Heidegger argues that this finitude and these limits are determined by the *ontological* givenness of Being as such, and not by the (ever-surmountable) *ontic* givenness of beings. For Heidegger, an adequate limit to the power of human willing is to be provided, not by the resistance of

beings or ontic presences, but by "the prior resistance of Being" as such [*die vorgängige Widerständigkeit des Seins*].⁴ Stated differently, Dasein's indebtedness and finitude are properly determined, not by ontic givenness, but only by the ontological givenness of Being itself. Dasein can always in principle overcome the limits provided by beings or ontic presences, but can never outstrip Being or presencing as such, over which we do not have any control. Indeed, all of Dasein's theoretical and technological success is inevitably indebted to the givenness of Being. Dasein's understanding and manipulation of beings would not be possible apart from the prior givenness of Being as such.

III.

At first glance, it may seem that Aquinas's thinking on the human knower is a classic case of the inauthentic, or merely ontic, kind of self-interpretation which Heidegger rejects. After all, Aquinas does speak of the human knower as a kind of substance or actuality, and he refers to the intellect as a kind of "thing."⁵ In spite of first appearances, however, a strong argument can be made in favor of the claim that what Thomas means by the substantiality or actuality of the human knower has little to do with the ontic, or entitative, view which Heidegger rightfully criticizes. In the following pages, I will try to show that Aquinas's thought on the human knower is indeed compatible with Heidegger's understanding of Dasein. My demonstration of this will have a negative side as well as a positive side. On the negative side, I will try to show that Aquinas's Aristotelian background leads him to view the human knower as a kind of being which—unlike beings within experience—can never be made immediately present. On the positive side, I will try to show that Aquinas understands the human knower as a kind of substance which exhibits such a high degree of immateriality that it retains no entitative obstinacy of its own, and thus is a sheer openness of the kind that Heidegger describes. The openness of the human knower, in turn, has implications for a Thomistic account of the human being's finite freedom. We begin, then, with the negative side

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 4. Auflage (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1973), 70. The English translation is mine.

⁵ The Latin term is "*res*." See, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* 1.82.4 ad 1. All subsequent references to the *Summa Theologiae* will appear parenthetically in the text in abbreviated form, for example: (*ST*, 1.82.4 ad 1). All subsequent English quotations are taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, literally translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947-48).

of our discussion.

No contemporary Thomist can deny the Aristotelian roots of Aquinas's thought. Some Thomists, however, may not fully realize that Aquinas's Aristotelianism leads him to a position which sounds very much like Heidegger's own position: the human discloser can never find itself as a simple presence among other presences within experience. We can explicate this further by referring to Aristotle.

According to a fundamental Aristotelian principle, nothing is intelligible except insofar as it is in act. The intellect is in act only insofar as it is actually understanding something, and so when it is not actually understanding something, the intellect is not actually intelligible. From this it follows that the intellect cannot know itself by virtue of itself alone, or by an act of direct introspection; such direct self-understanding would be possible only if the intellect were already intelligible by virtue of itself, apart from its being actualized in the knowing of something other than itself. Thus for Aristotle and for Aquinas, the intellect can come to know itself only through its understanding of something other than itself (see *ST*, 1.87.1).

According to another Aristotelian principle, the knowing and the known are one. The intellect can come to know itself only through its understanding of something other than itself; but in this self-understanding through the other, the intellect does not find itself as an object to be known alongside the other object being known. For such a duality of objects would violate the Aristotelian principle that the intelligible in act is one with the intelligent in act. If, in knowing itself through the other, the intellect knew the other as one object and itself as another object, then there would not be an identity of the intelligible and the intelligent. Thus for Aristotle and Aquinas, as for Heidegger, the human discloser does not know itself as something present within experience or as something alongside other objects which are known. Rather, the human discloser is fundamentally "outside" of itself and comes to know itself as a discloser only insofar as it returns back to itself "out of" the objects which it knows within experience. Along these same lines, Aquinas recognizes in the human knower a tendency very similar to what Heidegger calls the tendency towards inauthenticity or fallenness. According to Aquinas, material beings are the proper objects of the human intellect (see *ST*, 1.84.7). Since the proper object of the human intellect is material being, there always remains the danger that the human knower will misinterpret itself in terms of those material beings which it knows most directly.

This brings us to the positive side of our discussion of Aquinas. If the human discloser, for Aquinas, does not find itself as an ontic presence among other presences within experience, then how are we to conceive of the Being of the human discloser? Aquinas does refer to the

human knower as a kind of substance, but he also says other things about the knower's substantiality which make clear that his own "substantialist" understanding of the human knower comes rather close to Heidegger's conception of Dasein. According to Aquinas, a material substance is determined by both form and matter. The greater degree of formality or immateriality possessed by a substance, the greater is that substance's capacity for immanently-grounded unity; and the more immanently unified a being is, the greater is that being's capacity to withstand external threats to its own existence:

The mode of a thing's being is according to the mode by which it possesses unity. Hence each thing repulses, as much as it can, division, lest by division it should tend towards non-being.⁶

A naive reading of this passage would suggest that, for Aquinas, a being which is more immaterial and thus more resistant to threats to its own existence must also be more cut off from other beings. For Aquinas, however, just the opposite is the case: it is by virtue of its immateriality that a being can be cognitive; and to be cognitive is to be open to the Being of other beings (see *ST*, 1.14.1). How can this be, if a greater degree of immateriality implies a greater degree of self-subsistence in the face of external threats to a being's existence?

Paradoxically, the knower's greater degree of immateriality and self-subsistence in the face of otherness makes it essentially ecstatic, open, and directed towards the intelligibility of beings other than itself. It is because of the knower's high degree of immateriality and self-subsistence that the knower does not regard the other as simply "other." We can illustrate this by contrasting two different formal principles, the nutritive and the intellectual. On the level of nutrition, the living being withstands and overcomes the alien-character of other beings by destroying the other being in its otherness (that is, by consuming it). On the level of intellectual cognition, the intellect withstands and overcomes the alien-character of other beings, not by destroying the other in its otherness, but by preserving the other in its otherness. The intellect does this by *becoming* the other. Because of its greater degree of immateriality, the intellect can become the other while still remaining itself. The other loses the character of sheer otherness, not because it is destroyed (as in consumption), but because the knower *qua* knower does not stand opposed to the other as other; it is rather open to the

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 42. The English translation is mine.

other in its otherness. This is possible because the intellect perfects itself—and indeed truly *becomes* itself—only by becoming the other.

The intellect truly becomes itself only in becoming the other, and it can do this because it has no pre-given entitative obstinacy of its own. It can do this, in other words, because the intellect *qua* intellect is not already an ontic presence with entitative determinations of its own. The intellect's becoming-other is not self-destructive (as it would be for more material beings) since the intellect is nothing actual apart from its knowing of beings other than itself. By virtue of its immateriality, the intellect has no pre-given entitative actuality of its own, and thus it is nothing other than an openness for the presencing of beings other than itself.

For Aquinas, as for Heidegger, the human knower's openness to other beings implies something about the human knower's freedom. As Heidegger argues, Dasein's freedom means that Dasein's Being as a discloser is not determined or defined by any pre-given ontic presences or actualities within its world. In a similar vein, Aquinas argues that the human being's intellectual knowing is not caused directly by the material objects which are present and knowable within the world. This is so, according to Aquinas, since there must be a fundamental commensurability between recipient and what is received; accordingly, intellectual knowledge, which exhibits a fundamentally immaterial mode of being, cannot be caused in us by material objects alone. Our intellectual knowledge has an essentially immaterial manner of being and thus cannot be caused immediately and directly by the material things which are the intellect's proper objects. Because of this, Aquinas argues for a two-fold mediation:

It is not in the nature of the intellect to receive knowledge from sensible things immediately, but by means of sensitive powers, since it is necessary for there to be a certain fittingness between recipient and received. The species, however, existing in the senses have a certain agreement both with the intellect in so far as they are without matter, and with material things in so far as they have the conditions of matter. Whence sense fittingly receives from material things and the intellect fittingly receives from the senses. The intellect, however, does not receive immediately from material things.⁷

The first mediation, then, has to do with the senses: the senses exist in material organs and can thus be affected by material objects. Sense knowledge is particular, and thus it comes with the conditions of matter, but it is immaterial insofar as it is also a kind of knowledge. As

immaterial, sense knowledge is available to the intellect.

While sense knowledge is available to the intellect, it alone cannot suffice for the kind of knowledge which we have through the intellect. Sense knowledge, which is particular, must be transformed into intellectual knowledge, which is universal. Accordingly, there is required a second kind of mediation; this mediation takes place through the act of abstraction which the agent intellect performs upon the sensible phantasm. The phantasm, however, is not simply given as already intelligible; the phantasm is only potentially intelligible in itself, and must first be made ready for the act of abstraction by the knower's own faculties, including the cogitative sense. In turn, the knower's own faculties, including the cogitative sense, may be directed by the inquiring orientation of the intellect.

With this notion of abstraction, Aquinas affirms something similar to what Heidegger discusses under the rubric of Dasein's projective character. We will recall that, for Heidegger, we are open to the presencing of beings because of our projective orientation: in projecting ourselves upon our own potentiality-for-Being, we are open to the presencing of beings other than ourselves. The potentiality-for-Being towards which we project ourselves, however, is nothing already actual or present for us. In a similar vein, Aquinas would argue that the intellect *qua* intellect does not simply find itself existing amongst a collection of actualities or presences which already happen to be present for it, apart from its own activity. After all, the beings-to-be-known become actually intelligible for the intellect only to the extent that the active intellect supervenes upon the not-yet-intelligible phantasm and makes that phantasm actually intelligible. Since the proper object of the intellect is the intelligible *qua* intelligible, the not-yet-intelligible phantasm is, from the point of view of intellectual knowledge, "nothing" at all; and to that extent, the intellect is open to the presencing of beings only if it projects itself upon that which is simply not yet "there" for it. Insofar as the intellect's activity is not determined or delimited by pre-given presences, it is free in its projective, disclosive activity.

For Aquinas, as for Heidegger, the human knower is essentially free in its disclosive activity; however, this freedom does not imply any kind of arbitrariness. The human knower, for Aquinas as for Heidegger, is essentially finite in its freedom. The knower is finite, however, not because of any putative limits imposed by the pre-givenness of beings, but rather because of the pre-givenness of Being itself. As Aquinas affirms in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Being is the first

⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum, liber IV*, d. 50, q. 1, a. 1. The English translation is mine.

object of the intellect, and "nothing else can be conceived unless being is understood."⁸ No ontic or entitative presences can be given to the intellect except by virtue of the *a priori* givenness of Being itself. Thus while the human knower can outstrip the temporary limits imposed by any given ontic presence, it can never outstrip its dependence upon the presencing of Being as such. Thus the human knower remains finite in its disclosive activity.

The non-ontic, ontological basis for the knower's finitude becomes clearer if we consider Aquinas's discussion of the sensory powers. The human knower is finite and limited, but not because the knower has an otherwise infinite intellect which happens to be restricted by its dependence on sensory organs. As Aquinas suggests, the sensory organs exist for the sake of cognitive powers which are already finite in their very Being: "the powers are not for the organs, but the organs for the powers" (*ST*, 1.78.3). By extension, we can say that the knower is not finite because it is dependent on the sensory organs; rather the human knower has sensory organs because the human knower is "already" finite in its knowing. The human knower is finite in its very Being, even "before" it must contend with the ontic or empirical limits imposed upon it through its dependence on sensory organs. By the same token, Aquinas can affirm that angels are finite in their Being, even though their knowing is not restricted by the ontic limits of sensory organs. Borrowing from Heidegger's terminology, we might say that the human knower is finite because it is thrown, in a non-empirical way, into the kind of Being that it is.

Just as we might say that Aquinas's human knower is thrown non-empirically into the finite kind of Being that it is, so too we might also say that Aquinas's human knower exists as Being-ahead towards its own potentiality-for-Being. This, to be sure, is not Thomistic terminology; however, this terminology is not inappropriate if one understands how the human knower exists as Being-ahead. Aquinas would say that the human knower exists out towards its own perfection. The knower *qua* knower achieves its perfection in the act of knowing and thus in becoming (cognitionally) the object-to-be-known. How does the human knower, as potential knower, exist out towards its own perfection? It cannot do so by comporting itself towards some actual being which it already knows to be there for it; after all, insofar as the knower

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio, liber IV*, lec. 6, 605. The English translation is taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, lec. 6, 605. The English translation is taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1961), 243.

is merely out towards its own perfection, it is not yet perfected in the act of knowing and thus does not yet know the object as something actual towards which it could comport itself. Accordingly, the inquiring human knower cannot relate to its own perfection as it would relate to any kind of ontic presence or actuality which is already there for it. As with Heidegger's *Dasein*, Aquinas's human knower maintains itself authentically in its Being by projecting itself out towards its own perfection, a perfection which, precisely insofar as the knower is characterized by inquiry, is nothing yet actually present for it.

IV.

My analysis of Heidegger and Aquinas here differs from the well-known analysis by John Caputo in two important respects. First of all, I disagree with Caputo's claim that "... the essential issue in the confrontation of Heidegger and Aquinas is centered in the later Heidegger."⁹ I agree, of course, that a full confrontation between Heidegger and Aquinas must take the later Heidegger into consideration; however, Caputo's prioritizing of the later Heidegger is, to my mind, one-sided. As I have tried to show throughout this paper, some of the central points at issue between the two thinkers can be addressed through a comparison of Aquinas and the early Heidegger, insofar as both Aquinas and the early Heidegger focus on the Being of the intellectual knower. Caputo himself seems to acknowledge this, in part, when he writes: "The genuine point of contact [between Aquinas and Heidegger] is opened up by consideration not of *esse* but of *intellectus*" (*HA*, 266).

Secondly, I believe that Caputo is wrong to think that the only genuinely Heidegger-friendly elements in Aquinas's thought are to be found outside of Aquinas's metaphysics, and in his personal, religious life instead. Concerning those elements in Aquinas's thought which approach the thought of Heidegger, Caputo writes:

I would look for the unspoken horizon of St. Thomas' thought outside metaphysics, in a certain kind of non-metaphysical experience, of which the metaphysics is an objectivistic conceptualization and toward which it tends. I would look for the unspoken horizon of St. Thomas' thought in the mystical-

⁹ John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 217. All subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically in the text in abbreviated form, for example: (*HA*, 217).

religious experience of life which animates his works. (*HA*, 249)

Contrary to Caputo's claim here, I have tried to show that there are, even within Aquinas's metaphysics of the human knower, elements which sound remarkably like Heidegger himself. This is not to suggest, however, that we can recover the "Heideggerian" elements of Thomas while still remaining completely true to the explicit intentions of Aquinas himself. As Caputo is right to insist, it is not possible to adhere to the "historical actuality" of Aquinas, while also demonstrating his philosophical affinity with Heidegger:

So long as we remain on the level of the Thomistic text in its historical *actuality*, on the level of what St. Thomas himself actually said and intended to say, of the actual metaphysical doctrine which he developed in the Scholastic mode, then we shall never be able to bring Heidegger and Aquinas into living relationship with one another. (*HA*, 246)

Here, Caputo is quite right to stress something that Heidegger himself stresses: "higher than actuality stands *possibility*" (*SZ* 38, *BT* 63). With regard to our interpretation, this means that we should never content ourselves with thinking that the meaning of a thinker like Aquinas has been explained and "made actual" once and for all. The thought of any thinker from the past always contains new and unforeseeable possibilities for us today, and the revelation of these new possibilities is just as much a function of our own confrontation with Being today, as it is a function of an earlier thinker's confrontation with Being in the past.

In this paper, I have tried to suggest the possibility of a dialogue between Heidegger and Aquinas because I believe that a Heideggerian reading of Aquinas can unlock and release some of the existential-ontological possibilities of Aquinas's rich thought. For too long, many of these possibilities have been overlooked and even repressed by certain currents in neo-Thomism which seek to turn Aquinas's thought into a set of techniques for the purpose of combating what some fear to be the incipient nihilism of contemporary philosophy. If we have learned anything from Heidegger, however, we should realize that such attempts to fasten onto the ontic presence of rigid techniques only play into the hands of nihilism itself.

Finally, if a Heideggerian reading of Aquinas can unlock some of the possibilities of Aquinas's thought, then, conversely, a return to Aquinas might serve as a corrective to Heidegger's thinking. In his affirmation of the radical discontinuity between the Being of Dasein and other ways of Being, Heidegger may have unwittingly bought into those Enlightenment dichotomies which he sought to undermine: the dichotomies be-

tween autonomy and heteronomy, inside and outside, self and other. In the long run, it may turn out that Aquinas demonstrates the distinct advantage of being able to affirm a certain kind of continuity between knowing substances and non-knowing substances, yet without misconceiving the knowing substance as a kind of ontic presence among others.

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