Heidegger's Task of Thinking

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Heidegger’s Task of Thinking:

Explorations of Plato, Comparative Thinking, and Thought that is Indic

“There is Being, but not in the sense in which it is other than what it is Being for or to, not in the sense of what knowing, thinking, and speaking are about, other than them, as a reality confronting them, but inclusive of these as themselves modes of Being.”

Mehta

In “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” Heidegger claims that there are still possibilities for thinking beyond metaphysical philosophy. In his own words, “perhaps there is a thinking that is more sober minded than the incessant frenzy of rationalization… outside of the distinction of rational and irrational.” In Heideggerian fashion, this paper has no thesis. However, it explores Heidegger’s quest for new ways of thinking while shedding light on the antipathy “philosophy” still holds against non-Western, precisely, Indic thinking. This exploration consists of Andrea Nightingale’s argument for Plato’s construction of the discipline of philosophy, Steven Burik’s relation of early and later Heidegger’s claim on the end of philosophy to comparative philosophical thinking, and Mehta’s exploration of Heideggerian Being alongside Vedântic Brahman.

In his article, Heidegger claims the question of what the task of thinking is must be post-philosophically. That is because Heidegger understands philosophy as Western “metaphysics... the ground [that] has the character of grounding as the ontic causation of the actual, the transcendental making possible of the objectivity of objects.”

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1 Mehta, Heidegger, 32
2 Heidegger, Thinking, 449
3 Heidegger, Thinking, 432
words, philosophers have understood metaphysics as mandating a causative relation of Being to beings. Philosophers have become transfixed in this metaphysical relation that makes possible the objectivity of beings concerning the subjectivity of Being. In Heidegger’s own words, a metaphysical Being “is that from which beings as such are what they are in their becoming, perishing, and persisting as something that can be known, handled, and worked upon.” Metaphysics has yielded thinking of being to the detriment of Being.

Understandably, Heidegger has a problem with this metaphysical fascination with beings, given that its perfection has resulted in nihilist philosophical-turned-technological thinking. On the contrary, while Heidegger acknowledges that “not only do we lack any criterion… to evaluate… perfection,” his view of the end of philosophy entails that its “completion does not mean perfection.” Far from it. In Heidegger’s view, this completion has resulted from a philosophical legacy tied to a Platonism grounded on eschewed metaphysical thinking. Since it claims Being to being as an objective relation, philosophy must now function scientifically. In Heidegger’s own words, the development of the sciences – already surfaced in Greece – “belongs to the completion of [this] philosophy.” Scientific development now claims beings as technological and unaware of one’s unthought being concerning Being.

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4 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 432
5 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 433
6 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 432
7 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 433
It is essential, nonetheless, to understand that Heidegger is not anti-scientific. What he stands against is that “the ontologies of the various regions of beings” are now left to the sciences to interpret according to the rules of science. In other words, the being one is already transfixed in what has been thought of one’s relation to Being. It furthermore mirrors oneself in response to how metaphysical thinking has claimed to it the status of a mere technologically active being. That is why Heidegger contends that a theory now means “supposition of the [scientific] categories… [which deny] any ontological meaning.” One has turned from being grounded in Being, through an objective relation of one’s being to Being, to a technological, i. e., ontologically-void, representational thinking.

That is why Heidegger insists that there must be new tasks for thinking beyond the void view one has come to have of oneself at the end of Western Platonic metaphysical and philosophical thinking. In his rhetorical question, “is not then the end of philosophy after all a cessation of its way of thinking? To conclude so would be premature.” According to Heidegger, the new task for thinking can be neither metaphysical nor scientific. It is a task of making all that philosophy understands as its matter of thinking relevant to a task that overcomes philosophical thinking. Heidegger labels this task “less than philosophy.” It is so because the task takes on more than what has been thought in the course of the history of Western philosophical thinking.

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8 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 435
9 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 435
10 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 433
11 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 436
At the same time that Heidegger’s task for thinking runs the course of the history of Western philosophy, it must, nonetheless, return to its beginning. For Heidegger, one of the possibilities for the task of thinking “attempts to say something to the presence that was already said a long time ago, precisely at the beginning of philosophy… but has not been explicitly thought.”12 This, however, should no longer involve a call to the philosophical thing itself – whatever it is. The subjectivity of Being to the objectivity of being is precisely what must be gone. For Heidegger, what is intrinsic to this task of thinking has already remained unthought in the objective relation of being to Being. In his own words, “something that is no longer the matter of philosophy to think conceals itself precisely where philosophy has brought its matter to absolute knowledge and to ultimate evidence.”13 This brings one closer to Heidegger’s claim for the necessity of clearing.

Heidegger sees Lichtung as the context in which Being and being are appropriately related for new thinking tasks. Heideggerian clearing designates a “primal phenomenon”14 in which “what is evident is what can be immediately intuited.”15 Intuited, not thought, because what is thought still leans onto metaphysical thinking. This is important for Heidegger in that he argues that “philosophy” knows nothing of this clearing. The Platonic metaphysical tradition has passed over instead of traversing through clearing in its objectification of being to Being.

Besides clearing, Heidegger further relates his quest for new tasks of post-philosophical thinking to Aleteia – he understands it as a type of clearing. In his own

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12 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 437
13 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 441
14 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 442
15 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 443
words, “Aletheia [is]... the clearing that first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other.”\textsuperscript{16} Heidegger prioritizes this Aletheia because he considers it a fertile ground in the search for truth in pre-philosophical Greek beginnings. Heidegger goes as far as to rhetorically claim that one must “experience Aletheia... as unconcealment and then, above and beyond the Greek, think it as the clearing.”\textsuperscript{17} However, what does it mean to go even “above and beyond the Greek”? It is critical to recall Heidegger’s previous quest for a thinking that is “more sober-minded” and “outside the distinction of rational and irrational” than Platonic thinking on Being.

Before engaging with the question of a more sober-minded approach, it is essential to understand Heidegger’s resistance to Greek Platonic metaphysical thinking. In Genres in Dialogue, Nightingale argues that “Philosophy,” as Plato conceived, “comprised not just an analytic inquiry into certain types of subjects but a unique set of ethical and metaphysical commitments that demanded a whole new way of living.”\textsuperscript{18} It is not at all unreasonable that such a call for ethical positions within metaphysics must postulate the objective relation of being to Being. In other words, the ethical question of how to live takes priority over the more fundamental question of why one lives in the first place. This Kehre from understanding Being as what-is to understanding beings in their ethical positions resulted, Nightingale contends, from Plato’s explicitly defining of the dialectic mode of discourse used by philosophers in opposition to other modes of being. In the philosophical turn from metaphysics to ethics, the understanding of Being became

\textsuperscript{16} Heidegger, \textit{Thinking}, 445  
\textsuperscript{17} Heidegger, \textit{Thinking}, 448  
\textsuperscript{18} Nightingale, \textit{Genres}, 10
irrelevant to the inquiry of how beings should live. Notice that the metaphysical understanding of Being prior to this turn to ethics was already off the beaten track previously.

Revealing further the Platonic obscurity of thinking about Being, Nightingale argues that Plato constructed philosophy by targeting genres that claimed wisdom and authority. “Not surprisingly,” she contends, “when Plato engages within a given genre of discourse [in his dialogues], his stance is usually adversarial.” In other words, in the search for positing modes of being for beings, Plato employs tactics to differentiate “philosophy” from other disciplines that manifested differing tasks for thinking. According to Nightingale, Plato granted his thinking more authority than the other ways. Specifically, Nightingale shows that what Plato’s audience heard was a distorted version of another way of thinking that Plato deemed less rational than “philosophy.”

Heidegger’s characterization of Plato’s philosophy, however, reveals it as mired in a postsocratic obscurity of thinking about beings without the clearing for Being. Nightingale argues that “as a careful analysis of the terminology will attest, philosophein does not take on a specialized and technical meaning until Plato appropriates the term for his own enterprise.” This enterprise had done away with presocratic thinking of Being in favor of the ethical considerations of beings. For this reason, Nightingale contends that, despite his ongoing engagement with the ideas of many Presocratic thinkers, Plato’s definition of the

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19 Nightingale, Genres, 5  
20 Nightingale, Genres, 10
“philosopher” excluded these intellectuals. This is the point of convergence of Heidegger’s indictment of Platonic philosophical thinking.

An indictment that even Plato may have noticed as possible with his strict construction of philosophical thinking. Nightingale describes that there are “Plato’s rare but pointed alliances with traditional genres of discourse” other than philosophy. According to Nightingale, Plato has remained open to the possibility that a genre may positively contribute to the philosopher’s enterprise. In these cases, she argues, Plato blurs the boundaries he took such pains to create. Because Plato did not fix the boundaries of philosophy for the last time, Nightingale concludes by asking: what is at stake when professional philosophers insist, in Platonic fashion, that certain thinkers are not philosophers? It is with this question that Burik becomes busy.

In “The End of Comparative Philosophy and the Task of Comparative Thinking,” Burik argues that as Heidegger points to a more experiential way of thinking, the insistence by philosophers that certain thinkers are not philosophers are moot. In his own words, Burik believes that “this is one of the reasons Heidegger turned to the East.” In other words, the problem is not that non-Western thinkers are not philosophers. The problem is that this state of affairs shows how far from Being Western metaphysical thinking has gone. If the problem of philosophy at the end of philosophy is philosophical, it is a compliment to name what is non-Western non-philosophical thinking.

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21 Nightingale, Genres, 12
22 Burik, Comparative, 44
Furthermore, Burik argues that because the language of Western philosophy leads itself to think in metaphysical terms, the key to Heidegger’s task of thinking at philosophy’s completion must include an acknowledgment of a language issue. In his own words, “it is also a fact that most if not all Western languages have been so influenced by the metaphysical way of thinking that it is hard to even bring up the idea of some different way of thinking.”23 That is why Heidegger poses his project as above and beyond Greek thought, though it must return to such beginning. Although Heidegger is on a quest for an encounter with the ground of beings, Burik finds it problematic to seek of a “common” ground in comparative philosophy, given that Heidegger hinted that this common ground could be nothing but a hidden one.

According to Burik, the early Heidegger was not at all interested in comparative philosophy. The early Heidegger even went so far as “to state that only in the West there is what we call ‘philosophy,’ and that for example India [does] not have philosophy.”24 The early Heidegger considered Western languages other than German unfit for engaging with philosophy. Heidegger explicitly stated that French and English were inadequate because of their origin in Latin, and not Greek. According to Burik, Heidegger even thought that with the violent translation of ancient Greek into Latin, so much of the original Greek meaning had lost its meaning that it was at that point, after Plato had constructed philosophy in Greece, that the deterioration of Plato’s legacy unfolded.

23 Burik, *Comparative*, 3  
24 Burik, *Comparative*, 35
That is how the later Heidegger came to see the limits of Western philosophical thinking. According to Burik, Heidegger “becomes increasingly aware… that his major source of thinking, the ancient Greeks, were only able to achieve such greatness… in a direct confrontation with Asia.”25 In other words, Heidegger saw that there may be other possibilities for the task of thinking at the end of philosophy that does not rely on a fascination with the philosophy and metaphysics of the Greeks. It is to this task of Heideggerian thinking that Mehta comparatively assesses Vedāntic thinking.

In “Heidegger and Vedānta,” J. L. Mehta employs Heidegger’s understanding of the “end of philosophy” and “the task of thinking” to counteract the philosophical assertion that Vedāntic thought is mystical. In his own words, “comparative philosophy so far has proceeded largely based on an uncritical employment of… ‘metaphysical’ concepts, assumed as obviously and eternally valid, in the understanding of ‘philosophies’ such as those of India.”26 This is important for Mehta because, if one follows Heidegger’s understanding of a new task of thinking for philosophy, then dismissal of Vedāntic thought as non-philosophical and mystical functions as a double-edged sword. The non-philosophical and mystical character, as mentioned above, now functions as a compliment to Indic thought.

Mehta distinguishes between thinking as the thought that resulted from Aristotle and thinking as the medium of the Vedānta tradition. In his own words, for Vedānta, “thinking is not simply an expression of the universal [Aristotelian] urge… [that] all men

25 Burik, Comparative, 37
26 Mehta, Heidegger, 28
by nature desire to know…; the urge which becomes, when joined with the pathos of wonderment, the archê of all philosophy.”In other words, Mehta claims that in the thinking of the Vedānta tradition, the Heideggerian Gods have not fled. Though absent, the tradition has not denied them. They remain within the grasp of the Vedāntic task for thinking. That is so because, for Mehta, the present time for the Vedāntic thinker, though impoverished by Western metaphysical thinking, is still interpreted in light of a noble past that had not taken to itself the objectification of Being.

Nietzsche’s “spirit of Socratism” had not taken over the life of the Vedāntic thinker, according to Mehta’s thinking. In the context in which the Vedāntic thinker existed, “life… was still experienced as touched by the Divine… the dimension of the holy provided the context for all inquiry into reality…” Hence, nihilism, as the Nietzschean result of the end of philosophy following the Greeks’ understanding of it, had not infiltrated and cast its shadow on Vedāntic thinking. The Vedāntic thinker did not primarily think about metaphysics in terms of the objective relation of beings to Being. Vedāntic thought posed that beings are themselves non-objective transmutations of Being. The Vedāntic Being is not understood subjectively – it is what Heidegger thinks it as the what-is. Although Mehta acknowledges that concern for the “philosophy” of Vedānta blurred its task of thinking into paying insufficient attention to the medium of thinking itself, pre-philosophical Vedānta presupposes Being as integral to the non-ethical question of finding Being.

27 Mehta, Heidegger, 18
28 Mehta, Heidegger, 16
Mehta further contrasts the Vedāntic task of thinking with the one from Heidegger’s historical context. Heidegger’s contemporary philosophical thinking was “under the domination of that ‘profound illusion’… which lies in ‘the unshakeable faith that thought, using the thread of logic, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being… even of correcting it.’”  

Because of this profound recognition of Heidegger, Mehta not only praises him for the radical attempt to rethink the Greek formulation of Being anew but also indicts Heidegger’s contemporary and still present age’s destitution, which results from the Greek understanding of Being – and which defines non-Western thinking as irrational and mystical.

Mehta claims that one of the greatest Vedāntic thinkers also felt this destitution himself. In his own words, Śankara was not “just a traditionalist intent on restoring the Vedic tradition but was a thinker moved by the experience of his age as destitute.”  

According to Mehta, the elevation of nihilism that Buddhism had brought to India led Śankara to fight it and seek to show that it was still possible to ground life in Being. The metaphysical philosophy of Buddhist subjectivity consisted of taking things as void of a self, groundless, and yet holding Being in the grip that non-Being was all there was. Śankara fought against this trend of nihilistic thinking in which everything that existed was Nothing - Being represented as a non-Being. In Mehta’s words, Sankara was successful because he “spoke to men sharing a common tradition, still felt as binding.”  

In contrast, Heidegger’s world, whose thinking reflected the Europeanization of the Earth and its consequent

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29 Mehta, Heidegger, 18
30 Mehta, Heidegger, 20
31 Mehta, Heidegger, 21
homelessness, exhibited the dreariness of a world resolutely following the metaphysical understanding of the Greeks.

For the Vedāntic task of thinking, Mehta warns that one should not translate Vedāntic thought into terms of Western conceptuality. After all, Heidegger’s quest for Being is also “a quest for the right or appropriate language in which to talk about it, in which the region from which Being itself gets its sense can find utterance.” Western languages have proved unsuitable for the post-philosophical and non-metaphysical thinking that Heidegger leads. Heidegger had himself seen the limits of Greek, German, French, and English in their embeddedness in Greek metaphysical thinking.

Heidegger, however, was uninterested in Sanskrit. “Since [the metaphysical possibility of thinking] has been fulfilled in its ampest and purest form in the Greek,” Heidegger was not interested in how Sanskrit could speak as a language for a new task of thinking. It is Mehta’s employment of Sanskrit Brahman that reveals Mehta’s Vedāntic task for thinking. For Mehta, the Western understanding of Indian thought, and thus of the Sanskrit language in which it was inscribed, as mystical is only the name of “a category employed to indicate [one’s] blind spot…” Thus, Heidegger’s view of Sanskrit as another metaphysically representational language pits itself against Heidegger’s “quest for what is ‘never Greek anymore’… in this age of world-civilization and man’s homelessness, there is little meaning in the idealization [of Greek].” For Mehta, Heidegger’s possibility for

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32 Mehta, Heidegger, 26
33 Mehta, Heidegger, 27
34 Mehta, Heidegger, 28
35 Mehta, Heidegger, 28
non-Western thought as a task for thinking requires a rethinking of the negative value assigned to Indic thought as irrational, magical, and mystical.

Besides, Mehta claims that Brahman thinking as a Heideggerian task for thinking follows from Heidegger’s appropriation of the thought of mystics. In his own words, “Heidegger appropriates what he finds to be genuine thinking contained in the works of the mystics, takes them as gestures of thought, as happenings on the path of thinking.” For Mehta, the Western notion of mysticism lies in an extreme rationalization of philosophy, which is divorced from life. In other words, the traditional metaphysical contrast between entities known by reason and what one experiences must break down. In this case, thinking functions as a seeing that comes into view as experiencing. According to Mehta, thinking is an intellectual insight and experience. In sum, one must realize there is something is wrong with the characterization of Vedāntic thought as “mystical.”

In this paper, I have explored Heidegger’s understanding of philosophy’s completion in the West and the new possibilities for the tasks of thinking alongside the disregarding of non-Western thinking as magical, religious, irrational, and mystical. I have shown that if one is to take Heidegger’s position seriously, such categories as applied to non-Western thinking must not hold. As Heidegger himself saw the limits of what the Western philosophical tradition has accomplished, without dismissing its benefits, it becomes more and more imperative for stubborn philosophers and stubborn philosophical thinking to break away from imposing boundaries on thinking.

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36 Mehta, *Heidegger*, 35
As Plato’s construction of philosophy moved it away from Being to beings, what has remained unthought in the process must not be disregarded by the stubbornness of philosophy as an academic discipline. One should not narrow down so much as to lose sight of Being. Being does not hide itself but is hidden by philosophers in the process of philosophical thinking. If Western philosophy, as Heidegger accuses it, has found its perfection in nihilism, philosophy cannot afford to reject and label what remains unthought, and apart from nihilism, as mere religious, magical, irrational, and mystical thinking. It may be that it is in these oddly labeled categories that there is a clearing to end homeless and destitute world civilization.

In other words, Heidegger urges that one must cease to think of oneself as a piece of technological datum to be manipulated with. One must cease to think of thinking as a piece of flesh in a gory marketplace of ideas about thinking. Otherwise, as Parmenides has similarly urged: why follow “the opinions of [philosophers] who lack the ability to trust what is unconcealed [in their thinking]?”

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37 Heidegger, *Thinking*, 444
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