

BEING AND ULTIMATE REALITY

by

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DISCUSSION PAPER

on

Eugene Thomas Long's

**BEING AND COMPETING RELIGIOUS CLAIMS
A HEIDEGGERIAN VIEW**

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According to Eugene Long, Heidegger has approached the question of "ultimate reality" through his analysis of Being. Therefore, one way of testing the adequacy of Heidegger's analysis is to observe to what extent it may provide a "sufficiently comprehensive" theory of reality which would "help us understand the more concrete religious expressions of ultimate reality, reconcile differences which may be only apparant, and adjudicate between contradictory views." (p. 21) Long suggests that such a theory, whether or not it is provided by Heidegger, would be both desirable and beneficial in enabling us " to communicate across cultural and religious boundaries." (p.21) Such a comprehensive theory of reality would bridge the specific differneces of East and West into a more universal understanding and would "account for the different religious forms of life." (p.1)

Long characterizes all religions as aiming at some understanding of ultimate reality. I am inclined to agree. Therefore, I take it that these religious aims are metaphysical in nature, and it is for this reason that I question the employment of Heidegger's analysis of Being as providing any foundation for unifying religious differences. Given that I take Heidegger's analysis of Being to be a/metaphysical, I would like to put into question the following points that I take to be intregal to Long's position:

- 1) Heidegger's analysis of Being as an analysis of ultimate reality.
- 2) Heidegger's analysis of Being understood to provide a comprehensive theory of Being.
- 3) The very possibility of understanding and evaluating various conceptions or experiences of ultimate reality by means of Heidegger's analysis of Being or vice-versa.

Long correctly stresses that Being, as Heidegger conceives it, cannot be understood as a being, a what, an existant, and therefore cannot be understood as a subject of an object. To think Being in this manner is, for Heidegger, to think Being metaphysically, to think Being in terms of Presence. This understanding of Being is to be concerned with Being only insofar as it is. Metaphysical thinking overlooks the primordial questioning of the very occurrence of Being. It is the eventfulness of the disclosure of Being that makes possible the very overtness of ontic beings. Metaphysics has "forgotten"

this occurrence, the originating difference between Being and beings. Metaphysics is ontological in thinking Being as the universal ground of all beings and is theological in thinking Being to constitute the highest state of all existence. Heidegger's thinking is a/metaphysical thinking in that it undertakes a "destruction" of onto-theology understood as the essential constitution of metaphysics.

Questions of Ultimate Reality, God, Truth, Nothingness, Enlightenment, Humanism, etc., are metaphysical questions. Throughout the traditions of philosophy and theology, "ultimate reality" has been the paradigm for understanding Being as Presence. "Ultimate reality" names the search for an originary source, a first cause, a universal category, a comprehensive and rational framework. Thus, the attempt to understand Heidegger's use of Being as ultimate reality is, at least as far as I understand it, to think Being onto-theo-logically. Heidegger makes it quite clear that such appeals are forms of philosophical and religious totalitarianism, the attempt to account for and evaluate all phenomena by a reductionistic theory or formula, an explanatory framework that dominates them totally.

Long refers to the so-called "turn" in Heidegger's thinking that occurs after Being and Time. Whatever one may make of this turn, certainly Heidegger moves away from Da-sein as the ontological connection between Being and beings due to Da-sein's complicity in metaphysical thinking. The later Heidegger regards Da-sein, as he had developed it in the early work, to be riddled with "sub-jectism." For Heidegger, "sub-jectism" is a configuration of the metaphysical, an inversion of the meaning of Being. Thus the later Heidegger seeks a thinking that does not demand unity, a thinking that allows difference. Heidegger redirects the question of the meaning of Being away from any remnant of a total or singular reality such as Being understood as Presence or even Da-sein. The collapse of the provisional analysis of Being in Being and Time constitutes the impossibility of understanding Being as unity or totality. The recognition of the sub-jectism of Da-sein opens the space for a new departure in Heidegger's thought whereby Being cannot be thought literally, conceptually, theoretically or explicitly. Hence, this thinking cannot be understood to provide a more comprehensive theory of reality or even the glue for such a theory. Theory, critique and evaluation are all metaphysical tools

of onto-theological domination that has cast Being into oblivion throughout the history of metaphysics. Being, for Heidegger, teaches us nothing about what is and thus nothing of ultimate reality.

Being is not at all the accomplice of the totality, whether of finite totality or of an infinite totality. The notion of totality is always related to the existent. It is always a 'metaphysical' or 'theological' notion, and the notions of finite and infinite take on meaning in relation to it.¹

Thinking is not an inquiry into the components of the relation between ultimate reality and the various conceptions of it, or between Being and beings. While I take Long to be correct in seeing Heidegger's analysis of Being as an analysis of relation, I do not understand this relation to be one of conjunction. (p.23) To think conjunction is to think the presence of both conjuncts. I take the relation to be one of difference. This thinking of difference is impossible within the horizons of onto-theology. I think it no accident that the limits of metaphysical thinking have produced the end of philosophy, the age of technology, and the culmination of the history of the forgetfulness of Being. The age of technology is the very personification of the totalizing tendency of onto-theology, the ultimate sub-jectism, so total that "man everywhere and always encounters only himself."²

Being understood as ultimate reality precludes all difference. Ultimate reality's appeal to a permanent ground, a ground of presence which enjoys a total self-subsistence that guarantees the stability of all phenomena, renders difference unthinkable. It forecloses on the very possibility of thinking difference as difference.

Since metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, it represents beings in respect of what differs in the difference, and without heeding the difference as difference.³

Being occurs as a dissimulation that does not terminate in synthesis or reasoned telos. The historical ephipany of Being is, for Heidegger, the very disclosing of difference. While Being may presence itself as "ultimate reality" within the tradition of metaphysics, the equation of Being with one of its manifestations leaves difference unthought. Heidegger's thinker preserves difference, "shepherds" it. The thinker of difference seeks a

language that transgresses the theoretical, a heretical language spoken and heard in the traces of silence spun through the ephemeral fabric of the marginal and the suppressed. This language of difference casts off the privilege of unity and totality in order to let Being speak in its difference.

In conclusion, I want to stress that my differences with Long are not those of right and wrong, correct and incorrect. Therefore, I do not take our differences to be exclusionary. I would like to understand our differences with all the richness with which Heidegger empowers the word. I have engaged in reading Heidegger in a way which I take to be a/theological while I take Long to be engaged in reading Heidegger theologically. Such differences open the possibilities for understanding theologies in new and different ways. Therefore, I take Long's project to be one of vast importance in the continuation of the religious dialogue.

Footnotes

1. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in Writing and Difference (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978) p. 141
2. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in Basic Writings (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977) p. 308
3. Martin Heidegger, Identity and Difference (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1969) p. 76