

# Chapter 1

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## Ways of Being, Ways of Thinking

If there is one tendency that almost all philosophical traditions have shared, it is the assumption that there is a larger whole in which we participate or to which we belong. In some traditions, the whole has been conceived of as process, in others, it has been regarded as a kind of universal substance or being. The study of the cosmos in the West is often identified with metaphysics, a word which in itself is already laden with assumptions, for it suggests that this wholeness is predicated on something beyond the physical and sensual world. In the late modern and postmodern era, the idea of metaphysics has come under assault at numerous levels, prompting many philosophers to sound its death knell. It has been maligned both for its escapism and reductionism. Plato, who is considered the father of metaphysics, posited a doctrine which holds that permanent and unchanging ideas constitute the essence and truth underlying a more ephemeral reality. The task of the philosopher is to try to approach the timeless structures that both generate and make sense of the cosmos.

The schism established between the realm of ideas and the concrete, sensible world is the Platonic legacy that has been the target of frequent criticism. It is argued that a reverence for timeless ideas easily evolves into an attempt to render the world amenable to human manipulation. It is however important to note that this form of domination is probably an unintended consequence of Platonism since for Plato the perfect world of the ideas is never completely accessible to the human mind. According to Plato, very few of us, if any, can gaze directly into the light of the sun without danger of being blinded. Plato continuously emphasized the awe

with which the realm of ideas should be treated. Approaching its light demands a careful journey through the realm of the shadows we inhabit. Furthermore, Plato describes the philosophic quest as erotic, precisely because the perfect forms elude us and thus philosophy is spurred on not only by its successes but also by its own failures. The relentless Socratic questioning which fails to arrive at infallible definitions indicates that the philosopher is compelled to be a wanderer who never reaches his terminus. Furthermore, precisely because the forms are considered to be transcendent as well as immanent, many things can partake of a single form, and thus the world is not as easily dividable into distinct and separate objects. In short, Plato's philosophy still provides the possibility for a notion of interconnection, even if this is predicated on abstract notions of forms. To suggest that Plato's thought can be equated merely with an excessive systematization and mechanization is an unfair exaggeration. First of all, it overlooks the eroticism that Plato believes is inherent in the activity of philosophy. Secondly, it also ignores the fact that because many things can share in a single form, they are not automatically defined by their separateness from one another. Nevertheless the two-world dimension of Plato's ideas cannot be denied, since the world we inhabit is always a pale shadow in comparison with the more real world of the forms.

Stanley Rosen has suggested that Aristotle, rather than Plato is the true father of the kind of metaphysics that is railed against by many contemporary thinkers. In this he follows Heidegger, who maintains that Aristotle coined many of the terms that became the foundation of Western metaphysical thought. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle maintains that the study of being qua being is the subject of the highest science, namely philosophy, because it does not study being in its various aspects, but rather being itself. An understanding of being necessitates an understanding of substances. All beings possess what Aristotle calls qualities, such as colour, weight, size, and shape, but these alone cannot help us to determine what a thing is for and therefore substance provides the unchanging foundation for all of these attributes. The idea of substance implies that there is some essence which allows an entity to remain self-identical through change. Substance is to be presented in terms of logical structures that are recognizable by reason and therefore things are seen primarily from the standpoint of the human mind. In addition, the concept of substance also presupposes that a thing's essence is to be found in that which distinguishes it from other beings, rather than that which connects it to other beings. The ultimate substance, an unmoving mover,

would not be subject to change. There is an insistence that permanence and unity are preferred over the particular, plural and transitory.<sup>1</sup>

Immanuel Kant was perhaps the first Western philosopher to pose a serious challenge to the Aristotelian heritage of Western metaphysics. He argued that our knowledge depends on the accordance of the object with the a priori structures of thought. Rather than arguing that form was to be found in the object itself, as Aristotle did, he argued that it was located in the subject. Our objects are conceived of as representations to us. He also revealed the unsettling possibility to Western thinkers that the object or the thing-in-itself could not be grasped by human cognition. In doing so, he admitted what many Western philosophers were reluctant to admit, namely that there was something that would be forever unknowable.

These perspectives provide a vivid contrast with Chinese cosmology which views change rather than stasis as fundamental. Unlike many Western thinkers, Chinese philosophers do not insist that the cosmos be underwritten by a clearly defined logos. Rather than conforming to a single pattern, in Chinese philosophical discourse, all things participate in a continuously unfolding process. Unity is based on interconnection between things rather than on a shared universal essence. The characteristics of things emerge out of their relationship with one another and thus there is no sharp distinction between Being and Becoming, nor is there a sharp differentiation between substances. According to some accounts, the universe recreates itself in a process of continuous transformation that develops from the primordial breath known as *qi* (氣). *Qi* is a difficult term to translate because it encompasses both material and spiritual realms and refers to a kind of primeval vapor that embodies cosmic energy. It permeates everything but does not exist outside its multifarious manifestations. *Qi* passes from one form into another, and when things disappear they return to *qi*. However, there is no conception that *qi* is superior to the variegated shapes it is manifested in. It connects all things as a kind of life energy but it cannot be identified as a single substratum that underlies all substances. When beings disappear they become the potential of *qi* once more.

Chinese cosmology tends to view the world as a spontaneous emergence. While the word cosmology in the West is derived from the Greek *cosmos* which connotes “form” and suggests that form has triumphed over chaos, in Chinese thinking there is no dichotomous relation between form and formlessness. Furthermore, the idea of deliberate agency is notably absent as is the idea of an “unmovable mover.” There is no creator

who stands apart from the world that gives birth to the cosmos. The universe is seen, both in Confucian and Daoist understandings as a natural process without a definite beginning in time and without a personal creator. The *Huai-nanzi*, a Daoist work dating to approximately 122 BC refers to this: "There was a beginning. There was a time before that beginning. There was a time before the time which was before the beginning."<sup>2</sup> Creativity is a constant and organic process of unfolding. Joseph Needham has argued that the Chinese cosmos is comprised of dynamic energy rather than substance. Although creation stories do exist in Chinese mythology, they do not assume a position of preeminence. When Chinese thinkers write about underlying principles of the universe or the emergence of all things from *qi*, they are not thereby referring to a single temporal origin. Unlike Western thinkers, most Chinese philosophers do not hold to a definite or specific act of creation<sup>3</sup> but rather view creation as an ongoing process of return to origins.

According to Chinese accounts, the primordial breath of *qi* undergoes a transformation with its division into *yang* (陽), which created Heaven and the heavier breath *yin* (陰), which formed the earth. *Yang* represents movement and creativity while *yin* sets a limit on this movement. It is the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes* which provides the most well-known account of the relationship between *yin* and *yang*.<sup>4</sup> Here *yang* is represented by a solid line, symbolizing the continuous, while *yin* is receptive and is depicted by a broken line. *Yang* is seen as positive while *yin* is negative, but it is important to recognize that such negativity does not entail lack, but rather the power to receive. In the pictorial representation of *yin* and *yang*, both play a complementary role. According to Cyrille Javary, *yin* originally represented the dark side of the mountains while *yang* represented the southern sunny side implying that they are two sides of the same reality rather than opposites which contradict each other. He points out that the character for *yang* depicts the sun separated from the falling rain, suggesting that the sun has driven the clouds away at the end of a storm. *Yin*, on the other hand, includes the symbol for cloud as well as the idea of latency suggesting that the light is gradually eclipsed as the clouds emerge in the foreground. Neither moment is a static state since each includes the potential of the other, accounting for the alteration between them. The combination of *yin* and *yang* in each thing undergoes constant metamorphosis.<sup>5</sup>

The interaction between *yang* and *yin* is responsible for such movements as the rotation of the seasons, states of mind and also historical developments. The light of the sun increases until the summer solstice at

which point *yang* has reached its acme and *yin* begins its advance until *yang* returns. Once the limits of one are reached, the ascendancy of the other begins. While *yang* is ascending, *yin* becomes potential that will ascend. If Western philosophers often wonder how change can be accounted for, Chinese philosophers tend to take change for granted. The account of the interaction between *yin* and *yang* provides a marked contrast with a Platonic vision which privileges light and interprets darkness as its absence. In the *Book of Changes*, light and darkness play an equal role. Furthermore, the fact that *yin* and *yang* cannot be understood apart from each other directly counters the Aristotelian notion that any thing can be defined independently of other things.

The *Yijing* is often considered to be the most influential among Chinese classics and has exerted a profound influence on Chinese philosophy throughout the ages. The original meaning of *yi* (易) according to Richard Wilhelm was lizard and chameleon which symbolized changeability and easy mobility. The book consists of 64 hexagrams comprised of both divided and undivided lines symbolizing *yin* and *yang*. Each hexagram represents a situation rather than a fixed state and they continuously transform into others by changes in their lines. In this way, connections between hexagrams are underscored. Each hexagram refers to patterns in nature as well as psychological states of being which suggests that the changes that a person undergoes echo or reflect the rhythms of nature. Zhang Longxi points out that the meaning of the first hexagram *qian* (the creative), represented by six solid lines is symbolized by horse, head, sky, and father while *kun* (the receptive), consisting of six broken lines is represented by cow, belly, earth, and mother. While the meaning of *qian* cannot be easily encapsulated in language, it is something that horse, head, sky, and father have in common and the same thing applies to cow, belly, earth, and mother. Since *qian* is transformed into *kun*, the relationship between head and belly is analogous to the relationship between sky and earth. Zhang points out that while none of these images make sense in isolation, patterns can be discerned when they are juxtaposed in pairs although no single word captures the hexagram.<sup>6</sup>

There is no single character or hexagram which is considered to constitute the foundation or bulwark of all others. According to the *Book of Changes*, reflection on the simple facts of our existence heightens our awareness of constant change. In Chinese philosophy, it is the notion of permanence, rather than change that is illusory and any attempt to render the ever changing immutable is seen as a testament to human frailty or ignorance. However, this does not mean that Chinese philosophers

describe a world that is in constant tumult. Change, rather than being a source of upheaval is a process of harmonization: "The nature of the Creative is movement. Through movement it unites with ease what is divided. In this way the Creative remains effortless, because it guides infinitesimal movements when things are smallest."<sup>7</sup> The cycles of the seasons and the rising and setting sun are primary examples of the regularity of change and also imbue human actions with cosmological meaning. Even if there is a lack of equilibrium during certain periods, the assumption remains that equilibrium prevails in the larger scheme of things. Furthermore, there is no notion akin to the Western emphasis on beginnings or times prior to change: "Birth is the coming forth into the world of the visible; death is the return into the regions of the invisible. Neither of these signifies an absolute beginning nor an absolute ending, any more than do the changes of the seasons within the year."<sup>8</sup>

### NIETZSCHE'S SLEDGEHAMMER

Friedrich Nietzsche launched what is perhaps one of the most ruthless attacks against metaphysics in Western philosophy. He chastises a tradition that, in his view, had been dominated by Platonic presumptions which pitted the true world of the form and the apparent world of change against each other. According to Nietzsche, such a distinction is essentially nihilistic, for it drives an artificial wedge between concepts and "life," denigrating the movement of the latter in favour of the immutability of the former: "you ask me about the idiosyncrasies of philosophers? . . . There is their lack of historical sense, their hatred of even the idea of becoming, their Egyptianism. They think they are doing a thing *honour* when they dehistoricize it, when they make a mummy of it" (TI: 1). By disparaging all that falls outside of the purview of the concept, such a rigid conceptualism thoroughly undermines the kinesis which for Nietzsche comprises the essence of life. Metaphysics signifies the attempt to distill all phenomena into a single, unifying essence. This is highly problematic, not simply because it signifies a flight into a conceptual fantasyland, but because concepts are used to disembowel life.

Furthermore, for Nietzsche, the insistence on the truth of concepts has meant that we have robbed ourselves of the very real power of illusion to transform the world. Thought which refuses to recognize the agency of illusion is dangerous: "We have rid ourselves of the true world: what world are we left with? Perhaps that of appearances? . . . But no! *Along*

*with the true world, we have also rid ourselves of the apparent world*" (TI: 7). We are incapable of positing new ideas, because the old ones have become entrenched as a result of their valorization as timeless and universal truths. When truths cease to be transformative they are bereft of meaning in Nietzsche's view. Ironically, the transforming potential of truths may in part be due to their immutability, for if the world is indeed characterized by constant change, as Nietzsche suggests, then truths, while not being able to halt change, can have an effect on how human beings participate in it, even if it takes the form of resistance. Nietzsche would not deny that this is the case, but would suggest that we bear the manipulative intention of truths in mind, so that if need be, new ones can develop.

Since philosophy was irrevocably tied to metaphysics for long periods of time, Nietzsche questions the privileged status that philosophy had assumed for itself as the most sublime and worthy of human pursuits. Yet, he does so in part to rescue philosophy from itself, thereby preventing it from being relegated to oblivion. Metaphysical presuppositions had damaged philosophy in Nietzsche's view. This does not imply that Nietzsche suggests we dismiss theory and put praxis in its place. Instead, he intimates that philosophy may in part have itself to blame for the world we live in now, which is philosophically barren and in many ways thoroughly routinized. Our world is far less pragmatic than it appears to be. Praxis has not eclipsed philosophy, but rather has been infused with a rigid theoretical impetus which has attempted to render everything predictable. Ironically, our pragmatism is a thinly disguised theoretical rigidity: "Where man cannot find anything to see or to grasp, he has no further business—that is certainly an imperative different from the Platonic one, but it may be the right imperative for a tough, industrious race of machinists and bridge builders of the future, who have nothing but *rough* work to do" (BGE I: 15). Thus, the danger is not that philosophy has no impact on the world, but rather that its impact might have been too powerful, reshaping the world along "theoretical lines" to the extent that the schism between philosophy and praxis has become dangerously narrow. Abstractions have become our reality, as we continue to be mesmerized by the truth of numbers and logic. Nietzsche makes the bold suggestion that philosophy's excessive theoretical bent may have undermined the activity of philosophising. Once our concepts have achieved a stranglehold on our existence, there is no longer any need to philosophise. We deliberately limit our experience to ways in which it can be categorized, and then we argue that praxis is important

and philosophy is irrelevant. The hubris of philosophy has therefore led to its extirpation from our consciousness.

Paradoxically, Nietzsche suggests that only a philosophy aware of its limitations could continue to thrive, thereby participating in rather than shunning the process of life. We must be aware that there is always a residue left behind by philosophy, which threatens the order it envisions but at the same time acts as a catalyst for the creation of new philosophical worlds. The threats to philosophy are also what keep it alive since philosophy must feed on something outside itself. Thus, both the detachment of philosophy and its indebtedness to the life forces which spawn it need to be acknowledged. In this way, life and philosophy can be mutually invigorating. Such entanglement is depicted by the dance of Life and Wisdom in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra recognizes that his fondness for wisdom stems from a fondness for Life: "But that I am fond of Wisdom, and often too fond. . . . because she very much reminds me of Life!" (Z I: 32). Wisdom is portrayed as "changeable and defiant" often combing "her hair against the grain" (Z II: 10). Nietzsche does not imply, as is commonly supposed, that philosophy degenerate into a kind of crude biologism, but merely insists that the impulse to philosophize is part of the larger impulse to life and therefore philosophy should acknowledge its debts to the life forces that are its wellspring. Above all, the paradox of philosophy must be affirmed: namely that it both steps beyond the realm of the actual in order to change it while at the same time emerging from it. Furthermore, it must return to life in order to be able to step beyond it at all.

The tradition which revered Plato as its ancestral father is accused by Nietzsche of an overvaluation of theoretical truths that allegedly constitute the essence of reality, insisting that the "more Idea, the more being" (WP 527). Philosophy stood at the pinnacle of human knowledge because it was concerned with the cosmos as a whole rather than merely focussing on its constituent parts. Yet this vision came with a price. Nietzsche shuns such philosophical arrogance, insisting that philosophy reflects the needs of a limited being that has difficulty coming to terms with its finitude, and therefore invents a vision of a cosmos that tries to impose limits on the limitless in order to make the world predictable and amenable to mastery: "I do not believe that a 'drive to knowledge' is the father of philosophy; but rather that another drive has, here as elsewhere employed understanding (and misunderstanding) as a mere instrument. . . . for every drive wants to be master, and it attempts to philosophize in that spirit" (BGE I: 6).

Yet, behind Nietzsche's invective lurks a profound respect for the daring of philosophy which attempts to recast the world in its image and refuses to be constrained by existing conditions: "the charm of the Platonic way of thinking, which was a noble way of thinking, consisted precisely in resistance to obvious sense-evidence—perhaps among men who enjoyed even stronger and more demanding senses than our contemporaries" (BGE I: 14). While Nietzsche does not fully agree with the assault that he assumes Plato wages against the body, he also recognizes that Plato's thought at least tacitly pays tribute to the self-transforming nature of human beings. Platonic dialogues are marked by a relentless quest for permanent definitions, the pursuit of which is pleasurable because it is without terminus. It is the open-ended nature of the Platonic quest that is to be celebrated. So, while human beings long for permanence, the allure of philosophy inheres precisely in the inability to find it. Behind the thirst for stability lurks an insatiable desire for more, which would be thwarted by the very stability it allegedly seeks. In short, Nietzsche suggests that we long for permanence perhaps because we know it is unattainable and it can therefore keep fuelling our desire.

Nietzsche condemns Plato for preferring the "unreal to the actual" and being "so convinced of the value of appearance that he gave it the attributes 'being,' 'causality' and 'goodness' and 'truth' in short everything men value" (WP 572). Yet, there is also a tinge of praise in this critique, for the recognition of "untruth as a condition of life" also implies that one resists "accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way" (BGE I: 4). Nietzsche is therefore imploring human beings to recognize the revolutionary nature of the philosophic quest which overturns conventional presuppositions and subjects all facts to a ruthless critique.

Ironically it is the success of Plato that heralds philosophy's decline. While the "permanent ideas" originally are a powerful means of questioning established convention, the lust for permanence eventually ushers in a stifling conformity. Overconfidence in the truths of a desensitized and frigid reason mask a fear of change: "They all pose as if they had discovered and reached their real opinions through the self-development of a cold, pure divinely unconcerned dialectic (as opposed to the mystics of every rank, who are more honest and doltish and talk of inspiration) while at bottom it is an assumption, a hunch, indeed a kind of inspiration—most often a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract" (BGE I: 5). Those realms of life which cannot so easily be forced into a theoretical mould are summarily impugned, thus narrowing the scope of philosophical investigation. Nietzsche is attuned to the paradoxical connection

between the zeal for incessant questioning and the desire to repose in a bed of comforting truths which can no longer be subjected to scrutiny.

Logic is the primary example of philosophical extremism, and thus much of Nietzsche's assault focuses on it. The propensity to privilege logic eventuates in a rigid scientism which closes its doors to everything that cannot be classified. For the sake of knowledge, the quest for knowledge is obstructed. Nietzsche repudiates Socratic arrogance for its "unshakeable faith that thought, using the thread of logic can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting*" (BTr 15). Yet, at the same time Nietzsche reminds us of the aesthetic roots of logic thereby employing logic's own prejudices against the aesthetic realm to demystify logic itself. He offered the notion that "To be beautiful everything must be intelligible," as the counterpart to the Socratic dictum, "'Knowledge is virtue'" (BTr 12). The alleged inevitability of science masks its aesthetic and mythical dimensions. Its myths inspire an even deeper faith because it disguises its mythical origins: ". . . above the entrance gate of science, reminds all of its missions—namely, to make existence appear comprehensible and thus justified; and if reasons do not suffice *myth* has to come to their aid in the end—myth which I have just called the necessary consequence, indeed the purpose, of science" (BTr 15).

Ironically, the tendency to take philosophy too seriously had sounded its death knell in Nietzsche's view. If philosophy is to avoid being consigned to irrelevance, it must learn to take itself less seriously. It must give up its pretensions of capturing the world by uncovering its logos, recognizing instead that its explanations are maps that navigate human beings through the whirlwind of life. Thus, it must be prepared to continuously reexamine its own presuppositions. Philosophy needs the incongruities that life can provide in order to revitalize itself. The beauty of philosophical theorems, according to Nietzsche, consists not only in the illusion of permanence that they provide, but in their vulnerability to onslaught from the forces of life that escape philosophical definition. That which threatens philosophy also rejuvenates it and thus the lacunas and incongruities in philosophical knowledge must be celebrated for they enable it to remain alive.

However, Nietzsche's scorn for traditional philosophy should not simply be equated with a dismissal of the idea of wholeness. If metaphysics is defined as an attempt to think the whole, then Nietzsche has not relegated it to the dustbin entirely. Instead of conceptual truth, Nietzsche prefers the medium of the metaphor as a means of expressing a cosmic

reality since it is much more fluid than the concept and demands continuous reinterpretation. The problem with traditional metaphysics is that by thinking about the whole in static terms, it stopped thinking about it altogether. It is important for Nietzsche that the whole be thought in its dynamism. Nietzsche did not discount the seemingly irrepressible desire of human beings to feel part of a larger whole. Indeed he acknowledges that human beings must have a sense of a larger unity, but denies that it can be conceptually grasped. A journey towards logos demands a suppression of the body and passions, continuously pitting the temptations of permanence against the pleasures of finitude.

Nietzsche attempts, in part, to collapse the dichotomous opposition between the eternal and the finite. He does not follow Hegel in making the finite the manifestation of the eternal, but rather paints a picture of a cosmos based on the interconnection of finite beings: "The world exists. It is not something that becomes, not something that passes away. Or rather: it becomes, it passes away, but it has never begun to become and never ceased from passing away—it maintains itself in both—It lives on itself: its excrements are its food. . . . it follows that in the great dice game of existence, it must play through a calculable number of combinations" (WP 1066). There is no single order that underwrites this cosmos and so the particular is spared the humiliation of being consigned to the role of pawn in a universalist game. Since the interconnection between finite beings constitutes the pulse of the cosmos, the finite cannot be subsumed by the universal, nor can it be subsidiary to it. An eternal cosmos can never be known, for we must straightjacket that which we wish to make knowable.

This remodelled Nietzschean metaphysics is captured most eloquently in his metaphor of the eternal return of the same. Rather than referring to a transcendent realm which is used to judge our worldly existence, Nietzsche suggests that the activity of life itself is eternal. We participate in eternity because the world that we are part of undergoes constant transformation, and this change is wrought both on and by limited beings. It is the link between all things that gives us a sense of wholeness. Without the actions of finite beings there could be no change and so the finite is an essential player in the game of eternity. The activity of becoming goes on in perpetuity. There is no final state which reconciles all opposites, nor is eternity attributed to an unchanging realm of ideas. My action is always an interaction and thus is part of the *process* of eternity.

Through the metaphor of the eternal return, Nietzsche tries to reconcile the notion of individual human agency with the demand for

harmony and belonging. There is no such thing as pure agency since all our actions stem at least in part from the world to which we belong. Nietzsche reminds us of the repetition that occurs in the cycles of the seasons, day and night, and actions of creation and destruction, emphasizing that we are merely part of a larger natural process which has a regularity that we cannot transcend. All past experiences will recur through their repetition. This cycle is without a goal and has neither beginning nor end. The same message is echoed to Zarathustra by his animals: "Everything goes, everything returns the wheel of existence rolls on forever" (Z III 13).

Yet, at the same time Nietzsche is poignantly aware that the larger regularity that his animals point to is not experienced in the same way by human beings, who are agonizingly aware of their finitude. Even if the sun will always rise and set, there will come a time when my star will set forever. I will return again, not in my current form but rather through the effects that my life has had on others. The metaphor neither collapses sameness into difference nor collapses difference into sameness. What differentiates human beings from animals is that we are historical beings, who repeat the past by appropriating it and claiming it as our own through its transformation into something new. The German word *wiederholen* captures this ambiguity beautifully because it means to take the past again. This leaves open the possibility that it can be taken differently. Yet, the past remains embedded in the future, and thus from this perspective, the future is also identical to the past. There is identity in difference and difference in identity.

Furthermore, there is a tension built into the metaphor of the eternal return between the regularity of nature and the purposive actions of human beings who want to overcome the constraints they confront. Nowhere is this more evident than in Zarathustra's exhortation to bite off the head of the serpent, which represents death and asphyxiation but whose spirals also represent the cycle of life. The serpent is a symbol for the interconnection of life and death but it must be greeted with defiance:

The shepherd however, bit as my cry had advised him, he bit with a good bite! He spat far away the snake's head—and sprang up. No longer a shepherd, no longer a man—a transformed being, surrounded with light, laughing! Never yet on earth had any man laughed as he laughed! (Z III 2)

In order to participate in the cycle of the eternal return, human beings must also struggle against its inexorable nature. Unlike animals, they do not just accept it as is. Creation also necessitates an attitude of rebellion in Nietzsche's view. This is why the prospect of the eternal return fills Zarathustra with both longing and dread. We are unwilling to surrender ourselves to a world that eventually consumes us in the endless cycle of repetition.

All truths are eventually destroyed by the flux of nature. Truths can achieve stability only by leaving something out, but that which is left out eventually forces us to engage in a renewed process of evaluation. Meaning for human beings emerges neither from a passive submission to the cycles of nature, nor from the active agency of the subject, but rather from the juxtaposition of the two. We create something new in order to become part of a world that we are already in. Each new step is both a departure from the world of nature and a homecoming. We use the familiar to venture into the unfamiliar and in this way we make ourselves belong. Our revolt against nature is at the same time an adaptation to it. Nietzsche's philosophy is therefore not simply about smashing boundaries but also about learning how to live within them. In order to inhabit them, we must sometimes rattle them to their foundations. The meaning of the cosmos stems at least in part from our agency.

Thus, Nietzsche's eternal return suggests that meaning demands both sameness and change. Overcoming the past is also a way of reliving it. This sense of connection endows us with the experience of wholeness and it does not necessitate that a single pattern be imposed upon our experiences. Nietzsche does not deny the existence of a whole, but insists that it is experienced through our interconnection with other beings.<sup>9</sup>

## FROM METAPHYSICS TO BEING

Since Nietzsche made his explosive debut on the philosophical stage, Western thinkers have become increasingly suspicious of the promised land of a total and comprehensive knowledge. Hegel, who attempted to soothe the modern mind by making absolute understanding the result of a process, aired the final gasp of the absolute. In Hegel, the comfort of metaphysics is combined with the force of movement. It is through the unfolding of history that we are to come closer to a total understanding of the world. Nevertheless, this feat could not be accomplished without turning historical process into the handmaiden of philosophy, which

alone would offer a palliative for modern malaise. In the battle between mind and life, mind still emerges triumphant because living life is a mere stepping stone on the way towards comprehending it.<sup>10</sup> Absolute understanding is not dismissed outright, but rather is postponed to some indefinite point in the future. In the meantime, we may rest assured that we are heading towards it.

As I have pointed out, Nietzsche's eternal return conceives of wholeness very differently and refutes the idea of perpetual progress that Hegel clung to. The whole is to be affirmed and participated in, but not grasped conceptually. And yet, at the same time, Nietzsche is uncomfortable with human finitude, and this discomfort is manifested in the constant strife and uncertainty that he believes characterizes our existence if we refuse to hide behind a bed of comforting illusions. Hegel tries to soothe human beings by dangling the prospect of total understanding before us whereas Nietzsche makes every effort to shake us up. While Hegel proposes that we move forwards as the limits of each partial understanding are exposed, Nietzsche believes that we would never emerge fully from the agony and constraints of our partiality. The eternal return suggests that our mistakes and failures, along with our successes, will be repeated ad infinitum. Instead of progress, there is perpetual repetition. His philosophy undermines Hegelian confidence and presents our finitude as inescapable. Nietzsche leaves Hegel's panacea behind.

Martin Heidegger follows in Nietzsche's footsteps as a pivotal figure in the West's attempt to grapple with its growing unease regarding metaphysics. Like his predecessor, he is critical of metaphysical attempts to predicate truth on the unchanging essence of things. Nietzsche sees philosophy as the means through which the subject attempts to assert control over the world and impose limitations on the limitless. Heidegger, on the other hand, uses the notion of *Being* to expose the premetaphysical roots of philosophy. The term "Being," itself suggests that Heidegger does not want to abandon the idea of the whole completely, but at the same time, wants to stress that the cosmos not be identified with something beyond the world. He thereby redirects his attention to this world that we are in. At the same time, this in no way simplifies the task of prospective metaphysicians, because Heidegger vociferously denies that this Being can be grasped. Mystery is to be found in the world rather than beyond it. He underlines the importance of thinking about the whole as Being, while encouraging us to relinquish our desire to master or grasp it: "The question of the meaning of Being must be *formulated*. If it is a fundamental question, or indeed *the* fundamental question, it must be made transpar-

ent in an appropriate way” (BT 24, 5). Not Being is to be rendered transparent but rather the *question* of Being. The interrogation of Being is more important for Heidegger than any vain attempt to reveal the ultimate truth about it: “We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. *But this vague average understanding of Being is still a Fact*” (BT 25, 5). As Otto Pöggeler eloquently points out, philosophy does not constitute “the leap onto the rescuing shore, but rather the leap into the moving boat.”<sup>11</sup>

For Heidegger, the question of Being constitutes “*the fundamental question*” (BT 24, 5), remaining the focus of his philosophical musings throughout his life, even though it undergoes considerable transformation. Upon cursory examination, the concept of Being appears to imply that there is a single reality which all beings partake of. The meaning of individual beings must rest on their participation in this universal Being, and if only we could uncover its secrets, then we could both grasp existence and decipher its meaning. However, this is precisely the kind of thinking Heidegger wants to steer us away from. While the concept of Being does imply that there is a whole or connection between all things that are, Heidegger does not assume that it can ever be known. He shows that meaning depends not on the comprehension of Being but rather on the process of thinking about it. Yet, he insists that thinking is only possible because we enjoy an intuitive awareness of the presence of Being. Without intuition, philosophic activity would have no starting point to launch it forward.

Meaning inheres in the activity of philosophy rather than in the results it produces. It demands a ceaseless interrogation through which we continually reestablish a relationship between ourselves and Being. We reflect upon the whole, but as beings who are in the midst of it, rather than as passive spectators (WM 99). Heidegger deems it “progressive to give our approval to ‘metaphysics’ again” (BT 21, 2) in light of this reorientation. An exploration of Being is always part of the process of being and is not the outcome of detached and objective examination. In this, Heidegger is very similar to Nietzsche whose metaphor of the eternal return suggests that we cannot extricate ourselves from the position of being in the midst of things.

The term *Sein* is both verb and noun, and therefore refers to processes as well as entities. Heidegger capitalizes on this ambiguity, for even beings constitute a complex of processes. Being is unknowable not only because our finitude robs us of access to it, but because it is not static. This also casts doubt on a subject/object dichotomy. Metaphysicians had taken our

substantive existence itself for granted, and turned their debates towards questions such as the existence of God, the reality of the outside world, and the immortality of the soul. Heidegger considers this shift away from Being to be a form of philosophical negligence: “a dogma has been developed which not only declares the question about the meaning of Being to be superfluous, but sanctions its complete neglect” (BT 21, 2).

Furthermore, metaphysical thought had traditionally rested on the assumption that there is a marked dualism between the thinking being and the material world that is its home. Modern philosophers had become increasingly doubtful about the possibility of capturing material essence with the tentacles of thought. Nevertheless philosophers such as Kant were unable to quell their thirst for certainty and so argued that the structures of thought were the only terrain where consistency could be found. While Kant’s philosophy seems to denote a shift away from metaphysics towards epistemology, for Heidegger the two are integrally connected. In this sense, Kant revealed what metaphysics had implicitly always been about, namely the human subject’s propensity to structure the world in its own image. For this reason, Heidegger insists that Kant’s philosophy is still decidedly metaphysical.

Heidegger’s mentor Husserl was uneasy with the philosophical solipsism that Kant’s ideas potentially gave rise to and suggested that all phenomena are objects of consciousness, and thus every object should be understood in light of the way in which consciousness intends, or grasps it. Heidegger appropriates Husserl’s understanding of phenomena as a relation between subject and object, but reduces the subject’s intentionality considerably. His call to go “to the things themselves” (BT 50, 28) means that we have to acknowledge that the phenomena’s act of showing itself is related to the subject’s act of receiving it: “Thus we must *keep in mind* that the expression ‘*phenomena*’ signifies *that which shows itself in itself, the manifest*” (BT 51, 28). The human subject is therefore no longer considered the sole agent of perception since it is but one participant in a two-way process. Both the pure subjectivity of the subject and the unadulterated objectivity of the object are thrown into question. While Kant declares that it is pointless to use knowledge to venture into the terrain of the thing-in-itself, Heidegger insists that it is imperative that we keep the limits of philosophy in mind in order to protect philosophy from its own excesses. Failing to do so would impel us to forget that we are nudged into thinking by Being: “Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought” (BT 24, 5). Philosophy should no longer be seen as a way of mastering Being, but rather as a way of engaging in a dialogue with it.

If philosophy is seen as a kind of dialogue, its inability to capture Being should no longer elicit despair. Being's resistance to the strictures of thought imbues our world with a sense of wonder that impels us to continue philosophizing. It is Heidegger's willingness to push the frontiers of philosophy into non-philosophical realms that makes his thought so revolutionary. Metaphysical philosophy, in Heidegger's view, demonstrates a profound fear of the unknown, and assumes that all that is murky must be expelled from philosophical dialogue. Yet he insists that philosophy cannot help but begin with an intuition, which will always be nebulous. Every thought will eventually stumble upon some presupposition that is accepted *prima facie* and cannot be proven. This means that there is something that is more primordial than philosophy upon which philosophy is predicated, namely Being. This is evidenced by the fact that all of us exhibit an instinctive certainty as to what Being is and yet at the same time experience a discomfiting inability to say anything about it. We know that we exist, but we cannot provide a definition of existence, or even articulate what it means. Consequently, our philosophizing renders us less, rather than more, certain. The paradox of the unfamiliar familiar is precisely what precipitates the philosophical quest: "The very fact that we already live in an understanding of Being and that the meaning of Being is still veiled in darkness proves that it is necessary in principle to raise the question again" (BT 23, 4).

A dismissal of intuitive, or mystical knowledge, would entail cutting philosophy off from its wellspring. John Caputo argues that Heidegger's thought is radical because it refuses to settle on an ultimate rationale and indeed continuously invokes that which has none. In his view, Heidegger "calls for a leap beyond the realm of giving reasons in order to take up a non-conceptual, non-discursive, non-representational kind of 'thinking' which is profoundly divided from any of the traditional varieties of 'philosophy.'"<sup>12</sup>

Heidegger repeatedly turns the limitations of philosophy into a cause for celebration. Meaning consists in the continuous re-establishment of our relationship to Being. Heidegger, unlike Hegel, does not try to goad us on by tempting us with the suggestion that one day we may strike at the heart of Being itself. While Being makes philosophy possible, it can never be grasped by philosophy. This is why Heidegger insists "*Being* is the darkest of all terms" (BT 23, 4). According to Heidegger, Western philosophy has always been preoccupied with the question of Being but has lost sight of its origins by wrapping it in too many concepts. Our addiction to these concepts impels us to forget Being, which provided the

inspiration for their development in the first place. *Being and Time* opens by paying homage to Plato: "For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expressions 'being.' We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed" (BT 19, 1). There is no indication that Heidegger has any intention of working out the answer to this question. Instead he wishes to keep us in a perpetual state of perplexity. Heidegger is not just attempting to reclaim the origins of Western philosophy, but rather is trying to begin the beginning again "more originally, with all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity that attend a true beginning" (IM 29). Rather than erasing the unknowable, Heidegger proposes that we ceaselessly rethink it. Questions that yield no answer are not to be shunned by philosophy; rather they are to be embraced by it. For Heidegger, wonder is as important, if not more important than certainty and also enables us to maintain respect for the world of which we are a part. Heidegger recognizes something that seems anathema to many Western philosophers, namely that in order to feel at home in the world we must learn how to feel small in the midst of its vastness. He wants to avoid what he refers to as the "vicious subjectivizing of the totality of entities" (BT 34, 14). This is why Heidegger chooses to make our everydayness remarkable. Rather than looking for meaning in another world that legitimates and gives meaning to this one, we should shift our gaze back towards this world which is replete with mystery.

Since meaning is assumed to be the most important aspect of metaphysical inquiry, Heidegger repudiates claims that our understanding should be objective and detached.<sup>13</sup> Every thing that exists is already part of a whole, and we are aware of wholeness prior to being aware of things in themselves: "No matter how fragmented our everyday existence may appear to be, however, it always deals with beings in a unity of the 'whole' if only in a shadowy way" (WM 99). Therefore the world cannot be interpreted as something external to us: "Ontologically, 'world' is not a way of characterizing those entities which *Dasein* essentially is *not*; it is rather a characteristic of *Dasein* itself" (BT 92, 64). Heidegger's philosophy suggests that it is the process of establishing and reaffirming connections that endows the world with meaning; nothing can be meaningful standing on its own. The alleged detachment of value-free sciences such as logic, economics and science is illusory in Heidegger's view for it merely represents a way of being-in-the world that relishes predictability and control above all: "No particular way of treating objects of inquiry dominates the others. Mathematical knowledge is no more rigorous than

philological-historical knowledge. It merely has the character of 'exactness' which does not coincide with rigour" (WM 94).

However, we can never possibly uncover all the structures and connections that go into the making of a single being and therefore there is no end to the philosophic quest. Heidegger's Being, like Nietzsche's eternity, is deep and provides an endless well from which we can draw philosophical sustenance. The juxtaposition of the familiar and the obscure makes philosophy possible. We enjoy the intuitive certainty that Being is, and yet when we try to articulate a definition of it, we confront an insoluble conundrum. This suggests that there is always something about our own being that escapes us, and it is that which impels us to participate in the quest for meaning, forming and revealing interconnections with the beings around us. Our homelessness incites us to build a home. According to Heidegger, philosophy must not expose everything to the blinding light of knowledge, but rather must recognize the importance of darkness. Light as well as darkness can blind. Philosophers must learn not to spurn the shadows.

Heidegger insists that all our musings about Being derive from an engagement with things that are. Polt points out that a Chinese garment worker, "in whose language subject and predicate can be connected without a copula, still understands being in every sentence she uses, because her sentences are about entities, beings, things that are."<sup>14</sup> At one level there is an implicit elemental understanding about Being which exists independently of language and indeed confounds it. We cannot understand Being without also be-ing in a world of beings. The fact that we are always at a loss for words is not a warning call to give up the quest for Being, but rather suggests that it will be an open-ended one. The mystery of Being must not be suppressed, and the paradox of both familiarity and ignorance must be upheld. Nothing could be more strange and yet also more familiar to us than Being. Traditional metaphysics had attempted to banish the unfamiliar; Heidegger wants to reintroduce us to it.

Being is unspeakable for several reasons. Lived experience can never simply be reduced to the concepts of the mind which always leave something out. Mind and Being, while always in a relation to each other, cannot be equated. Furthermore, although we have an awareness that there is something which links all beings, and which we all participate in, we shall never be able pin it down. In order to speak of something, we must limit it, and the reduction of Being to a concept or idea would be imposing boundaries on the boundaryless. Being is not a class or genus

in the Aristotelian sense, which unites objects due to common properties, nor is it a grand puppeteer that masterminds all movements of existence: “The ‘universality’ of Being ‘transcends’ any universality of genus” (BT 22, 3).

Thus, Heidegger’s objective is not to yield scientific certainty but rather to encourage a process whereby we continuously locate ourselves in the larger context of Being. It is a philosophy which affirms and celebrates the limitations of the human subject. The concept of Being reminds us that we are part of a whole that predates us, but at the same time, we are impelled to create this wholeness by interrogating the whole in such a way that interconnections are continuously forged. The whole is not static, it is movement, and this is why it will resist all attempts to be known.

### BEYOND METAPHYSICS: THE HEIDEGGERIAN TURN

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger focuses primarily on the human subject’s inquisition of Being. His famous turn (*Kehre*) is often assumed to represent a descent into mysticism ensuing from a profound disenchantment with both politics and philosophy.<sup>15</sup> However the leap between his later and earlier writings is by no means as great as it is presumed. While the subject seems to fade further into the background in his later writings, even in *Being and Time*, Heidegger reminds us that it was Being that impels us to philosophize. Therefore, philosophy emerged out of a relationship between Being and human beings and was not a singularly human achievement. In his later writings, Heidegger more strongly underscores the point that human beings cannot and do not think on their own, but rather are incited to think by Being. If his works are marked by an increasing preference for poetry as a form of expression, it is because he believes that such an art is more attentive to its muse, namely Being. While in *Being and Time* he insists on the importance of thinking about the whole, in his later writings he reminds us that thinking about the whole is also a way of listening to it. The most dangerous legacy of metaphysics is the unquestioned centrality it accords the human subject. Heidegger’s writings become more mystical in tone to remind us that we should not forget what makes knowing possible in the first place. Mysticism is not the antithesis of philosophy, for without it there could be no philosophy.