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Radical Contextuality in Heidegger’s Postmetaphysics: The Singularity of Being and the Fourfold

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1. Being: From Ontotheological Universality to Transitional Singularity

In his *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1988), Jürgen Habermas describes “radical contextualism” as the defining mark of “postmodern” thought and as a “manifestation of the spirit of the times.”¹ Indeed, the theme of the radical contextuality of meaning is common to a wide variety of contemporary philosophical orientations from hermeneutics, structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction to the “ordinary language philosophy” rooted in the later Wittgenstein. As opposed to the classical Platonic and Aristotelian model of the ideality and permanence of the meanings expressed and communicated through material language, the many variants of the radical contextual approach typically hold that linguistic and discursive meaning is itself context-sensitive and generated in the dynamic and holistic frameworks of different historical languages, cultures, and discursive practices.

In what follows, it will be argued that a certain type of radical contextuality is a key topic of Heidegger’s thinking.² Heidegger’s “contextualism,” it must be added, is of a particular kind. It concerns being as such, in the broad phenomenological sense of the intelligible or meaningful givenness of things corresponding to human openness or receptivity to this givenness.³ In keeping with Heidegger’s historical self-interpretation, his position can indeed be designated as “postmetaphysical” in the sense that it calls into question some of the most fundamental presuppositions of the Western metaphysical tradition, the paradigmatic structure of which Heidegger discovers in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

For the Aristotelian metaphysical approach, the fundamental problem inherent in the term “being” (*to on, ens*) is its extreme universality. In scholastic terminology, being is a “transcendental” notion, that is, one that transcends the most general kinds of things but is not itself a definable kind or genus.⁴ Being pertains to particular instances of “to be” in different senses that are irreducible to any common

definition. For Aristotle, however, this does not make “to be” a merely equivocal expression. Everything that is said to “be,” in one sense or another, does share a common point of reference, which eventually turns out to be an *exemplary* sense of “to be”: *ousia*, substantiality or Entity, that is, the being-ness of a determinate particular entity.⁵ As opposed to particular material and spatiotemporally situated entities that are implicated in the potentiality and contingency of matter, the supreme and perfect entity that serves as an ideal reference point for all others is a completely actualized, simple, and constant being: the metaphysical divinity (*theos*), whose being, Aristotle argues, consists in the absolutely self-sufficient activity of pure intuitive self-awareness, thought thinking itself (*noēsis noēseōs*).⁶ The greatest part of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* thus turns out to be a preparation for the conclusion that the pursued science of being *qua* being (ontology) is, in fact, achievable only in the form of theology, of the study of the supreme *kind* of entity.⁷

Settling the question of being by referring to a supreme instance of “to be” is what the later Heidegger designates as the “ontotheological” constitution of Aristotelian metaphysics. This he finds at work already in Plato’s account of the Idea of the Good as the supreme Idea.⁸ In Heidegger’s historical narrative, the hierarchical ontotheological model has fundamentally dominated Western metaphysics through medieval Aristotelianism and the modern, post-Cartesian metaphysics of the subject, which relocated the metaphysical Archimedean point from the transcendence of divine self-awareness into the immanent self-awareness of the thinking ego. For Heidegger, the proper culmination of modern metaphysics is Nietzsche. In thinking subjectivity as life and as will to power, that is, as a non-teleological and self-referential movement of self-enhancement in which subjectivity imposes temporary and instrumental “values” upon an inherently valueless and meaningless reality, Nietzsche produced an “inverted Platonism,” a “negative ontotheology” that unfolded the final implicit possibilities of the metaphysical tradition and thus exhausted its basic conceptual resources.⁹ This exhaustion makes possible the radical reconsideration of the pre-Socratic “first inception” (*der erste Anfang*) of metaphysical thought—a reconsideration that Heidegger, in his later thought, describes as an emerging “transition” (*Übergang*) from the end of metaphysics into “the other inception” (*der andere Anfang*) of Western thought.¹⁰

This transition is most comprehensively traced out in Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*, written between 1936 and 1938. The transition is, of course, an immensely multifaceted process that Heidegger never exhaustively systematized. Heidegger is mostly content with tentatively pointing out individual aspects of the transition. We will see that a central aspect of this process is the move from the Aristotelian-scholastic understanding of the transcendental universality of being to a postmetaphysical perspective on the singularity of being, or rather, on being as singularization—as a spatiotemporal instantiation that is

never “the same” in two different instants, but rather renders every instance “of” being intelligible as a unique constellation of meaningful presence.

2. Being as Singularization: Heidegger’s “Last Word”

As Reiner Schürmann puts it, the singular event of being, which Heidegger thought in correlation with the singular “there” (*Da*) of openness, is the “other” of the ontological tradition. The singular, Schürmann concludes, is Heidegger’s “penultimate” word and his *last* word is, accordingly, “singularization.”¹¹ The fact that this “last word” has attracted relatively little attention in Heidegger scholarship is at least partly due to the experimental and tentative character of Heidegger’s relevant formulations.¹² The uniqueness (*Einzigkeit*) and singularity (*Einmaligkeit*) of being are perhaps most clearly indicated in the following passages from *Contributions* and the subsequent treatise *Mindfulness*:

Within the realm of the leading question [that is, the Aristotelian metaphysical question concerning being *qua* being], . . . the essentiality of essence [*Wesen*] consists in the greatest possible generality. . . . On the other hand, when being [*Sein*] is grasped as event [*Ereignis*], essentiality is determined in terms of the primordially and uniqueness [*Einzigkeit*] of being itself. The essence is not the general but, rather, precisely the abundance [*Wesung*] of uniqueness in each instant.¹³

The uniqueness and singularity [*Einmaligkeit*] of being are not properties attributed to being or even deduced determinations. . . . Rather, being itself is uniqueness, is singularity.¹⁴

Even though the singularity of being does not explicitly emerge as a theme in Heidegger’s work until the mid-1930s, formulations foreshadowing this topic can be found in texts from the very outset of his philosophical career. In a 1915 trial lecture on the concept of time in the science of history, echoing the Baden Neo-Kantians, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, Heidegger calls for a radically “individualizing” historical science, the goal of which would be to “depict the context of the effects and development of the objectifications of human life in the uniqueness [*Einzigartigkeit*] and singularity [*Einmaligkeit*] of these objectifications.”¹⁵ In Heidegger’s early work, however, the problem of giving an account of the historical situatedness of singular lived situations is not addressed simply as a problem for the methodology of historical science. It is already meant as a challenge to the entire philosophical tradition. In 1923, Heidegger announced the task of elaborating a radicalized ontology—a new approach to the question of being as such—by way of a “hermeneutics of facticity,” that is, a radically interpretive phenomenology of concrete lived experience in its context-specific and situated character.¹⁶ This task of elaborating a new fundamental ontology of situatedness set the course for *Being and Time*. In a structural

analogy with Aristotle's metaphysics, fundamental ontology was to articulate the meaning or sense (*Sinn*) of being as such, that is, the basic structural precondition for meaningfulness in general, by way of an analysis of an "exemplary being," an outstanding instance of being.¹⁷ The exemplary being of fundamental ontology is, however, fundamentally different from the Aristotelian God. It is precisely the mortal and finite human Dasein that is "exemplary" simply in the sense that it is characterized by an understanding openness to meaning, thus providing the receptive *there* for any meaningful being-there.¹⁸

The first stage of fundamental ontology, the analytic of Dasein, aims at disclosing temporal situatedness—Dasein's temporality or "timeliness" (*Zeitlichkeit*)—as the basic structure of Dasein's "caring," that is, purpose- and meaning-oriented, existence. After a preparatory analysis of the different categories or modes of existence, the existentials, these existentials are referred back to three temporal ecstases, that is, three dynamic aspects or vectors of Dasein's unitary temporal happening ("temporalization," *Zeitigung*) as contextual and situated.¹⁹ In terms of the ecstasis of futurity or "forthcoming" (*Zukunft*), Dasein "comes forth to itself" from its open futural possibilities by grasping the fact that it has always already come to be in a specific situation (the ecstasis of "already having been," *Gewesenheit*) in terms of the finite possibilities orienting this precise situation.²⁰ On the basis of this initial temporal contextuality, Dasein is receptive to the concerns of the present (*Gegenwart*), the ecstasis through which the things of the world are primordially given as meaningful in a practical world-context (readiness-to-hand or availability, *Zuhandenheit*). Things are available within a temporally multidimensional network of references to practical possibilities and existing practices. Contrary to the "vulgar" linear representation of time as a succession of now-points, the three ecstases in their reciprocal interplay are essentially "contemporaneous" (*gleichzeitig*), in the sense that they form a unitary, although complex, process of contextual meaning generation. As Heidegger puts it in his 1936 Schelling lectures, this "at once" (*Zumal*) of the three ecstases is "the singular uniqueness [*einmalige Einzigkeit*] of the inexhaustible fullness of timeliness [*Zeitlichkeit*] itself."²¹

The most "authentic" or "proper" (*eigentlich*), that is, ontologically most primordial, mode of temporal existence is the primarily future-oriented *resoluteness* (*Entschlossenheit*) in which Dasein is released from its ordinarily exclusive immersion in present concerns to experience the full temporal dimensionality of its own being.²² The ecstasis of the present is thereby singularized into an *instant* (*Augenblick*),²³ an instantaneous "glance of the eye" into the unique context-specificity of one's singular situation and into the situated, processual identity of Dasein as "in each instance mine" (*je meines*).²⁴ In brief, in the instant, Dasein grasps a singular constellation of meaningfulness in its temporally constituted singularity and its own receptivity to such singularity. As Heidegger puts it his 1924–25 lecture course, the instant is "*catching sight of the just-this-once* [*Diesmaligen*], of the concrete singularity [*Diesmaligkeit*] of the instantaneous situation [*augenblicklichen Lage*]."²⁵ In the 1929–30 lectures, the instant is described as what "properly makes Dasein

possible. . . . This instant is the look of the resoluteness of Dasein for being-the-there [*Da-sein*], the being-the-there that, in each instance [*jē*], is in such a way that it exists in the situation it has unreservedly seized upon, an existing which is in each instance singular [*einmalige*] and unique [*einzigē*].²⁶

Fundamental ontology seeks a path from Dasein's timeliness to the temporality (*Temporalität*) of being as such, that is, to the contextual singularity of the givenness of meaningful presence. Heidegger's potentially misleading characterizations of the disclosure of being as a "transcendental cognition" and of being as the "*transcendens* pure and simple" are modified by the following remark: "The transcendence of the being of Dasein is a distinctive one since in it lies the possibility and necessity of the most radical *individuation*."²⁷ Being is "transcendental," no longer in the scholastic sense of that which is most universal and transcends all limited determinations, but rather in the sense of the contextualizing horizon that transcends simple and immediate presence and, in its structural correlation with Dasein's temporally contextual receptivity to meaning, "gives" meaningful presence as singular.²⁸

The completion of fundamental ontology would ultimately have required a turn or reversal (*Kehre*) in its initial approach, a turning back to reconsider Dasein on the basis of the temporal sense of being, in order to render visible the reciprocity of the structural correlation between being and Dasein.²⁹ Already in *Being and Time*, Heidegger points out that Dasein is the point from which fundamental ontology sets out and to which it must again revert (*zurückschlagen*).³⁰ Furthermore, in 1928 Heidegger explicitly announces that after the completion of the temporal analytic, fundamental ontology is to undergo a conversion into a "metontology" or "metaphysical ontic," that is, a "post-ontology" or "reverse ontology" in which beings are to be approached again in terms of an explication of the sense of being.³¹ This turn or conversion was to be accomplished in the missing Division I.3 of *Being and Time*, "Time and Being." It turned out, however, to be unfeasible within the conceptual framework of fundamental ontology, which Heidegger eventually deemed to be too deeply anchored in traditional terminology.³² During the early 1930s, Heidegger therefore concentrates his efforts on developing his discourse with the help of "reversed" expressions. Most conspicuously, fundamental ontology's vocabulary of going outside and beyond—*existence*, *ecstasis*, and *transcendence*, terms that could still be construed as implying an outset in a self-immanent subjectivity that is only subsequently exceeded—is replaced by a vocabulary of entering and remaining within. The seemingly converse turn from designating Dasein's mode of being as "existence" (*Existenz*, literally, "standing out") to "insistency" (*Inständigkeit*, literally, "standing in") in the "there" shifts the emphasis to the fact that the singular and situated disclosure of being in specific beings is "entered" *from* a preceding, singularizing background context and not vice versa.³³

An "instant" of meaningful presence is thus literally a "standing within" (Latin: *in-stans*) a specific meaning-context. On the other hand, Heidegger now reconsiders the development of the metaphysical tradition in the light of a deepened perspective on the historicity of being itself. The various epochs in

the metaphysical tradition are now regarded as articulations of the respective experiences of being in its historically situated configurations. The transitional experience of being as singularization is not presented as a genial insight into some underlying suprahistorical truth that was “there” all along. This experience is, rather, a new instant—Heidegger presents it, at this point, as a pure possibility—in which the entire tradition from which it has emerged would gain a transformed meaning.³⁴

The fruit of these reconsiderations is *Contributions to Philosophy*, which looks at the postmetaphysical transitional situation with a view to an emerging possibility of thinking, namely, articulating being postmetaphysically as event (*Ereignis*). As its parenthesized subtitle, *Vom Ereignis*—literally *of* or *from* the event—emphasizes, being is no longer approached by way of the exemplary receptive being, *Dasein*. Rather, the point of departure is the event of being itself in the sense of the reciprocal correlation between the contextual givenness of meaning and *Dasein*, which is no longer simply identified with human being as such but rather understood as a determinate possibility of human being.³⁵ Heidegger’s textual strategy in *Contributions* is to emphasize the difference between the transitional approach to being as singularization and the traditional metaphysical notion of being as extreme universality by designating the former with the obsolete German orthography *Sein*, translated into English as “beyng” or “beying,” and the latter with *Sein*.³⁶ *Ereignis*, the title for the basic dynamic character of *Sein*, is the event or the “taking place” of historical singularity in which meaningful presence “finds its place,” in other words, is contextualized and situated within the “instantaneous site” (*Augenblicksstätte*) of spatiotemporal situatedness (*Zeit-Raum*) furnished by *Dasein*. As a situated site of the event of meaningful presence, *Dasein* “corresponds to the uniqueness of beyng as event [*Ereignis*].”³⁷ As Heidegger later notes, he uses the word *Ereignis* as a *singulare tantum*, a noun (like *wine* or *sugar*) singular by definition: *Ereignis* is not a general term comprehending a multiplicity of single events, but rather refers to the singularization of the singular as such.³⁸

3. The Fourfold Contextuality of Singular Presence

The topics of radical contextuality and singularization are particularly relevant for understanding the purpose of one of the most important and most enigmatic figures of Heidegger’s later thought: the *fourfold*, first introduced in its definitive form in the 1949 Bremen lecture on “The Thing” and reappearing in texts of the 1950s.³⁹ The fourfold is a model consisting of two pairs—sky (*Himmel*) and earth (*Erde*), divinities (*die Göttlichen*) and mortals (*die Sterblichen*)—intersecting in a “onefold of four,” in the complicated unity of a singular thing. This can be seen as Heidegger’s most ambitious articulation of being as the event of the contextual singularization of the meaningful presence of things to the human being.⁴⁰ As Graham Harman points out, the primary weakness of the fourfold is the fact that Heidegger never adequately links it to the rest of his project; it rather “seems to drop magically from the clouds.”⁴¹ Heidegger did, however, apparently incubate the figure for a long time, only to leave it more or less

embryonic. An early diagram of the fourfold can be found already in *Contributions*.⁴² In the lectures of the same period, notably the 1934–35 Hölderlin course,⁴³ *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935),⁴⁴ and “The Origin of the Work of Art (1935–36),”⁴⁵ Heidegger develops related models.⁴⁶ It appears that at this point Heidegger had begun to consider the three-dimensional ecstatic temporal model of *Being and Time* an insufficient account of the contextuality involved in a singular meaningful situation.

Jean-François Mattéi has interestingly suggested a structural analogy between Heidegger’s fourfold and the Aristotelian doctrine of the four causes.⁴⁷ This approach is all the more compelling since Heidegger, in “On the Essence of Ground” (1929), explicitly connects the three temporal ecstases, as three modes of providing “grounds” for a meaningful situation, to the traditional metaphysical question concerning the fundamental kinds of reasons or causes. In this text, Heidegger also points to the lack of unity and ultimate justification of the four Aristotelian causes. He adds, however, that there is “an unmistakable orientation toward illuminating ground in general in an originary manner” in Aristotle, who “was not content merely to list the ‘four causes’ alongside one another, but was concerned with understanding their interconnection and the grounding of this fourfold division.”⁴⁸ The Aristotelian causes articulate different factors that account for the presence of a particular material entity, making it warranted and comprehensible; they are different types of answer to the question, “Why (this, rather than something else)?”⁴⁹ For Heidegger, the fourfold clearly has an analogous function: it articulates the basic structure of the multidimensional context that individuates and singularizes a thing as a situated instance of meaningful presence.

This should not, of course, mask the profound differences between the two fourfold models. For Aristotle, a thing is an ontologically independent and (relatively) self-sufficient entity; its “causes” are either aspects of its intrinsic ontological structure (form and matter) or other entities (its originator, such as its producer, and the final cause, ultimately divine perfection) to which it stands in an extrinsic relationship.⁵⁰ In the 1949 Bremen lectures and the associated 1953 lecture, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger maintains that the Aristotelian doctrine of the four causes is fundamentally related to the process of *production* (*poiēsis*), which, he insists, provides the basic ontological model for Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics. In his view, Plato and Aristotle basically articulate entities as *products*, that is, as particular implementations of an ideal prototype.⁵¹ By contrast, as is clear already from *Being and Time*, the Heideggerian model first and foremost applies to things as they are encountered in the context of concerned dealings, of *use* and *employment*. In this model, a thing as a singular focal point of meaningfulness is *nothing but* a “onfold of four,” in other words, a temporary intersection of four dimensions involved in a *practical* situation.⁵² These dimensions are not things or entities in their own right.⁵³ They are merely evoked and referred to and thereby “employed,” in the literal meaning of the German *dingen* (“to hire,” “to employ”): engaged, gathered, enfolded in and by the thing, and thus

“present” only indirectly *as* references or orientations, *in* and *through* their “employment.”⁵⁴ The focal point of a practice and the practical context it focalizes are not two separate relata of an extrinsic relation. Rather, they presuppose each other and are intelligible only in terms of their reciprocal interplay.

The basic phenomenological function of the fourfold can be illustrated with the help of a simple and concrete example. The fundamental Platonic orientation of philosophical inquiry toward the realm of ideas is motivated by the insight that any concrete and particular spatiotemporal thing is, to a certain extent, in each instant singular.⁵⁵ My desk, for example, is never *exactly* identical in two different instants. What does persist as identical is its specific whatness, that is, its ideal desk-ness; its numerical self-identity (its being *this* desk and no other) is dependent upon its species-identity (its being a *desk*). Aristotle concludes, with Plato, that the primary (but not exclusive) aspect of the entity-ness of entities is their conceptual determinacy, that is, their universal form.⁵⁶ It is an ontological deficiency of concrete particulars that they are not simply equivalent to their form but require spatiotemporal instantiation in matter in order to be actualized as “there,” as a “this-here-now.”

In the transitional perspective outlined by Heidegger, the determinate and persistent conceptual self-identity of my desk in each instance would, however, no longer be seen as the primary and predominant feature of its being-there. Account would rather be taken of the full context-specificity that makes my desk singularly meaningful to me in each concrete practical situation: it is now a storeroom for my books, now a support for my computer, now a surface on which to place my cup of coffee, now a concrete example to be used in my work, and so on. The whatness of the desk is, of course, there as a constitutive element of permanent identity in each instant of the desk’s presence. If at any moment I ask myself *what* this thing before me is, I already distance myself from my current practical involvement with it and the answer will almost inevitably be that it is a *desk*. But as Plato himself shows in the *Republic*, the “Idea” that guarantees the applicability of the name is, first and foremost, a certain kind of function.⁵⁷ The applicability of the name *desk* obviously depends on whether or not the thing at hand can function as a desk. The desk can be painted red and it will still be a desk, but if its legs are cut off, it is no longer truly worthy of the name *desk*, at least in its usual sense.

Plato, however, does not take the analysis further. He focuses on just one of altogether four relevant factors at play here.

1. For Plato, the primary factor involved in the ideal conceptual identity of a thing is, as we saw, its *functionality*. However, this functionality has now turned out to be dependent on three other factors.
2. Another aspect of the meaningful functional presence of my desk is clearly its sheer *materiality*. This materiality is defined by the desk’s material makeup, its implementation, and its current

material condition (for example, its being worn down and cluttered with books and papers). This materiality delimits its capacity to fulfill its function as my desk. This factor was, to a certain extent, recognized already in ancient metaphysics. Plato himself implicitly acknowledges that an understanding of what a thing *is* involves an understanding of what kind of material implementation can fulfill its determining function. Aristotle's basic critique of Plato is that the conceptual forms of concrete things, as universal and common to many instances, are not substances, that is, not *there* in their own right, but only insofar as they are materially instantiated.⁵⁸

3. On a further level, it can be argued that I can encounter my desk as a functioning desk only in the context a *purposive* project involving a desk, such as writing an article or organizing my papers. Moreover, such projects are arguably meaningful only with regard to more and more comprehensive projects, such as philosophical study and academic scholarship, professionalism and intellectual work in general, and so on. The purposes of such projects are ultimately dependent upon the comprehensive "purposes of life" that orient me as a member of a specific community, in other words, the ultimate ends and aims—if any—orienting all particular projects within a given cultural context.
4. Immediately connected to the previous factor is the historically specific *cultural and communal* dimension that delimits in advance the kinds of projects I am likely to be involved in. It is within a particular historical community that certain overarching purposes (such as academic scholarship) are shared and certain individual projects (such as writing academic papers) make sense. Arguably, something can function as a desk—and consequently be subsumed under the concept *desk*—only in a certain kind of culture that allows certain practices, projects, and ends. Nonliterate cultures do not have desks because they have no use for them, lacking the relevant practices.

Beyond the dimension that the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition has perceived as alone or primarily constitutive of the beingness of my desk—namely, related to the first factor, its whatness—three interrelated dimensions of functional meaningfulness can thus be distinguished: its particular materiality, the practical context of ends and purposes to which it belongs, and the historical, cultural, and communal context within which such practices and projects, as well as their ends, are shared.

The point of distinguishing these four dimensions is to suggest the following preliminary interpretation of the fourfold:

1. *Sein* can be understood as the realm of shared and visible openness, of articulated appearing and appearance. As the dimension of visibility and articulation, its function is analogous to that of

the “formal cause” or conceptual form (*eidos, logos*) in Aristotelian metaphysics. Heidegger’s sky is, however, clearly not the Platonic “heaven”⁵⁹ of eternally stable Ideas or forms, but rather a dynamic historical and cultural sphere of appearing that is constituted only in an interaction with the other dimensions.⁶⁰ An indication of this can be found in Heidegger’s 1957 essay on the poet Johann Friedrich Hebel, in which the “sky” in Hebel’s work is interpreted as standing for non-sensuous “sense” (*Sinn*) or “spirit” (*Geist*). “Sky” intertwines with “earth,” the symbol for the “sensuous” (*das Sinnliche*), to form the “sensuous sense” of (linguistic) meaning.⁶¹

2. The *earth*, as the counterpart of sky, is the opaque dimension of inarticulate materiality, the “ground” or “soil” that grants here-and-now-ness to things. Its function is analogous to the Aristotelian “material cause.” Aristotle, however, subordinates matter (*hylē*) to form as the ontological “residue” in things that are not simply identical with their form but require spatiotemporal instantiation in order to be actualized. Conversely, Heidegger, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” characterizes the relation between earth and “world” (the historical realm of relational meaning comprising aspects of the “sky,” “mortals,” and “divinities”) as “strife” (*Streit*).⁶² This emphasizes that materiality and articulation are equally primordial and irreducibly interdependent aspects.⁶³
3. The *divinities* or gods are the orienting dimension of ideals, aims, norms, final purposes, or “values.” As the plural form emphasizes, in spite of the analogy they do not simply correspond to the Aristotelian God as an absolute “final cause” for all things.⁶⁴ The Heideggerian gods are the gods of a specific people, that is to say, historically and culturally situated ideals and ends.
4. The *mortals*, that is, finite and situated humanity, are the dimension of culture and community, of historical and cultural facticity, and of communal and linguistic receptivity to shared experience with regard for shared ideals and norms.⁶⁵ This dimension is parallel to the Aristotelian “efficient cause,” which Aristotle generally associates with the human being as an initiating agent, but first and foremost in the role of a “producer,” as the initiator of a process of production or implementation.

4. Conclusion: Singularity and the History of Being

We have argued that theme of the radical contextuality of being—of the embeddedness of each instance of meaningful presence in a multidimensional context of references that makes it meaningful in a unique and singular way—runs through Heidegger’s work from his fundamental ontology to his mature thinking of *Ereignis*. We also presented a tentative reading of Heidegger’s fourfold (*Geviert*) as his most developed articulation of this contextuality, building on the incomplete account of the temporal sense of being in

Being and Time. The remaining step is to consider the implications of this fourfold contextuality for the postmetaphysical approach to being as singular and historically configured.

When each instance of being is regarded as constituted by *all* of the four dimensions of the fourfold described above, none of which has any independent subsistence but is irreducibly intertwined with the other three, it becomes evident that no two instances can be simply “equivalent” to each other in the sense of manifesting some homogeneous universal form. Each situation is rather a heterogeneous and complicated configuration of multiple dimensions. This singularity of particular constellations of the fourfold is indicated by Heidegger’s words: “Each thing arrests [*verweilt*] the fourfold into an instance of the resting [*in ein je Weiliges*] of the onefold of the world. . . . Only what is compliantly conjoined [*gering*] from a world becomes a thing once [*einmal*].”⁶⁶

What, then, becomes of the persistent identity of meanings that their ideality was supposed to guarantee? Here, close attention must be paid to Heidegger’s distinction between two senses of “identity” or “sameness”: *das Gleiche*, “alike,” “equal,” or “equivalent,” and *das Selbe*, “identical” in the sense of “one and the same” or “selfsame.” The former designates a homogeneous unity, a lack of distinction; it “constantly moves toward the indifferent [*Unterschiedslose*],” dispersing differences into “the bleak unity of what is one in a merely uniform manner [*einförmig*].”⁶⁷ The latter, by contrast, is a heterogeneous and complex unity, a “belonging-together of the diverse,” a Heraclitean harmony of the discordant that “gathers what is distinct into a primordial unison [*Einigkeit*].”⁶⁸ This distinction offers a new point of view on the difference between Aristotelian metaphysics and Heideggerian postmetaphysics. It is precisely a hallmark of Aristotle’s question concerning being qua being to look for a common denominator, something equal and equivalent in all particular beings, some “indifferent oneness.” “Being as such” (*to on*) is shown by Aristotle not to be such a principle; the only common feature that can be discovered in all instances of “to be” is their membership in the *hierarchy* of being, which entails a ubiquitous reference to the universally valid, constantly intelligible, and accessible supreme entity as an ideal of *perfect* being. Heidegger’s thinking of being, however, is not a quest for a universally equivalent principle. What is “identical” in Heidegger’s sense of “selfsame” in each instance of being, in each meaningful situation, is simply the *singular situatedness* in a meaningful context that differentiates situations. Being is not something that precedes individual situations or instants in order to be instantiated in them. Being is, rather, this *event of instantiation as such*, the “employment” of the fourfold context into the one-foldness of a singular thing. As Heidegger puts it in *Contributions*: “The eternal is not the incessant; rather, it is that which can withdraw in the instant so as to return once more. That which can return, not as the *equal* [*das Gleiche*] but as what transforms ever anew, the one-unique [*Eine-Einzige*], beyng [*Seyn*], such that in this manifestness it is at first not recognized as the selfsame [*das Selbe*]!”⁶⁹

The contextual singularity of being does not mean that each instant flashes forth once and then vanishes into the past without a trace. Nor is it simply retained in the form of a past present. Each instant rather dynamically transforms and modifies the “already having been,” the factual background of subsequent instants from which their respective futural prospects emerge. It remains as an aspect of the tradition that admits of being “repeated,” in Heidegger’s emphatic sense of *retrieval* (*Wiederholung*) as a transformative reappropriation of a situation that has already been, not as mere reproduction of something past.⁷⁰ To retrieve an instant is to experience it anew in the context of another instant in which it will, however, always have a transformed meaning. “*Only the singular [das Einmalige] can be re-trieved.*”⁷¹ It is precisely because of its singularity that being can “have” a “history” (*Geschichte*) in the sense of the series of transformative reappropriations of the first, Greek inception of the Western philosophical engagement with being and of the different encounters with being made possible by these transformations—a series that constitutes the unfolding of Western metaphysics.⁷² Or rather, “the history of being is being itself and only that”⁷³: being *is* the historical unfolding of meaningfulness in singular situations that are never mutually “equivalent” but nevertheless constitute a continuous tradition of retrieval and inheritance. “The unity and cohesiveness of history [*Geschichte*] is determined in terms of the uniqueness of being. *In* uniqueness every single thing is in each instance unique and only *thus* belongs to the One. The essential relations to history are grounded not in that which is general in a multiplicity . . . but in the uniqueness of the simple.”⁷⁴

Notes

For extremely helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay, I thank Brendan Mahoney and Andrew Mitchell, as well as the editors of this volume. For an in-depth discussion of these topics, see Backman, *Complicated Presence*.

¹ Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, 58–59, 153–55, 179; *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 49–50, 115–17, 139. On historical singularization as a specifically “postmodern” topos, see Magnússon, “The Singularization of History.”

² Brent Slife (“Information and Time,” 533–50) mentions Heidegger’s “radical contextuality and holism.”

³ As Thomas Sheehan concisely puts it: “As a phenomenologist, Heidegger understands *Sein* in all its historical incarnations as the *meaningful presence* (*Anwesen*) of things to human beings—that is, as the changing *significance* of things within various contexts of human interests and concerns” (*Making Sense of Heidegger*, xii). The question of being thus also inherently involves a question of the *correlation* between encountered things and the corresponding human concerns and intentions.

⁴ The term (*nomina*) *transcendentia* is used by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* 1.30.3; 1.39.3; 1.93.3) of being (*ens*), unity (*unum*), truth (*verum*), and goodness (*bonum*). The form *transcendentalia* was introduced in the seventeenth century.

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.2.1003a33–b16; 7.1.1028a13–b7; cf. Owens, *The Doctrine of Being*, 265. I borrow the translation of *ousia* as “Entity/entity” from Owens (*ibid.*, 137–54).

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.6.1071b2–7.1073a13, 12.9.1074b15–1075a10.

⁷ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1.1026a18–32. Cf. Owens, *The Doctrine of Being*, 300, 453–54.

⁸ On ontotheology, see, for example, Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 235–36, 378–79; *Pathmarks*, 180–81, 287–88; *Nietzsche*, vol. 2, 311–15; *Nietzsche*, vol. 4, *Nihilism*, 207–10; *Identität und Differenz*, 31–67; *Identity and Difference*, 42–74.

⁹ See, for example, Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, 415–32; *Nietzsche*, vol. 2, *Eternal Recurrence*, 198–208; *Nietzsche*, vol. 2, 1–22, 177–229, 231–361; *Nietzsche*, vol. 3, *Will to Power*, 161–251; *Nietzsche*, vol. 4, *Nihilism*, 147–250.

¹⁰ See, for example, Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 4–6; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 6–8. Cf. *Nietzsche*, vol. 2, 21; *Nietzsche*, vol. 3, *Will to Power*, 182.

¹¹ Schürmann, *Des hégémonies brisées*, 718, 733; *Broken Hegemonies*, 581, 594. Cf. Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 12–13, 219; “Ultimate Double Binds,” 243–46. See also White, *Logic and Ontology in Heidegger*, 194–95; Nancy, *L’expérience de la liberté*, 91–93; *Experience of Freedom*, 66–68; *La communauté désœuvrée*, 191–92; *Inoperative Community*, 103–5; Greisch, “La parole d’origine,” 204; Ruin, *Enigmatic Origins*, 206; Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis*, 204, 211–12, 244–82; Beistegui, *Truth and Genesis*, 147; Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology*, 16, 86, 173, 244, 313; Ziarek, *Language after Heidegger*, 33–41.

¹² Heidegger also seems to speak of the uniqueness (*Einzigkeit*) of being in a wider and more indeterminate sense in which it encompasses even the traditional metaphysical notion of being as the unique “one over many” (*Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 60; *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 83; *Grundbegriffe*, 51–54; *Basic Concepts*, 43–46).

¹³ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 66; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 53; translation modified.

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Besinnung*, 128; *Mindfulness*, 108; translation modified.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Frühe Schriften*, 427; *Supplements*, 56; translation modified. Here, Heidegger is picking up Wilhelm Windelband’s famous distinction between the “nomothetic” explanatory generalization characteristic of natural sciences and the “idiographic” descriptive study of individual historical phenomena that is particular to the humanities (Windelband, *Präludien*, 136–60; “History and Natural Science”). This distinction became a central theme in the Southwest or Baden School of Neo-Kantianism, which had an unmistakable influence on the young Heidegger. Cf. Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning*, 20–63.

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Ontologie*, 1–3; *Ontology*, 1–3.

¹⁷ This structural analogy between fundamental ontology and Aristotelian metaphysics is emphasized by Heidegger (*Geschichte der Philosophie von Thomas von Aquin bis Kant*, 60; *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, 26; *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 19–20; *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik*, 201–2; *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 158).

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 6–7; *Being and Time*, 5–6; cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 439n7[c]; *Being and Time*, 6n§.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 323–31; *Being and Time*, 309–16. For the characterization of the ecstases as “vectors” of the unitary movement of temporalization, see Protevi, *Time and Exteriority*, 126.

²⁰ I borrow the apt rendering of *Zukunft* as “forthcoming” from Chernyakov, *Ontology of Time*, 192.

²¹ Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung*, 136; *Schelling’s Treatise*, 113–14; translation modified. Cf. Heidegger, “Unbenutzte Vorarbeiten zur Vorlesung vom Wintersemester 1929/30,” 11; *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 14–16; *On Time and Being*, 14–16. See also Pöggeler, *Der Denkweg Martin Heideggers*, 251; *Martin Heidegger’s Path of Thinking*, 203.

²² On resoluteness, see Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 295–310, 325–30, 338–39, 382–8; *Being and Time*, 282–88, 311–15, 323–24, 364–68.

²³ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 328, 338; *Being and Time*, 313, 323.

²⁴ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 41; *Being and Time*, 41.

²⁵ Heidegger, *Platon: Sophistes*, 163–64; *Plato’s Sophist*, 112; translation modified.

²⁶ Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, 251; *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 169; translation modified. As William McNeill (*The Glance of the Eye*) has shown, the instant (*Augenblick*) is Heidegger’s reappropriation of the kind of intuitive apprehending of a singular situation that Aristotle attributes to practical insight or prudence (*phronēsi*). Designating the instant

as Dasein's most primordial mode of receptivity inverts the Aristotelian subordination of *phronēsis* to comprehensive understanding or wisdom (*sophia*), which is characterized by an intuitive apprehending of the supremely *universal* determinations. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7.1141a16–b16; 6.8.1142a23–30, 6.11.1143a32–b5.

²⁷ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 38; *Being and Time*, 36. Cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 3; *Being and Time*, 2.

²⁸ Cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 440n38[a]; *Being and Time*, 36n*. See also Slife, "Information and Time," 542.

²⁹ Cf. Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 34; *On Time and Being*, 31; Preface to *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, XVII–XXII. See also von Herrmann, *Die Selbstinterpretation Martin Heideggers*, 264–78; *Wege ins Ereignis*, 67–68; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3, 191; *Heidegger's Ways*, 20–21; Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, 231–45; Backman, *Complicated Presence*, 121–53.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 38, 436; *Being and Time*, 36, 413.

³¹ Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik*, 199–202; *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 156–59.

³² Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 327–28; *Pathmarks*, 249–50.

³³ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 319, 467; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 253, 368; *Besinnung*, 144–45; *Mindfulness*, 123; *Die Metaphysik des deutschen Idealismus*, 54; *Wegmarken*, 325–26; *Pathmarks*, 247–49. Cf. Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 322; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 255.

³⁴ Cf. Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 44, 53–58; *On Time and Being*, 41, 49–54.

³⁵ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 319; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 252.

³⁶ I adopt here the established English rendering of *Seyn* as *beyng*. The use of this obsolete eighteenth-century German orthography is supposedly meant to stress the "anteriority" of being as *Ereignis* in relation to the metaphysical perspective on being; the Early Modern English variant *beyng* (used in sixteenth-century texts interchangeably with *beynge* and *being*) thus performs roughly the same function. Heidegger adopts the use of *Seyn* in his first lecture course on Hölderlin (*Hölderlins Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"; Hölderlin's Hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine"*), and it can thus be taken also as a reference to Hölderlin as the postmetaphysical poet. It should be noted that Heidegger later drops even this spelling, noting that it is improper to use any cognate of *Sein* for postmetaphysical purposes (*Holzwege*, 364n[d]; *Off the Beaten Track*, 275n[a]).

³⁷ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 375; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 296. Cf. Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 323, 384; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 255–56, 303–4. See also Ruin, *Enigmatic Origins*, 200–201; Beistegui, *Truth and Genesis*, 147.

³⁸ Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, 25; *Identity and Difference*, 36.

³⁹ Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, 11–12, 17–21; *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 10–12, 16–19; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 164–66, 170–75; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 170–72, 175–80. Cf. Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, 152–81; *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 175–208; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 139–56; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 143–59; *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 9–33, 157–216; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 187–208; *On the Way to Language*, 57–110.

⁴⁰ Polt (*The Emergency of Being*, 74n97) and Mitchell (*The Fourfold*, 3–4) point out Heidegger's (perhaps exaggerated) statement, in a 1964 letter to Dieter Sinn (cited in Sinn, *Ereignis und Nirwana*, 172), according to which the "thing lecture" was thus far his only published attempt to present his thinking directly "on its own terms," rather than relating it to the tradition.

⁴¹ Harman, "Dwelling with the Fourfold," 294. This is without doubt the reason for the "tragic mistake," noted by Harman, that "no major concept of Heidegger's career has received less detailed treatment than the fourfold" (292). For a more extensive discussion of my reading of the fourfold, see Backman, *Complicated Presence*, 135–53, 165–69, 180, 190–202. Andrew Mitchell's recent outstanding work *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger* is one of the only book-length studies on the topic. Among other major contributions toward a concrete interpretation are those of Jean-François Mattéi ("Le chiasme heideggerien"; "Heideggerian Chiasmus"; "L'étoile et le sillon"; "Le quadruple fondement"; *Heidegger et Hölderlin*; "La

quadruple énigme de l'être”), James C. Edwards (*Plain Sense of Things*, 165–94), Karsten Harries (*Ethical Function of Architecture*, 158–62), and Graham Harman (*Tool-Being*, 190–204; *Heidegger Explained*, 131–35; “Dwelling with the Fourfold”).

⁴² Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 310; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 246.

⁴³ Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen “Germanien” und “Der Rhein,”* 245; *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* 222–23.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 149; *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 209.

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 1–74; *Off the Beaten Track*, 1–56.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the “prehistory” of the fourfold in Heidegger’s work of the 1930s, see Backman, *Complicated Presence*, 135–53.

⁴⁷ Mattéi, “L’étoile et le sillon”; “Le quadruple fondement”; *Heidegger et Hölderlin*, 33–85, 189–271; “Le quadruple énigme de l'être,” 136–37. It should be noted, however, that Mattéi’s way of construing the analogy differs from the model suggested here: Mattéi associates the sky with the efficient cause, earth with final cause, divinities with formal cause, and mortals with material cause (“L’étoile et le sillon,” 61–65; *Heidegger et Hölderlin*, 201).

⁴⁸ Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 124; *Pathmarks*, 98.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Physics* 2.1.194b16–195a26; *Metaphysics* 5.2.1013a24–b28.

⁵⁰ Heidegger notes Aristotle’s failure to distinguish between “ontical” causes (other entities) and transcendental causes (ontological structures; *Wegmarken*, 170–71; *Pathmarks*, 131).

⁵¹ Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, 6–7; *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 6–7; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 11–17, 160–61; *Basic Writings*, 313–19; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 166–67.

⁵² For an elegant articulation of Heidegger’s thing as a “focus” or “focal point” of a practice, see Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 196–99; cf. Roesner, *Metaphysica ludens*, 237.

⁵³ Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zur Hölderlins Dichtung*, 170; *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 194–95.

⁵⁴ Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, 13; *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 12; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 166; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 171–72. On the etymologies of *Ding*, “thing,” and “employing,” see Grimm and Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 2, 1169–72; Klein, *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary*, 516, 1607.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Plato, *Cratylus* 432d4–440d2.

⁵⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.17.1041a6–b33.

⁵⁷ Plato, *Republic* 10.596b12–608b10.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.8.1033a24–1034a8.

⁵⁹ In the *Phaedrus*, Plato famously situates the ideas in a “place beyond the heavens” (*hyperouranios topos*; 247c3).

⁶⁰ James C. Edwards interprets *sky* as standing for the “ongoing social practices . . . within which things come to presence as the things they are,” as the “illuminating linguistic and behavioral practices that constitute us and our common world” (*Plain Sense of Things*, 170). For Andrew Mitchell, the sky is the “wide expanse of appearance” and the “space of the earth’s irruption” that is “nothing inert or stable, but constantly aflutter with the streaming of . . . relations” (*Fourfold*, 116, 307); Mitchell also emphasizes the “natural” association between the sky and time (145–62).

⁶¹ Heidegger, *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens 1910–1976*, 150; “Hebel,” 100.

⁶² Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 35–36; *Off the Beaten Track*, 26–27.

⁶³ Cf. Haar, *Le chant de la terre*, 122–33; *Song of the Earth*, 57–64; Edwards, *Plain Sense of Things*, 169–70; Dreyfus, “Heidegger’s Ontology of Art,” 411–13; Mitchell, *The Fourfold*, 71–115.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7.1072a21–27.

⁶⁵ Cf. Edwards: “To know oneself to be mortal . . . is to know that . . . *everything* . . . is contingent upon a constellation of circumstances that will someday no longer hold together” (*Plain Sense of Things*, 173).

⁶⁶ Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, 20, 21; *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 19, 20; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 173, 175; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 178, 180; translation modified. On the meaning of the more or less artificial verb *geringen*, see Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3, 283; *Heidegger's Ways*, 135–36; cf. Mitchell, *Fourfold*, 269–78.

⁶⁷ Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 187; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 216–17.

⁶⁸ Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 187; *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 216–17; translation modified. Cf. Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, 152; *Principle of Reason*, 89–90. See also Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 154–55; *Adventure of Difference*, 168.

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 371; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 293; translation modified.

⁷⁰ On retrieval (*Wiederholung*), see Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 385–86; *Being and Time*, 367–68.

⁷¹ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 55; *Contributions to Philosophy*, 45; translation modified. Cf. Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen “Germanien” und “Der Rhein,”* 144–45; *Hölderlin's Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* 127.

⁷² On the history of being (*Geschichte des Seins*) as metaphysics, see Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 2, 363–448; *End of Philosophy*, 1–83.

⁷³ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 2, 447; *End of Philosophy*, 82; translation modified.

⁷⁴ Heidegger, *Über den Anfang*, 44. Cf. Vail, *Heidegger and Ontological Difference*, 45; Ruin, *Enigmatic Origins*, 206; Beistegui, *Truth and Genesis*, 147; Polt, *The Emergency of Being*, 86.

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