



HERMENEUTICS, METAPHYSICS, AND THE QUESTION OF BEING

Hermenêutica, Metafísica e a questão do Ser

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Wer das Tiefste gedacht, liebt das Lebendigste.¹

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so also to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.²

Abstract: Notwithstanding the current common knowledge, which tells us that we live in post-metaphysical times, that metaphysics has come to an end and has been declared dead, the status of metaphysics should be reassessed in light of the contemporary hermeneutical tradition, and the possibility of reconfiguring it on the basis of the hermeneutical tradition should be seriously considered. Metaphysics, as an attempt to understand and articulately explain Being in its totality, has not died: that would mean the end of philosophy itself and, ultimately, the denial of the ability of human beings to understand themselves as Being, that is, as a whole. The hermeneutical tradition developed by Heidegger and Gadamer contributes strong arguments to corroborate this assertion. Finally,

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¹ HÖLDERLIN, Friedrich – “Sokrates und Alcibiades”. In: HÖLDERLIN, Friedrich – *Vol. 1, Sämtliche Werke*. Herausgegeben Von Friedrich Beissner. Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1946, p. 260.

² THOREAU, Henry David, *Walden*, 9, quoted in HADOT, Pierre – “There are nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers”. In: *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. 19.3 (2005), p. 229.

because particular views of reality correspond to particular ways of acting, the metaphysics implicit in philosophical hermeneutics may help us to resist political-religious radicalism.

Keywords: Hermeneutics. Metaphysics. Being. Language. Heidegger. Gadamer.

Resumo: Partindo do lugar comum hodierno que afirma que a Metafísica chegou ao seu fim – sendo declarada como morta – e que vivemos em tempos pós-metafísicos, nos propusemos reavaliar seu status bem como a possibilidade de reconfigurá-la a partir da tradição Hermenêutica contemporânea. Justificaremos aqui que a Metafísica – enquanto uma proposta de compreensão e de explicitação articulada do Ser em sua totalidade –, não morreu, pois isto significaria decretar o fim da própria Filosofia e, em última instância, seria afirmar a incapacidade de o ser humano compreender-se enquanto Ser, isto é, enquanto um todo. É na tradição hermenêutica desenvolvida por Heidegger e por Gadamer que buscaremos argumentos para corroborar esta nossa hipótese. Dado que a uma visão do real corresponde uma ação determinada, a Metafísica implícita da Hermenêutica Filosófica, enquanto compreensão e explicitação do Ser em sua totalidade, poderá nos ajudar a não sucumbirmos aos radicalismos político-religiosos.

Palavras-chaves: Hermenêutica. Metafísica. Ser. Linguagem. Heidegger. Gadamer.

1. *The current state of metaphysics*

Perhaps the largest and most emphatic philosophical choir at present – made up of voices from the realm of positivism, pragmatism, materialism, and other “isms” – is the one gathered around both the critique of metaphysics as a *démodé* philosophical theme³ and the death of metaphysics as a *dépassé* philosophical proposal. Undoubtedly, “our century is full of claims about the end of metaphysics” as “a social phenomenon and as an assertion.”⁴ Hence the oft-repeated refrain, “We live in a post-

³ “Much has been said in recent times about the end of metaphysics, both by those who would proclaim its demise and by those who would defend its continuing validity. But little has been said about its beginning. In many ways the beginning of metaphysics is the most difficult part of it, especially in our antimetaphysical age. Many have declared the question *dépassé* or simply meaningless, choosing rather to restrict questioning to the realm of the physical or the social sciences. Others have admitted the question, but have found no rational way of dealing with it, and so have resorted to faith or mystical discourse to speak of being. Others still have reflected upon the long tradition of rational discourse about being and have found it wanting. These are the ones who have proclaimed ‘the end of metaphysics’ from within metaphysics itself and who present us with the greatest difficulty as we begin in this inquiry into being.” BLANCHETTE, Oliva – *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, p. 4.

⁴ LYSAKER, John – “Heidegger’s Absolute Music, or What Are Poets for When the End of Metaphysics Is at Hand?” In: *Research in Phenomenology*, 30.1 (2000), p. 180-181.

“From Carnap to Rorty, Horkheimer to Habermas, from Heidegger to Derrida, traditions have gathered around the claim that metaphysics has come to its end.” *Ibid.*, p. 181.

-metaphysical age,” which has been sung for several decades and whose echoes are present in our daily lives in their different nuances and in phrases such as “It’s unsophisticated to defend metaphysics” or “This is metaphysical,” meaning that “this” is empty, abstract, merely theoretical, or meaningless.

What is worse than insisting on proclaiming the end of metaphysics, however, is the current trend toward advocating the impossibility of resuming and reconfiguring it. As Joseph Moeller states, “Perhaps a time even more adverse to Metaphysics is setting in – a time which, in opposition to the Modern Age, is aware of its nescience and its limits, but which intends to master life, or rather endure it, within this ignorance and limitation.”⁵ More serious than making the mistake of disdaining metaphysics is persisting in this particular brand of ignorance. For the mere “professional” of philosophy it may be convenient to join the choir, and it may even prove necessary to simply intone the discourse about the end of metaphysics and position oneself in favor of its death. The masses have a weakness for radicalism – which is why they will crown someone king one day and then demand his crucifixion on the next (or even on the same day) – since they are ruled only by the dualistic, binary logic peculiar to the principle of *Tertium non datur*. The posture of the “professional” philosopher, however, stands in conflict with the vocation of philosophers for whom leaping from or over their own reality is an act that requires “courage,” even if their way of being is naturally metaphysical.

The fact is that the “post” in “post-metaphysical” has been construed as *postmortem*, as a time beyond any possibility of “resurrecting” metaphysics. This funereal ambiance has clouded our bat’s eyes and made it difficult to discern what has really happened to metaphysics. It is as if we have been paralyzed by the alleged “end” of metaphysics, whose rule had extended from the beginning of philosophy until two hundred years ago. We should now open our eyes, awake from our drowsiness, and make its rising from the ashes possible. Although on the one hand it was necessary that metaphysics be considered dead, on the other hand we cannot join the resentful mourning of those who deplore its “tragic” fate. Furthermore, we should not overlook the presence of metaphysics in some contemporary views of science, in self-organization theories, and even in poetry. At any rate, “something” from the philosophical world has died, and we are in a period in which “something” no longer exists. This climate is so evident and familiar that it is difficult not only to pose but also to respond to the question, “What is the status of Metaphysics today? Does it still enjoy any kind of general esteem?”⁶ This is the philosophical problem that I hope to clarify and investigate here.

⁵ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 240.

⁶ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 227.

My starting point is the fact that it is not metaphysics as a whole that has died but a particular understanding and conception of it. What no longer exists – or at least is no longer seen as valid – is the view of metaphysics based on the Wolfian/Kantian/⁷ Hegelian⁸ orientation. To deduce from this fact that metaphysics is dead, however, amounts to throwing the baby out with the bath water, as it were. At the same time, I do not share *tout court* the optimism of Peter Wust, who refers to our time as a period of the “resurrection” of metaphysics.⁹ Metaphysical proposals of an archaeological, teleological, or theological nature do not solve, separately, the impasse of metaphysics in contemporary times. In the same way, it is, strictly speaking, not possible to undertake a science of metaphysics by relying on the model of modern science.¹⁰

Rather than a tragedy, however, it is a privilege to live in this “post-metaphysical” period, for woe to us if we were to remain mere subjects of the “queen of sciences.” It is a privilege because we can take up one of the chief lines of the philosophical corpus and reconfigure our view of it – against the mellifluous academic stream that stresses repetition rather than creation. Thus we should not adhere to a philosophical “fad” but should focus instead on the destiny of human beings themselves and the issues related to the meaning of our lives. And this kind of language, of course, already places us in the realm of metaphysics! As the example of Job suggests, faithfulness to conscience is better than subservience to the philosophical fads adopted by those who would not dare to work out new modes of understanding the real.

⁷ “Kant rejected the idea that *be* or *Sein* could be thought of as a predicate, or as a subject or questioning, because for him that meant that *be* would have to be some other essence over and above the essence that was already posited as a thing in the subject of a judgment, some noumenal object over and above the phenomenal object. If there were such essences or noumenal objects, we had no way of knowing them. More fundamentally still Kant would say that, if there is any real essence to be known, it is already known as the phenomenal object. This is how the question of *be*, or even of *being*, came to be eliminated or forgotten in modern philosophy.” BLANCHETTE, Oliva – *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, p. 25.

⁸ See WIEHL, Reiner – “Heidegger, Hermeneutics, and Ontology.” In: WACHTERHAUSER, Brice R. (Ed.) – *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986, p. 473.

⁹ See MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 227.

¹⁰ “While Heidegger may have stopped thinking that there could be a science of being in any sense of the term, we think there is still a possibility for such a science and that this possibility appears precisely in a proper understanding of the subject matter for such an investigation, namely, being as being. Our proposal here is not to attempt to do what Heidegger did not do, that is, to develop a systematic articulation of what is at issue in the question of being. In other words, it is to begin a systematic investigation into being as being that will eventually include not only Heidegger’s more specific question of the *be* of being, but also other questions such as that of the properties of being as being or that of the causes of being as being, all the way to the final question of a summit of being.” BLANCHETTE, Oliva – *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, p. 6.

We are fortunate to live in “post-metaphysical times,” fortunate that our age is not considered metaphysical – and at any rate, not even at the time of its historical emergence was metaphysics monolithic, for whereas Plato and Aristotle differed in their conceptions of metaphysics, the sophists did not even believe that it “existed” – because only under these conditions can something new be thought and philosophically justified. It is precisely from the action of negation that something new may arise. If in the realm of ethics the “crisis” of values and norms is a positive factor that makes ethical reconfiguration possible, why should we not apply the same principle to metaphysics? Why should we not conceive of metaphysics as an orientation and a structure similar to ethics and politics, which, though woven by the thread of time and therefore not seen as absolute sciences, do not cease to be “philosophical” or to belong to the corpus of philosophy? Should metaphysics have an absolute “form” simply because it deals with Being, “ultimate things,” and “first and last principles”?¹¹ Just as any other area of philosophy, metaphysics should be seen only as a project, a conceptual construct, for we are marked by the seal of temporality, which makes us what we are and what we can be.

In this sense I agree with Moeller’s question and answer on the matter: “Would our thinking then be anything different than the horizon-thinking of a finite man? And would not the very finitude of this man be nothing but the self-manifesting limit of our thought which always seeks to reach beyond itself and thereby in this attempt already manifests its failure?”¹² This already points to a different conception of metaphysics, not as a definitive, final, absolute science but as a provisional proposal to be continually reconfigured, since it rests on finitude, which is one of the constitutive features of Being.¹³

Metaphysics, in short, “is not at the end, but it is at the hand.”¹⁴ What has come to its end is the metaphysics which did not take (human) Being seriously in its investigation; what is at hand is a metaphysical model founded upon human finitude in its effort toward self-understanding and its attempt to articulate the real. A philosophy that takes finitude seriously in its conceptual contexture need not, as Moeller writes, “be unconditionally

¹¹ As the Brazilian poet Mario Quintana writes, “Why should we lock life in concepts and norms? / The Beautiful and the Ugly . . . Good and Evil . . . Pain and Pleasure . . . / They are all forms / rather than degrees of Being!” [Por que prender a vida em conceitos e normas? / o Belo e o Feio ... O Bom e o Mau... Dor e Prazer... / são formas / E não degraus do Ser!] QUINTANA, Mario – *Poesias*. São Paulo: Globo, 1994, p. 120.

¹² MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 229.

¹³ RICHARDSON, William – *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. See the chapter titled “Characteristics of There: Transcendence, Finitude, Temporality”, p. 272-279.

¹⁴ LYSAKER, John – “Heidegger’s Absolute Music, or What Are Poets for When the End of Metaphysics Is at Hand?” In: *Research in Phenomenology*, 30.1 (2000), p. 180.

inimical to Metaphysics. It would only point to this: that Metaphysics today has no genuine chance to succeed because it has not taken the finitude of man seriously enough.”¹⁵ We need to reconfigure traditional metaphysics, particularly in the way it has subjected finitude to the dictates of the Absolute by constructing systems that have frozen human existence and the articulation of Being in their conceptual meshes. In other words, we need to reflect on the object of metaphysics in contemporary times, that is, on Being in its due and universal proportion.

2. The object of metaphysics today

Such is man; when the wealth is there, and no less than a god tends him with gifts, though he remains blind and unaware.

First he must suffer...¹⁶

An attempt to reconfigure metaphysics should focus specifically on the object of metaphysics, which, in my view, is linked to its destiny, to its death or rehabilitation in the present. In this vein, I will give attention to its proper language, methodology, and teleology.

2.1. Of Being and in Being

Unlike the particular sciences, which deal with one or another aspect of being, metaphysics deals with the issue of being “as being or of being as whole.” That is why metaphysics includes everything and “is about everything that is inasmuch as it is, about being as being; not being as this, or that; it is not about one kind of being or another, but about being simply as being. This is what distinguishes metaphysics from all the other sciences and makes it especially difficult to grasp in its beginning.”¹⁷ For this reason it also comprehends non-being, nothing. It addresses issues that are not confined to the realm of knowledge, and although the realm of knowledge must address these issues they are not restricted to understanding and articulation through cognitive activity.

As the object of metaphysics, Being cannot be reduced to either impressions or certainties, for, as universal articulation and knowledge of the whole, it both transcends and includes them. Thus, “being as it presents itself in

¹⁵ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 230.

¹⁶ HÖLDERLIN, Friedrich, Bread and Wine, quoted in ‘p. 35.

¹⁷ BLANCHETTE, Oliva – *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, p. 12.

this first act of knowing is neither just intellectual nor just sensible, but both at the same time"; it cannot be reduced or classified according to the classical distinction between genus and specific difference, for it "encompasses what is to be understood according to both genus and specific difference as one in its being."¹⁸ As a process of understanding and articulating being, metaphysics tries to conserve tensionally and dialectically, in one whole, the sensible and the intelligible, the one and the many, the particular and the universal. In other words, "Being, as the process of emerging into non-concealment in its There, is insuperably finite, therefore negated, therefore a non-emerging, or concealment, at the same time that it is a revelation."¹⁹ Western metaphysics imploded because of its inability to maintain within its discourse this tension that is constitutive of and proper to Being, which is constituted and revealed processually. Besides being irreducible to any one of its aspects, "Being" as being can never be reduced to a concept or formula to be immediately apprehended. As incarnation and mediation, Being, nevertheless, is not confined to either of these aspects. Furthermore, "it does not refer to anything beyond all possible experience, but only to being as given in experience considered as a whole."²⁰ At the root of the mistaken criticisms leveled against metaphysics we find the confusion between metaphysical and meta-empirical knowledge. Although the meta-empirical aspect does belong to Being, metaphysical knowledge cannot be reduced to the meta-empirical, nor is it constituted as a discourse dissociated from experience.

In contrast to scientific research, which investigates a particular aspect of being, metaphysics investigates Being itself as being, always linked to the experience of the totality of the real. This does not imply the supremacy of metaphysics over the other sciences, nor should we resume the philosophical tradition that understood metaphysics as "the queen of all sciences," but "far from coming first in the order of human inquiring and learning, metaphysics should rather come last, or at least after some inquiring into the principles and causes of particular aspects of being [...]. Metaphysics has something to gain from the other sciences, since all of them have to do with one aspect of being or another."²¹ Knowledge with a view toward understanding the whole and making it explicit – which is proper to the network model proposed by certain theories of self-organization – attests to the presence and validity of a consistent approach to the object of metaphysics in contemporary times. Thus metaphysics, instead of placing

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁹ RICHARDSON, William – *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. See the chapter titled "Characteristics of There: Transcendence, Finitude, Temporality", p. 285.

²⁰ BLANCHETTE, Oliva – *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, p. 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

itself in a position of superiority over the other sciences, sees itself at their side in an attitude of respect and dialog ruled by the triadic logic of *Tertium datur* rather than by the binary logic peculiar to classical-modern metaphysics. Now we are dealing with an open, mobile conceptual construction without the arrogance of the kind of metaphysics that wished to deduce the real from concepts and ultimate principles.

Since the time of Aristotle we have known that “being is said in many ways,”²² and for this reason we can and must approach it from different points of view at different moments in time. Being gathers and manifests itself in “various meanings” as “identity in judgment [...] ‘authentic’ Being as essence, Being as horizon, Being as fullness of reality,” and if we survey the history of philosophy we will see that there is not really one meaning that is hegemonic over and against the others, just as there is not a single correct and definitive understanding of Being.²³ All forms of saying and expressing Being are always “surpassed and encompassed by Being, which cannot itself further be surpassed and encompassed. Thus the question about the ‘meaning’ of Being can indeed serve to clarify the *question* of Being, but never or not at all to clarify what ‘Being’ should properly mean. For Being itself transcends the question of Being and makes it possible.”²⁴ I also concur with Moeller’s claim that the Being “to which Metaphysics leads, Being from which our thought is established, is not exhausted in the characteristics which characterized philosophical solutions since Plato’s Idea of the Good, through the Aristotelian Form on the one hand and the Unmoved Mover on the other, since the Thomistic *esse* and *actus purus*. We are saying that Being is not exhausted by all these characteristics. That does not mean that these solutions are false, nor does it mean that one solution is as comprehensive as another.”²⁵ What cannot be justified is the claim that one characteristic is “the best” or “the only one” to understand and make Being explicit, for, however much we try to express it, “the question of Being is a hidden question, or rather the hidden question of any genuine Metaphysics – implicit even where Being ‘as’ Being has not already been expressly named or rather has not itself made its appearance. [...] In many manifestations of things-which-are – even in art – Being may very definitely manifest itself, even if it is not expressed in language.”²⁶ This understanding of Being relates to the tension between what is said and what is not said that Heidegger develops in reference to Hölderlin and that we find in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. According to Gadamer, this tension involves “all

²² ARISTÓTELES – *Metafísica*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2002.

²³ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 234.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

that remains unsaid whenever anything is said.”²⁷ Being manifests and hides itself at the same time. It becomes “flesh” and at the same time it is not limited to its circumstances. After all, in the words of Heraclitus, “The Logos loves to hide.” If on the one hand one of the causes of the failure of metaphysics was basically the absolutizing of one of these poles, on the other hand the success of metaphysics will depend on their joint articulation as expressed by a dialogical dialectics.

Finally, Being “is not nothing, but everything or whatever is. In this immediacy it is neither indeterminate or determinate. It is simply confused and calls for clarification through questioning. Even in his methodical doubt Descartes knew being already and was only looking for which ideas might correspond to it. Clarity and distinctness of ideas became for him the first criterion of certainty.”²⁸ This was one of the mistakes made by modern metaphysics, which in its search for the ideal of certainty, univocity, and clarity as the ultimate foundation of all things ended up promoting a conceptual construction in which human beings, fragile and finite, were excluded at the end of the process. In order to reconfigure and justify metaphysics today we must take up its object in its due proportion. We must understand it as something that cannot and should not be totally expressed and defined, for “we are not the constitutors of Being, but rather those constituted by Being.”²⁹ We are not the constitutors of Being, and for this reason we should not want to have total control over it, because from the point of view of knowledge this would mean falling back on deductivist thinking – and from a socio-political point of view this could lead to justifications of all manner of totalitarianism. With the notion of “Being as being” in its totality we approach an understanding of the real that sees it as a web in which its ways of being are interwoven in a consistent manner.

2.2. Metaphysics and hermeneutics in the context of the question of Being

Heidegger was one of the few contemporary philosophers to take up the issue of metaphysics with the seriousness it requires, and he proposed not its destruction but its supersession through hermeneutical philosophy. In his view, as far as the history of metaphysics is concerned, “The question, which until now has not been authentically thought, is the question concerning the Being of beings, the question of the meaning of Being posed

²⁷ “Das ist Hermeneutik, zu wissen, wieviel immer Ungesagtes bleibt, wenn man etwas sagt.” Gadamer, Hans-Georg – “Dialogischer Rückblick auf das Gesammelte Werk”. In: GRONDIN, Jean (hg.) – *Gadamer Lesebuch*. Tübingen: Mohr, Siebeck, 1997. p. 286.

²⁸ BLANCHETTE, Oliva – *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, p. 32.

²⁹ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 239.

in terms of the ontological difference between Being and beings.”³⁰ The “forgetfulness of Being” led to the inability to think metaphysics in an authentic and proper manner. Therefore, he sought to open up new paths to thinking metaphysics: “allowing this unthought to be thought and simultaneously allow[ing] it to be preserved in its status as ‘that which cannot be thought before’ (*Unvordenklichkeit*). This demand to bring the unthought, as opposed to the thought, into the circle of the thinkable, the evident paradox of making this unthought into the thinkable and that which is thought and doing it in such a way that it simultaneously retains its ‘not being thought’ (*Ungedachtsein*).”³¹ According to this line of thinking, Being is not given in a finished manner, nor can it be delimited by the scientific-instrumental method. Being requires a specific approach according to the circular movement between the thought and the unthought, the said and the unsaid, the objectifiable and the unobjectifiable, an approach that is revealed in the structure of the game itself.

Many of the questions and answers proposed by Heideggerian-Gadamerian hermeneutics are of a metaphysical nature because they have been generated by “old” (and new) aporias proper to metaphysics. I mention here only the intimate mutual belonging of “the essence of Being and the essence of Language,” which raises again “the essential question of metaphysics, specially the question about the Being of metaphysics on a different path, on the path of hermeneutics.”³² Gadamer discusses this issue in his reflections on what he calls “Ontology of Language,” which can be summarized in his statement, “*Being that can be understood is language.*”³³

What is common to Heidegger and Gadamer “is the thought of the absolute priority of Being, of Being over thinking and knowledge, over consciousness and human existence. [...] Priority is given to finitude over infinitude, to the conditioned over the absolute, to think-like substantiality over self-conscious subjectivity, to the concrete, individual existence over the abstract and general essence.”³⁴ Priority does not mean hegemony, but – having in mind the structural model of the game or the hermeneutical

³⁰ WIEHL, Reiner – “Heidegger, Hermeneutics, and Ontology.” In: WACHTERHAUSER, Brice R. (Ed.) – *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986, p. 460.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

³² “Dass für Heidegger das hermeneutische Denken der Zusammengehörigkeit von Sein und Sprache die Weise ist, wie er die metaphysischen Wesensfragen, allen voran die metaphysische Seinsfrage, auf einem anderen Weg, dem Weg der Hermeneutik, neu stellt”. HERMANN, Friedrich-Wilhelm von – *Die Metaphysik im Denken Heideggers*. Roma: Urbaniana University Press, 2004, p. 148.

³³ “Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache”. GADAMER, Hans-Georg – *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1990, p. 478.

³⁴ WIEHL, Reiner – “Heidegger, Hermeneutics, and Ontology.” In: WACHTERHAUSER, Brice R. (Ed.) – *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986, p. 478.

circle – a joint and totalizing articulation of these aspects of Being where Being is neither deduced nor predictable in a conceptual and definitive manner. This is an ontological reversal, a repositioning of the Copernican turn made by Kant. Gadamer himself “sees the essential common element of his hermeneutical thought with Heidegger’s thinking of Being, that is, in the recognition of the absolute priority of Being as the highest ontological principle” in such a way that “the turn of both hermeneutical thinking and the thinking of Being appears as a ‘return’ to the original thought of Being before that turn, as a ‘step back.’”³⁵ Heidegger implements this metaphysical or ontological “return” by going back to the pre-Socratics, whereas Gadamer does so by rediscovering Plato’s dialectics.

2.3. As human being and of human being

One of the main causes of the death of metaphysics, or its “excommunication” from the academy, as we have seen, was its one-sided approach to its object. The reconfiguration of metaphysics today leads us to approach Being not as “an empty definition, but that which determines both the things about us and ourselves.”³⁶ The failure of traditional metaphysics had its origin, to a large degree, in the reductionist treatment of its object and, as a consequence, of human being,³⁷ for the “determination of the essence of man shows itself to be guided by a conception of being which covers over and conceals the most proper way in which man is man. If the traditional, metaphysical representation of language corresponds to the metaphysical determination of the essence of man, this representation of language, too, is formed by that understanding of being which is developed outside the view of man as man.”³⁸ Since traditional metaphysics rests upon an essentialist definition of (human) Being, a language with the same content corresponds to it. Thus, the language of metaphysics is presented and exhausted in the isomorphism between the thing and what is said. To reconfigure the notion of metaphysics today means to broaden the conception of language in such a way that it is not reduced to a description of objects. Instead, language itself is a means, a “worldview,” in the words of Humboldt.³⁹

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 478-79.

³⁶ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 233.

³⁷ As Richardson puts it, “Up to now, we have spoken only of the There of Being and of the There-Being, without calling it man. The reason should be clear enough: we wish to avoid as much as possible an anthropological conception of this phenomenon, growing gradually into what for Heidegger is a meta-physical interpretation of what is most profoundly proper to man”. RICHARDSON, William – *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003, p. 279.

³⁸ HERMANN, Friedrich-Wilhelm von – “‘The Flower of the Mouth’: Hölderlin’s Hint for Heidegger’s Thinking of the Essence of Language”. *Research in Phenomenology*, 19 (1989), p. 28.

³⁹ GADAMER, Hans-Georg – *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1990, p. 436. In this regard, see especially section 3.3, “Language as horizon of a hermeneutic ontology”, p. 435-84.

One of the implications resulting from an approach proper to Being is the understanding of human being as a whole. Thus, metaphysical discourse is not alien to human being, since “metaphysics is an interrogation in which we insert ourselves in a questioning manner into totality in such a way that in the question we the questioners are ourselves questioned.”⁴⁰ Perhaps this is one of the main peculiarities of metaphysics vis-à-vis the other sciences. Whereas the object of understanding of metaphysics is the investigating agent itself, in the other sciences the agent does not necessarily or primarily appear or come under question. Whereas in metaphysics the object is always seen, treated, and conceived as a whole, in the modern sciences it is approached and conceptualized in a partial way.

Just as Being cannot be conceptually exhausted, (human) Being is ultimately not “capable of being clarified, and what truth is can be explained even less. Only the question remains, and the most questionable is the question why we question at all.”⁴¹ We will never possess an accurate, definitive, absolute, complete answer to the question of who (human) Being is. That is why any metaphysical construction oriented toward absoluteness is doomed to failure, whereas a construction oriented toward the question of human identity rather than the answer proves to be more authentically metaphysical, since asking is what essentially characterizes human being.

A particular conception of the world corresponds to a similar way of acting, and vice-versa. As a “whole,” the subject itself comes under question in metaphysical investigation. But who “does” metaphysics? Who is the genuine subject, the genuine metaphysician? Only the philosopher? As Blanchette affirms, “Every one using intelligence in some critical sense has some knowledge of being, and hence everyone can or does have some grasp in some sense of what is required to become a metaphysician as well as an empirical scientist. But not everyone has a fully articulated knowledge of Being. Most of us have some knowledge of being articulated in our common knowing or in some particular science. Only a few seem to want the further articulation that comes with metaphysical questioning, over and above the questioning of common sense or of particular sciences.”⁴²

The “essence” of human being consists precisely in being “an existence that understands Being,” which is what is most proper to human beings in comparison to other animals. That is why “this way of being cannot be grasped within the distinction between what-ness and that-ness (*essential* and *existential*)” in the same way that “the notion of *animal rationale* fails to grasp man as a being that existentially understands beings – fails to

⁴⁰ HEIDEGGER, Martin – *Os conceitos fundamentais da Metafísica: mundo, solidão*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 2003, p. 11.

⁴¹ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 238.

⁴² BLANCHETTE, Oliva – *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, p. 30.

grasp man as *Dasein*.”⁴³ Those who argue that we live in post-metaphysical times fail to grasp that, *in nuce*, we are metaphysical beings and that our happiness depends on this, as does, consequently, our ability to work out an ethics and a politics on the same level. This assertion ultimately rests on the assumption that “the Being which opens itself to man is not simply his own Being but the Being of beings as such.”⁴⁴

Just as in the case of Being, “man’s ownmost essence is not at all comprehensible according to a definition which indicates the character of species and class. If existence which understands being is not developed according to the character of a class derived from the notion of species shared by other beings, then that means: Existence that understands being determines man as a being as a whole.”⁴⁵ This is the specificity of metaphysics vis-à-vis the sciences, including anthropology, although it is not disconnected from them.

Thus, “Metaphysics is the thinking through of the things-which-are back to Being. And this thinking through is itself an achievement of Being, since thought is a mode of human Being. Metaphysics takes place towards Being and from the Being of man.”⁴⁶ The fact that we ask – about ourselves and about the real – attests to our metaphysical way of being, which pulls us out of our immediateness so that we can think, conceive, and express Being in its totality. To deny this means denying our “naturally” metaphysical way of being. The metaphysical constructions that did not take this aspect of being to its ultimate consequences have failed, and rightly so. The reconfiguration of metaphysics is justified on the basis of a coherent linkage between what is said and what is not said, between what is thought and the unthinkable, Being and human being, part and whole. In this way, “such Metaphysics occurs with the complete perfection of the person, insofar as thought is also a personal deed. But such Metaphysics is ‘personal’ in a deeper sense insofar as the ground of personal being develops in it, for Metaphysics occurs as the development of Being which makes a person into a person. Personal existence and Metaphysics live and think from out of the same Being-ground. Metaphysics is the thoughtful building up of the person upon Being.”⁴⁷ It is wrong to see metaphysics as entangled in the mesh of pure abstraction or the assembling of definitive and absolute concepts. A philosophy that takes into account and incorporates into its fabric the human and divine dimensions of Being presents itself as a mobile and – why not? – “narrative” metaphysics.

⁴³ HERMANN, Friedrich-Wilhelm von – “‘The Flower of the Mouth’: Hölderlin’s Hint for Heidegger’s Thinking of the Essence of Language”. *Research in Phenomenology*, 19 (1989), p. 30.

⁴⁴ RICHARDSON, William – *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003, p. 281.

⁴⁵ HERMANN, Friedrich-Wilhelm von – “‘The Flower of the Mouth’: Hölderlin’s Hint for Heidegger’s Thinking of the Essence of Language”. *Research in Phenomenology*, 19 (1989), p. 29-30.

⁴⁶ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 239.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

Finally, as Hölderlin reminds us, "Such is man [. . .] he remains blind and unaware. / First he must suffer." Unfortunately, we daily observe the increasingly disastrous consequences for our planet – such as global warming – that result from a partial and limited human understanding of Being. It is deeply lamentable, to say the least, that through blindness and ignorance we should only learn how to reconfigure our way of seeing and expressing the real in response to the very destruction of the planet itself. Perhaps this newly reconfigured metaphysics, like the owl of Minerva, has arrived too late and must content itself with only the remnants of a life destroyed. However, perhaps there is still time to join those seeking to announce the dawn of a day in which we will be able to see more clearly and act with awareness of ourselves as a whole. After all, as Plato has taught us, "Those who are able to see the whole are philosophers; those who are not able to do so are not philosophers."

3. *By way of conclusion*

An appropriate understanding of Being shows us that a particular model of metaphysics has come to its end, but that metaphysics as a whole is not dead, for this would imply the death of philosophy itself, which would be an absurdity. For this reason, the ontological reversal promoted by Heidegger and taken up by Gadamer is so essential for reconfiguring metaphysics. On the basis of the hermeneutical tradition developed by both thinkers, it is possible to understand more clearly the fact that metaphysics and philosophy are transformed to the extent that they seek to justify and articulate an understanding of Being that is no longer limited to the dictates of the Absolute or History writ large. The object of metaphysics is taken up again in its due proportion to the extent that the subject itself is reincorporated and questioned as a whole. In contrast to the abstract and empty tradition that has characterized Western metaphysics, metaphysics as reconfigured on the basis of the ontological reversal "appears not merely as the setting up of horizons which man constructs 'beyond' the things-which-are. It is much more the perfection of personal Being along the exceptional lines of a questioning by the whole man according to his grounding power into precisely that which makes a person into a person. And this grounding power leads beyond the subjectivity of the subject"⁴⁸ as well as beyond the objectivity of the object.

From a methodological point of view we can distinguish two paths proper to metaphysics: "one which presses from the being of the things-which-are into essence in order to throw light upon it; the other which measures this essence against Being as the norm of the 'beingness' of the things-which-

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

are (*Seiendheit des Seindes*). The understanding of Metaphysics admits both approaches and in a sense it furthers both methods, since our thought itself is differentiated and must be so. We think as existents, but we think back to the ground of our existence, or beyond our existence.”⁴⁹ If we review the history of metaphysics, we will realize that either we ignore this by not taking seriously Heraclitus’s aphorism that “the ascending path is the same as the descending one” or we absolutize one of the paths to the detriment of the other. The survival of metaphysics, however, depends on the joint articulation of these paths, which Plato had already shown us in his ascending and descending dialectics. We find a similar view in Gadamer, for whom philosophy must be constituted by the conceptual movement that moves not only from word to concept but also from the latter to the former. The syntheses thus obtained are neither definitive nor absolute, but open, as is proper to philosophical dialog. Discourse within and on Being does not exhaust Being, whether because we think in time and beyond it or because we are essentially temporal. We find a clear expression of our way of being metaphysical in the words of the poet Fernando Pessoa: “Be whole in each thing, put as much as you are / In the least that you do,”⁵⁰ for although we are engulfed in and constituted by the finite, we can also complete and surpass it by aspiring to totality even in our minimal actions.

If we mold an open, mobile metaphysics, we will be able to conceive human being and language in the same way and vice-versa. Traditional metaphysics was projected toward the outside of time, whereas metaphysics as reconfigured is woven by, with, and in time: after all, both human being and the language of metaphysics are constituted and marked by the thread of temporality.

The problem of modern human beings was that they were seduced by a song of binary knowledge about being. Ruled by the principle of uniformalizing identity, they resigned their metaphysical dimension and constitution in order to feel secure and comfortable in their absolute “constructions.” Living in this way, however, “the man who no longer dares to inquire into his Being has made resignation of his life’s attitude.”⁵¹ But to avoid or fail to actualize this natural metaphysical way of being amounts to resigning one’s fullest way of living, thinking, feeling, and loving. From this it is possible to “deduce” that metaphysics as a whole can never die. This post-metaphysical time represents a crossroads that demands from us a conscious choice for or against our own destiny. To continue singing the death of metaphysics amounts to singing our own funeral rites, whereas attempting to reconfigure it in a new way means taking control of our lives and redirecting our action in accordance with a horizon that is as

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁵⁰ PESSOA, Fernando. *Obras Completas de Fernando Pessoa (Odes de Ricardo Reis. Vol. 4)*. Lisboa: Edições Ática, 1967, p. 135.

⁵¹ MOELLER, Joseph – “Metaphysics Today”. In: *Philosophy Today*, 5.4 (1961), p. 240.

universal as possible. In this sense, our philosophical posture under the aegis of the whole “goes further since human existence reaches further, for human existence can never be wholly exhausted. And insofar as human existence is not to be exhausted and yet remains finite, our human thought must go beyond human existence.”⁵² Based on the fact that a particular worldview produces a corresponding action, justifying metaphysics today amounts to taking our destiny and the future of our planet seriously. What else are wars, religious and political radicalism, and the destruction of our planet itself if not the fruit of our limited and partial view of the real? To undertake metaphysics today means to take on the challenge of trying to reformulate our understanding of being without claiming to exhaust it, learning how to create vital connections among its multiple ways of being, which imply a conception of ethics, politics, and economics characterized by solidarity and sustainability.

In considering the vocation of metaphysics, we can say that we stand before two options: “one which preserves the value of man, the other which destroys that value in a process. Such destruction, insofar as it expresses itself in thought, is itself a metaphysical position or at least a philosophical belief – or unbelief.”⁵³ Metaphysics has not died, since metaphysics itself is our attempt to understand, express, conserve, and foster life on our planet. Rather than an “issue of fashion,” metaphysics is an issue of life itself because, in its essence, it deals with and tries to articulate Being in its totality by interweaving its finite understanding with the threads of divinity that inhabit and constitute Being. Metaphysics is neither *dépassé* nor *démodé* but first and foremost an *impasse* insofar as we, as metaphysical beings, must unceasingly reconstitute the meaning of our existence in the time and place that we inhabit. A proper and universal understanding of Being corresponds to an action of the same proportion, that is, to a posture that, instead of excluding the *tertium*, leads us to include it, superseding the dualistic and Manichaean logic that divides the world into good and evil, clean and unclean, dominators and dominated. A reconfigured metaphysics must follow the path of a triadic logic that negotiates between what we do not yet know and our desire to be. I share the metaphysical understanding of being expressed by Riobaldo in the Brazilian classic *Grande Sertão: Veredas*: “I’m an ignorant man. I like to be.”⁵⁴

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⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁵⁴ ROSA, João Guimarães – *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1958, p. 292.