

Heidegger on the World, Nothing, and the *Grundlegen der Metaphysik*

“Welt *ist* Nie, sondern *wel tet*”: “The world never *is*, but *worlds*.”¹ This enigmatic phrase marks a turning point in Martin Heidegger’s essay “On the Essence of Ground.” It points towards (1) the “nothing” for Heidegger and (2) the “world” as a concept of key significance for his thought. In both cases the nouns in question, Heidegger argues, ought to be understood as verbs. The world *worlds*, just as in “What is Metaphysics?” Heidegger tells us that “the nothing noths”: “das Nichts selbst Nichtet.”² To say that the world *is* or nothing *is* is to obscure the question of being itself, the *Seinsfrage*: the question of what *is* is. For Heidegger, then, nothing *is* not; nothing *noths*. The world *is* not; the world *worlds*.

My essay ponders this difference between *Welt* and *welten*, between *Nichts* and *nichten*, by inquiring into just what it is that nothing actively does, which is to say, in what way “nothing” is a “ground” for being. What is this nothing that is not yet a thing, but rather a “no-thing,” a “nothing”? How does this nothing lie at the cusp of being and non-being? In what way does it not name an origin, yet nonetheless might be described as an *Ursprung*? This essay begins with an introduction to the relation of world and nothing for Heidegger, by situating this relationship in the project of “fundamental ontology.” This requires an excursus into Heidegger’s reading of

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm Herrmann, 2., durchgesehene Auflage, Gesamtausgabe, Band 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996); Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, trans. David Farrell Krell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Future parenthetical citations will be to these editions, with the volume and page number from the German *Gesamtausgabe* edition first in parentheses followed by the English translation, when available, as follows: (9:164/126). Citations to *Being and Time* follow the standard system of referring to the German page numbers, which can be found in the margins of both the 1962 Macquarrie and Robinson and the now-standard 1996 Joan Stambaugh English translations. Other citations, especially to secondary sources, are given in full in footnotes.

² In *Pathmarks*, translated as “the nothing *nihilates*”; I think the nothing *noths* better indicates the relationship between the noun *Nichts* and the verb *nichten*, but this is a complicated issue on which see the full discussion below.

Kant as elaborating a *Grundlegung der Metaphysik*, “a laying of the ground for metaphysics.” I closely examine both Kant’s use of “ground” in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and Heidegger’s uptake of it in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, before returning to “What is Metaphysics?” to read “nothing” against this background. Finally, this essay returns to the place of “world” in “On the Essence of Ground” to understand its relation to “nothing.”

Let us begin with Heidegger’s preface to the 1949 third edition of “On the Essence of Ground” (published in the first edition of *Wegmarken* from 1967). Heidegger tells us:

The treatise “On the Essence of Ground” was written in 1928 at the same time as the lecture “What is Metaphysics?” The lecture ponders the nothing, while the treatise names the ontological difference. [*Diese bedenkt das Nichts, jene nennt die ontologische Differenz.*] (9:123/97)

Heidegger affirms that there is a basic, bidirectional relationship between the “world” and “nothing.” More precisely, both concepts are related to the project of fundamental ontology. This term is used to denote the set of problems that Heidegger undertook in his initial mature philosophical project: that, is, the Marburg lectures of 1923–28, which culminated in the 1927 publication of *Sein und Zeit*, and the subsequent Freiburg lectures of 1928–35 (of which “What is Metaphysics?” is the first). The project of fundamental ontology is taken up in *Being and Time* as a renewal of the *Seinsfrage*, “the question of the meaning of being [*der Frage nach dem Sinn von Sein*]” (2:2/1). Thus, what is needed first is the *formulation* of the very question at hand: “first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question [of being]” (2:1/1).

The project of fundamental ontology began with a break from Husserl’s phenomenology, but was most concentrated in Heidegger’s intensive engagement with Aristotle’s texts. As Daniel Dahlstrom reminds us, *Sein und Zeit* “emerges from an attempt to elaborate categories for a planned Aristotle commentary.”³ Indeed, this engagement with the Greeks is one of the most

³ Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *The Heidegger Dictionary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3.

persistent guiding threads in Heidegger's long intellectual trajectory (although he later tends more strongly towards the pre-Socratics, especially Parmenides and Heraclitus). Yet Heidegger's relationship to the ancient Greeks, as representatives of "the tradition of metaphysics," is ambivalent from beginning to end. On the one hand, Heidegger sees Greek thought as the original site of the obscuring of the question of being: the issue, Heidegger says, is that "on the foundation [*auf dem Boden*, lit. "from the ground" (or soil, or territory)] of the Greek point of departure for the interpretation of being a dogma has taken shape which not only declares that the question of the meaning of being is superfluous but sanctions its neglect" (2:2/2). On the other hand, he also sees Plato and Aristotle as the source (*Ursprung*) for renewal of that same question of the meaning of being.

Jacques Taminiaux helpfully indicates how this ambivalent relationship to the tradition of metaphysics in *Being and Time* remained obscure, such that although the book's "readers had every reason to suppose that it should bear some relationship to the entire tradition of philosophy from Plato to phenomenology, ... no one was able to assess fully the nature of that relationship."⁴ Nowhere is this more evident than in the relationship to Aristotle:

On the one hand, by linking the concept of time articulated in the *Physics* to the level of fallen everydayness, Heidegger clearly distanced himself from Aristotle, while on the other hand, by crediting Aristotle with understanding truth as unconcealing [*aletheia*] and with having assigned to truth a site other than judgment, he seemed at a crucial point to claim allegiance to the Greek thinker. Yet on the question of what this different site for truth was for Aristotle, once more the book was remarkably reticent. Heidegger, without any further commentary, simply limited himself to referring the reader to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Zeta, and to the *Metaphysics*, Theta. In both cases, Heidegger at the same time said too much and too little.⁵

Like many Germans, Heidegger sees the Greeks as properly his, both in their folly and their insight. Or, as Glenn Most puts it, "Heidegger's Greeks are Germans in togas" just as

⁴ Jacques Taminiaux, *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology*, ed. and trans. Michael Gendre, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), xv.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xvi.

“Heidegger’s Germans are Greeks in *Lederhosen*.”⁶ I will not say more about this question, except to note that this same ambivalence marks Heidegger’s relationship to phenomenology (Husserl) and the German tradition of philosophy (Kant), too. In each case, there are moments where Heidegger’s project seems to *renew* metaphysics and others where it seems to *destroy* it.

The fruit of the “seeking” promised in *Being and Time* was to be a fundamental ontology, that is a metaphysics that provides the basis for any study of being. Yet the status of this metaphysics remains fraught for Heidegger. On the one hand, *Being and Time* by its own admission seems to be basically seeking a renewal of metaphysics. Yet, as we have just seen, much of the work contains a contradictory tendency, an *anti*-metaphysical stance. This “anti-metaphysical” attitude became all the more salient after the book’s publication in 1927, as Heidegger realized that his continued use of Kantian terminology like “conditions of possibility” and time as the “transcendental horizon” of being misled readers as to the ultimate purpose of *Being and Time* — nowhere more so than in the postwar uptake of the book in a more-or-less vulgar existentialism, where Dasein becomes a transcendental subject via which a phenomenology can be elaborated that might renew metaphysics.⁷ This is in part because the second part of *Being and Time*, the promised phenomenological *Destruction* of the history of ontology, was never written. The impact of *Being and Time* on its readers was ambiguous, contradictory and ambivalent, as much in 1931 (when Henri Corbin first translated Heidegger into French and chose the infelicitous phrase *réalité humaine* to translate *Dasein*) as in the postwar decades.

⁶ Glenn Most, “Heidegger’s Greeks,” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 10, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002): 94–95.

⁷ On this subject see the intellectual history by Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Thus, the very status of Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology is fraught from beginning to end. As Jacques Taminiaux put it in his work *Lectures de l'ontologie fondamentale* (1989), with respect to *Being and Time*,

It was immediately evident that a prodigious amount of reading in the texts of the tradition had accompanied the work's preparation and, thus, it was clear that the references appearing in the notes and in the body of the text were more than standard practices of academic scholarship. One could therefore have suspected that Heidegger's readings concerned the very core of the enterprise called fundamental ontology. But the principle which guided these readings remained mysterious. On the one hand, when *Sein und Zeit* thematically treated the great texts of the tradition — such as Descartes on world or Hegel on Spirit and time — it was always with a view toward stressing that the project of the book was leading somewhere else. On the other hand, many signs could be found to indicate that the intended demarcation was not the final word on how to deal with the tradition.⁸

In the 1947 “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger explicitly repudiates such “anthropologicistic” readings of *Being and Time*, but this move is generally agreed to mark a turn (*Kehre*) in Heidegger's thought away from his earlier project of “fundamental ontology.” For the purposes of this essay, I want to acknowledge this later shift but more closely track “nothing” and “world” as concepts in this earlier stage of Heidegger's work from c. 1923 to 1935. By sketching what the project of fundamental ontology is for Heidegger, we can better understand how “What is Metaphysics?” and “On the Essence of Ground” are caught in the maelstrom of these conflicting tendencies in Heidegger's project. The “nothing” is poised between metaphysics and anti-metaphysics, being and non-being, and so its elucidation must begin in an exposition of the project of fundamental ontology as indicated above.

The early stage of Heidegger's project of “fundamental ontology” is especially reflected in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, first published in 1929 (the same year as the lectures “On the Essence of Ground” and “What is Metaphysics?”). Heidegger's book drew also on

⁸ Taminiaux, *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology*, xvi.

lectures he had presented at the Davos *Hochschule* in March 1929, where he had a famous debate with Ernst Cassirer, the eminent neo-Kantian.⁹ Heidegger's interpretation of Kant differed markedly, and self-consciously, from this prior academic orthodoxy; Heidegger himself proclaimed that "every interpretation must necessarily use violence" in order to "wring" from the actual text that which as yet remains unsaid in it (3:xvii/xx). In particular, Heidegger presents the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a work intended to establish the *ground* of metaphysics. This is starkly opposed to what is usually understood to be its purpose: to establish the *limits* of possible metaphysics, that is the conditions of possibility of all empirical knowledge. In other words, Heidegger argues that Kant's project is not to identify the principles of experience or mathematical cognition (this being the interpretation offered by the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, and later taken up in the influential 1966 work by Peter Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*). Rather, Heidegger thinks that Kant's project is to identify the *ultimate conditions of possibility of metaphysics*. It is in this sense that Heidegger identifies Kant's project as "fundamental ontology." As he puts it in the introduction to *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*:

The following investigation is devoted to the task of interpreting Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as a laying of the ground for metaphysics [*als eine Grundlegung der Metaphysik auszulegen*] and thus of placing the problem of metaphysics before us as a fundamental ontology [*um so das Problem der Metaphysik als das einer Fundamentalontologie vor Augen zu stellen*]. (3:1/1)

In short: the project of "fundamental ontology" that Heidegger is articulating does not just borrow a Kantian vocabulary or structure but in fact at least purports to be a reading of Kant. To understand Heidegger's project in "On the Essence of Ground," "What is Metaphysics?," and *Being and Time*, we must more fully consider Heidegger's relationship to Kant.

⁹ On this debate, see Peter Eli Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000).

Many Kant scholars in Heidegger's time and ever since have objected strongly to his reading, on the grounds that it distorts Kant's text in all regards so that Kant comes to resemble nothing more than the philosopher of *Being and Time*. Yet, as Karin de Boer and Stephen Howard point out in a recent article on Heidegger's interpretation of Kant, "Heidegger's overall effort to reclaim Kant as a philosopher concerned with the conditions of possibility of metaphysics has textual support and deserves to be taken seriously."¹⁰ After all, it was Kant himself in the A preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* who had introduced his project in the following terms:

this critique ... had first to display the sources and conditions of its possibility [*Bedingungen ihrer Möglichkeit*], and needed to clear and level a ground that was completely overgrown [*einen ganz verwachsenen Boden zu reinigen und zu ebenen nötig hatte*]. (A xxi)

The question at issue here is: what kind of ground is this? Can clearing a ground that was completely overgrown ("*einen ganz verwachsenen Boden zu reinigen*" — note that it is a "Boden," not a "Grund," and that the action of "clearing" is etymologically related to the title of the book, a *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*) possibly be identified with Heidegger's much more systematic usage of *Grundlegen* and *Grunden*?

This is a significant question not just in terms of understanding Heidegger's relationship to Kant, but also understanding the logic and development of Heidegger's own project of fundamental ontology, within which concepts like "nothing" and "world" must be placed. The "nothing," for instance, might be understood on the one hand (I) as a primordial pre-phenomenological source of concepts and meanings, an *Ursprung* of ontology, or on the other

¹⁰ Karin de Boer and Stephen Howard, "A Ground Completely Overgrown: Heidegger, Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (March 4, 2019): 359, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2018.1450218>.

hand (2) as the manner in which this pre-linguistic origin offers itself to language.¹¹ In both cases, “nothing” might be described as a *ground* (although we should not forget that Heidegger uses two different words that are both usually translated as “nothing”: the noun *Nichts* and the verb *nichten*). In the former case it is more of a foundation (or at least a soil, *Boden*, from which concepts might grow), while in the latter case it is a ground only in the more minimal sense of the way in which (as Wittgenstein put it) Heidegger “runs up against the boundaries of language.”¹² (Indeed, Wittgenstein himself described in the *Philosophical Investigations* how any search for meaning, that is any sort of metaphysical investigation, will at some point in trying to dig for foundations “hit bedrock,” and then “my spade is turned.”¹³) In short: “ground” for Heidegger, as for Kant, lies somewhere between a minimal meaning of a simple condition and a more maximalist sense of foundations.

My contention is that we can shed light on this duality in the meaning of “ground,” which I argue holds just as true for “nothing” and “world,” by returning to Heidegger’s relationship to Kant. Heidegger writes at the beginning of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*:

Fundamental Ontology means [*heißt*] that ontological analytic of the finite essence of human beings [*des endlichen Menschenwesens*] which is to prepare the foundation [*das Fundament*] for the metaphysics which “belongs to human nature.” Fundamental Ontology is the metaphysics of human Dasein which is required for metaphysics to be made possible [*die zur Ermöglichung der Metaphysik notwendig*]. It remains fundamentally different from all anthropology and from the

¹¹ I draw this distinction from the helpful entry by Iain Thomson, “Nothing (*Nichts*),” in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 520–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511843778.036>.

¹² Wittgenstein’s full remark on Heidegger, as made to the Vienna Circle at the home of Moritz Schlick on 30 December 1929, is as follows: “I can very well think what Heidegger meant about being and anxiety [*Sein und Angst*]. Man has the drive to run up against the boundaries of language [*gegen die Grenzen der Sprache anzurennen*]. Think, for instance, of the astonishment that anything exists [*das etwas existiert*]. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer to it. All that we can say can only, a priori, be nonsense. Nevertheless [*trotzdem*] we run up against the boundaries of language.” See further Paul M. Livingston, “Wittgenstein Reads Heidegger, Heidegger Reads Wittgenstein: Thinking Language Bounding World,” in *Beyond the Analytic-Continental Divide: Pluralist Philosophy in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹³ “If I have exhausted the justifications [*Begründungen*] I have reached bedrock [*harten Felsen*], and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’ [*‘So handle ich eben.’*]” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §217)

philosophical [*Sie bleibt von aller Anthropologie, auch der philosophischen, grundsätzlich unterschieden.*]. (3:1/1)

One of the fascinating points being made here is that even at this early stage (1929), Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology is fundamentally (*grundsätzlich*) different from all anthropology or philosophy. This statement is puzzling, especially given what follows: an identification of Fundamental Ontology with the Kantian project.

Provided that an idea first manifests itself through its power to illuminate [*ihre Kraft zur Durchleuchtung*], the idea of fundamental ontology will prove itself and present itself [*bewähren und darstellen*] in an interpretation [*Auslegung*] of the Critique of Pure Reason as a laying of the ground [*Grundlegung*] for metaphysics. (3:1/1)

The interpretation (*Auslegung*) of Kant Heidegger offers seeks to introduce the reader to the discipline of fundamental ontology, which just *is* the laying of the ground (*Grundlegung*) for metaphysics. To summarize, then: we have a reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as a *Grundlegung der Metaphysik*; an explication of fundamental ontology in those terms, that is as a laying of the ground for a truly possible positive metaphysics; and yet a refusal of the "anthropological" or "philosophical" dimensions of this project, a refusal that is more prominent in the postwar *Kehre* yet already has traces in this early work.

One question we might ask to draw out this puzzle is: is *Grundlegung* of this sort a Heideggerian invention, proper to *Being and Time*, or is it something that can also be found in Kant? In other words, is "ground" for Kant merely a condition of possibility, a minimal boundary or limit of metaphysics, or itself something metaphysical and primordial? Is the ground in question for Kant as for Heidegger a minimal animating principle, or a richer soil (*Bode*) in which being grows? This is the question that "nothing" responds to, which is why Heidegger in "On the Essence of Ground" begins with a consideration of *arché* in Aristotle, then moves to the

“principle of reason” (*Satz vom Grundes*)¹⁴ in Leibniz, before concluding the first section of the essay with a brief section on “ground” that brings together themes from *Kant and the Problems of Metaphysics* to argue that “ground” has a special connection with “being.” In particular, Heidegger’s argument in this essay is that the sense of *Grund* as reason (*ratio*), as in the “principle of sufficient reason,” is in fact derivative upon the more primary sense of being itself as ground. Heidegger writes about this with respect to Kant:

We see the connection between “ground” and “being” above all in Kant’s metaphysics. It is certainly the case that one commonly finds a lack of any explicit treatment of the “principle of reason” [*eine ausdrückliche Behandlung des “Satzes vom Grunde” vermissen*] in his “critical” writings, unless one allows the proof of the second analogy to count as a substitute for this almost incomprehensible shortcoming. Yet Kant did indeed consider the principle of reason, and did so at a distinctive place in his *Critique of Pure Reason* under the title of the “supreme grounding principle of all synthetic judgments” [*obersten Grundsatzes aller synthetischen Urteile*]. This “principle” [*Satz*] analyzes *what in general [überhaupt]* — within the sphere, and at the level of Kant’s ontological inquiry [*im Umkreis und in der Ebene der ontologischen Fragestellung Kants*] — belongs to the *being* of beings as accessible in experience. (9:136–7/106–7; italics in original)

For Kant, indeed, “grounds” abound. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “concepts of objects in general” are said to “lie at the ground of all experiential cognition as *a priori* conditions” [*als Bedingungen a priori aller Erfahrungserkenntnis zum Grunde liegen*] (A94/B126). Here, as elsewhere in Kant’s first critique, “ground” (*Grund*) is used as equivalent to “condition” (*Bedingung*), that is to say with regard to the “ground of the possibility” of a particular mode of intuition or cognition (see further A10, A102, A202/B247, A401). This seems like a rather more minimal sense of “ground” than Heidegger implies, though the exact sense remains contested in the (extensive) secondary literature.¹⁵ After all, the question of just what “condition” or “ground”

¹⁴ To belabor an obvious point: the German word *Grund* means both “ground” and “reason.” *Der Satz vom Grund* therefore refers to the “principle of sufficient reason,” but the semantic range of the German *Grund* simply cannot be matched by the English “ground.”

¹⁵ The influential minimalist interpretation offered by PF Strawson in *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), that Kant offers a “complete repudiation of transcendent metaphysics” (16), is generally agreed nowadays to be some ways off the mark of what Kant really meant by “limit,” “condition,” or “boundary.” As Stephen Howard puts it: “Most Kant scholars today would acknowledge that, for all the importance of Strawson’s pioneering study, his broad claims here

means for Kant is really a question about what a *critique* of pure reason consists in. Is it a merely negative project, submitting metaphysics to the “tribunal of reason” such that reason may identify for itself the limits of possible knowledge? Or is the tribunal more that of a land survey department, interested in tracing out the boundary between objects of experience and things in themselves, and thus in fact providing an idea of a possible future metaphysics?

This returns us again to the questions Heidegger raises in his interpretation of what a *Grundlegung der Metaphysik* consists in. But before returning to *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, let us consider again the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant features one of his most poetic and splendid metaphors to describe the need for proper grounds:

The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels [*im freien Fluge die Luft teilt, deren Widerstand sie fühlt*], could get the idea [*Vorstellung*] that it could do even better in airless space [*Luftleeren Raum*]. Likewise, Plato abandoned the world of the senses because it posed so many hindrances for the understanding, and dared to go beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of pure understanding [*in den leeren Raum des reinen Verstandes*]. He did not notice that he made no headway by his efforts, for he had no resistance, no support, as it were, by which he could stiffen himself, and to which he could apply his powers [*seine Kräfte*] in order to get his understanding off the ground. It is, however, a customary fate of human reason [*ein gewöhnliches Schicksal der menschlichen Vernunft*] in speculation to finish its edifice [*Gebäude*] as early as possible and only then to investigate whether the ground has been adequately prepared for it [*ob auch der Grund dazu gut geleeget sei*]. (A5/B9)

To get understanding off the ground (*um den Verstand von der Stelle zu bringen*) we need something to gain traction against. (Here one might think once again of Wittgenstein, and particularly his famous pronouncement about our need for “rough ground” when we have gone too far into a metaphysical investigation.¹⁶) Reason might suffer the delusion, like the dove, that

are some distance from Kant (perhaps closer to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*). Kant is concerned with distinguishing not between meaningful and meaningless thought but between objects of possible experience, which can be cognized, and ideas of things in themselves, which can be merely thought; Strawson's blunt claim that the *Critique* repudiates metaphysics does not withstand scrutiny.” Stephen Howard, “Kant on Limits, Boundaries, and the Positive Function of Ideas,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2022): 65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12652>.

¹⁶ “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal [*die Bedingungen in gewissem Sinne ideal sind*], but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk [*wir ben deshalb*]

a space without resistance, e.g. a pure delineation of limits, would best suit its “free flight.” But air is necessary, not just to breathe, but for the dove to beat its wings against. Truly free flight comes not from the absence of resistance but from the support resistance provides. What the bird needs is an atmosphere with an enclosing boundary, not a *tabula rasa* with only the most spare of limits.

It is only with something “by which he could stiffen himself,” then, that the metaphysician could get his understanding off the ground and into the air, too. Read along these lines, we might understand how Kant offers his *Critique* less as an attempt to trace *limits* than as an opportunity to trace out a protective *boundary* within which life might flourish. (A limit [*Schranke*] is a mere negation of a single domain, while a boundary [*Grenze*] constitutes a positive division between two domains.) Kant says in the “Doctrine of Method”:

Our reason is not like an indeterminably extended plane [*Ebene*], the limits [*Schranken*] of which one can cognize only in general, but must rather be compared with a sphere, the radius of which can be found out from the curvature of an arc on its surface (from the nature of synthetic *a priori* propositions), from which its content and its boundary [*Grenze*] can also be ascertained with certainty. Outside this sphere (field of experience) nothing is an object [*Objekt*] for it; indeed even questions about such supposed objects [*Gegenstände*] concern only subjective principles of a thoroughgoing determination of the relations that can obtain among the concepts of understanding [*Verstandesbegriffen*] inside of this sphere. (A762/B790)

Kant sees his role, then, as a researcher (*Forscher*) into the nature and boundaries of this “sphere of reason,” a task that has far more than merely negative utility. (Indeed, in his autobiographical remarks Kant was quite clear that “I myself am a researcher by inclination” and that this task of inquiry is only of value insofar as it serves “to establish the rights of humanity.”¹⁷) As Stephen

auch nicht gehen können]. We want to walk: so we need *friction* [*Reihung*]. Back to the rough ground! [*Zurück auf den rauhen Boden!*]” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §107)

¹⁷ “I myself am a researcher by inclination. I feel the entire thirst for cognition and the eager restlessness to proceed further in it, as well as the satisfaction at every acquisition. There was a time when I believed this alone could constitute the honor of humankind, and I despised the rabble who knows nothing. Rousseau has set me right. This blinding prejudice vanishes, I learn to honor human beings, and I would feel by far less useful than the common laborer if I did not believe that this consideration could impart a value to all others in order to establish the rights of

Howard puts it: “reason, as we know, has boundaries, and Kant does not refer to them only to warn against their erroneous transgression.”¹⁸ Rather, the fact that reason has boundaries, not limits, is precisely what allows metaphysics to be a science that can be *completed* (and in this sense unlike mathematics or the natural sciences): “thus, for Kant, the finite task of a critique of pure reason can securely guide the infinite task of the systematic investigation of nature.”¹⁹ As Kant puts it, if we can “determine the domain [*Umfang*] and the boundaries [*Grenzen*] of our reason, ... all the questions that pure reason lays before us ... must therefore be able to be solved [*aufgelöset*] and their validity or nullity [*Gültigkeit oder Nichtigkeit*] must be able to be comprehended [*begriffen*]” (A763/B791). Establish the boundaries of metaphysics through a critique of pure reason, and true progress in all human domains is made possible. (Indeed, just this is the promise of Enlightenment, *Aufklärung*.)

The edifice of reason, a structure (*Gebäude*) of great value to humankind, must be built on ground that is adequately prepared for it. If we are able to clear the ground appropriately, by implication, a positive metaphysics is possible; all that is needed is a fundamental ontology, a true *Grundlegung der Metaphysik*. Here, Kant seems quite close to the interpretation Heidegger offers in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. He even invokes the extended metaphor of the building trade that Heidegger features so prominently throughout his work. As Heidegger puts it in *Kant and the Problems of Metaphysics*:

To this end, the general meaning of the term “laying the ground” [*Grundlegung*] must first be clarified. The expression’s meaning is best illustrated if we consider the building trade. It is true that metaphysics is not a building or structure [*Gebäude*] that is at hand, but is really in all human beings “as a natural construction or arrangement” [B21].

humanity.” Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. Patrick R. Frierson and Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 96. *Akademie Ausgabe* 20:44.

¹⁸ Howard, “Kant on Limits, Boundaries, and the Positive Function of Ideas,” 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

As we already saw above, this metaphor of the “building trade” is not original to Heidegger, but is in fact invoked by Kant. Both Heidegger and Kant seem to agree here that metaphysics is built from something that humans always already experience (a “fundamental attunement of human *Dasein*), yet for its elaboration requires an adequate clearing of “a ground that is completely overgrown.”

Yet Heidegger also makes it clear that his understanding of foundations and the building of a metaphysical edifice departs quite markedly from Kant’s. Indeed, in the 1973 preface to *Kant and the Concept of Metaphysics*, Heidegger recognized that he may have misinterpreted Kant: after the publication and troubled (mis)reception of *Being and Time*, Heidegger says, “Kant’s text became a refuge [*Zuflucht*], as I sought in Kant an advocate for the question of Being which I posed [*einen Fürsprecher für die von mir gestellte Seinsfrage zu suchen*],” even if “in truth, however, Kant’s question is foreign [*fremde*] to it” (3:xiv/xviii). For Heidegger himself, then, the *Grundlegung der Metaphysik* has nothing to do with constructing solid pillars upon which an edifice (*Gebäude*) might be built, but rather consists in the “architectonic circumscription and delineation of the inner possibility of metaphysics, that is, the concrete determination of its essence” (3:2/2). For Heidegger, then, “laying the ground for metaphysics” is “no empty producing of a system and its subdivisions,” but rather “the projecting of the building plan itself so that it agrees with the direction concerning on what and how the building will be grounded” (3:2/2). Heidegger is right to point out that *Grundlegung* as such appears much less often than *Grund*, only twice in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Yet it plays a hugely significant role: for instance, in A763/B791 (cited above) Kant says that the critique of pure reason offers a “better groundwork” (*bessere Grundlegung*) for “progress” (*Fortgang*). Rather than “ground” as “conditions of possibility,” as for Kant, Heidegger shifts the focus to considering the *laying of*

ground, *Grundlegung* itself, as the ultimate foundation of any metaphysics, that is, the preliminary understanding of the being of beings. This is the basic project of fundamental ontology.

My argument, as a consequence, is that “nothing” unfolds this *Grundlegung der Metaphysik* for Heidegger. If “nothing” comes to play such an important role in the evolution of Heidegger’s thought with respect to being and the disclosing of world, just what is this “nothing”? Is nothing to be found in acts of negation (as in Hegel’s logical operation)? In the absence of things (no-thing)? In a fundamental attitude to the world (nihilism)? What is primary here is not nihilism (*Nihilismus*) but nihilation (*Nichtung*). This nihilation, or *noth-ing*, is explicitly not *annihilation*. In other words, when “nothing noths” it is certainly not the case that it is in a logical sense negating the antecedent; nor is it the case that the previously existing objects are “annihilated.” Instead, nihilation is encountered by *Dasein* with beings as a whole, as *Dasein* is “held out [*Hineingehaltenheit*] into the nothing” (9:115/91). By being held out over beings as a whole in this way, *Dasein* experiences transcendence, that is “the primordial openness of the nothing” (9:137/109). This sense of *primordiality* or *Ursprünglichkeit* indicates that nihilation belongs essentially to the unfolding of being. This is why the question of nothing is a metaphysical question: in “What is Metaphysics?” Heidegger explicitly argues that because of its primordial origin and its direction towards *Dasein*, which asks the question of being, nothing poses the metaphysical question. This not the thematization of a metaphysical fact, nor strictly speaking a phenomenology of a “sense” of nothingness, but rather the “simple nearness of an unobtrusive prevailing” of being which “occurs essentially as language itself” (9:332–3/252–3), as Heidegger will eventually come to put it in the “Letter on Humanism.”

But first, let us take another look at “What is Metaphysics?” Just what is the “nothing,” and what is its significance? As mentioned above, this essay was first given as Heidegger’s inaugural public lecture at the University of Freiburg on 24 July 1929. This partly accounts for why he begins with a consideration of the task of the various sciences (*Wissenschaften*). But this quickly leads him to consider, in opposition, the “distinctive relation to the world in which we turn toward beings themselves”: that is, metaphysics (9:105/83). In other words, the consideration of sciences and the nothing is just a way by which “we provide metaphysics the proper occasion to introduce itself” (9:105/82). Heidegger’s elucidation of this question leads him to the “explicit formulation: How is it with the nothing? [*Wie steht es um das Nichts?*]” (9:106/84). In other words, it is through this *asking about* the nothing that metaphysics can pose itself not as a question about specific beings but as a seeking after being in general.

In particular, Heidegger clearly says that “nothing” has a special, more primordial relationship to being than, say, logical negation does. Heidegger rejects the claim that negation or the “not” might “represent the higher determination under which the nothing falls as a particular kind of negated matter” (9:107/86). Rather, “we assert that the nothing is more originary [*ursprünglicher*] than the ‘not’ and negation” (9:107/86). It is in this sense that, as we indicated above, we might consider the “nothing” as a “ground” in Heidegger’s sense: that is, distinctively “originary” or “primordial” (*ursprüngliche*) and bearing in particular a special relationship to being. This particular relationship Heidegger in this text calls “the fundamental attunement of anxiety [*Angst*],” which is “that occurrence in Dasein in which the nothing is manifest and from which it must be interrogated” (9:112/89). It is in anxiety that “the nothing rises to meet us.” This active doing is neither “negation” (*Verneinung*) nor “annihilation” (*Vernichtung*) but *nihilation* or *noth-ing* (*Nichtung*). This nihilation, *Nichtung*, is “the essence of

the nothing [*das Wesen des Nichts*]: “the wholly repelling gesture [*im Ganze abweisende Verweisung*] toward beings that are slipping away as a whole, which is the action of the nothing that closes in [*umdrängt*] on Dasein in anxiety” (9:114/90).

The *active* nothing — *Nichtung*, not *das Nichts* — is a ground of being for Heidegger, or better put, a *laying of the ground* for metaphysics (*Grundlegung der Metaphysik*). We might think again of Kant, who said that human reason needs *resistance* (*Widerstand*) to “get understanding off the ground,” like a dove needs air to beat its wings against in order to achieve “free flight.” It is *nothing* that provides this resistance for Heidegger. As he puts it: “Only on the ground [*Nur auf dem Grunde*] of the original manifestness [*ursprünglichen Offenbarkeit*] of the nothing can human Dasein [*das Dasein des Menschen*] approach and penetrate beings [*auf Seiendes zugehen und eingehen*]” (9:115/91). Even more basically, Heidegger says that “Da-sein means: being held out into the nothing [*Hineingehaltenheit in das Nichts*].” For “without the original manifestness of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom”; “*Ohne ursprüngliche Offenbarkeit des Nichts kein Selbstsein und keine Freiheit*” (9:115/91). Here, then, we see how Kantian Heidegger sounds: what is needed for freedom and selfhood is an originary ground, an *ursprüngliches Grund*. The laying of this ground, the *Grundlegen der Metaphysik*, is what is manifested in the questioning of the nothing.

We might now return to the preface to the third edition “On the Essence of Ground” and note that they are not a simple exposition of the 1928 work but a revisionary retrospective written in 1949, after the “Letter on Humanism,” that aims to rehabilitate fundamental ontology by revising the project of *Being and Time* and shifting its stated task from the “metaphysical” or “anthropological” realm, that is from saying something strictly “positive,” to a work that speaks only in and of the negative. Heidegger writes in the preface:

The nothing is the “not” of beings, and is thus being, experienced from the perspective of beings.

The ontological difference is the “not” between beings and being. Yet just as being, as the “not” in relation to beings, is by no means a nothing in the sense of a *nihil negativum*, so too the difference, as the “not” between beings and being, is in no way merely the figment of a distinction made by our understanding (*ens rationis*). (9:123/97)

In one sense, “nothing” for this later Heidegger becomes less essential. In particular, Heidegger takes great care to distinguish his work from “existentialist,” “anthropologizing” readings. The earlier sense of “nothing” as linked basically to the human being’s “attunement” of anxiety is de-emphasized, and what becomes more important is instead the relation of “nothing” itself to “being.” Yet the nothing paradoxically becomes more important for this later Heidegger’s anti-humanism, or “negative anthropology”: the human comes to be defined essentially by what he is *not*, which is to say, by his nearness to nothing. In short, through the nothing Heidegger articulates his postwar antihumanism.

The *locus classicus* for this shift in Heidegger’s thought is the 1947 “Letter on Humanism.” There, Heidegger writes:

The one thing thinking would like to attain and for the first time tries to articulate in *Being and Time* is something simple. As such, being remains mysterious, the simple nearness of an unobtrusive prevailing [*die schlichte Nähe eines unaufdringlichen Waltens*]. The nearness occurs essentially as language itself [*Diese Nähe west als die Sprache selbst*; note the absence of “essentially,” rather “selbst” functions just as in *Das Nichts selbst nichtet*]. ... Human beings do not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of being, come to presence and depart [*Ob es und wie es erscheint, ob und wie der Gott und die Götter, die Geschichte und die Natur in die Lichtung des Seins hereinkommen, an- und abwesen, entscheidet nicht der Mensch*]. (9:332–3/252–3)

Again, in this post-1945 work Heidegger is re-emphasizing the *nothing* in order to revise his pre-1935 project of “fundamental ontology.” In particular, “nothing” comes to be a key term from the early work that can be revisited in the later retrospective commentaries, so that Heidegger can downplay the importance of “humanism” or “existentialism,” without abandoning the vocabulary and conceptual architecture of the pre-*Kehre* works entirely. Heidegger wrote explicitly about

this shift in the unpublished manuscript known as *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)* or *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*:

In *Being and Time* Da-sein still stands in the shadow of the “anthropological,” the “subjectivistic,” and the “individualist,” etc. — and yet the opposite of all of this is what we have in view [*das Gegen-teil im Blick*] — of course, not as what was initially and solely intended, but rather this opposite, everywhere only the *necessary consequence* of the deciding transformation of the “question of being” [*Seinsfrage*] from guiding-question [*Leitfrage*] into the grounding-question [*Grundfrage*].

[In *Being and Time*] “understanding of being” and *projecting-open* [are thought] — *and indeed as thrown!* The *being-in-the-world* of Dasein. But “world” [is] not the *Christian saeculum* and the denial of god or atheism! *World* [is experienced] from within the essential sway of truth and of the t/here [*Da*]! (§172; 65:295/208)

Here we see that “world” is equally important a term to track as is “nothing,” both for the role it plays in “fundamental ontology” and for how it is later transformed after 1945. In particular, “world” stands between the human and being: *Dasein* is *being-in-the-world*. To elucidate “world” is therefore to elucidate the relation between *Dasein* and being, which we have already considered from the perspective of “ground” and of “nothing.”

To do that, and thereby to conclude, let us return to “On the Essence of Ground.” There, Heidegger writes that “we name *world* that *toward which* Dasein as such transcends, and shall now determine transcendence as *being-in-the-world*” (9:139/109). Note here, too, the similarity with Kant, who refuses the transcendent but embraces the possibility of *transcendental* metaphysics. For Heidegger, “world co-constitutes the unitary structure of transcendence; as belonging to this structure, the concept of world may be called *transcendental*” (9:139/109). What I argued earlier in this paper is that Heidegger takes from Kant the meaning of “ground.” I then indicated the way in which “nothing” functions as such a ground for Heidegger. What we see now, returning to “world,” is the way in which it too functions as such a “transcendental

ground.” Heidegger acknowledges both his debt to Kant and his attempted radicalization of the Kantian project,

observing that precisely Kant came to recognize the “transcendental” as a problem concerning the intrinsic possibility of ontology in general, even though the “transcendental” for him still retains an essentially “critical” significance. For Kant the transcendental has to do with the “possibility” of (that which makes possible) that knowledge that *does not illegitimately* “soar beyond [*überfliegt*]” our experience, i.e., is not “transcendent,” but is experience itself [*sondern Erfahrung selbst ist*]. The transcendental thus provides the restrictive [*einschränkende*], yet thereby simultaneously positive, delimitation (definition) of the essence of nontranscendent ontic knowledge [*Wesensbegrenzung der nichttranszendenten*] — i.e., knowledge that is possible for human beings as such. A more radical and more universal conception [*Fassung*] of the essence of transcendence, however, necessarily entails a more originary elaboration [*ursprünglichere Ausarbeitung*] of the idea of ontology and thus of metaphysics. (9:139–140/109–110)

In short: for Heidegger, “nothing” and “world” are transcendental in a deeply Kantian sense.

What I have attempted to show in this paper is precisely this way in which “nothing” and “world” function for Heidegger as Kantian transcendentals, especially through an elaboration of what a *Grundlegung der Metaphysik* consists in. I think both Heidegger and us, his readers, are left with an ambivalent feeling about the extent to which the Heideggerian project breaks from or merely renews the project of Kantian metaphysics. All I can claim to have achieved in this paper is to show that this is the ambivalence against which the relation between “nothing” and “world” must be placed.

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