**“The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” by Martin Heidegger**

“The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” is a lecture Heidegger gave in the 1960s which, in many ways represents the culmination of a lifetime of thinking about Being. In this lecture, the *clearing*, as the openness that first grants presencing, rises to prominence. But Heidegger wants to focus here on a special sort of clearing, one that represents the “possible presencing of presence itself.” He calls this *aletheia* [unconcealment] and it is the absolute root of all human experience, Being as Being, that which makes all beings possible. Unfortunately, as the absolute ground of experience, it is therefore fundamentally ungraspable by human experience or thought. This unrealisable apprehension turns out to be the ultimate task of thinking.

The End of Philosophy

To understand what Heidegger means by this we first have to know what he means by philosophy. “Philosophy is metaphysics. Metaphysics thinks beings as a whole – the world, man, God – with respect to Being, with respect to the belonging together of beings in Being.” But, as he has said elsewhere, it doesn’t, and *can’t*, think Being itself, Being as the ground on which beings are what they are.

So, philosophy is metaphysics. But Heidegger thinks metaphysics is ending in the sense of coming to completion. This doesn’t mean that it has been perfected, such a word is meaningless with regard to philosophy, “each epoch of philosophy has its own necessity”; rather, it means “the whole of philosophy’s history is gathered in its uttermost possibility.”

What is now happening is that philosophy – that is, metaphysics – is evolving into the sciences.

The Clearing

However, even after the dissolution of philosophy into the sciences, there is a task remaining for thinking which neither philosophy as metaphysics nor the sciences birthed from philosophy are able to express.

To get to this task, Heidegger returns to the mantra of phenomenology; “to the things themselves”. Both Hegel and Husserl used this expression but their emphasis was on the “themselves”, meaning a rejection of things/methods inadequate to philosophy. Hegel found his certainty in the absolute idea, but ‘idea’ since Descartes has meant the *cogito*, the subject. This means that the Being of beings only becomes present in the subject. Husserl’s rejection was of the phenomena of intentional consciousness but he, like Hegel, sought philosophical certainty in a transcendental subjectivity. Both of these approaches presuppose the “matter of philosophy” before they even begin.

Heidegger instead focuses on the “thing” in the above formula and the way it comes to appear, or “becomes present.” All appearance occurs in some sort of “brightness” but the brightness itself “rests upon something open, something free”. Brightness can only illumine in this open space. Heidegger calls this “openness that grants a possible letting appear and show “clearing.”” The *clearing* is the “primal phenomenon”, the heart of all presencing.

What *presences* in the clearing is not just what is present, but also what is absent. Even absence, “cannot be as such unless it presences in the *free space of the clearing*.” This must be so because if it weren’t, we wouldn’t even recognise something as absent. Ironically, a things absence, must necessarily be present to us for it to be as absence.

Not just metaphysics, but positivism as well, both start their investigation of the Being of beings by looking at the *idea*, which is the outward appearance of things. All outward appearance, however, “is a manner of presence. No outward appearance without light… But there is no light and no brightness without the clearing. Even darkness needs it.”

The Task of Thinking

So, the clearing is openness. But it isn’t just that by which all things (beings) come to presence. It is also the “possible presencing of that presence itself.” Before anything else, what “first grants unconcealment [*aletheia*] is the path on which thinking pursues one thing and perceives it… that presencing presences.” Heidegger is here saying that the absolute first unconcealment (presencing) which allows unconcealment (presencing) at all is that in which the clearing “first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other.” The clearing in which Being and thinking are first presenced together Heidegger calls *aletheia* (unconcealment).

Why is Heidegger not translating *aletheia* as “truth” here? Because ‘truth’ as the correspondence of knowledge with beings and also as the certainty of the knowledge of Being, is only possible within *aletheia* thought of as unconcealment. “For truth itself, like Being and thinking, can be what it is only in the element of the clearing.”

*Aletheia* as unconcealment is the root of all human experience; Heidegger’s elusive lifetime goal, Being as Being. However, *aletheia*, as *the* unconcealed, itself remains concealed; “Only what *aletheia* as clearing grants is experienced and thought, not what it is as such.” We can never grasp *aletheia* itself, we can only apprehend it through what it presences. *Aletheia* is “the clearing of presence concealing itself, the clearing of a self-concealing sheltering.”

The task of thinking at the end of philosophy then appears to be an endless one. We have reached a path we can never fully traverse and yet must continue to walk. It seems to me that Heidegger is saying that the task of thinking is something like a perpetual contemplation of, or reflection on, *aletheia*, which, by its very nature will never be fully revealed but can be indirectly glimpsed, or thought, in many ways.

Heidegger’s final question is whether “all this unfounded mysticism or even bad mythology, [is] in any case a ruinous irrationalism, the denial of *ratio*?” He rejects this by questioning reason itself. Reason (and irrationality too) can only ever be sufficiently grounded in *aletheia* and no matter the impressive results that appear to justify our technological-scientific, rational age, the whole edifice is only possible on the basis of *aletheia* as unconcealment. Far from being the final word on reality, the rational has failed to even ask the appropriate question.