

Heidegger's Interpretation of the Platonic *Cave Allegory* and *Theaetetus* (1931/32)
as an Early Indication of *Kehre* and *Ereignis*

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François Fédier, in his recently published book *Entendre Heidegger*, notices a very interesting fact, namely that Heidegger's view about the nature of philosophical translation and hermeneutics changes significantly between 1927 and 1937.¹ Thus, in his course *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* from 1927, Heidegger affirmed that “we not only want, but we are compelled to understand the Greeks better than they have understood themselves.”² Ten years later, in his essay from the *Holzwege*, “Nietzsches Wort: »Gott ist tot«” (1936-40), Heidegger said that “a good interpretation will never understand a text better than its own author, but in an other way. Still, this ‘other way’ (*dieses Andere*) must be able to attain the ‘same’ (*das Selbe*) of that thing that is thought of in the interpreted text.”³ Heidegger's shift is quite clear: philosophical interpretation of texts should not attempt any more to think *better* as their author, but in an *other* way. This otherness is not a result of the fact that Heidegger adopts a position *different* from other metaphysical thinkers of the past. Each of them believed firmly that he thought better and saw further than his predecessors. As Fédier remarks in his book *Le temps et le monde*, Heidegger had the same ambition in his *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (1929): namely, to fulfill a destruction of Kant and to think the essence of metaphysics better than Kant did.⁴ But the Heidegger of the mid-thirties wanted to attain a radical *otherness* by comparison not only to a particular thinker, but to the whole history of Western metaphysics. This otherness would not separate him from the tradition, but would enable him to reach to the very self of this tradition, i.e. to that ‘same’ to which every metaphysical thinker was bound to refer. By so gaining access to *der erste Anfang*, i.e. to the first source of Western thinking, Heidegger was compelled to speak of *der andere Anfang*, “the *other* source” of Western thinking, a source that he endeavoured to describe, thus preparing the West for its advent.

In the following, I would like to concentrate on a course by Heidegger from 1931/32, dedicated to Platonic thinking, and which belongs right in the middle of the period to which Fédier alluded. It is entitled: *The Essence of Truth. On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*⁵. If one

¹ Fédier, François (2013), *Entendre Heidegger et autres exercices d'écoute* (Paris), 110.

² Heidegger, Martin (1975), *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (GA 24) (Frankfurt/Main), 157, translation mine.

³ Heidegger, Martin (1977), *Holzwege* (GA 5) (Frankfurt/Main), 213, transl. mine.

⁴ Fédier, François (2010), *Le temps et le monde* (Paris), 341.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin (1997), *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit. Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet* (GA 34) (Frankfurt/Main). English translation by Ted Sadler: Heidegger, Martin (2002), *The Essence of Truth. On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*

takes into account Heidegger's above mentioned shift in understanding the task of interpretation, one must wonder which of the two positions is dominant in this course. Does Heidegger want to think better than Plato, or does he already want to integrate Platonic thinking in the development of the first source of Western thinking – namely, as *the* moment when the power of this source began to wane? My guess is that Heidegger already moves within the *second* hermeneutical perspective. There are some passages in the course that allow us to draw this conclusion, and I will quote some of them further below. If my guess is correct, then this course is *our earliest indication* of Heidegger's shift in his way of reading the Western thinkers. But I would argue that the importance of this course goes further than that, insofar as it provides us with the opportunity to see how Heidegger prepares the ground for the most central term of his second period, namely *Ereignis* ("enowning"⁶). The whole course is based, as I intend to show, on a tacit elaboration of *Ereignis* with the help of Platonic thinking – a very remarkable fact. The presence of *Ereignis* is attested also by Heidegger's use both of the German prefix *er-* and of the terms *Eigentlichkeit* ("authenticity") and *sich zueigen werden* ("to authentically appropriate oneself"), in close proximity to each other. *Ereignis*, "enowning," will appear for the first time in the volume *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* from 1936/38, but we can see it already unfolding in this interpretation of Plato. Another central term of Heidegger's later thinking, *Kehre* ("turning"), is absent as such, but Heidegger uses throughout the course a multitude of terms composed with the radical *kehr-*, namely: *umgekehrt*, *Umkehr*, *Rückkehr*, *Zukehr*, *Verkehrung*. As we know from the *Contributions*, *Kehre* is closely connected to *Ereignis*, motivating Heidegger to speak of a *Kehre im Ereignis* ("turning in enowning"). According to him, the *Kehre im Ereignis* is the matrix of the hermeneutical circle and of all circles in understanding. I will try to show further below how this course helps us to better understand this difficult topic of the *Contributions*.

As a whole, this exceptional course can be read not only as a way of applying to a specific thinker (namely Plato) the new perspective on philosophical translation and hermeneutics, not only as a text where Heidegger unfolds a new terminology, but also as a reflection on the essence of understanding, of knowing, hence as a reflection on the essence of essence, of truth and, of course, of man.

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(London/New York). The quoted passages are taken from this translation (slightly modified by me). The page numbers refer to the German original.

⁶ This is the rendering of *Ereignis* by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly in their translation of the *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (GA 65): Heidegger, Martin (1999), *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* (Bloomington).

But how is this course situated within the range of Heidegger's interpretation of Plato? His detectable interest in Plato spans nearly twenty years, starting with his lecture on the *Sophist* from 1924/25 and ending with the course *Parmenides* from 1942/43. In a letter to Hannah Arendt from 1954 he writes about his wish to re-examine his own interpretations of Plato, starting with the one on the *Sophist*, and to read Plato anew, but we don't have any traces of this new reading. Heidegger focused only on five Platonic dialogues, namely: the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. With the exception of a chapter from his book on *Nietzsche*, dedicated to the dialogue *Phaedrus*, all his interpretations remained unpublished till the *Complete Works* began to appear starting with 1975. There is, still, one notable exception to this, namely the famous article *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, published in 1942. Before 1992, when the interpretation of the *Sophist* was published, practically all the literature on the topic "Heidegger and Plato" focused on this essay. By scholarly confronting the Heideggerian interpretation with the Platonic text, the literature concluded, on the whole, that Heidegger was wrong to maintain that Plato is responsible for the transition from truth as unhiddenness (*aletheia*, *Unverborgenheit*) to truth as correctness (*Richtigkeit*) – this being the main thesis of his essay. His interpretation was regarded as violent and biased by his view on the history of Western philosophy as a gradual loosing of the first source. In fact, it is argued, Plato was not primarily concerned with the essence of truth or untruth in his dialogues. The essay *Plato's Doctrine of Truth* from 1942 is based on the course from 1931/32, to which I referred before. This same course was held anew by Heidegger three years later, in 1933/34, at the very moment when he was Rector of the Freiburg University, which is quite a peculiar fact, because Heidegger never repeated his courses. It is easily visible that Heidegger drew heavily on this course when he conceived, ten years later, in 1942, the article *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*. In my opinion, only the course from 1931/32 enables us to fully understand the motives of the famous thesis concerning the role of Plato in the transition from truth as unhiddenness to truth as correctness. As it has been already noticed, in the essay from 1942 Heidegger skipped the interpretation of the dialogue *Theaetetus* and focused only on the Cave Allegory. But it is exactly the *Theaetetus* part – centering on the Platonic reading of the essence of un-truth as falsehood (*pseudos*) – that explains the prevalence of truth as correctness and the gradual forgetting of truth as unhiddenness. Still, Heidegger choose not to publish his insights into the essence of un-truth (*Verborgenheit*), perhaps for the same reason that he didn't publish the *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* and all the subsequent volumes.

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In the following, I will concentrate firstly on the interpretation of the Platonic Cave Allegory, and then on some key passages concerning the dialogue *Theaetetus*. As I said before, the main points of interest will be the unfolding of the terms *Kebre* and *Ereignis*, which are, in my view, the deeper motives in elaborating this course.

Let me begin by explaining the hermeneutical basis from which Heidegger undertook this unusual interpretation of Plato and which is not laid out expressly in the course. My thesis is this: far from accusing Plato of a philosophical blunder, i.e. the missing of the truth as unhiddenness (and thus acting from a scholarly-scientific perspective), Heidegger hermeneutically *needs* Plato and his four-staged Cave myth in order to expose it as the necessary stage of a broader “story” that he will later call “history of Being”, *Seinsgeschichte*. There is a peculiar *affinity* between Heidegger and Plato, similar in a way to the earlier one with Aristotle, from the beginning of the twenties, even if Heidegger has radically changed his views on interpretation. In fact, he opens up so wide to Plato and makes such an use of his hermeneutical prowess, that one gets the impression of him *mirroring* himself in Plato. There is surely no trace of him trying to think *better* than Plato – even if, in the end, we see Heidegger accusing Plato and the Greeks of a “failure” (*Verfehlung*)⁷ and a “mis-take” (*Versehen*)⁸ in their effort to grasp the essence of untruth. Here are three examples of this peculiar identification: *Seinsverständnis* (“understanding of Being”) is simply equated with *Seinserstrebnis*, i.e. the Platonic strive to attain Being (*eros, eporegesthai tes ousias*)⁹; Platonic *paideia* is equated with *Geschichte des Daseins*, “history of Dasein”¹⁰; man’s effort to attain *aletheia* – as described in the Cave Allegory – is the enduring source and beginning of our *Existenz*¹¹. Far from trying to think “better” than Antiquity, Heidegger tries instead to attain, by all means, its originality and intensity – in order to distance himself radically from it. This effort of distancing and becoming “other” is possible only within a “sameness” that has to be conquered first.

Perhaps the most ardent wish of Heidegger in this course – expressed as such already in the *Introduction* – is to regain the vigor of *Geschichte* and to escape the barrenness of *Historie*: “We mean that with man himself something *occurred* (*geschah*) which is greater and more primordial than his usual activity; an occurrence (*Geschehen*) and a history (*Geschichte*) to which we must return, and which we *must* re-enact if we want to grasp something of the essence of truth. (...) The return to the Greek beginnings of Western philosophy is difficult not because our sources are scanty, but because our Dasein is impoverished, because it does not measure up to the claim

⁷ Heidegger (1997), 320.

⁸ *ibid.*, 322.

⁹ *ibid.*, 216.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 235.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 122.

and power of the little which *has* been transmitted. For even where we have a great deal, as with Plato and Aristotle – what have we made out of this? A perhaps distinguished but nevertheless groundless scholarship, and a diligent but rather tasteless enthusiasm. Or one thinks it is actually preferable no longer to know anything whatever about it. *How* are we supposed to initiate this return?”¹² Heidegger’s answer: by reconnecting ourselves to the source of Western thinking in Greece, because “the beginning [is] what is greatest”¹³. But what are the motives of our actual groundlessness? Are we alone responsible for it? Even if Heidegger does not directly say that *the source itself* harbors in itself the gradual losing of the fundamental experience, I think that his message is clear: “What already happens in Plato is the waning of the fundamental experience, i.e. of a specific fundamental *stance* (*Grundstellung*) of man towards beings, and the weakening of the word *aletheia* in its basic meaning. This is only the beginning of that history through which Western man lost his ground as an existing being, in order to end up in contemporary groundlessness.”¹⁴ Plato and Aristotle are the thinkers in whose work the waning beings, equated by Heidegger with the transformation of truth as unhiddenness (*aletheia*) into truth as correctness of sentences (*logos*). In order to approach the source and regain its originality – as it was perhaps captured in the fragments of the Pre-Socratics (Heraclitus is mentioned here) –, we have to understand why and how the fundamental experience has become ineffective in Plato and Aristotle. These two great thinkers of the West are now “accused” of being the perpetrators of a forgetting.

Before dealing with Heidegger’s interpretation of the Cave Allegory, let me say a few words about his emphatic new positioning towards Plato and Aristotle at the end of the *Introduction*. This emphasis confirms the shift in understanding the interpretation of the history of Western philosophy to which François Fédiér has pointed. This shift is, in fact, connected to a shift in *orientation* of Heidegger himself. The first Heidegger, the one before 1931/32, believed in a gradual improving of our philosophical sight. The phenomenological project assumed that the destruction of the history of philosophy can furnish us with a clear ground on which ontology can be brought to completion, so that the meaning of Being can be explained in the end. The orientation is here towards the future, and it is assumed that there is a progress in clarity within the history of philosophy. When Heidegger interprets Plato’s *Sophist* in 1924/25, he says in the *Introduction* of this course that we need to know Aristotle first, because his work is more precise and clear than that of Plato. Thus, he applies the venerable hermeneutical principle “from the

¹² *ibid.*, 15-16.

¹³ *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 120.

clear into the obscure,” *vom Hellen ins Dunkle*¹⁵. But now, seven years later, Heidegger thinks different, because he is more attentive to the originality of the source of Western thinking *and* because he wants to attain an “otherness” by comparison to the history of the West. His hermeneutical boldness is the same, but it has acquired a different orientation. He now returns to Plato and Aristotle not as instances of a clarity greater than that of the Pre-Socratics, but because he wants to understand why and how a gradual losing of the initial ground takes place in their works. Does this mean that he simply reverses the hermeneutical principle, transforming it into “from the obscure into the clear”? Not at all. This is not a reversal, but a *return*. Heidegger returns to the most original source because he has *already* seen it and now he wants to see it again – and this “again” implies also to understand why and how the source has withdrawn gradually from man in the works of Plato and Aristotle. If the first Heidegger was more future-oriented, the second Heidegger is more aware of the *source* of his former orientation to the future. Nothing is lost, given up, or abandoned. Instead, everything is now more source-conscious. That is why Heidegger doesn’t speak of a “better understanding” of the history of Western thinking any more, but of an “other way” of understanding it. Only when the first source is fully seen (as first), does an *other* source begin to emerge. I quote now Heidegger’s own words from the *Introduction* of the course from 1931/32: “*How* are we supposed to initiate this return (*Rückgang*)? Should we not return to the past through what is closer to us, by passing through what is more recent? [The former position!] Do not Plato and Aristotle treat the essence of truth more comprehensively, from more points of view, and more reflectively? Could we not come to more certain conclusions about earlier philosophy by taking our lead from these later thinkers? This seems to be possible, and to a certain degree we want to pursue this method, but for different reasons. [The latter position!] Not because, in order to compensate for scanty witnesses, we hope to make retrospective conclusions, but because in Aristotle and Plato we can see how the indicated fundamental experience has already begun to be ineffective, so that the fundamental stance (*Grundhaltung*) expressed in the basic meaning of the word *aletheia* is re-formed in a way which prepares for what we alluded to earlier: the common conception of the essence of truth, which apparently has nothing more to do with *aletheia*...”¹⁶

But why “apparently” (*scheinbar*)? Because for us, today, there *seems* to be no connection between the truth as correctness and truth as *aletheia*. In fact, we think that there is *no other* truth than truth as correctness. According to Heidegger, we have lost any contact with the history, *Geschichte*, of the essence of truth. For us, the actual essence, correctness, is unique and forever

¹⁵ Heidegger, Martin (1992), *Platon: Sophistes* (GA 19) (Frankfurt/Main), 11.

¹⁶ Heidegger (1997), 17.

durable. But this is only an appearance (*Schein*) – which, like any “true” appearance, must conceal the fact that it is an appearance. If we look into the history of the essence of truth, i.e. into this strange fact that the source gives itself once, and then gradually retires by leaving the impression that there was no source, then it may be that correctness is only the derivative essence of truth, not the original one. Heidegger ends his course with the following words: “We attempted to answer the question concerning the essence of truth by looking at a piece from the history of the concept of truth, and at a piece from the history of the concept of untruth. But perhaps we have learnt to understand that it is precisely *here*, and *only* here, in such *history*, that we experience the *essencing* of truth. (...) For this reason we can reach what truth is, and how it essences [verb!], only by *interrogating* it in respect of its own *occurrence*; above all by asking after *what* remained *unhappened* (*ungeschehen*) in this history and which was closed off, so much closed off that ever since it has seemed (*so scheint*) as if in its primordially it *never was essentially*”¹⁷. This last phrase is quite remarkable: Heidegger speaks here about something that wasn’t part of the history at all and, by so “doing,” concealed the fact that it wasn’t part of it. He means, in my opinion, the fact that the source didn’t *unfold as source* (i.e. truth as *aletheia*), but retired after its original coming so completely, that even the trace of its non-unfolding remained unseen. The moment when the truth as *aletheia* could have been seen was in Plato’s dialogues, and especially in the *Theaetetus*, because there Plato attempted to understand the *pseudos*, the falsehood. According to Heidegger, falsehood is only a form of un-truth, and not the essential one. By highlighting un-truth only as falsehood, Plato paved the way for the understanding of its contrary, the truth, only as correctness. So, the moment of the unfolding of truth as *aletheia* was wasted.

As it seems, Plato was preoccupied to understand the essence of falsehood as a wrong attribution of a predicate to a subject, this attribution being itself a form of the human discourse (*logos*). He didn’t pay attention to the fact that falsehood is a way in which *the things* seem to us – of course, because we let them seem so or so by enabling and sustaining the realm of phenomenality. This seeming of the things gives us either the true Being of the things, *or* only an appearance. According to Heidegger, Plato’s mis-take (*Verfehlung*)¹⁸ was due to the fact that he didn’t see this primordial interplay of Being and appearance, of truth *and* un-truth, but looked only at the human mind and its failure. The primordially of the duality of Being and appearance, i.e. their essencing (*Wesen*), became thus secondary and retired even as a secondary one. By understanding and interpreting this initial mis-take, Heidegger can now endeavor to let the

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 322.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 320.

essencing of truth as *aletheia* unfold as such. This is the meaning of his return to the Greeks, more precisely to the source that they have seen for the *first* time.

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Having all this in mind, let us now concentrate on Heidegger's interpretation of the Cave Allegory and let us examine the necessity and the conditions of his returning to it. He detects in the Allegory four stages: 1. The situation of man in the underground Cave; 2. The failed liberation of man within the Cave; 3. The genuine liberation of man to the primordial light; 4. The freed prisoner's return to the Cave. Heidegger's point is to show that Plato describes in this strange *mythos*, or "story," the unfolding of the essence of man (*die Wesensgeschichte des Menschen*)¹⁹. In German, *Geschichte* means both "story" and "history," this latter word being understood by Heidegger, as I would now translate it, as an essential "unfolding". For Heidegger, Plato's Cave Allegory is not just a simple story or metaphor, but is the exposition of the unfolding of the Western world as such: namely to become free, to be liberated and to gain access to the primordial light through knowledge. Any free man will then endeavor to free others through liberation and education, *paideia*. In a resuming paragraph, just before turning to the fourth stage, Heidegger brings together four key terms of the Cave Allegory, namely light, *idea*, freedom and unhiddenness (*aletheia*) under the cover of a fifth term, *Entbergung*, translated into English as "deconcealment". What unfolds here is not only the fact that man can gain access to the *ideai*, i.e. to the very nature and essence of all beings, but simultaneously the fact that man gains access to himself and his essence. By attaining the liberating light, man discovers himself, i.e. he deconceals himself as *already* set on a path to truth. When struggling to gain access to the *ideai* as the source of cognitive light for all beings, man realizes that he is already moving within the horizon of a scenario which is greater than himself because it is a *prior* one. (When speaking of *Ereignis*, I will come back to this "priority".) In Heidegger's words: "...this allegory gives precisely the history (*Geschichte*) in which man comes to himself as a being in the midst of beings. And in the history of man's essence it is precisely the occurrence (*Geschehen*) of unhiddenness, i.e. of deconcealment, that is decisive."²⁰ The fact that, in Plato, man is *ex-posed*, *given over* to the unfolding of truth is deduced by Heidegger from the very metaphor of the liberation from the Cave. As he puts it: "*ex-sistere, ex-sistens* [means]: to stand out into the unhiddenness of beings, to be *given over* [*ausgesetzt*] to beings in their totality, thus to the confrontation between itself and

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 77.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 75.

beings. (...) Only by entering into the dangerous region of philosophy is it possible for man to realize his nature as *transcending* himself into the unhidness of beings.”²¹ The Platonic Cave left behind through liberation and education and the Heideggerian *Existenz* correspond to one another in this interpretation.

Let us now focus on the fourth stage, which is – in my view – the most significant for the dialogue between Heidegger and Plato. This is where we encounter the words *zurückkehren*, “to return,”²² *Umkehr*, “turn”²³. Why does the freed prisoner return to the Cave? Plato doesn’t tell us, he just describes the fact that the returning prisoner would find it difficult to adapt his luminous eye to the dark Cave, thus giving the other prisoners an extra reason for not wanting to quit their places. They would all the more oppose a releasing and liberating effort and would kill any liberator if they could. Apparently, says Heidegger, in the fourth stage we don’t get something new about the essence of man. “We turn back to where we previously were, to that we already know.” Or rather not? What is the meaning of this *Umkehr*, of this turn in the economy of truth as unhidness and deconcealment? The prisoner who turns back and sees the situation in the Cave is the *only* one who oversees the whole situation of the actual prisoners and understands *why* they cannot distinguish the beings from the shadows – namely because they don’t *know* that there is a difference involved. He is the *only* one who – like Plato or Socrates – could invent such a story as the Cave Allegory.

But for Heidegger, something essential is missing from the fourth stage of the Platonic Cave Allegory, something that lends a sense of urgency to *his own* return to this venerable myth, namely the fact that Plato’s dialogues omit to discuss the very essence of the shadows and their *inseparability* from truth as un-hidness, *a-letheia*. Heidegger is very interested in the privative nature of the Greek word *a-letheia* as un-hidness or un-concealment, which throws light on the fact that concealment is also a primordial force and even the background upon which truth unfolds. Here is, in my view, the most clear expression of this interdependence: “Hiddenness is always and necessarily present at the occurrence of unhidness, it asserts itself unavoidably in the unhidness and helps the latter to itself.”²⁴ As man is not the master of the unfolding of truth, he is neither the master of the shadows of concealment. If the liberator wants to fight the shadows, he must acknowledge the fact that the line between beings and shadows is not a simple one to draw, because – in the Cave – the shadows will present themselves *as* the truth itself, perverting its manner of unfolding to the extent of making-believe that *there is no* such unfolding.

²¹ *ibid.*, 77.

²² *ibid.*, 80.

²³ *ibid.*, 81.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 145.

So that truth in its unfolding must be understood not as an elimination of the shadows, but as an *overcoming* of concealment, in German: *Überwindung*. Heidegger insists here on the inner co-belonging of truth and concealment and of their primordial struggle, about which he adds: it “is the kind of struggle which first *creates* its enemy and assists its enemy to the *most incisive antagonism*.”²⁵ Plato saw the difference between shadows and beings – this is attested by the very existence of the Cave Allegory –, but he did not interrogate its nature, neither in the Cave Allegory, nor elsewhere. Which is to say that he didn’t see the very fact that man is *only an actor* within the greater scenario of the unfolding of truth as the horizon within which man attempts to find an answer to his own essence. By ignoring the struggle within the *aletheia*, Plato underestimated the power of concealment. As Heidegger argues, in his *Theaetetus*, Plato reduced the hiddenness and its “priority” over man to a mere human act, which fails to attribute a predicate to a perceived thing. Thus, primordial *lethe* became a mere *pseudos*, i.e. a mis-taking of something for something by the human mind, like an archer who misses the mark.

If Plato sees the necessity of a return to the Cave, what is the meaning of Heidegger’s *other* return to the Cave Allegory and to the Greeks as such? Where lies the necessity of *his Zurück-kehren* or *Umkehr*? It is the effort to bridge a gap of more than two millennia in order to liberate that primordial unfolding of truth as the horizon within which man can attempt to ask the question of its essence. This horizon has been only *felt* by Plato and the Greeks, but it has not been grasped as such. The consequence of this “failure” (*Verfehlung*) – which now refers to the Platonic focusing on the *human* side of failure only – is that we are left today with the barren relationship between subject and object and with the essence of truth as correctness of their correspondence. Phenomenology, through the concept of intentionality, has endeavored to re-establish an inner connection between human consciousness *and* the givenness of its object. Heidegger questions exactly the terms of this intentional connection and wants to re-gain access to the *Grunderfahrung*, i.e. the fundamental experience which man must make in order to ask why and how can man endeavor to learn and, by so doing, to know his own essence.

In the end, the necessity of the return to the Greeks lies in history itself, i.e. in the *full* unfolding of the primordial deconcealment, which demands now, at the time of deepest groundlessness, to be thought as such. By so doing, the mankind of the West can fulfill the last step of the deconcealment: namely to think deconcealment as such and thus to gain access to his / its own essence as *Existenz*, i.e. as the being opened to something else and *prior* than itself. There is a peculiar interdependence of deconcealment and man which constitute what Heidegger calls history of the West. We could think of this interdependence as a *circularity* that must be

²⁵ *ibid.*, 92.

traced back to the central Heideggerian term *Kehre*, “turning,” which is absent as such from the course but which transpires when Heidegger speaks about *zurückkehren* or *Umkehr*. What does *Kehre* mean for Heidegger? I quote only a few lines from the § 255, entitled *Kehre im Ereignis*, “The Turning in *Ereignis*”, from *Contributions to Philosophy*: “*Ereignis* has its innermost occurrence and its widest reach in the turning. The turning that holds sway in *Ereignis* is the sheltered ground of the entire series of turnings, circles and spheres, which are of unclear origin, remain unquestioned, and are easily taken in themselves as the ‘last’...”²⁶ Heidegger means here, among others, the circle in understanding, i.e. the hermeneutical circle.

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I come now to the second part of my paper, namely the question of *Ereignis*. If we want to know the deeper necessity of Heidegger’s return to the forgotten nature of truth as unhidness and thus to the full scenario of deconcealment, we are compelled to ask what is *Ereignis* and in which way does a turning constitute its meaning. This course on Plato from 1931/32, five years earlier as the above mentioned *Contributions*, gives in my opinion a first glimpse of the meaning of the most central philosophical term of Heidegger’s later thinking. Both the prefix *er-* and the significance of *eigen* are used in several key moments of the interpretation of Plato’s thinking.

There are two main passages in the course where Heidegger uses the powers of the German prefix *er-*, and both regard extremely sensitive Platonic topics. One concerns the functioning of the Platonic *idea*, the other concerns the way in which the human soul strives to get access to Being (*ousia*) in the dialogue *Theaetetus*.

What is the Platonic *idea*? In Heidegger’s interpretation, the *idea* is the “what-is” of something, the original light in which we see something *as* something. In everyday Greek, *idea* named the aspect of a thing. But this aspect doesn’t belong to something as such: it is indeed the aspect of a thing only insofar as it *gives* itself to us. With our comprehending eyes, we see what a book is from the way it looks or seems. In Heidegger’s German: “Wir sehen dem Begegnenden an, wie es *ausieht*, – *was* es ist”²⁷. As both English and German suggest, there is a peculiar interdependence of our *looking* (*ansehen*) and the way in which things *look* (*aussehen*). Wherein lies this interdependence? What kind of special seeing is this, in which we see the “what is” of something? “It is not a staring at something present, not a simple finding of something and

²⁶ Heidegger, Martin (1999), *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* (Bloomington), 286.

²⁷ Heidegger (1997), 50.

receiving of something into our vision, but a looking in the sense of perceiving [*Erblicken*]. This means first *forming* what is looked at *through* the looking and *in* the looking, i.e. forming in advance, modeling. This pre-modeling perceiving of being, of essence, is already *bound* to what is projected in such a projection.”²⁸ Thus, the Platonic *idea* is something that exists only within a special kind of human sight, which Heidegger calls *Erblicken*. Here, the prefix *er-* suggests a kind of *letting* or *enabling* of the thing we look at to look like this or that. The *idea*, the “what is,” the *a priori* light in which we see something as something, doesn’t belong to us, but it doesn’t belong to the thing either. *We* form it when we see *something* as something. Platonic *ideai* are, as Heidegger puts it, neither subjective, nor objective. Further down in his course, when Heidegger begins to interpret the dialogue *Theaetetus*, he comes upon the Platonic verb *dianoein* (185 a 4 sq.) and to his rendering of the human capacity to perceive something that is not perceivable with the eyes only, or with the ears only, but with the soul itself, i.e. the capacity to perceive something as something, as primarily a being. Heidegger will render *dianoein* not simply as “thinking” – traditionally opposed to the senses, *aistheseis* –, but as a *hin-nehmendes Vor-nehmen*, i.e. as a taking that makes a step forward, going over the thing and then, as a result of this anticipating step, taking and accepting the thing which *now* gives itself to me as such. This anticipating-accepting movement of the human perception as regards its object is another description of what Heidegger has in view with the German prefix *er-*. We recognize here the same circularity that the turning implied. The things look *like* this or that, they give themselves *as* such and such to us, because we enable them to do this, i.e. we open up a space of phenomenality within which things can manifest themselves or hide themselves, by only seeming. The circularity is envisaged here at its most basic level, namely the level of phenomenality and givenness. The Platonic *idea* stays here in proximity to the “as”-structure from *Being and Time*.

Let me now come to the second passage where Heidegger uses both the prefix *er-* and the word *eigen*, “proper”, “authentic”. He comments the line where Theaetetus says that *ousia*, “Being,” “belongs to what the soul, through and by itself, strives for” (186 a 2 sq.). The genuine movement of the soul towards the highest categorial is here called *eporegesthai*, i.e. an *orexis*, a striving for. Heidegger translates it as *Erstreben*. This is not a striving meant to acquire, to have and to dispose of its object in an everyday manner, but it is an enabling of the object to be ever striven for: “...one can think of a striving wherein the object is held fast *as such*, but also thereby held fast *to oneself*, so that one finds oneself in this holding fast to the object, indeed such that one finds oneself not just as a point and thing and subject, but in the sense of the soul’s essence,

²⁸ *ibid.*, 71.

which is essentially a *relationship* – thus finding oneself precisely *as* this striving relationship to the object. This kind of striving (...) does not strive to possess the object, but strives for it to *remain* as striven for, as held in the striving, in order that the striver finds himself *from* that for which he strives. Such striving would be authentic in so far as the striving self does not strive away from itself but rather back towards itself, i.e. in order that, in this striving, it may gain-itself-by-striving (*sich zu er-streben*).²⁹ Everything here is built on the mere power of the prefix *er-*. In this context of having and gaining himself, it is no wonder that Heidegger speaks, two pages before, about *Eigentlichkeit*, i.e. “authenticity,” and *sich zueigen werden*, “to appropriate himself”³⁰. From *er-* and *sich zueigen werden* one can easily coin the term *Ereignis*.

What does *Ereignis* then stand for? *Ereignis* would be the original name for “the most central problem of philosophy”³¹, as Heidegger calls it elsewhere, namely the distinction between subject and object. It is the name for the deep and original strive of the human soul to gain and preserve its access to that which cannot be possessed as such, but that gives to the soul its horizon and thus binds it to the widest freedom. In his course, Heidegger calls this Platonic strive *Seinsstreben*, “strive for Being itself” and equates it expressly with his own term *Seinsverständnis*, “comprehension of Being”³², thereby acknowledging again the need to mirror his own research in Plato’s philosophy. It is quite remarkable that Heidegger points here to the fact that Plato called this strive for Being also by the name of *eros*. It would be very interesting to study the connection between Heidegger’s understanding of Being (*Seinsverständnis*) and the Platonic *eros*. To my knowledge, this relationship has been discussed by Heidegger in his newly published seminar on *Phaedrus* from 1932³³, i.e. in close proximity to this course on the Cave Allegory and *Theaetetus*.

If the Cave Allegory revealed, in Heidegger’s view, the deconcealment at work in Plato’s dialogues – even if it has not been seen as such by Plato himself –, the dialogue *Theaetetus* reveals, among other things, the fact that Plato saw very well this mysterious strive of the soul for what Heidegger would call simply “Being”. Both texts interpreted by Heidegger reflect, in his view, the effort of Platonic (and also Greek) philosophy to name that genuinely human effort to remain always on the move towards something *prior* to any particular being and which Heidegger calls “Being”. This something always prior does not exist as such, alone by itself, but is at work only insofar as the human soul strives for it. In taking steps towards it, the soul discovers that is *already* there and that all the soul’s effort has long been motivated, i.e. set in motion, by this very

²⁹ *ibid.*, 215.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 213.

³¹ *ibid.*, 72.

³² *ibid.*, 216.

³³ Heidegger, Martin (2012), *Seminare: Platon – Aristoteles – Augustinus* (GA 83) (Frankfurt/Main).

thing which it was striving for. Its priority has nothing of the traditional causality or conditioning any more. Instead, this priority is of a weak and delicate nature, because it is formed, as Heidegger said, in the very act of looking at it: “What we describe in this way is the unity of perceiving, which in a sense first creates the perceivable in its innermost connection.”³⁴ This primordial interdependence or circularity (*Kebré*) between man’s soul and its ever retreating object is the source from which any hermeneutics springs and to which it constantly returns. I think that François Fédier captured very well the delicacy of *Ereignis* when he translated it by the French word *avenance*³⁵.

³⁴ Heidegger (1997), 73.

³⁵ Heidegger, Martin (2013), *Apports à la philosophie. De l'avenance* (Paris), traduit par François Fédier.