

5

Heidegger's Caves *On Dwelling in Wonder*¹

MARY-JANE RUBENSTEIN

IT HAPPENS EVERY TIME I teach Heidegger. While working through an essay like “The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics,” my students will be holding on as best they can, writing furiously as I try to take them through Heidegger’s elusive prose. We will make our way through metaphysics’ occlusion of being, through the way that representational thinking reduces beings to objects of human consumption, and might just gain some ground on Heidegger’s shift from unconcealment (*alêtheia*) to the unconcealment of concealment (*Ereignis*)—when all of a sudden there will be two heads inclined toward one another, some whispering, and a few dropped jaws at the back of the room. “Everything okay?” I will ask. “Sorry,” a student will respond. “I hadn’t known Heidegger was a Nazi . . .” “*Heidegger was a Nazi?*” someone will chirp from the front. And this will bring all my talk of re-vealing and re-veiling to an abrupt halt. Somewhat reluctantly, I will lead them on a detour through what has become a great stumbling block for continental philosophy and critical theory, a question asked too much by some and too little by others; in short, what

1. Adapted from *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* by Mary-Jane Rubenstein. Copyright © 2009 Columbia University Press. Used by arrangement with the publisher.

was Heidegger thinking? Which is to say, *was* Heidegger, the thinker who called thinking back to thinking, thinking at all? When he took up the Rectorship of a nazified Freiburg University in 1933, an act that he may or may not have come to call the greatest stupidity of his life, was he thinking the way he has taught us to think? Or was this commitment something more like a refusal to think; a failure to heed what called for thinking, a foreclosure of his own task of thinking?

One of the most provocative accounts of Heidegger's great stupidity can be found in a piece Hannah Arendt wrote to commemorate his 80th birthday. In this essay, Arendt ranks Heidegger with the greatest philosophical giants of all time, even likening him to Plato.² She goes on to say that those of us who would like to follow such powerful thinkers encounter a formidable obstacle when we realize that philosophers often make disastrous political decisions. Heidegger's commitment in 1933 was akin, she says, to Plato's attempt to teach philosophy to Dionysus the tyrant of Syracuse in 362 BCE. Both of them were blinded to concrete political reality, and Arendt attributes Heidegger's blindness to his being stuck—of all things—in wonder. She compares Heidegger to the ancient philosopher Thales, who was so fixated on the stars above him that he fell into a well below him. Eyes set on some metaphysical revolution, Heidegger failed to notice the yellow stars in front of him, the deportations next door, the burning of temples and storefronts. In short, Heidegger embodies the figure of the typical philosopher who, having climbed out of the cave into the brilliance of the sun, returns to his subterranean home to find he can no longer see in the darkness.

It may seem puzzling that Arendt associates wonder with a *failure* to think, considering that wonder is traditionally said to be the origin of thinking itself. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, for example, Socrates tells his wonderstruck interlocutor, "this is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering (*thaumazein*). This is where philosophy begins, and nowhere else."³ In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle reaffirms that "it is owing to their wonder (*thaumazein*) that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize."⁴ And Descartes locates wonder (*l'admiration*) as the first of all the passions, from which all subsequent thinking emerges.⁵ So there is a broad consensus that Western philosophy cannot function

2. Arendt, "Martin Heidegger at Eighty," 293–303.

3. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d.

4. Aristotle, "Metaphysics," 982b.

5. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, article 53.

without wonder. Where many post-Socratic thinkers differ from one another is in the extent to which they believe philosophy ought to *stay* in wonder. Once wonder gets philosophy going, should it be sustained or eclipsed? Deepened or overcome? Along with Aristotle and Descartes, Arendt would choose the latter option. As far as she is concerned, genuine “Platonic” wonder is meant simply to be a “leaping spark”—an initial and momentary disorientation before the philosopher goes on to form concrete theories and opinions.⁶ So there is nothing wrong with wonder, as long as one doesn’t have too much of it. Heidegger’s mistake, therefore, was not his capacity for wonder *tout court*; rather, it was his “taking up and accepting this faculty of wondering as [his] abode.”⁷

While I have contested elsewhere the accuracy of Arendt’s account of wonder,⁸ I would nevertheless maintain that her having attributed Heidegger’s Nazism to it opens a critical ethical question, namely, is wonder a “good” place for thinking to be located in the first place? Does wondering at the extraordinary, or the ideal, blind us to the ordinary world of material “shadows”? Surely the answer depends on what wonder means. I propose therefore to explore the problem of Heidegger’s great stupidity, and that of philosophy’s ethical engagement more broadly, through Heidegger’s own work on wonder, and his two readings of Plato’s allegory of the cave.

Heidegger’s Wonders

While Heidegger’s work shifts in focus, tone, and terminology as it matures, the corpus remains unflinching in its conviction that metaphysics cannot think its own condition of possibility. Being (or later, “beyng”) sets philosophy in motion, but for that very reason remains inaccessible to philosophy. Heidegger therefore spends his career looking for a way to deliver thinking back into its “ground,” which he later calls its “first beginning.” And since this first beginning has never actually been thought, working back to it would amount to propelling thinking forward into “another beginning.” With all of this attention to the origins of philosophy, it is perhaps unsurprising that *thaumazein* makes numerous appearances along Heidegger’s paths back to the beginning.

In *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger mentions wonder briefly, distinguishing it from the curiosity (*Neugier*) that drives

6. Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 97.

7. Arendt, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” 299.

8. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, 20–23.

calculative-representational thinking: “curiosity has nothing to do with the contemplation that wonders at being, *thaumazein*, it has no interest in wondering to the point of not understanding. Rather, it makes sure of knowing, but just in order to have known.”⁹ While curiosity seeks to amass knowledge, wonder withstands uncertainty; while curiosity flits from being to being, wonder stops and “wonders at being.” Insofar as it gets back behind objectified beings to being-itself, wonder seems to be the capacity central to Heidegger’s entire project. But following this brief, stunning attribution, Heidegger does not mention the mood again, concentrating instead on the ontological attunement of *Angst*.

It is not until his Freiburg lecture series in 1937–38 that Heidegger addresses the question of wonder at greater length, affirming *thaumazein* as the “basic disposition” proper to philosophy’s “first beginning.” Heidegger suggests that if Socrates had named “curiosity” as the origin of philosophy, then thinking might be justified in its persistent effort to explain (away) the whole world. However, “the reference to *thaumazein* as the origin of philosophy indicates precisely the inexplicability of philosophy, inexplicability in the sense that here in general to explain and the will to explain are mistakes.”¹⁰ At this point the distinction between curiosity and wonder is crucial for Heidegger, because again, finding another beginning for thinking depends on thinking through the first one. Curiosity, he insists, can only lodge us more deeply within the calculative confines of metaphysics, whereas wonder remains with the inexplicable. For this reason, it could well be the disposition that “transports [thinking] into the beginning of genuine thinking.”¹¹ For this reason, Heidegger spends a good deal of time in these lectures trying to get wonder right.

Reserving the term *Erstaunen* to translate *thaumazein*, Heidegger sets it apart from four other moods with which it might be confused: *Verwunderung*, *Bewunderung*, *Staunen*, and *Bestaunen*. Similar to curiosity, *Verwunderung* craves, marvels at, and collects novelties, leaping from one fascinating phenomenon to another like children in a natural history museum. It does not ultimately dwell anywhere, but rather is perpetually “carried away by something particular and unusual and hence is an abandonment of what in its own sphere is particular and usual.”¹² *Bewunderung* also occupies itself with that which is unusual, but, unlike *Verwunderung*,

9. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 161.

10. Heidegger, *Basic Questions*, 136.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 142.

Practices of Wonder

it always maintains a certain distance from the object of its admiration. It is perhaps helpful here to note that, in the second *Critique*, Kant confesses that the two things that fill him with *Bewunderung* are “the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.”¹³ In the third *Critique*, Kant commends such *Bewunderung*, “an amazement that does not cease once the novelty is gone,” over against *Verwunderung*, which fades as soon as it understands the unusual object before it.¹⁴ Against Kant, Heidegger suggests that even *Bewunderung* falls short of *thaumazein* because it remains grounded in the known as it gazes upon the unknown, whereas genuine wonder makes the known itself unknown. *Bewunderung*, Heidegger says, is ultimately marked by measurement, comprehension, and *self-affirmation*, and therefore has very little to do with the *thaumazein*’s “wondering to the point of not understanding.” Finally, *Staunen* and *Bestaunen*, while prisoners neither to *Verwunderung*’s flightiness nor to *Bewunderung*’s myth of self-mastery, lose themselves completely in a sort of stupefied amazement, abandoning the ordinary in favor of one extraordinary thing.

As it turns out, each of these moods amounts to an inadequate interpretation of *thaumazein* because of its failed relationship to the everyday. Whether forgetting it in favor of the newest craze or standing firmly in it to examine the attainments of rocket science, each of these forms of intrigue takes for granted what is most usual of all, holding the great unknown against the drab (and therefore uninterrogated) background of the known. In *Erstaunen*, on the other hand, the source of wonder is the everyday itself: “precisely the most usual whose usualness goes so far that it is not even known or noticed in its usualness—this *most usual itself* becomes *in* and *for* wonder what is most unusual.”¹⁵ We might think here of Socrates’s student Theaetetus, who finds himself lost in wonder when he realizes he has no idea what knowledge is. It is here that Socrates calls this wondering the “origin of all of philosophy,” saying “this is where philosophy begins, and nowhere else.” Wonder wonders at the inscrutability of the ordinary—at our inability to know something as ordinary as what it is to know. Considering that not much is more “ordinary” than being itself, one might leap ahead to ask whether *Erstaunen* might perhaps be the mood most appropriate to Heidegger’s “way back into the ground of metaphysics.” Yet Heidegger does not make this ascription; in fact, he spends the rest of the lectures reigning in its force.

13. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 203.

14. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 133.

15. Heidegger, *Basic Questions*, 144.

Almost immediately after naming wonder in the 1937–38 lecture series as the mark of philosophy's fundamental “inexplicability,” Heidegger launches into a detailed explication of wonder. In thirteen bullet points, he lists wonder's various attributes, eventually abandoning it as an unregenerately “ontic” attunement. *Erstaunen*, we learn, is attuned to the “what” of beings, but not to the “that” of being.¹⁶ Evidence of this failure can be seen practically everywhere in the modern world. How else could we understand the whole earth's having been made into a stockpile for humanity's global domination? It was a refusal to wonder at being's “that” that reduced all beings to calculable objects in the first place. And now that all beings have been tagged and packaged as objects of consumption, we *cannot* wonder at being. “For centuries,” Heidegger writes, “the *being of beings*, which was for the Greeks the most wondrous, has passed as the most obvious of everything obvious and is for us the most common: what everybody knows. For who is supposed not to know what he means when he says the stone *is*, the sky *is* overcast? . . . On account of its obviousness, being is something forgotten.”¹⁷ Because “we” are unable to be amazed by beings in their being, the mood of our thinking can no longer be one of genuine wonder. Wondering only at whatness, *Erstaunen* can deliver thinking back to its first beginning, but it cannot deliver us into a new one.

The 1937–38 lectures come to an end almost immediately after this discussion of *Erstaunen*: the fundamental mood of philosophy that turns out not quite fundamental enough. Just before he falls silent, however, Heidegger makes an oblique reference to a “still veiled basic disposition,” which, now that wonder is impossible, might push thought “into another necessity of another original questioning and beginning.”¹⁸ Heidegger had named this “other” basic disposition only once during the lecture series, and he does not do his audience the service of repeating or elaborating upon it at the end. At the beginning of his first lecture, Heidegger invokes what he calls the “basic disposition of the relation to being,” one that would remain “open to the uniquely uncanny fact: that there *are* beings, rather than not.”¹⁹ In other words, this disposition would be attuned to the thatness that metaphysics (and *Erstaunen*) misses. For the few minutes during which it is addressed, this disposition finds a provisional name: *Verhaltenheit*, which is usually translated as “restraint” or “reservedness.”

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 159.

18. Heidegger, *Basic Questions*, 160.

19. Ibid., 3.

Practices of Wonder

Inherent in this disposition are two equiprimordial comportments, kept in perpetual tension. The first is “terror (*Erschrecken*) in the face of what is closest and most obtrusive, namely that beings are,” and the second is “awe (*Scheu*) in the face of what is remotest, namely that in beings, and before each being, being holds sway.”²⁰ But just as in *Being and Time*, where Heidegger calls *thaumazein* “the contemplation that wonders at being” only to stop talking about it, the Freiburg lectures call *Verhaltenheit* the disposition that wonders at thatness, only to forbid further discussion of it. Heidegger warns his audience that “only one who throws himself into the all-consuming fire of the questioning of what is most worthy of questioning has the right to say more of the basic disposition than its elusive name.” Yet he goes on to say that even the one who seeks thus to immolate himself will not discuss *Verhaltenheit* at any length; rather, having “wrested for himself this right, he will not employ it, but will keep silent.”²¹ And this is just what Heidegger proceeds to do. Unlike *Erstaunen*, that inexplicable explicated in thirteen bullet points, the ever veiled *Verhaltenheit* is protected from direct communication—animating, perhaps, but never suffering dissection within, Heidegger’s analysis.

Well, not quite “never.” At the same time that he was preparing and delivering the 1937–38 lecture series, Heidegger was also composing his *Contributions to Philosophy (from Enowning)*, a quasi-aphoristic outline intended to accomplish the crossing from metaphysics into “beyng-historical thinking.” It is in this text, intentionally never published during his lifetime, that Heidegger indulges in a meditation upon the foundational mood of the “other” beginning. Aside from this, the only remaining elaborations upon *Verhaltenheit* can be found in the passages Heidegger deleted from the first draft of the Freiburg lectures he was composing at the same time.²² Heidegger, then, does not exactly “keep silent” about this veiled disposition. Rather, one might say that he both reveals and conceals *Verhaltenheit* by performing it; that is, by restraining “restraint” to pages that would only be circulated posthumously.

Before clinging too closely to this rather generous reading, however, one would also do well to consider the historical particularities surrounding the emergence of Heidegger’s newly proclaimed “beyng-historical thinking” (a thinking that, of course, rejects as “historiography” such

20. *Ibid.*, 4.

21. *Ibid.*

22. These pages are appended to both the German and English volumes of these lectures. See *ibid.*, 168–86.

petty concerns as dates and dictators and wars). Heidegger deletes the passages on *Verhaltenheit*, *Erschrecken*, and *Scheu* from his public lectures in 1937. The Nuremberg laws had passed two years earlier, *Krystallnacht* was looming on the horizon, and Karl Jaspers had just been barred from the German universities because his wife was Jewish. Heidegger, perhaps not so unaware of these events as some might like to imagine, had renounced his position as rector of Freiburg in 1934, but had still worn a Nazi badge to his friend Karl Löwith's house in 1936: a troubling wardrobe choice, even if Löwith had been a gentile.²³ While it falls out of the scope of this project to offer psychological conjectures about the extent of Heidegger's loyalty to the Nazi party, it had doubtless become clear to him by 1937 that it was a less-than-perfect alliance. National Socialism had not catapulted Germany into the new and glorious metaphysical beginning Heidegger envisioned, his own work had come under intense scrutiny by party members and opponents alike, and he may have anticipated that any direct appeal to *Erschrecken und Scheu* might look a bit too much like Nazi propaganda—especially in light of unfortunate sound bites like “we must first call for someone capable of instilling terror into our *Dasein* again.”²⁴ Whether compelled by literary or political necessity (or both), then, Heidegger reserves “reservedness” for later.

A signal that his concern to veil this material is not *solely* political, however, is that when it is finally treated explicitly, the mood of the “other” beginning does not find systematic explication in thirteen theses. It is, instead, illuminated in periodic flashes scattered throughout the deleted and unpublished material. Heidegger even hesitates to assign it any one name, lest a conceptual stranglehold render it powerless to deliver thinking from conceptuality: “the grounding-attunement of another beginning can hardly ever be known merely by one name—and especially in crossing to that beginning. And yet, the manifold names do not deny the onefoldness of this grounding-attunement; they only point to the ungraspable of all that is simple in the onefold.”²⁵ Among these manifold names are “intimating” and “deep foreboding,” which give wonder a certain portentous resonance. Yet Heidegger spends most time on the triumvirate, nameable only “in a distant way,” of *Verhaltenheit*, *Erschrecken*, and *Scheu*.²⁶

23. Safranski, *Martin Heidegger*, 320.

24. Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, 172.

25. Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 16.

26. *Ibid.*, 11.

As we have seen, Heidegger limits the wonder he calls *Erstaunen* to the first beginning when he limits its “object” to the “being of beings.” Focused as it is on beings as they appear, *Erstaunen* overlooks the event of appearance itself; that is, the event of being. This seems a strange failure to attribute to wonder, inasmuch as Heidegger holds *thaumazein* to be the disposition attuned to unconcealment (*alêtheia*). If wonder wonders at unconcealment itself, then how can wonder possibly miss the truth of being? The missing link here is provided in a deleted passage from the 1937–38 lectures in which Heidegger explicitly declares even *alêtheia* to be an insufficiently primordial name for “truth.” What unconcealment presupposes, and for this reason cannot see, is the *con*-cealment to which it is perpetually bound: “truth is not simply the unconcealedness of beings—*alêtheia*—but, more originally understood, is the clearing for the vacillating self-concealment. The name ‘vacillating self-concealment’ is a name for being itself.”²⁷ In the *Contributions to Philosophy* this self-donating double movement of being is rebaptized *Ereignis*, or “the event [of being’s appropriation to beings].” Insofar as *Ereignis* takes place in the constant interplay of concealment and unconcealment, it makes clear what *alêtheia* risks leaving unelaborated: that truth does not exist in some Platonic realm apart from the everyday material world. Rather, it occurs as and through the ordinary. One might think here of Heidegger’s insistence in *Being and Time* that “authentic existence is nothing which hovers over entangled everydayness, but is existentially only a modified grasp of everydayness.”²⁸ If truth takes place as an occurrence rather than a location, an event rather than an object, then it completely dismantles the notion that the truth is “out there” in some world of pure unconcealment. Rather, it takes place through this world—the only world there is.

It is Heidegger’s abandonment of truth as *alêtheia* that necessitates his abandonment of wonder as *Erstaunen*. As he pushes on to *Ereignis*, he announces that now he must find a new foundational mood. It is crucial to note, however, that *Ereignis* is no radical departure from *alêtheia*. It is, rather, both unconcealment *and* concealment, so that truth cannot open onto *Ereignis* without going back to truth as *alêtheia*. So it is with wonder. *Verhaltenheit*, as it turns out, is nothing more—and nothing less—than a more primordially thought *Erstaunen*, a new incarnation of *thaumazein* that holds itself between wonder and *its* opposite—a wonderstruck,

27. Heidegger, *Basic Questions*, 179.

28. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 167.

horrified, amazed kind of fright that becomes the dispositional possibility of futural thinking itself.

The work of this futural philosophy will be to think the “beyng” that has *withdrawn* from beings, giving them over to the calculating forces of modern technology. Brought into being-abandoned, beings can only appear as objects; in other words, severed from being, beings are not themselves. And yet, beings are. This, for Heidegger, is absolutely terrifying. The disposition that might unsettle thought out of its representative manipulations, then, is not a simple wonder at the thatness of beings—for who could possibly be surprised that beings are?—but rather, shock (*Schrecken*) and/or terror (*Erschrecken*) that, strictly speaking, *beings cannot be*. What instills this terrifying shock is the sudden realization “that beings can *be* while the truth of being remains forgotten”—that, like wind-up dolls with lost keys, “beings strut as beings and yet are abandoned by beyng.”²⁹ Yet this terror is accompanied by a kind of harrowed astonishment: “just as wonder bears in itself its own sort of terror, so does terror involve its own mode of self-composure, calm steadfastness, and new wonder.”³⁰

This “new wonder” is *Scheu*, a mood Heidegger describes as “awe in the face of what is remotest, namely that in beings, and before each being, beyng holds sway.”³¹ Awe is the second, more enduring movement of this new wonder, a response to the shock of *Er/schrecken*. So if *Erschrecken* registers that that which is, cannot possibly be, then *Scheu* sees that it nonetheless *is*. While *Erschrecken* recoils at the abandonment of being, *Scheu* marvels that being nonetheless gives itself through this withdrawal. In short, this “new wonder” marvels that beings cannot be, and yet beings are, that is to say, being *happens*. Where being cannot possibly happen.

In sum, Heidegger gives us two substantial treatments of wonder. The first is *Erstaunen* as the first disposition of philosophy, and the second is *Verhaltenheit* as the disposition that might transport thinking back to its deepest roots, and into a new beginning. In both incarnations, it is important to note that wonder wonders not at the extraordinary as such, but rather at the uncanniness of the everyday. Wonder wonders at the extraordinary in and as the ordinary. What then does this mean for the philosopher who attempts to dwell in it?

We will remember that Hannah Arendt likened Heidegger to the philosopher whose eyes are so trained on the brilliance of the Forms that

29. *Ibid.*, 169.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 4.

he can't see a thing in the ordinary world—who is so lost in wonder that he fails to find his way around once he returns to the cave. The problem of philosophy's ethico-political engagement therefore hinges on the *nature* of wonder. Is wonder the disengaged contemplation of disembodied Forms, in which case Arendt is right to discourage us from it, or does wonder prompt us to think differently about the way the philosopher ought to live in relation to the everyday world of the cave?

Heidegger's Caves

Heidegger considers Plato's allegory of the cave so provocative that he reads it twice: once in his 1931 lectures at Freiburg (followed by a series on Plato's *Theaetetus*), and again in an essay written in 1947, after the University's denazification committee had prohibited him from lecturing in public.³² Each reading is accompanied by Heidegger's own translation of the tale—the 1931 version a Heidegger-inflected revision of the then-standard Schleiermacher translation, and the 1947 version a substantial revision of the first.

In his 1931 effort, Heidegger divides his translation and commentary into four parts. The first part of the story introduces us to the hypothetical inhabitants of a hypothetical cave underground. Held in chains from the time of their birth, the people who live there can only see a wall in front of them, onto which shadows of various objects are projected by means of a hidden fire and screen.³³ From the viewpoint of the prisoners, as Plato tells us, these shadows are not shadows but things-in-themselves. In a more Heideggerian register, these images are what is unconcealed and therefore constitute “the true” (*alêthes*) at this stage. For the cave dwellers, in other words, the shadows are beings. In the second stage (515c–515e), one man somehow loses his chains and turns to face the objects and the fire behind him. In comparison to the shadows to which he was accustomed, the things he now sees are truer, “more unconcealed” (*alêthetera*), and therefore “more *beingful* beings,” although he cannot yet recognize them as such.³⁴ The third stage (515e–516e) follows this man as he is dragged from the cave into the blinding light of day, learning how to gaze upon objects under the sun and ultimately the sun itself, an allegory for the Good. To refer to this “truest”

32. The first account can be found in Heidegger, *Essence of Truth*, 1–106. The second can be found in Heidegger, “Plato's Doctrine of Truth,” 155–82.

33. Plato, *Republic*, 514a–15c.

34. Heidegger, *Essence of Truth*, 26.

truth, as well as the other Forms, Heidegger borrows a term from book 6 of the *Republic* (484c): *ta alêthestata*, the “most unconcealed, the essentially unconcealed, the primordially unconcealed, because the unconcealment of beings *originates* in them.”³⁵ Finally, the fourth part of the story (516e–517a) tracks the liberated man’s return to the cave, where he is ridiculed and quite possibly killed by the cave dwellers. If he survives, Plato tells us, he will come to rule the cave as the philosopher-king.

One great insight that emerges during the course of Heidegger’s analysis is that truth, here narrated as a process of liberation, does not reside statically in any one of these stages. Rather, it *takes place* in the transitions between them. Accustomed to two-dimensional projections, the prisoner initially will not understand what he sees when he turns around to face the objects and the fire behind him. In fact, simply because they are more familiar, he will probably be inclined to think the shadows are truer than what is now revealed to him.³⁶ Similarly, when this man is hauled out of the cave, the sunlight will seem so bright by comparison to the darkness that, at first, he will be unable to see anything. Once his eyes adjust a bit, he will be able to see the things that most resemble the projections inside the cave; that is, shadows. Gradually, he will be able to look at reflections, then objects in a dim light, objects in the sunlight, and finally the sunlight itself. Only at that point will he finally understand the shadows in the cave *to be shadows*. Liberation—that is, the *occurrence* of truth itself, and not simply its recognition—therefore depends upon the gradual adjustment of one’s vision: truth happens in the transitions.³⁷

Yet Heidegger argues that Plato misses the import of these transitions by locating truth statically in the Forms outside the cave. Had he emphasized the transitions rather than the stages themselves, Plato would have seen that hiddenness belongs to revelation: that there is no unconcealment without concealment, no truth without untruth. After all, what is ontologically most unconcealed (i.e., the realm of the Forms) is most *concealed* from the perspective of the cave dwellers and vice versa. Perhaps most radical of all, then, is Heidegger’s recognition that the prisoner is not fully freed for the truth in the “third” stage, when he looks upon the Forms, but rather in the “fourth” stage, when he returns to the cave: “the ascent does not proceed upwards, to something higher, but *backwards*.”³⁸

35. *Ibid.*, 49; translation modified.

36. *Ibid.*, 26.

37. *Ibid.*, 44.

38. *Ibid.*, 58.

Again, Plato crowns as philosopher-king the one who chooses to endure the pain of this homeward journey, but for Heidegger the re-descent is not just a matter of compassion or duty; it is a matter of the happening of truth itself. If truth is not lodged within the Forms, but in the transitions between truth and untruth, then the one who simply takes up residence outside the cave is *not actually free*. As Heidegger puts it, “whoever comes out of the cave only to lose himself in the ‘appearing’ of the ideas would not truly understand these . . . as wrenching beings from hiddenness and overcoming their concealment. He would regard the ideas themselves as just beings of a higher order. Deconcealment would not *occur* at all.”³⁹ Since truth only takes place as the transition from hiddenness to unhiddenness, there is no truth without hiddenness. Truth’s very occurrence therefore depends upon “*a return from the sunlight.*”⁴⁰

It is at this point, however, that matters begin to get complicated. When Heidegger calls the cave an allegory for the occurrence of truth, he does not mean that it tells the story of a person’s learning a truth that exists somewhere. To the contrary, truth itself *happens* as the one man exits and returns to the cave. This is to say that truth depends on the liberated person it forms: “the essence of truth *qua alêtheia* is deconcealment, therefore located in man himself.” Admitting that he has performed a “daring” reduction of Truth to “something human,” Heidegger adds the qualification that, of course, “everything depends on what ‘human’ means here.”⁴¹ The truth does not come into being through everyday, cavelly people (cf. “the they” of *Being and Time*), but only through the one who makes it out of and back into the cave. Effecting the truth, this man effectively *becomes* truth, becomes himself as truth. And so the formation of this “man” as unconcealment-itself makes him the unconcealer: the man is finally liberated when he becomes liberator of the people who remain in the cave. Ultimately, then, the fourth stage in the gradual emergence of truth is decisive for Heidegger because it marks the arrival of this liberator:

Liberation does not achieve its final goal merely by ascent to the sun. Freedom is not *just* a matter of being *unshackled*, nor just a matter of being free *for* the light. Rather, genuine freedom means *to be a liberator* from the dark. The descent back into the cave is not some subsequent diversion on the part of those who have become free, perhaps undertaken from curiosity about

39. Heidegger, *Essence of Truth*, 66.

40. *Ibid.*, 63.

41. *Ibid.*, 54, 55.

how the cave looks from above, but is the only manner through which freedom is genuinely *realized*.⁴²

As we know both from Plato's account and Heidegger's gloss, however, this liberator's homecoming is not exactly celebrated with a ticker tape parade. Just as his eyes were blinded by the sun in the transition to the third stage, they are blinded again by the darkness in the transition to the fourth. Far from greeting him as their leader and following him to freedom, his compatriots begin to say of him that he went all that way to wreck his eyesight, and if he tries to help them see, they will probably try to *kill* him.⁴³ With this difficulty in mind, Plato goes on to discuss the gradual readjustment from light to darkness that the philosopher-king would first have to undergo before helping his cave-mates to adjust their eyes from darkness to light: "Therefore each of you in turn must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others and grow accustomed to seeing in the dark. *When you are used to it*, you'll see vastly better than the people down there."⁴⁴ Concretely, this acclamation takes shape for Plato as fifteen years of practical political training in the cave (539e–540a). The Heideggerian account, on the other hand, cuts out before all of this: "if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?" And here Heidegger's story ends.

Bound by this execution, Heidegger's account of the occurrence of truth is entirely tied up with violence. The liberator's tendency to be murdered is merely the final phase of what has been an ethically questionable process from the beginning. Heidegger writes: "liberation, in the sense of turning around towards the light of the sun, is *violent*. Attaining what is . . . unhidden involves violence, thus . . . resistance, such that the one to be freed is forced up along a rugged path. The ascent demands work and exertion, causing strain and suffering . . . a sudden ripping loose, followed by, outside the cave, a *slow adaptation*."⁴⁵ What is offensive to Heidegger about the murder of the philosopher, then, is not the introduction of force into the history of truth, but rather the use of force by the *wrong party*. Because he is attuned to truth, only the liberator may exert force over others. Because he understands beings' unconcealment, he is transformed into beings' unconcealer, and "only then does he gain power to the violence he

42. *Ibid.*, 66.

43. Plato, *Republic*, 517a.

44. *Ibid.*, 520c; emphasis added.

45. Heidegger, *Essence of Truth*, 32.

must employ in liberation.”⁴⁶ This necessary violence takes two different forms in Heidegger’s 1931 lectures. The first is that the philosopher will force others to repeat his journey, “dragging . . . the others out into the light which already fills and binds his own view.”⁴⁷ It should be noted here that, inasmuch as the liberator’s vision is still exclusively “bound” to the light, he has not taken any time at all—let alone Plato’s fifteen years—to learn how to see in the dark before dragging others out of it. So the “slow adaptation” is for some reason limited to the space outside the cave. Inside the cave, Heidegger does not seem to hold out much hope at all for an equal and opposite readjustment to the darkness. He maintains that since the liberator’s “assertions fail to correspond to what everyone down there agrees upon is correct,” the liberator will not even try to see from their perspective (in the manner, one might say, of Socrates): “The philosopher will not himself challenge this all too obligatory cave-chatter,” Heidegger announces, “but will leave it to itself, instead immediately seizing hold of *one* person (or a few) and pulling him out, attempting to lead him on the long journey out of the cave.”⁴⁸

From what immediately follows this passage, however, we see that while the philosopher will not stoop to the level of engaging this mindless “cave-chatter,” he does not just “leave it to itself,” either. Rather, he openly contradicts what the cave people say by means of “assertions” the people will never understand—that is, whenever he is not leading forced marches out of the cave. “The liberated one returns to the cave with an eye for *being*,” Heidegger explains.

This means that he who has been filled with the illuminating view for the being of beings will make known to the cave-dwellers his thoughts on what *they*, down there, take for beings. He can only do this if he remains true to himself in his liberated stance. He will report what he sees in the cave from the standpoint of his view of essence. . . . On the basis of his view of essence, *he knows in advance, before he returns to the cave*, what “shadows” mean, and upon what their possibility is grounded. Only because he *already knows* this is he able, returning to the cave, to demonstrate that the unhidden now showing itself upon the wall is caused by the fire in the cave, that this unhidden is shadow.⁴⁹

46. *Ibid.*, 60.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 63.

49. *Ibid.*, 64–65; emphasis added.

If the forced marches out of the cave constitute one form of violence, I would argue that these “assertions” inside it constitute another. There is no mention here of the slow and painful recalibration that the being-dazzled philosopher must undergo in order to see the shadows in the cave again. He knows everything he needs to know before he heads back down, and so never takes the time to learn to see what the cave folk see. This is the reason that his view will remain incompatible with theirs. His relationship with the people in the cave is thus irremediably agonistic, for all this “liberator” can do is lecture at an audience that will never understand him or *force* a few of them to understand him by tearing them away from the cave, at which point the others will want to kill him. And, in the midst of all this violence and counterviolence, Heidegger mentions incidentally that these philosophers “are to become *phulakês*, guardians. Control and organization of the state is to be undertaken by philosophers.”⁵⁰ Somehow, even though the philosophers can’t understand the shadows within it, fail to communicate inside it, provoke homicidal tendencies among those who live there, and spend most of their time wrestling one or two promising young boys *out* of it, the philosophers will rule the cave.

What has happened here?

Heidegger, it seems, has lost sight of his most profound insight: that truth takes place in the *transitions*, or encounters, between darkness and light, *and vice versa*. By ignoring the considerable problem of the neophyte philosopher’s inability to see in the dark, by insisting that his focus is solely on being and essence and light, Heidegger not only makes a violent and useless polemicist out of the philosopher-king but also reinscribes precisely what he calls “*Plato’s doctrine of truth*.” For, if the liberator returns to the cave with his eyes trained only on what is *not* in the cave, then the implication is that, *before* he returns, he already has—and already *is*—the truth. If nothing in the thoughtless chatter of the cave people can teach him anything about the being and truth and essence that he knows “in advance,” then *truth does not occur in the cave at all*. Surely if concealment and unconcealment happen through one another, then the descent must be seen as integral to the occurrence of truth—not just an opportunity to report on it. But by the end of this account, truth is simply located, just as it is for Heidegger’s Plato, outside the cave: in a being without beings, transcendence without worldliness, and unconcealment without concealment.

Heidegger, I would argue, is partly justified and partly unjustified in reading *Plato* in this manner (but his *own* lapse into this vision remains

50. Heidegger, *Essence of Truth*, 73.

very puzzling indeed). On the one hand, Plato seems to authorize the notion that the return to the cave cannot teach the philosopher anything. In the illustration of the divided line, for example, Plato describes the highest form of *nous* as reaching conclusions “without making use of anything visible at all, but only of forms themselves, moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms.”⁵¹ On the other hand, Plato has Socrates ridicule those otherworldly philosophers who live out their days on the “Isles of the Blessed,” and who stubbornly refuse “to go down again to the prisoners in the cave and share their labors and honors.”⁵² In this notion of “sharing,” Socrates preemptively repudiates Heidegger’s insistence that the returned philosopher will refuse to listen to “cave chatter.” Even more radical, however, is Socrates’ account of the end of the cavely readjustment period that Heidegger omits. After fifteen years of political training in the cave, Socrates says, “at the age of fifty, those who’ve survived the tests and been successful both in practical matters and in the sciences must be led to the goal and compelled to lift up the radiant light of their souls to what itself provides light for everything. And *once they’ve seen the Good itself*, they must each in turn put the city, its citizens, and themselves in order, using it as their model.”⁵³ This is nothing if not astonishing: what Socrates says quite explicitly here is that it is only *after* the philosophers have readjusted their vision to the blinding darkness that they finally see the Good itself. *In the midst of the cave*. And is this not what Heidegger has been saying all along? That the truth always and only opens in and through the untruth that conceals and reveals it? Why then does Heidegger cave in to such a facile bifurcation between the cave and the open, untruth and truth, shadows and things-in-themselves? And what would it mean to retell the story in such a way that truth might genuinely take place in their between—in the interstices of what is embodied in the “cave” and what is promised in the “open”?

Heidegger’s second translation and interpretation of this allegory gets us a bit closer than the first to opening this betweenness, if ultimately by shutting it down in the opposite direction. In his 1947 essay on the cave, Heidegger stresses even more strongly the priority of the transitions over the stages themselves and, promisingly, almost always counters his references to the upward adjustment with equal and opposite rhetorical nods to the downward adjustment. In the first few pages, for example, he argues that

51. Plato, *Republic*, 511b–c.

52. *Ibid.*, 519c–d.

53. *Ibid.*, 540a–b.

“the ‘allegory’ recounts a series of movements rather than just reporting on the dwelling places and conditions of people inside and outside the cave. In fact, the movements that it recounts are movements of passage out of the cave into the daylight and then back out of the daylight into the cave.”⁵⁴ In this version of the story, even more explicitly than in the first, the one who makes his way out of the cave is meant to make his way back *down* to free those who are still imprisoned within it. The most striking difference between the two narratives, however, is that the second presents its reader with a liberator who has very little confidence in his ability to liberate.

In 1947, what concerns Heidegger far more than it had sixteen years earlier—before the war, before the Rectorship, before the humiliating appearances in front of the denazification committee—is the problem of the philosopher’s night blindness. In marked contrast to the picture of poorly received triumphalism he paints in his earlier account, Heidegger now steeps his philosopher in political impotence: “the one who has been freed is *supposed* to lead these people too away from what is unhidden for them and to bring them face to face with the most unhidden. But the *would-be* liberator no longer knows his or her way around the cave and risks the danger of succumbing to the overwhelming power of the kind of truth that is normative down there, the danger of being *overcome* by the claim of the common ‘reality’ to be the only reality.”⁵⁵

In this version, as in the earlier one, the philosopher is “threatened with the possibility of being put to death,” and the downward descent is portrayed agonistically as a “battle waged within the cave between the liberator and the prisoners who resist all liberation.” Unlike the pontificator/bodysnatcher of the first scenario, however, the philosopher in this second one is a profoundly *vulnerable* character whose grasp on his “vision for essence” once he returns to the cave is tenuous at best.⁵⁶ In marked contrast to the Liberator of 1931, who descends with a full knowledge of the truth and remains blind to his blindness, this more circumspect would-be liberator of 1947 recognizes not only that it is difficult to hold fast to the truth of the “open,” but also that he “no longer knows his way around the cave.”⁵⁷

Frustratingly, this newfound circumspection does not lead Heidegger to say that the philosopher should learn how to see again. The philosopher can only readjust to the dark, Heidegger maintains, insofar as he ceases to be

54. Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth,” 165.

55. *Ibid.*, 171.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*

what he has become, giving up his vision of the truth in order to recall “the kind of truth that is normative down there.” Just as in the 1931 reading, the viewpoints of the cave and the open are exclusive of one another, and only the latter is the locus of philosophy. Even though there is no talk of violent draggings or impassioned speeches in the 1947 text, there are still two totally separate abodes: “the one inside and the one outside the cave. . . . The kind of astuteness that is normative down there in the cave . . . is surpassed by another *sophia*. This latter strives solely and above all to glimpse the being of beings in the ‘ideas.’ . . . Outside the cave *sophia* is *philosophia*.”⁵⁸ Just like the first reading, then, the second deconstructs (or reconstructs, which in a supposedly deconstructive text, amounts to the same thing). Heidegger caves, reconsolidating truth into its “Platonic” abode in the third stage. In fact, this second collapse is even more explicit than the first, because while Heidegger had at least initially tried in 1931 to maintain the decisiveness of the re-descent in stage 4, here he argues that “real freedom is only attained in stage three,” that “authentic” liberation only occurs outside the cave.⁵⁹ So while it is the philosopher’s destiny to become a misunderstood politician in the first interpretation, his best option in the second would probably be to remain out in the open where his vision of “the most unconcealed” is the most unobstructed. Equally problematic positions, the liberator of 1931 reenters the world to wage war with it, while the philosopher of 1947 would be wise, in the words of David Hume, to “make [his] escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy.”⁶⁰

At the very end of this second commentary, however, Heidegger begins to point toward a path for future thinking. He writes that while thinking must return to its origins in order to begin again, this repetition must be nonidentical in order to move thinking forward. Any “recollection” of Platonic truth cannot “take over unconcealment merely in Plato’s sense”; it must also attune itself to “the ‘positive’ in the ‘privative’ essence of *alêtheia*”—that is, to forgetting, hiddenness, and untruth.⁶¹ Presumably, then, insofar as genuine attention to truth as unconcealment would always reveal an equiprimordial concealment, such thinking would maintain itself within their relentless oscillation. It would have to take its placeless place *between* hiddenness and revelation, darkness and light, beings and being, and earth and sky. While Heidegger’s own read-

58. Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth,” 180.

59. *Ibid.*, 169.

60. Hume, “Natural History of Religion,” 185.

61. Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth,” 182.

ings never quite sustain this possibility, then, these last moments of this essay can be heard as a call for *another* rereading of the cave—one that might *stay with* the liminality and caveliness that both of Heidegger's own accounts ultimately flee.

The philosopher in this schema would neither escape the cave forever nor live among shadows without looking at them, nor lose sight of the way shadows can be deceptive. Rather, she would be the one attuned, as Plato tells us, to the Forms and the material realm, the stars and the dirt, the truth and the shadows; moreover, to push beyond Plato, to the total interrelation of these terms: to the unconcealment of the most concealed; the truth as it opens through the most untrue; or being as it occurs in even the most negligible being.

In other words, the truth that Heidegger ultimately attributes to the exit from the cave would open in and through the cave itself. This is to say, there is no spatial separation between the “cave” and the “open,” no “other world” to oppose to “this one”; rather, *the space of the cave is all there is*. Just as “authenticity” for the early Heidegger is simply a “modified grasp of everydayness,” “truth” would emerge by means of the cave-chatter, as a different way of hearing. The extraordinary would show itself through the everyday, as a different way of seeing. Rather than opening onto some other world, this genuinely “Heideggerian” truth would unsettle the “Platonic” effort to abandon the ordinary by seeing the extraordinary through it. And attending to the ordinary, as Heidegger has been telling us all along, is the work of wonder. As he writes in 1937, “wonder does not divert itself from the usual but on the contrary adverts to it, precisely as what is the most unusual of everything and in everything.”⁶²

Once More to the Cave

So where are we? In particular, where are we with respect to Hannah Arendt's charge that Heidegger's overlooking earthly atrocities was a matter of his having dwelled too long in wonder? It seems that this charge holds only if wonder takes place in the so-called third stage—in the exit from the cave. If wonder wonders at Forms and essence and light, then coming back down to reality, to people and politics, requires abandoning wonder. What we have seen from Heidegger's analysis of wonder, however, is that it does not wonder at the extraordinary as such; rather, wonder wonders at the unusuality of the most usual of all. And what we have seen from his

62. Heidegger, *Basic Questions*, 145.

Practices of Wonder

readings of the cave is that the philosopher *ought* to find the truth opening out through the world of the shadows. Both of these lines of analysis show that a thinking that would “dwell” in wonder, if such a thing were possible, would be fiercely attuned to the ordinary. Neither lodged in unreflective everydayness (the usual as usual) nor floating in the philosophical clouds (the unusual as unusual), wonder would dwell in between them, in that strange rhythm of *Verhaltenheit*: between the shock of the ordinary, and the awe that the extraordinary happens through the ordinary as such.

So *Er/schrecken* hits us in those moments when something familiar—something we’ve never thought to question or even look at properly—becomes suddenly beautiful, or horrifying, or inadmissible. This shock opens onto a “new wonder,” or awe (*Scheu*), which can have the sense of gratitude, or disgust, or even outrage, as we realize that that which simply cannot be, somehow is. So shock hits in those moments when a squirrel becomes suddenly majestic, or an ordinary word like “knowledge” becomes inscrutable, or an ordinary practice like driving my car becomes ethically insupportable. And awe reveals that this majesty is what a squirrel is; that unknowability is constitutive of knowledge; and irresponsibility insists itself even through responsibility. Wonder dwells in this relentless between. And in fact, it may be that even a word like “between” fails us here, because in wonder’s shock and awe, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the true and the untrue, the earthly and the ideal open in and through one another, even perhaps *as* one another. The truth in the common stuff we overlook, being in the beings we brush aside, the homely “here” where Heraclitus’s gods are also. We therefore need a different dimensionality entirely; neither the vertical transcendence of the cave and the open nor some undifferentiated immanence, but something fractal, perhaps, or holographic, or chaotic. This would be the place from which we’d have to go once more to the cave; here where our most familiar story has become unfamiliar, all our bearings gone, and thinking seems impossible: “this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else.”

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. "Martin Heidegger at Eighty." In *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, edited by Michael Murray, 293–303. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.
- . "Philosophy and Politics." *Social Research* 57 (1990) 73–103.
- Aristotle. "Metaphysics." In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Descartes, René. *The Passions of the Soul*. Translated by Stephen H. Voss. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Concepts*. Translated by Gary E. Aylesworth. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- . *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected "Problems" of "Logic."* Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- . *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- . *Contributions to Philosophy (from Enowning)*. Translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- . *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*. Translated by Ted Sadler. London: Continuum, 2002.
- . "Plato's Doctrine of Truth." In *Pathmarks*, edited by William McNeill, 155–82. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Hume, David. "The Natural History of Religion." In *Dialogues and the Natural History of Religion*, edited by J. C. A. Gaskin, 134–96. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.
- . *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.
- Plato. *Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Edited by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992.
- . *Theaetetus*. Edited by Bernard Williams and Miles Burnyeat. Translated by M. J. Levett. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992.
- Rubenstein, Mary-Jane. *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Safranski, Rüdiger. *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*. Translated by Ewald Osers. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.