

Ecstatic Self-Determination. A Reflection on the Possibility of an Ontological Correspondence between Heidegger's Dasein and Plotinus' Nous

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Abstract: With reference to previous research on the relation between Heidegger's thought and Neoplatonism, this investigation seeks to show concisely how—despite the profound distance between the finitude of Dasein and Plotinus' doctrine of the divine Nous—there exists a fundamental correspondence regarding their ontological structure. This correspondence may be described as a phenomenological principle of the necessary precedence of the pre-determinate and pre-present horizon over the ecstatic openness. That is to say, there must already be a primordial horizon through which openness to beings as presence becomes possible at all. By examining this structure in both the early and later Heidegger, and through a phenomenological approach to Plotinus's doctrine of the Nous' self-determination in its turning toward the One, the paper argues that a common fundamental paradigm of rationality can be discerned, i.e. a mode of thinking that is no longer metaphysical in the onto-theological sense, yet capable of unifying within itself the two essential moments of ecstatic openness and self-determination.

Keywords: clearing, horizon, openness, self-determination

Over the past several decades, both affirmative and critical studies have been devoted to exploring the possibility of a structural connection between Heidegger's thought and Neoplatonism, particularly that of Plotinus. The central claim of such research is that in the conception of the history of metaphysics as Ontotheology, Heidegger prominently ignores Neoplatonic philosophy and that, had he taken it seriously, he might have recognized that, contrary to his own critique of metaphysics, there exists a form of thinking whose grounding of Being and beings is not established in the constant presence of a first substance, supreme

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being, subjectivity and absolute spirit as absolute self-presence or as the totality of presence. Rather, in a manner strikingly close to Heidegger's own later thought, the Neoplatonic model conceives the origin of Being as lying in the One (ἕν)—prior to and beyond any determination and appearance, any substantiality, reflection, presence or self-presence, and indeed beyond any possible attribution of the copula "is," i.e., an origin that withdraws from all presence. From this standpoint, the Clearing (*Lichtung*) of Being in Heidegger's later thought has been interpreted as corresponding to Plotinus's One, forming the basis for a critique of Heidegger's own critique of the whole history of metaphysics as Ontotheology.¹ In this light, scholars have emphasized that Heidegger's concept of the ontological difference can clearly be traced within Neoplatonic thinking of the One, since the origin of beings is not reduced to a first being or to the totality of beings conceived as the absolute presence of a self-thinking spirit or subjectivity. Rather, like Heidegger, Plotinus understands the origin of the appearance and presence of Being of beings as nothingness, calling the One "nothing of all" (οὐδὲν τῶν πάντων).²

On this basis, recent studies have further argued that, for both Heidegger and the Neoplatonists, the possibility of knowing or approaching the origin of Being must necessarily take the form of a pre-predicative or pre-propositional mode of thinking, since the origin in question is the pre-determinate and pre-present horizon that cannot be grasped within the structure of predicative assertion. Consequently, for both, thought concerning the pre-determinate origin takes on a poetic structure, and ultimately, all saying is rooted in the richness of silence.³ For the Neoplatonists, the essential criterion of such pre-propositional thinking lies in the duality and multiplicity inherent in every predication and determination, and in the necessary priority of the One over both. For Heidegger, this takes the form of the priority of the Clearing over any

¹ For example, see Klaus Kremer, "Zur ontologischen Differenz. Plotin und Heidegger," in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 43 (1989), 673–694. Also see Werner Beierwaltes, *Das wahre Selbst* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2001), 120–122; and Beierwaltes' detailed essay on Heidegger and Neoplatonism: "EPEKEINA, Eine Anmerkung zu Heideggers Platon-Rezeption," in *Fussnoten zu Plato* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2011), 371–388. Regarding the critique of Heidegger's conception of the history of metaphysics as Ontotheology and the history of the forgetfulness of Being in light of Neoplatonism and the role of the One therein, see Wayne J. Hankey, "Why Heidegger's 'History' of Metaphysics is Dead," in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 78:3 (2004), 425–443. Also see Reiner Schürmann, "Neoplatonic Henology as an Overcoming of Metaphysics," in *Research in Phenomenology*, 13:1 (1983), 25–41.

² "Nothing of all" (οὐδὲν τῶν πάντων), in the sense that it "precedes the totality" (πρὸ τῶν πάντων). Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ed. by Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), III. 8. 9.

³ See chap. 7 of Emile Alexandrow, *The Other Platonist Beginning: Heidegger and Neoplatonism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2024), 288–306.

appearing or mode of Being that can be expressed under the copula “is.” Recent scholarship has also emphasized the shared foundation between Heidegger and Neoplatonism in their critique of the metaphysics of substance, since, for the Neoplatonists, every idea or being is constituted only through relational participation within the total horizon of Being as the unity of the whole (ἐν πάντα). The Aristotelian notion of οὐσία as an independent, self-subsistent individual thus is overcome and gives way to a dialectical conception of relationality within the totality of Being, where relation itself takes precedence over the relata⁴.

On the basis of these studies—and seeking to take them a step further—this paper proposes that Heidegger’s interpretation of the relation of sameness (αὐτό, *Selbigkeit*) between thinking (νοεῖν) and Being (εἶναι), as presented in *Identity and Difference*⁵ and in “Maira,”⁶ can be brought into proximity with Plotinus’s theory of the relatedness of Nous towards the One. Both can thus be reinterpreted within a common fundamental structural correspondence.

The evident difficulty in pursuing this comparison is that Heidegger’s understanding of νοεῖν and thinking in Parmenides refers to the human being, Dasein, whereas Plotinus in speaking of νοῦς and νοεῖν, does not refer primarily to human being but rather to divine intellect, i.e. to the intelligible structure of Being itself, the intelligible cosmos as the world of ideas. Yet despite this apparent distance, I shall argue that the ontological structure of intellect (νοῦς) and thinking (νόησις) in Plotinus and of Dasein’s existential structure in Heidegger both follow a common fundamental insight, which I call *ecstatic self-determination*. At first glance, this expression seems paradoxical: self-determination suggests a reflexive, circular, and self-enclosed activity, whereas ἔκστασις (*Ekstase*) signifies precisely the overcoming of reflexivity—the movement of going beyond oneself and being opened to what transcends oneself.

I will seek to show, in three steps, how such a structure first takes shape in Heidegger’s account of the ontological constitution of Dasein; second, how it finds its analogue in Plotinus’s doctrine of the Nous; and finally, how, by interpreting Plotinus phenomenologically through Heidegger, one can articulate a new conception of rationality—one that is no longer metaphysical in the onto-theological sense, but grounded in the unity of ecstatic openness and self-determination.

⁴ See chaps. 3 and 5 of James Filler, *Heidegger, Neoplatonism, and the History of Being: Relation as Ontological Ground* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Der Satz der Identität (1957),” in *Identität und Differenz*, GA 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006).

⁶ Martin Heidegger, “Maira (Parmenides, Fragment VIII, 34–41) (1952),” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, GA 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000).

Self-Projection and Ecstatic Openness in Dasein

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger conceives the ontological structure of Dasein as temporality, as the meaning of Dasein's Being which is thought within the "ecstatic-horizonal unity."⁷ The two constitutive elements of temporality—ecstasis and horizon—are, each in its own sense, modes of openness. Dasein, in its very Being, is the structure of being-directed-toward-encounter—that is, openness as being-toward-the-presence-of-beings. For encounter to occur, Dasein's temporality must, in its ecstasies (*Ekstasen*), be an act of transcending—an *ἐκστασις*—toward the horizon of encounter. Ekstasis is the very act of transcending toward the horizon, and the horizon is the destination of this transcending, the field within which encounter becomes possible. Dasein must thus transcend beings toward the horizon of the appearing of beings—that is, toward the horizon of the world, within which the connection between the two aspects of being-in-the-world and intra-worldly being is made possible.

However, the horizon is not a third entity; rather, it is the horizon of appearance itself, which is opened only through Dasein's own transcendence. Heidegger emphasizes in *Being and Time* that it is the very ecstatic movement of Dasein that brings forth and opens its own horizon as the direction of its transcendence.⁸ Thus, when the openness and ecstatic movement of Dasein are directed toward the horizon of the world—which is itself opened through that same ecstatic openness—this movement of openness turns back upon itself. The ecstatic openness coincides with the horizonal openness, such that Dasein, within the ecstatic-horizonal unity of temporality, returns to itself in a circular form. Heidegger calls this ecstatic self-reflexivity the "existential sameness" (*esistenziale Selbigkeit*) or even "existential solipsism."⁹ At this point, the structure of reflexivity seems to have been transposed onto an existential level, since Heidegger explicitly states in *Being and Time* that the "Lichtung"—the Clearing—is none other than the *da* of Dasein itself, and that the traditional notion of "natural light of reason" (*lumen naturale*) is an "ontic" image of the same openness of Dasein.¹⁰ Thus, in Heidegger's early understanding of the ontological structure of Dasein, Dasein is, at once, open and ecstatic toward the horizon and yet, in its existential-reflexive identity with itself, self-determining. Heidegger calls temporality "self-projection in

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, GA 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 365.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

the absolute sense" (*Selbstentwurf schlechthin*),¹¹ for one can no longer ask for a ground beyond the chain of projection—from beings to Being, and from Being to temporality.

After the turn, however, Heidegger no longer identifies the Clearing with the Da of Dasein or with its "existential sameness." He now insists that ecstatic being (*Ek-sistenz*) of Dasein is grounded within and belongs to the Clearing itself. In this sense, Dasein's standing-out is an in-standing (*Inständigkeit*) within the Clearing.¹² Ecstatic openness is thus understood as necessarily conditioned on the prior horizon of the Clearing as the Beyng itself. In other words, "natural light" is no longer the possession of Dasein's Da, leading, in the Aristotelian sense, to the reflexive identity of intellect and the intelligible. Instead, in a Platonic manner—by recalling the Allegory of the Sun in *Republic* 507d–508b—lighting is now understood as the enabling condition for both seeing ($\nu\omicron\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$) and the visibility ($\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$) of beings. It transcends both poles of the relation, making them possible as related. This understanding corresponds precisely to Heidegger's interpretation of the "sameness" ($\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}$) between $\nu\omicron\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$ and $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ in Parmenides. The event of sameness must be understood as a belonging-together (*Zusammengehören*), through which both intellect—as ecstatic revealing ($\acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\varphi\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$)—and Being of beings—as self-showing ($\varphi\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$)—can become possible in their reciprocal relation.¹³ As Heidegger writes in "Letter on Humanism," it is only through the Clearing that the "light" and the "outlook" arise for the seeing of intellect and the visibility of Being of beings in their sameness.¹⁴

Yet this should not lead us to think that Dasein, in Heidegger's later thought, no longer projects Being of beings, only passively receiving Being from the prior giving of the Clearing. Rather, Dasein finds its in-standing (*Inständigkeit*) ecstatically within the Clearing so that it may project Being of beings. The Clearing is, therefore, no longer identical to the *da* of Dasein, nor even with Being of beings. The Clearing, as the event of sameness, is Beyng itself, prior to both Dasein and Beingness of beings, and this priority makes possible the reciprocal relation between Dasein and Being of beings. After the *Kehre*, Heidegger explicitly distinguishes between Beyng itself (*Seyn selbst*) and Being of beings or Beingness (*Seiendheit*), stating that Beyng itself is the "ground" which "grants" the very possibility of Being of beings.¹⁵

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, GA 24 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 437.

¹² Martin Heidegger, "Einleitung zu Was ist Metaphysik (1949)," in *Wegmarken*, GA 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 374.

¹³ See Heidegger, GA 11, 45–48.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Brief über den Humanismus (1946)," in *Wegmarken*, GA 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 332.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Hegel*, GA 68 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993), 51.

The necessity of the priority of the horizon as Clearing over the ecstatic character of Dasein lies in this: without the prior horizon, ecstatic openness would collapse into a self-enclosed reflexive circle, rendering the very movement of transcendence impossible. The reflexive model of total self-presence abolishes openness, namely, the essential character of φαίνεσθαι in Being and ἀποφαίνεσθαι of intellect and logos.¹⁶ In such a case, the sameness of intellect and Being degenerates into the closed self-referentiality. As Heidegger notes in his Letter to Jünger, ecstatic transcendence (*Transzendenz, Überstieg*), which belongs essentially to openness, inverts into its opposite: a descending regression (*Reszendenz, Rückstieg*).¹⁷ Thus, an unopened, self-referential and reflectively closed intellect in itself conceived as absolute self-presence falls away from ἀποφαίνεσθαι and becomes instead non-intellect or irrationality.

The priority of the horizon over Ekstasis is precisely what makes possible the directedness and transcending movement through which projection and determination occur. The reciprocal interweaving between the active aspect of ecstatic projection and disclosure on the part of Dasein, and the receptive aspect of in-standing and thrownness under the precedence of the horizon, is what makes the structure of openness intelligible as the act of letting-be (*das Lassen* as *Seinlassen*).

The Self-Determination of Nous through its Turning toward the One

Plotinus, following the Aristotelian notion, conceives Nous as thinking of thinking (νόησις νοήσεως), or self-intuition. Yet, unlike Aristotle, he understands the reflective and self-directed movement of Nous in a dialectical manner, as containing an inner relationality as duality and multiplicity. The unity of Nous in its self-thinking is therefore not a simple unity but a composite one, composed of three constitutive aspects: the active determining aspect, the passive determined aspect, and the mediating movement that unifies them, namely the act of thinking itself. Intellect, in its triadic structure, is the unity of the whole (ἐν πάντα), that is, totality itself.¹⁸ In the self-directed and self-unfolding movement of Nous, Being comes to actuality as intelligibility, and intellect comes to actuality as Being. Thus, in

¹⁶ Heidegger, *GA 2*, 34.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, "Zur Seinsfrage (1955)," in *Wegmarken, GA 9* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 398.

¹⁸ See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, V.3.5.43. For a critique of Plotinus on the claim that the divine Nous cannot be simple, see V.1. 9. 15–23. See also Jens Halfwassen, "Metaphysics of the One and the Theology of Nous: Plotinus' Critique of Aristotle" in *Der Aufstieg zum Einen: Untersuchungen zu Platon und Plotin* (München: K. G. Saur, 2006), 210–214.

its ontological structure, Nous is the unity of sameness between thinking and Being.¹⁹ In this sense, Nous is self-determining, because it turns toward itself and, in this reflective self-relatedness, finds itself as its own intelligible content. In this inward mediation, Nous first introduces an internal distinction within itself as the distinction between intellect and the intelligible, and then returns to itself, bringing itself into unity through its own mediation. Hence, Nous, as the intelligible structure of Being, is a unity-in-multiplicity as totality, and its structural unity of self-relationality consists simultaneously in two correlative acts: self-differentiation and self-mediation, whose result is self-determination.²⁰ Accordingly, Nous, in Plotinus's thought, is a movement of self-projection in the sense of self-determination.

Yet if we see the unity of Nous only within this inner dialectical mediation—as Hegel interpreted it²¹—as the unity of totality and as absolute self-presence, it will entirely constitute its ontological – that is to say, onto-theological – structure. Nous would then have no prior horizon toward which it is ecstatic; it would form a closed, circular totality in itself, and in its self-sameness it would itself be its own horizon. However, Plotinus, unlike Aristotle and also unlike Hegel,²² does not regard Nous as the ultimate or primordial principle, nor does he understand the unity of totality within it as self-sufficient. Rather, for Plotinus, Nous is, prior to all self-determining movement and prior even to its self-presence and actuality, ecstatic toward the One as absolute transcendence and priority.

To elucidate this structure, Plotinus employs a vivid image: Nous looks toward the One and intends its unity, yet never reaches the One itself beyond all determination; rather, by gazing toward the One, it attains unity within itself as its own determination.²³ Conceptually expressed, Intellect, as the act of seeking the unity as self-unification, self-determination and self-relation, must already stand in an ecstatic relation to the prior horizon of the pure, pre-determinate and pre-presential unity in order to project and realize itself as self-relational reflective unity-with-itself. Nous must already stand in

¹⁹ For a detailed exposition, see Jens Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus* (München: C.H. Beck, 2004), 66–68.

²⁰ See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, V.4.2.3–7.

²¹ See Jens Halfwassen, “Nous as Subjectivity in Hegel’s Interpretation of Plotinus” in *Hegel und der spätantike Neuplatonismus* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2016), 365–373.

²² In the essay “Hegel und die Griechen (1958)”, Heidegger criticizes Hegel’s position by stating that prior to the absolute self-presence of the spirit, the concealment of “the Clearing” must prevail, and that presence itself emerges into unconcealment from concealment. See Heidegger, “Hegel und die Griechen (1958)”, in *Wegmarken, GA 9* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 440–444.

²³ See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, V.2.1.9–13.

and stand ecstatic toward the prior horizon of unity, so that its movement of seeking unity may be rendered possible.

Thus, from a phenomenological standpoint, the One occupies the position of the prior horizon for the ecstatic intentionality of Nous. The horizon gives the possibility and scope of vision, yet it never itself becomes an object of sight, i.e. idea as intelligibility. The horizon is what makes the ἔκστασις of Nous possible by opening the horizon of unity before Nous, so that Nous may enter its unifying movement and realize itself. Hence, although Nous actively determines itself, such activity always already takes place under the precedence of the prior horizon of unity that is in no way a unity of reflexive identity or of determination, but one that precedes every determination. This unity precedes all appearance, presentation and presence; it is prior to every manner of Being, being-something, substance (οὐσία) and Idea. This prior horizon—what Heidegger would call the Clearing—withdraws itself from appearance and presence precisely in order to preserve within itself the very possibility of appearance and presence.

The Possibility of an Ontological Correspondence

Beyond the clear distance between the finite Dasein in Heidegger and the divine Intellect in Plotinus, there is a shared criterion operative in both, one that prevents Plotinus's doctrine of Nous from being easily subsumed under the heading of metaphysical Onto-theology. This common criterion can be expressed phenomenologically as the necessity of the priority of the pre-determinate horizon over ecstatic movement of determining and projecting. The horizon must be pre-present so that presence itself can become possible within the ecstatic movement, thus, the ecstatic openness of intellect must ground—regarding its ἔκστασις—toward the prior pre-presential horizon.

Under this criterion, the meaning of the fundamental concept of finitude (*Endlichkeit*) in Heidegger's thought also becomes clearer. Finitude, in the sense Heidegger applies it first to Dasein and later even to Being itself, has no ontic meaning, i.e., being limited by other beings. Rather, as Heidegger emphasizes in his later thought concerning the finitude of Being, finitude stands opposed to the infinite as the idea of "totality" or as a closed reflexive circle: "If Being is posited as the infinite, then it is precisely thereby determined."²⁴ As Heidegger puts it, finitude here means something "altogether different": it is "the abyssal groundlessness (*Ab-grund*) of that

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, GA 65 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 268–269.

which lies in the midst.”²⁵ If we ask what stands opposed to the closed and reflexive circle of totality, we encounter, on the basis of Heidegger’s later phenomenological thought, the following answer: the priority of the horizon as the condition of possibility for ecstatic openness; this very precedence over all determination is precisely what means groundlessness.²⁶

The horizon must already be at work so that, on the one hand, the intellect as intentional directedness toward beings may be openness as disclosure (*ἀποφάνεσθαι*), and, on the other hand, the Being of beings may be openness toward intellect as appearance (*φάνεσθαι*). According to Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretation of Parmenides, the priority of the horizon as correlation, as belonging-together (*αὐτό*) must already be at work for both *Nous* and Being, as the two relata of this correlation, to become possible at all. *Dasein* as *νοεῖν* is in its ontological structure for Heidegger *ἔκστασις* (*Ek-sistenz*), standing-out and being-outside-itself, which projects itself in its encounter with beings. Yet for such self-projection to occur at all, it must already stand-in within the precedence of the horizon of the Clearing. From this perspective, Plotinus’s insistence that the divine *Nous* is not the primordial origin, and that it must remain open and ecstatically related to the One as the prior horizon beyond itself, founds the structure of *Nous* not in the onto-theological criterion of pure self-presence, but rather in its ecstatic openness. This structure, in turn, becomes the paradigm for human intellect as well. Within this paradigm, intellect is not reflective self-consciousness as absolute self-presence—which would ultimately negate the very possibility of openness and disclosure—but is, prior to any reflection, ecstatic. Within itself, intellect already shows the structure of transcendence toward the horizon.

Conclusion

In a phenomenological understanding of the ontological structure of *Nous*, we arrive at a model of rationality that is neither, on the one hand, completely self-founded in an onto-theological absolute self-presence, such that it loses its dimension of ecstatic openness, nor, on the other hand, deprived of the activity of disclosure, unification, determination and projection, so as to collapse into a mere passivity and fall outside the scope of the act of *νοεῖν*. Rather, *νοεῖν*, in its very relation to *εἶναι*, is always the act of disclosure. Yet *νοεῖν* can truly be intellect and thinking only insofar as it already stands within the priority of the horizon of the Event of Sameness (*αὐτό*). This condition is precisely the act of letting-be and the stance of

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Besinnung*, GA 66 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 88.

²⁶ See Heidegger, GA 11, 41.

Gelassenheit that defines Dasein as $\nu\omicron\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$. This same condition can likewise be rediscovered within the ontological structure of Nous in Plotinus.

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