CHAPTER 4

Metaphysics and the Mood of Deep Boredom:
Heidegger’s Phenomenology of Mood

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Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of boredom has as its primary concern, not the psychological or anthropological investigation of a mood as something “merely subjective,” but the fundamental philosophical questions that are traditionally the province of metaphysics. Heidegger’s analysis takes boredom not as a “subjective experience” whose possible causes might be a matter of interest to psychology, but as a phenomenon with an essentially temporal character. For boredom is a mood in which time becomes suddenly conspicuous. Heidegger distinguishes three different forms of boredom which make time manifest in different ways. The mood’s relevance to the questions of metaphysics is in the kind of time revealed by “deep” boredom in distinction from the “clock-time” of everyday life. It is Heidegger’s basic philosophical position that our understanding of being always has an inner connection to time through its relation to human temporality.

The name of the twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger is sometimes associated with the attempt to carry out an ontological examination of the phenomenon of mood as part of the treatment of certain questions in metaphysics. Yet it is incongruous that because of the – on principle inaccurate – received classification of him as an existentialist philosopher we associate him in this context largely with an obsession with the phenomena of the mood of Angst. The analysis of Angst appears prominently, as well as in other places, in his major work of 1927 Sein und Zeit (Being and Time) (SZ, 184ff. et passim). But Heidegger’s longest, most exhaustive phenomenological analysis of a mood is in fact that of the mood of boredom (Langeweile). This is presented in his 1929-30 lecture-course held in Freiburg and takes up fully one hundred and sixty pages of the current edition of the text of the course, published as Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik (The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics), thus dwarfing the analysis of Angst in Sein und Zeit. That Heidegger thinks the phenomenon of boredom deserving of such detailed analysis at all, however, and that a lecture actually on the subject of metaphysics should be, as it appears, suddenly interrupted in this way by a lengthy diversion into the investigation of a mood, requires some explanation. Why should philosophy be concerned
with the purely “subjective” quality of boredom? What has boredom to do with metaphysics? The place where we might look for an answer to this question is suggested by the following: of all Heidegger’s writings the analysis of boredom gives us perhaps the best insight available into the objectives and methods of his attempt to overthrow the precedence of logic in philosophy. His advocacy of such a reappraisal of the place of logic is best known from the short inaugural lecture of 1929 “Was ist Metaphysik?” (W, 103-122). Here Heidegger argues that metaphysical questions should not be approached under the terms of the “rule” of logic, in other words the “presupposition that in this question ‘logic’ is the highest authority, that understanding is the means and thinking the way” (W, 107). He takes as an example metaphysical question the “question of ‘the nothing’.” In order to address this question he does not make use of the analytical apparatus of formal logic but instead has recourse to the “illogical,” to a mood, namely the “irrational feeling” of Angst. For “Angst manifests the nothing” (W, 112).

It is characteristic of Heidegger’s philosophy of this period as a whole to deny that logic is a “presupposition” of metaphysics and to seek to show that, on the contrary, “logic […] is grounded in metaphysics” (MAL, 128). His disputing of the presumed priority of logic is of a piece with his basic conviction as to the proper methodological character of philosophy, which he expresses in Sein und Zeit with the assertion that “ontology [i.e., roughly speaking, metaphysics] is possible only as phenomenology” (SZ, 35). The appropriate way into a metaphysical question should be sought in certain determinate moods, laid bare by the methods of phenomenology. For “philosophy always occurs in a fundamental mood” (GM, 10). There is no suggestion that boredom and Angst exhaust the spectrum of possible moods which could be chosen for the task, although the choice of mood is by no means arbitrary.

The question of the nothing is not the only metaphysical question discussed by Heidegger. To pursue further the theme of the “logical” tradition, we can consider a traditional problem in ontology concerning a subject of inquiry first opened up for investigation by Aristotle: the problem of the categories. In the following we shall examine Heidegger’s view of this philosophical problem and his disputing of its merely “logical” status. This will allow us to see the connection between certain themes in traditional metaphysics and Heidegger’s apparently “idiosyncratic” phenomenological method.

1. The Problem of the Categories and their Relation to Time

For Aristotle the categories constitute one of the four fundamental ways in which “entity” – i.e. anything that is – can be said (Met. Δ, 1017 a). Since