COLLOQUIUM 4
PLATO’S QUESTION OF TRUTH
(VERSUS HEIDEGGER’S DOCTRINES)
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ABSTRACT
Heidegger's thesis that truth underwent in Plato a fateful transformation from unconcealment to correctness is well-known because defended in an essay that Heidegger published during his lifetime and that has been widely read since: Plato’s Doctrine of Truth. One goal of the present paper, however, is to show how Heidegger’s interpretation of the Republic’s Cave Analogy in the 1931 course from which the essay is supposedly derived, as well as his interpretation of the Myth of Er in the Parmenides course delivered shortly after the essay’s composition, are in tension with, and even undermine, the essay’s thesis. The other, and more important, goal of my paper is to show that this richer interpretation offers a fruitful approach to the question of truth in Plato that is missed by both Heidegger’s detractors and his defenders.

When one thinks of the topic of Plato and Heidegger on truth, one usually thinks of Plato’s Doctrine of Truth, a 1940 essay (first published in 1942) supposedly deriving from a course Heidegger first gave in 1931/32 and repeated in 1933/34: On the Essence of Truth. Here, as is well known, Heidegger argues that the essence of truth underwent in Plato a fundamental and fateful transformation from unconcealment to correctness. What is not well known is that when Heidegger closely interprets Plato’s texts, as he arguably does not in the 1940 pamphlet, he discovers a much richer conception of truth sharply at odds with the mentioned thesis. The complex history of Heidegger’s interpretation of truth in Plato is far beyond the scope of this or any other paper. I therefore focus on only two key interpretations that are at odds with Heidegger’s thesis, namely, the interpretation of the Cave Analogy in the 1930’s, and the interpretation of the

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1 First published in 1942, though Heidegger tells us that it was “zusammengestellt” in 1940 (1978, 477). Dostal strangely gives 1930/31 as the date the essay was written (1992, 61), presumably on the basis of Heidegger’s claim that the “Gedankengang” goes back to the 1930/31 (an error for 1931/32) course (Heidegger 1978, 477). Obviously, to say that the path of thinking pursued in an essay goes back to 1930/31 is not to say that it was written in 1930/31.


Myth of Er in the 1942 Parmenides course (Heidegger 1982). From the perspective of these two interpretations, not only the thesis of the essay Plato’s Doctrine of Truth, but even more Heidegger’s later retraction of this thesis in favor of the claim that the Greeks always experienced truth only as correctness, will prove untenable.

But why should Heidegger’s interpretation of truth in Plato, especially given its contradictions and inadequacies, concern us at all? One reason is that reflection on Heidegger’s distinction between truth as unconcealment and truth as correctness can, I will argue, shed much light on Plato’s conception of truth, and therefore also on the understanding of philosophy at work in the dialogues. Here Heidegger can be defended against the critiques of Jonathan Barnes (1990), Jan Szaif (1998, especially pp. 145-147), and Enrico Berti (2005), among others. The other reason is that if Heidegger’s thesis of a ‘transformation’ proves ultimately untenable, this is not because Plato’s ‘unsaid doctrine’ was that truth is unconcealment, but rather because truth in Plato is the problematic, tense, and inseparable coexistence of unconcealment and correctness and as such is always an open question. Faced with Heidegger’s own insistence on an opposition between unconcealment and correctness so fundamental that only the postulation of a historical transformation in the essence of truth can account for it and only ‘another beginning’ can redeem it, we can find in Plato a corrective to such an insistence. In short, both Plato and Heidegger stand to gain from their Auseinandersetzung on the question of truth.

I. The Essence of Truth in the Cave Analogy: WS 1931/32 and WS 1933/34

A. Truth as the Play of Concealment and Unconcealment in the Cave

In the courses of 1931/32 and 1933/34 Heidegger’s interpretation of the Cave analogy emphasizes the extent to which it is not a static image but a story, i.e., the story of prisoners being freed from their bonds, gradually making the difficult ascent out of the Cave, and then gradually adjusting their eyes to the light outside the Cave. His account thus divides the analogy into its different stages and focuses our attention on what is happening at each stage. But what he sees these progressive stages as exhibiting is a conception of truth not as correctness and not as a property of assertions, but as a “property” of being, specifically, being in its unconcealment. Heidegger can thus claim in 1931-32 that the central unifying theme of the analogy is “the true” (τὸ ὀληθὲς): “and this has nothing to do with imita-