THINKING IN DECISION

by

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In Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning) Heidegger attempts to prepare a site for a decision that would allow for another beginning not only of philosophy but also of Western history. According to him, this other beginning would transform not only the way we think but also the way a world discloses for human beings. Given that a major decision is what frames and animates Heidegger’s thought in Contributions, in this essay I will read Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy through the notion of decision. Before engaging in this reading I would like to make two preliminary remarks: First, a reading of Contributions through the notion of decision highlights the ethical dimension of this work. By “ethical” I do not mean to say that Contributions offers us an ethics in the traditional sense of a system of thought concerning moral conduct. Contributions neither sets nor follows a moral or political agenda, but rather is ethical in the Ancient Greek sense of the word in that it concerns our customary dwelling on earth.

Second, a reading of Contributions in terms of decision also requires that we free this word from its subjective and anthropological connotations. As Heidegger understands them, fundamental decisions are nothing we—as supposed subjects of our actions—make but rather something determining us.

The main decision at stake in Contributions, as well as in Heidegger’s thinking thereafter, concerns be-ing in its historicality (Geschichtlichkeit). By the historicality of be-ing Heidegger means the disclosive and transformative power of be-ing as an originary occurrence. According to him, the possibility of a disclosive occurrence of be-ing is in danger of getting ultimately lost in the domination of what he calls “machination” (Machenschaft). Machination designates a way of being in which productivity, calculative thought, and adventure (Erlebnis) determine...
how the world, things, and we ourselves are disclosed and understood. It designates a way of relating to things (in the widest sense) in the oblivion of be-ing as such. Machination leaves no room for the wonder of being-t/here (Da-sein), the wonder of be-ing as such, nor does it leave room for a shocking realization, namely, that be-ing has withdrawn from things, i.e., that being has no concrete historical site in which it can shine forth originally. The decision over be-ing’s historicality will determine whether another beginning of history will grant be-ing a historical site (a time-space), which would reveal to us original modes of dwelling on earth and in a world with other beings.

But what makes Contributions ethical is not just that it concerns this decision as its main topic. What gives Contributions its peculiar character, its structure and language, is that this decision over be-ing’s disclosive occurrence is enacted in this work. The thinking of Contributions finds itself in this decision and at the same time occurs as this decision. Thinking participates in a decisive/deciding event that at the same time decides over this thinking itself. Thinking is in decision. But what does it mean to be in decision?

Decisions—in German: Ent-scheidungen—are occurrences that contain a break or cut, as the root meaning of -cision (which resonates, for example, in the English word incision) suggests. This cut articulates both a passing away and an arrival, a closure and an opening, in their unbridgeable difference. To be in decision means to be in this unbridgeable difference, exposed to it, and called to take a stance in it. To be in decision also means that the decision concerns the being of whatever is in decision; it concerns possibilities of being.

We probably all have experienced such standing in decisions, most strikingly in deadly illnesses that struck us our loved ones, in the birth of a child, when we fall in love or find ourselves leaving a companion. In such decisive moments of our lives we find ourselves in decisions we do not make and that transform our lives no matter what stance we take towards what happens in these decisions. As these decisions occur we cannot know where they will take us, and yet despite this blindness, we are called to be responsive and thus responsible towards what happens in them.

The thinking of Contributions finds itself in a similar stance, but one of larger dimensions since what is in decision, according to Heidegger, is not this or that possibility of being, but be-ing’s historicity, the very possibility of a disclosive occurrence of being. According to Heidegger, be-ing as such occurs as the event that grants possibilities