DISCUSSION: RESPONSE TO PETER WARNEK

by

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I would like to begin by thanking Peter Warnek for the lucidity of his remarks and the care with which he has analyzed my attempt to engage with Heidegger’s difficult text. All of Peter’s remarks would require a lengthy response, and I can only hope here to venture a few sketchy replies. Much of what I shall say will be by way of clarification. At times, I shall have no other choice but to be fairly blunt. Following are the two main points to which I wish to return.

There is, first of all, the question of Heidegger’s “anthropocentrism.” As Heidegger himself makes clear, “isms” are, for the most part abdications in the face of the task of thinking and are all-too-easy and reductive ways of labeling thoughts. I must therefore make myself clear on this point.

I would like to begin by marking a difference between anthropomorphism, which I understand as projecting traits or qualities of the human onto the matter at hand (in this particular case, the truth of being), and anthropocentrism, which consists in maintaining a certain privilege (one that Being and Time would have called, and indeed did call, “ontical”) of the human in a discourse bearing on something that exceeds the human, precedes it, and at the same time situates it. What Heidegger accomplishes, and what simply does not allow us to equate such an accomplishment with a straightforward humanism or anthropocentrism, is a radical displacement (which is at once a replacement) of the human, precisely in terms of an originary disclosedness to the very excess I was just evoking: the essence of the human is itself nothing human; it is not grounded in the human itself (who is therefore not its own ground, and thus also not the ground of Nature as such and as a whole). The human is itself only by being (transitively, creatively) that to which it is, from the start, disclosed, but which itself needs to be preserved, or grounded, repeated in and through an instituting act.
We can only recall here Heidegger’s response to Beaufret, according to which his thought is situated on a plane where there is only principally Being, and precisely not only men (as Sartre famously claimed). The human, in the sense developed in Contributions, is nothing like a rational animal or a creature or an autonomous subject. It is only in and through the undoing of, or the being wrested from selfhood in the sense of a self-positing, self-grounding act. The sense of the human developed here is in close proximity to the Nietzschean quest for a humanity beyond the confines of Platonism. This is a sense that is very much to be invented. So, given the radicality of such a move, why still speak of a certain anthropocentrism? Because, despite everything, there remains the problematic of the proper and the own, of ap-propriation and owning (albeit inscribed within its counter-effectuation as ex-propriation and dis-owning). This “remainder” does not warrant a critique. For it is Heidegger’s own contribution—one, I believe, which is shared by the whole of phenomenology, to the point of constituting its irreducible ground—to have so radically thematized the nature of this remainder. This remainder is that without which phenomenology cannot think. This is of course something that cannot be shown here. Let us simply recall that Derrida has gone very far in this direction.

What needs to be emphasized is that the unfolding or the truth of being carries with it the human, the sense and essence of which is redefined in and through this unfolding. What calls for questioning is the way in which this takes place, the sense with which the human is granted in the process, namely, as the proper (name) of being, as its destination, this term or this end, this terminus or this terminal without which being would not arrive at or reach itself, would not be truly itself, would not be. Does the human, then, not remain caught within an (enlarged) economy of sameness and selfhood, as the ontical pole of an onto-historical sending? Can the human be thought only as the proper name, and thus as the subject of an oriented economy of presence? Must the “there is” (Da-sein) prior to all things present be relayed and repeated in the human as the being who stands out (in all senses of the term) in this clearing? For Heidegger is quite clear about the fact that Being “needs” the human in a way that is quite distinct. To be sure, Being “needs” all other beings, in the sense, established in the essay on Anaximander, of a granting of essence. Yet being needs man as this ultimate possibility of grounding through gathering and sheltering. Thus, in the end, it is quite obvious that beyng does not “need” man in the way in which it needs, say, dogs or rocks. For it