Thought and Issue in Heidegger*

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In the Preface to a collection of texts which were reissued in 1967 under the title "Wegmarken" Heidegger writes: "Whoever sets out on the way [Weg] of thought knows least of all about that determining issue which -- from back beyond him, as it were -- draws him on."

This acknowledgement attests that Heidegger did not regard thought as his property. As an outcome Heidegger shared this conviction with many philosophers. For Hegel, for instance, thought was the "active universal" in contrast to a conception of thought as "subjective activity." Yet, I said: "as an outcome." For the experience that led Heidegger to be convinced of the non-subjective nature of thought was a completely different one.

Heidegger also shared with others the view that what is thought, the "work," has a Being fully independent of the person of the thinker: In a work the truth of the issue itself comes forth.

Thus it would run counter to Heidegger's basic convictions for us to memorialize him today in a biographical way. We must devote ourselves rather to his thought and his work. But what does "work" mean for Heidegger? This work is not a self-contained whole, not a system. For Heidegger philosophy is possible only as a questioning which sets out ever anew. Therefore, it would be wrong to deal with his questions as though they were results which could be recapitulated in a summary. Nevertheless, these questions had something in common: all were ways of thought, all had to do with one issue, one task of thought --

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to be sure, ways of a thought transformed over against the tradition and of a transformed issue. If one bears in mind that nothing less hinges on the transformation of thought and issue than the preparation for the advent of the "saving power" within that "highest danger" which prevails for man today, then we must attempt to clarify what thinking genuinely is for Heidegger and what its present and future issue and task are. These questions are at the basis of Heidegger's entire endeavor.

According to academic custom there devolves upon me the task of presenting as a whole the work of the deceased. Now, the thoughts of such an extremely difficult thinker as Heidegger cannot be simply repeated; any presentation must be the result of many years of interpretation. This is even more the case with his later writings. From them, however, I would like to take up the basic questions, because previous Heidegger-scholarship has not interpreted these texts in such a way as to show how Heidegger's entire concern can be found in them. The attempt to show this I regard as my contribution to this occasion. Through an interpretation of his later writings (suspending my own views) I hope to comply with Heidegger's demand that we carry on what he thought, that others be able to take up his questioning again at that point to which he carried it.

In this sense I see his last publication as his legacy. It is entitled "Das Ende der Philosophie und die Aufgabe des Denkens" - "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thought". The opening sentences of this essay read: "The title designates the attempt at a reflection [Besinnung] which persists in questioning. Questions are pathways to an answer. The answer, once arrived at, ought rather to constitute a transformation of thought than a pronouncement upon some subject matter." And of the "task of thought," Heidegger says: "To inquire into the task of thought is, within the frame of reference of philosophy, to determine what it is that is of concern to thought, what is 'at issue.' Such is, in the German language, the connotation of the word "Sache."

We shall deal in this paper with these two problems: What was thought (Denken) for Heidegger? And what was the "task and issue" - "die Sache des Denkens"? To elucidate these two problems we pose the following three questions:

1) How did Heidegger characterize previous, that is to say, metaphysical thought?
2) In what sense was Heidegger's own thought already "transformed" or "other" than previous metaphysical thought?