

## Heidegger's Critique of Western Metaphysics

### Abstract

This paper aims at clarifying Heidegger's critique of modernity and notices his exceptional approach to metaphysics in general and to the relationship between Being and being specifically. In doing so, I will give a brief explanation about what comes to our mind when we consider modernity. Later in the paper, I will make an effort to elucidate Heidegger's critique of modernity and his mystical tendency to free himself from the problematic situations that modernity faces. I am going to make use of Heideggerian interpretations of Leibniz's the Principle of Reason and the Principle of Identity and his analysis of these principles in the light of his ideas that are prone to be the beginning of post-modernity. Lastly, I will seek Heidegger's metaphysical view on Being as the ground or abyss.

### Key Terms

Heidegger, Reason, Being, Modernity, Principle of Reason, Ground, Appropriation, Man.

## Heidegger'in Batı Metafiziği Eleştirisi

### Özet

Bu çalışma, Heidegger'in modernite eleştirisini açıklığa kavuşturmayı ve onun genelde metafiziğe yönelttiği istisnai yaklaşım ile Varlık ve varolma arasındaki ayrımına dikkati çekmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Böylece moderniteyi düşündüğümüzde zihnimize olup bitenler hakkında kısa bir açıklama yapmış olacağım. Çalışmada daha sonra, Heidegger'in modernite eleştirisi ile onun kendisini modernitenin karşı kaşıya bıraktığı problemlerden kurtarmayı amaçlayan mistik eğilimini aydınlatmaya çalışacağım. Bunu, Heidegger'in Leibniz'in Akıl ve Özdeşlik ilkeleri yorumu ile bu ilkelere ilişkin, post-modernizmin ilk işaretleri olabilecek olan kendi fikirleri çerçevesindeki çözümlenmeleri çerçevesinde gerçekleştireceğim. Son olarak Heidegger'in, temel ya da boşluk olarak Varlık üzerine olan metafizik görüşünü araştıracağım.

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Heidegger, Akıl, Varlık, Modernite, Akıl İlkesi, Temel, Kavrayış, İnsan.

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In this paper, I will try to clarify Heidegger's critique of modernity and notice his exceptional approach to metaphysics in general and to the relationship between Being and being specifically. Firstly, I will try to give a brief explanation about what comes to our mind when we consider modernity. Secondly, I will make an effort to elucidate Heidegger's critique of modernity and his mystical tendency to free himself from the problematic situations that modernity faces. I am going to make use of Heideggerian interpretations of Leibniz's the Principle of Reason and the Principle of Identity and his analysis of these principles in the light of his ideas that are prone to be the beginning of post-modernity. Lastly, I will seek Heidegger's metaphysical view on Being as the ground or abyss.

To begin with a brief look to modernity, the basic elements of modernity can be considered as the self, reason, the world, science and language. Originally, the self in modernity is conscious, rational, self-sufficient, self-governing and complete. The self seems like a close-set because it has the ability to find answers to the questions about the world and itself. The self which is the household of reason can know itself through reflection upon itself in a manner of representational thinking. While knowing itself, reason approaches the self as an object, since reason objectifies anything to explain it. Moreover, the world as well as the self, is knowable objectively through reason and the reason explains world through 'science'. Science is the universal, objective truth, independent of the individual (being) although discovered by the intellect. Knowledge is good and valuable for its own sake. It's fair to claim that after the Industrial Revolution, people seek knowledge not for the functional or beneficial reasons, but for the significance of knowledge itself, although in my opinion, it does not seem possible to evaluate knowledge for its own sake. Rather, it would be better to give away the idea lies behind the quest for knowledge, that is knowledge is always discovered by reason and having more knowledge can be considered as equal as having more rational power. Therefore, this has a crucial spot in modernity, since the appreciated power is the power of reason. When we consider the basic idea of modernity, we encounter the effort to put reason in the center of order and disorder in the society so as to harmonize them with the help of rationality by reducing the disorder. Furthermore, rationality is reflected by language too. Language operates to represent the observable world which is objectively available to the mind; the words serve as representations of thoughts or things and this is the only functional role that it has.

Keeping the key notions of modernity in our minds, now it is easy to see how the metaphysical tradition of Western thinking has some pre-assumptions that lie on the foundation of it. Right after the Socratic turn in Western thinking, starting from Plato's idea of universals and their accessibility through reason, continuing with Aristotle's notion of logos, history of philosophy predictably took its way through construction of modernity. The importance of reason and rationality resounded in Cartesian assertion 'cogito ergo sum' and in Kantian categories that set the ground for objectivity in the mind. The basic principle that inspires the whole metaphysical tradition was finally spoken out by Leibniz in his Principle of Reason.

In his book *The Principle of Reason*, Heidegger considers Leibniz's Principle of Reason, namely 'nothing is without reason (ground) or *nihil est sine ratione* in its original form in Latin. The book's 'aim is to "think" this principle "through", not only

in the sense of understanding it “thoroughly”, but in the sense of thinking all the way through the metaphysical proposition down into the source from which the metaphysics springs<sup>1</sup>. This principle is not only a principle that is found out and marked by Leibniz. It underlies the whole Western metaphysical tradition, even though it was unspoken before Leibniz asserted it as a principle. The tendency to look for a foundation or fundamental principle dominates the whole metaphysics. The quest for the primary principle is problematic according to Heidegger, since ‘nothing is without reason’ not only calls for a reason for “everything that is” if we take the sentence in an affirmative sense, but also calls for a ground for the principle itself which causes a ‘perplexing circle’ in the first place<sup>2</sup>. The first and most powerful principle puts itself at stake as being the fundamental principle, because it also requires another grounding principle according to the principle that the very itself suggests. The Principle of Reason has a contradictory disposition when we try to apply the principle to itself; the principle seems to be invalid for itself as we try to escape from falling into a vicious circle. If we think that this fundamental principle is an exception that leaves itself out of its range, we commit ourselves into groundlessness:

Everywhere we use the Principle of Reason and adhere to it as a prop for support. But it also immediately propels us into groundlessness without our hardly thinking about it in its genuine meaning<sup>3</sup>.

The ground that Leibniz is looking for, will serve our cognition as a tool for grasping and finding out which propositions are true. The search for the ground, a foundation that will justify the true propositions and constitute a truth-maker for the subject to have an objective truth is for the sake of ‘objectness of objects’ which supports the notion of representational thinking<sup>4</sup>. In Western metaphysical tradition, representational thinking means understanding the world and the self through objectifying them; the world is not within the direct access of the self, it is only accessible through reason. A bare picture of world is not possible, because we first drain it with reason. ‘Hence a sufficient reason must be given to the ego in order to guarantee the ego that its representations are genuinely “representative” of the world, that they genuinely bring the world back “before” the ego’<sup>5</sup>. The principle is replaced before the ego; as the principle of the ego; as the principle of taking the world and ego as a subject to cognition. According to Leibniz, the Principle of Reason is the ‘fundamental principle of rendering sufficient reasons’, reason demanding the rendering of reason or reason demanding a sufficient reason<sup>6</sup>. The Principle of Reason makes the distinction between subject and object more vivid and settles this distinction at the basis of the act of gaining knowledge, since it introduces the being that has the capability to reason proceeds as the active side in the act of learning or acquiring knowledge whereas places

<sup>1</sup> p. 49 from: Caputo, J.D. (1978). *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> p. 13 from: Heidegger, M. (trans. Lilly, R.) (1991). *The Principle of Reason*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>4</sup> From now on, I will refer to *the Principle of Reason* as PR.

<sup>5</sup> PR, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Caputo, p. 55.

PR, p. 33.

everything else than reason as the objects of reason. Such a distinction emphasizes not only the objectification of entities, but also objectification of other minds or even the rendering reason itself. The ratio becomes separated from the ground and even if we consider it as subsiding with the ground, the ground only appears as the condition of possibility for the reason:

If in modernity being is transcendently determine as objectness and this as the condition for the possibility of objects, then being disappears, as it were, in favor of what is called "the condition for the possibility" and is a kind of Rational ground and grounding<sup>7</sup>.

The Principle of Reason has a supremacy which we tend to think that it is human, easily reached by rational beings and as a matter of fact, a power generated by rational beings. Heidegger objects that:

The Principle of Ground is not just a proposition (Satz), not even a basic proposition (Grundsatz), but a decree (Spruch) which lay claim to our thought and makes a demand of us (in Anspruch nehmen). The power of this decree is nothing human, but the power of Being itself, for it is clear for Heidegger Leibniz's principle is the address of Being to man<sup>8</sup>.

We fail to hear the 'voice of Being itself' when it echoes in the Principle of Reason<sup>9</sup>.

For Heidegger, why the Principle of Reason waited for so long to be expressed clearly and how this principle is placed at the center are the core questions that should be answered. According to Heidegger, Being places a demand upon the subject to find a reason, to initiate a reason for everything that is.

It is interesting that the Principle of Reason does not give us a clue about what reason is whereas it asserts that everything has some sort of representational ground and implies that a reflective thinking is applicable upon the reason itself; both of which can only be considered as features of reason. 'The Principle of Reason is, according to the way of understanding it, not a statement about reason, but about beings, in so far as they are beings'<sup>10</sup>. In order to understand what Principle of Reason indeed tells us, we need to let the principle speak, let it express itself and we need to listen to what it is saying outside the boundaries of representational thinking that we have been committed to.

Heidegger not only analyzes the Principle of Reason, but he also studies the Principle of Identity, since both principles are basic but does not say anything about the nature of the terms used in them. The Principle of Identity is 'A=A meaning A is A. With this "is", the principle tells us how every being is, namely: it itself is the same with itself'<sup>11</sup>. 'The doctrine of metaphysics' reads this principle as identity belonging to Being whereas in the earliest period of thinking 'identity itself speaks out in a

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Caputo, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.57.

<sup>10</sup> PR, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> p. 26 from: Heidegger, M. (trans. Stanbaugh, J.) (1974). *Identity and Difference*. New York: Harper and Row.

From now on, I will refer to *Identity and Difference* as ID.

pronouncement which rules as follows: thinking and Being belong together in the Same and by virtue of this Same'<sup>12</sup>. Before rationality was introduced as the ground for metaphysics, philosophers like Parmenides tended to interpret the Principle of Identity as 'Being, together with thinking, belongs in the Same. Being is determined by an identity as a characteristic of that identity'<sup>13</sup>. Unlike the most influential philosophers after Plato, the pre-Socratics were free of representational thinking that still dominates our mode of thought. Grasping the Principle of Identity as Being and man belonging together is possible through adopting a different approach towards understanding the meaning of 'belonging together'. To put it in Heidegger's words:

By our moving away from the attitude of representational thinking. This move is a leap in the sense of a spring. The spring leaps away, away from the habitual idea of man as a rational animal who in modern times has become a subject for his objects. Simultaneously, the spring also leaps away from Being. But Being, since the beginning of Western thought, has been interpreted as the ground in which every being as such is grounded<sup>14</sup>.

If we move back to the quest of ground, we will again find the Principle of Reason at the heart of our quest: nihil est sine ratione. Heidegger modifies this principle. He tries to find the underlying meaning of the principle, nothing is without Ground. But 'in Leibniz's metaphysics, whatever comes to be must have some measure of perfection. Therefore the ground which serves as its foundation must be a "sufficient" ground'<sup>15</sup>. For the sake of completeness and perfection, the new version of the principle is: 'nothing is without rendering its reasons' that can be interpreted as 'nothing is without a why'<sup>16</sup>. For Heidegger, there are two relationships to a ground. One is 'why' relationship, whereas the other can be called as 'because' relationship. The seat of the faculty of reason is inclined to establish a 'because' relationship, since it initiates a cause for every event that takes place within the realm of its perception. He makes use of some verses of Angelus Silesius to make his new 'why relation' version of the Principle of Ground clear. The verses are as follows:

The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms.

It pays no attention to itself, asks whether it is seen<sup>17</sup>.

The rose's cause does not have to be rendered for it. It does not ask itself why it blooms or does not care if anyone sees itself blooming and causing to be the ground for its blooming. Rather, it just lets itself be, it falls under the realm in which the question 'why' loses its authority. The rose is trouble-free for itself; it is not demanding any sufficient reasons for its blooming. We can take two attitudes towards the rose; we can either objectify it and try to grasp it within the boundaries of our representational thinking, or we can let the rose be with patience and kindness by leaving it to be. 'What is unsaid in the fragment –and everything depends on this- instead says humans, in the

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> *ID*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Caputo, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> *PR*, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> *PR*, p. 35.

concealed grounds of their essential being, first truly are when in their own way like the rose –without why<sup>18</sup>. The rose's not having 'why' does not mean that it does not have 'because'; 'the rose has a ground but it does not consider (*achtet nicht*) it, nor does it question (*fragt nicht*) it'<sup>19</sup>. We have difficulty in recognizing things as being-themselves or with a more Kantian expression being-in-themselves. Expressing an approach that is free from the framework that men are placed in by the verses of a mystical poet is not a twist of fate, given that in ordinary life, we are so captured by being the subject for all objects that we encounter. Everything stands for us, in front of us and even though they don't stand for us, 'every "object" which "stands before" (*gegen-steht*) "consciousness" must have a ground' for the sake of totality and completeness of our framing of the world<sup>20</sup>.

By this conception of totality of the technological world, we reduce everything down to man, and best come to the point of calling for an ethics of the technological world. Caught up in this conception, we confirm our opinion that technology is of man's making alone. We fail to hear the claim of Being which speaks in the essence of technology<sup>21</sup>.

Technology or what Heidegger also calls 'atomic world' that seems to be the achievement of humankind as we constructed new scientific theories, it is indeed a way for Being to disclose itself, Being's try to reach to the beings. We cannot see how being sends (*Geschick*) itself to Being, Being reveals itself in beings as the horizon which beings present themselves. The relationship between Being and beings is a complicated one and although Heidegger is deeply critical about the Western metaphysical tradition of rationalization and placing everything to a ground that starts from Plato and comes until today, he believes that the 'incubation period' for the manifestation of Principle of Reason is not a coincidence; Being opens the path to unconceal itself through the formulation of the Principle of Ground and the principle itself is a means for beings to hear the call of the Being that governs the language. Here, Heidegger commits himself to a non-subjectivist notion of language by claiming that language itself speaks and helps Being in its process of concealment and unconcealment. It seems to transmit the message of Being and makes it communicate through the mystery of the words. It's mysterious in the sense that words collaborate with Being in its withdrawal and let it reveal itself by the *Geschick* of being, dedication, loyalty and effort of being to grasp the unconcealment of Being. In other words, beings get into the Being through the way of language:

Thinking receives the tools for this self-suspended structure from language. For language is the most delicate and thus the most susceptible vibration holding everything within the suspended structure of the appropriation. We dwell in the appropriation inasmuch as our active nature is given over to language<sup>22</sup>.

To make this clear, we need to touch upon what appropriation or event of appropriation is. I will refer to the meaning of event of appropriation later in my paper.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> Caputo, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> *ID*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 36.

What seems confusing about the relationship between Being and being is Heidegger's assertion that 'Being itself, however, belongs to us; for only with us can Being be present as Being, that is, become present'<sup>23</sup>. Thus, not only beings need Being, but also Being needs beings. The ground for beings is abyss, Being as the groundless ground is an abyss. 'Being does not have a ground but itself serves as a ground for every being'<sup>24</sup>. By saying this, Heidegger tries to break the perplexing circle that we may find ourselves in when we dig into the idea of a ground, since the Principle of Reason was demanding us to find a ground for everything implying that our reason also requires to have a ground. Now, Being serves as the ground which has its origin from an abyss meaning that it has no ground but constitute the ground for itself. Caputo phrases Being as 'both ground and abyss'<sup>25</sup>. Being opens itself to beings and it is only beings that can grasp and gather the Being through the lighting process of Being as beings, happening of unconcealment process. Being sends itself and withdraws, the origin sends itself but it stays behind because it cannot show up as it is not an entity, it stays concealed. 'Being proffers itself to humans in that it clearly furnishes to beings as such a temporal play-space. As such a *Geschick*, being essentially comes to be as a self-revealing that at the same time lasts as self-concealing'<sup>26</sup>.

Heidegger touches upon five main points that are the elements of the leap of the Principle of Ground. When we go back the analysis of the principle, we now can see the '*Geschick* and withdrawal of being' that 'characterizes the history of Western thinking up till now as we look back on it and into it from out of leap'<sup>27</sup>. This leap is only visible to us when we get out of the traditional method of thinking; 'the realm from which one leaps is the history of Western thinking experienced as the *Geschick* of being'<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, this is hard to see immediately, since traditional Western metaphysics dictates us to put man and his rationality into the center and take being as the active and capable agent to have access to the 'truth' as we are designated to it. Now that we are ready to embrace the fact that the mainstream of philosophy is not mainly *Geschick* of being but actually the process of unconcealment of Being and beings openness to it, we are ready to review the elements of the leap step by step. The first of the five main points is his worry about the 'incubation period' of the Principle of Reason; 'now since the Principle of Ground is indeed a saying about Being, as we have learned from the leap of thought, it is clear that this period of incubation is also a period in which Being itself, in its "truth," was likewise sleeping'<sup>29</sup>. As a second point, expressing the Principle of Reason as a 'fundamental principle' and staying attached to that principle to set objectivity caused Being to withdraw itself even more. The third point is the discussion about taking the Principle of Reason, or 'fundamental principle of rendering sufficient reasons' as the 'mighty Principle that determines our age'<sup>30</sup>. The fourth move was Heideggerian distinction between 'why' and 'because that both were hidden in the

<sup>23</sup> ID, pp. 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> Caputo, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> PR, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> PR, p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> Caputo, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> PR, p. 58.

Principle of Reason, this distinction opened us the path to understand that the ground is an abyss and Being as the ground is groundless; he made use of Angelus Silesius' blossoming rose, in order to clarify that 'being stands on its own grounds. The mystical poet speaks from the region in which Being and ground belong together, in which things rest in themselves, in their own ground'<sup>31</sup>. The last point can be considered as listening to Being speaking through the Principle of Reason and letting it to get to us. As we took a leap from the way that we used to grasp the Principle of Reason under the influence of representational thinking and learned to hear Being from the words of a mystical poet, we had a shift of meaning in the Principle of Reason. Heidegger carried us from the grounds of reasoning to the call of the abyss as the groundless ground of beings. We are now drawn into a sending, withdrawal and unconcealment as an eventing process.

To turn back to the relationship between man and Being, Heidegger openly indicates in his *Identity and Difference* that 'man obviously is a being'; thus the role of man in his attachment to Being is characterized by Heidegger as follows:

But man's distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as the being who thinks, is open to Being, face to face with Being; thus man remains referred to Being and so answers to it. Man is essentially this relationship of responding to Being, and he is only this. This "only" does not mean a limitation, but rather an excess<sup>32</sup>.

Therefore, the relationship between Being and man is now outspoken as a reciprocal bond, a union an act of responding and coming together under the horizon of unconcealment of Being. The man is capable of and open to grasp Being, whereas Being invites being for gathering together in its unconcealment. Being willingly allows beings to meet with it in togetherness. Heidegger uses the phrase *event of appropriation* to refer to the distinctive relationship between beings and Being: 'the event of appropriation is that realm' vibrating within itself; through which man and Being reach each other in their nature, achieve their active nature by losing those qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them'<sup>33</sup>. The heart of the responding relation and the constellation is characterized as the event of appropriation. The Being as an abyss 'is neither empty nothingness nor murky confusion, but rather: the event of appropriation. In the event of appropriation vibrates the active nature of what speaks as language, which at one time was called the house of Being'<sup>34</sup>. So, the role of language is not only to help serving for the conciliation between Being and being, rather language plays a more fundamental role as Heidegger attributes it the task of being the house of Being.

To return and finalize the difficulty about the idea of ground, for Heidegger, we can now infer that Being as the ground cannot be the subject for the question of 'why', like the rose in the verses of Angelus Silesius; it is always itself without a ground and as the abyss, it can only be gathered when it allows itself to be reachable for the beings that are gifted with the ability to welcome Being with openness. This is a play that both parties are dedicated to. Moreover, while talking about the play, now it is time for us to reduce the two-sided talk about Being and being into a simple oneness: 'Nothing is

<sup>31</sup> Caputo, p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> ID, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

without *ground/reason*. Being and ground/reason: the same. Being, as what grounds, has no ground; as the abyss it plays the play that, as *Geschick*, passes being and ground/reason to us<sup>35</sup>. This play is an unavoidable one and 'the play is without "why"'. It plays since it plays<sup>36</sup>.

To conclude, Heidegger is deeply critical about tradition of metaphysics that dominated the history of philosophy. He claims in *the Principle of Reason* that:

Today it seems that the withdrawal of the essence of being is complete. We say "today" and mean atomic age which is beginning, an age through which modernity supposedly comes to completion insofar as the initial, basic trait of this epoch unrestrictedly unfolds to its furthest extremity<sup>37</sup>.

Furthermore, according to Heidegger, 'the history of metaphysics is a vast "language-game" played not by man but by Being, a language-game in which we do not play with words, but words play with us' and 'the history of philosophy is the playing of Being with man'<sup>38</sup>. So, the whole metaphysical tradition was actually missing the point of doing metaphysics as they failed to open themselves to the hide and seek game of the Being. What we better do is to open ourselves to be drawn into the play of Being which is inescapable for us.

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<sup>35</sup> PR, p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> PR, p. 56.

<sup>38</sup> Caputo, p.82.