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Dwelling Poetically, Proceeding Orphically: The Platonic Tradition and the Heideggerian Humanism of Ernesto Grassi

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DWELLING POETICALLY, PROCEEDING ORPHICALLY:
THE PLATONIC TRADITION AND THE HEIDEGGERIAN HUMANISM
OF ERNESTO GRASSI

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

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by

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Abstract

Martin Heidegger exerted an immense influence over twentieth century thought by providing profound insights into the nature of Being as well as scathing social critiques, focused on the destructive force of late modern technological reductionism. As part of Heidegger's project, he elaborated upon a sophisticated history of Being in which two great monsters of Platonism and Humanism are cast as Antichrist and False Prophet. Subsequently, however, his own student Ernesto Grassi argued that Renaissance Humanism was not a stepping stone towards subjectivism and technological thinking, but rather stood in conformity with the fundamental essence of Heidegger's own project.

This study seeks to perform the same service for the much maligned history of Platonic thinking. After reviewing the important details of the positions held by Heidegger and Grassi in the Introduction and Chapter One, I move on to an examination of the history of the interpretation of Plato in Chapter Two. Here I show that, when we approach Plato correctly, his thought conforms to insights later offered by Heidegger and Grassi. In the remaining chapters of the study, I demonstrate that this misunderstanding afflicts not only Plato himself, but it has also affected the interpretation of the entire Neoplatonic tradition. Thus, in Chapter Three, I show that Plotinus receives and expands upon the core insights which Plato possessed, and that Platonism's role in the development of technological enframing has been gravely mistaken. In Chapter Four, I show how the later integration of Neoplatonic thought into some of the greatest Christian Platonists did nothing to eliminate these core insights of the Platonic tradition. Finally, in Chapter Five, I show that Marsilio Ficino, the Platonist painted by Grassi as the arch-villain who undermined the Heideggerian project of the Renaissance continued to maintain the fundamental insights of the Platonic tradition.

Ultimately, therefore, Platonism, far from being the foundation of technological enframing in the modern era, is able to offer great assistance to the Heideggerian-Grassian project of renewing poetic and rhetorical speech as the foundation of philosophical thinking.

Introduction

The Danger of Technological Thinking and Its Alleged Platonic Roots

On April 3, 1996, officers of the Federal Bureau of Investigation descended upon the cabin of Theodore Kaczynski and uncovered 40,000 pages of handwritten journals, bomb components, a live explosive and the original typed manuscript of Kaczynski's manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future." This event would mark the end of Kaczynski's seventeen year campaign of terror in which he killed three people and wounded twenty-three others with homemade bombs. What could drive this man—brilliant mathematician, educated at Harvard and the University of Michigan, and the youngest ever appointed professor at the University of California at Berkeley—to retreat to the wilds of Montana and begin such a murderous rampage?¹

According to Kaczynski's own words in "Industrial Society and Its Future,"² the primary motivation for the bombing campaign was to initiate a revolution to bring about the collapse of the "industrial technological system" because it had caused a monumental reduction in the autonomy of persons by absorbing them into "leftish" collectivist ideologies. In particular, as part of his extensive critique of modern, technological culture he claimed "[i]n the future, social systems will not be adjusted to suit the needs of human beings. Instead, human beings will be adjusted to suit the needs of the system" (Kaczynski 85). To avoid this calamity, Kaczynski argued that it was necessary to launch a full-scale revolution against the weaknesses of industrial technological society and utterly destroy it, because, in his view, no part of the system can be

1 This question is not meant to direct us towards the life events of Theodore Kaczynski that contributed to directing his mind towards the conclusions at which he arrived, but rather the reasons themselves which he expressed. For more information on the biographical and psychological causes of Kaczynski's activity see Alston Chase, *A Mind for Murder: The Education of the Unabomber and the Origins of Modern Terrorism*.

2 All citations from "Industrial Society and Its Future" are taken from the edition of Kaczynski's essays found in the volume *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski, a.k.a. "The Unabomber."*

redeemed because all its components are interconnected (74). As such, he sought for a band of revolutionaries with this singular cause in mind—the destruction of the technological world, by any means necessary (102).

Kaczynski, however, is hardly the only person to make an observation about the negative effects of industrial and technological society on humanity. While he was on trial for his campaign of bombings, he was approached and befriended by the anarchist philosopher John Zerzan. While Zerzan did not actively advocate physical violence to bring about this end, his intellectual opposition toward technological society was perhaps even more extreme than that of Kaczynski. While Kaczynski famously stated, "[t]he Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race" (36), Zerzan traced the problem to a far earlier source, stating in his work *Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization*: "[f]rom initial alienation to advanced civilization, the course is marked by more and more reification, dependence, bureaucratization, spiritual desolation, and barren technicization" (4-5). Zerzan explicitly links this "initial alienation" to the development of an impulse towards the "mastery of nature" and the introduction of symbolic culture:

Culture is a fairly recent affair. The oldest cave art, for example, is in the neighborhood of 30,000 years old, and agriculture only got underway about 10,000 years ago. The missing element during the vast interval between the time when I.Q. was available to enable symbolizing, and its realization, was a shift in our relationship to nature. It seems plausible to see in this interval, on some level that we will perhaps never fathom, a refusal to strive for mastery of nature. It may be that only when this striving for mastery was introduced, probably non-consciously, via a very gradual division of labor, did the symbolizing of experiences begin to take hold. (5)

Zerzan also argues, following the anthropological analysis of authors such as Marshall Sahlins³, that hunter-gatherer societies were not plagued by the burden of excessive work (50),

3 In particular as found in Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*.

nor did they engage in systematic brutality. Rather, he suggests, "[w]hile virtually every society that adopted a domesticated relationship to nature, all over the globe, became subject to organized violent practices, the non-agricultural knew no organized violence" (5).

Zerzan's thought is notably different from Kaczynski's, as presented in his manifesto, because while Kaczynski sees the emergence of an alienated society primarily as a result of the development of technology itself, Zerzan attributes the development of technology to a more basic domesticating impulse. That is, while Zerzan does take a solidly negative stance towards technology, he asserts that it is essentially a *symptom* of a much more fundamental drive: the desire for mastery over nature.

While Zerzan's utopian vision of pre-agrarian society makes him distinct, his analysis of the basis of technological society is fundamentally shared by the eminent twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger is most famous, of course, for his contributions to the field of ontology; however, we should not overlook the fact that his careful analysis of the question of Being was intimately related to his concerns regarding modern technology and the scientific worldview.⁴ While the depraved mind of Kaczynski thought the solution could be found in the almost random bombing of individuals involved in professions associated with the modern "techno-industrial" complex, Zerzan proposes a more gradual and peaceful process of "re-wilding" in which we shed our "civilized" natures and return to an original unity with the natural world. Heidegger's view, however, seems to provide the greatest practical possibility of moving forward because, while all three thinkers move to get behind the

4 There are, of course, many other thinkers who have recognized the danger of technological thinking. For example Jacques Ellul provided a famous critique in his work *The Technological Society*. More recently, Bill Joy, co-founder and then Chief Scientist of Sun Microsystems, in his essay "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us" in *Wired* likewise offered a harsh assessment of technological development. However, these three thinkers to whom I refer above form a representative sample of differing approaches to the problem at hand.

impulse and principles of technology, only Heidegger appears to see the problem in the fullness of its ontological significance. As such, Heidegger provides a superior pathway to overcoming the problem due to his greater understanding of the root of the problem itself. Furthermore, as a result of his deeper ontological understanding of the issue, Heidegger's path to overcoming technological thinking does not rely on a simplistic obliteration of art, culture and the humanities along with technology.

However, while Heidegger's analysis does give insight into the ontological difficulties posed by the question of modern technology, I will argue during the course of this study that, with respect to the details of his ontological analysis, Heidegger made a number of errors in evaluation. This will be true particularly of his assessments regarding the role of Platonism and that of Humanism in the developments which culminate in technological thinking. In the following chapters I will set out to demonstrate the fundamental basis of Heidegger's thought about the "forgetfulness of Being" wherein Western thought is dominated by successive historical paradigms by which beings as a whole appear and present themselves and, correspondingly, the paradigms become so totalizing that their nature *as* historically contingent paradigms fades into the background. I shall also show how Heidegger's student Ernesto Grassi fits into the framework of his thought, in particular by discussing his view of Renaissance Humanism as an exception to Heidegger's general historical schema and how the intellectual tools and perspectives of the Humanists constitute this exception.

Overall, however, my primary focus will be on responding to critiques leveled against Plato and the Platonists by both Grassi and Heidegger to demonstrate that the Platonic tradition from Plato to Marsilio Ficino is not subject to the "forgetfulness of Being" any more than Grassi's Humanists. Indeed, I shall demonstrate that the core features of Grassi's Humanists are

present in the historical Platonic thinkers. In doing so, I hope to establish Platonism, with aid from the intellectual tools of the Humanists according to Grassi's model, as a fundamental way to overcome subjectivism and nihilism in our contemporary circumstances, particularly in the form of what Heidegger calls Ge-stell, or the tendency to view all of reality as manipulable resources for our exploitation, which I shall discuss in more detail below.

In his essay, "The Question Concerning Technology,"⁵ Heidegger points out that the normal assessments of technology as a means to an end and as human activity converge to establish the instrumental and anthropological definition of technology (312). Heidegger goes on to point out that this instrumental attitude towards technology shapes the entire relationship that human beings have towards it. Indeed, in words that we found echoed in Zerzan's own treatment, we find Heidegger saying: "Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. We will, as we say, 'get' technology 'intelligently in hand.' We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control" (313).

Heidegger refuses to end his analysis there, however. Having come to the conclusion that the instrumental definition of science is fundamentally correct, he goes on to ask what the instrumental itself is. Heidegger begins by exploring the traditional conception of causality in which one has the material, formal, final and efficient causes. He concludes that, given these structures, the definition of causality must be found in the idea of that to which something is indebted. "The four causes are the ways, all belonging at once to each other, of being responsible for something else" (314). In particular, he holds that they are responsible for letting the object of which they are the cause come forth into presence (316). From this, argues

5 All citations from "The Question Concerning Technology" are taken from the edition of Heidegger's essays found in the volume *Basic Writings*.

Heidegger, it becomes apparent that the fundamental nature of instrumentality is “revealing” or bringing things from concealment forth into unconcealment. To this idea of revealing, Heidegger links the literal etymology of the Greek word *aletheia*, traditionally translated as “truth.” Thus, ultimately, Heidegger concludes, the essence of technology lies within the realm of this revealing. That is, that technology is a way in which a world of intelligibility comes forth into unconcealment.

However, for Heidegger, as with every mode of the unconcealing of Being, technology bears a reciprocal concealment. What then is the distinct mode of revealing found within modern technology? Heidegger refers to the particular form of unconcealment found in modern technology as “enframing” (*Ge-stell*). Fundamentally, this enframing means that the world reveals itself as a constant challenging-forth. In particular, the world reveals itself as a place to be unlocked, transformed, stored, distributed, and switched about. That is, the world reveals itself as a “standing reserve” (*Bestand*) to be manipulated (321-322). Heidegger's thought supports and illuminates Zerzan's idea that there is a flowering of a drive towards mastery and manipulation inherent in the thought of technology; however, Heidegger pushes the thought even further and argues that the origin of the drive towards manipulative mastery originates from the ontological reality of Being revealing beings as standing reserves to be manipulated. However, the implications of this are immense. Heidegger points out that “[o]nly to the extent that man for his part is already challenged to exploit the energies of nature can this revealing that orders happen. If man is challenged, ordered, to do this, then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve” (323). Man finds himself caught in the world of enframing, compelled by the very essence of technology to approach the world in a technological fashion.

In his 1964 essay “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,”⁶ Heidegger characterizes the domination of enframing as the end of philosophy in the present age. It is important to bear in mind that for Heidegger philosophy and metaphysics are interchangeable concepts—“philosophy is metaphysics” (432-434). However, this does little to clarify the issue—what then is Heidegger's definition of metaphysics? Furthermore, what does it mean for philosophy/metaphysics to be coming to an end?

First, for Heidegger, metaphysics is characterized particularly by the forgetfulness of the question of Being as such. In his 1949 “Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics?'”⁷ he states “[b]ecause metaphysics interrogates beings as beings, it remains concerned with beings and does not turn itself to Being as Being” (278). Heidegger argues that whenever metaphysics engages in the question regarding the nature of beings, it does so in light of the fact that beings are already exposed and illuminated by the light of Being; however, such an analysis is not able to go beyond itself to the question of the essence of Being itself. Instead, Heidegger suggests that the entire history of metaphysics is dominated by a term which he borrows from the renowned Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant: onto-theology (1969: 58-59).

For Heidegger, “onto-theology” is taken to refer to the union of the two dimensions of traditional Western metaphysics, which he refers to as “ontology” and “theology.” Ontology is taken to be the mode of approaching beings which seeks to explore their commonality. That is, ontology seeks to explore the nature of the shared unity of all the various different entities encountered in the world, under a single definition which is valid for all entities at all times. In

6 All citations from “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” are taken from the edition of Heidegger's essays found in the volume *Basic Writings*.

7 All citations from “Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics?'” are taken from the edition of Heidegger's essays found in the volume *Pathmarks*.

his 1957 lecture “On the Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics,”⁸ Heidegger describes this as “the ground-giving unity of what is most general, what is indifferently valid everywhere” (58). Theology, on other hand, is the highest and supreme instantiation of that common principle. Theology is the totality of the being of beings thought of as the ground of all entities. Thus, Heidegger says: “all metaphysics is at bottom, and from the ground up, what grounds, what gives account of the ground, what is called to account by the ground, and finally what calls the ground to account” (58). Therefore, we see that for Heidegger, the essence of metaphysics is the double search for a grounding of entities by securing the Being of beings, both in the sense of the commonality of being in which all entities share and by discovering the highest entity from which all entities receive their efficient causality.

Now that we have discovered what Heidegger means when he speaks of metaphysics, we are able to move on to our second question. Why does he speak of metaphysics coming to an end? To answer this question, it is first necessary to understand that Heidegger does not mean by this claim that metaphysics has reached some kind of *telos*, some perfection or fulfillment, of its nature. Indeed, he denies that different forms of metaphysical thinking are commensurable at all, stating in “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”: “Not only do we lack any criterion that would permit us to evaluate the perfection of an epoch of metaphysics as compared with any other epoch; the right to this kind of evaluation does not exist. Plato's thinking is no more perfect than Parmenides'. Hegel's philosophy is no more perfect than Kant's. Each epoch of philosophy has its own necessity” (433). Rather, when Heidegger discusses the end of metaphysics, he means it in the sense of arriving at the utmost borders of metaphysical thinking, the gathering-in of all the possibilities of metaphysics. For this reason it is unsurprising to find

8 All citations from “The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics” are taken from the edition of Heidegger's essays found in the volume *Identity and Difference*.

that Heidegger considers technological thinking to be the conclusion and end of the history of metaphysics—metaphysics has come to regard everything as a standing reserve which is only the final expression of the field which metaphysics opened to itself by trying to think towards grounds. Why might we say this? Iain Thomson points out that the understanding of metaphysics in this sense of double grounding seeks to allow us to give an account and explanation of both common being and also, in its theological mode, the efficient causality of being as a whole (2000: 302). Giving an account is already the beginning of the manifestation of being, not as a mysterious and ineffable presencing, but rather as a graspable and manipulable concept—a concept that can be *used* to explain the structure of entities. The ultimate expression of this impulse, of course, is technological enframing. However, if technological enframing is the extreme end of the possibilities of metaphysics, whence lays their beginning? Once again, Heidegger tells us in no uncertain terms: “Metaphysics is Platonism” (“The End of Philosophy” 433).

In opposition to metaphysical thinking, Heidegger holds out hope for a deeper, more original form of thinking. However, this thinking should not be considered as a new, superior form of metaphysics; rather Heidegger seeks the meaning of Being itself which has been obscured by every instance of metaphysics forgetting Being as such in favor of reducing being to *a* being or the *beingness* of beings. Heidegger seeks after the non-identical “Same” which underlies all the various, incommensurable metaphysical epochs, as indicated in his lectures on Nietzsche. However, he does not seek this Same in its presence, as in the case of metaphysics, but rather in the interplay between concealing and unconcealing, in the sheer act of presencing. For, as he mentions in that same lecture, “this 'same' is so essential and so rich that no single thinker exhausts it; each commits all the others to it all the more strictly” (Heidegger 1979: 36).

Heidegger wishes to bypass these metaphysical ontologies entirely and seek a fundamental ontology in order to find a new beginning for thinking. For what reason is Heidegger so concerned with overcoming metaphysics? Due to the fact that the furthest limits of metaphysics are inherently nihilistic—a nihilism that Heidegger ultimately traces back to Plato (Glazebrook 164). Heidegger does this despite the fact that he suggests that the inauguration of the forgetfulness of Being in Platonic philosophy was not a purely human failing, but rather a result of Being concealing itself. Therefore, Harman states about the culmination of this forgetfulness in technological enframing: “Strangely enough, Heidegger does not believe that humans are to blame for this horrible predicament—instead, being itself is to blame! For it is being that passes itself off as mere presence, and thereby invites us to convert things into a stockpile of manipulable slag” (136).

Heidegger has a chosen method for recovering a more originary understanding of the meaning of Being, a method laid out in *Being and Time*, namely *Destruktion*. According to Thomson this *Destruktion* first manifests itself as a progressive diachronic analysis of western metaphysics as onto-theology, leading back to the beginnings of Greek thought among the Pre-Socratics. At this point, rather than step back into an even more primordial point in time, Heidegger takes a synchronic step by examining the way in which different early Greek philosophers approached the question of Being. In particular, Thomson maintains, he finds in Parmenides and Heraclitus the conception of Being, not as “permanent presence,” but rather as “emergence and disclosure.” Due to this historical claim, Thomson points out that even though for Heidegger the development of a metaphysics of presence is linked to Being's self-manifestation in certain ways, it cannot be *necessary* because these other forms of thinking presented themselves at the beginning of Greek philosophy (317-318).

Earlier in this introduction I mentioned that I shall show in the course of this study that Heidegger is in error regarding his evaluation of Platonic philosophy (p. 4). Thomson's insight is essential to the task because it is this precise divergence between the thinking of Being and its forgetfulness in metaphysics that constitutes the basic source of the critique. In particular, I shall demonstrate that an almost exact reversal of Heidegger's history of philosophy (at least until approximately the time of Descartes) is in order—that, in fact, the vast majority of the history of philosophy is characterized, not by the forgetfulness of the question of Being, but precisely by the thinking of this problem, and that Plato himself should be viewed as the great shepherd who serves as the mentor of this movement. This should come as no surprise. After all, the two figures among the Pre-Socratics whom Heidegger considers to be the most aware of the meaning of Being are precisely the two generally considered to have exerted the most influence on the development of Plato's thought. Alfred North Whitehead was more or less correct when he commented that the "safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (39) and Heidegger was indeed clinging to this same insight when he commented, as we have seen, that "metaphysics is Platonism;" however, since the history of metaphysics (if we wish to maintain Heidegger's name for Plato's activity) is, in fact, radically divergent from Heidegger's understanding, what this claim means will be something much different than Heidegger intended. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that this re-evaluation of the Platonic tradition is of vital importance to the pursuit of a robust education in the humanities, particularly rhetoric and literature, in the wake of the dominance of mathematical, scientific and technological thinking which has risen in the modern period.

In Chapter One, I shall examine Heidegger's thoughts on poetry and their relationship to thinking as elucidated in the thought of his student Ernesto Grassi. In particular, I shall explain

how Grassi believed he had discovered in Renaissance Humanism, not the metaphysical and anthropocentric thought which Heidegger believed dwelt there, but rather an originary grappling with the poetic-rhetorical word and its relationship to the question of Being as the clearing in which beings are able to come forward. Grassi's examination of the nature of Humanism is particularly important because it marks the last period of resistance before the capitulation to metaphysics (understood according to Heidegger's negative connotation) with the advent of modernity. I shall also point out how Grassi continues Heidegger's critique of Platonism and wishes to drive a wedge between the Humanist endeavor in this period and the Platonic one, which he associates with aiding the fall into the forgetfulness of being and rise of Cartesianism. While accepting Grassi's positive evaluation of Humanism, I shall, naturally, reject his characterization of Platonism. Indeed, I will draw upon the four primary criteria of Grassi's philosophy which he finds manifest in the Humanist tradition and use them as the standards by which to evaluate the history of Platonism for the remainder of the study.

In Chapter Two, I shall turn to the evaluation of Plato himself. Despite the generally negative evaluation of Plato by Heidegger and Grassi, a number of scholars have risen up to challenge the idea that Plato actually fits into the history of metaphysics in the way which Heidegger lays out in his later works. Indeed, even Heidegger and Grassi equivocate on the issue of Plato's conformity to their own history of philosophy. Chief among these commentators are Francisco Gonzalez in his *Plato and Heidegger: A Question of Dialogue* and Mark Ralkowski in *Heidegger's Platonism*. The former work is a careful analysis of all the times in his career when Heidegger engaged directly with Plato's thought and speculates on the missed opportunities for dialogue between the two philosophers on the basis of Heidegger's own resistance to Plato's particular philosophical method of attempting to approach the clearing of

Being through *logoi*. This work does a great deal to elucidate the unspoken commonality between the two philosophers. Ralkowski's book offers an insightful glance into the history of the interpretation of Plato in the modern period and then presents a compelling case that Heidegger's own conception of Being and truth as unconcealment was largely influenced by his interpretation of the Allegory of the Cave found in the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*, particularly as developed in Heidegger's 1931-32 lecture series *On the Essence of Truth*. This lecture course demonstrates a marked difference from Heidegger's later characterization of Plato in his much more famous work on *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, which generally serves as the guiding light to characterizations of the relationship between the two philosophers. Ralkowski describes this early relationship between Heidegger and Plato in the following manner:

Heidegger's encounter with Plato's philosophy is so profound, in fact, he worries that "the little that is my own becomes more and more hazy to me in this keen air" (Heidegger to Jaspers, December 8, 1932, *HJC* 143). When we look at the work that Heidegger produced on Plato's cave allegory at this time, it's clear that he means what he says in his letters. Between 1931 and 1934, for example, Heidegger argued that Plato's cave allegory could help us "more clearly to grasp the essence of *aletheia* as unhiddenness" (*ET* 85) because it gives expression to a "*fundamental experience*, an experience which tells us something about the fundamental stance of man in his philosophical comportment to beings"--namely, Dasein's comportment towards "gradations" of simultaneously revealing and concealing disclosure. During this time Heidegger's attitude towards Plato is mostly positive. He both confirms elements of the Dasein analytic of *Being and Time* and discovers the most important ingredients of his later thought—namely, the distinction between Being as such and the Being of entities—in his positive appropriation of Plato's cave allegory. (62-63)

In her work *Postmodern Platos*, Catherine Zuckert devotes a chapter to summarizing Heidegger's interpretation of Plato. Although by necessity of subject her focus is primarily on the standard model of Heidegger's characterization of Plato as the founder of metaphysics, she confirms the enduring importance of Plato to Heidegger by demonstrating that over the years of his intellectual activity, Heidegger's attitude towards Plato was constantly shifting as he

reappraised and re-evaluated his own philosophical project. Indeed, she points out that whenever Heidegger wished to clarify, expound, modify or enhance his own theories, he turned back to the works of Plato as the place to begin (33).

Despite the positive appraisal of the importance of Plato to Heidegger's thought, even those scholars who are sympathetic to overturning the negative appraisal of Plato found in the later Heidegger very often go about their task by drawing a distinction between Plato and "Platonism." Sometimes, the idea of Platonism seems to manifest itself as a false image of Plato constructed out of a misinterpretation of Plato himself. Gonzalez, for instance, states that Heidegger closed off the possibility for a genuine confrontation between himself and Plato "by paying little attention to Plato's dialogues and dialectic, by turning Plato into something called 'Platonism' by means of extremely broad and simplistic interpretative strokes, and by ultimately making the name 'Plato' a label for the extreme *other* of his own thought" (343). However, at times, writers within the Continental tradition have been more explicit that this merger involves attributing to Plato ideas found in later forms of the Platonic tradition. In *Questioning Platonism*, Drew Hyland states:

I want to be clear that my critique here is limited to their [continental philosophers'] claim, in effect, that *Plato* is a Platonist in the metaphysical sense that they wish to criticize, that the positions of Platonism are actually Plato's positions that are espoused in the dialogues. A second, very different issue that I will not address, is the question of the development of Platonism as a movement, a dominant movement, in the history of philosophy after Plato. I am often quite sympathetic to their critiques of Platonism, as opposed to their claims, explicit or implicit, that Platonism is actually espoused in the dialogues as Plato's intent. A fascinating and worthwhile study could be made of the history of Platonism, of how the dialogues came to be (mis)interpreted by subsequent philosophers as espousing Platonism. (14-15)

It is this final aim that I shall take up beginning in Chapter Three but in a way quite distinct from what Hyland may have intended. I shall seek to show that the Neoplatonists are

authentic interpreters of Plato's dialogues and not a divergence from his thought. However, rather than this resulting in a fall into onto-theology, I shall demonstrate that the authentic thinking of Being present in Plato's own writings was not lost to the Western tradition by a subsequent forgetfulness, but was rather retained and cultivated by those who considered themselves disciples of Plato. This stance has methodological implications for this study as one primarily concerned with examining Plato within the context of the tradition which bears his name. As such, I shall treat as authentic those works of Plato which the Platonists traditionally considered authentic, even if modern scholarship reckons the ascription dubious. This is particularly significant with respect to works over which a significant amount of disagreement abounds, such as the *Seventh Letter*. Thus, while modern scholars are divided on the issue, for the sake of this methodology, the question of the letter's authenticity can be safely ignored since the Platonic tradition has historically held the letter to be authentic and therefore part of the overall view of the nature of Platonic philosophy.

It should further be noted that while many of the scholars in the Continental tradition either join Plato to the Platonists in a negative, metaphysical fashion or separate them precisely to liberate Plato individually from that particular morass, there are a few exceptions. Sara Rappe, in her groundbreaking work *Reading Neoplatonism*, turns her attention to the paradox of the Neoplatonists' tradition of textuality and exegesis with respect to their emphasis on non-discursive thinking and the ineffability of the realities which they are attempting to explore. Rappe specifically attributes to Plotinus's philosophical revolution in the *Enneads* a means to overstepping speculative metaphysics (2-3). Likewise, Eric Perl in his essay "Signifying Nothing: Being as Sign in Neoplatonism and Derrida" has performed an invaluable service by inspiring a deeper inquiry into the meaning of the general structure of Plotinus's thinking, as well

as how that thinking relates to the prevailing trends of postmodernity. Catherine Pickstock has also made significant contributions in her *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* by an interpretation of Plato which shows him opposed to the so-called “metaphysics of presence” while at the same time keeping him in direct continuity with his later Neoplatonic interpreters.

Wayne Hankey has further indicated that precisely on the basis of Heidegger's history of metaphysics, there has been a renewed interest in Neoplatonism. This interest manifests itself in several ways, the first being the rather obvious attempt to highlight the supposed onto-theological structure of the movement, in direct conformity to Heidegger's story. However, it has also shown itself in attempts to emphasize the Neoplatonic rather than Aristotelian elements in Thomistic thought, particularly by emphasizing Thomas's rejection of onto-theology through the appropriation of the writings of the Christian Neoplatonist commonly known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (Hankey 2004: 3). In Chapter four, I shall take up the challenge of examining syntheses between Neoplatonic and Christian thought stemming from the writings of the Areopagite. In addition to the Areopagite himself, I shall pay special attention to Thomas Aquinas, due to his immense influence on the subsequent history of Western thought, and to Gregory Palamas as a major inheritor of the Neoplatonism of Dionysius within the thought-tradition of Eastern Europe. Fran O'Rourke took up the challenge of demonstrating the influences of Dionysius on Thomas in his book *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* as well as examining the relationship between the thought of Aquinas and Heidegger in numerous articles and book chapters, making him a preeminent example of the second movement described by Hankey. The French philosopher-theologian Jean-Luc Marion represents an important figure in the analysis of Aquinas, in particular, having maintained in his

original French edition of *Dieu sans l'être* that Aquinas was indeed an onto-theologian as identified by Heidegger. However, Marion came to change his mind, arguing against that original judgment in a forward added to the English edition of the work. Furthermore, he subsequently argued forcefully against the idea of onto-theology in Aquinas in an article originally published in the *The Thomist*. However, notable Heidegger scholars have responded to these attempts to defend Aquinas, including John D. Caputo in his *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics*. Likewise, Ernesto Grassi himself responds to a defense of the Areopagite in his *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism*, attempting to elucidate what he saw as key differences between the thought of Heidegger and Dionysius.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I bring the analysis of the Platonic tradition to a close by looking at the thinker whom Grassi blames for rejuvenating traditional metaphysics and thereby overturning the project of authentic Humanism, Marsilio Ficino. Ficino is notable insofar as, to my knowledge, with the exception of stray mentions and Grassi's own critique, he has been almost entirely ignored within the question of Platonic onto-theology. However, due to Grassi's scathing criticism of him from the perspective of Heidegger's own history of metaphysics and his contemporaneous existence with the exact figures that Grassi finds to represent most fully his own vision of a more original, poetico-rhetorical philosophy, Ficino demands careful attention and analysis. Furthermore, he is without a doubt the most prominent member of the Platonic school in the Renaissance and set the tone for the interpretation of Plato's texts up until the modern overturning of Neoplatonism by Stephanus and Serranus in the sixteenth century (Ralkowski 7). His importance to this study is only increased due to the fact that he stands as a two-fold reflection of the Platonic heritage, having carefully read and translated Plato and his ancient commentators directly and also having studied extensively the reception of those writings

by way of the Thomistic tradition, as demonstrated by Ardis B. Collins in *The Secular is Sacred: Platonism and Thomism in Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Theology*.

A final note is necessary about the nature of this study. While the review of secondary literature found in this introduction has concentrated on the question of the presence of Heidegger's definition of onto-theological thinking in the Platonic tradition, the ontological difference between Being and beings is only one dimension of Grassi's thought to be explored in the following chapters. Given this fact, an explanation of this particular concentration regarding the secondary literature is necessary. The first reason is theoretical, insofar as the ontological difference is fundamental for the other central aspects of Grassi's thought which shall be elaborated upon in Chapter One. As such, it possesses a form of primacy as the *sine qua non* of the entire project. If the Platonists are, in fact, onto-theologians, none of Grassi's other criteria could possibly be met. The second reason is simply that Grassi is less well known and appreciated in philosophical circles than, in my view, he should be. As such, the secondary literature exploring his concept of poetico-rhetorical philosophy as developed in his examination of the Humanists in relation to the Platonic tradition is virtually non-existent. Where it is explicitly mentioned at all, it is generally in passing and in a context in which Grassi's critique of the Platonists is taken as simply being a point of fact. Indeed, an examination of this question constitutes the most significant contribution of this study to original scholarship.

Chapter One

Humanism and Its Interpreters

Humanism is perhaps the most significant intellectual movement to arise out of the Renaissance. There is, however, a great amount of debate about what exactly constitutes the essence of Humanism and therefore who can accurately be called a Humanist. In this chapter, I shall present a number of competing theses regarding the nature and dimensions of the movement, beginning with mainstream scholarship on the Italian Renaissance and culminating in the philosophical visions of Humanism in the writings of Martin Heidegger and Ernesto Grassi. While the examination of the various interpretations of Renaissance Humanism in this chapter will remain relatively broad, I shall revisit and expand upon them in Chapter Five for their specific relationships to the appropriation of the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino.

Before proceeding to the attempts at forming a critical definition of Humanism, it behooves us to look briefly at the thought of Petrarch, the father of Humanism, to see what he considered to be the most quintessential elements of the newly developing movement. One of the key elements of Petrarch's defense and definition of the new Humanist endeavor (though the word "Humanism" was still many centuries away) was the critique of current scholastic culture. In this he was especially critical of certain supposed Averroists (Hankins 2007: 40). However, his fundamental attack does not seem to have anything to do with any particular doctrines of Averroes, but rather with the (he claimed) uncritical appropriation of Aristotelian philosophy prevalent among the scholastics (40). By contrast, Petrarch pointed out that the Church Fathers generally seemed to have considered Plato to be the superior philosopher, although he was not, *per se*, advocating the promotion of Platonism so much as indicating the limitations of *any* human teacher (41). All these critiques, however, are prolegomena to a general stance against scientific philosophizing—the Christian should be secure in his theological position and while he

might find edification and aid in the thought of the philosophers, he should never allow it to be idolized because it would inevitably lead to error (41-42). More than anything else, this general critique of philosophy was based upon the principle that the scientific pursuit of knowledge for its own sake lacked a firm *moral* dimension. This, for Petrarch, is the fundamental differentiation between the scholastic and Humanist worldview—the scholastics were concerned with offering a scientific account of reality; the Humanists were interested in promoting the lived experience of the good life within human communities (42-43). The study of the pagan classics would be promoted as a way of studying that level of knowledge appropriate to human beings—how to live, the nuances of human history and political life, manners and eloquence (44). Philosophy was favored more for its eloquence and persuasive power as a mean of leading one to a proper way of life than for rigorous exactitude while Petrarch and the Humanists regarded as an engagement with triviality. Logic was surpassed by rhetoric in education and philosophy (45). These general elements constituted the insider view of Humanism, as expressed by Petrarch.

The first scholarly position I would like to examine is that put forward by Paul Oskar Kristeller. Kristeller, a preeminent figure in the study of Renaissance Humanism and philosophy, first states that the meaning of the term Humanism is as ambiguous as the meaning of the Renaissance itself. This does not, however, prevent him from attempting to formulate a definition for the term which encompasses the various factors which he sees manifested in the pursuits of the Humanists (Kristeller 1990: 3). In particular, methodologically, Kristeller wishes to be very careful not to adapt *Renaissance* Humanism to any of the conceptions of Humanism which existed at the time of his writing. As such, his definition primarily centers on those pursuits which gave the Humanists their name, specifically the *studia humanitatis*. These he named as grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy, all shaped by a careful

attention to the writers of classical antiquity (Kristeller 1961: 9-10). These areas of expertise are applied both to the Humanists' own original literary pursuits and to their contributions to the study of existing texts.

Kristeller points out that the primary scholarly contributions of the Humanists consist in their development of literary and textual criticism. With respect to literary criticism, the Humanists prided themselves on their careful attention to classical philology and style and then turned these developing skills towards a deeper understanding of the intentions of the authors of the classical texts. In the field of textual criticism, Kristeller draws attention to the fact that the Humanists performed systematic analyses of various manuscript traditions in order to produce emended critical editions of the texts which were purified of scribal errors and interpolations (1990: 6). Furthermore, they were able to employ their skills as classical philologists in order to engage in historical criticism of texts. This skill was prominently on display in works such as Lorenzo Valla's critical evaluation of the *Donation of Constantine*, which exposed the work as a forgery and hoax (Kristeller 1990: 11).

From the Humanists' scholarly work, Kristeller also draws attention to their own original literary endeavors. In particular, these were activities which drew upon their knowledge of classical style, but generally were employed to address contemporary situations, often social and political. This was brought into their literary use of speeches and letters, which were often published means of communicating the contemporary concerns of their communities in high classical style (Kristeller 1990: 8-9). Curiously, this often included their historiographical writings. Where one might have expected them to pay careful attention to ancient historiography, often their attention was instead turned to matters of contemporary relevance, while also drawing upon the model which the classical authors provided (Kristeller 1990: 10). It

should be clear from what has already been said about these literary endeavors that, while the Humanists were trained in Classical philology and had a great concern for classical traditions, their primary aim was not necessarily a scientific understanding of that tradition for its own sake, but rather for the advancement of the field of literature in a contemporary context which used the Classical tradition in order to animate its practice. In this way, Kristeller holds that Humanists are distinct from modern Classical scholars (Kristeller 1961: 10). Furthermore, while he does maintain that the Humanists can be considered contributors to the field of moral philosophy, he is careful to emphasize that they did not predominantly write systematic treatises on the topic and seemed to be more concerned with opening up several different fields of inquiry by which to come to a greater understanding of the questions involved in moral science (Kristeller 1990: 15).

Kristeller is quite clear, however, that the reason that moral philosophy was a field of inquiry for the Humanist is that it deals with the concrete problems of human existence in contrast to the highly technical discussion of more esoteric disciplines amongst the scholastic philosophers (1990: 16). On the other hand, for Kristeller, the pursuits of the Humanists excluded examination of logic, natural philosophy, metaphysics, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, law and theology, that is, all those fields which were systematized in the established curricula of the scholastics and medieval universities (1961: 10). Speaking of the Humanists' activities, which led to the reintroduction of Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Scepticism and even new interpretations of Aristotelianism by their concern for ancient sources, Kristeller holds that these developments constituted aspects of Renaissance philosophy, but he does not characterize them as being part of Humanism itself. Rather, they represent a distinct branch of intellectual inquiry which was only made possible by the distinct contributions of Humanist philological and literary methodology (Kristeller 1990: 11). Kristeller specifically denies the

idea that the Humanists constituted a class of professional philosophers, arguing that they possess no consistent philosophical position and that, rather, their shared concerns were all deeply integrated with the rhetorical rather than philosophical tradition (Rabil xi-xii). Kristeller sums up his conceptual divisions as follows:

Thus Renaissance Humanism was not as such a philosophical tendency or system, but rather a cultural and educational program which emphasized and developed an important but limited area of studies. This area had for its center a group of subjects that was concerned essentially neither with the classics nor with philosophy, but might be roughly described as literature (1961: 10).

Therefore it should be clear that a significant aspect of Kristeller's interpretation of Renaissance Humanism is the stringent divide between what he sees as the scholastic and philosophical strains of Renaissance thought and the literary and rhetorical contributions of the Humanists.

As previously mentioned, Kristeller has a particularly compelling concern to differentiate Humanism in the Renaissance from the modern movements bearing the same name, which is likely a strong factor in his rejection of a philosophical definition of Humanism. Although Kristeller's interpretation of Humanism is now undoubtedly the most widely accepted, it should be noted that his impulse in this respect stands in opposition to the other major school of mainstream interpretation of Renaissance Humanism in the twentieth century, most prominently exemplified in the work of Eugenio Garin (Rabil xii). In contrast to Kristeller, Garin wishes to place a more significant emphasis on the relationship and continuity of modern humanisms and the tradition which flourished in Italy on the eve of modernity (Hankins 2003: 576). Garin's project is more in tune with the standard interpretation of Humanism prevalent in Italy which views Humanism as an intrinsically philosophical movement, lying between medieval scholasticism and the advent of modern philosophical schools. Indeed, the nineteenth century Italian school, to which Garin was originally indebted, was characterized in particular by the

view that Humanism formed the link between the font of philosophy in ancient Greece and its modern culmination in German idealism, particularly Hegelianism and Neo-Kantianism (Hankins 2003: 576-577).

Following World War II and the strong association of German idealism with the previous fascist regime, Garin is instrumental in detaching the history of Italian philosophy from the idealist tradition—championed by such pro-fascist thinkers as Gentile—and taking research in Renaissance Humanism in a neo-historicist direction; however, he still remains devoted to maintaining the connection between historical Humanism and modern philosophical movements, while simultaneously emphasizing discontinuity from the medieval scholastic tradition (Hankins 2003: 579). That is to say, while Kristeller emphasizes the continuity between the Classical and Medieval rhetorical traditions in the rising Humanist movement, while also paying attention to the continuing endurance of scholasticism in philosophy as well as the rising work of Platonic philosophers, he always maintains the distinction between these various strains of Renaissance thought. On the other hand, Garin's endeavor sees Renaissance Humanism as incorporating all these various intellectual strains in the Renaissance into a unified whole. Furthermore, this vision is also influenced by the viewpoint of Hans Baron, another famous scholar of the Renaissance in the second half of the twentieth century, who argues for a distinctive break between the thought of the fourteenth and fifteenth century Humanists (Hankins 1995: 312). The confluence of these two strains of thought tended to lead to the reduction of emphasis on the continuity between Medieval and Renaissance culture while likewise emphasizing the philosophical importance of the Humanist movement.

Amos Edelheit has contributed to this discussion by pointing out that Kristeller's characterization of the intellectual strains of the Renaissance contains a certain artificiality.

Edelheit shows that there are notable figures whom everyone recognizes as Humanists, such as Erasmus and Valla, who expressed deep interest in philosophy and theology. Furthermore, he draws attention to the fact that, for instance, Pico della Mirandola wrote a speech, *De hominis dignitate*, which is almost a manifesto of the Humanist view of mankind and was considered a member of the same intellectual circle by contemporary Humanists. Inexplicably, however, under Kristeller's definition, Pico's scholastic and philosophical aspirations completely exclude him from membership as a Humanist (Edelheit 2008: 10-11).

Primarily, Edelheit's critique of Kristeller rests upon the fact that Kristeller engages in extreme compartmentalization in a way which is not native to the Humanist movement in its historical context—an ironic criticism given Kristeller's own claim to be strongly opposed to contemporary Humanist movements reimagining the historical meaning of Humanism to suit their own devices. As a result of this compartmentalization, Kristeller is unable to recognize the strong interconnectedness of the Humanists' interest in rhetoric and Cicero, critiques of scholasticism, and their development of philosophy (Edelheit 2008: 11-12). Due to these concerns, Edelheit is sympathetic to Garin's methodology for approaching Renaissance intellectual history. Garin's approach is to avoid the artificial compartmentalization advocated by Kristeller and to allow the internal, historical dynamics of the culture of the period under examination to be manifest in the theoretical constructions regarding those times. Theoretical simplicity must give way to historical truth (Edelheit 2008: 15).

Martin Heidegger, likewise, agrees with Garin and Edelheit that Humanism is inseparable from its philosophical elements. The conclusions which he reaches, however, regarding the nature of those elements are quite distinct to his own philosophical agenda. Heidegger deals with this issue of the philosophical relevance of the history of Humanism primarily in his "Letter

on Humanism,” written in 1946 and prepared for publication in 1947, in response to Jean Beaufret’s letter regarding Jean-Paul Satre’s lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism.” In the “Letter,” Heidegger has scathing comments to make about Humanism, making the general claim, as Soffer puts it, that “Humanism lies at the root of the reification, technologization, and secularization characteristic of the modern world” (547). How and why might Heidegger come to such a far-reaching indictment of Humanism? The most significant problem with Humanism, as far as Heidegger is concerned, is that “[e]very Humanism is either grounded in a metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one” (“Letter on Humanism” 245).⁹

What does this mean? Heidegger takes it to be the case that every historical instance of “Humanism” already assumes a particular essence of mankind. However, this essence is determined by the relationships which hold between particular beings and not the relationship between human beings and Being as such. As a result, historical humanisms close off the uncovering of the true essence of humanity by supplying a metaphysical definition that leads to forgetfulness of Being: “[h]umanism is opposed because it does not set the *humanitas* of the human being high enough” (“Letter” 251). In order to support his claim, Heidegger follows his standard methodology of attempting to reach back and locate the historical essence of the development of the nature of Humanism as it appears in the history of metaphysics.

Heidegger locates the development of the notion of Humanism first of all in a standard Heideggerian trope of the Roman appropriation of Greek terminology. For Heidegger, the Roman practice of translating Greek terms into their own language without possessing the corresponding original Greek experience which those terms describe is responsible for much of the rootlessness of western thought (Soffer 557). This surfaces in the case of Humanism by

9 All citations from “Letter on ‘Humanism’” are taken from the edition of Heidegger’s essays found in the volume *Pathmarks*.

Heidegger's claim that the Romans translated the Greek *paidea* into the Latin *humanitas*. For Heidegger, Roman *humanitas* represents the attempt among the Romans to differentiate themselves as *homo humanus* against *homo barbarus* through their encounter with Hellenistic Greek culture. However, because the Romans were appropriating Greek culture without Greek experience, the primary concern of *humanitas* became *eruditio et institutio in bonas artes*. That is, Roman *humanitas* came to reflect specific training in language, literature, art, and so forth. *Humanitas* is grounded in the idea of the knowledgeable and cultured man over and against the uneducated barbarian ("Letter" 244).

Why should the above characterization of Humanism present a problem? Answering this question hinges on what Heidegger envisioned to be the defining characteristic of the Greek conception of *paideia*. For Heidegger, the Greek conception of *paideia* focuses on the personal journey of experience. It means to free ourselves from our everyday experience and then to reappropriate the world in a more reflexive, phenomenologically informed fashion. As Thomson puts it, "[g]enuine education leads us back to ourselves, to the place we *are* (the *Da* of our *Sein*), teaches us 'to dwell' (*wohnen*) 'there' and transforms us in the process" (2005: 159). By contrast, the Roman attitude betrays an understanding of education as a process of the acquisition of data, specifically about elements of Greek culture objectified and isolated from the very experiences which are essential to genuine *paideia*. That is, for Heidegger, the Roman attitude towards education is a symptom of a developing subjectivism which culminates in the modern interpretation of education in the age of technological enframing in which ultimately education is manifest in the systematized and bureaucratized transfer of data into information receptacles, resources to be optimized (Thomson 2005: 152-153). In this disposition towards education, Heidegger finds that Roman Humanism has already taken the essence of humanity to be given

from the outset as a rational animal, *animal rationale*. That is, that animal who is capable of distinguishing himself from among other animals by virtue of his reason, including his ability to cultivate himself by a system of education which shall render him *homo humanus*. However, he points out that such conceptions do not think “the difference of beings and Being,” and in it “we abandon the human being to the essential realm of *animalitas* even if we do not equate him with beasts but attribute a specific difference to him.” In so doing, we fail to think the proper essence of humanity (“Letter” 245-246).

This issue does not end with the decline of the Roman Empire. Heidegger reflects likewise on the instantiation of Humanism in the Renaissance, stating that the “so-called Renaissance” is a “*renascentia romanitatis*” with the identification of *romanitas* with *humanitas* with the scholastic predecessors of the Humanists now identified in the role of the necessary opposition in the form of *homo barbarus* (“Letter” 244). Thus, Renaissance Humanism is a continuation of the Roman project of the reinterpretation of Greek *paideia* apart from the Greek experience which informed the term and is characterized by the objectified and scientific study of history and philology as the basis for the formation of mankind through the acquisition of knowledge. Thus we see that Heidegger's critique of Humanism, from its foundations in the Roman translation of Greek terminology down to its cultural resuscitation among the Italian Humanists, is fundamentally founded on the problem of the objectification of nature and culture as resources to be created and exploited by a human subject. As a result, Soffer is quite correct to point out that “Humanism in its philosophically archetypical form turns out to be found... in the *cogito* of Descartes, the transcendental idealism of Kant, and the value-thinking of Nietzsche, each of which posits the subject as the ultimate ground of being” (Soffer 550). Although this seems to make the natural object of Heidegger's critique the subjectivity of early modernity (and

its culmination in late modern technological enframing)—which it certainly is—it seems natural, given the circumstances of his response to Sartre's claim that existentialism itself constitutes a Humanism, that he should provide an historical analysis linking the development of such subjectivity to its roots in Humanism. It has been suggested, therefore, that Heidegger's identification of Humanism with a certain anthropocentrism is to be found in the movement's emphasis on the dignity of man in the idea that man is a “god-like creator and shaper of the universe” culminating in Giambattista Vico's principle of *verum et factum convertuntur* (the true and the made are converted), suggesting that “the object of knowledge is the creation of the subject.” Such a conception of Renaissance Humanism is then held to draw a natural progression to Kant's transcendental idealism (Soffer 553).

The Italian school, which we first saw earlier in our discussion of the origins of the interpretation of Humanism as found in the works of Eugenio Garin, thus seems to have exerted considerable influence over the development of the thought of Martin Heidegger regarding the nature of Humanism, since Heidegger held fast to the idea that modern subjectivism was firmly rooted in the project of Renaissance Humanism. Indeed, his student Ernesto Grassi made much of the influence of standard interpretations of Renaissance Humanism on the thought of Heidegger regarding the nature of the movement:

Heidegger's evaluation of Humanism reveals that he held to a very traditional interpretation of that movement. When we speak here of traditional interpretation, two noted scholars come to mind as representatives of such a view. Ernst Cassirer began with the misleading assumption that Humanism exhibits signs of the beginning of modern epistemology. With this in mind, he examined it in terms of epistemological problems, and offered his evaluation on that basis. Paul Oskar Kristeller, on the other hand, sees the philosophical significance of Humanism primarily in its Platonic and Neo-Platonic systems (1983: 31).

Grassi here makes a reference to Ernst Cassirer—a Renaissance scholar from the generation before Kristeller and Garin—as the primary representative of what has been called the

Italian school, in all likelihood due to the famous debate between Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos, but the continuity with Garin's ideology is quite clear: Ernst Cassirer, a Neo-Kantian, attempted to link Humanism as a movement with the development of modern epistemology, and Garin, likewise strongly links Renaissance Humanism with the pre-history of modern Enlightenment thinking (Hankins 2011: 489). This marks the link between traditional Renaissance scholarship and Heidegger's view of Humanism as forming part of the philosophical basis for modern subjectivity.

The more unusual remark in the above quoted passage is, in fact, the idea that Kristeller saw the philosophical significance of Humanism in Platonism. While it is true that Kristeller took his interpretation of Platonic-Kantian philosophy to be an objectively true *philosophia perennis* (Hankins 2011: 490-491) he introduced a strong division between Renaissance philosophy and Renaissance Humanism. The significance of Grassi linking these two elements in Kristeller's thought is, however, not entirely lost for two reasons. First, Heidegger clearly seems to bear the influence of Kristeller's division in his regard for Humanism as a purely scholarly and educational movement, dedicated to the cultivation of training in arts and letters, on the imitation of the Roman interpretation of Greek *paideia*. Furthermore, as we have seen in the introductory chapter, Heidegger strongly links all metaphysical thinking with Platonism and thus considers the historical instantiations of Humanism to be metaphysical. As he says, "every humanism is either grounded in metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one" ("Letter" 245) and "the essence of Humanism is metaphysical" ("Letter" 262). It seems safe to say, therefore, that for Heidegger both sides of Kristeller's thesis obtain. Heidegger considers Humanism to be grounded in metaphysics insofar as it appears as Roman *humanitas* which preconceives human being in the form of a proto-subjectivism, which corresponds to Kristeller's

own assertion regarding the nature of the Humanist movement as grounded in the *studia humanitatis*. Additionally, Heidegger also considers Humanism to be the ground of a metaphysics insofar as it actively and philosophically advances metaphysical thinking, as in the case of the endorsement of an explicit tradition of Platonic philosophy within certain elements of the Humanist movement during the Renaissance.

Having established Heidegger's basic stance towards Renaissance Humanism, we may now turn our attention to his student Ernesto Grassi. It is relevant first of all to give a brief overview of some of Grassi's own intellectual foundations as a means to unveiling his distinctive approach to the problem of Humanism, as well as his analysis of his master's teaching on the matter. Grassi says in the prologue to his *Renaissance Humanism* that in his early career he was trained in the idealistic philosophy of Hegel, promoted by Croce and Gentile (XII), standard training in Italian philosophy at the time as a result of the thesis of Bertrando Spaventa that “Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel are the true disciples of Bruno, Campanella and Vico” (X).

While Grassi was originally trained in the idealist philosophy of Hegel, he eventually came under the influence of phenomenology, first under Edmund Husserl and then ultimately under Heidegger himself. Indeed, he was first responsible for the publication of Heidegger's “Letter on Humanism” in 1947 (Grassi 1983: 49) and it was Heidegger to whom Grassi dedicated his first scholarly work, which had also been written under his supervision (Grassi 1988: IX). However, in 1938, Grassi was commissioned to establish the institute *Studia Humanitatis* under the Royal Italian Academy in Berlin, which finally opened at the end of 1942 (Grassi 1988: XVII). Ultimately, at the close of his career, he found himself retiring as Professor Emeritus at the University of Munich having occupied the chair for “Philosophy and Intellectual

History of Humanism” (Grassi 1988: XIX). This broad history of Grassi's career makes it apparent that Grassi stood in a particularly privileged position to judge the issue of the interpretation of Humanism. He was trained in the Hegelianism of the Italian school, inspired by Spaventa, which held Renaissance Humanism to be a precursor to modern philosophy; he studied extensively under Heidegger, providing him with a keen insight into the thinking of his master; and, finally, he spent the better part of his career intensely studying the primary works of the Italian Humanists from a philosophical perspective. It is as a result of these various converging areas of study that Grassi was to formulate his own interpretation of Humanism in the Renaissance. W. David Hall in “The Primacy of Rhetoric: Ernesto Grassi's Recovery of Humanism and the Possibilities for Philosophy and Religious Studies” has extracted from Grassi's works four major themes which predominate in his vision of the philosophical importance of Humanism: (1) the ontological difference, (2) the relationship between *res* and *verba*, (3) the importance of the imagination and the need for topical philosophy and (4) the centrality of metaphor for conceptuality (4). In the remainder of the chapter I shall outline the meaning of these characteristics, and then they will form the basic framework for examining the relationship between Grassi's humanistic philosophy and the Platonic tradition throughout the remainder of this study.

Grassi's pursuit of an authentic interpretation of Renaissance Humanism arose partly from his early engagement with the philosophy of Giambattista Vico. Vico has already been mentioned above as an example of someone who lent credence to the idea that Humanism was a precursor for the development of modern philosophical movements. This was manifest particularly with respect to Vico's *verum-factum* principle as an example of the development of the modern idea of the sovereign subject. Grassi himself was originally under the influence of

Giovanni Gentile in attempting to find in Vico the basis of modern idealistic philosophy. While Grassi was to remain concerned with the philosophy of Vico for the rest of his career, he progressively began to distance himself from the idea that Vico served as the basis of modern idealism (Moore 443) and instead began to see him as the philosopher representing the fullness of humanistic thought (Grassi 1980: 5). Indeed, in perhaps his most famous work, *Rhetoric and Philosophy*, Grassi explicitly denies the premise that the identity of *verum* and *factum* should be taken as the exclusive or primary element of Vico's thought (6).

Indeed, ironically for those who attempt to place Vico at the forefront of the development of modern philosophy, he displays an extremely critical attitude towards the thinking of Descartes, the founder of full-fledged modern subjectivity (Miner 13). While Cartesian subjectivity claims to establish the *ego* with an indubitable foundation from which other truths may be then logically concluded, thus establishing the subject as the basis from which the external world hangs, Vico strenuously objected to this conclusion. Rather, Vico suggested that Cartesian subjectivism was not a sufficient response to the claims made by skeptics because the *cogito* did not, in fact, produce indubitable knowledge of the thinking subject. Instead, Vico suggested, the *cogito* produces mere apprehension of thought (Miner 14). Indeed, in his work *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, Vico draws upon the tradition of Latin literature to demonstrate that the *cogito* is not an amazing philosophical insight, but rather a relatively normal apprehension attainable by even the simple Sosia in Plautus's *Amphitryon* when, with Mercury appearing in his likeness, he says:

*Certe aedepol quom illum contemplo et formam agnosco meam
Quemadmodum ego saepe in speculum inspexi, nimis similis est mei
Itidem habet petasum, ac vstitum, tam consimile est atque ego
Sura, pes, statura, tonsus, oculi, nasum, dens, labra,
Malae, mentum, barba, collum: totus, quid verbis opus est.*

*Si tergum cicatricosum, nihil hoc simili est similius.
Sed quom cogito, equidem certo sum, ac semper fui.*

By God, when I look upon him, I recognize my own figure,
the one I often spy in the mirror, the one resembling me.
He's got the same hat and clothes. We're completely similar:
his legs, feet, build, hairstyle, eyes, nose, teeth, lips,
cheeks, chin, beard, neck—all the same. What more can I say?
If his back is scarred from whippings, there's no likeness more like me.
And yet, when I think, I am equally certain that I am and that I always was. (Qtd
in Vico 2010: 32-33)

This simple man's apprehension does not satisfy the place of indubitable knowledge from which to construct an unassailable vision of reality by critical art alone. It does not even succeed in satisfying the skeptic, for the skeptic does not doubt his own thoughts and apprehensions nor his own being. What the skeptic doubts is knowledge of these things, not consciousness of them. Vico states that knowledge includes “possessing the genus, or form, by which something comes to be” (32-33). Therefore, according to Vico, in order for the *cogito* to offer true knowledge of the self, one would have to contain the causes of his own existence, which Vico denies (Miner 15). As opposed to the radical claims of modern subjectivity, Vico clearly acknowledges the temporal thrownness and finitude of mankind in his recognition of humanity's inability to give an account of its own existence (Miner 6). We find ourselves already in a time and place and limited to certain perspectives on knowledge and, therefore, do not have access to the certain and indubitable knowledge towards which Descartes aspires.

Given Vico's clearly negative assessment of Cartesian critical philosophy, the question then opens as to what precisely is his—and, with him, Humanism's—philosophical significance. Grassi provides a compelling answer that brings together his knowledge of the Humanist tradition with the existential phenomenology of Heidegger. Grassi points out that Vico's true insight was to free philosophy from logical formalism and a priori metaphysical deductions

(1980: 6). Since the time of Descartes, critical method had been received as the only valid basis for philosophical thinking. From Descartes himself to the time of Hegel, poetic, metaphorical and rhetorical thought had been denigrated as extraneous to philosophical thinking and, indeed, a factor in obscuring the facts derived by rational thought. This critique of rhetorical thought was likewise linked to the limitations of representatives of the Latin tradition, such as Cicero, as not really possessing philosophical significance—representatives of the Latin tradition who were, of course, extremely significant for the Humanists (Grassi 1988: 1-3). Grassi even identifies this opposition between rational and rhetorical thought—and thus, Greek and Latin thought—as present in the writings of Plato, particularly in the *Gorgias* (1987: 68).

By contrast, Vico launches a critique against the mainstream of the philosophical tradition for concerning itself primarily with speculation about nature rather than speculation about human history and human concerns, precisely on the basis of the principles involved in the critique of Descartes seen above. Since men have not made the world, and therefore do not contain the principles of the world within themselves, they cannot come to full and proper knowledge of it. By contrast, the human world is the creation of man and therefore knowable by him (Grassi 1980: 5-6). The concern for the study of nature over human affairs is particularly troubling to Vico due to the introduction of Descartes' geometrical method into its analysis. Through this method, Vico sees an impulse towards domination comparable to what is found among political tyrants, a desire for the mastery of nature which does not obey natural limits established by prudence (Miner 5-7).

Here we see echoes of Heidegger's concerns about technological enframing. Indeed, the predominance of the critical art is grounded strongly in the belief that one can come to a rational definition of beings which remains valid abstracted from all time and place. This brings us to the

first characteristic of Grassi's humanistic philosophy—the ontological difference. For Heidegger, the Cartesian project against which Vico objected is a characteristic form of onto-theology in which the subject is taken to be the highest being and subjectivity is taken to characterize the common essence of beings—that is, the world is constituted as an objective presence for a subject. Like all onto-theology, Cartesianism confuses Being with a being, in this case the subject. In the introduction I described the negative issues which Heidegger believed arise from the forgetfulness of Being, particularly the end of metaphysics in technological enframing. Now, I would like to attempt to give a positive account of the ontological difference, as viewed by Grassi.

Heidegger, Grassi points out, was intrigued by the fundamentally contradictory nature of the term “Being,” underlining, among several other arguments, that Being is both what is most understandable because it is the basis for understanding all beings and “that which is most *hidden*” because it eludes all definition, as every attempt to secure it causes us to speak in terms of beings instead of Being as such. Likewise, Being is what is most “universal” because it can be said of all beings that they are, but at the same time Being is also that which is most “particular” because Being coheres in every *individual* being. Grassi points out that the natural conclusion of the fact that Being eludes all rational determination is that individual beings, who are only intelligible by knowledge of Being (since, as Grassi says, “beings are a 'participle' of Be), are likewise rendered incapable of being securely captured by rational language (Grassi 1987: 69-70). Although it is certainly the case that Vico does not specifically articulate this distinction, it appears to lie implicit in the Vichian critique of the *cogito*. Descartes attempts to secure the definition of Being by establishing it as meaning subjectivity, but Vico sees clearly

that we lack rational knowledge of Being. We merely possess consciousness of it. Being is held out as a question.

In his article, “The Rehabilitation of Rhetorical Humanism: Regarding Heidegger's Anti-Humanism,” Grassi provides an insightful analogy to help illustrate the ontological difference. Grassi suggests that we contemplate what comes together in playing a game—there are the rules of the game and the instruments with which the game is played. Suppose someone were to lay before you a deck of cards and asked you to scrutinize the entire deck intimately, to become familiar with its every detail—the look, feel, shape, etc. of every individual card. Now further imagine that, after having devoted a considerable amount of time to this task, your interlocutor were then to inquire of you the rules of the game. The task now being demanded of you is, of course, absurd. As Grassi states: “[e]ven the most attentive analysis of the instruments of the game (dice, cards, balls) does not by itself make it possible to identify the game in question since the same instruments can be used for different games.” Individual beings can only be understood by virtue of a prevailing code, an historically instantiated epoch of Being (142). This is why every onto-theology must ultimately be overcome because it attempts to define Being by an examination of beings, but all such determinations remain radically contingent. To return to the analogy of the deck of cards, this would be akin to attempting to define the nature of the game to be played by holding up the Queen of Hearts and, based on her qualities, defining the other cards of the deck in reference to her. Furthermore, we become so engrossed in this theory about the nature of the deck that we start to believe that this understanding is in fact *necessary* and atemporally true.

This brings us to the second facet of Grassi's analysis of the philosophical importance of Renaissance Humanism, the relationship between *res* and *verba*. Traditional metaphysical

thinking is characterized by precisely the emphasis on *ars critica* that seeks to establish a rational definition of beings which holds in all places and all times without exception. Beings, therefore, become properly identified with their definitions—essence is known through definition and definitions are the underlying concept of the thing apart from all circumstances. Grassi quotes from Dante's *De Monarchia* in order to demonstrate this traditional conception of the relationship between things and words:

Since every non-original truth is always revealed on the basis of a first guiding truth, it is inevitable that every investigation should arrive at the cognition of this first truth and should refer to it analytically, in order to attain certainty about all the assertions that have their roots in it (qtd in Grassi 1988: 5).

In this passage, according to Grassi, Dante suggests an idea strikingly reminiscent of Descartes' own project to establish a point of indubitable truth from which all other truths might be derived according to the rules of logic. Traditional philosophy, it is argued, is concerned with attaining the logical truth of beings as grounded in an irrefutable truth of a *first* being, whether that being is Plato's Form, God, or Descartes's Subject.¹⁰ The task of philosophy then becomes the rational clarification of the substance of beings. In order to achieve this end, only what is essential to the beings under discussion can be maintained—a concept and definition must be formulated that stands outside the various shifting circumstances of lived experience. Thus, according to Grassi, in traditional philosophy, rational language is the only legitimate kind of language available (1988: 6).

¹⁰ The purpose of this study is not to perform an in depth critique of Grassi's own use of specific texts; however, it should be noted that his appropriation of *De Monarchia* in this instance is curious. Dante here does not, in fact, seek out some being as a first principle as his concern is with ethics and not with any form of (meta)physics. As such we find for Dante that "*pax universalis... pro principio rationum... supponatur*//universal peace... is to be taken as the first principle" (I.IV.5). Such a principle is hardly the ground of indubitable facts. Indeed, Dante himself states "*erat necessarium... velut signum prefixum, in quod quicquid probandum est resolvatur tanquam in manifestissimam veritatem*//it was necessary to have such a principle to serve as an agreed point of reference to which anything which had to be proved might be referred back, as if to a self-evident truth" (I.IV.6). Dante here is using an historically contingent ethical principle, universal peace, as the target of an analogy to a first principle of metaphysics. It is this metaphysical analogue at which Grassi's critique actually aims.

For Heidegger, as we have seen, traditional Humanism likewise falls within this metaphysical mentality because it prioritizes the question of the human being, making it the ground for the understanding of all beings. Thus conceiving of beings as having their meaning in relation to the human person constitutes a preliminary contribution to modern subjectivity. If Humanism does not make the sovereign subject the ground of all beings, it holds the essence of humanity to be already predetermined on the basis of some other form of metaphysics—say, determining mankind in relation to divinity, and so forth—as a being whose essence is rationally derived from some *other* first being. However, Grassi strenuously denies that this supposedly traditional problem of the definition of beings continues to be the prevailing concern of the Humanists. Grassi holds the inversion of the normal relationship of *res* and *verba* to be one of the major philosophical innovations of the movement.

Although Grassi found the beginning of the departure from the traditional, metaphysical view of language in Dante's work *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1988: 7), particularly in its stress on the need for an historical language and its emphasis on the here and now, Dante still hovered on the borderline between what Grassi considered the scholastic and Humanist views of the relationship between *res* and *verba* (having espoused the alleged scholastic view in other works).¹¹ The full transition to a Humanist manner of approaching the problem, however, was, according to Grassi, accomplished in the insights of the philologist Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370-1444). Grassi attributes to Bruni the explication of the idea that words derive different meanings depending on the *context* in which those words appear, rather than an atemporally framed logical derivation. It is also important to note that the idea of words gaining meaning based on context

¹¹ According to Grassi, the scholastic view consists of the pre-determined rational and atemporal nature of beings (*res*) which words (*verba*), as neutral tools, then tries to explain using logical language. By contrast, the Humanist view is that words (*verba*) are the ecstatic response to different existential contexts and it is through the words that we encounter the historically conditioned and variable nature of beings (*res*).

is not based on a foundation of anthropology or subjectivity, as might be the case in modern metaphysics. It is not that a sovereign human subject *creates* the new meanings of the words and thrusts them upon the world. They arise not from the subject, but from the existential circumstances in which they appear (1998: 21-22).

For Grassi, traditional theories of language are based firmly on an ontology. Furthermore, that ontology is static, determined and atemporal. In this understanding, language is reduced to simply a neutral medium, a tool by which the philosopher attempts to explicate the meaning of the thing by producing logical definitions which grasp the essence (*ousia/substantia*) of the thing (*to on/res*) (1998: 6). Bruni gives profound philosophical importance to the observance of the variability of the meaning of words based upon the context in which they appear—the proper use of a word is not, in fact, reliant on its correspondence to an objectively existing, stable thing, but rather the word itself, in its variability, *establishes* the thing for a particular time and place. Ontology is now dependent on the word. The word reveals an interpretation of being. Furthermore, while in traditional philosophy everything that could not be seen to hold irrespective of temporality was judged to be an accidental quality of the thing; with Bruni's innovation it becomes apparent that historicity is an *essential* characteristic, inseparable from a properly conceived ontology (Grassi 1998: 22-23).

In describing the inversion of the primacy of *res* and *verba* in the thought of the Renaissance Humanists, I have pointed out that the Humanist view should not be equated with the view of the subjectivists in which the human subject merely constructs the world of meaning and then projects and objectifies it. Rather, I have stated that the meaning of words arise from particular existential contexts, reflecting that *res* are historically constituted. However, if these meanings are not created by the subject, but arise from circumstances, then how do human

beings gain access to them? It cannot be through the use of pure rationality due to the limitation of rational language to only operate within already established systems. This brings us to the third primary characteristic of Grassi's account of Renaissance Humanism, namely the primacy of rhetorical language and the need for a topical philosophy.

Grassi finds this element of his thought, once again, expressed most clearly by Giambattista Vico. While Descartes attempts to degrade all forms of rhetorical and poetic speech as superfluous to philosophy, which was to focus purely on the critical art, Vico instead presents the historical reality of education in the liberal arts. In particular, Vico calls upon the fact that the art of *topics* precedes the art of criticism, logic and dialectic. In his *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, he states:

In our days, instead, philosophical criticism alone is honored. The art of “topics,” far from being given first place in the curriculum, is utterly disregarded. Again I say, this is harmful, since the invention of arguments is by nature prior to the judgment of their validity, so that, in teaching, that invention should be given priority over philosophical criticism (14).

Traditionally, the topical art had first been explored by Aristotle in his treatises, *Rhetoric* and *Topics*. It must be said that the meaning which Aristotle wishes to establish for the term *topos* in this context is far from clear.¹² Some scholars have found in Aristotle's term two divergent meanings borrowed from the standard usage of the word. The first is derived from military terminology of the fourth century BCE in which *topos* refers to “a position out of which one can effectively build an attack.” The second usage is derived from mnemonics in which one has a variety of common premises immediately at hand. Out of this developed the dual nature of

¹² It is likely that for Aristotle himself this dilemma was never thematized. He likely intuited a *topos* as merely being a “place.” However, the later tradition was forced to struggle with the background implications implicit in Aristotle's own understanding of what “place” means. Therefore, this discussion does not so much reflect Aristotle's own explicit thinking on the issue of *topos* so much as the necessity for drawing out the unspoken meanings in order to advance our own understanding thereof.

the *topoi* as being both actively used for the refutation of an opponent's arguments and passively as a means of organizing one's own theses (Drehe 131-132).

These two divisions come down through the oratorical and philosophical traditions of antiquity to comprise two basic approaches to *topoi*. Mortensen traces this development into *topoi* (or *loci*) as described by Cicero from whose work he divines five different types of *loci*: taxonomic, ideal, affective, mnemonic, and logical. The first four types, broadly speaking, are closely interrelated and derive their origin from the oratorical tradition proper and the last type derives from the traditional philosophical appropriation (52). The primary difference between the two types lies in their basic function. The logical *loci* are focused on the establishment of "the relationship of premises in syllogistic arguments" and "are designed to generate premises for a given line of argument." By contrast, the broadly rhetorical *loci* serve to help an orator "determine which arguments would be appropriate" (52-53).

The logical *loci* deal with issues such as cause-and-effect, contradiction, genus, etc. (53) and more closely align with Aristotle's conception of a *topoi* of the second type in which the "place" signifies a rule of inference from which *archai* (first principles) are derived (38-39). The rhetorical *loci* are more precisely focused on perceiving the associative connection between different kinds of facts which present themselves in any concrete situation which is to be subject to rhetorical speech. By first observing the likenesses between various aspects of the case, the orator is then able to construct specific arguments about those topics, in which task he would be aided by logical *topoi* or, more simply, the rational process (37-38).

Based on the insights of rhetoric, Grassi indicates that the Humanists have produced a major revolution in philosophical thinking. Whereas Aristotle had already observed that the principles of logical discourse were not self-grounding and, indeed, did not possess a scientific

character, he had failed to realize that this fact rightly unseats logical thought from its primacy in philosophical discourse. Since all rational discourse is based on a deduction from presupposed premises, it might have logical validity, but be fundamentally detached from the concrete reality of the phenomena (Grassi 1980: 44). Topical philosophy, on the other hand, operates on the principle not of *ratio* but rather of *ingenium*. *Ingenium* is a faculty of the human person which allows one to see and gather together things into categories of similarity. It is that characteristic of man which allows him to see beyond what is immediately presented to his senses and rather to gather up various things according to likenesses.

According to Grassi, this principle of *ingenium* is first revealed in mankind's work. In particular, it originates when mankind encounters the world as something which provides for mankind's needs. Thus, in the concrete circumstances of human activity, the world and its objects are encountered in the immediacy of meaning provided by the context of the experience accessed through man's imaginative and inventive faculties. As Grassi says, "[t]he fact is that the circumstances in which particular urgent needs arise are new and will not be repeated and, to use Vive's¹³ metaphor, 'beseige us,' they sharpen our inventive capacity" (1980: 14). Therefore, in the face of necessity, *ingenium* allows the discovery of meaning which can be as simple as providing for basic and instinctual needs or as complex as the foundations of all human social order:

Grassi discussed *ingenium* as the effort that life exerts in its efforts to perpetuate itself amid the exigencies of existence. *Ingenium* is the animal response to necessity. In the human being, this ingenious response takes the form of labor by which the human world, i.e., life in human institutions—language, economics, law, etc.—is constituted (Hall 18).

¹³ Juan Louis Vives is cited by Grassi for the purpose of demonstrating the widespread recognition among the Humanists of some of the central theoretical problems explored by Vico to the point where they were proposing similar questions totally independently.

With these words it is not difficult to see the specter of subjectivism hovering over the entire enterprise. After all, this seems to suggest straightforwardly that the human world is constituted by human labor, which is precisely what arises from the *ingenium*. This brings us to the final of the four characteristics of Grassi's thought—the centrality of metaphor in conceptuality.

For Grassi, the historical meanings of words—which in turn determine the historical meaning of their referents—are *not* determined by the imposition of human will and interpretation upon those circumstances. From the perspective of Heidegger and Grassi such an imposition would be to offer a privileging of the modern interpretations of Being, namely subjectivity, by holding to the idea that our primordial state is a subject over and against a world of objects. However, on the contrary, as Heidegger had argued in *Being and Time*, the presupposition of this subject-object dichotomy was not the originary ground of human experience of the world—an issue which he would expand into his history of Being in subsequent works throughout the rest of his career. For Grassi the metaphor played a primordial role in this determination of meaning.

For Grassi rational language which is concerned with division and critique relies on a more primordial insight into the similarities between things in the world named topical philosophy, made possible by the faculty of the *ingenium*, which has the purpose of finding, joining and aggregating (Grassi 1980: 45). The normal understanding of the metaphor in its literary character has to do with the “transposition of words.” However, this literary form of the metaphor must be based on a prior recognition of a similarity between the things under discussion and is thus derivative. Grassi points out that, in fact, metaphor lies behind all human conceptuality:

Empirical observation itself takes place through the “reduction of sensory phenomena to types of meanings existing in the living being; and this “reduction” consist in the “transferring” of a meaning to sensory phenomena. It is only through this “transference” that phenomena can be recognized as similar or dissimilar, useful or useless, for our human realization. In order to make “sensory” observations we are forced to “reach back” for a transposition, for a metaphor. Man can manifest himself only through his “transpositions,” and this is the essence of his work in every field of human activity (1980: 33).

Thus, for Grassi, Being is metaphorically transferred to beings in various historical circumstances which arise in conjunction with human labor, which forms the basis of the historical world. Thus historically determined meanings arise from the call of Being and mankind’s passionate response (Grassi 1994: 10). When Grassi says that the context determines the meaning of beings, he is referring to the call of Being through the historical development of linguistic meanings, human necessity and the primordial metaphorical transference and interconnection between beings. In turn, mankind responds to this call through the functioning of the *ingenium*, philological analysis and through the pre-reflective judgment of entire peoples (*sensus communis*) (Hall 19).

These insights from Grassi into the operation and preeminence of poetic and rhetorical language help to clarify and expand upon issues which Heidegger himself raised regarding the meaning and nature of the work of art throughout his philosophical career. Accordingly, I wish to examine some of the primary issues of Heidegger’s conception of artwork and how they are clarified and expanded upon by Grassi’s own insight. In particular this will be important because Grassi, as we shall see, opposes precisely the artistic impulses of the Humanists against the Platonic understanding of art. Therefore, by examining the Grassian-Heideggerian conception of art—particularly in the context of its philosophical roots in Being, topical philosophy and primordial metaphorization—we can establish a ground from which to judge the allegedly onto-theological character of Platonic conceptions of artwork.

According to Heidegger, our contemporary experience of the work of art is hopelessly mired by the ontological presuppositions of modernity, which he identifies as aesthetics. From the Heideggerian perspective, the aesthetic idea of the work of art is grounded in the subject-object dichotomy in which art is primarily viewed as an object which draws the viewer out of his enclosed subjectivity and allows him to have a profound life experience. Given the particular onto-theological character of modern subjectivity, it is impossible for Heidegger to consider such an account of how we ordinarily experience art as cutting to the primordial essence of the work of art (Thomson 2011: 48). Indeed, Heidegger makes the bold claim that art in the modern period is altogether dead. However, while it is true for Heidegger that a great amount of modern art is, indeed, completely trivial or even a manifestation of the objectification of everything as standing reserve, in reality he does believe that there are certain examples of modern art that transcend this inherent deficiency (Young 120-121). However, we shall see that for Heidegger the role of great modern art is of an entirely different kind from his normal view of what constitutes great art—that is to say, Heidegger maintains two quite distinct ideas of what makes artwork great.

In order to understand either of Heidegger's two conceptions of great art, it is necessary to return to elements of Heidegger's understanding of Being because, unsurprisingly, for Heidegger the question of what constitutes great art is intimately connected to the understanding of the ontological difference. A number of the key concepts which inform Heidegger's understanding of the history of Being appear with different terminology in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." While normal studies in the philosophy of art focus on the artist or the effect of art on its viewers, Heidegger views such approaches to art as grounded fundamentally in onto-theological approaches to "aesthetics." By contrast, Heidegger is concerned with

approaching the essence of art through artwork itself, which is precisely where he begins his inquiry into the topic in “The Origin.”

Heidegger insists that such a pursuit must begin with an examination of the “thingly” character of the work of art. He sets out, therefore, to divest the reader of all his or her prior metaphysical notions of what constitutes a “thing,” in turn attacking the idea that thing is a substance to which properties adhere, a bundle of sensations, and matter-form composites. According to Heidegger, all these explanations for the thingly character of a thing are grounded in the “Greek experience of the Being of beings in the sense of presence” which comes to its fruition in the translation of this conceptions into Latin in medieval thought where “Roman thought takes over the Greek words without a corresponding equally authentic experience of what they say, without the Greek word” (“The Origin” 23), a theme which he continues to expound in his later “Letter on Humanism.” In contrast to this thinking of being as presence, Heidegger proposes an alternate reading which associates the thingly character of things with their nature as what he called “equipment.” The equipmental understanding of the thing is characterized by its usefulness. The thing must be thought of within the context of its practical use in the world and not in an abstracted fashion (“The Origin” 32). Here we see echoes of Heidegger’s conception of *Zuhandenheit* developed at length in *Being and Time*.

However, Heidegger points out that the equipmental character of the thing does not normally present itself as apparent to us. It is a pre-reflective judgment on the nature of the thing, given security by the reliability of the equipment in its availability to lived experience. The example given by Heidegger here is of a peasant woman’s shoes:

The equipmental quality of equipment consists in its usefulness. What about this usefulness itself? In conceiving it, do we already conceive along with it the equipmental character of equipment? In order to succeed in doing this, must we not look out for useful equipment in use? The peasant woman wears her shoes in

the field. Only here are they what they are. They are all the more genuinely so, the less the peasant woman thinks about the shoes while she is at work, or looks at them at all, or is even aware of them. She stands and walks in them. That is how shoes actually serve. It is in this process of the use of equipment that we must actually encounter the character of equipment. ("The Origin" 32)

Heidegger suggests here that the equipmental character of the pairs of shoes can only be encountered within the context of their usefulness. Indeed, he begins to protest that the shoes thought of as objects present for analysis or a pair of isolated peasant shoes depicted in van Gogh's painting of shoes, standing isolated without a context, cannot reveal their equipmental character. However, as he says this, Heidegger suddenly presents a dramatic reversal and offers an analysis precisely of van Gogh's painting of the pair of shoes with profound philosophical importance. I shall quote the relevant passage in full:

A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet—From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, and trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.

At this point, Heidegger pronounces something of a reversal of his previous position. He now argues that "perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes. The peasant woman, on the other hand, simply wears them... she knows all this without noticing or reflecting" ("The Origin" 33).

Heidegger goes on to state that "[t]he art work lets us know what shoes are in truth... Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth.

The entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being” (“The Origin” 35). Thus we see that the fundamental character of the work of art becomes the fact that it is a happening of truth. In particular, Iain Thomson has captured precisely what it is about this painting of van Gogh that caused Heidegger to reach this conclusion. He notes the careful phrase by which Heidegger introduces his sudden reversal on the topic, “a pair of peasant shoes and *nothing more*.” This is an important detail because Heidegger himself has a notorious history of “nothing” constituting a much greater concept than simple absence (Thomson 2011:84). In order to explain what is implied by Heidegger’s use of the term we must therefore look further into the work.

In his exposition of van Gogh’s painting, Heidegger draws attention to two particular terms—“earth” and “world.” These two terms would take on great significance in the rest of the work and would continue to be a major theme throughout all of Heidegger’s future work, although under different names. If we recall, for Heidegger, history is composed of various historical epochs in which beings have taken on a certain meaningfulness, with our own late modern period being characterized by the view of beings as standing reserve. It was further pointed out that that these different, incommensurable historical epochs are not determined by the projection of meaning by a sovereign subject, but rather by Being itself, revealing and concealing. This, then, forms the basis of Heidegger’s conception of truth as concealment—Being has revealed the truth of beings in a particular historical epoch, while concealing other meanings. With this in mind, we are able to approach properly what Heidegger means by “earth” and “world” in the current work.

Later in the “Origin,” Heidegger speaks of “earth” as “the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing.” On the other hand, “[t]he world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and

essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people” (47). The parallels to what has previously been stated should become immediately apparent. Heidegger, in this essay, is beginning to meditate upon the ontological significance of the work of art. In doing so, he has identified his conception of “Being itself” (*Sein selbst*) with “earth” and “the being-of-beings” (*Seinendheit*) with “world.” Heidegger speaks about the relationship between the two concepts in this way:

That into which the work sets itself back and which it causes to come forth in this setting back of itself we called the earth. Earth is that which comes forth and shelters. Earth, self-dependent, is effortless and untiring. Upon the earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world. In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth. This setting forth must be thought here in the strict sense of the world. The work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth.* (“Origin” 45)

Here we see reflected Heidegger’s entire ontological schema. Earth comes forth and it is upon it that man sets forth his “dwelling in the world.” However, as we have seen, earth is “self-secluding” and “concealing.” Earth is seen precisely insofar as it grounds a world through work, which pertains to the “destiny of an historical people.” Earth corresponds exactly to that self-concealing presencing of frameworks of intelligibility in different historical epochs. World, in the general sense, stands in for that horizon of intelligibility or, more specifically, as a particular historical manifestation of the total sum of significations available to an historical people.

Having brought the ontological structure of the essay into view, let us return to the role of the work of art itself in this schema. Recall that the *work* is said to be what brings the earth forth as a world. Elsewhere in the essay Heidegger states: “[t]owering up within itself, the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abiding in force” (43). However, he also says the “setting forth of the earth is achieved by the work as it sets itself back into the earth” and “world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world” (46-47). This is vital, as we have already seen Heidegger

explain in the case of the pair of peasant shoes that it is the work of art that has placed this dynamic of earth and world before our eyes. The work thematizes the emergence of world from, through and on the earth whereas previously Heidegger's peasant woman neither noticed nor reflected on this dynamic. In *Being and Time* the earth was thematized as the *Abgrund*, abyss, beyond our worlds of meaning which was revealed in *Angst*'s calling into question the totality of beings (147). The abyss to which Heidegger also gave the name *nichts*, nothing, in his 1929 essay "What is Metaphysics?" when he stated: "Only on the ground of the original manifestness of the nothing can human Dasein approach and penetrate beings" ("What is Metaphysics?" 91).¹⁴

This is the same nothing which introduced Heidegger's meditation on van Gogh's painting: "A pair of peasant shoes and *nothing more*//Ein Paar Bauernschuhe und *nichts weiter*." However, as Young notes, there is a distinct shift in the understanding of the nothing since it was first introduced as the abyss which calls beings into question in *Being and Time*:

Late Heidegger, no less than early, insists that the 'beyond' of beings is 'nothing.' Having liberated himself from metaphysics, however, the character of this nothing undergoes a radical reassessment. No longer is it to be thought of as the 'abysmal', 'empty' or 'negative' nothing. Rather, it is to be understood 'positively' as the nothing of 'plenitude', the nothing that is, to be sure, 'something completely and utterly Other (*Anderes*) than beings', but, for all that, undoubtedly 'something (*etwas*)' (GA 15, p 363). Overcoming metaphysics is understanding, as Schopenhauer succinctly put it, that the 'Other' of beings is not an 'absolute' but only a 'relative' nothingness. Otherwise put, it is understanding that it is not an ontological but rather an epistemological nothing, 'nothing' in, but only in, the sense of being beyond our ultimate standards of intelligibility; 'nothing (comprehensible) to us', the mystical. (Young 2001: 132)

A work of great art for Heidegger is said to bring forth a world precisely as a holy place because the earth "juts through world," this inexhaustible plenitude beyond the horizon of intelligibility is made manifest precisely in the work of art simultaneously bringing world into

¹⁴ Heidegger continues to use "nothing" in this sense repeatedly in "What is Metaphysics?"

visibility and exposing it *as* world. This is the meaning of Heidegger's statement about van Gogh's painting: "perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes."

However, there is something unclear in Heidegger's account of art. In "The Origin," he suggests that in order for a work of art to be great, it must be linked to an act of preservation. A private or unknown work of art cannot have the quality of greatness. A great work of art is firmly entrenched in its unfolding of the historical understanding of a group of people, hence why the definition of world which he provided included "the destiny of an historical people." It is for this reason that major examples of great works of art for Heidegger are the ancient Greek temple or the medieval cathedral. These are works of art that help form and concretize an entire way of being-in-the-world for a people. Great works of art are world-historical. He states:

Art is historical, and as historical it is the creative preserving of truth in the work. Art happens as poetry. Poetry is founding in the triple sense of bestowing, grounding and beginning. Art, as founding, is essentially historical.... Art is history in the essential sense that it grounds history.... The origin of the work of art—that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of a people's historical existence, is art. This is so because art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical. ("Origin" 75)

With this great pre-eminence given to the work of art, it is easy to see how some interpreters have given what Young identified as a "Promethean" reading of Heidegger's conception of artwork, that the artist *creates* a world (29). This would, of course, suggest some form of subjectivism in which a particular human artist projects his view of reality onto the world. Young, however, demonstrates that this reading is incompatible with both Heidegger's own examples of great artwork (surely the Greek temple already *presupposes* the existence of the Greek way of being-in-the-world?) as well as with the insights which he had already discovered in writing *Being and Time*. In that work, human beings are said to be in a state of thrownness, always already immersed in a world (122-123). Likewise, human *cultures* also find themselves

in this state of inauthenticity in which their world is received as a background which has faded out of view as surely as the shoes had faded into the background for the peasant woman. Rather than being the Promethean work of a great artist, world first emerges—though not yet thematized through a great work of art—through “language.” It is important to remember that, for Heidegger, language takes on a radically new meaning from its conventional (or metaphysical) definition as a means of communication. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger has already stated:

All discourse about... which communicates in what it says has at the same time the character of *expressing itself*. In talking, Dasein *expresses* itself not because it has been initially cut off as “something internal” from something outside, but because as being-in-the-world it is already “outside” when it understands. What is expressed is precisely this being outside, that is, the actual mode of attunement (of mood) which we showed to pertain to the full disclosedness of being-in. Being-in and its attunement are made known in discourse and indicated in language by intonation, modulation, in tempo of talk, “in the way of speaking.” The communication of existential possibilities of attunement, that is, the disclosing of existence, can become the true aim of “poetic” speech. (157)

Here we can see that Heidegger does not consider language to be a tool by which to refer to external objects encountered as such, but rather it is the mode of Dasein’s expression in being-in-the-world. Fundamentally then, language refers to the entire way of life for a people which has appeared organically. It is not something that arises from human impulse, but rather is a response on the part of human beings to the existential circumstances sent by Being.

All of this should remind us of what we have already seen present in the work of Grassi, particularly in his interpretation of Vico. Language as the pre-reflective way of life of human beings is the equivalent to Vico’s *sensus communis*: “judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, and entire nation, or the entire human race.”¹⁵ However, while Heidegger is content to speak of the effects of great works of art, Grassi provides an account from within the rhetorical theory of Renaissance Humanism which shows how the work of art

¹⁵ Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, quoted in Schaeffer, 83.

arises in and through topical philosophy in man's passionate response to the call of Being. The work of art, as we saw, is fundamentally "poetry" and likewise topical philosophy is an expression of the meaning formation of poetic and rhetoric language and thought. Thus, Grassi is able to clarify Heidegger's thought by drawing upon the concepts of topical philosophy and in particular the gathering and inventive power of the *ingenium* to explain the way in which the work of art grounds and preserves the emergence of historical worlds.

There is one last issue that must be clarified regarding the nature of the work of art as expressed by Heidegger. Earlier it was noted that for Heidegger there are two forms of great art. Thus far I have focused primarily on the first type, that world historical art which thematizes a particular historical era, which makes the entire un-thought ethos of a people appear precisely as a world which emerges from the earth and, therefore, as a holy place. However, this type of art may appear in the idea of a Greek temple or a medieval cathedral, but it scarcely explains the image which first introduced the entire discourse—van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes. Indeed, I previously drew attention to the fact that Heidegger possesses a general disdain for modern art, thinking that modern artistic expression is hopelessly mired with subjectivism in the form of aesthetics. Should not this criticism, by all right, exclude this painting of van Gogh as well?

In point of fact, Heidegger actually maintains an affection for a number of modern artists. Heidegger had a deep obsession with Holderlin; however, he also held in esteem a number of modern painters in addition to van Gogh, particularly Klee and Cezanne (Young 121). None of these figures possess the sort of world-historical importance of a medieval cathedral. None of them produced art which is so integrated with the consciousness of an entire people that it defines and thematizes their historical dwelling. How then can Heidegger possibly entertain the

idea that their artwork qualifies as great? The answer lies in the current historical conditions of our times. Nietzsche had already observed that the, “death of God,” in the fact that the metaphysical objectification of the universe in modernity had destroyed the relevance of religious life to the experience of mankind. Indeed, this was symptomatic of a general nihilism that characterizes modernity. In short, the modern era is a time in which the sense of wonder has been completely eviscerated from the experience of man.

Heidegger’s consciousness of this fact and its relevance for the essence of art is on full display in his essay “What Are Poets For?” The central question of the essay arises from a poem of Holderlin: “... and what are poets for in a destitute time?” The destitute time for Heidegger is modernity in which “the divine radiance has become extinguished in world history” (89). It does not take much effort to connect this issue of divine radiance with Heidegger’s phenomenology of the holy which has already been linked to the recognition, in a period defined by a great work of art, of earth jutting through world, hence allowing a world epoch to retain a numinous quality. This numinous quality or divine radiance is precisely what is absent in our times. Indeed, the problem is deeper than even a general absence of the experience of the holy:

At this night’s midnight, the destitution of the time is greatest. Then the destitute time is no longer able even to experience its own destitution. That inability, by which even the destitution of the destitute state is obscured, is the time’s absolutely destitute character.... Perhaps the world’s night is now approaching its midnight. Perhaps the world’s time is now becoming the completely destitute time. (90-91)

In this time of absolute destitution the world is characterized by *Gestell*, technological enframing, which prevents anything from coming forth as holy. Any attempt at world historical-art would be reduced to a standing reserve for manipulation and therefore fail to achieve its purpose. Artists in such a time period cannot produce works like the Greek temple. This is why Heidegger has, following Holderlin, asked the question, “what are poets for in a destitute time?”

In response to this question, Julian Young has extracted that purpose which Heidegger envisions—the artist of modernity is to lay the foundations of the holy. He cannot yet establish world-historical art which founds a world while retaining the numinous presence of earth precisely because the interplay of presence and absence between world and earth has been devastated by technological enframing. Thus, the modern poet must attempt to pull forth that very interplay and make it present in order that *future* poets might once again attempt great works of art. The great modern poet seeks to keep alive the memory of the holy (98-99).

This brings us back to Heidegger's discussion of van Gogh's painting of the pair of boots. If we recall, Heidegger specifically identified the painting as depicting a pair of boots and "nothing more." In particular, he stated, "from the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth." In the wake of criticisms that Heidegger has merely projected his own subjective impressions onto the van Gogh's painting by claiming that it depicts that shoes of a peasant woman rather than van Gogh's own shoes (as seems to be the reality), Iain Thomson has offered an argument that Heidegger's analysis arises from the work of art itself. He claims that precisely what is distinctive about van Gogh's 1886 painting of a farmer's shoes is that in "the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes" one is able to discern the emerging image of a woman holding a hoe, the woman farmer to whom Heidegger refers. Thomson argues that Heidegger himself discerned this inchoate figure and it formed the basis of his phenomenological analysis of the painting (2011: 114). Furthermore, Thomson points out that in other attempts by van Gogh at painting pairs of shoes, one is able to see further figures emerging from the indistinct background (2011: 87). While I remain somewhat skeptical of Thomson's analysis of the 1886 version as depicting a woman farmer, the idea that the indistinct background of other versions of van Gogh's treatment of pairs of shoes, such as that of

early 1887, give forth phantom images, such as faces and the crucifixion of Christ, seems far less contestable. As such, it scarcely matters whether Thomson's analysis of the particular painting under discussion is accurate, because van Gogh's treatment of pairs of the shoes, in general, seem to contain a characteristic which, for Heidegger, also marked the genius of Cezanne and Klee: semi-abstraction.

In order to penetrate fully what this focus on semi-abstraction in art means, we must turn our attention to the forms of art most disdained by Heidegger: symbolic and representational art. For Heidegger the issue with both these art forms is that they remain fundamentally locked within the metaphysical paradigm. Heidegger characterizes symbolic art as that art which seeks, by the use of sensuous images, to represent indirectly something beyond itself which is not itself sensuous or rather the *supersensuous* (Young 135-136). This type of art qualifies as metaphysical for Heidegger due to his critique of onto-theology. According to Heidegger, in the historical effort to symbolize the supernatural through the sensuous, what has occurred is that objectification of being by the thinking of being as a particular being, an objectified presence. As such, symbolic art destroys the holy and therefore fails to satisfy the earth condition which characterizes great art. As we shall see going forward, Heidegger considers this attempt to concretize the supersensuous in the sensible a primary characteristic of the Platonic conception of the work of art (Young 138-139). On the other hand, there is the problem of naturalistic representation, simple mimetic art. This art is locked into metaphysics because it, like simple onto-theology, remains locked within the framework of beings. Naturalistic art seeks to offer representations of natural and sensuous phenomena, but in doing so neglects that which is other than beings. Once again, we see that naturalistic representation fails to honor the earth condition which characterizes great works of art (Young 140-142). Since both these forms of artistic

expression neglect the truly numinous and holy, they cannot do the work of the artist in this time of destitution. Likewise, Heidegger does not hold that *purely* abstract art can perform the function of bringing forth the world as a holy place for quite the opposite reason—abstract art does not present the world at all and so therefore cannot bring it to presence as a holy place (Young 168).

Given the preceding critique of mimetic art (of both the symbolic and naturalistic form) as well as purely abstract art, one can now see more clearly the value that Heidegger sees in art of a semi-abstract variety.¹⁶ Beginning with van Gogh's painting, Heidegger sees the indistinct backgrounds and negative spaces of the work as giving forth *hints* at emerging beings. This same thing persists in a more pronounced fashion in the painting of Cezanne, where the central figures depicted seem to shake and blur, constantly threatening to fade into the background. Finally, semi-abstraction becomes a most thoroughly pronounced artistic technique in the paintings of Klee. In Klee, the chaos at first threatens to turn the paintings entirely into abstract art; however, upon closer examination, one can see the figures and images arising from the chaos into presence. This, for Heidegger, is the quintessential role of modern art. The work of Klee shows distinctly that other beyond being from whence beings arise into presence. It seeks to remind the world of the holy which has grown indistinct by the force of modern enframing. It seeks out to found the holy upon which future artists can generate again great works of art comparable to the ancient Greek temple or the medieval cathedral.

For Grassi, the world of the Humanists must necessarily lie somewhere between the two poles of Heidegger's great artistic endeavor—the poets, for Grassi, still bring beings to presence

¹⁶ For an in depth discussion of Heidegger's relationship to various modern artists, see Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, Chapter 4, "Modern Art," pp. 120-174.

and thematize the historical world, but they stand at the climax of the nihilistic¹⁷ inclinations of late medieval Scholasticism, heading towards the dawn of modernity. Indeed, one might say that, from Grassi's perspective, the Humanists were a final heroic stand to preserve the holy against the growing tide of nihilism and subjectivism, but that ultimately their efforts were undercut by the resuscitation of Platonism which occurred through the appearance of Ficino. Going forward, I shall examine this question of the supposed opposition between Platonism and Humanism and we shall see how closely the Platonist view of the world and that of the Heidegger and Grassi align.

¹⁷ The decline towards "nihilism" in late medieval thinkers is often ascribed to an "ontological flattening" associated with the development of the concept of the univocity of being in Duns Scotus. The subsequent growth of nominalism and voluntarism are likewise often invoked in this designation. For a more extensive treatment of this topic see Laurence Paul Hemming, "Nihilism: Heidegger and the grounds of redemption" in *Radical Orthodoxy*.

Chapter Two The Humanist Plato

The interpretation of Plato has historically always presented extreme difficulties. Even in antiquity various schools existed which attempted to lay claim to the essential element of Plato's philosophical impulse, be they so-called "Middle Platonic" dogmatists who worked under the influence of the Stoic philosophers or the "Academic Skeptics" who viewed Platonic philosophy as primarily based in the art of refutation and *aporia*, which they considered a purely Socratic model. Of course, by far the most influential of the ancient interpretations was that school which developed out of the thinking of the third century Egyptian philosopher Plotinus, commonly known to modern scholarship as "Neoplatonism."

As noted at the outset of this study, a large amount of time will be spent analyzing various Neoplatonic presentations of Plato throughout history; however, this form of analysis is not without controversy regarding whether Plato himself should be included in the study and regarded as authentically interpreted by these sources. First and foremost, this difficulty is grounded in the fact that the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato has been virtually completely dismissed as a *misreading* by modern Platonic scholarship. Therefore, in order to establish the plausibility of the analysis which I am to undertake, it is necessary to review the various approaches to Plato that have gained currency in the modern period and offer them up to critical analysis.

It should be stated at the outset that the impulse for doing such an analysis of the *status quaestionis* is not to reject wholesale modern contributions to the analysis of Plato as wanting when compared to Neoplatonic interpretations. Modern scholarship has, however, generally attempted to drive a wedge between the thought of Plato himself and his Neoplatonic commentators. This becomes particularly important to our present study when Heidegger and

Grassi speak negatively about Plato, insofar as they assimilate him to “Platonism” (with Neoplatonism explicitly in mind, particularly in Grassi’s case), while sometimes offering positive accounts of his work only when this modern separation between Plato and Platonism is observed. As such, I wish to offer an analysis of the various positions of modern scholarship in order to present the idea that, in fact, the most plausible contemporary examinations of Plato lend themselves to a continuity with authentically understood Neoplatonism. Thus I hope to show through the rest of this study that when Heidegger and Grassi assimilate Plato to Platonism, they are correct regarding their impulse not to separate these thinkers, but incorrect in their conception of the content of the shared thought of the Platonists because they identify (Neo)platonism with a position held neither by Plato nor the Neoplatonists.

I will return to the relationship between a correct interpretation of Plato himself and the work of his Neoplatonic successors in the next chapter; however, at the present time it is necessary to review the history and state of Platonic scholarships in the modern period. Once an authentic methodology for the interpretation of Plato is established, it will then be possible to see how well this vision of Plato coheres with Grassi’s philosophical project by examining how the four characteristics of Grassian philosophy outlined in the previous chapter appear within the body of Plato’s own works.

The Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato held dominance for over a thousand years from the time of Plotinus in the third century to its last major commentator, Marsilio Ficino, in the fifteenth century (Tigerstedt 1974: 7). The sixteenth century, however, saw a definitive shift in the structure of Platonic studies. The influence of modern impulses against received tradition entered into the interpretative task with the attempts of Stephanus and Serranus to develop a fundamentally new approach to Plato (Ralkowski 7). They viewed Plato as a systematic

philosopher and tried to derive their system from a completely new examination of the Platonic dialogues. This impulse would reach its full height in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century. Schleiermacher would argue that there are two essential characteristics of Platonic philosophy. First, Plato must be regarded as a systematic philosopher. Second, there is a unity between form and content in Plato's writings. That is, the dialogue form is of philosophical relevance. The way in which Schleiermacher himself combined these two elements was to propose that Platonism comprised a definite system of doctrines that were pedagogically unfolded through successive discussions in the dialogues (Gonzalez 1998: 3).

While this impulse has been maintained by some interpreters, in general Schleiermacher's vision of Platonic philosophy suffered under the burden of what modern interpreters took to be inherent contradictions in the content of various dialogues. How can Plato's thought be a single, unified system of doctrines if his writings are self-contradictory? The nineteenth century solution to this issue was to combine the impulse of Plato as a dogmatic and systematic philosopher with the theory that his views of that system remained in development during the productive period of his writings. That is, Plato was attempting to convey doctrines in his dialogues, but he himself was in the process of revising these doctrines visibly within the dialogues themselves. This position on the interpretation is generally known as the “developmentalist” interpretation and has maintained a strong position as the scholarly consensus in Platonic studies. However, the developmentalist hypothesis is not without its own difficulties.

In general, the starting point for the developmentalist approach to Platonic studies has been to adopt Aristotle's statement that the *Laws* was a later composition among Plato's dialogues and work backwards. The first tool used in this sense is stylometric analysis which

allows scholars to map out verbal and stylistic similarities between the *Laws* and other Platonic dialogues. As such, there developed a rough consensus of what were to be considered Plato's "late dialogues" (Brandwood 90). Likewise, following Aristotle's claim that the historical Socrates focused exclusively on questions of ethics and not broader philosophical speculation into areas such as epistemology and ontology, scholars have tended to separate out Plato's dialogues dealing with questions of virtue which end in *aporia* as being "early," in imitation of his master (Penner 121). Finally, the remaining dialogues in which Plato seems to move away from questions regarding human virtues and towards more diverse issues, such as ontology, and appears to these interpreters to no longer focus on simple refutations, but to be proposing doctrines of his own, are classified as "middle dialogues" (Kraut 3-4).

The greatest difficulty with the developmentalist interpretation of the Platonic dialogues is that it relies heavily on two primary presuppositions. First is the idea that we can accurately establish a chronology of Platonic thought. While the developmentalist model claims to have established a rough chronology of Plato's works using stylometry, there is still a great amount of debate about the development of Plato's thought within the different periods of his composition (Kraut 14). This problem is only exacerbated by questions regarding the validity of stylometric analysis in establishing chronology at all. Does a similarity of style and vocabulary necessarily demonstrate chronological proximity or does it merely indicate artistic or thematic correspondence? This question is especially appropriate of an author of such well recognized artistic power and precision as Plato. In reality, the only firmly attested external evidence regarding Platonic chronology which we possess is the aforementioned fact that the *Laws* were Plato's final composition, unpublished at the time of his death (Kraut 15). Since any attempt to understand Plato's philosophical system on a developmentalist account presupposes the necessity

of tracing this development temporally, this chronological *aporia* seems to render the task of the developmentalist futile and potentially fundamentally incorrect.

This chronological difficulty is only compounded by the examinations done of the structure and nature of the dialogues by recent scholarship. The separation of the “early dialogues” relies on the presupposition that in his early career Plato produced dialogues that were merely imitative of Socrates's distinct style of questioning, terminating in *aporia*, and that only in the so-called Middle period does Plato begin to present positive hypotheses. However, J. B. Kennedy claims to have found distinct elements of Pythagorean-influenced structure not only in the later dialogues, but also those regarded as early by the developmentalists, including both the *Euthyphro* and even the *Apology*, despite developmentalist arguments that such developed doctrinal content is a later accretion within Plato's philosophical career (8-9). If this is so, the general structure of these dialogues no longer appears as a legitimate indicator of their chronological position within the Platonic corpus.

The second presupposition is the very idea that Plato intended to formulate a systematic philosophy at all, a presupposition inherited in modern scholarship primarily from the position of Schleiermacher. In effect, this presupposition causes the developmentalist to mine the dialogues for arguments supporting particular “Platonic positions,” bearing in mind the idea that these positions may be revised or even abandoned over time. A major example of this is the idea that, in the so-called Middle Dialogues (particularly the *Republic*), Plato formulated a theory of the Forms which he is then sometimes held to have abandoned after subjecting it to a damning critique in the *Parmenides* only for the theory (supposedly) to disappear or be greatly reduced in importance during the so-called Late Dialogues.¹⁸ However, this presupposition causes the

¹⁸ Although, if Plato is attempting to propose a “theory of the Forms” then this seems to be clearly untrue, since the *Timaeus*, agreed among developmentalists to be a “Late Dialogue,” clearly depicts the existence of separated

developmentalist to embrace, by necessity, an unlikely interpretative strategy: the rejection of the dialogue form of Plato's writings as fundamentally irrelevant. In order to allow this doctrinaire interpretation of the dialogues, the developmentalist has found it largely necessary to posit the primary speaker of any dialogue—whether it is Socrates, Timaeus or the Eleatic and Athenian Strangers—as simply representing the mouth-piece of Plato (quite arbitrarily, it should be noted). The dramatic form, the give-and-take of dialectic, the frequent *aporia*—all are rendered irrelevant in this interpretation which converts the dialogues into merely disguised treatises. That is, the developmentalist approach, in its attempt to explain the apparent contradictions in the positive content of the dialogues, sacrifices Schleiermacher's second criteria, the unity of the form and content in Plato's philosophy.

Due to the apparent absurdity that Plato should write in a style so opposed to the purpose of explicating a systematic philosophy, as the dialogue form seems to be, new interpretive approaches to the dialogues have arisen. In particular, some modern scholars have proposed a non-doctrinal reading of Plato. The suggestion is once again that Schleiermacher is wrong regarding his two principles; however, in this interpretation it is the first and not the second principle which must be forfeited. While there is a unity of form and content in the works of Plato that entails that one *reject* the idea that Plato intended to be a systematic philosopher at all. However, this interpretation has its own flaws. As Lloyd Gerson has pointed out, there are certain positions¹⁹ that the dialogues seems to engage in a universally critical fashion and, if Plato were secretly to hold these positions or to think these positions just as valid as any other, it

Forms. This represents one of the many difficulties which render developmentalist accounts of “Plato's doctrines” inherently vacuous.

¹⁹ Gerson here specifically mentions Plato's general support for the philosophical life and philosophy's superiority to all forms of sophism. Elsewhere in the same work (10ff) he presents his view that the core impulses of all Platonic philosophy are antimaterialism, antimechanism, antinomialism, antirelativism, and antiskepticism, without these impulses implying a fixed doctrinal content in any particular Platonic philosopher.

would seem to make Plato the worst kind of sophist (2013: 37). Furthermore, even if one goes so far as to say that the dialogue form refuses to yield *any* insight whatsoever into Plato's own thought—including these apparent principles of Gerson—the results appear quite dismal. What we are then left with is an empty form of eristic. Since eristic is the art of the sophist, we are once again left with the conclusion that under the model of absolutely no positions, Plato would again be reduced from a philosopher to a sophist. Since this seems like a fundamentally unappealing position, the approach of the non-doctrinal interpreters of Plato seems to be as fundamentally flawed as the doctrinal approach, in either its unitarian or developmentalist form.

A third approach to Platonic interpretation developed from the roots laid by Dietrich Tiedemann and Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann and more fully developed by Hans Joachim Kramer and Konrad Gaiser (Nikulin 2). This school of interpretation centers on the idea that Plato was indeed a systematic philosopher, but the dialogues do *not* contain our only or even most complete access to his doctrines. Basing themselves on the doxographic testimony of Aristotle in particular, these scholars, generally known as the Tübingen school, claim that the essence of Platonism is contained rather in the unwritten doctrines which Plato commended to his pupils in the Academy. Furthermore, from the perspective of the Tübingen school, the dialogues are seen as being products and introductions to intra-Academic discussions. As such, the Tübingen school constitutes a branch of Platonic research which views Platonism from a primarily esoteric perspective. Besides the fact that the doxological testimony appears to give credence to the idea that Plato held and taught ideas not found—at least not obviously—within the scope of the dialogues²⁰, members of the Tübingen school also argue that the writings of the

20 See Mitchell Miller, "The Choice Between the Dialogues and the 'Unwritten Teachings: A Scylla and Charybdis for the Interpreter'" in *Plato's Third Way* for an attempt to find the roots of the esoteric doctrines on display in the dialogues themselves.

Platonists themselves support this position by speaking of the Platonic life as a form of *askesis*. Indeed, in every instantiation of Plato's academy, the personal discourse between master and student is upheld as an ideal of philosophy.

Furthermore, the Tübingen school calls on Plato's own authority in his written works to support their claim that the transmission of Plato's ideas was primarily oral, specifically by drawing upon the philosophical digression found within the *Seventh Letter*:

Indeed, there neither is now nor ever will be a written work by me on [what I seriously study]. The reason is that this subject matter cannot at all be expressed in words as other studies can, but instead, from living with the subject itself in frequent dialogue, suddenly, as a light kindled from a leaping flame, [knowledge] comes to be in the soul where it presently nourishes itself.²¹

This passage from the *Seventh Letter*, combined with Plato's apparently critical comments towards writing as found in the *Phaedrus* lend credence, for the Tübingen school, to their idea that Plato's philosophy is primarily to be found in the doctrines reported among the doxographers as having been transmitted orally from master to pupil, rather than recorded in the written texts of the dialogues.

However, ultimately this appeal to the *Seventh Letter* does more to undermine the truth of the esotericists claim than to support it. It is certainly true that this letter suggests that Plato does not think that writing could convey what he considers to be the most important topic, but what is the reason for this fact? While the esotericists focus on Plato's reticence to record that which he considers to be most worthy of study in writing, they ignore that the reason for this hesitation, given by Plato, is that the subject matter cannot, *in principle*, be expressed in words. The Tübingen school, while seeing with the non-doctrinal interpreters the inherently ambiguous and non-dogmatic nature of the dialogues, embraces the idea of philosophy as a systematic science

²¹ Gonzalez's translation is used for the *Seventh Letter*. Unless otherwise noted, all other translations from Plato's Greek are my own.

held by the dogmatic interpreters of Plato, whether their stance be developmentalist or unitarian. As such, despite the initial attraction the Tübingen school may possess, there seem to be aspects of Plato's own stated stance towards philosophy that belie their attempt to penetrate Plato's thought.

Is every angle for the interpretation of Plato therefore defeated? On the basis of the *Seventh Letter*, it does not seem possible that Plato was proposing that philosophy consists of a systematic formulation of doctrines about reality—whether written or oral—but likewise the dialogues do seem to reveal an inclination to divide the sophist from the philosopher and eristic from dialectic, thus rendering any idea that Plato envisioned philosophy as idle chatter highly dubious.

Francisco Gonzalez offers a “third way” between these various dogmatic and skeptical approaches. Since Gonzalez's approach most closely parallels the understanding in this study of the best way to interpret the Platonic dialogues, I shall spend some amount of time summarizing and demonstrating the legitimacy of his interpretation and method.²² The core of Gonzalez's interpretation rests on a two-fold understanding: the dialogues are indeed aiming for a form of knowledge (*contra* the skeptical approach), but that that knowledge is fundamentally not a knowledge of *propositions*. The knowledge found in the dialogues is closer to non-propositional, practical knowledge—knowledge *how* rather than knowledge *that*. Furthermore, the reason for its non-propositional nature is because it cannot be objectified as a result separable from the method which is employed to attain it. For Plato, the truths of philosophical inquiry are most certainly not merely relativistic or subjective—Lloyd Gerson in particular has spent considerable effort demonstrating that anti-relativism is one of the key components of Platonism which

²² For a more complete analysis see Francisco Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1998.

appears consistently throughout the dialogues and throughout the tradition of those who claim Plato as their master (Gerson 2013: 13). Nevertheless, Plato also does not hold the position that philosophical truths are separable, objective “facts” which can be taught and handed on as propositions. Instead, Plato’s idea of philosophical knowledge is found in the form of a self-knowledge which exists inseparably from the knower and the dialectical process of inquiry. This, indeed, is the reason for the suitability of the dialogue form to Plato’s philosophical endeavor. Gonzalez states: “the subject and the object become one in the method which mediates between them. This view makes philosophical method *everything*. The method is not simply a tool by means of which we arrive at some objectifiable results which themselves constitutes philosophical knowledge; instead the method *is* philosophical knowledge” (1995: 160-61).

That Plato has something like this in mind is most explicitly on display in the *Seventh Letter*, for whereas Plato clearly states that philosophical knowledge cannot be expressed in words, he does not for that reason indicate that philosophical knowledge is inherently inaccessible, as the skeptics might hold. Instead he states that:

In relation to each being there are three things that are necessary means of attaining knowledge, and this knowledge must itself be placed beside them as a fourth thing: the first is the name, the second is the definition, the third is the image, and the fourth is knowledge. To these we should add as a fifth thing, the being that is known and that is truly being. (342a-b)

Plato begins with a conception of knowledge that cannot be expressed in definitions, but which is rather attainable through the knower entering into the mystery of the known. That is because, as Plato indicates, there is a distinction between knowledge by which something is qualified and that which it is. In describing an object as in scientific discourse, we are fundamentally addressing the issue of how that thing is qualified. However, in Plato's view,

dialectic is precisely what reveals to us what a thing *is*. As Gonzalez puts it, philosophy is “a method that *shows* rather than proves, that *manifests* rather than describes. It is primarily neither deductive nor analytic, but rather exhibitiv” (1995: 162). However, Plato is quite clear that the means by which this exhibition is made manifest is through the mediation of these things which are *not* the thing itself, in dialectic:

Yet the process dealing with all four, moving up and down to each other, barely gives birth to knowledge of the ideal nature.... Only barely, when the [three], that is, names, propositions, as well as appearances and perceptions, are rubbed against each other, each of them being refuted through well-meaning refutations in a process of questioning and answering without envy, will wisdom along with insight commence to cast its light in an effort at the very limits of human possibility. (343e, 344b)

Thus, we can expect to find in Plato *indications* of truths, hints and suggestions about the fundamental nature of reality, but not dogmatic, systematic formulations. Plato does not share the modern sensibility that anything that can justifiably be called philosophy must be reducible to a systematic exposition of doctrines. Rather, he belongs to the ancient and venerable tradition in which philosophy was primarily a way of life, an orientation towards reality.

The conception of philosophy which Gonzalez has mapped out as fundamental to the correct interpretation of Plato is deeply at odds with the critique of the Platonic tradition found within much of Ernesto Grassi's oeuvre. In his work *Renaissance Humanism*, after referring to the authentic Humanist appreciation of the power of the metaphorical word and poetic expression, Grassi says the following:

The Platonic Humanist tradition distances itself radically from these problems. It proceeds from the problem of the rational definition of being, in accord with which knowledge endeavors to attain “surety” or “certainty” by anchoring these in abstraction, as universals, in the non-historical. Everything which is revealed through the senses appears as a reflection of “ideas,” of the rational concepts which constitute the eternal cause of the appearance. The meaning of words is located in the logical transcendence of what the senses reveal; so man is raised through this rational process to a vision of the eternal, to being by and for itself.

Philosophical Platonism... will scarcely add anything new from a philosophy standpoint to this traditional schema of metaphysical thought. (115)

Furthermore, lest it be objected that Grassi here refers to *Platonism* and not to *Plato*, it should be pointed out that in *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism*, Grassi unequivocally states that “for the general structure of Plato's metaphysics, it is essential that the *ideas*... form a well-ordered system. And from this the definitions of beings are rationally *inferred* by means of logical, dialectical investigation” (16). It is evident from these statements that Grassi's own interpretation of Plato is to collapse Plato into Platonism while accepting Heidegger's critical assessment of Platonism as a form of proto-Cartesian rationalism heading headlong into its culmination in modern technological thinking and nihilism. It should be noted that a significant element of Grassi's conception of Platonism includes the assertion that Plato's *ideas* are reducible to “rational concepts.” This assertion, of course, runs completely at odds with Plato's own statement that concepts or definitions are precisely what is *not* sought by the philosopher. Rather the rational account constitutes a statement *qualifying* the thing itself, which must be continually challenged in the activity of dialectic.

The remainder of this chapter will concern itself with the demonstration that Plato is not enamored by the ability of reason to produce universally applicable, a-temporal definitions which constitute the fundamental nature of reality. First I shall show that, even by Heidegger and Grassi's own admission, Plato does not fall into the onto-theological act of identifying Being as such with beings, and only by ignoring their own original insights into the Platonic texts and progressively distorting the meaning of those texts does that idea emerge. Next, I shall explore the question of the “ancient quarrel” between philosophy and poetry. In doing so, I shall show that Plato's critiques of the poets are primarily focused on their mimetic function, a reality that Heidegger himself subjected to significant critique. Furthermore, in examining the differences

between the poets and philosophers, I shall also highlight similarities which will draw a closer association between Plato's conception of the philosopher and Grassi's conception of the Humanist. Ultimately we shall see, contrary to Grassi's assertion, that Plato's aim is not to attain any kind of rational certainty, but rather to encounter the world continually anew through the ongoing process of dialectic, which lacks the inferential character which Grassi assigns it. Rather, I shall show that Platonic dialectic has an indicative character more similar to the topological philosophy of the Humanists than it does to logical deduction.²³

Regarding the question of the ontological difference, it is surprising to find that, despite the prevailing insistence in Heidegger and Grassi regarding the forgetfulness of Being in traditional metaphysics—and the particular identification of Plato as the original author of this forgetfulness—Heidegger's own early works indicate that he was quite sensitive to the fact that Plato did not suffer from this confusion. It was only gradually over the course of the 1930s, culminating in his definitive work on the subject, his 1940 *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, that Heidegger began to see Plato as the founder of onto-theology. As such, the natural place to begin a defense of Plato on this account would be to show that Heidegger's own analysis of Plato in his

²³ During the course of this chapter, I shall not treat Plato's *Timaeus*. This may seem an odd omission, given that Proclus and Ficino both wrote commentaries upon this dialogue and, in its account of the Receptacle, it treats the relationship between the beingness and entities. There reasons for this omissions are several. First, the dialogue is not given any significance by Heidegger, Grassi or Gonzalez. Indeed, in his entire volume dedicated to treating the relationship between Heidegger and Plato, both actual and hypothetical, Gonzalez mentions the *Timaeus* only twice, both times merely in passing. Second, while it was the only partially available dialogue in the West during the medieval period, Dutton has pointed out that its interpretation was obscured by a failure to differentiate Plato himself and Calcidius's comments, including by my principle representative of that period, Thomas Aquinas (193). Third, while Ficino did compose a commentary on the work, it treats extensively of a variety of issues pertaining to mathematical magic and Renaissance proto-science which are not immediately interesting for our topic (Allen 2003: 238-239). Furthermore, he treats topics of more interest to this project in his *Platonic Theology* and commentary on the *Parmenides*. Fourth and finally, the structure and arguments of the *Timaeus* itself, particularly regarding the Receptacle, which would be of the most interest to this project, are often confusing and contradictory to the point of incoherence, a fact acknowledged by the speakers within the dialogue itself and explicated extensively by Kenneth Sayre in his "The Multilayered Incoherence of *Timaeus*' Receptacle" (60-79). In short, to treat the *Timaeus* justly would involve such extensive exegesis that it surpasses the scope of this study.

earlier work was closer to the proper interpretation of Plato and how his subsequent interpretation failed to account adequately for the content of the Platonic text.

The early work which provides the greatest insight in this respect is Heidegger's 1932 lecture series on *The Essence of Truth*. In this lecture series Heidegger focuses his effort primarily on a discussion of two major images in Plato's *Republic*: the Allegory of the Cave and the Allegory of the Sun (though he treats them singularly, drawing upon the latter to clarify the former). It is not necessary to recount in detail the primary allegory to which Heidegger directs our attention in this lecture due to its deserved fame; however, I shall do so nevertheless in order that the reader may not overlook any of its details.

The Allegory of the Cave is an extended metaphor found in the seventh book of the *Republic*. Socrates asks his interlocutor Glaucon to envision a cave with a long entrance open to light, and that within this cave people live, but in the peculiar state of being chained up at their legs and necks so that they can only see what is directly in front of them. Behind them stands a wall behind which men are carrying various different figurines and objects peeking out over the top. Still farther behind the prisoners and the wall, there burns a fire whose light reaches down into the depths of the cave, casting the shadows of the objects above the wall onto the cave wall in front of the prisoners. Socrates then proceeds to imagine a prisoner being ripped from their previous place and turned towards the light. Ultimately he imagines one of these prisoners being pulled out into the upper world of sunlight, at first suffering blindness, but then being able to see real objects more clearly than he originally saw the shadows on the cave wall and recognizing the source of their illumination in the sun. Finally, he imagines the same prisoner, now freed, descending back into the cave in order to aid his fellow prisoners in their own liberation. Unfortunately, Socrates envisions such a person, having been dazzled by the light of day, being

rendered blind by his descent back into the darkness of the cave, thought a fool by his fellows, and ultimately killed for trying to pull others from the cave into the light.

Heidegger considers the primary message of the Analogy of the Cave to center on the question of *aletheia*, un-concealment. This is vitally important because for Heidegger the emergence of a conception of *aletheia* as “truth” (that is, the correspondence between assertion and object), rather than unconcealment, is a principle necessary for the emergence of onto-theology. Indeed, by the time of his 1942 essay, Plato has become the founder of onto-theology for Heidegger precisely because he then finds in this portion of the *Republic* the forgetting of the traditional Greek idea of unconcealment and the emergence of truth as correctness of vision, that is, correspondence. Yet this alteration in Heidegger's thought over the course of the 1930s does not seem to cohere particularly well with Plato's own text and as such his later revisions should be rejected for an interpretation more closely matching his original assessment as given in 1932.

Before delving into Heidegger's own interpretation of the allegory, it is necessary to speak first about more common interpretations of the points which Plato is trying to make. The general trend in Platonic interpretation—following the standard doctrinaire or dogmatic approach—is to read the allegory as an early exposition of Plato's “theory of the Forms.” Upon this interpretation, we are meant to view Plato as presenting a view of reality with multiple levels. The prisoners inside the cave are taken to represent everyday people, living in a world directed towards sensible objects from which they draw their understanding and ideas about truth. Plato, by contrast, wants to indicate that, because of the shifting nature of the world of sense, it is impossible to come to true knowledge through it. It is a world of *becoming*, not of *being*. The best one could hope for, in such a situation, would be “true opinion.” However, Plato fails to be content with the idea that our thought must terminate in this way. As such, he posits

another world, above the world of sensible particulars. This secondary world is a purely spiritual world, distinct from the vicissitudes of lived, historical existence. Here is the stable world of *being* rather than the ever-shifting world of *becoming*. In the allegory, this secondary world is meant to correspond to the world outside the cave. The objects in this world are eternal, timeless and unchanging, and, as such, it is possible to come to true, well-founded knowledge of them. Furthermore, the Forms which occupy this second world are taken to be the models for all those things in the first world. All sensible trees *are* by virtue of their participation in the *true* tree in the world of the Forms; all sensible circles *are* by virtue of the Form of circle and so on. That is, the Form is what all sensible objects share as the common nature of their being. Additionally, the Form is envisioned as being something of an object in its own right; indeed, it is the perfect paradigm of the things which exist in the world of sensible particulars and time. For instance, every circle in the sensible world possesses imperfections which do not allow it to correspond perfectly to the idea of a circle; however, the Form of the circle in the second world lacks those imperfections. Thus, the Forms come to represent both the common nature shared by all sensible particulars and their perfection and model.

It should be apparent that this common description parallels exactly Heidegger's idea of onto-theology. In order to explain the world of lived experience, Plato has sought to define being, but in doing so, he has given it a concrete instantiation as *a* being which fulfills the role of both ontology (common nature) and theology (perfect paradigm). As such, Plato is taken to forget the question of Being as such and initiate the history of metaphysics characterized by the task of logically determining being as the ground of beings.

In 1932, however, Heidegger offers an interpretation of the allegory which is substantially at odds with the conventional doctrinal interpretation. In the first stage, Heidegger

discusses the condition of the prisoners in the cave. In describing their situation, he makes note of that fact that Plato refers to the shadows projected on the cave wall as τὸ ἀληθές, the unconcealed. However, he observes that the distinctive position of the prisoners trapped within the context of the cave is characterized precisely by their inability to see the shadows as that which is unhidden. Rather, for the prisoners, the shadows are simply that which is self-evidently at hand (Heidegger 2013: 24). In Plato's accounts, Glaucon remarks: “ἄτοπον λέγεις εἰκόνα καὶ δεσμώτας ἀτόπους//You are speaking of an out-of-place image and out-of-place prisoners.” However, Socrates simply replies “ὁμοίους ἡμῖν//(they are) similar to us” and moves forward (*Republic* 515a). It is not difficult to see why Heidegger, given this statement by Socrates, came quickly to associate the prisoners of the Cave Analogy with human beings in their everydayness. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger would call this condition “inauthentic Dasein.” Human beings in their normal engagement with the world do not encounter that world thematized as the unconcealedness of being, but rather they mistake their everyday encounter with beings as being simply what is given. We saw this same reality in the last chapter in the discussion of the peasant woman referenced in Heidegger's description of the van Gogh's pair of shoes—the shoes do not appear to her in their being in her everyday experience; they disappear into the background.

This brings us to the second stage of Plato's analogy. At this point, one of the prisoners is depicted as being loosed from his bonds. He turns back and witnesses the objects carried behind the wall and the fire which casts their shadows into the cave. At first such a prisoner is presumed to be blinded by the light of the fire and shocked by the objects he sees. As such, according to Socrates and Glaucon, he would turn back, taking the shadows he previously observed as being “more unconcealed” (ἀληθέστερα) than what is now brought before his eyes. For Heidegger, the

introduction of this comparative terminology takes on a special significance for understanding Plato's conception of truth. Onto-theological conceptions rely on the meaning of beings being taken as established, and, therefore, the primary conception of beings as coming forth into their unconcealment is lost. In such a circumstance, "truth" is reduced to the form of a correspondence between thought and beings, particularly in the form which can be articulated as a proposition. Heidegger observes, quite rightly, that truth—unconcealment—appears to admit of degrees, based on the comparative form employed. However, propositions are either true or false and so such terminology does not easily assimilate to a view of truth as correspondence. Heidegger also notes that Socrates characterizes those objects which cast the shadows as μάλλον ὄντα, more beingful, thereby seeing that being also admits of degrees and, in fact, there is an intimate relationship in the analogy between being and truth (2013: 28-29).

Heidegger's account then immediately moves forward to a discussion of the liberation of the prisoners from the cave into the "world of light." However, in doing so, he passes over offering an adequate interpretation of the fire within the cave. Ralkowski notes this omission, but presents the argument that there is an implicit assumption in Heidegger's text that the fire represents the particular historical world of Dasein. He has several reasons for making this assertion. First, he notes that for Heidegger the light of the fire is what allows the shadows (i.e.: beings in their everydayness) to appear. However, as we shall see shortly, for Heidegger it is the world of light beyond the cave which constitutes the Being of beings. That is, the world of light stands in for the general horizon of all intelligibility. However, since the light of the fire is parasitic upon the light of the sun above, it seems appropriate that the broader horizon of all the possibilities of intelligibility be distinguished from a particular historical world or epoch in which beings in their everydayness appear (66). Ralkowski points out that this confrontation

with the fire allows the historical world of Dasein to present itself precisely *as* world; it allows Dasein to encounter beings *as* beings, rather than as lost in the world of their everyday significations. The turn towards the fire presents the opportunity to view one's own historical world as fundamentally unnecessary (67). We have already seen this movement in the previous chapter. The turn towards the fire is precisely that thematization of beings which can occur in the great work of art.

For Plato this moment seems to be parallel the *aporia* experienced by Platonic interlocutors in many of the dialogues. Often, the interlocutors appear as though they possess knowledge of a topic under discussion at the opening of dialogues (*Euthyphro* 4e-5a, *Laches* 188e-189a, *Ion* 530d) only eventually to be shown to have no true knowledge at all by the conclusion (*Euthyphro* 15c-e, *Laches* 200c, *Ion* 541e-542b). This concluding *aporia* often depicts them becoming frustrated and simply exiting the discussion to continue along the path they had chosen for themselves before the dialogue took place. This precisely parallels the analogy's vision of a prisoner who is freed from his shackles, but, in looking back towards the fire, is dazzled and so turns himself again and regards the shadows as more unconcealed than the objects he saw beyond the wall. They see that their knowledge is unstable and contingent on their own world of experience, but refuse to accept the conclusion. This, likewise, coheres with Ralkowski's view that Heidegger implicitly associates the fire with a particular instantiation of an historical world.

This movement, however, does not take a high priority in Heidegger's discussion of the analogy of the cave, presumably because he does not feel that Plato himself gives it a high degree of emphasis in the *Republic*. The quick abandonment of the issue is only further reinforced by the fact that Heidegger does not regard this initial turn towards the fire as being a

liberation into the philosophical life at all (2013: 35), an understandable conclusion given the Platonic parallel. Rather, Heidegger, as mentioned, is quick to move on to a discussion of the ultimate liberation from the cave into the world of the forms. Heidegger notes that Plato refers to the world of light as being the foundation for the unconcealment of beings:

The ideas are the most unhidden, the essentially unhidden, the primordially unhidden, because the unhiddenness of beings *originates* in them. In the first, and especially in the second stage, we already encountered a necessary ordering between *alethes* and *on*, *alethestera* and *mallon onta*. What is unhidden in the first stage, although shadow-like, is already in a certain sense *on*, something of which the prisoners quite spontaneously say that it *is*. Correspondingly, in the second stage, *ta alethestera*, to which comparative there corresponds more-being, *mallon onta*. Thus too in the third stage there must correspond to what is ‘now unhidden’ a being which is *most beingful* [*das Seiendste*]. Both (more- being and most-being) are asserted of what is revealed in and for seeing, the *eidos*; (what-being, *ti estin*): the *genuinely unhidden* must also be what *genuinely is*. What has most being is the most unhidden. In fact, in precisely the most decisive passages Plato uses a characteristic expression. He calls the ideas *to ontos on*, the being which has being [*das seiendlich Seiende*] — the being which is *in the way* that only beings can *be*: *being*. To this *ontos on* there corresponds *alethinon*. (2013: 54)

This characterization of the world of light being the most beingful which originates unhiddenness for our everyday experience corresponds to Heidegger’s understanding of metaphysics. It can therefore be said that Heidegger interprets Plato’s forms as corresponding to his own conception of the Being of beings, the “historically fluctuating metaphysical paradigms” which allows beings to come into the open (Ralkowski 71). However, is it not possible to imagine the forms not as historically fluctuating paradigms, but rather as higher *objects* upon which those objects of our everyday experience are based? That is, after all, the standard dualistic interpretation of Plato. Is it not the interpretation that Heidegger himself later comes to embrace in depicting Plato as the author of metaphysics? Is it not possible that Plato, rather than grasping an insight into man’s historical thrownness has rather embraced a supernaturalism which we have seen previously condemned by Heidegger?

At this point in his analysis of Plato, Heidegger does not seem to observe the problem of supernaturalistic onto-theology in Plato's writings. In discussing the nature of the forms he states:

At the origin of the unhiddenness of beings, i.e. at being's letting-through of beings, the perceiving is no less involved than what is perceived in perceiving—the ideas. *Together* these constitute unhiddenness, meaning they are nothing 'in themselves,' they are never *objects*. The ideas, as what is sighted, *are* (if we can speak in this way at all) only *in* this perceiving seeing; they have an essential connection with perceiving. The ideas, therefore, are not present but somehow hidden objects which one could lure out through a kind of hocus-pocus. Just as little do they carry around *subjects*, i.e. are they something subjective in the sense of being constituted and thought-up by subjects (humans, as we know them). They are neither things, objective, nor are they thought-up, subjective. (2013: 58)

In these earlier lectures, Heidegger did not consider the characterization of being as *eidos* to imply the reduction of Plato's conception of being to onto-theology. By the late 1930s, in his lecture series on Nietzsche, concurrent with his ongoing revisions of his lectures on truth which would culminate in "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," Heidegger still considered Plato to have an ontological conception of truth (1979: 182-183). That is, truth was still regarded fundamentally as pertaining to beings and not to propositions. However, Heidegger had come to view Plato's *eidos* as a crystalized "outward look," present at hand to the mind (172). As such, the Nietzsche lectures represent an intermediate stage between Heidegger's early writings on Plato's conception of truth and being and the culmination of his depiction of Plato as an onto-theologian. It was only a matter of time until the conception of the ideas as stable presence rather than paradigms of intelligibility would lead to give way to truth being reduced to a mere correspondence between propositions as facts rather than its deeper significance as *aletheia*, the emergence of entities into meaningful presence, available for comportment (Wrathall 13)

Francisco Gonzalez, however, has noted that this move is completely unjustified by a reading of Plato's texts. This later onto-theological analysis is grounded primarily in a simplistic

etymological analysis of the words *eidos* and *idea* employed by Plato. Since these words are related to sight, Heidegger goes on to reduce his earlier, careful reading of Plato's ideas see above to this much more simplistic concept—if the *eidos* is something to be seen, it means it must be a presence available to sight (2009: 113). As we have seen, however, Heidegger rejected this claim because he recognized that the ideas were not present as objects, rather they constitute the power of unhiddenness.

The ideas are not, however, grounded fundamentally in the sense of presence, but rather in the sense of *dynamis*, power. The ideas are the power for beings to be what they are. Gonzalez points out that Heidegger, even in his 1920s lectures on the *Sophist* recognizes the centrality of the fact that the forms are defined in terms of power rather than presence (88-89). It is important to note, however, that this definition of the ideas as power is, itself, not taken to be a definitive and secure concept of the ideas. Rather, the ideas are left as a perennial *aporia* (93).

This characterization of the ideas as power which is subject to a further destabilizing as *aporia* lends credence to Ralkowski's assertion that the ideas can be adequately read as shifting metaphysical paradigms. The world of the ideas are precisely what allow beings to come forth as beings. This is what is most commonly known in Heideggerian terminology as the Being of beings or the horizon of all possible manifestation of intelligibility. In the terminology of "The Origin of the Work of Art" this would be the equivalent of "world," in the broad sense of a general term referring to all the possible actual manifestations of historical worlds. Each of these particular historical worlds, we have seen, would be the equivalent of the fire in Plato's analogy.

The final element of Plato's cave analogy is the Good. Plato describes the Good as "οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ' ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας//not that the Good is being, but yet beyond being" (509b). He likewise discusses the relationship between truth (unconcealment)

and the Good in the following manner: “φῶς τε καὶ ὄψιν ἡλιοειδῆ μὲν νομίζειν ὀρθόν, ἥλιον δ’ ἡγεῖσθαι οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἔχει, οὕτω καὶ ἐνταῦθα ἀγαθοειδῆ μὲν νομίζειν ταῦτ’ ἀμφοτέρω ὀρθόν, ἀγαθὸν δὲ ἡγεῖσθαι ὁπότερον αὐτῶν οὐκ ὀρθόν//To think of light and sight as sun-like is correct, but it is not correct to consider them the sun, so also here to think them both [knowledge and truth] good-like is correct, but to consider either of them the Good is not correct” (509a). The Good then is fulfilled by the image of the sun in Plato’s analogy of the cave which illuminates the world beyond the cave.

Ralkowski suggests that Heidegger’s reading of Plato’s cave analogy is precisely what would give rise to his own later distinction between Being as such and the Being of beings (75). To return once more to the terminology of “The Origin,” Being as such would be the equivalent of “earth,” the concealed source of unconcealment which gives being and truth, that which lies beyond all horizons of intelligibility, that which is truly other than being. Heidegger describes the Good in this manner:

We recall in clarifying the *idea* as such we already encountered superlative determinations: the idea is something highest, namely the most beingful being and the most unhidden being. The ideas are the most beingful beings because they make being comprehensible, ‘in whose light’, as we still say today, a particular being is a *being* and is *what* it is. The ideas are also the most unhidden, i.e. the primordially unhidden (in which unhiddenness *arises*) in so far as they are what first let beings show themselves. But if there is a highest idea, which can become visible *over* all ideas, then it must exist *out beyond* being (which is already most beingful) and primordial unhiddenness (unhiddenness as such). Yet the good, as that which exists out beyond the ideas, is also called *idea*. What can this mean? It can mean only that the highest idea holds sway most primordially and authentically by *allowing both the unhiddenness of beings to arise*, and the *being of beings to be understood* (neither of these without the other). The highest idea, although itself barely visible, is what makes possible *both* being and unhiddenness, i.e. it is what *empowers* being *and* unhiddenness as what they are. The highest idea, therefore, is this empowering, the empowering for *being* which as such *gives* itself simultaneously with the empowerment of *unhiddenness* as *occurrence*. (2013: 80)

Anyone familiar with the philosophy of the late Heidegger should recognize in this passage a clear reference to the “event of appropriation,” *Ereignis*. This term, furthermore, is merely another way of expressing the concept of *Sein selbst*, Being itself, Being as such (Capobianco 34-50). This evidence demonstrates that, despite his later protestations, Heidegger himself saw a great deal of commonality between his own later thought and his early interpretation of Plato.

However, perhaps it can be maintained that Grassi did not share such insights into the “Heideggerian” nature of Platonic thought as those shown above. We have seen in the previous chapter that, in his later writings on the Humanists, Grassi takes an extremely strong, negative stance towards Plato, identifying his philosophical enterprise with the Cartesian search for certainty grounded in logically deduced rational concepts. Grassi possessed a long history of engagement with Plato preceding these statements, however, having composed his *Habilitationsschrift* on Plato’s *Meno*, *Il problema della metafisica platonica*, in 1932 around the same time as Heidegger’s lectures on “The Essence of Truth.” (Rubini 252). Like Heidegger’s work on Plato at the same time, Grassi’s early work demonstrates a radically different evaluation of Plato’s goals, purpose and method. Whereas we might characterize Grassi’s later analysis of Platonic thought—which, according to Grassi, encompasses both Plato himself and the tradition which follows him—as a radical form of the dogmatic interpretation, his works in the 1930s seems to take an approach much closer to that of Gonzalez and the dialectical or dialogical approach:

First of all, *if the process of reminiscence has no beginning* [given the immortality of the soul], *truth is in no way beyond the process of investigation* but, rather, coterminous with it. What we call truth, that which manifests itself, is contained in the philosophical event, or better, it identifies with the same event. Socratic *aporia*, the doubt, the questioning of reality, is not a [sic] just a way to somehow forge ahead toward a truth that stands like an object or conclusion beyond

investigation. Rather, to every step of the process, to every successive questioning, corresponds a given manifestation. In this sense to know, to see truth, is truly to remember. ... Thus, to “remember truth” means to doubt: that is, to question reality and by so doing to discover new horizons when others [i.e., the Sophists] had prematurely established a conclusion by asking a question that was not far-reaching enough. This is what philosophy is about. (qtd. in Rubini 255)

Thus, it appears that Grassi’s later characterization of Plato’s philosophy has more in common with his earlier critique of the sophists rather than Plato. Indeed, we shall see that Grassi has struck upon a core element of what differentiates a genuine philosopher from a sophist for Plato—the denial that stagnant verbal formulations can capture the essence of truth. Having shown broadly that Grassi’s negative appraisal of Plato was not his universal position, let us move on to looking at Plato himself to see further conjunction between the position of these two thinkers.

Grassi’s great esteem for the poets, expressed throughout his various works on Renaissance Humanism, raises a question: how can one claim a continuity of thought between Grassi and Plato when Plato possessed a well-known and foundational hatred of poetry. After all, in the discussion of the *Republic* he drives the poets out of the city (595a). Plato further establishes the idea of an “ancient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy (607b). How can this be reconciled with Grassi’s own belief that rhetorical-poetic language is the *foundation* of philosophical thinking?

Our first task should be to somewhat clarify Grassi’s position. Does Grassi believe that all poets and all poetry are wonderful and revelatory? Do all poets thematize beings and thereby open up new worlds before our eyes? We saw already that Heidegger held art in a particularly high esteem, but there were some forms of art that were excluded as being inherently metaphysical. Does Grassi share this perspective? The answer is a resounding yes. He states in *The Primordial Metaphor*:

What is the difference between *persuasion* (*peitho*) and *ecstasy* (*ekstasis*)? Persuasion presupposes a logical truth, rationally provable, which, because of its structure, does not arouse our passions. Its metaphorical, illustrative, figurative nature concerns only passionateness. Its role in making the meaning of reality manifest is secondary; it is simply a ‘means’ to realize the rational truth already attained. ‘Ecstatic’ language, instead, is that which, in its originality, underivedness, and groundlessness—characteristics due to the fact that it is ‘inexplicable’—does not have a *demonstrative*, but an *indicative* character. (64)

This is more or less the division which Heidegger has made between metaphysical art which expresses a pre-existing framework of thought and those great works of art that *open* historical eras of thought or thematize beings as beings. Since both Grassi and Heidegger are reluctant to extend their praise of poetry and art to every expression of those activities, we should therefore not hold Plato to a higher standard in that respect. Plato expressing a negative critique of art at one point should not *ipso facto* exclude him as a rationalist. Indeed, we shall see the importance emerge of Plato’s statement at *Republic* 595a: “τὸ μηδαμῇ παραδέχεσθαι αὐτῆς ὅση μιμητική//In nowhere receiving however much of it is mimetic.” Plato does not offer a blanket condemnation of art. Plato, rather, offers a critique of precisely that form of art which is condemned by Heidegger.

Plato’s *Ion* provides a deeper perspective on Plato’s thoughts about poetry. In this dialogue, Socrates encounters a rhapsode—a master of poetic (in this case, Homeric) recitation—by the name of Ion. Ion informs Socrates that he has won first prize in a competition of rhapsodes. Ion claims that he is able to not only perform the works of Homer perfectly, but also give an exposition upon their contents. This claim draws Socrates into a discussion about the rhapsode’s craft. Socrates inquires as to whether Ion’s mastery is restricted to Homer alone or extends to other poets also. At first, Ion states that he only has knowledge of Homer. When confronted with the situations in which Homer and some other poets speak of the same topics, however, he professes that he would speak the same about both poets in such a circumstance.

Socrates in turn challenges Ion that the poets generally talk about the same thing, even if they speak differently of it. However, if Ion is able to expound upon Homer, who is said to speak better on these shared topics, he should be able to pick out the bad speech among the other poets. However, Ion denies this claim, stating that he is completely ignorant of other poets.

In response, Socrates offers wholehearted agreement and an explanation: Ion is able to expound upon Homer alone because his rhapsodic abilities are *not* derived from *knowledge* of the topics that Homer treats, but rather from a manner of divine inspiration (533d). Socrates then goes on to present an analogy of a magnetic stone able to move iron rings through a descending chain of power. According to the analogy, the power of the Muses is equivalent to a magnet which passes its effects to sequential iron rings which stand for poets, rhapsodes, and finally audiences. At first, Ion is amenable to this suggestion, but he retreats somewhat when Socrates suggests that such a person is out of his mind. In response, Socrates leads Ion to agree that there are different specialties which each treat their own particular subject matter (charioteering, medicine, etc.). Furthermore, in those instances in which Homer touches upon those subjects in his poems, it is the masters of those professions, and not the rhapsodes, who are most qualified to judge whether Homer speaks properly about those fields of expertise. Ion still avers, eventually claiming to be a general in order to avoid saying he possesses no expertise at all. Finally, Socrates confronts him: either Ion is wronging Socrates by having an expertise which he refuses to speak or he has no expertise and operates under divine inspiration. Given this choice of options, Ion agrees to be called divine.

At first glance, it would be easy enough to take this dialogue as yet another assault on poetry. In this reading, Plato would be offering the explanation of “divine inspiration” as a joke which makes fun of the foolishness of Ion while really showing that he simply lacks all expertise

whatsoever. Indeed, this dialogue is often read in modern times precisely as a contribution to Plato's anti-artistic assault (Büttner 112).

Büttner, however, offers good reasons to reject this analysis. He cites two major lines of argumentation that Socrates's assertions of poetic inspiration are to be taken seriously: internal and external evidence (112-114). The internal evidence refers to many occasions in the Platonic corpus in which inspiration is attributed to individuals as the source of their apparent abilities.²⁴ While Büttner offers numerous examples, he is aware that one could always challenge any one of these instances on the basis of it, too, being ironic. He maintains, however, that in some instances the idea of inspiration seems so integral to the context, that it is difficult to imagine it being intended ironically. I would add that multiple references to a particular type of inspiration, found in various circumstances, reinforces a claim to seriousness. Likewise, when other types of inspiration are linked into that same context, it increases the probability of that type of inspiration also being taken seriously. For instance, Socrates often speaks of daimonic inspiration as the basis for his philosophical career (*Apology* 33c), but the idea of the inspired philosopher also appears in the *Phaedrus* (244a.ff). In the *Phaedrus*, however, poets are also included among the inspired individuals mentioned. Since it is highly unlikely that the mention of inspired philosophers is meant to be ironic, it casts extreme doubt over whether the inspiration of the poets in the same passage should be considered ironic. This is especially true given Plato's own repeated suggestion elsewhere that some poets are under divine inspiration.²⁵ Beyond this internal evidence, the aforementioned external evidence centers on the fact that none of Plato's immediate successors seemed to have any question about Plato having considered inspiration a legitimate element of poetic expression. Indeed, Speusippus, Xenocrates, and

²⁴ For example: *Republic* II.366c-d, *Apology* 33c, *Laws* VII.811c, *Laws* IV.719c-d.

²⁵ See Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets in Plato's Dialogues" in *Plato and the Poets* for more examples.

Aristotle number among those who seem to have taken Plato's statements about poetic inspiration in a non-ironic fashion (Büttner 112).

More damaging to the claim that divine inspiration is intended in an ironic fashion, however, is that, if it is indeed spoken ironically, then Socrates himself has now come under fire. After all, as Gonzalez points out, Socrates speaks on all the various diverse topics of life about which the poet and rhapsode speak (2011: 98). Surely Socrates, after lambasting Ion, could not turn around and say that he speaks on all these topics with the "philosopher's *techne*." Indeed, Socrates, in the beginning of the *Ion*, denies possessing *techne*, saying he is envious for it (530b). Yet, Socrates presents Ion with a dilemma—either you possess technical mastery or you are divinely inspired and out of your mind, even though Socrates does not appear to consider himself to be out of his mind. This raises the question of whether the choice offered to Ion constitutes a necessary dilemma. Is there a form of divine inspiration which does not entail this same kind of blind madness? (Gonzalez 2011: 99).

Such a form of inspiration is precisely what Plato puts on display in the *Phaedrus*. The *Phaedrus* depicts both the philosopher and the poet as participating in a form of divine madness. Indeed, this dialogue explicitly *commends* the poet who composes under the influence of divine inspiration over a person who would write according to *techne*, thereby directly supporting the praise of Ion in the former dialogue as largely straightforward rather than ironic (245a). However, at the same time, poetic inspiration is depicted as occupying a lower level than philosophical inspiration (248d). Socrates describes philosophical inspiration thus:

δεῖ γὰρ ἄνθρωπον συνιέναι κατ' εἶδος λεγόμενον, ἐκ πολλῶν ἰὸν αἰσθήσεων εἰς ἓν λογισμῷ συναιρούμενον· τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν ἀνάμνησις ἐκείνων ἃ ποτ' εἶδεν ἡμῶν ἢ ψυχῇ συμπορευθεῖσα θεῶν καὶ ὑπεριδοῦσα ἃ νῦν εἶναι φαμεν, καὶ ἀνακύψασα εἰς τὸ ὄν ὄντως. διὸ δὴ δικαίως μόνη πτεροῦται ἢ τοῦ φιλοσόφου διάνοια· πρὸς γὰρ ἐκείνοις ἀεὶ ἐστὶν μνήμη κατὰ δύναμιν, πρὸς οἷσπερ θεὸς ὢν θεῖός ἐστιν. τοῖς δὲ

δὴ τοιούτοις ἀνὴρ ὑπομνήμασιν ὀρθῶς χρώμενος, τελέους ἀεὶ τελετὰς
τελούμενος, τέλος ὄντως μόνος γίγνεται·

For man it is necessary to understand a conception, gathered together from many perceptions into one account, according to a form, and this is the recollection of those things which our soul, journeying with god, saw at that time and overlooked that which we now say exists and raised up to the beingfully being. Therefore surely the reason of a philosopher alone justly grows wings, for, by memory, according to its power, it is always with those things with which god is divine. And now a man correctly using reminders for such things, always completing the complete initiations, alone becomes truly complete. (249b-c)

It is clear from this passage that, while philosophy relies on inspiration just as poetry does, it does not remain in the state of mindlessness attributed to poetic inspiration. While the philosopher, like the poet, sees things with the divine, he does not remain simple in the state of a passive receptacle, as in the case of the mimetic action of the poets or, even more so, the rhapsodes, as exemplified by Ion. Rather, the philosopher continually calls to recollection the divine things by the application and use of his reason. Nowhere in this passage does Socrates suggest an action like that proposed by Grassi's analysis of Platonic thought in which, by rational inference, one arrives at logically deduced concepts as first principles. On the contrary, rational philosophical activity is tied up with recollection of something above and beyond itself. Philosophical dialectic is the medium in which truth comes forth.

The testimony of both the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus* indicate that, ultimately, the poet and rhapsode are lacking in technical mastery of the type found among doctors, charioteers and diviners. Socrates and the philosopher are likewise lacking this kind of knowledge. However, Socrates is also not the unknowing, passive receptacle of inspiration as the poet is. Gonzalez puts it this way:

Socrates does indeed turn out to be unlike Ion in possessing a *technē*, but one quite different from that in terms of which he judges Ion. Socrates' *technē* is given and inspired by something higher than itself; furthermore, it is a *technē* of loving and striving, rather than a *technē* of mastery. Neither self-possessed expert

nor mad poet, the philosopher is a hybrid of the two. Yet this is not to say that in the philosopher reason and inspiration are simply juxtaposed in an external fashion. Rather, the kind of reasoning or expertise that characterizes the philosopher is intrinsically unlike that of the doctor or the mathematician in that it is the recollection of a reality that, while inspiring and motivating it, is yet not fully grasped or clearly seen by it. Philosophy is a constant and irresolvable tension between reason and inspiration and thus between self-control and madness. The philosopher must be open to divine inspiration while resisting the danger of becoming a passive mouthpiece of the god and thus losing himself and his own reason. (2011: 104-105)

In this context, we may return to Socrates's envy at the opening of the *Ion*. Why should Socrates be envious of Ion? After all, have we not seen that the rhapsode ultimately possesses no expertise at all? This is certainly the case, but an important and recurrent theme in the dialogue is Ion's constant insistence, against all reason, that he *does* possess a *technē*. This is particularly on display when Ion comically refuses to acknowledge that he is out of his mind in his performances. Socrates proceeds to demonstrate, by calling upon a number of examples, that people with expertise could judge passages from Homer with greater technical mastery than Ion. Socrates then wishes Ion to explain which passages are most subject to the technical expertise of the rhapsode, if the rhapsode does indeed possess a *technē*. Ion immediately responds "all of them," despite having conceded, immediately prior, that technical experts are more suitable to judging Homeric passages regarding their own expertise than a rhapsode (539e). Indeed, Ion's absurd insistence that, as a rhapsode, he is also a master general is an example of his desperate need to assert his possession of *technē*. Ultimately, it is only the dilemma of being either a bad man or divinely inspired that allows Ion to concede "πολὺ γὰρ κάλλιον τὸ θεῖον νομίζεσθαι//for it is more beautiful by much *to be considered* divine" (542b). Even here Ion still believes that he possesses technical mastery, but he is willing to be considered "merely" divinely inspired because it is better than being thought wicked.

Furthermore, Ion is persistent not only in his absurd claims to technical mastery, but he is unabashedly broad in his claims regarding the scope of that mastery. Despite the contrary being demonstrated, he claims to have superior technical mastery over all things discussed by Homer. Given Homer's incredibly broad range of episodes, this claim is shown to amount essentially to mastery of all areas of knowledge. If that claim were not astounding in its own right, it is only further compounded by the fact that Plato elsewhere clearly insists that this is not a peculiar belief of Ion. It is the standard belief among the people that the poets are the great teachers of mankind precisely because they possess this kind of knowledge (*Republic* 598d-599a). This is reflected in the *Ion*'s discussion of the chain of divine inspiration which ultimately, through the medium of the poet and the rhapsode, enthralls the audience as well.

The poets are not an isolated case in Plato's dialogues, however. Noburu Notomi has demonstrated a great deal of parallel between the depiction of the poets and that of the sophists.²⁶ Some major shared characteristics are (1) they are both mimetic, producing images of wisdom and *technē* (*Republic* 595a-b, *Sophist* 268c), (2) they both claim mastery over "all things" (*Republic* 596c-e, *Sophist* 233d-234c), but in fact their mimetic art only deals with a small part of the topics they treat, rather than the whole (*Republic* 598b), and (3) they are both actually in a state of ignorance (*Republic* 600e-601c, *Sophist* 233a-c). As we shall see, these are key issues for Plato.

The *Meno* is another important dialogue for understanding Plato's thought. Gonzalez shows that it has a central role in the development of Plato's dialectic through the introduction and exposition of the method of hypothesis. It becomes doubly important in the context of this study since we have seen that this dialogue served as the basis of Grassi's own habilitation. In

²⁶ For a detailed account, see Noburu Notomi, "Image-Making in *Republic* X and the *Sophist*: Plato's Criticism of the Poet and the Sophist" in *Plato and the Poets*.

the *Meno*, the eponymous character raises the question for Socrates of whether or not virtue can be taught. Relevant here is what kind of man Meno is. He is described explicitly as being acquainted with the wisdom of Gorgias. That is, he is trained by sophists. Given the sophists' penchant for displays of verbal and definitional acumen, his reaction is therefore somewhat unsurprising when, in the dialogue, Socrates insists that he does not even know what virtue is and so cannot answer Meno's question on whether or not it can be taught. In response to Socrates pleading for an answer, Meno, true to his training, provides a number of examples and definitions. However, Socrates objects. None of these answers are what virtue *is*. They are merely examples or definitions that fall short because they do not properly and adequately apply to all instances of virtue. That is, Meno offers *images* of what virtue is and presents them as being virtue *itself*. Most importantly, at the beginning of the dialogue, Meno is shocked that Socrates claims to not know what virtue is (71b-c) but, after they discuss the topic, ultimately admits: “καίτοι μυριάκις γε περὶ ἀρετῆς παμπόλλους λόγους εἶρηκα καὶ πρὸς πολλούς, καὶ πάνυ εὖ, ὥς γε ἐμαυτῷ ἐδόκουν· νῦν δὲ οὐδ' ὅτι ἐστὶν τὸ παράπαν ἔχω εἰπεῖν//And yet a thousand times I have proclaimed very many words about virtue and for many people, and very good ones, as they seemed to me, but now I am not able altogether to say what it is” (80b).

This is a flaw this is constantly on display among the students of sophists in the dialogues—they have been taught clever turns of phrase and argument and mistake it for true knowledge. That is, their so-called knowledge turns out to be empty words without any understanding. Heidegger calls such words “idle chatter” (*Gerede*) in *Being and Time*. They are a received tradition which really offers no window onto the reality they describe. They are verbal *images*. Likewise, the poets produce images (*eidolon*). However, just like Ion they

mistake those images for technical mastery. The images of the poets, therefore, become another form of idle chatter.

This is an important point in considering Ernesto Grassi's views of the *Ion* and its meaning. Earlier in his career, Grassi defended the idea that Plato was presenting an authentic image of inspired poetry. In his 1946 work *Verteidigung des individuellen Lebens*, Grassi was "intent on proving that the Humanists' attention to poetic metaphysics is the elaboration of ideas already present in antiquity, in Plato's *Ion* in particular" (Rubini 264). Grassi argued that the vision of poetic inspiration in the *Ion* stood against modern subjectivism by suggesting that poetic expressions were not projections of the self, but were rather a passionate response to transcendence in immanence: "the poet elevates himself over the sensual world and, what is of the essence, something new is shown to him" (qtd. in Rubini 265). Grassi, however, does not seem to have conceived the *negative* consequences of divine inspiration, in its poetic form, as expressed in Plato's dialogues, an issue to which I shall return at the conclusion of this chapter.

In contrast to the naïve poets, Plato does not confuse knowledge about something with knowledge of the thing itself. Even in the *Meno* and the *Republic*, in which he introduces the hypothetical method, he is quite clear that the method "draws logical connections between different properties of a thing without any attempt to transcend these properties in an understanding of what the thing itself is" (Gonzalez 1998: 175). What makes these claims hypothetical is that the terms which are used to describe them are not understood; they are vague and ambiguous and thus subject to refutation. Even if they are believed to be true, they are not, in fact, understood. For instance, if one were to make the claim that "virtue is good," this claim might be held as quite true; however, we cannot truly have *understanding* (*episteme*) of the claim without understanding what virtue *is* and what good *is*.

The obvious objection to this hypothetical method is that Socrates has already told Meno in the dialogue that he cannot speak *about* a thing (for instance, whether virtue is teachable) without knowing *what the thing is*. When he introduces the hypothetical method he seems to be doing precisely this. On this basis it is no surprise that the *Meno* features prominently the theory of recollection, as this theory, for Plato, suggests that we already possess a pre-reflective, intuitive grasp of the meanings of terms, an insight which has not been scientifically derived. Thus, according to Plato, we *do* know what the things we speak about are, but our knowledge of them is indistinct. We do not see them clearly as they truly are, but rather, we see them cloaked in *doxa*, belief rather than understanding. Gonzalez states:

Before this knowledge is recollected to the point of becoming explicit, it remains implicit in our ordinary use of the word “virtue.” This knowledge implicit in our everyday discourse can be likened to a kind of inspiration. We have a sense of what we are talking about when we claim that virtue is good, and we also have a sense that this claim is true; we cannot, however, explain where this “sense” comes from. We thus normally rely on this kind of inspiration to guide our words and actions. The method of hypothesis too, as a method that avoids raising the What-is-x? question, needs to be grounded on nothing more than this kind of inspiration. (1998: 176).

As we saw in our earlier treatment of Plato’s *Seventh Letter*, the method of hypothesis itself never leads, by deduction, back to an non-hypothetical first principle as a discursive concept, but rather through the dialectical process of refutation itself, in undermining the hypotheses and definitions via exposing their limitations and ambiguities, *manifests* to those engaged in it ever greater insights into *what* the thing under discussion is, rather than how it is qualified.

This train of thought in Plato reaches its culmination in the *Cratylus* and the *Republic* where Socrates overturns the primacy of mimesis in conferring truth. He had previously described the artisan and the artist as being, respectively, one and two steps removed from the truth, with the

artisan creating artifacts based on the forms and poets creating images based on the world. Regardless of whether or not the idea of divine inspiration for the poet should overthrow this particular hierarchy, there remains little doubt that the divinely inspired poet is still entirely mimetic. He produces a semblance in words of simply what he receives and no more. While there is certainly truth in such an expression, it does not truly thematize beings in the way Heidegger's great artwork should because the expression of the artist simply becomes part of a background of inauthenticity which has not been appropriated for oneself. In this context, Socrates introduces the fact that it is the *user* and not the *maker* who has deeper understanding. In the *Cratylus* the user is directly identified with the dialectician (390c). Whereas an etymologist might objectify words as a conventional group of sounds, it is the dialectician who, in entering into the *use* of those words in discourse, allows their true meaning to become manifest and thematized (Gonzalez 1998: 89).

Likewise, in the *Republic*, book X, Socrates devotes a lengthy discourse to the priority of the user's knowledge (601c-602c). I shall offer two brief excerpts from the passage to illustrate the point: “πολλὴ ἄρα ἀνάγκη τὸν χρώμενον ἐκάστῳ ἐμπειρότατόν τε εἶναι καὶ ἄγγελον γίνεσθαι τῷ ποιητῇ οἷα ἀγαθὰ ἢ κακὰ ποιεῖ ἐν τῇ χρήσῃ ᾧ χρηῖται//Therefore it is very necessary that the user for each thing is the most experienced, and he becomes a messenger to the maker on which things he makes are good or bad in the use for which they are used” (601d). These statements lead directly into an assault on the act of mimesis which culminates in a direct assault on the knowledge of the poet. Indeed, this passage from the *Republic* shows exactly the same reality reflected in the *Ion* and *Phaedrus*—the poet has no knowledge of that which he imitates: “ὁ δὲ μιμητὴς πότερον ἐκ τοῦ χρηῖσθαι ἐπιστήμην ἔξει περὶ ὧν ἂν γράφῃ, εἴτε καλὰ καὶ ὀρθὰ εἴτε μή, ἢ δόξαν ὀρθὴν διὰ τὸ ἐξ ἀνάγκης συνεῖναι τῷ εἰδότει καὶ ἐπιτάττεσθαι οἷα χρὴ γράφειν; -- οὐδέτερα.//And does the

imitator have understanding, from having used them, about that which he writes, whether they are fine and correct or not, or correct belief through interaction, from necessity, with the one who knows and being told how it is necessary to write? – Neither” (602a).

I now wish to return to the issue of Grassi’s positive evaluation of Plato’s stance towards poetry as recorded in the 1940s. While Grassi successfully identified that Plato did indeed attribute a straightforward encounter with transcendence to the poets, he perhaps pushed the interpretation too far by suggesting that Plato’s depiction of the poets allows them to open up and thematize a world of intelligibility. Indeed, in Plato’s account, the poet does not actually open up new worlds at all precisely because of this failure to recognize the true essence of poetry. Grassi should have taken into account that it was not the *poets* (as such) who possessed a poetic metaphysics, but rather the *Humanists*. Indeed, for Grassi, as has been shown in the preceding chapter, the distinguishing characteristic of the Humanist movement is its self-conscious awareness of the role of philology, poetry and language in philosophy. It is not merely that they wrote poetry, for we have already seen that Grassi envisions types of poetry that do *not* possess ecstatic power. It is that, in composing poetry, the Humanists engage it as a philosophical, revelatory enterprise. Thus, rather than becoming a manifestation of metaphysical or persuasive art, Humanist poetic enterprises maintain the dynamic between “earth” and “world” that allows the world to be encountered anew as a holy place.

In Plato’s text it is the philosopher who takes on this role. This chapter has demonstrated that Plato’s conception of the philosopher is a far cry from the rationalist and subjectivist philosophers following Descartes. Rather, Plato envisions the philosopher as the supreme form of poet, who encounters the transcendent and then struggles and wrestles with it to bring forth a glimpse into the nature of being as given by the Good that surpasses being. In doing so, he

moves beyond the uncritical shared conceptions of a people, expressed in ordinary language (*sensus communis* in Grassi, *doxa* in Plato) to an insight of being as given. The philosopher is not a subjectivist for, indeed, Plato's account of his nature is in direct response to a proto-subjectivist and relativistic revolution in Greece bred from the work of the sophists for whom, as Protagoras said, "man is the measure of all things" (Pickstock 3). The philosopher does not possess a mastery of reality by logical force—those who think they do are, indeed, sophists—but rather he possesses an insight into being and truth through language and within the historical circumstances in which he finds himself. It is fitting, therefore, to refer to Plato as a Humanist, for in him is found the same insights into language and historicity, as well as the encounter of the transcendent within the immanent as characterizes Grassi's account of that movement.

Chapter Three

Neoplatonism Against Metaphysics

The last chapter demonstrated that Plato's own philosophical positions do not commit him to the broad, rationalistic and onto-theological account criticized in the later writings of Heidegger and Grassi. Instead, Plato himself had very many of the same concerns as the Renaissance Humanists. However, this does little to resolve the general conflict between Grassi and Platonism. Although Grassi associated the traits of so-called Platonism with Plato himself, presumably following Heidegger's own later anti-Platonism, his main critique pertains to the inherited tradition and *not* primarily to Plato. Indeed, a number of scholars in the modern Continental tradition have made attempts to separate Plato from the tradition precisely for the sake of liberating the founder of Western philosophy from these critiques. Even advocates of Plato, however, are faced with what appears to be a considerably more difficult challenge when it comes to liberating the Neoplatonists. After all, are not these later Platonists the epitome of metaphysical decadence with their ever expanding, intricate ontological systems? Are these not precisely the kinds of philosophers who believe that they can give a rationalistic, atemporal account of the nature of reality, thereby eviscerating any concept of historical perspective and fundamentally cutting off the question of the givenness of being and truth within a closed system of rationality? In order to begin answering these questions, I shall first briefly touch upon the history of the development of Platonic thought as well as describe what is generally taken to the standard account of the overall structure of Neoplatonic thought.

Following the death of Plato, the interpretation of his work passed through a number of stages, including an extended period of skepticism as well as a period of somewhat naïve dogmatism, based on interactions with the Stoics, during the period of Middle Platonism. However, I shall focus henceforth on those individuals largely subject to the form of Platonic

interpretation generally called by scholars “Neoplatonism.” The reason for this selection is twofold. First, earlier models of Platonic interpretation collapsed as independent narratives and those elements of their thought which were considered the most philosophically significant and convincing were incorporated into and unified by the Neoplatonists (Remes 4-5). Therefore, Neoplatonism is the best attested and most fecund ground for delving into the complexity of Platonic thought after Plato. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Neoplatonism arose and climbed to dominance among philosophical schools in the waning days of antiquity. This made the school contemporaneous with the ascendancy of Christianity. As a result of a number of factors, Neoplatonism exerted a strong influence on the subsequent philosophical formulations of Christianity and thus secured for itself an enduring role from antiquity to the present.²⁷ Most importantly, Neoplatonism is the form of Platonism which is at the forefront of Grassi’s mind in his critiques.

Neoplatonism itself is a distinctive interpretation of the Platonic tradition which arose in the third century CE out of the previous Middle Platonic tradition²⁸ while also drawing on many other sources from other schools of ancient philosophy. The founding figure of the movement is generally regarded to be the philosopher Plotinus, although Plotinus himself attributed his teachings to his master Ammonius Saccas, who left no written texts. Plotinus was born in Egypt and began his philosophical training in Alexandria. He eventually joined the military campaign of Emperor Gordian III against Persia in hopes of thereby gaining access to Persian and Indian philosophers. When the campaign resulted in failure, Plotinus relocated to the capital city of Rome and established a circle of philosophy students (Remes 19). Aside from Plato, Plotinus

²⁷ For more information on the early union between Neoplatonism and fledgling Christian philosophy see George Karamanolis. 2013. *The Philosophy of Early Christianity*. Durham: Acumen.

²⁸ See John Dillion, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* for a comprehensive analysis of this period of Platonic interpretation.

has the distinction of being the only other philosopher of antiquity whose entire corpus of writings survives, edited and arranged by his student Porphyry into a massive work known as the *Enneads*. Unfortunately for commentators, Harris points out that “the *Enneads* probably deserves to be called the world’s worst written book” because it presumes the reader to have comprehensive philosophical knowledge—of even Plotinus’s own thought—at every step (2). This effect most likely originates from the fact that the book seems to have arisen out of the context of living philosophical discourse in Plotinus’s academy.

The standard account of Plotinus’s thought is usually focused on the idea of a descending hierarchy of metaphysical principles marked by ever increasing levels of multiplicity. In particular, this is grounded in Plotinus’s treatise on what his editor Porphyry termed the “three primary hypostases.” The first of these is the single unifying principle of all reality—the One—which was held to be beyond being, predication and thought and was the possibility for the existence of all things (Remes 7). According to Gerson’s account, the One contains all reality “virtually” or “indistinctly” within itself (1994: 32-33).

Emanating from this first principle is the *Nous*. The *Nous* constitutes the entire intelligible structure of reality within a self-thinking intellect. This could crudely be described as a combination of the Aristotelian notion of self-thinking intellect combined with Plato’s theory regarding intelligible forms. In this manner, the *Nous* reflects ultimate reality in the structure of a one-many, insofar as it contains all intelligible within a single structure. The Neoplatonists would distinguish this, therefore, as a one-many as opposed to the absolute unity of the One. The *Nous* is the first realm of being and the first realm attainable to thought, although such thought is distinct from normal thinking insofar as it is non-discursive and immediate (Remes 7-8). As the *Nous* came forth from the One, so the third hypostasis *Psyche* comes forth from the

Nous. Here we find motion, time and discursivity (Wallis 53). Following upon the *Psyche* is the material world in all its divisibility. Ultimately, all things strive for a reversion back to the *Nous* and the One (Remes 8-9).

For all the Neoplatonists, it is important to note that philosophy is never merely an abstract system of reasoning. Rather, their philosophical endeavors are intimately tied to their pursuit of a certain way of life and a quest for mystical enlightenment (Wallis 85). In light of the critiques of Heidegger and Grassi, it will be necessary to examine what precisely is the meaning of this “mystical enlightenment.” After all, on the basis of this standard model, it seems quite easy to assume that the form of mysticism implied here is a flight from beings into the bosom of some supernatural higher being. This, indeed, is precisely what Grassi envisions when he describes the Platonic type of philosophy in *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance*

Humanism:

The first conception of philosophy, the one that Heidegger defines as the “metaphysics of beings,” asks only about the relationships between beings and grants supremacy to the search for truth. This form of thought is determined for Heidegger by the forgetfulness of Being. The truth that the metaphysics of things claims to possess holds forever and everywhere. Hence, the only language which such a metaphysics can recognize is rational in nature, and, conversely, poetic language cannot have any scientific character in this view. (91-92)

We have seen in the previous chapter that, with regards to Plato himself, this criticism ultimately fell short. Now it is time to see whether the Neoplatonists have likewise avoided the pitfall, or if, ultimately, there is good reason for the Heideggerian critique. The following analysis will focus on the writings of Plotinus as the most influential author among the classical Neoplatonists.²⁹

²⁹ Later Neoplatonists, particularly Proclus, also contributed a great number of insights to the later Platonic tradition; however, in their core characteristics they share the same basic models as Plotinus and as such he is taken as representative. However, see p. 157-158 for additional, relevant Proclean theories.

The first question to examine is whether Plotinus possesses an awareness of the ontological difference. If Plotinus is aware of this divide, the idea that he is locked in a concern for logically deducible truth will take an immediate blow, since Being or *Ereignis* is precisely that which *gives* truth and being. The place to begin this inquiry is to examine the most exotic of Plotinus's principles—the One. Immediately we are confronted with the absolute limitation of any discourse about the One. Referring to the One, Plotinus writes:

ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ αἷτιον λέγειν οὐ κατηγορεῖν ἐστὶ συμβεβηκός τι αὐτῷ, ἀλλ' ἡμῖν, ὅτι ἔχομέν τι παρ' αὐτοῦ ἐκείνου ὄντος ἐν αὐτῷ· δεῖ δὲ μηδὲ τὸ "ἐκείνου" μηδὲ "ὄντος" λέγειν ἀκριβῶς λέγοντα, ἀλλ' ἡμᾶς οἷον ἔξωθεν περιθέοντα τὰ αὐτῶν ἐρμηνεύειν ἐθέλειν πάθῃ ὅτε μὲν ἐγγύς, ὅτε δὲ ἀποπίπτοντας ταῖς περὶ αὐτὸ ἀπορίαις.

For to say that it is the cause is not to predicate something incidental of it but of us, because we have something from it while that One is in itself; but one who speaks precisely should not say “that” or “is”; but we run round it outside, in a way, and want to explain our experiences of it, sometimes near it and sometimes falling away in our perplexities about it. (VI.9.3.49-55)³⁰

There may be a temptation to read this passage as though the One were to be taken as an ineffable object in itself, since Plotinus does say “ἐκείνου ὄντος ἐν αὐτῷ//that One being in itself.” This, however, would be a grave error, an error which Plotinus explicitly enjoins his reader to avoid by immediately following it with a denial of both “this” and “being” as accurate statements regarding the One. Indeed, the purpose of the passage is specifically to emphasize the inherent otherness of the One from being. In this respect, I argue that John Deck is correct in maintaining that statements relating to the ineffability of the One ought to be regarded “as Plotinus [sic] most profound doctrine of the One” and “absolutely definitive” (1982: 35). After all, if the only way we are able to gain information about Plotinus's conception of the One stems from Plotinus's words about it, we should afford a priority to a statement *about* statements about

³⁰ Armstrong's translation is used throughout, sometimes with my own personal alterations.

the One as the hermeneutical key to understanding all statements about the topic. Indeed, even when Plotinus states that, rather than speaking of the One directly, we “run around it outside” he must qualify it with οἷον//as it were, as if. This qualification is necessary for the simple reason that the One is not truly an “it,” there is not really an “outside” nor “inside” of the One. Plotinus elsewhere affirms that The One is no-thing; even the otherness of being beyond being does not constitute a separate nature for it³¹:

τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἔστι λαβεῖν ὡς τόδε· ἤδη γὰρ οὐκ ἀρχή, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο μόνον, ὃ τόδε εἴρηκας εἶναι. εἰ οὖν τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ γεγομένῳ, τί τῶν ἐν τούτῳ ἐκεῖνο ἐρεῖς; οὐδὲν δὲ τούτων ὃν μόνον ἂν λέγοιτο ἐπέκεινα τούτων. ταῦτα δὲ τὰ ὄντα καὶ τὸ ὄν· ἐπέκεινα ἄρα ὄντος. τὸ γὰρ ἐπέκεινα ὄντος οὐ τόδε λέγει -- οὐ γὰρ τίθησιν -- οὐδὲ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ λέγει, ἀλλὰ φέρει μόνον τὸ οὐ τοῦτο. τοῦτο δὲ ποιοῦν οὐδαμοῦ αὐτὸ περιλαμβάνει· γελοῖον γὰρ ζητεῖν ἐκείνην τὴν ἄπλετον φύσιν περιλαμβάνειν.

[I]t is impossible to apprehend the One as a particular thing: for then it would not be the principle, but only that particular thing which you said it was. But if all things are in that which is generated [from the One], which of the things in it are you going to say that the One is? Since it is none of them, it can only be said to be beyond them. But these things are beings, and being: so it is “beyond being.” This phrase “beyond being” does not mean that it is a particular thing—for it makes no positive statement about it—and it does not say its name, but all it implies is that it is “not this.” But if this is what the phrase does, it in no way comprehends the One: it would be absurd to seek to comprehend that boundless nature... (V.5.6.7-16)

This language is all too familiar. It represents the same reality which Heidegger identified with *das Nichts* and *Ab-grund*. Heidegger’s “earth”—another name for the same concept—was the concealed source of unconcealment. It is that which is beyond being, which gives forth the appearance of intelligibility. This, likewise, appears to be the sense in which the One is described, obliquely, as “cause.” Plotinus says, “All beings are beings by the One, both

³¹ This view of the One makes language regarding it exceedingly difficult. At times, due to the limitations of language, it must be asserted that the One possesses no otherness. By this assertion is meant that the One is not *a* being distinct (i.e. other) from other beings. However, this very fact does make the One utterly distinct and inherently other than the being of beings as a whole. When otherness or distinction is attributed to the One, it is intended in this sense.

those which are primarily beings and those which are in any sense said to be among beings” (VI.9.1-2). It is important to note that, for Plotinus, causality does not generally have the sense of production and still less so when it is indicated of the One. Rather, as Costa says: “Plotinus emphasizes the difference between eidetic and efficient causality.... Plotinus contrasts the production of effects by means of an activity with the causality of the principles which act only through the immutability of their nature” (361). That is, the certain sense in which being can relate to the One as cause is not by means of efficient, productive causality, but rather as a result of the One becoming *manifest* from itself in being, while still remaining entirely other than being. Plotinus’s evaluation of the One, indicates that he has thought beyond the structures of onto-theology.

At the opposite end of the Neoplatonic spectrum lies what Plotinus says about the sensible cosmos. It should be recalled at this point that Grassi posited, as a central difference between the thought of the Humanists and the Platonists, the relationship between *res* and *verba*. He argued that the Platonists claimed that logically established essences of objects held priority for which it was the duty of language to offer a description. We saw in the last chapter that Plato himself did not, in fact, hold this position, with truth being manifested through ordinary language and interrogated through the *user’s* art of dialectic, rather than firmly established atemporally.

Let us now turn to see whether Plotinus adopts an essentialist framework towards beings.

Plotinus, in fact, argues quite forcefully against a certain understanding of essentialism in the sixth *Ennead*. Gerson uses the image from Aristotle’s theory of cognition to illustrate what he takes to be Plotinus’s view of the relationship between form and sensible particular—synonymy in nature and homonymy in being:

According to Aristotle’s account, knowledge is the identification of knower with the form of a knowable object. The form in the intellect is synonymous with the

form in that which is known, but cognitive being is homonymous with the being of the knowable. The concept of humanity is not a man. That is what homonymy indicates. But the form of humanity in the intellect really is that form. It is not an approximation or arbitrary symbol of it. That is what synonymy indicates. The real and the cognitional are ordered as prior to posterior. Plotinus' point is that the Form of Man is related to the individual man analogous [sic] to the way the individual man is related to the form of man in intellect. (2002: 64).

Plotinus is thereby arguing for the paradigmatic nature of the relationship which obtains between the form and the sensible particulars. Gerson notes "once homonymy is combined with synonymy, one is not obliged to say either that the Form of Man is a man or that Socrates is not a man because the essence of man is separate from him. He participates in the essence and so he is a man, but he is not identical with the essence." However, Gerson frames this strongly in terms of the "separation" of the Forms and therefore as a relationship between an object and a copy of that object (2002: 64-65). While there is some truth to this analogy, I shall argue that it can generate a false impression of the relationship between the intelligible and sensible realms in Plotinian thinking. In particular, it can give the impression of a two world dualism as is often ascribed to Plato; however, we shall see that this is ultimately an inadequate way to formulate the Plotinian view of reality, just as it was shown to be inadequate in the case of Plato himself.

However, first let us examine the further implications of the Plotinian position regarding the relationship between form and instantiation. Because Plotinus has "separated" the Form from the particular instantiation, the qualified identity based on act and potency proposed by Aristotle which allows him to argue that sensible particulars are essentially their form, though they are not identical to that form as a result of material potency (i.e. Socrates is essentially a man, though what it means to be a man and the man Socrates are not identical), is no longer present. As such, sensible particulars are no longer to be identified with their Forms. This has the effect of destroying the pretense of essentialism:

ἀλλὰ ἀρά γε ἡ αἰσθητὴ οὐσία συμφόρησις τις ποιότητων καὶ ὕλης, καὶ ὁμοῦ μὲν πάντα ταῦτα συμπαγέοντα ἐπὶ ὕλης μιᾶς οὐσίας, χωρὶς δὲ ἕκαστον λαμβανόμενον τὸ μὲν ποιόν, τὸ δὲ ποσὸν ἔσται, ἢ ποιὰ πολλά;... καὶ οὐ δυσχεραντέον, εἰ τὴν οὐσίαν τὴν αἰσθητὴν ἐξ οὐκ οὐσιῶν ποιοῦμεν· οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸ ὅλον ἀληθὴς οὐσία, ἀλλὰ μιμούμενον τὴν ἀληθῆ

But then, is sensible substance a conglomeration of qualities and matter, and are all these compounded together on one matter substance, but when each is taken separately will one be quale and one a quantum, or will they be many qualia?... And there is no need to object if we make sensible substance out of non-substances; for even the whole is not true substance but imitates [*mimoumenon*] the true substance (*Enneads* VI.3.8.19-23, 31-33)

Here we see that Plotinus has replaced the essentialist model with a model based on sensible things as composed of a nexus of instantiated forms and matter, none of which are considered to be “essential.” This anti-essentialist impulse in Plotinus will have consequences for the status of discursive thought and its ability to offer what Grassi would consider the quintessential Platonic “rational concept” of beings. In particular, it leads quite naturally to the collapse of the distinction between essential and accidental properties since now all properties have been rendered properly accidental (Rappe 2000: 39). Undermining this relationship, of course, has a significant effect on the place of logic and discursive reasoning in Plotinus. How does one provide necessary definitions related to beings if those beings fundamentally lack static essences?

In fact, the ability of our discursive reason to offer comprehensive explanations of the sensible world of our everyday experience is precisely what is under attack by Plotinus. Interestingly, Plotinus does not refrain from the use of discursive reasoning, generally, to offer explanations of the world; however, he does suggest, due to the collapse of the distinction between essences and accidents, that the explanatory power of our discursive statements are destabilized. Sara Rappe has treated this extensively in her work on what she terms Plotinus’s assertion of “coordinate arising.” She describes it thus:

This doctrine presents a two-fold analysis of the phenomenal world, both parts of which are intended to break up any belief in an independently real or self-subsistent eternal world. The first theme is a description of the world as an *interdependent nexus of beings*. Under this description, the familiar Stoic idea of *cosmic harmony* receives a more profound philosophical interpretation as a system of relationships which can be described as mutually reflective points of view. The second theme treats the multiplicity of individuals more on the analogy of thoughts arising in the mind, each expressing the nature of the thinker who has them. (2002: 74)

The first part of coordinate arising is an extrapolation of an issue which we have already encountered. The fact that Plotinus rejects Aristotelian substance theory as it applies to individuals means that what does constitute an individual is entirely relational. This relationality can then, “from a certain point of view,” be represented in a variety of ways, rather than based on a strict, authoritative teleology (Rappe 2002: 74). This is precisely why Plotinus says:

ὅτι ἔχεις μὲν σὺν αἰτίαν εἰπεῖν δι’ ἣν ἐν μέσῳ ἡ γῆ καὶ διὰ τί στρογγύλῃ καὶ ὁ λοξὸς διότι ὠδί· ἐκεῖ δὲ σὺ, διότι οὕτως ἐχρῆν, διὰ τοῦτο οὕτω βεβούλευται, ἀλλ’ ὅτι οὕτως ἔχει ὥς ἔστι, διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ταῦτα ἔχει καλῶς· οἷον εἰ πρὸ τοῦ συλλογισμοῦ τῆς αἰτίας τὸ συμπέρασμα, οὐ παρὰ τῶν προτάσεων· οὐ γὰρ ἐξ ἀκολουθίας οὐδ’ ἐξ ἐπινοίας, ἀλλὰ πρὸ ἀκολουθίας καὶ πρὸ ἐπινοίας· ὕστερα γὰρ πάντα ταῦτα, καὶ λόγος καὶ ἀπόδειξις καὶ πίστις.

[Y]ou can explain the reason why the earth is in the middle, and round, and why the ecliptic slants as it does; but it is not because you can do this that things are so there; they were not planned like this because it was necessary for them to be like this, but because things There are disposed as they are, the things here are beautifully disposed: as if the conclusion was there before the syllogism which showed the cause, and did not follow from the premises; [the world-order] is not the result of following out a train of logical consequences and purposive thought: it is before consequential and purposive thinking; for all this comes later, reasoning and demonstration and the confidence [produced by them]. (V.8.7.37-44)

Fundamentally, we are seeing a Plotinian reiteration of something which was already present in Plato’s account. Our discursive analysis of reality describes how things are *qualified* rather than what they *are*. In Plato, therefore, the method of hypothesis may report statements about reality, but they are conditioned by the inherent instability and ambiguity of discursive

analysis and therefore always subject to deconstruction. At no point through such hypotheses can one *deduce* or *infer* the Being of the beings under discussion.

The Neoplatonic view of causality centers upon an eidetic view in which effects are the result of the presence of the cause in the effect. That is, the effects are manifestations of the causes, rather than an Aristotelian teleological or efficient approach to causality. Since Plotinus views sensible particulars as failing to be substances in a true sense, they lack “horizontal causality.” Thus, all usage of Aristotelian logic to explain causal relations among sensible particulars is not a statement of reality, but only a qualified reality (Rappe 2002: 76).

Now, let us return to the issue introduced by Gerson’s separation of intelligible reality from sensible reality in the manner of a copy to an original. This kind of speech certainly has a long Platonic pedigree. Indeed, it stretches all the way back to Plato’s descriptions of *mimesis* in the *Republic*. Indeed, Plotinus uses this exact term “*mimoumenon*” to describe the way in which sensible particulars are not true substances but “imitate” true substances. In this case the true substances being referred to are the intelligible Forms. Have we then arrived at an onto-theological conception of being in Plotinus, after all? While Plotinus’s conception of sensibles clearly denies any form of essentialism, it seems to hang ultimately upon a *higher* form of essentialism of which beings are merely a copy or imitation.

In our analysis of the cave analogy, however, Plato’s intention was *not* to represent the Forms as separated substances of which sensible reality was merely a pale imitation. Rather, the shadows on the wall of the cave were taken as true beings, but lost in everydayness and inauthenticity. In that case, the objects which cast the shadows on the cave wall were not separated realities existing in and for themselves, but rather took on the characterization of the historically conditioned metaphysical paradigms through which beings become manifest, the

Being of beings. The shadows on the cave wall stood for the things themselves, but seen in a confused and hazy manner.

However, does this same principle apply to Plotinus or has he allowed himself to be consumed by metaphysical impulses? Plotinus, in this respect, turns out to be a true and faithful disciple of his master. He writes: “ὥστε εἶναι τὰς αἰσθήσεις ταύτας ἀμυδράς νοήσεις, τὰς δὲ ἐκεῖ νοήσεις ἐναργεῖς αἰσθήσεις//so that these perceptions here are dim intellections, but the intellections there are clear perceptions” (VI.7.30-32). This shows that the apprehension of the particulars *is* the intellection of the Forms, though in an unclear mode. Even more importantly, intellection is said to be the clarity of sense perceptions. This means seeing beings in their Being. As a result of Plotinus’s conception of eidetic causality, the Intellect is *manifest* in the particular; it is the particular world seen clearly. This should allow us to shed the conception of a duality in Plotinus’s thought, but still perhaps does not allow us to shed the specter of metaphysics completely, for perhaps we could imagine that when beings are understood according to their being, these results could be produced in the form of objectified facts. After all, is something like this not implied by the comparison which Plotinus makes to Egyptian hieroglyphs:

οὐ τοίνυν δεῖ νομίζειν ἐκεῖ ἀξιώματα ὅρᾱν τοὺς θεοὺς οὐδὲ τοὺς ἐκεῖ ὑπερευδαίμονας, ἀλλ' ἕκαστα τῶν λεγομένων ἐκεῖ καλὰ ἀγάλματα... Δοκοῦσι δέ μοι καὶ οἱ Αἰγυπτίων σοφοί, εἴτε ἀκριβεῖ ἐπισήμη λαβόντες εἴτε καὶ συμφύτῳ, περὶ ὧν ἐβούλοντο διὰ σοφίας δεικνύναι, μὴ τύποις γραμμάτων διεξοδεύουσι λόγους καὶ προτάσεις μηδὲ μιμουμένοις φωνὰς καὶ προφορὰς ἀξιομάτων κεχρῆσθαι, ἀγάλματα δὲ γράψαντες καὶ ἐν ἑκάστον ἑκάστου πράγματος ἄγαλμα ἐντυπώσαντες ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς τὴν ἐκείνου <οὐ> διέξοδον ἐμφῆναι, ὥς ἄρα τις καὶ εἰστήμη καὶ σοφία ἕκαστον ἐστὶν ἄγαλμα καὶ ὑποκείμενον καὶ ἀθρόον καὶ οὐ διάνοησις οὐδὲ βούλευσις.

One must not then suppose that the gods or the “exceedingly blessed spectators” in the higher world contemplate propositions, but all the Forms we speak about are beautiful images in that world.... The wise men of Egypt, I think, also understood this, either by scientific or innate knowledge, and when they wished to

signify something wisely, did not use the forms of letters which follow the order of words and propositions and imitate sounds and the enunciations of philosophical statements, but by drawing images and inscribing in their temples one particular image of each particular thing, they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world, that is, that every image is a kind of understanding and wisdom and is a subject of statements, all together in one, and not discourse or deliberation. (V.8.5.20-23, 6.1-9)

Does this passage not present intelligible knowledge as a form of static representation?

Certainly it is different than the normal knowledge of discursive thought, but yet it seems present at hand and available for perfect cognition. Certainly this must be a metaphysics of presence.

The Form is a static image which language, as a tool, attempts to grasp, even though its attempts are individually insufficient. It must certainly have been this model which Grassi had in mind when he complained that in Plato's metaphysics, here extended to Plotinus, "the totality of beings and all the contents of thought (hence of all beings), form a well-ordered system" (1983: 79). After all, does not Plotinus himself state, "intelligible realities are originated in so far as they have a beginning, but unoriginated because they have not a beginning in time; they always proceed from something else, not as always coming into being, like the universe, but as always existing" (II.4.5.24-28), and many other things like it? This would seem to indicate the static, unchanging nature of the intelligible sphere for Plotinus.

However, this may not be as clear as it seems at first. As Smith has pointed out, there are also references to "before" and "after" in the Intellect (Smith 211). Armstrong has pointed out that there are passages "which seem to attribute process, change and history to Intellect" (1971: 71). Indeed, Plotinus does suggest: "since Intellect is a kind of sight, and a sight which is seeing, it will be a potency which has come into act" (III.8.11.1-3) and, furthermore:

Τὸ μὲν οὖν ἐπ' αὐτοῦ ἵχνος αὐτοῦ τῷ νῷ ὁρῶντι ἔδωκεν ἔχειν· ὥστε ἐν μὲν τῷ νῷ ἡ ἔφεσις καὶ ἐφιέμενος αἰεὶ καὶ αἰεὶ τυγχάνων, ἐκεῖ<νος> δὲ οὔτε ἐφιέμενος -- τίνας γάρ; -- οὔτε τυγχάνων· οὔδε γὰρ ἐφίετο. Οὐ τοίνυν οὐδὲ νοῦς. Ἐφεσις γὰρ καὶ ἐν τούτῳ καὶ σύννευσις πρὸς τὸ εἶδος αὐτοῦ.

The Good, therefore has given the trace of itself on Intellect to Intellect to have by seeing, so that in Intellect there is desire, and it is always desiring and always attaining, but the Good is not desiring—for what could it desire?—or attaining, for it did not desire [to attain anything]. So it is not even Intellect. For in Intellect there is desire and movement to convergence with its form. (III.8.11.22-27)

It should become clear now that for Plotinus, Intellect is not a static presence at all. On the contrary, the Intellect is an always striving, always desiring, ability to bring forth in itself the manifestation of the One beyond being. It possesses a dynamism in that it is a constant process of non-discursive expression of the utter transcendence of the One. Life and movement, far from being excluded from the Intellect, are central to its existence and nature:

εἰ γὰρ μηδεμίαν ἔχει ἐξαλλαγὴν μηδὲ τις ἐξεγείρει αὐτὸ εἰς τὸ ζῆν ἑτερότης, οὐδ' ἂν ἐνέργεια εἴη· οὐδὲν γὰρ ἂν ἡ τοιαύτη κατάστασις μὴ ἐνεργείας διαφέροι...οὐκ ἔστιν ἄρα τὰ ὄντα εἶνα μὴ νοῦ ἐνεργήσαντος, ἐνεργήσαντος δ' ἐ ἀεὶ ἄλλο μετ' ἄλλο καὶ οἷον πλανηθέντος πᾶσαν πλάνην καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ πλανηθέντος, οἷα νοῦς ἐν αὐτῷ ὁ ἀληθινὸς πέφυκε πλανᾶσθαι· πέφυκε δ' ἐν οὐσίαις πλανᾶσθαι συνθεουσῶν τῶν οὐσιῶν ταῖς αὐτοῦ πλάναις.

For if it has no change in it, and no otherness wakes it to life, it would not even be an active actuality: for such a state would be undistinguishable from non-actual inactivity.... It is not then possible for the real beings to exist if Intellect is not actively at work, forever working one thing after another and, we may say, wandering down every way and wandering in itself, as it is natural for the true Intellect to wander in itself; and it is natural for it to wander among substances while the substances run along with its wanderings. (VI.7.13.11-13, 29-33)

Here we see that “substances” [*ousiai*] run along with the movement of the Intellect in its wanderings. Likewise we should recall that the basis of the movement is the Intellect’s irrepressible desire to express the Good which is manifest within itself. We should be reminded of Heidegger. We have seen that, for Plotinus, the One or the Good stands beyond being and gives itself into manifestation, unconcealment and being. Thus, the One is the equivalent of Heidegger’s *Ereignis* or *Sein selbst*. Following upon that, Plotinus also possesses a conception of the Being of beings, the framework and power through which beings are able to come forth

precisely as beings, which he calls the Intellect. Furthermore, the Intellect cannot be static and still remain what it is—the paradigmatic unfolding of reality of the One. Why should this be?

Eric Perl notes that since the sensible world and the Intellect are merely degrees of the same reality, we should come to recognize that the real matter for thought in Plotinus is the One in distinction from Being as a whole, including both the Intellect and the sensible (2002: 147). This seems to me the proper conclusion. Furthermore, it is this very distinction which makes the “wandering” of the Intellect necessary. To speak of the One is, strictly speaking, impossible. Even to say “the One” is to mischaracterize its reality. This is because intelligibility is grounded in our ability to comprehend and make distinctions between things. In order for something to be understood, it must *be* some-thing. This fundamental convertibility between being and intelligibility is found throughout the corpus of Greek philosophy; its ultimate origin is in the identification of thought and being in Parmenides (Stamatellos 74-75). This means that a thing must be one, that is itself, but also other, that is distinct from other beings. However, the One is lacking in all otherness. As lacking in all otherness, it is impossible for the One to be any sort of being. It is no-thing, as we have seen. Perl says,

Intelligibility, and therefore being, is constituted only in and by the differences of one form from another within the system of being. Being itself is a text, an interweaving of forms constituting one another through their mutual differentiation.... Only within the system of differentiation can anything be thought, and therefore no object of thought, no being, can be isolated outside this system and encountered as pure presence. Intelligibility and therefore being is constituted by the play of differences within the system of intelligible beings. Differentiation is not prior to being, since there can be no difference without beings which differ (from each other) but neither is being prior to differentiation, since there can be no being without determination and therefore difference. (2002: 131-132)

As a result of this play of differences, the wandering of the Intellect, not only is the sensible realm which lacks true substances constituted by the failure of discursive thought, but

even the Intellect as the Being of beings is constituted by an historically fluctuating nexus of interrelations. Armstrong states:

The inner life of Intellect has a history, the history of a mind endlessly exploring the rich and varied world which is itself, a world of which the content is indeed all continually present to it, ever fresh and new and intimately its own, so that its exploration is an unwearying joy, never staying into uncongenial territory and leaving no room for boredom (V, 8, 4, 26-31); but a world which is explored successively, part by part, and in which, it would seem, there is always room for further discoveries. (1971: 73)

At this point we have seen the radical distinction between the One and Being exposed by the utter lack of otherness which distinguishes the One, and that the Intellect, rather than being a static presence, is in fact a dynamic history of the unfolding of unconcealment and being, given by the One. The priority of *res* according to the interpretation of Platonism offered by Grassi has been thoroughly undermined. The structure of being is not a well-ordered system after all, but a dynamically living nexus of interrelation and meaning arising from the Intellect's wanderings.

However, what about the other side of Grassi's equation, the centrality of the *verba* in the determination of the historical appearance of *res*? Does discursive expression play a central role in the historical conception of being for Plotinus? In his work *The Primordial Metaphor*, Grassi quotes a passage from Nicholas of Cusa which he takes to demonstrate a cognizance of "the thesis of the originary character of the 'word,' with its dominance and urgency, which are independent of any prior rational determination of beings" (56-67). In the passage, Cusanus states:

In fact, if I question you on the substance of what you think you know, you will reply that you can't express the truth as such about man and stones. But if you know that man is not a stone, you know it not by virtue of a science which presumably taught you about man, stones, and the difference between them, but by accident, by virtue of their diversity of shapes and actions. Having discerned these, you established names for them. Names, in fact, are determined by an act of discerning reason. (qtd. in Grassi 1994: 57)

This act of “discerning reason//*ratio particularis*” refers to the apprehension and understanding of things according to the outward appearance of their accidental qualities as opposed to understanding their causes and natures. Hence, one is able to distinguish, for example, between men and stones because of the distinctions in their outward appearances. Grassi here is making the point that the encounter with the world through the outward appearances of accidents in various existential contexts and *not* a pre-determined scientific definition is the origin of human naming. Now recall precisely what we saw earlier in Plotinus’s description of anti-essentialism in sensible reality. It is precisely because substances are a nexus of qualities, all in interrelation with each other, that no definitive analysis can yield a static nature of the thing under discussion. No rationalistic explanation suffices as though the reality followed from the syllogism. Compare the words of Gerson about Plotinus to the words quoted by Grassi above:

A classification of conglomerates is a classification of homonymous images. Take a drawing of a conical shape. Is it a tepee or an ice-cream cone? The answer is purely contextual or pragmatic because what the drawing is of is not entailed by the shape. The conical shape, however, is or contains a synonymous image of the Form. The classification of homonymous images, like sensible composites, in terms of synonymous images, like the instances of Forms, is interdicted because sensible composites are bodies that contain matter. There is no more of a necessary connection between these two types of images than there is between the proportions of a drawing and the medium in which the drawing is rendered. (Gerson 2002: 68)

In both accounts we see that the interpretation of sensible perception is the subject of interpretation based on the immediate context, not on a previously established, rational scientific analysis. That which we encounter in the world, neither for Grassi nor for Plotinus, is a pre-established essence. However, is the “immediate context” for Plotinus simply whatever a thinking subject happens to wish to say about an object before it at the time? Is there a sneaking

hint of subjectivism here? After all, for Grassi, the world being interpreted in *sensus communis* is not an object. Rather he describes it in this way:

We must now identify the phenomena by virtue of which our world is revealed to us so that we may disclose the realm and the meaning of primordial passion. No *phone*, no sensory perception hovers isolated in mid-air, in abstract, rarefied space. On the contrary, it becomes crystallized in various situation, in the signification of individual beings which appear within an order system in accordance with principles of measure. There arises a *kosmos* that is in no way a human creation, but which dawns and sets in a temporal *phyein* to the rhythm of the warning signs of an underivable absolute.... The elements of language are not metaphors merely in the sense that a certain meaning is transferred onto meaningless phenomena that are mechanically explained.... Originary emotion is passionately experienced through the indicative signs of the sense within the limits of pleasure and pain. We exist and function in a passionately experienced world granted to us by signs that direct us and caution us. The act of appearance of these signs, which bind us and compel us, marks the beginning of the game that discloses our possibilities. The confrontation with the reality of such originary experience constitutes the act that generates our world. (1994: 134, 135, 137)

Is this an accurate representation of how Plotinus too believes we come to encounter the sensible world in our pre-dialectical experience? Sara Rappe speaks of the Neoplatonic position in this way: "Plotinus suggests that anytime the mind simply looks at another thing, it is necessarily either enthralled by that object or subject to it. Thus to be aware of an external object is to be subject to passion, in the sense that a *pathos* is an adventitious event" (2000: 60). Plotinus, like Grassi, does not envision the encounter with the external world to be a mind simply projecting subjective ideas onto a standing object, but rather an encounter with a thing as a passionate call of being in an existential context, a call that then manifests itself in the formulations of discursive language. This discursive language exemplifies what we have seen in Plato as *doxa*, common opinion, the *sensus communis*, which expresses a generally received tradition of pre-reflective interpretation for discursive reality.

Through what mechanism does Plotinus suggest that human beings formulate this interpretation of discursive reality? It cannot be through logical deduction because no discursive

science can accurately capture the structure and purpose of reality. Cusanus called this, “an act of discerning reason” or “*ratio particularis*” as opposed to scientific rationality because it distinguished between the sensible presentations of the particular objects. Plotinus calls this aptitude the imagination (φανταστικόν).

For Plotinus, the imagination is a two-fold faculty—sometimes posited as “two image-making powers” (Gerson 2009: 147)—which is “the *terminus ad quem* of all *properly* human conscious experience... the faculty of man without which there can be no conscious experience” (Warren 277). The first aspect of this two fold faculty is the sensible imagination. This is the aspect of the imaginative faculty which allows the individual to gather up the data of sense organs into a single, sensible image in the mind (Warren 278). Plotinus generally considers this to be the passive facet of imaginative activity (Warren 285). On the other hand, Plotinus envisions the second facet of this faculty as the conceptual imagination. This conceptual imagination receives a framework of understanding from the Intellect, “rules” by which the images of the sensible imagination can be comprehended by the mind. That is, the conceptual imagination provides a pre-critical interpretation of the information which is being encountered (Gerson 2009: 147). Together, this union of the two facets of imagination in putting together intellections and the images of sense perception is how Plotinus understands the Platonic teaching on “anamnesis”:

As for the things which come to it from Intellect, it observes what one might call their imprints, and has the same power also in dealing with these; and it continues to acquire understanding as if by recognizing the new and recently arrived impressions and fitting them to those which have long been within it: this process is what we should call the “recollections” [*anamneseis*] of the soul. (V.3.2.9-14)

Plato suggested that humans possess a pre-critical understanding of things before they begin to think about them, which is what allows ordinary language and everyday interpretation

(*doxa* or *sensus communis*) to operate, and he associated this precisely with the myth of recollection. Essentially what Plotinus is suggesting here is that the imaginative faculty of the soul finds an interpretation of sense images which form the basis of this background understanding. From this background understanding proceeds the articulations of discursive reasoning. Is this not precisely the role of the imagination envisioned by Grassi?

Topics is the doctrine of “finding” [*invenire*] arguments. The aim of dialectic³² does not consist in the provision of truth, but in providing that which can appear to be true in a specific “situation” in time and space, the “probable” [*verisimile*].... Only *ingenium*³³ is able to grasp [*coligere*] the relationship between things in a concrete situation in order to determine their meaning. This capacity has an “inventive” character, since it attains an insight without merely bringing out what is present in the premises as reason does in a logical derivation. *Ingenium* reveals something “new” [*ingenio... ad res novas proclives*], something “unexpected” and “astonishing” by uncovering the “similar in the unsimilar,” i.e., what cannot be deduced rationally. (2001: 89, 91-92)

For Grassi, following upon this activity, the Humanists then engage in the art of interpretation, which pulls out and exposes the vitality and importance of the historicity of the word for determining the meaning and founding an historical world. They show through the interpretation of the poetic words the underlying philosophical significance of the poets. Plotinus shows the same determination to undermine the conception of fixed meanings. Following upon the techniques laid out by Plato, Plotinus seeks to expose the limits of discursivity. He does this by employing discursive speech to undermine the stability of the worldview proposed by that speech to allow us to remember the question of Being, to remember the holy. As Kevin Corrigan writes about the techniques of Plato and Plotinus:

Plato, for example, makes story, example, prayer, myth, and argument fundamental parts of philosophical dialectic. This may be a controversial view of Plato’s dialectic, but for Plotinus there is simply no question: *mythos* and *logos*

³² The surrounding discussion in *Rhetoric as Philosophy* shows that Grassi intended dialectic here to be “understood in Aristotle’s sense” (92) or “as Aristotle defined it” (90), rather than in the Platonic sense which has generally been conveyed by “dialectic” in this study.

³³ “Grassi, citing Vico, characterized imagination as the ‘eyes of *ingenium*’” (Hall 12).

are *both* essential to dialectical thinking.... These new representative languages finally will be inadequate also, but their very strangeness—their ability to provoke under-thought (*hyponoia*, cf. 10, 28: shall we *under-think* it to be the nothing?)—may by that very token be more appropriate to the question at issue than more linear forms of representative enquiry. (172)

And likewise, in the same vein, Frederic Schroeder writes:

Speech can never exhaust its subject as interpretation is for Plotinus never definitive and belongs to a hermeneutical circle encompassing intelligible and sensible reality. A declarative statement will cry out for further discursive analysis. A statement belonging to discussion and discursive analysis will leave us feeling that there is something more not embraced by the narrow confines of the statement. Necessarily, because what is discussed is not some thing, Plotinian conversation will always resemble an attempt to recapture with frustrating partiality a seamless discourse that we have known but forgotten. Yet language, ever mantic, is transparent to reveal the One in and through the discursive operations of the mind. (352)

In the discussion of Plotinus's work in this chapter I have attempted to establish two overarching points. The first point is that the general thrust of Plotinus's thought is in continuity with Plato's own thinking. Plotinus continually maintained that he was merely an interpreter of the Platonic tradition, simply a "Platonist." However, as we have seen, in the modern parlance of Continental philosophy it is often felt that Plato must be separated from the Platonists to save him from their perceived errors. Such a rescue attempt is utterly unnecessary.

The second point which I have tried to illustrate is that underlying the structure of Plotinus's thought is not a logical metaphysician run amok, but an insightful, poetic philosopher whose basic world view appears to conform very closely to Grassi's own views. This point is a response to the other great trend in the Continental treatment of the Platonic tradition, a trend to which the later Heidegger and Grassi both belong: the attempt to turn Plato and the Platonists both into something which really resembles neither of them so that they may serve as the opposition to postmodern insights. Such a move should be considered unacceptable. However, Platonism has passed through various stages in its history, most prominently its integration into

Christian thought. As such, next we shall turn our attention to ancient and medieval interpretation of this body of knowledge within Christianity to see whether the essential core of Platonic teaching is lost in the transition or retained.

Chapter Four

Christian Neoplatonism and the Oblivion of Being

In the last chapter, we saw that continuity with Plato's thought was maintained by his most famous ancient interpreter, Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism. Within a few centuries, this philosophy had taken root in an entirely new context as it was assimilated into the arguments and theology of early Christian thinkers. Did this union between Athens and Jerusalem fundamentally alter the inherent structures of Neoplatonism? More importantly, did it rob the movement of those fundamental aspects which allowed it to preserve the mystery of Being? To answer this question, I shall turn my attention to three figures in the history of Christian thought: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Thomas Aquinas and, to a lesser extent, Gregory Palamas.

The figure known as Pseudo-Dionysius is generally regarded by contemporary scholarship to have been a Syrian Christian living in the late fifth and early sixth century. This date is generally derived from the presence of a substantial similarity of ideas and images between this author and the late Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus (Saffrey 64). However, prior to critical studies in modernity, it was widely believed that the author was none other than the first century disciple of Paul mentioned in the biblical book of Acts (17:34). As a result of this identification, his writings carried a vast currency among Christian theologians throughout the medieval period. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas quotes from Dionysius over 1700 times (Doherty 189). Likewise, in the east, Dionysius exerted a powerful influence which culminated in the mystical theology of Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century (Meyendorff 1964: 133)

While it is rather uncontroversial that the Areopagite and Palamas were under the influence of Platonism—though to what extent they moved beyond or disregarded their Platonism is something of an open question—Thomas Aquinas is distinct in this regard. Indeed, the thinker is much more often associated with the school of Aristotelianism. After all, Aquinas

wrote copious commentaries on the works of Aristotle and called him “*the Philosopher*” when he referenced him in his massive body of work. Indeed, there are contemporary schools of interpreting Aquinas which are heavily focused on drawing out the depths of his Aristotelianism (Ashley 3). The waters are only made muddier when we consider the massive amount of scholarly commentary on Aquinas which originated from the “Leonine” movement, which was spurred on by Pope Leo XIII’s 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* calling for the reinvigoration of the study of St. Thomas’s philosophy. A large part of the difficulty arose from the movement’s heavy reliance on the tradition of the commentators of the Second Scholastic, particularly Francisco Suarez. However, Suarez and his confreres introduced a number of distorting influences which are completely at odds with the authentic teaching of Aquinas on a variety of issues. In particular, Suarez introduced a novel conception of Being, which we shall see in the course of this chapter. In general, the fact that the philosophers in the School of Salamanca, like Suarez, were of a thoroughly modern philosophical disposition led to the deployment of Aquinas among the Leonine Thomists of an anti-Cartesian project rooted fundamentally in the burgeoning modernism of these later scholastics, rather than in Thomas himself (Kerr 17-19).

Other contemporary thinkers, however, have been much more open to the idea of a primarily or significantly Platonic interpretation of Aquinas. Indeed, Hankey has pointed out that in response to the challenges raised by Heidegger there has been something of a renaissance in looking at the Platonic and Dionysian elements of Aquinas’s thought as a means to defend him against the charges of onto-theology and the oblivion of Being (Hankey 2006: 190-191). However, it would be erroneous to attribute all such shifts in emphasis as simply grounded in a reactionary stance towards post-modern philosophy. In particular, Josef Pieper and Alasdair MacIntyre both recognize a strong Platonic strain in the thought of Aquinas and, while being

aware of Heidegger and the issues which he raises, should not be construed as interpreting Aquinas in a way which is fundamentally in reaction to Heidegger. Notably, according to Kerr:

For MacIntyre, the importance of Thomas, as exemplar resides in the way that he integrated the contending traditions in his day... Aristotelianism and Augustinianism—into a new dialectical synthesis with the capacity to direct enquiry still further beyond itself... He is engaged in integrating the various relevant considerations advanced by his predecessors in the rival Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions—two different understandings of truth, indeed, two different epistemologies, one might say—but not a work of integration that amounts to ‘epistemological justification’ in the modern sense. (17-18)

This insight that St. Thomas’s dialectical method points beyond itself and is not intended to synthesize the previous tradition as a final reflection on the intelligible structure of the universe is also found in the works of Pieper:

A Thomism which limits itself to the consideration of the material substance of the explicitly said necessarily proves itself inadequate in a time which confronts man with wholly new problems and brings him into contact with realities previously barely glimpsed. In times such as these it is imperative to call to mind that qualities which made Thomas what he was: the all-inclusive, fearless strength of his affirmation, his generous acceptance of the whole of reality, the trustful magnanimity of his thought. And we find occasion, also, to remember: The formal and theoretical justification for this attitude is found precisely in Thomas’s doctrine of the infinitely many-sided truth of things. Truth cannot be exhausted by any (human) knowledge; it remains therefore always open to new formulation. (Pieper 1957: 102-103)

These insights into the fundamental method of Thomism will become relevant as we proceed through the course of the chapter. In particular, we shall see the connection between these insights and a Platonic core which undergirds much of Thomistic thinking, not as a body of discursive knowledge taken as an immovable statement about reality—for we have seen repeatedly that this itself is contrary to Platonic thought—but as a basic stance towards existence. For now, having established that Aquinas certainly possesses some form of Platonic pedigree through his associations with Augustinian and Dionysian thought, it is appropriate to inquire into the core questions of Grassian Humanism in the context of these Christian Platonists.

Let us first turn our examination to the thought of the Areopagite. Given his undisputed Platonic credentials, we should be unsurprised to find immediately that Dionysius's formulation of the structure of existence bears a striking resemblance to the basic insights present in Plotinus. The fundamental understanding of reality for the Areopagite is grounded in the primordial Greek insight that there is a convertibility between intelligibility and being. That is, whatever exists is available for thought; whatever is available for thought is an existent entity (Perl 2007: 5). As with Plotinus, the Platonic tradition holds that this very fact necessitates that difference be a constituent factor of being. However, since difference is granted by a prior oneness, there must "be" the One beyond being who gives every being its determination and thus its being and intelligibility. This is precisely the sentiment adopted by the Areopagite in his treatise on the

Divine Names:

Ὡςπερ γὰρ ἄληπτα καὶ ἀθεώρητα τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ἐστὶ τὰ νοητὰ καὶ τοῖς ἐν πλάσει καὶ τυπῷ τὰ ἀπλᾶ καὶ ἀτύπωτα, τοῖς τε κατὰ σωμάτων σχήματα μεμορφωμένοις ἢ τῶν ἀναφῆς καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος ἀμορφία, κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν τῆς ἀληθείας λόγον ὑπέρκειται τῶν οὐσιῶν ἢ ὑπερούσιος ἀπειρία καὶ τῶν νοῶν ἢ ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἐνότης. Καὶ πάσαις διανοίαις ἀδιανόητόν ἐστι τό ὑπὲρ διάνοιαν ἔν... Καὶ γὰρ ὡς αὕτη περὶ ἑαυτῆς ἐν τοῖς λογίοις ἀγαθοπρεπῶς παραδέδωκεν, ἡ μὲν αὐτῆς, ὃ τι ποτέ ἐστιν, ἐπιστήμη καὶ θεωρία πᾶσιν ἁβατός ἐστι τοῖς οὖσιν ὡς πάντων ὑπερουσίως ἐξηρημένη. Καὶ πολλοὺς τῶν θεολόγων εὐρήσεις οὐ μόνον ὡς ἀόρατον αὐτήν καὶ ἀπερίληπτον ὑμνηκότας, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀνεξερεύνητον ἅμα καὶ ἀνεξιχνίαστον ὡς οὐκ ὄντος ἵχνους οὐδενὸς τῶν ἐπὶ τὴν κρυφίαν αὐτῆς ἀπειρίαν διεληλυθότων.

Just as the senses can neither grasp nor perceive the things of the mind, just as representation and shape cannot take in the simple and the shapeless, just as corporeal form cannot lay hold of the intangible and incorporeal, by the same standard of truth beings are surpassed by the infinity beyond being, intelligences by that oneness which is beyond intelligence. Indeed, the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process.... In the scriptures, the Deity has benevolently taught us that understanding and direct contemplation of itself is inaccessible to beings, since it actually surpasses being. Many scripture writers will tell you that the divinity is not only invisible and incomprehensible, but also "unsearchable and inscrutable," since there is not a trace for anyone who would reach through into the hidden depths of this infinity. (588b-588c)³⁴

³⁴ Translations of Dionysius by Colm Luibheid are used throughout.

In this passage, we see the repeated affirmation that God for Dionysius is unknowable and surpassing all comprehension. Furthermore, he is also described as surpassing all being. That these assertions rest on the Neoplatonic position of the convertibility of being and intelligibility is apparent from the move of representational thought being unable to grasp intelligible realities to *beings* being surpassed by the “infinity beyond being.” This passage thus demonstrates the identity between being and intelligibility for Dionysius. There are, of course, important implications of this claim. Describing God in this fashion negates any kind of being in God. God, as beyond being, is immediately rendered no-thing.

Although already attested in Plotinus, it becomes necessary to recall this claim, because Grassi actually makes a move to differentiate negative theology as a “third way,” opposed to both traditional metaphysical thought and Heideggerian thought. In particular, Grassi takes the major distinction between Heideggerian thought and negative theology to be that negative theology is, ultimately, like metaphysics, grounded in an ahistorical nature. In order to support this claim, he brings up the discussion of Dionysius’s treatise on *Mystical Theology* in which is said:

Ἐμοὶ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα ἡῤῃθω· σὺ δὲ τῇ περὶ τὰ μυστικὰ θεάματα συντόνῳ διατριβῇ
καὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἀπόλειπε καὶ τὰς νοερὰς ἐνεργείας καὶ πάντα αἰσθητὰ καὶ
νοητὰ καὶ πάντα οὐκ ὄντα καὶ ὄντα καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἔνωσιν, ὡς ἐφικτόν, ἀγνώστως
ἀνατάθητι τοῦ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν οὐσίαν καὶ γνῶσιν·

My advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. (997B)

For Grassi, two related implications follow from passages such as these found within the Dionysian corpus: the denigration of beings and the vision of divinity as a being by and for itself. Grassi phrases it in this way:

The essential difference between Heidegger's philosophy of unhiddenness and negative theology as found in Dionysius and John of the Cross consists in their completely different starting points. They understand divine Being as a Being in and for itself, outside of history, so that it emerges primarily through the theophany of a mystic. Heidegger, however, claims that Being emerges through the "clearing" of different, purely historical spaces in which particular gods, institutions and arts appear historically. For negative theology, as well as for Heidegger, Being (God) is "sublime," but in a fundamentally different sense. In negative theology the sublime and elevated nature of God is defined in the sense that it finally can be made visible only by relinquishing those capacities (rational knowledge, memory and will) that make possible the "day" of rational life. (1983: 91)

From this argument, Grassi goes on to propose that, likewise, for Heidegger "Being is not exhausted by beings." However, for Heidegger "beings belong to the revelation of Being and must be 'held to' in their particular historical form" (91). Essentially what Grassi argues here is that, although Heidegger's Being surpasses any expression by beings, this does not entail that it has a distinct essence above and apart from beings. Being, for Heidegger, is expressed in beings within their own historical expression, with the "opening of Being" being remembered precisely through the realization that this expression of beings does not exhaust the possibility of beings. That is, the opening to Being is expressed through the realization of the historical nature of the distinction between beings and the metaphysical paradigm of their particular historical interpretation at this moment (91).

In reading Dionysius against Heidegger in this way, Grassi is making an error both in his own simplification of Heidegger and in his reading of Dionysius. It seems that the purpose of what he says here about Heidegger is to make perfectly clear that Heidegger does not conceive of Being, that is *Sein selbst*, as a concealed presence or, in Derrida's terminology, a "transcendental signified." Rather he wants to maintain the Heideggerian sense of Being as "the temporal-spatial, finite and negated, appearing of beings in their beingness, which calls forth and even compels from the human being (Dasein) a correspondence in language that allows both what

appears—and appearing itself—to be made manifest meaningfully” (Capobianco 4). However, what Grassi has overlooked—or, at least, failed to express adequately—is precisely what it is that allows the openness to Being to appear within the context of entities. Let us return momentarily to Heidegger’s meditations on modern art. Heidegger describes the earth jutting up through world as revealed in the work of art. This *could* be interpreted in the way which Grassi speaks here—that *Sein selbst* is encountered in the beings themselves—but, in fact, if we look at the way Heidegger speaks in his interpretation of van Gogh’s painting of the pair of shoes, he is confronted with the *nichts weiter*. He speaks of the world of peasant woman appearing out of the “dark opening.” Likewise, in his examination of the semi-abstractions of Cezanne and especially of Klee, the images barely peer out of the empty chaos. My point is not to say that Heidegger thinks of *Sein selbst* as some form of presence beside beings, but rather that Heidegger often describes the manner in which it is encountered as the beings put to one side for the appearance of the nothing. Likewise, *Angst* suspends beings, puts them into question, and allows the appearance of the *Ab-grund*.

Heidegger speaks in all of these ways which suggest the suspension of beings for the confrontation with the nothing, even though the encounter happens through beings. We take these statements for what they are, suggestive hints, images that point towards the reality of an encounter which cannot be contained by the instantiation of particular beings because of its raw sublimity. It would be an injustice to Heidegger’s thought to turn around and pronounce, because of such images, that *Sein selbst* is a static presence which transcends beings. This is the same injustice which is applied to Dionysius’s thought by ignoring the implications of his Platonic presuppositions. It seems likely that onto-theological prejudices regarding any formulation of Christian theology are more to thank for this distortion than the texts of Dionysius

himself. In fact, to read Dionysius in this fashion would be to do nothing other than completely undermine the entire philosophical foundation on which his view of reality rests.

If one were to propose that God for Dionysius were other than being in the sense of some form of presence over and against being, this would suggest that God would properly contain “otherness.” He would be some kind of being “other than” the kind of beings that we encounter in our ordinary experience. However, we have already seen that Dionysius follows Plotinus on this issue. It is precisely the fact that God is lacking in all otherness that allows him to be the foundation which gives forth being. For it is by every entity being determinate, that is, by each entity being *one*, that difference is able to arise. If difference and otherness were present in God, the entire ontological order would collapse and God, too, would be a being, different from other beings. This is, in fact, precisely what Grassi suggests, but precisely what Dionysius denies.

Despite the *a priori* absurdity of Grassi’s assertion, given Dionysius’s basic assumptions, it should also be noted the Dionysius explicitly denies that there can be some form of primordial vision of God which operates outside the context of beings, stating: “the divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils” (*Celestial Hierarchy* 121B-C). He also speaks of the same issue several times in his *Ninth Letter* saying:

Διὸ καὶ ἀπιστοῦμεν οἱ πολλοὶ τοῖς περὶ τῶν θείων μυστηρίων λόγοις· θεώμετα γὰρ μόνον αὐτὰ διὰ τῶν προσπεφυκότων αὐτοῖς αἰσθητῶν συμβόλων... Ἄλλως τε καὶ τοῦτο ἐννοῆσαι χρή, τὸ διττὴν εἶναι τὴν τῶν τέολόγων παράδοσιν, τὴν μὲν ἀπόρρητον καὶ μυστικὴν, τὴν δὲ ἐμφανῆ καὶ γνωριμωτέραν, καὶ τὴν μὲν συμβολικὴν καὶ τελεστικὴν, τὴν δὲ φιλόσοφον καὶ ἀποδεικτικὴν· καὶ συμπλέκεται τῷ ῥητῷ τὸ ἄρρητον.

“That is why so many continue to be unbelieving in the presence of the explanations of the divine mysteries, for we contemplate them solely by way of the perceptible symbols attached to them.... But there is a further point to understand. Theological tradition has a dual aspect, the ineffable and mysterious on the one hand, the open and more evident on the other. The one resorts to symbolism and involves initiation. The other is philosophic and employs the

method of demonstration. (Further, the inexpressible is bound up with what can be articulated.) (1104B, 1105D)

These statements from Dionysius should make it clear that he closely links the apprehension of the sublime to the encounter with the symbols. It should also be remembered that, while Dionysius does discuss cultic symbols such as liturgy and scriptural metaphors, he is committed by his ontological assumptions to the position that, in fact, all reality constitutes a sign and a symbol. While Grassi tries to make an issue of the fact that Dionysius seems to suggest few people will encounter the apprehension of God by stating “although for him divine Being is both revealed and hidden in every being, God’s Being is visible only for a few, that is, the object of a Theophany” (1983: 90), for Heidegger too most people live lives of inauthenticity in which the encounter with Being may never occur. There is no significant difference between the position of Dionysius and Heidegger on this issue.

Eric Perl has pointed out that Derrida, in a line of reasoning much like Grassi’s own, has tried to make it seem as though Dionysius’s philosophy hints towards a hidden presence (2002: 142). In doing so, he has tried to draw upon the imagery of Dionysius’s *Ninth Letter* (1105c) to present the idea that the divine symbols are “shields” which conceal this ineffable presence from common view. However, both Grassi and Derrida believe that ultimately these images may be stripped away and reveal what they conceal in its own stark presence, via mystical union. Perl has argued very convincingly against this position by pointing out that within the span of a single passage the word *προβάλλω* is employed in an ambiguous sense. Derrida has latched onto the usage that indicates that symbols “shield” (*προβεβλήσθαι*) a hidden truth to indicate that behind all of Dionysius’s words lies a hidden presence. However, Perl has pointed out that earlier in the same passage, another form of the same word is used to refer precisely to the manifestation and

presentation of the hidden (προσβεβλημένα) (2002: 142). The “throwing forth” of beings both conceals and reveals the mystery, like the iconostasis of a Byzantine church.

Dionysius teaches that God can only enlighten human beings by the very act of being concealed in veils. This is precisely what is in mind in this instance. There is no way to reveal God apart from the use of symbols whose very mode of use is to reveal something in concealing it, for God is not a being. To strip away all the symbolic veils which conceal his existence would ultimately be to expose him precisely as he is: as no-thing. Nothing lies behind the symbolic veils. Dionysius himself suggests as much when he says: “We have therefore to run counter to mass prejudice and we must make the holy journey to the heart of the sacred symbols. And we must certainly not disdain them, for they are the descendants and bear the mark of the divine stamps. They are the manifest images of unspeakable and marvelous sights” (*Ninth Epistle* 1108C).

Wear and Dillion, attempting to codify Dionysius treatment of symbols, appeal to the late Neoplatonic concept of theurgical symbols, a not unreasonable approach given Dionysius’s apparent indebtedness to Proclus (86). Furthermore, the description of the divine symbols as thematizing that which is unknowable seems to have deep Proclean roots. In Proclus’s description of the work of the poet, in fact, the poet participates in the creation of ordered reality because the words of the poet make manifest the highest principles in visible forms. Thus the later Platonic school emphasizes the ontological signification of creative words (Struck 243). An important distinction should be made in this regard—in this later Platonic theory of symbolic expression the images employed are *not* mimetic. The poet does not imitate some higher being through the use of symbols. Rather there exists a “sympathy” between the higher principle and the material substrate of its expression (247). The fundamental result of this is that the poetic

symbols are not taken to represent any kind of higher, established truth, but rather contain in themselves the power to make manifest in some way the ineffable presence of the gods, God or the One, due to some trace of the divine present in beings³⁵ (250). Perl's exposition of the place of symbols for Dionysius demonstrates the connection between this Neoplatonic theory and Dionysius's own quite clearly:

The ascent from symbols is the penetration into them. To rise to unknowing, to remove all the veils, to take away all things, is most fully to enter into the symbols, or beings. At the peak, therefore, we find the perfect union of knowing and unknowing, in which all beings are most perfectly known in being wholly unknown just as a word is most perfectly known in being ignored, because all beings are nothing but symbols of God. The mystical union is not a non-symbolic encounter with God as an object other than all things. It is rather a penetration into all things to God who, as "all things in all things and nothing in any," is at once revealed and concealed by all things. To ascend to unknowing is to see the darkness hidden and revealed by all light, to hear all things "announce the divine silence." (2007: 108)

It should be apparent from this examination of the function of symbols in Dionysius that Grassi's distinction between Dionysian negative theology and Heideggerian thought collapses. The very distinctions which Grassi attempted to establish between Heidegger and Dionysius are precisely those places where commonality arises. For Dionysius, as for Heidegger, that which is beyond the sphere of beings appears in and through beings. Dionysius does not conceive of beings as "a basic hindrance to the experience of 'God'" or as "obstructions to the soul that is trying to get a view of God," as Grassi says (1983: 92), but on the contrary, are precisely the place of encounter with the divine.

Before turning to Thomas Aquinas, a brief aside into the thinking of Gregory Palamas is warranted. Palamas was a fourteenth century monk who lived in one of the monasteries of

³⁵ Proclus's own cosmological hierarchy, in which the traditional gods of the Greeks are entertained as ineffable "henads" standing as the mediating factor between the One and Intellect allows him to incorporate elements of pagan religiosity into his ontological schema, but truthfully adds little to the main point, especially with respect to the Dionysian formulation.

Mount Athos, in Greece. He is generally regarded, among the Orthodox, as offering the definitive formulation of Dionysian doctrine regarding the relationship between God and beings. In particular, I wish to show that the eastern Christian tradition accepted and viewed Dionysius in a way that did not regard God as a transcendent object or hidden presence. Specifically, Palamas directly attacks the idea which is proposed by Grassi as belonging to the Areopagite—that the negation of beings is a means to obtaining an encounter with a transcendent and hidden presence: “It is not only a God who surpasses beings, but more-than-God; the excellence of him who surpasses all things is not only above all affirmation, but also above all negation; it surpasses all excellence which could enter into the mind” (qtd in Meyendorff 206-207). This corresponds to the Dionysian principle that God is functionally equivalent to the Neoplatonic One, insofar as, technically speaking, the One is beyond both affirmation and negation because it is present in all things and yet distinct from all things. This is because its absolute Oneness does not permit distinctions, as are found in negations and affirmations, properly speaking. Indeed, Palamas offers an interpretation of mystical union alluded to by Dionysius, to which Grassi objected, the discovery of an even greater mystery than that revealed by symbols and by negation (208). There is no presence here for a seeing beyond sight, only the absolutely unfathomable mystery of that which stands outside being.

However, Palamas wishes to offer a true explanation of the relationship between God and the world. After all, if God is so transcendent, how can he be regarded as acting in the human person, according to the teachings of the Christian religion? In response to this necessity, Palamas draws upon a concept expressed in Dionysius’s *Second Letter*. Dionysius says:

Πῶς ὁ πάντων ἐπέκεινα καὶ ὑπὲρ θεαρχίαν ἐστὶ καὶ ὑπὲρ ἀγαθαρχίαν; Εἰ θεότητα καὶ τὸ ἀμίμητον μίμημα τοῦ ὑπερθέου καὶ ὑπεραγάθου, καθ' ὃ θεούμεθα καὶ ἀγαθυνόμεθα.

How could it be that he who surpasses everything also transcends the source of divinity, transcends the source of all goodness? This is possible if by divinity and goodness you mean the substance of that gift which makes [us] good and divine and if you mean the inimitable imitation of him which is beyond divinity and beyond goodness, by means of which we are made divine and made good. (1068A-1069A)

From this idea—the divinity who exceeds the divine—Palamas derives his most significant theological contribution, the essence-energies distinction. The primary function of this distinction is to provide for the ability of God to be unfolded symbolically in the order of the world, while still recognizing his fundamentally absolute transcendence (Lossky 70). Indeed, Palamas asserts that the divine energies are truly God and thus God is truly present in the world, but at the same time maintains that “this unknowable Essence remains ‘transcendental’ with respect to them and the energies are ‘inferior’ in relation to the essence; the same God reveals himself and remains transcendent to his own revelation” (Meyendorff 218). This idea has massive implications for the nature of the created order, Meyendorff writes:

The creative act is a mystery perfectly inaccessible to human reason, and could only take place in as much as the divine Being was not totally identified with his inaccessible essence, but 'came out from it' to act outside himself: 'it is in fact his will'—not his essence—'which is the origin of beings.' Therefore God is Creator in an absolutely unique fashion, for the creation leaves his essence unchanged in the sense that he had *no* need of the creation and does not suffer (*oude paschei*) any limit in his power, for such a need and such a limit would be both weakness and 'complexity' in the Being of God. (223)

One may wonder why I have highlighted this particular idea from Palamas, except to demonstrate that the eastern tradition of Christianity has maintained that Dionysius observed the ontological difference. The purpose of this illustration will become clear as we move forward to looking at Thomas Aquinas. Due to the way in which Thomas chose to frame his discussion of being, particularly insofar as he identifies God as *esse ipsum subsistens*, some have suggested that he has capitulated to metaphysical thinking. I intend to suggest that precisely this form of

division is implicit in Aquinas's account of God, allowing him to maintain the utter transcendence of the deity.

Moving on to Aquinas, I would like to first present a preliminary argument that Aquinas is not subject to what Heidegger generally interprets as being the foundational content of onto-theology. First, God for Aquinas most definitely does not meet the criterion that would reduce God to an entity. In the commentary on the *Liber De causis* he states: "But the truth of the matter is that the first cause is beyond being [*supra ens*] inasmuch as He is infinite *esse* itself. But *ens* means that which participates in *esse* to a finite degree..." (qtd. in Caputo 1982: 144). In mentioning that *ens* participates in *esse* after God has been designated as *esse* might, furthermore, create the confusion that God himself is the being of all entities. Such an assertion would most definitely affirm a metaphysical reliance between God and entities which would support the claim of onto-theology (to say nothing of collapsing into a simple pantheism). Hence, Aquinas says in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*: "Now the divine being is not attached to another nature, but is the nature itself, as shown above. If, therefore, the divine being were the formal being of all things, it would follow that all things are simply one" (1.26).

The most comprehensive treatment of the relationship between the thought of Heidegger and that of Aquinas is found in John Caputo's magisterial work *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics*. Caputo agrees to all the claims which I have just made above (140-145); however, he still does not acknowledge that Aquinas's philosophical work allows him to transcend Heidegger's oblivion of Being. The reason for his reluctance is that he believes that, while Thomas has laid out the distinction between *esse*, being itself, and *ens*, entities, and therefore observed the ontological difference, he has failed to think the very nature of that difference. Caputo phrases the complaint in this way:

The one point in Heidegger's notion of "onto-theo-logic" which does befit St. Thomas' metaphysics, however, is that the doctrine of *esse* is a "-logic," a science of Being in the causal sense. Thomas consented to enclose his experience of *esse* within the borders of a *scientia*, a *Wissenschaft*. Though he knows there are matters higher than *scientia*, such as faith itself, mystical and finally beatific union, he is nonetheless content to confine his experience within the concepts and propositions of a science, without insisting that the meaning of *esse* is destroyed by the very scientific mode of expression. (1982: 157)

Furthermore, Caputo insists that the distinctly linguistic nature of the difference for Heidegger also separates Aquinas from thinking in this manner because, he insists, Aquinas possesses a traditional metaphysical understanding of language. In its place is precisely the theory of language which we have seen throughout this study, the idea that language gives birth to and shapes the experience of meaning and being. Essentially, Caputo holds that Aquinas has failed to recognize what Grassi would call the reversal of *res* and *verba* (1982: 158). Caputo explains his view of Aquinas's relationship to language:

I must say that Thomas thinks *in* the Latin language without thinking that which bestows the language. He does not see the particular ontology which is embedded in Latin to be just that, a particular way in which "language itself speaks," a particular way in which Being sends itself and indeed, more importantly, withdraws under the guise of "making" For St. Thomas, language is especially a tool which is to be hewed to the demands of *scientia*, as is evident in his attempts to purge his own language of all metaphor and poetic license, of unnecessary imagery, and of everything subjective. That idea never entered St. Thomas' mind that language opens up the field of presence in which we dwell, that language shapes and structures the whole understanding of Being which is at work in a given age. He lacked an historical consciousness in general and thus he lacked as well a consciousness of the historicity of language. He did not thematize the medieval Latin spoken in the thirteenth-century universities, and so he never understood it to be a stage in the history of the address of language to man. (1982: 164)

Essentially, the concern comes down to something which we have encountered before in the Platonic tradition. According to Caputo, Aquinas believes that he has fundamentally grasped the structure of reality by means of a discursive formulation because he thinks, fundamentally, that rational natures exist as static presences and that the goal of language is to act as a tool to

describe them, rather than language being something historically conditioned and given over by Being to allow it to come to presence in a particular age.

In fairness, Caputo does not actually believe this, exactly, for he mentions that Aquinas is aware of things higher than conceptual science. Indeed, in the final chapter of his study, he suggests that Aquinas ultimately *does* overcome metaphysics, but not in and through his philosophical work, but only by its abandonment (1982: 255-256). Ultimately, the position of Caputo becomes identical and merges with Grassi's distinction between negative theology and Heideggerian thought. After discussing his view of Aquinas's mysticism, he raises the question of what, then, is the difference between Heidegger and the mystical Thomas? Caputo answers:

In Heidegger, the hiddenness of Being, the withdrawn depths from which beings emerge into presence, is something final. There is no further dimension which can be anticipated in which it would be possible to shed light on this darkness. *Gelassenheit*, the openness of thought to these mysterious depths, is the ultimate attitude which one can adopt. But in religious mysticism such as is implicit in Thomas and explicit in Eckhart, this is not the case.... Religious *Gelassenheit* is openness to the mystery, but the mystery is not concealed from itself. It is, and this is the believer's faith, a sphere of self-openness, self-presence.... But the simple unity of *esse* and *intellectus* which stands at the summit of St. Thomas' doctrine is essentially found beyond time and history. This *unio* takes place most perfectly in eternity, in *patria*, in the homeland of the soul outside of time. (1982: 280, 282)

We see here exactly those same issues raised by Grassi. For Caputo, religious mysticism is characterized intrinsically by the idea of a hidden, transcendent presence and, further, by an eternality which denies beings as a hindrance to the encounter with the divine. This is not at all the case for Dionysius, however, for whom the equation of being and intelligibility firmly determine that that which gives being must itself be no-thing and, further, that it is only knowable insofar as it is concealed in beings as in symbols. Likewise, we have seen that Palamas, following Dionysius, contributed a theological formulation specifically designed to maintain the utter transcendence of God from Being. I shall now argue that Caputo is correct to

claim that Aquinas considered his “metaphysical” project conditional and aimed to overcome it. However, rather than this being attained by its utter abandonment for a higher form of presence, necessitated on Caputo’s view (it seems to me) by Aquinas’s alleged inability to think historically, I shall suggest that Aquinas here actually follows a traditional Platonic methodology. I shall demonstrate that Aquinas was fully aware of the implications of language for the determination of meaning and, as such, his metaphysical “system” is a self-conscious exercise in Platonic dialectic, a form of the method of hypotheses. For Aquinas, it is in and through discursive formulations that one is led to the mystery which juts up through an historical construct.

First, I would like to engage the idea that Aquinas’s *esse* remains locked within the framework of a “-logic” which is inherently closed off to the transcendence of metaphysics. This same question was asked by Jean-Luc Marion in his article “Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theology”:

Yet Thomas Aquinas does not take away all the ambiguities implied by two features of the onto-theo-logic constitution of metaphysics. First, is the nonreciprocity between God and created entities enough to get away with a metaphysical interpretation of creation? Second, and in particular, would not the causal grounds of entities as well as that of the being of entities (as created *esse commune*) by God identify themselves with the metaphysical causation of entities by the supreme entity in metaphysics? One immediately recognizes that the answer to these two questions depends on knowing, first, to what extent God remains tangentially *ens supremum* and, then, to what extent the act of being relies on being itself. (65)

Note here that Marion raises the exact same issue which caused Caputo to declare that Thomas did not think the difference between Being and beings. Caputo stated his object in this way:

What else is the “participational” structure of Being in St. Thomas but the “circling around one another” of *esse* in *ens* and *ens* in *esse*... The being (*ens*) comes into Being (*esse*) in the coming-over of *esse* to the *ens*. *Esse*, on the other

hand, comes over to the being (*ens*) by communicating itself to the *ens*. Now, this articulation of the *esse-ens* relationship has to do with *esse* understood as *esse commune*, and this, as we have seen, is for St. Thomas a merely logical relationship. But the same kind of circling holds true when *esse* means God. Then the circle becomes *similitudo*-process, the process of *exitus* and *reditus*. In the first movement, God communicates, not His own *esse*, but the likeness of His *esse*, so that there is, as St. Thomas says, a kind of “diffusion” of the divine Being, not in the sense that it is broken up and spread around, but in the sense that its likeness is reproduced everywhere. This is the *exitus* of God into the world, of *esse subsistens* into the *ens creatum*. In the second movement, creatures arrive in the likeness of God; they come into Being as analogical, participated likenesses of Being itself. Their very being is to be analogically like God. (1982: 154-155)

We see here that Caputo had proposed that the participation of all things in the likeness of God, by his presence to them as cause, is a foundational concept of the scientific, causal understanding of reality which leaves Aquinas’s thought locked in the frame of “-logic.”

In order to address this concern adequately, we must turn our attention to what Aquinas himself says about God as *esse*. First, as we have already seen, within God, there is an identity between existence and essence according to Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* (I q.3 a.4).

Furthermore, Aquinas asserts:

licet per revelationem gratiae in hac vita non cognoscamus de Deo, quid est, et sic ei quasi ignoto jungamur; tamen plenius ipsum cognoscimus, inquantum plures, et excellentiores effectus ejus nobis demonstrantur, et inquantum ei aliqua attribuimus ex revelatione divina, ad quae ratio naturalis non pertingit: ut Deum esse trinum, et unum.

Although through the revelation of grace in this life we are not able to know about God *what* he is and thus we are joined to him as if to an unknown; nevertheless we know him more fully inasmuch as more and more excellent of his effects are demonstrated to us, and inasmuch as we attribute other things to him from divine revelation to which natural reason does not obtain, such as that God is three and one. (I q.12 a.13 ad 1)

So we see here that God, as *esse ipsum subsistens*, is unknown and unknowable according to natural concepts. Aquinas speaks here of that knowledge we do have being derived from God’s effects and from revelation. However, despite the fact that Aquinas does lay out

these options for our coming to a certain kind of knowledge of God, it should be remembered that, like Plotinus, Thomas qualifies all his speech about God in advance, stating that:

quod hujusmodi quidem nomina significant substantiam divinam, et praedicantur de Deo substantialiter, sed deficiunt a repraesentatione ipsius. Quod sic patet. Significant enim sic nomina Deum, secundum quod intellectus noster cognoscit ipsum. Intellectus autem noster, cum cognoscat Deum ex creaturis, sic cognoscit ipsum, secundum quod creaturae ipsum repraesentant.

That names of this type indeed signify the divine substance and are predicated substantially about God, but they fall short from the representation of him. Which is thusly proved. For thus the names signify God, according to how our intellect knows him. Moreover, our intellect, since it knows God from creatures, thus knows him according to how creatures represent him. (I q.13 a.2 resp.)

Here Aquinas says quite clearly that God cannot be known in himself, but only through the medium of creatures. This is vital because it adds a radical contingency to every statement, affirmation and denial, made of the divine. It is important to note, however, that in the same article, Aquinas states:

quod de nominibus, quae de Deo dicuntur negative, vel quae relationem ipsius ad creaturam significant, manifestum est, quod substantiam ejus nullo modo significant, sed remotionem alicujus ab ipso, vel relationem ejus ad alium, vel potius alicujus ad ipsum.

That about the names which are said about God negatively or which signify his relation to creatures, it is manifest that they signify his substance in no way, but the remoteness of something from him or his relation to something or rather of something to him.

Since it is already established that, within God, existence and essence are identical realities and, furthermore, that existence as such has no positive conceptual content, insofar as creatures are disbarred from knowing the essence of God which is just existence, *esse*, the question is raised: according to the principles established in the *Summa Theologica* regarding the proper efficacy of names with respect to God, should *esse ipsum* be considered a positive name or a negative name? Given its lack of content, it seems necessary to conclude its position as a

negative name. However, this releases God, from *within* the context of Thomas's metaphysical arguments, from the ties of the "participational structure." It posits an essence of a "God without being," beyond the dimensions of *esse*. How then is the world said to be properly related to God?

This is precisely where Aquinas could benefit from the more positive formulation of the distinction between essence and energies posited by Gregory Palamas. It is precisely through his manifestation that the world bears relationship to God, but God is transcendent to that manifestation. Thus, rather than participating in the divine *esse* in such a way that it terminates the question of Being as the *actus essendi* in the form of an extrinsic causal effect, rather the transcendent nature of God is just what radiates Being from himself. God, being beyond *esse*, would be properly restored to his position as no-thing, as attested by the tradition. If this is so, we would be returned to the structure of the revelatory power of being which we saw expressed in Dionysius. If it could then be demonstrated that Aquinas has any conception of the revelatory power of language as manifest in history, we have now returned to the Platonic-Humanist formulation of reality which we have seen emerging across the scope of this study. Indeed, even Caputo admits that if God can be liberated from his *causal* relation and seen to bear a relation of *manifestation*, then Aquinas will have broken through the barrier of onto-theo-logic (1982: 241).

Aquinas, however, *does* touch upon this issue. Caputo's argumentation relies heavily on the relationship of extrinsic efficient causality in order to function. That is, Caputo follows Heidegger in conceiving of the relationship of God's presence to creatures as a matter of production. However, Aquinas's own conception of God's presence in creatures is significantly more complex than this for a number of reasons, and proper distinctions must be borne in mind. It is necessary to note the basic distinction between the talk of efficient causality related to God

and the normal meaning of efficient causality. Efficient causality ordinarily implies causing an object's act of *becoming*. Aquinas, on the other hand, following Avicenna, argues for a distinct causality related to the act of *being* (*De Potentia* V.I). However, while Avicenna permits the mediation of existential causality extrinsically through created effects, Aquinas holds this to be an impossibility (*De Potentia* III.IV). However, this alone still does not allow Aquinas to meet Caputo's criterion of a theophanic and manifestational understanding of the world's relationship towards God. It merely indicates that creatures reflect God in their being as his extrinsic *effect*.

This is not, however, Aquinas's final word on the issue. Aquinas maintains that creatures possess no proper potentiality for the act of being, as such, this diffusion of divine power must always be retained in beings as beings (*De Potentia* V.II). However, Aquinas holds to the Aristotelian contact principle regarding the necessity of the presence of an agent to its patient. Aquinas furthermore extends this principle of Aristotelian physics to incorporeal acts. As such, incorporeal agents must be considered spatially present to their patients, despite lacking intrinsic spatiality, in their entirety and not by parts. Additionally, immaterial spatial presence does not exclude the presence of a body. On the contrary, the closeness of an immaterial agent occupying the space of a body is a form of closeness beyond that of touching bodies, although the body does not reciprocally influence the immaterial agent (Goris 44). Goris importantly notes that the spatial presence of the immaterial agent is only analogically related to that of a body by failing to be circumscribed, but that its spatial presence in the material world is *not* merely by its power nor by its intention. The immaterial agent has a *real* spatial presence of its whole substance (43). *Created* spiritual agents can only be present in a single place due to the limitations of their own particular individuality. God, by contrast, due to the fact that he is not any kind of being, but rather *esse ipsum subsistens*, is substantially present to all things at once as the source of their

individual *esse proprium* (47-48). Due to the incommunicability of the act of being, indeed, God's spatio-temporal, substantial presence in and to the creatures is an inextricable and intrinsic part of being a creature (49-50).

When the full implications of Aquinas's notion of the omnipresence of God are combined with the insights stemming from Marion regarding the meaning of divine *esse*, in its negative aspect, a whole new conception of "causal" presence is brought to light. When Aquinas says that God is the being of creatures *non essentielle sed causale* (*In I Sent*, d.8, q.1, a2, qtd in Goris 50 n. 54) we should bear both these insights. Together they signify that God is properly conceived as no-thing in itself, a God without being, who is substantially manifest intrinsically—rather than through extrinsic production—only in the spatio-temporal presence of creatures. Aquinas's vision of the relationship between God and the world is, like Dionysius's, theophanic. Here we see that Aquinas, like Plato, while using the language of metaphysical hypothesis transcends the normal limitations of that mode of expression from within. While Caputo asserts that Aquinas is content to confine himself to the expression of *scientia*, he fails to see that Aquinas's basic presuppositions about language and divine transcendence cause that very language to open into a mystery beyond itself. Aquinas does not strive to free himself from metaphysics through a form of iconoclasm; he passes beyond and through metaphysics as through an icon.

Another important topic is Thomas's relationship to language. Caputo has presented a view of an Aquinas who is focused on the acquisition of technical precision in language in order to overcome all possible forms of poetic ambiguity in order that language may be purged and purified for the sake of *scientia*. Furthermore, he presents Thomas as oblivious to the shaping effect of language on the conception of Being possessed by those who use it, for instance, in suggesting that Thomas's own thought is irrevocably shaped by some kind of essence of the

Latin tongue, and that, moreover, Aquinas is oblivious to this fact. Aquinas, so to speak, thinks *within* a tradition, but cannot think the tradition *itself*.

In fact, contrary to this claim, a detailed survey of Thomas's language, "Sur la langue technique de Saint Thomas d'Aquin" by F. A. Blanche, has revealed the exact *opposite*. Rather than employing a sophisticated technical vocabulary tailored especially for *scientia*, Thomas employs a fluid, living approach to his language use. As Pieper remarks:

Thomas did not establish any definite, fixed terms which he planned to use in a consistent manner. On the contrary, he was fond of employing several synonymous expressions side by side. We find that he employs no less than ten different phrases to express the concept of relation. Contrariwise, the word *forma* has ten different meanings as Thomas used it. *Causa efficiens* is at one time *causa effective*, another time *causa agens* or *active* or *movens*. It was, as Blanche says, not a mere chance matter of temperament, but the product of definite, clearly formulated principles. Thomas was careful to avoid making exact, "precise" definitions of such fundamental concepts as "cognition" and "truth." For Thomas was convinced that an absolutely adequate name, completely and exhaustively defining a given subject or situation so that all alternatives are excluded and that name alone can be employed, simply cannot exist. (1991: 112-113).

In an over-emphasis on "systematic treatises" like the *Summa Theologica*, it can become easy to forget that the core of Scholastic instruction centered on the *Quaestiones*, and the above mentioned openness, ambiguity and play are present in these texts of St. Thomas. Indeed, one could describe Thomistic *quaestiones* as often ending in the openness of Platonic *aporia*.³⁶ This should come as no surprise since Aquinas, like Plato, was devoted to the user's art with respect to language, stating: "nominibus utendum est ut plures utuntur//names must be used as the many use them" (qtd in Pieper 1991: 114).

³⁶ This is not to imply something fundamentally unique about Thomas's approach. Thomas is here taken to be representative, not exceptional.

Furthermore, Thomas was repeatedly insistent that, although he formulated discursive argumentation on the basis of Aristotelian essentialism, “*formae substantiales per se ipsas sunt ignota*//substantial forms are unknown through themselves” and “*differentiae essentiales sunt nobis ignotae*//essential differences are unknown to us” (qtd. in Pieper 1957: 65). This is because we do not have access to essences except through their accidental qualities which Aquinas takes to reflect the essences like an effect reflects its cause (*De Ente* IV.94). As a result of this, the names which express sensible particulars arise from their attendant circumstances since natures are only hypothetical constructs of our intellect (Pieper 1957: 65). This has strong parallels to the indeterminacy of language and essence that is reflected in the writings of Plotinus. Finally, belying Caputo’s claim that Aquinas was unaware of the determining power of linguistic constructions, we have Aquinas’s own testimony from the introduction of his polemical tract against the Greek attesting to just this form of sensitivity. As Pieper elaborates:

Nevertheless, St. Thomas’ small essay *Against the Errors of the Greeks* (1263) is important for several reasons. In it, for instance, he formulates and advocates the principle of “benevolent interpretation,” that is to say, an interpretation which endeavors, as far as possible, to regard the text in question as understandable and acceptable. He also expounds the impossibility of intelligently translating an idea from one language to another by translating “word for word.” In spite of his inadequate knowledge of Greek, it appears that Thomas had learned by personal experience that translation, strictly speaking, is something altogether impossible... (1991: 90)

Here we see clearly that Thomas had an understanding that different linguistic circumstances give rise to fundamentally different apprehensions of being. This is not to say there cannot be some communication across linguistic lines, but fundamentally translation is impossible. If it were merely a matter of language acting as a neutral tool for describing an objectified rational concept, this impossibility could not arise. This combined with Thomas’s view that linguistic expressions of sensible objects arise from their immediate context rather than

from a scientific comprehension of their essence militate against an understanding of his work according to the guidelines established by Grassi for what constitutes a Platonic, metaphysical philosopher.

Perhaps it will be objected, however, that Thomas expresses a negative view about the poets. After all, he does describe poetry as *defectum veritatis* (Murray 64). However, we should not rush too quickly to a conclusion on this matter. Despite his characterization of the poets in this way, he acknowledges in his *Commentary on the Sentences* that there is a commonality of method between theology and poetry. Specifically, both arts make use of metaphor to express that which reason is unable to grasp. There is, of course, the contrast that poetry attends to that which is below reason and theology attends to that which exceeds our reason's ability to grasp, such as mysteries of the faith (Murray 68). However, it seems that we should not rush from a statement such as this to the conclusion that Thomas therefore has a negative view of all poetry. In looking at Thomas, we will find instead a keen similarity between himself and Plato on this point.

As we have seen, Plato had many negative words about the poets; these disparaging remarks, however, largely result from his defining the limits of the poet to the mimetic imitator without *techné* nor love of wisdom. That is to say, it was not by looking at the characteristics of artistry that a negative conclusion was reached about the artists. Rather it was the very fact of their negative characteristics that caused them to be distinguished into the category of "poet." On the other hand, those who were subject to the same divine inspiration, who likewise spoke with metaphors, but who, enflamed with love of the divine, turned their minds towards their revelations in the act of dialectic, were not called "poets" but rather "philosophers." It seems likely that something very similar is at work within the Thomistic corpus.

Indeed, Thomas refers to “theological poets” in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics* without intending to indicate the authors of scripture, but rather the illustrious artists among the Greeks (Murray 66). He spoke of them there as “*Isti autem poetae quibusdam aenigmatibus fabularum aliquid de rerum natura tractaverunt*” (1.4.83). Moreover, those poets discoursed about the nature of things with certain riddles of fables” (1.4.83). Furthermore, he accepted the idea that there had been divine revelation in general among the Gentiles, spoken through their prophets in myths and images (Pieper 1991: 146). Let us remember, however, that Aquinas has already spoken in such a way as to privilege such theological discourse *above* the pursuit of reason. Now such statements apply not only to sacred scriptures, but also to the true poets among the nations. We should not be dismayed, therefore, that some poets are depicted as of poor stock, for this opinion was found not only in Plato, but likewise in Heidegger in their joint criticisms of mimetic art.

Compare Grassi’s claims about the view of poetry in the medieval context to what is actually found within the writings of Aquinas. Grassi states that:

From the traditional view point, the essential function of poetry was to express the ontologically established truth. For Mussato [a Humanist], however, it represented the original and eternal manifestation of divine power, such as it is revealed in history, where things are constantly re-discovered and assume a new significance. (1988: 12)

Likewise, he draws on Salutati’s radicalizing of the ideas found in Mussato and Boccaccio:

The poets, whether they create fables in rhyme or report the pure truth about historic deeds... have as their inmost desire to point to something that goes beyond nature, customs, or actual deeds.... These authors [the Theologians] therefore tell us of the secret of the true God form behind the veil of poetic language. Under the force of necessity, they discovered that manner of speaking that made use of the poetic... And if for this reason we change the words, objects, or actions through which he [Being or God] reveals himself to us—to the extent

and in manner he wishes—we then speak and act with regard to what cannot be spoken. (qtd. in Grassi 1983: 66-67)

When Grassi describes what he takes to be the medieval view of poetry, he intends a situation in which an already determined rational proposition is covered over with imagery in order to make it more appealing or easier to understand. By contrast, the Humanists view poetry as being subject to a divine inspiration which helps to pull up an ordinary understanding of reality in their current circumstances. This latter view more closely corresponds to Thomas's assessment of the theological poets. They are spoken of explicitly as having God speak through them, and he makes perfectly clear that poetic metaphor, in theology, attests to things above and beyond reason, which makes understanding the theological message of the poets as a rationally deduced concept utterly untenable. Rather, we should take these assertions as indicating the manner in which God wished to reveal himself among the nations at a particular time and place. This view coheres with the continuum of Aquinas's other ontological and linguistic insights.

Overall, far from being a metaphysician inscribed within the sphere of rational discourse, Aquinas has revealed himself to have a deeply mystical insight into the nature of Being, derived from his Platonic influences, which manifests itself *within* the dialectical relationship to discursive reality which has been characteristic of all the Platonists we have encountered. Thomas is vividly aware of the insufficiency of rational, discursive discourse to capture and contain the utterly transcendent God who manifests himself in all of created reality as a series of symbols. I shall conclude this chapter with a quote from Josef Pieper which illustrates this fact in a vivid fashion:

The act of falling silent, however, was only the most superficial existential embodiment of an attitude which Thomas had already expounded, and whose theoretical basis he made clearer and clearer with the passing of the years. This attitude is revealed not only in the fragmentary character of his work; not only in what is missing, but also in what he explicitly says. For he explicitly says that all

our knowledge, including the knowledge of theologians, is fragmentary in character. The clarity of St. Thomas's diction is deceptive. Chenu speaks of argumentation "within the mystery." Thomas was so little a classicist of systematic thought that, on the contrary, we become aware that he cherished "an extreme suspicious of systems." (Pieper 1991: 158-159)

From here, I shall move on to the final chapter of this study, in which I shall compare the Humanists to that Platonist who is depicted as their most direct adversary as he is their immediate contemporary. We shall see whether Marsilio Ficino indeed takes the school of Platonic philosophy away from the shared insights of Plato, Plotinus, Dionysius, Palamas and Thomas and into the depths of metaphysical and rationalistic thinking or whether he continues as a faithful student of his inheritance in a way which is compatible with his contemporaries.

Chapter Five

Marsilio Ficino, the Humanists and Proceeding Orphically

In the first chapter of this study, I gave a general overview of a number of scholarly approaches to the definition of Renaissance Humanism. I would like to return to that subject, but with an eye to how these different scholarly interpretations relate to the place of Marsilio Ficino with respect to the movement. After this initial overview, I will return to the question of the thought of Ficino himself and how he compares to the rest of the figures we have looked at so far in this study.

In Chapter One, I discussed Paul Oskar Kristeller who saw a conceptual divide between the various fields of Renaissance scholarly activity. Ficino was without a doubt the greatest representative of the emerging Platonic philosophical movement of the Renaissance and was heavily influenced by the Humanists. His literary style and his copious supply of formal letters for publication both reflect his Humanist education. Additionally, his strong attraction to Platonism and his assiduous attention to classical texts are all characteristics shared by many Humanists (Kristeller 1943: 12-13).

However, Kristeller is unwilling to consider the contributions of Ficino—or Renaissance Platonism in general—as an authentically Humanist endeavor. Several factors play into this separation. The first is the strong continuity which Kristeller observes between the Platonic tradition under Ficino and the preceding Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions of the medieval period (Kristeller 1990: 58). Indeed, he notes that Ficino quoted entire pages from Augustine in support of his adaptation of Platonism to Christianity. He also notes that Ficino was influenced heavily in certain elements of metaphysics by Thomas Aquinas's work *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Kristeller 1943: 14-15). Indeed, it has been noted by Ardis Collins that it is not only Augustine from whom Ficino quotes entire pages—Thomas also enjoys a similar privilege within Ficino's

magnum opus, the *Platonic Theology* (x). Additionally, other works, such as his unfinished commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, appear to have been formed with massive borrowing. Both in form and content, Ficino's commentary mimics Thomas's own (Lauster 47).

However, these influences alone are not the main reason for the exclusion of Ficino from the Humanist canon. Rather, it is his subject matter which causes him to be excluded. As I showed in Chapter One, Kristeller considered Humanism to be a movement primarily concerned with literature and education. Indeed, he explicitly banishes metaphysical speculation from the realm proper to Humanist thought. Ficino, however, he considers to have been a profoundly metaphysical thinker, stating of his work:

There was at the time a profound intellectual gap between dogmatic theology which had its basis in faith, and Aristotelian scholasticism which was then largely limited to logic and physics. This gap could not be bridged by a purely literary or scholarly Humanism but rather by a metaphysical Platonism based on reason and on the most respected ancient authorities besides Aristotle. This Platonism did not oppose the Christian religion or the Aristotelian science of the time, and it did not attempt to replace them. It rather tended to supplement them in an area of thought that been neglected up to that moment but now had become increasingly important for a large number of writers, scholars and thinkers. (Kristeller 1990: 90-91)

From Kristeller's perspective, Ficino was not merely influenced by the traditions of Augustine and Thomas, but rather his primary aim was deeply involved with them. In this way, while possessing a certain Humanist style and being influenced by them in the selection of his subject matter, Ficino for Kristeller is a profoundly scholastic figure. His concern with metaphysics, Thomism and reason in the form of syllogistic argumentation all seem to guarantee that he be excluded from Humanism, properly speaking. Thus, while Kristeller regards Humanism as being exclusively the provenance of certain literary experts and scholars, the Humanists' broad interest in the revival of elements of classical antiquity and close attention to texts allowed them to acquire "fellow travelers" in their cultural program, even if those

individuals were not Humanists, properly speaking. Ficino, who according to Kristeller was primarily concerned with the philosophy of Platonism in its metaphysical form, appears to fall into this category of thinker.

Another prominent scholar of Marsilio Ficino, Michael J. B. Allen, appears to fundamentally agree with Kristeller's basic project. In his work *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* he goes so far as to link his work explicitly as subsidiary to the work of Kristeller. He suggests that while Kristeller, in his magisterial monograph *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, had focused on developing Ficino's themes in his *Platonic Theology* in a systematic fashion, Allen himself would be making a small supplement to that work by explicating the themes explored by Ficino in his commentary on the *Phaedrus* (Allen 1984: xii). Although Allen is more apt than Kristeller to recognize elements of esotericism, mysticism and demonology in the works of Ficino (Allen 1984: 24), he still feels that fundamentally the rational philosophical content of Ficino's Platonism must be abstracted from his other contributions—or even his methodologies—as the pinnacle of his intellectual achievement (Allen 2006: 5-6). As a result of this view, Allen—like Kristeller—has devoted all of his scholarly attention to works which are explicitly philosophical, the *Platonic Theology* and his Platonic commentaries, without paying due attention to their place in the totality of his corpus. This decision is not merely one of necessity in approaching a large body of mostly unedited primary sources, but one which hangs upon a hermeneutical presupposition that the true treasures of Ficino's thought are to be found in his Platonic works alone and that his other works are merely popular or apologetic (Allen 1998: 42).

As opposed to Kristeller (and, of course, Grassi), Amos Edelheit positively includes Ficino within the context of Renaissance Humanism. Indeed, Edelheit responds directly to

Kristeller in the introduction of his work. While Kristeller presents Humanism as an exclusively cultural phenomenon and wishes to draw a distinction between the movement and scholasticism, Edelheit points out that Kristeller has this compartmentalization on display in his work on Ficino's philosophy. In this work Kristeller offers a criticism of the use of the term "mysticism" because he wishes to maintain a sharp distinction between philosophical speculation and religious thought. This distinction, however, is completely alien to a writer like Ficino who named his primary philosophical work the *Platonic Theology* (Edelheit 12). Essentially, Kristeller wishes to extract and rarify the philosophical components of Ficino as an abstract, rationalistic and primarily secular system of thought, completely divorced from his humanistic context. According to Edelheit, this characterization results in a profound misunderstanding of both Ficino's place in intellectual history and Humanism itself (12).

One may be left to wonder, however, if this is simply a matter of terminology. Is there a substantial difference between calling Ficino a Humanist, as Edelheit does, and calling him a philosopher who was influenced by Humanism, as Kristeller does? Does the *content* of his thought remain the same in either case? Edelheit clearly believes that the labeling is important and his primary motivation for this belief rests upon the idea that, by isolating Ficino as a philosopher with Humanist influences, the true dynamic interplay of those influences within the body of his thought is substantially wounded. Edelheit's assertion is borne out in Kristeller's treatment of Ficino as a rationalistic philosopher in a way which is almost completely detached from other fields of inquiry. If there is, in fact, more to Ficino than that, then this has clearly been detrimental to a proper understanding of Ficino's place in Humanism. Indeed, this kind of mischaracterization could have exerted a deep influence on Grassi's own reading of Ficino and

certainly the reading of *all* Humanism by Heidegger, which Grassi asserts arose from Kristeller's treatment of Renaissance philosophy by way of his interpretation of Ficino.

Edelheit set forth to demonstrate his claim by examining Ficino's theological works in order to expose the radically different theoretical orientation from medieval scholasticism therein. Edelheit notes that, in his *Praedicationes*, Ficino does not employ the normal methodology of scholastic philosophy in the form of syllogisms, demonstrations and refutations, but rather relies on the informal rhetorical style championed by the Humanists in their rejection of scholastic jargon (Edelheit 15). He further notes that, while Ficino sometimes draws upon Aristotelian categories, he also blends them with new sources grounded in the Humanist rediscovery of the sources of Platonism (Edelheit 149-150).

Furthermore, in a move which is particularly important due to Kristeller's characterization of Ficino as a largely secular, rationalist philosopher, Edelheit notes that when it comes to the question of what differentiates man from other entities, Ficino does *not* fall back on the Aristotelian trope of mankind's *reason* being his distinguishing factor. Instead, he expresses the view that man's *religiosity* is what distinguishes him (Edelheit 150). This could perhaps be regarded as a relatively minor modification, except for the view that Ficino holds regarding the nature of religion as expressed in his theological work, *De Christiana religion*. In particular, he asserts that religious truth is an *historical* encounter. Ficino quite clearly holds that the content of religious truth arises from its specific historical context through what he calls the *prisca religio*, the ancient religion. In this way he is able to successfully incorporate the pre-Christian religions not only of Judaism, but of pagan antiquity, into a providential schema which culminates in the emergence of Christianity. This *prisca theologia* allows him to integrate the

unfolding of Hermetic, Zoroastrian, Orphic and Platonic wisdom as instance of the truth of religion in history (Edelheit 209).

It is particularly important to note that the *prisca theologia* for Ficino is not the same thing as natural religion. That is, in the formation of lines of transmission, the power of the human intellect does not attain throughout history to atemporal truths. Instead, there is an historical clearing to make way for the meaning of being to come forth. That is, the *prisca theologia* arises in history by a kind of divine revelation, manifest in particular historical circumstances (Idel 148). This is vitally important when looking at Grassi's thesis regarding Ficino's Platonism as starting from a point of concern with ontology and then moving into rational deductions from that being. For, in his theological works, Ficino expresses a view very similar to one of which Grassi speaks positively as an example of the power of the poetic word in the new Humanist model of thought. Grassi states:

In the unhiddenness which the poetic statement reveals to us, gods, things, and creatures appear with their original meaning. But here we must ask, if we are to speak of gods, with what gods are we concerned? Are we concerned with just those of the ancients or with those of the Old and New Testaments as well? Salutati's answer is that there is a single invisible God, revealed differently in different historical forms in different places and times. (1983: 25)

Grassi then proceeds to quote from Salutati at length, in a statement which deserves to be reproduced because of its proximity to Ficino's own view of the development of religious thought throughout history:

But since they [the poets] saw that God, the architect of the whole world, completed everything in wisdom... and yet wisdom is nothing other than God himself, they called God by different names although they felt that it was one and the same.... So it should not seem doubtful to anyone that even with such a large number of gods, the poets did not think of many, but of just one. But they variously named this God because of the divergent variety of his tasks, times and places. (qtd. in Grassi 1983: 25)

Additionally, despite his view of the culmination of the ancient religion in Christianity, Ficino does not view the historical transformation of religion to be yet concluded. Indeed, he notes that Christianity has declined into a mere formalism in his own day and that miracles now rarely occur. This seems to be the motivating factor behind his own Christian Platonism. It is intended to serve as a point of renewal to rejuvenate Christianity in the historical unfolding of religion (Edelheit 213). This combination of historical consciousness and the avoidance of the typical scholastic modes of argumentation in favor of an informal, rhetorical style are both characteristics of the Humanist movement, and thus contributing factors in Edelheit's characterization of Ficino as an authentically humanistic theologian.

Edelheit's position on the matter is strengthened by the input of James Hankins, who points out that, in contrast to traditional scholastic methodology, Ficino appears to *reject* philosophical foundationalism (Hankins 2008: 110-111). Hankins describes Ficino as a theological coherentist whose standard methodology is grounded *not* in providing a chain of logical demonstrations, culminating in a systematic treatise, but rather by bringing his reader to see the beauty of the correspondence of the parts to the whole. That is, Ficino seeks to show his reader how various independent philosophical arguments cohere as an interrelated network, rather than a chain of syllogisms derived from first principles (Hankins 2008: 111). This is considerably more consonant with the method described by Edelheit in Ficino's theological works, a method grounded in rhetorical persuasion rather than strict logical force.

Having now provided an overview of some of the competing interpretations of Ficino's place with respect to Humanism, to which we shall return, I would like to establish that Ficino, like those Platonists before him, has a conception of the ontological difference. While it is true that in his largest work, the *Platonic Theology*, he attempts to downplay the significance of the

One beyond Being, the fact that he does indeed still hold this position is most manifest in his debates with Pico della Mirandola about the highest principle of reality (Dillon 2011: 14-15).

Pico asserted that Plato's *Parmenides* did not contain any information that might give hints at the structure of reality, but rather that it was an example of a logical exercise. Pico proposed this idea in service of a larger philosophical project, the reconciliation of Platonic and Aristotelian thought. By designating the *Parmenides* as concerned purely with logical disputation, Pico hoped to eradicate the necessity of dealing with the apparent conflict between Aristotle's vision of being as the highest principle of reality and the more traditional Platonic notion that the One stands beyond, over and above beings (Allen 1986: 421).

Ficino, however, could not see any way to reconcile such a reading of the dialogue with either the testimony of the ancient pagan Platonists or, more importantly, with the testimony of Dionysius the Areopagite as to the utter transcendence of God or the One over all being (Allen 1986: 451). Thus, in his commentary on the *Parmenides*, we find Ficino insistent on the transcendent One beyond Being:

Quoniam vero suppositio prima colit ipsum simpliciter unum ente superius, ideo omnes ab eo entium conditiones negat. Est enim ab omnibus absolutum, tamquam principium finale, praecipue et eminenter efficiens.

The first hypothesis concerns the absolute One that is superior to being. Therefore, it denies of it all the conditions of beings. For the One transcends all things, so to speak, the final principle and first and eminently efficient cause.³⁷ (LII.1)

Note that in the above passage, Vanhaelen translated *tamquam principium finale et eminenter efficiens* as simply "as the final principle and eminently efficient cause." I have instead rendered *tamquam* as "so to speak." I do this on the basis of imitating the sense offered by Plotinus's mode of speech about the One, in which he often couched any positive declarations

³⁷ Translation is Vanhaelen's with some emendations.

about it in similar terms. This movement is justified further by Ficino's own words in Chapter Fifty-Four of the same commentary:

Affirmationes circa summum deum fallaces admodum periculosaeque sunt. Solemus enim in quotidianis affirmationibus nostris certam quondam speciem proprietatemque concipere et applicare aliquid alteri atque definire.

Assertions about the highest God are utterly false and dangerous. For we are accustomed in our everyday assertions to designate some particular species and property, to attribute something to something else, and to establish a definition. (LIV.1)

We may recall a similar admonition from Plotinus. Everything that is said about the highest principle is automatically a distortion of its nature because it surpasses all things and is, therefore, no-thing. This constitutes an affirmation of the principle that we have seen shared by Platonists: that there is a fundamental ontological chasm between beings and that which is other than beings.

As with other instances of the presentation of being beyond being, in the case of Ficino, this argument entails that the One has no definitive, concrete nature that can be grasped by thought. He specifically denies this, even going so far as to call affirmations about the One "dangerous" because such affirmations make the mistake of confusing this first principle with a being and therefore *definere*, define or delimit, it.

This unlimited nature of the One is important to the discussion of the omnipresence of God. In the *Platonic Theology*, Ficino writes:

Difficile reperitur ubi sit deus, quia nusquam est quod nullius vel subiecti vel loci limite cohibetur. Difficilius reperitur ubi non sit, quis in omnibus est illud in quo sunt, per quod fiunt, per quod servantur quaelibet 'ubique.' Deus ideo est in omnibus, quia Omnia in eo sunt. Quae nisi essent in eo, essent nusquam et omnino non essent. Per deum hoc ipsum 'ubi' est diciturque 'ubique.'

It is difficult to find where God is because nowhere is that which is not confined by the limit of either substrate or place. It is more difficult to find where he is *not*. For present in all things is that in which things everywhere exist, by which they

are made, through which they are preserved. God is in all things, therefore, because all things are in Him. If they were not in him, they would be nowhere and completely non-existent. Through God “where” itself exists and is said to be “everywhere.” (II.6.4)

Statements like these recall the teachings of Dionysius the Areopagite. For Dionysius, because God is beyond being, he is not determinate, whereas everything which has being is of a determinate character. In turn, all beings are constituted by the limitation and difference from one another (Allen 1989: 62-63). In order to be anything at all, however, they rely on the oneness of God to make them one. As a result of this, God is present to and in all beings, even though he is nowhere and no being (Ficino 1985: 47). It likewise recalls the teaching of the omnipresence of God in Aquinas wherein it was demonstrated that precisely insofar as God is absent, he manifests himself through his presence to and in all created realities.

As a result of this ineffable presence of God permeating all reality, the world for Ficino is pervaded by divine “sympathy” (Celenza 89). This understanding originated with Iamblichus; it had a long pedigree by the time it reached Ficino, however, having been a principle accepted by both Proclus and Dionysius. The sympathetic relationship between the transcendent divinity of God and the world allows the material world to appear precisely as symbol, as an analogy for transcendence. The sympathetic relationships are *not* mimetic. The transcendent is not an object, a presence or a concept that can be imitated, as God is not a being of any kind. Struck describes symbolic poetry in this fashion:

According to Proclus, the symbols are usually jarring, corporeal, sometimes even vulgar depictions of divine natures involved in the material world. The “symbolic” category of poetry seems clearly to have been developed in a defensive context. Those things that will count as symbols in Proclus’s thinking are those that most offended the poets’ traditional critics, including Plato: the castration of Ouranos, the binding of Zeus, Ares’ tryst with Aphrodite, the expulsion of Hephaestus from Heaven. Proclus consistently invokes these infamous scenes as examples of the poets’ greatest achievements. They are proofs of their inspired, hyperrational wisdom. Symbolic poetry arises from a divine

madness that is higher than reason; it emanates from the Muses, possesses the poet, and then radiates out to the poet's readers. The parallels to the *Ion* are clear. When writing "symbolic" poetry, the poet is no longer an imitator of mere appearances, rather he acts according to a higher principle. The poet produces base images, just as the demiurge of nature takes the unified world of the higher principles and stamps them into inert matter, and, precisely like the theurgist, fashions statues that carry a trace of divine presence. (242-243)

Thus, through poetic expression, new ways of encountering reality can appear by virtue of the divine transcendence jutting up through them. There are alternative ways of talking about poetry, however. Grassi brings up the imagery employed by Cristoforo Landino. He begins by saying:

It was, as Landino explains, not the philosophers but the poets who proclaimed the laws by means of which human society was first constituted.... The poets are rightly termed *Vates*, from *vi mentis*, in Latin because all of them are characterized by great agitation and intellectual effort. The Greeks called them *poetae*, a derivation from the verb *poieo* which means to create. (1983: 93-94).

In this, Grassi recognizes a conformity with what he considers to be the authentic Humanist tradition. However, he quickly reverses that view and designates Landino a Platonic pretender:

For Landino's further remarks the influence of Platonic thought becomes more and more apparent. Poetry has its primacy only to the extent that it leads man, who always lives in a concrete historical situation, to a reality that lies "outside of time and history." Poetry serves for Landino only to transport us back "to our original fatherland" ("rivolare all' antica patria"). As our souls dwelling in heaven they participated in that harmony in which the eternal spirit of God consists and from which the movement and order of the heavens come. But they then dove into the earthly slime ("nel terreno limo sommersi") and can only now hear the musical relationships that are our basis." Poetry leads to a necessary liberation from our earthly ties, because the soul is hindered by the senses from exercising its original activity ("e dai terreni legami retardato l'animo"). (1983: 94)

It is certainly the case that Ficino, too, speaks about poetry in the manner described here by Grassi. In his letter *De divino furore*, Ficino says:

Thus when the soul has received through the physical senses those images which are within material objects, we remember what we knew before when we existed outside the prison of the body... The whole soul then kindles with desire to fly back to its rightful home, so that it may enjoy that true music again. It realizes that as long as it is enclosed in the dark abode of the body it can in no way reach that music. (1975: 46-48).

However, questions immediately arise. First, in the passage, Ficino seems to claim that the soul has previously enjoyed heavenly music in a state of pre-existence. However, this claim seems entirely unlikely to be meant in a literal sense, for in Book XVII of the *Platonic Theology* he spends a considerable amount of time discussing the views of the various ancient Platonic academies about the nature of the soul. In XVII.4.2, he explicitly states: “Sed non putamus ob hoc necessarium esse eam sursum atque deorsum vices innumerabiles agere//But we do not think on account of this that it is necessary that it [the soul] travel up and down innumerable times” and “numquam tamen fiat vera de specie in speciem transmigratio//nevertheless a true transmigration from species into species never happens.” That is to say, that when Ficino speaks in this fashion we should emulate his treatment of Plato on this matter: “sed multa, quae de circuitu eius ab ipso tractantur, tamquam poetica, aliter intellegimus quam verba videantur significare//but much which they say about its circuit from itself, as poetic, we understand otherwise than the words seem to signify” (XVII.4.1).

However, to explain what he takes to be the true faculties of the soul in that same chapter, Ficino makes a reference to the soul being “pregnant with the seeds of every kind of life.” This statement itself is a reference to the Ficino’s conception of the human soul as being a microcosm of the universe for the purposes of reinforcing its demiurgic ability, for as Ficino says elsewhere: “Est utique deus in terris” (*Platonic Theology* XVI.6.7). If Ficino’s description of the nature of the divine furor of poetics is itself a poetic embellishment, what should it mean other than the abandonment of the body and our temporal circumstances? It should be taken for the recognition

of the transcendent working through the material signs and thereby destroying our lives of idle chatter and opening up the possibility of new worlds, in the here and now. The poetry carries one beyond their own world so that the world can be made anew.

Such a thing, if not explicit, is at least implicit in other accounts of divine inspiration, such as that of Salutati, which are found among the Humanists that Grassi favors. Indeed, Grassi himself emphasizes that Salutati holds that “through poetry, men are ‘diverted from that which their senses present to them’” (1983: 24). This explanation has the added strength that it unites the two statements of Landino rather than producing a schizophrenic image of the artist as one who grounds culture while fleeing from the world. Furthermore, Landino did not receive one image (flight from the world) from the Platonists and the other (culture creator) from some other source, rather both originated in his Platonic instruction (Tigerstedt 1968: 473-474). Entering into the divine fury did not mean the abandonment of the world and the temporal for some reified intellectualized state. Angela Voss describes the general idea in this manner:

Thus ‘to proceed Orphically’ meant adopting a poetic vision, a vision rich in mythology, symbol, allegory, metaphor. Indeed Michael Allen has pointed out that ‘to proceed Orphically was the *only* way of accommodating polytheistic structures to the deep grammar of monotheism.’ And the only way to ‘proceed Orphically’ was to transcend logical thinking and abandon oneself to *Eros*... (Voss 236)

This is not the abandonment of the world; this is the use of metaphors and images from the experience of artistic reality in order to help structure and shape the intelligibility of the world. In short, this constitutes the standard activity of the Humanists as understood by Grassi.

This view is manifest in the account of Ficino’s views on dialectic. Allen points out that Ficino’s resuscitation of Platonic dialectic (*pace* Kristeller) aims directly at overturning the syllogistic logic predominant among his contemporary scholastic Aristotelian colleagues (1998: 190-191). However, Allen, while preserving keen insights into Ficino’s appropriation of Platonic

dialectic, makes errors regarding the implications of those insights because he relies on an account of Platonic and Neoplatonic dialectic developed by Guthrie in his *A History of Greek Philosophy* which rests upon a quintessentially modern way of reading Plato. As a result, he conceives of the Forms as hypostasized static essences, in conformity with the view espoused by the later Heidegger, and the Good as a “first principle” identified with a “premiss” (Allen 1998: 151).

However, this view is erroneous in its reading of Plato and likewise not reflected in the development of the tradition by Plotinus. Furthermore, since in Christian reformulations—including those of Dionysius, Aquinas and Ficino—the Forms are included within the effable essence of the God beyond being, it becomes untenable to render them as static presences. On the contrary, since Dionysius the Forms as “divine names” have stood as the conduit in which God shines forth in creatures as a theophany while remaining himself unparticipated—a conception seen reflected in Ficino’s comments on divine omnipresence (Boland: 142). As such, I shall draw upon Allen’s account of Ficino’s dialectic, but offer a correction according to the more properly Platonic understanding of intelligible reality established in Plato and found reflected in Ficino. Furthermore, I shall show how this Platonic conception of dialectic takes Ficino even further away from being a rationalistic philosopher than even Hankins’s coherentist view of his thought.

First, Ficino’s conception of dialectic shares the perspective with Plato that dialectic, like poetry, is an inspired activity. Indeed, just as in the Orphic ecstasies described above, the encounter with the transcendent is a fundamental aspect of the entire activity (Allen 1998: 190). This separates dialectic from Aristotelian logic which is concerned with “tautological predication” (155) and “mundane, circumscribed and technical” issues (191). Ficinian dialectic,

rather, is concerned with the “transcendent art of non-tautological predication” (155). Within Aristotelian logic, the primary element of the task is concerned with demonstration, operating within the system to produce a syllogism which allegedly corresponds to the objective reality of the situations and thereby establishes its truth (161).

By contrast, in his commentary on the *Parmenides*, Ficino mentions that, in engaging in Platonic dialectic, the master “exercituro videlicet ingenium//for surely training the *ingenium*” (Proem). This corresponds to what Grassi had established as a major aspect of the Humanist program. Being calls within concrete historical circumstances and human beings respond by the exercise and training of their *ingenium* as the faculty of gathering together into likenesses through topological philosophy and thereby introducing new grounds for encountering the world in its intelligibility. Likewise, Plato emphasized that knowledge of things arose and manifested itself in concrete historical circumstances through the exercises of the “user’s art” of dialectic. Dialectic thereby becomes the privileged place where everydayness and idle chatter are destroyed, and, thereby, beings are able to come forward in their truth.

So far, everything that has been said has been in line with the understanding of dialectic which has been developed throughout the body of this study. Allen’s analysis, however, has picked up a few elements from modern understandings of Plato which undermine the essence of Platonic dialectic. Indeed, whereas I have argued that Plato’s thought bears similarity to Grassi’s idea about the essence of Humanism, Allen argues that Ficinian dialectic differs markedly from both Aristotelian logic *and* the more “logocentric,” rhetorical analyses of the rise of meaning offered by, for example, Lorenzo Valla, for which Grassi is a partisan (Allen 1998: 191). He draws this distinction precisely because he has fallen under contemporary ideas regarding Plato’s own vision of reality and, therefore, how that is expressed and manifest in later Platonists such as

Ficino. For instance, Allen asserts that Plato's dialectic is concerned with attaining "certainty," and that the fundamental distinction between the mathematician's *dianoia* and the *noesis* of the dialectician is this attainment of certainty (151). Allen thinks, therefore, that the Platonic Forms should be identified with objects, static presences, standing ready for perception, and, furthermore, following Guthrie, that those objects should be identified with "general concepts" (153-154). This conception allows Allen to say of the experienced dialectician: "Whereas his earlier hypotheses had begun as provisional, non-deductive and subject to *elenchoi*, his later definitions end up as 'examined,' truly deduced from 'the certainty of the first principle' and therefore irrefutable" (151).

This analysis does not correspond to what we have seen of Platonic dialectic, however. In the *Seventh Letter*, the identification of real knowledge with a "concept" is an unsustainable claim because Plato identifies concepts as among those things subject to refutation and destruction within the dialectical method.³⁸ If concepts must be destroyed, then how are they, in fact, to be taken as the ultimate ground of reality? Furthermore, the distinction which Guthrie draws between *dianoia* and *noesis* is far from clear. He seems to imply that it is merely a difference of degree—the mathematicians offer a collection of postulates, but the dialectician moves beyond them by adding one more *proper* postulate, the account of the first principle. However, if this is the case, the strong distinction which Plato established between *dianoia* and *noesis* seems to collapse. In fact, dialectic does not aim at the accumulation of objective data, but rather at establishing a depth of intuitive understanding which helps to refine one's ability to

³⁸ The acceptance of the *Seventh Letter* is purely methodological, as stated in the Introduction of this study, and does not imply an argument for or against its *actual* authenticity. The basic concept cited here, found in summary in the *Seventh Letter*, has been established as Platonic through an examination of the dialogues in Chapter Two.

properly make assertions because the assertions themselves are better understood. This is a difference in *kind*, not of *degree*.

This seems, however, to be impossible. First, Ficino has not established a “world of ideas,” standing concretely, waiting for perception. Instead, he has followed Dionysius the Areopagite in asserting the utter transcendence of God and joining the intelligible paradigms, the divine names, to that ineffable reality as what is thrown forth into beings. That is, he has established being as a fundamentally theophanic manifestation of that which is beyond being. However, as with Dionysius, what lies beyond the symbolic nature of beings is no-thing, not a static presence for clear viewing. Second, Allen himself makes statements about Ficino’s own conception of dialectic that stand in contrast with Guthrie’s idea, but which are in perfect conformity with Plato’s own views of dialectic.

Allen, for instance, recognizes that for Ficino the knowledge gained in the noetic insight produced by dialectic is non-discursive (1998: 170). Furthermore, Allen asserts that Ficino “was reluctant to think of human souls ever abandoning discursiveness altogether” (1998: 171). That is to say, Ficino adopts the position which is manifest in Plato—*noetic* insight is obtained by the *continual* engagement with the destabilization of hypotheses in dialectical activity. However, in what way is an additional postulate in a chain of deductive reasoning rendered non-discursive? This seems to be an incomprehensible claim if the Forms are to be identified with “general concepts” and that dialectic aims for “certainty” in Guthrie’s fashion. After all, one does not need to continually engage in dialect in order to grasp the Platonic version of Descartes’s *cogito*, whereas Plato and Ficino both present this as the way in which dialectic is practiced.

These similarities between Plato’s own conception of dialectic and Ficino’s reception of it also render Hankins’s coherentist assessment of Ficino dubious at best, although he was right

to challenge the idea of Ficino as a foundationalist. In order to explore this issue more fully, it is important to map out more closely what Hankins takes coherentism to mean and what is emblematic of coherentism in Ficino's case in particular. Coherentism, in general, Hankins describes as the idea that "a belief is justified if and only if it is part of a coherent system of beliefs" and "what creates belief is the way that the whole web of beliefs make sense of nature, history and our lives as rational and moral beings" (2008: 110). Under coherentism the justification for beliefs is found within the interconnection of the entire web of beliefs, in how well an entire system of belief explains our lived experience, rather than proceeding from a select few "indubitable" first principles by successive deduction.

In the case of Ficino, Hankins states that "all religious beliefs justify themselves in terms of other religious beliefs and not in terms of foundational truths of unaided natural reason" (2008: 111). He thereby draws a distinction between Ficino's methodology and that to which Grassi links him, namely the Cartesian school of rationalism, specifically stating that, unlike Descartes, Ficino does not "want to reason outward *more geometrico* from truths of reason to truths of religion" (15). A similar fact is noted by Allen, although he does not draw out its significance, when he observes that in some argumentation of the *Platonic Theology* the existence of the soul formed the basis of arguments for the existence of angels and elsewhere the existence of angels formed the basis of argumentation for the existence of the soul (1975: 223). While this seems to be circular reasoning according to foundationalist principles, for the coherentist this would be an expression of the mutual interdependence of the various postulates.

However, despite these suggestions that Ficino is a coherentist, the position ultimately suffers from the same problems as the foundationalist arguments. In particular, a coherentist account of Ficino's thought fails to account for the sharp divide between *dianoia* and *noesis*,

between *ratio* and *intellectus*. It would seem on a coherentist account that the practice of dialectic could serve only to expand the field of postulates which demonstrate mutual interdependence to enlarge the scope of the coherent paradigm. However, this is, once again, an addition only of *degree* and not of *kind*. No matter how many additional discursive postulates are added within a paradigm, this does not account for the paradigm itself, whereas Ficino's "proceeding Orphically" specifically involves surpassing *ratio*.

Hankins unwittingly raises interesting points on this issue when he discusses the method of refutation employed by Ficino in the *Platonic Theology*. He points out that Ficino does not seek to establish a common set of first principles with opponents and then indicate where they have failed to reason adequately from those principles (2008: 112). Rather:

In each case he does not offer arguments against the inferior philosophies but tries to show that they are incomplete: that there are realms of psychic and noetic experience that are left unexplained by atomism or Stoic materialism or Aristotelian metaphysics. He repeats the same move at the beginning of Book VI. When dealing in more detail with the arguments of Lucretius against immortality, Ficino (using a skeptical method) shows that there could be alternative explanations for the evidence of mortality advanced by Lucretius, and that there are other phenomena not covered by his theory. He takes his counterarguments from Aristotle, Thomas, the Stoics and Arab philosophers indifferently so long as they can be used to shake confidence in Lucretius' arguments.... In short, his arguments are overwhelmingly dialectic rather than formally demonstrative or apodictic. He often appeals to the beauty and goodness of the doctrines taught by Christian Platonists and the ugliness and ill consequences of the doctrines he opposes in a way that would utterly discredit him with an Anglo-American analytic philosophers. Yet Ficino, surprisingly to our ears, identifies his method as peculiarly Platonic and vastly superior to the logic-chopping argumentation of scholastic Aristotelians. (2008:112-113)

Whereas it may strike Hankins as peculiar to think of this method as Platonic, it should not. These statements recall Plato's method of hypothesis. Plato's dialectical methodology holds that all discursive postulates are inherently ambiguous, incomplete and subject to refutation because they are only capable of speaking *about* something and not speaking the thing

itself. At the same time, only in proposing and destroying these hypotheses in continual dialectical activity—the user’s art—do beings come forward in their truth. No discursive analysis of reality holds an eternal, demonstrable validity. Thus, Plato often refutes a claim to knowledge by his interlocutors by calling upon the ambiguity of word or by pointing out a concrete example in which their theoretical construct cannot account for the entire issue at hand and is therefore insufficient. This is the same method Ficino employs when he seeks to show that different philosophical schools fail to account for the totality of our lived experience.

Ultimately, therefore, the same stance as from the time of Plato is found in Ficino—discursive reality and discursive expression are a necessary means for the manifestation of the holy and transcendent, but no discursive expression is able to provide one with a direct and stable vision of that reality. For Ficino, dialectic and inspired poetry provide a conduit to “proceeding Orphically.” That is, through language, to allow beings to shine forth, not in their everydayness, trapped in a logical prison, but as a theophany of the ineffable divine no-thingness.

It is important to note that “proceeding Orphically” was described above as “the *only* way of accommodating polytheistic structures to the deep grammar of monotheism,” a concern which also occupied other Humanists, like Salutati. Ficino’s own impulses in this area led him to transform and expand something which was already an existing trope among the Humanists, namely the idea of a *prisca theologia*, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The idea, in fact, possesses roots that stretch back to antiquity and were alive and well in the medieval period. It originally emerged in the form of *theologia poetica* or *prisci poetae*. That is, it originated in the allegorical appropriation of pagan poets as displaying insights into the deep structures of reality. In this way we could say that Aquinas was a precursor to this idea, but it grew to its true heights of prominence with the emergence of the Renaissance (Trinkaus 1995: 688-689).

Petrarch offered a defense of poetry and the Humanists, for example, by calling on the idea of *prisci poetae*:

You belch forth imprecations against the poets as though they were enemies of the true faith to be avoided by the faithful and driven away by the Church; what do you think of Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome, what of Cyprian, Victorinus the martyr, what of Lactantius and the other catholic writers among whom almost nothing is written without the traces of the poets, while on the contrary almost none of the heretics has inserted something poetic in his little works either because of his ignorance or because there was nothing in harmony with his errors among the poets. For although many mention the names of the gods (which it must be believed they did on account of the nature of the times and the culture of those peoples rather than because they followed their own judgements, and which the very philosophers also did who, as we may read in the rhetorical books, did not think the gods existed), nevertheless the very greatest of the poets have declared in their works that they believed in one omnipotent God, the creator, ruler and maker of everything. (qtd. in Trinkaus 1995: 691)

Trinkaus solidly places Petrarch, Boccaccio and Salutati within the tradition that regarded the pagan poets as possessing and concealing a hidden tradition of wisdom which lay behind and underneath their apparent words. Indeed Boccaccio was to offer an explanation of the origins of poetry on the basis of this conception. He imagined individuals, inspired by wonder at the observation of nature coming to believe in one power that dwelt behind the visible cosmos whom they then praised by sacral verse (1995: 694). Salutati goes so far as to suggest that, in the interpretation of pagan poetry, it may be the case that God has worked to include meanings within the text, unintended by the human author. Such a move, obviously, gives great license to the assimilation of the pagan poets to the general teaching and culture of Christianity (700). Salutati observed in the pagan poets the ability to reflect the infinite potential of divine power in various different concrete historical manifestations, stating:

For as they [the Greeks] called one and the same divinity in the heavens Luna, in the forests Diana, and in the underworld Proserpina, they also presupposed this whole complex of gods as a single essence of them all and named it according to the plurality of its possibilities and with the different names of their activities. (qtd. in Grassi 1983: 68)

This form of appropriation of the ancient poets was, therefore, a common trope among the Humanists. If this sort of teaching was inherently inimical to the view of the Platonic tradition, then why do we find that it possesses a central role in the teaching of Ficino? For without a doubt, Ficino took up, modified and developed this idea for his own sake. Idel notes that Ficino played with different conceptions of what he termed the “*prisca theologia*,” varying between the idea that the pagan authors had been directly influenced by the revelation to the Hebrews (unilinear) and the idea that they were subject to independent manifestations of divine inspiration (multilinear). Ultimately, however, he concludes that the idea of multilinear, independent historical manifestations of the divine is the more prevalent idea held by Ficino (147). For Ficino, among the Gentiles, there existed a chain of great inspired teachers beginning with Zoroaster descending through the poet-theologian Orpheus and finally culminating in the teachings of Plato (151).

The most important thing to note about this development of the *prisca theologia* in Ficino is the meaning and purpose that it plays. We have seen previously that Grassi holds that the poets have a special role in making manifest the truth of Being in particular historical circumstances and thereby serving as the founders and rejuvenators of human institutions and culture. I propose, following Edelheit, that, in fact, for Ficino, his adoption of the idea of a great chain of *prisca theologi* is intended to serve as a great founding myth by which society is to be reordered, and therefore is deeply aligned with the Humanist project as envisioned by Grassi. The purpose of the myth was nothing less than the overthrow of Aristotelian late Scholasticism in order to re-found society and religious devotion (Edelheit 206).

Ficino seems to have believed that Christendom in his day was in the midst of a full scale crisis. Whereas he believed that, in the age of the apostles, the Christian faith had been vivified

and engaged by its direct connection to living prophecy and miracles, that by his own time it had dissolved into an empty formalism (Edelheit 245). In Heideggerian terms, the Christian epoch could be said, in Ficino's view, to be suffering from "world decay," in which the traditions of Christian civilization have devolved into idle chatter, detached from the force which originally allowed them to lay the groundwork of Christendom.

Ficino believed that the appropriate way to correct this problem was to encourage the unification of the spiritual, intellectual and political life (Edelheit 253). Indeed, he forcefully bemoaned that this was not the case in his day, stating in his *De Christiana religione*:

Quanta denique et quam vera doctrina in priscis Christianorum episcopis, presbyterisque quis nesciat? O Felicia secula, quae divinam hanc sapientiae religionisque copulam, praesertim apud Hebraeos Christianosque integram servavistis. O secula tandem nimium infelicia, quando Palladis, Themidisque (id est, sapientiae et honestatis) et separatio divortium miserabile contigit. Proh nephas, sic datum est sanctum canibus lacerandum.

Who does not know how great and how true the doctrine was among the ancient bishops and priests of the Christians. O you happy age which preserved this divine union of wisdom and religion, especially intact among the Hebrews and Christians. O at last exceedingly miserable age when the separation and divorce of Pallas and Themis (that is, of wisdom and integrity) miserably obtains. Alas, thus was holiness given to the dogs to be lacerated.

For Ficino, the myth of the *prisci theologi* allows him to offer a mythical, primordial model by which to understand the proper and appropriate manner in which civilization should exist. The union of Platonic dialectic with religious piety is meant to restore a sense of the immediacy of holiness and thereby rejuvenate true religion apart from simple ceremonial repetition. In this way, we can see that in the myth of the *prisca theologia*, Ficino affirms what was seen in the Humanists of whom Grassi offers approval, as well as Landino, that poetry and myth constitutes the foundations of culture.

Overall, we have seen that Ficino does not, after all, embrace a rationalistic and reductionist view of reality in the manner of Descartes. Rather, Ficino envisions a philosophical and religious program specifically aimed at *overcoming* the rationalism of late Scholasticism which would eventually culminate in the works of Descartes. He pursues this program within the context of the traditional Platonic observation of a principle which stands beyond beings and therefore destabilizes all attempts to contain and delimit the nature of reality within the static establishment of a logically deduced system of beings. Following from this fact, in a way directly parallel to Heidegger and Grassi, he envisions a poetic foundation to society, sensitive to the transcendence which destabilizes any atemporally fixed account of reality.

Conclusion

Platonism, Humanism and the Overcoming of Technological Thinking

In the Introduction to this study I raised the issue of modern criticism of technological culture taken to its extremes through its manifestations in figures such as Kaczynski, Zerzan and Heidegger. In particular, I focused attention on how Heidegger unfolds the ontological basis for technological thinking which causes all of reality to be interpreted as a standing reserve for manipulation and exploitation. I hold this to be a particularly pressing issue of concern in a time like our own in which the physical sciences are held in such universal esteem and there appears to be an increasing assault on the legitimacy, usefulness and purpose of the study of the humanities.

In Chapter One, I pursued the question of how Heidegger thought this problem could be addressed in a time of “destitution” like our own. Heidegger appeared to believe that an immediate encounter within the scope of the work of art could renew in the mind of the modern individual a sense of the holy and thereby lay the ground for future poets to break through the technological framework of modern thinking and cause Being to once again appear manifest in its mystery and power in the founding of an entirely new historical period, beyond the *Gestell* of modern technology. Furthermore, in this chapter, I introduced the issue of Humanism explored by Heidegger’s student. Whereas Heidegger had been uniformly critical of Humanism, Grassi showed that the Humanist dedication to the primacy of the revelatory power of the word made them kindred spirits with Heidegger’s own philosophical project. Just as Heidegger envisioned modern artists like van Gogh, Cezanne and Klee using their art to pull forth a direct vision of the mystery behind beings, Grassi held that the Renaissance Humanists had a similar dedication. In their case, the power of poetry and the word would overcome the empty destitution of an overly rationalistic late form of Scholasticism.

Grassi makes some unique contributions to this agenda which are worth note and admiration. While the basic framework of his thought is grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, he did not limit himself to the thinking of his master. First, by demonstrating the Humanists did not fit into Heidegger's "history of Being," he opened up the possibility for a general questioning about the integrity of Heideggerian mythology. While he failed to see that the Platonic tradition, likewise, defied Heidegger's vision of a universal forgetfulness of Being, the insight is the key to opening up future critiques (including this one). Furthermore, he did not leave Heidegger's theoretical models untouched. Drawing upon his knowledge of Renaissance Humanism, he was able to show the way that earlier historical figures had approached the same sort of issues that appeared in Heidegger's thought. In doing so, however, he was able to make use of and adapt their tool, including their conception of the *ingenium* and their system of topical philosophy. These are, in my opinion, invaluable for the expansion and strengthening of any practical means towards overcoming modern nihilism. If Heidegger has provided a certain general structure for thinking, Grassi has drawn upon his historical resources to help develop tools towards achieving the goal of breaking free of enframing.

Importantly, however, neither Heidegger nor Grassi, in their later works at least, had much respect for the Platonic tradition, viewing it as a form of—if not the *essential* form of—the rationalistic, reductionistic, technological thinking to which they were so powerfully opposed. In Chapter Two, I sought to demonstrate that Heidegger and Grassi had misrepresented Plato in their later works. That Plato, far from being dedicated to a conception of reality which is reducible to rational conceptions, Plato's entire dialectical philosophy is directed towards the destabilization of any and all discursive claims to have captured the structure of reality. This was captured through the use of Francisco Gonzalez's paradigm of a dialogic/dialectical approach to

the dialogues over against insufficient dogmatic and skeptical approaches which predominate in the modern period.

In Chapter Three, I showed how this powerful essence of Platonism was not lost with the transition to the tradition of the late antique founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus. Indeed, the transcendence of that which is beyond being and how it gives itself forth in contingent manifestations of human thought lies at the very center of the insights of the Neoplatonic philosophers. Even more significantly, as shown in Chapter Four, the marriage of Platonism and Christianity did not undermine this core element of Plato's tradition. On the contrary, the powerful apophaticism and theophanic foundations of Christian conceptions of reality only served to reinforce and rejuvenate this insight that had always lain at the heart of the Platonic tradition. Finally, I showed in Chapter Five that Marsilio Ficino, despite his demonization by Grassi, still steadfastly maintained the ontological difference and through it the power of Platonic dialectic as an initiatory method into deep insights into the nature of reality.

The question might arise, however, as to why this should matter. Surely this is a matter of purely historical interest—were Heidegger and Grassi wrong about Platonism? However, if it is merely an historical question, with no important implications for lived experience, does it truly have any significance at all? I mentioned briefly in Chapter One that Plato's philosophical methodology appeared in response to the Sophistic movement. The sophists were a movement which strongly paralleled elements of modern thought. In particular, they combined the dual qualities of extreme subjectivism and intense ratio-centrism. They held that man himself was the measure of all things and that, likewise, reality could therefore be grasped and manipulated via his own discursive formulations and propositions about it. This belief then became manifest in their horrifying displays of eristic argumentation. In pursuing these various activities and lines

of thinking, the sophists posed a significant threat to the traditional manner of Greek life. This is fully on display, ironically, in the trial of Socrates when, under suspicion of being a sophist, he is charged with the corruption of the youth of the city.³⁹

All of this largely amounts to the idea that Plato was confronting, in his own day, very similar, though not entirely identical, threats to those which Heidegger and Grassi saw as haunting out modern technological society. Much of the background of Plato's own thinking on the underlying issues regarding this problem are paralleled in Heidegger and Grassi, including his affirmation of the ontological difference and thus the contingency of human thought and traditions. Heidegger and Grassi both seem preoccupied with the idea that technological thinking can be overcome by a direct vision, in a work of art. That, for instance, reading Boccaccio or standing before a painting of Klee will open up the holy for the viewer. This seems to be unlikely, however, especially in a time of utter destitution, as in the modern period. Heidegger himself has indicated, for example, that the aesthetic reduction of artwork to a commodity of the art industry is *part* of the power of enframing, as much as the encounter with a beautiful river is reduced to thoughts of generating hydro-electric power.

Although Heidegger, outside his philosophy of art, also gives an affirmation of creative engagement with the history of thinking in order to overcome its limitation, he is notoriously dogmatic, mythological and erroneous in his evaluations and engagements with those traditions (as his reading of Platonism shows). This is why the resuscitation of Plato is far from a matter of

³⁹ In giving this account, it is important to distinguish to whom this terminology of "sophist" is referring. In particular, these statements do not mean to convey information about the group of philosophers which were known by that name and sometimes dramatically depicted in the dialogues of Plato, such as Gorgias and Protagoras. Rather, "sophist" is being used to refer to those types of individuals against whom Plato is often seen reacting in the dialogues, that is, his own contemporaries. This is true despite the fact that at times Plato has sometimes put the thought of these contemporaries into the mouth of a previous generation of eminent thinkers. See G. B. Kerferd. 1981. *The Sophistic Movement*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981 for more details on the historical sophists.

mere historical interest. Platonic methodology does not simply replace ratiocentric thinking with a counter mythology or an attempt at a direct vision, in the Heideggerian manner. Rather, Plato's methodology is truly to encounter the frameworks which it is challenging and to demonstrate by their own criteria their radical insufficiency at confronting the depth of reality. That is, Platonism is truly a maieutic technique which contributes to the collapse of totalizing pretensions from within that which it encounters. Plato repeatedly demonstrated this fact by his depiction of Socrates's confrontations with sophists throughout the dialogues.

Therefore, in rejecting the Platonists, Heidegger and Grassi were, in fact, rejecting their strongest allies in the struggle against the domination of technological thinking. At the same time, the adoption of a Platonic methodology allows for the greatest preservation of the positive elements within scientific thinking, precisely because Platonism challenges the totalization of paradigms in and through dialogue with metaphysics, rather than merely steeping back from it. It is my contention, therefore, that properly evaluating the true essence of Platonism opens up greater possibilities for breaking down the barriers of *Gestell* and truly laying the groundwork for the re-emergence of great works of world-historical art after the modern period. In this endeavor, I believe that going forward, the task will be to integrate the fundamental tools which Grassi has provided (the centrality of metaphor in conceptuality, topic philosophy, the *ingenium*, etc.) into a general Platonic approach which could be used to great effect in overcoming our current destitution.

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Vita

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