

ISSN 1918-7351  
Volume 3 (2011)

Review of Santiago Zabala's *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Santiago Zabala's *The Remains of Being* is a significant intervention into the field of hermeneutics with an emphasis on the application of hermeneutics to ontology. Zabala makes a persuasive case for the necessity of a renewed engagement with the question of the meaning of Being, but the core message of the book is that this question has been doubly complicated. The doubling of the question is a blunt fact of our contemporary situation; we are not only the inheritors of Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics, but we also find ourselves in a position to assess the disparate responses to this destruction. Zabala's contribution is to collate the insights derived from these responses and open up a discussion of their implications. The crucial insight to be derived from these responses is the recognition that the double expression of Being has always been with us but that its recognition is a relatively recent success:

The thesis of this book is that philosophy since Plato has not only been a "forgetfulness of Being," as Martin Heidegger explained in *Being and Time*, but an expression of Being's remnants, that is, the remains of Being (xi).

The unfolding of this thesis takes place over a brief, but ambitious, one-hundred and fifty pages divided up into a short preface and three chapters. The preface is, for the most part, a direct, and sometimes personal, appeal to the reader about the singular importance of the ontological question. It is immediately obvious that Zabala takes the ontological question to be best addressed according to Heidegger's hermeneutic-ontological schematic.

The opening chapter is a survey of Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics and the material will be familiar to readers versed in the Heidegger scholarship. Readers unfamiliar with Heidegger will find an intelligible account of a difficult theme in Heidegger's work. This account alone is worth the price of admission. Zabala is sensitive to Heidegger's program without imitating it and this is to his credit. He allows a picture of the destruction of metaphysics to emerge in preparation for his articulation of its responses and he is careful to allow the force of the issue to materialize naturally. To this end the first chapter is effective. The second chapter assembles six illustrative responses to the destruction of metaphysics. As Zabala states:

In this second chapter, I will seek the remains of Being, the state in which Being addresses itself, through six philosophers who worked after Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics, under the admonition that philosophy must work out Being for itself anew (56).

The six representative thinkers are Reiner Schürmann, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ernst Tugendhat, and Gianni Vattimo. The final chapter draws together these responses and it is here that Zabala becomes a direct participant in the response to Being's double expression. Zabala's input is to send the program in a positive direction and he intends to do so by participating, with some mediation as we will see, in the generation of Being. It is only upon reaching the final chapter that it becomes clear why it was originally necessary to navigate our path through both Heidegger and his interlocutors. That exegesis unfurls into a rounded account of 'how it goes with Being' in our current situation. This is achieved in the final chapter by a reformulation of the hermeneutical-ontological problematic as requiring a new kind of logic. Before this logic can be generated one must first take a step back, to Heidegger and the responses to Heidegger, and only then can we hope to catch up with Being.

The first question that one must raise about a book such as this is whether philosophy is still concerned with Zabala's preliminary thesis, outlined in the preface, that philosophy ought to concern itself with the status of Being in the wake of the destruction of metaphysics. It is not so common today to take Heidegger's program seriously and even less so is it accepted that we must ask what it means to think Being *after* Heidegger according to the coordinates of his program. What must be remembered is that for Zabala hermeneutic-ontology is not to be considered as belonging to the history of philosophy, but is to be affirmed as a generative method in its own right. In our current situation, in which the ontological debate is shaped as much by Deleuze and Badiou as by Heidegger, a minor oversight on Zabala's part is his failure to fully justify his deference to Heidegger's status as *the* ontological figurehead. Nonetheless such qualms are unlikely to be felt too strongly among his intended audience. Although his starting point is by no means a certainty among all readers it ought to appeal to those with an active interest in hermeneutical research.

Zabala accepts Heidegger's thesis that the ontological question has priority over all others in the discipline of philosophy. This is the precise meaning of the remains of Being—as what remains despite our more specialized research interests. Being, no matter how much one might wish it were not the case, always “remains at the heart of philosophy” (8). If the reader is willing to accept this thesis, the impossibility of displacing the question of the meaning of being, then it follows that the choice to begin with Heidegger is a sound one. Sound because it is Heidegger who has argued for this position in the most convincing manner of arguably any philosopher in our tradition. Zabala puts it that Heidegger's singular contribution is to have brought philosophy back to its essence: “[Heidegger] brought philosophy back to its essential realm: the difference between Being and beings” (25).

Zabala more strongly asserts this priority by discussing the ontological question as if it were not merely a problem to be passed over, but a philosophical obligation. In a tone reminiscent of the later Heidegger we are informed throughout the book that Dasein is the sole entity capable of preserving the message of Being (40) and also that Dasein is the entity that alone is capable of retrieving the (forgotten) question and as such is its guardian (26). In his most direct affirmation of this originary ontological obligation Zabala stresses that “Dasein exists for the sake of Being.” (35) The founding stone of Zabala’s generative logic is the acceptance of the ontological obligation coupled with the blunt fact of the ontological problems’ intransigence for the philosopher. The problem, simply put, cannot be *faithfully* circumvented.

Taking the destruction of metaphysics to have been a success, Zabala tasks contemporary hermeneutic-ontology with thinking through the “consequences of this event” (5). This event is characterized as the recognition that “foundational” metaphysics is illusory (5). Since we are dealing here with a proliferation of consequences rather than an easily identifiable grand consequence we turn naturally to hermeneutics as a method because hermeneutics is uniquely suited to pulling together seemingly disconnected strands of thinking. Without the stability of a foundational metaphysics we must ask how we can discriminate between knowledge and illusion. How can we know about the status of Being in a post-metaphysical, post-foundational epoch? This is the *precise* dilemma arising from the consequences of the destruction of metaphysics. Since one can neither “abandon” or “replace” Being, because it cannot be faithfully bracketed, it *remains* the guiding problem for us to pursue (6). The contours of philosophical questioning remain firmly defined by Being, but we are coming to terms not simply with Being, as Heidegger attempted to do, but with the remains of Being such that “today it is the remains of Being that determine the interpretative nature of philosophy” (23).

Once one has appropriated this basic position for themselves it is possible to accept Zabala’s extension of the ontological problematic to include the remains of Being itself. The remains of Being are precisely what cannot be bracketed out in either practical, theoretical, ‘ontic’ or even phenomenological investigation to this day. For example the ontic sciences, despite their apparent ability to engender results without providing an ontological clarification of their metaphysical position, can never ‘overcome’ this remainder and must settle for the, perhaps psychologically appealing, path of pushing the issue to one side and eventually forgetting it is an issue at all. As mentioned earlier Being is what always remains. With this in mind our minor critique extends only to Zabala’s early delimitation of his potential audience to include those for whom the stakes are already known. For those who have been looking for an immanent critique of our current situation, and one that proceeds in the mode of hermeneutic ontology, the extension of hermeneutical research to include the remains of Being will prove intuitively satisfying. Zabala describes the content of the remains of Being as its “traces and scraps” (6). To attune ourselves to the meaning of

these remainders is “to clarify what Being signifies in our present situation” (7).

This clarification will be Zabala’s signature contribution and he masterfully coordinates the diverse responses to Heidegger’s destruction in an effort to set in motion a new hermeneutics capable of dealing with remainders rather than Being outright. This hermeneutics begins, in a familiar move, by taking a “step back” (46). It is clear that Zabala does not want to reach back to Heidegger’s development of hermeneutic ontology in order to forge ahead with the development of his own ontology:

[This method] will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge but instead will only try to treat instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events (11).

This step back, a taking stock of the consequences of the event of the destruction, includes all the familiar problems in the Heidegger scholarship. Hermeneutic-ontology comes to be identified with philosophy as such and retains the peculiar, if somewhat strained, attempt to privilege ontology in relation to the other, so called ‘ontic’ sciences. We hear nothing of how these sciences have impacted upon our contemporary ontological considerations. It is a minor quibble but it is important that hermeneutic ontology today consider how the sciences have altered ontological questions from the outside in. One must begin to take into account the pressure from the natural sciences, the neurosciences, and cognitive science in relation to these fundamental questions or, at least, we should consider their explanations for why it is that we pursue these kinds of questions. Further it is also that case that internal critiques are absent for the most part and analytic philosophy, with the complicated exception of Tugendhat, is lumped alongside the ontic sciences, as not quite grasping the priority of the question of the meaning of being.

Leaving aside these problems Zabala’s revival of hermeneutic-ontology operates by developing a “logic of remains,” necessitated by the ontology of remains, which must be hermeneutic in orientation since “hermeneutics is the most adaptive way to recollect the remains of Being” (14). Hermeneutics is the proper response, as we have seen, because it can collate the information of the responses to the end of metaphysics without resorting to the establishment of a foundational metaphysics. That is hermeneutic ontology does not answer the end of metaphysics with a new metaphysics. To this end our six representative thinkers are chosen for their sensitivity to the logic of remains. This is a form of logic sensitive to the radical impossibility of a new foundational metaphysics. Zabala does not argue that his six thinkers are explicitly performing this logic of remains, but rather claims that in their responsiveness to this task they are model thinkers of the consequences of the event of the destruction of metaphysics:

I do not want to suggest that philosophy has always been, without knowing it, the remains of Being, but only that some philosophers after Heidegger's destruction of ontotheology have overcome metaphysics by recognizing that Being must be worked out anew, that is, destroyed, interpreted, and generated (16).

Zabala is aware that there are some glaring absences from his six representatives, but he provides convincing reasons for the omission of three in particular: Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and Alain Badiou. The latter is perhaps the most needless explanation since it is clear that Badiou's neat and direct dismissal of Heidegger pits him openly against the development of a new hermeneutic-ontology. The omission of Levinas is much more significant, but Zabala argues, consistent with his overall project, that in truth Levinas is not concerned with Being (or the remains of Being), but with displacing ontology such that we might build toward an ethics instead. At best one might argue that Levinas deploys ontology in a contrastive procedure that reveals its ethical lack, but either way Zabala is quite right to bracket him. In the case of Marion, perhaps the most complicated exclusion, Zabala disqualifies him on the basis that Marion emphasizes fundamental ontology only in so much as it can be spun in the service of theology. In a rather refreshing reminder, in light of the 'theological turn' in continental thinking, Zabala tells us that theology is a "ontic science like chemistry or mathematics" (20). The final point can, of course, also be used as evidence against the inclusion of Badiou.

I take the merits of Zabala's book, and his proposed project, to rest on his willingness to remain himself with the question of the meaning of Being. In our current situation it is tempting to either outright reject Heidegger's program, as Deleuze and Badiou did, or to bypass it without so much as a mention, as when hermeneutic ontology is discussed in the past tense as a failed method. This is also the reason, I suspect, that Zabala praises the six thinkers discussed in the second chapter of *The Remains of Being*. For Zabala the truth that "Being remains and it cannot be set apart" remains a significant, if not the most significant, insight of philosophical thought and one he is happy to attribute it to Heidegger without becoming an acolyte (101). Further, Zabala brings to light the irony of dismissing this insight. In order to reject Heidegger's insight, that the question of Being is so easily forgotten and covered over, one must precisely forget it and cover it over. The ease with which we elide the issue is itself a repetitious confirmation of Heidegger's warning. Even Heidegger's hard work in instigating the recollection of the fundamental question can become staid and contribute to this process. The proper response, according to Zabala, and it is by no means dogmatically asserted, is to re-engage the question precisely within the current situation—as we have it. The point that is pushed again and again is that no matter what the superficial shifts in our philosophical questioning might be one can never brush this question under the rug—Being always remains *as a question*.

*The Remains of Being* is a convincing account that the content of hermeneutic-ontology ought to not only be Being, but should include the remains of Being. And further to the point we should come to see that both are to be considered as expressions of the ontological question. In the final chapter, where Zabala puts the logic of remains into play, we get a glimpse of a generative interpretation or, in Vattimo's phrase, a "logics of discursive continuities" (104). Since we are dealing with consequences, and not a single, easily definable 'consequence,' hermeneutic-ontology cashes out various 'logics' of dispersed 'discursive continuities.' There is no escaping the fact that such a logic will be unusually constituted in that it will need to be radically flexible to the proliferation of the 'remains,' 'traces,' and 'scraps' of Being. But one cannot pretend that the ontological question can be attended to otherwise. Zabala assembles the resources of Schürmann (the an-archic) and Vattimo (the historic) to his cause, but it is clear that his final chapter is but a provisional attempt at formulating his proposed approach. He does, however, manage to solve a crucial problem: how to think Being without foundation, without metaphysics? To do so one must, guided by the positive hermeneutic goals of generation, interpretations, and production, become methodologically an-archic (open, non-foundational) and historic (attuned to the current situation). From this basis one might learn to build an-archically upon the historic and so begin the slow process of responding to the remains of Being. This is nothing more than to recollect the question of the meaning of Being as we now have it.

*Paul Ennis*