

COMUNICACIONES

Heidegger's Hermeneutic of Gods and Men: Parallels in His *Parmenides*

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The present article looks at a facet of Martin Heidegger's 1942-43 lecture course *Parmenides* (1982/1992)--at parallels laid out there between gods and men. These parallels are of interest in their probable relation to Heidegger's now much discussed and much maligned long chapter on animals in a now-famous course of 1929-30.

But before proceeding, a word about a characteristic of the present study: its occasional identification of the dates of Heidegger's lectures. These dates do not appear in any edition. Ted Kisiel, the author of the breakthrough *Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* (1993), worried them out of student notes (Kisiel, personal communication) and has been widely generous with them. Important in themselves in relating the lectures to one another in time, these dates are also important in locating the lectures in given historical contexts both broad and narrow: the Germans' WWII campaign on the Eastern Front on the one hand, and Heidegger's relation to National Socialism on the other. The *Parmenides* contains an extended repudiation of the Nazis so successfully disguised that it remained long un-recognized, then mis-recognized as anti-British (Frank, 2011), and as Heidegger was teaching this course the Germans were suffering the shortages on the home front mentioned here and were losing the battle of Stalingrad, decisive for the outcome of WWII in Europe (their defeat: January 31, 1943). This history is too notable to go unmentioned.

Now to other matters. In a now well-known section of the earlier course, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1983), Heidegger devoted himself to a continuation of the task he set himself in 1927's *Being and Time*. That task had been to provide a grounding for Western philosophy in the human being, the one type of living being Heidegger saw capable of an awareness of Being and for which its own Being is an issue. This being he called Dasein. But with all that he accomplished in that celebrated work Heidegger had more to point to about Dasein, especially in its relations to its world, relations he viewed as distinctive. He had yet to explore adequately the nature and range of these relations, yet to articulate the nature of their distinctiveness, obliterated, he saw, in the ancients' view of man as *zoon echon logon*, later rendered *animal rationale*.

Convinced that man is not an animal, and in order to arrive a fuller understanding of the human, he undertook a study of those living beings most like humans and at the same time different, as a means of demonstrating the distinctiveness of the human from the animal being. Binary opposition being a mandatory path to knowing for Heidegger, he saw human and animal not as identified with one another but in opposition, this opposition decisive as a means both of knowing the nature of the animal and of the human. Animals' definitive difference from humans in their relations to their worlds would be revelatory of aspects of humans' world-relations that the label *animal rationale* might leave unrecognized. Heidegger of course confirmed that this difference--which, he saw, determined not only the nature and possibilities of humans' world relations but the human's world itself--was indeed the difference between having and not having language, as the phrase *zoon logon echon* had indicated, but he showed at length and precisely, in the case of various specific animals, the nature of this

difference. Man's linguistic ability determined for the human a freedom to engage in innumerable unprescribed ways of Being--a freedom to act and determine its world not vouchsafed the animal, which lived a life radically limited *by* its world.

Heidegger's understanding *of* animals and their worlds was dependent on biologists' studies, chief among which were the unprecedented discoveries of his near-contemporary, Jakob von Uexküll, who saw animals' ways of Being constricted by animals' environments (Buchanan 2009). But even via Uexküll's insights, Heidegger was unable to view animals' relations to their worlds from within animals' points of view, and thus in ways he could satisfactorily compare with those of humans. He admitted such a shortfall of his study as this inability imposed on him. He was unable "satisfactorily to clarify" what he had intended.

An unforgettable outcome of his study was his now well-known statement that animals are "poor in world," understandable in the sense that animals necessarily operate under the constraints of a world they find rather than form--have in fact been determined by--as is demonstrably less true of humans (as Herder had shown in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, when he observed the ever-diminishing influence of geography and climate on humans' lives).

But Heidegger's recognition of having fallen short of his intentions in 1929-30 does not mark the end of his concern to clarify, via comparison, the nature of humans' relations to their world and to Being, or, in fact, to maintain his view of the animal/human difference. He continues to refer frequently to animals, albeit typically in abbreviated comments. Animals seldom seem far from his mind. His central focus, however, rests on Dasein and its ways of knowing and Being. Then suddenly, and without preamble, in his *Parmenides* a decade later, he enters upon another also apparently comparative study, though without noting it as comparative. Moreover, he reverses his direction and mode of comparison. Instead of attempting to understand humans in terms of their *differences* from *animals*, ontological differences having been his concern, he reveals humans as *sharing* certain crucial capacities and thus ways of Being *with* another *sort* of being.

Leaving generally faint traces in the *Parmenides*, but also one brief though full-throated objection to the view of man as *animal rationale* (Heidegger 1992, pp. 51, 53, 68-69), "the ultimate metaphysical determination of man," Heidegger otherwise leaves little hint of a relation between his treatment of gods and men in the *Parmenides* and his inquiry of 1929-30. But he clarifies certain roles performed by humans in their relations to world and juxtaposes them with comparable roles occupied by the other sort of being--in this case placed higher than humans in the West's traditional hierarchy, Being's Great Chain. These beings are Greek deities.

Thus without noting comparison as his method or emphasizing difference as he had in the case of the human/animal question, he lays out accounts of the ways of Being of both humans and these "higher" beings, accounts that find the same or similar actions describing both. Heidegger records regarding the obvious as "blanched with...anemic pallor" (Heidegger 1998b, p. 86)--and he often avoids belaboring it, instead engaging his audience, as here, in recognizing necessary connections on its own. The ways of Being of the Greek gods that Heidegger has in mind and that he lays out for us to discover as similarities with those of humans are immediately and directly revelatory of the essence of these gods. They happen also to be revelatory of the essence of the human, which he had sought less directly via his animal studies.

Is this apparently new approach to the human in connection with the divine in the form of Greek divinities a delayed result of his earlier limited success at determining the nature of the human via a study of animals? One cannot be sure, but a certain

observation on Heidegger's part *long* after his animal studies of 1929-30 but *shortly* after the *Parmenides* suggests this as likely. In his "Letter on 'Humanism'" of 1946, he states that although animals "are in a certain way most closely akin to us, ... they are at the same time separated *from* [us] by an abyss." This is not new, but there is more: "The essence of divinity [can seem] closer to us than what is so alien in other living creatures, closer, namely, to our ek-sistent essence than is our scarcely conceivable, abysmal bodily kinship with the beast." (Heidegger 1998a, p. 248).

This statement deserves close examination. Animals, in Heidegger's view, do not, since they cannot, "ek-sist," for to ek-sist means, for him, to be aware of Being and be aware of being thus aware. This ultimate awareness is our essence and is enabled by language. "The Greek essence of man is fulfilled in the "to have the word." (Heidegger 1992, p. 79). One could say that it belongs to animals' essence to be *un*-aware of Being. "Abysmal bodily kinship" is a condensed reference to several things, perhaps beginning with the animal "body"'s in-ability to speak and write. Though possessed of anatomical structures similar to those of humans, the animal body is still separated from the human by an ontological abyss: the difference between the human body's language-related, thus entity-uncovering abilities and their absence in the animal body. Humans' awareness of Being and their awareness of *this* is a function *of* the human body's abilities to voice and to think entity-uncovering words, to hear and understand these words, and to transform the languaged word into potentially permanent form in writing, none of which abilities is vouchsafed the animal. The word, in whatever form, brings beings and Being into humans' ken, brings them, as it were, to *be*.

Thus that we share an ontologically understood bodily relation to the animal is "scarcely conceivable." The difference between ek-sisting and being unable to ek-sist is an abyss, a chasm, but bottomless, groundless. Humans' ground, and thus their essence, their route to ek-sisting, is their awareness of Being, granted them by language. Animals, physically similar *to* humans, nonetheless remain "alien." They must, because of limitations imposed on them by their environment. Differing abyssally from animals, ontologically speaking, humans can identify more closely, also ontologically speaking, with their gods: "the *essence* of divinity is closer to us..." Our gods are more like us ontologically (closer to our ek-sistent essence) than the anatomically similar animal. When Heidegger makes this comment (1946), he does not provide a gloss. But he has already clarified its meaning. Three years before, he had taught his *Parmenides* course, and it was here, though he makes no mention of it in 1946, that he had pointed out Greek gods' and humans' ways of Being in words that, as we shall see, highlighted their similarities.

Thus it appears that Heidegger may in fact, in his *Parmenides*, have been attempting to bring his demonstration of the nature of the human being in terms of its *differences* from *animals* full circle and ultimately to a successful outcome by focusing on *similarities* between humans and their *gods*. Here one finds him identifying and elaborating on humans' ways of Being in relation to their world that that are similar to the world relations of gods. Again, without hinting that what he is pointing out are resemblances, Heidegger's uncoverings in the *Parmenides* of the essentially human find humans described as unmistakably possessed of godlike capacities--and, vice versa. These are capacities that unconceal beings, unconceal the forms that Being takes.

In order to avoid possible mis-assumptions, a reminder is in order that the divine, of whose essence Heidegger speaks here, is ancient Greek divinity, and that, moreover, he finds firm distinctions separating the gods of the Greeks and the God of Christianity, noting these in several sets of comments. I focus on these so that we may see that by emphasizing the differences between the Old Testament God of Christianity and the gods of the Greeks, Heidegger will be preparing the way for a recognition of the

nearness we have seen him later note specifically between the gods of the Greeks and the Greeks themselves. This contrasts with the farness of the Christian god from his worshippers, on which Heidegger focuses when he later writes that “the Christian see[s]...man in contradistinction to *Deitas*.” (Heidegger 1998a, p. 244).

The earliest such comments come in Lecture # 5 (January 12, 1943) as part of his anti-Nazi discourse, long successfully masked as merely anti-Roman:

“The God of the Old Testament is a ‘commanding’ God; His word is: ‘Thou shalt not,’ ‘Thou shalt.’” “The gods of the Greeks are not commanding gods but rather ones that give signs, that point.” Uncovering beings, they “dwell in the region of *alétheia*.” (Heidegger 1992, p. 40).

The second such set comes in Lecture # 7 (January 26, 1943)

“...it is not sufficient to use the single God of Christianity as the measure [of deity].” “As long as we make no attempt to think the Greek gods in the Greek way, i.e., on the basis of the essence of the Greek experience of Being, i.e., on the basis of *alétheia*, we have no right to say a word about these gods, whether in favor of them or against them.” (Heidegger 1992, pp. 60-61).

The third comes in Lecture # 12 (March 2, 1943):

“The fundamental essence of the Greek divinities, in distinction [from] all others, even the Christian God, consists in their origination out of the ‘presence’ of ‘present’ Being.” “...the Greek gods, just like men, are powerless before destiny and against it. *Moirai* holds sway over the gods and men, whereas in Christian thought, e.g., all destiny is the work of the divine ‘providence’ of the creator and redeemer, who as creator also dominates and calculates all beings as created.” “The Greek gods [do not] dominate Being; they are Being itself as looking into beings.” (Heidegger 1992, pp. 110-111).

Thus the Greek gods are neither dominating nor calculating nor are they creator gods. They are rather participatory gods, entering into and being part of the worlds they enable, as in the myths of the Near East long antedating both Christianity and the Homeric myths. (Baring and Cashford). They do not create, but give signs and point, exhibit “self-disclosing emergence” (Heidegger 1992, p. 110) and a type of looking, as we shall see, and dwell in the region of *alétheia*, where, given language, humans also dwell, for, as Heidegger will emphasize shortly, “language is the clearing-concealing [i.e., the *alétheiac*] advent of Being itself.” (Heidegger 1998a, p. 249).

Be this as it may, Heidegger is careful to make clear that gods and humans are not to be identified with one another, neither, he points out, having been modeled after the other. He is careful, also, to point to the existence of a distinction between them. But he points too to a relation they share that is “reciprocal.” In doing so he sets the stage for an understanding of what we have seen him refer to as the Greek gods’ being “closer to our ek-sistent essence” than the “alien” animal. We are thus not unprepared to recognize gods’ and humans’ similarities.

With the following telling observations Heidegger opens his Lecture # 12 (March 2, 1943), pointing twice to a distinction of essence between gods and men but also to their reciprocal relation. “The Greeks neither fashioned the gods in human form

nor did they divinize man. The essence of the Greek gods cannot be explained as an “anthropomorphism,” [any] more than the essence of Greek man can be thought as a “theomorphism.” That is, “the Greeks neither humanized the gods nor divinized man.” Rather, “they experienced the gods and men in their distinct essence, and in their reciprocal relation, on the basis of the essence of Being in the sense of self-disclosing emergence, i.e., in the sense of looking and pointing (Heidegger 1992, p. 110).

The distinction Heidegger sees between Greek gods and men (each possessing a “distinct essence”), however, does not mean, as noted, their definitive separation in the sense in which “the Christian see[s]...man in contradistinction to *Deitas*.” (Heidegger 1998a, p. 244). Both gods and men participate in bringing beings into Being and Being into view. The Being the gods bring into view is an aspect of and from themselves. Men do this via the word; the gods, via other, though related, means to which, as divinities, they have access.

What, then, are the ways of Being of gods and men that Heidegger lays out and that we may recognize as likenesses, if we will? Each of these ways we have noted above as belonging to the gods finds an echo in man, or vice versa. But Heidegger’s presentation of these lacks symmetry. This has to do in part with whether Heidegger will have made certain points clear in earlier years. I say vice-versa in that, apparently on the basis of the usual hierarchy, with gods at the farthest reaches of the imaginable, one typically speaks of gods first, men later, as in “gods and men.” Heidegger does not necessarily observe this order when he addresses gods’ and men’s ways of Being. But although he emphasizes that the Greek gods are not modeled after men, and vice versa, he does not hesitate to read the gods’ ways of Being across what he knows of men’s.

Let us note and then examine briefly the ways of Being attributed here to gods and men, reserving that way to which Heidegger pays the most extended, detailed attention for a more extended examination.

The Greek gods “give signs....” (Heidegger 1992,40). Before noting this Heidegger has provided a single outstanding example of their doing so: Zeus’s “slinging his lightning bolts to the right to the right and letting appear propitious signs.” (Heidegger 1992, p. 31). Slinging the lightning bolts is an action understood by humans as a sign to be interpreted, a sign with a meaning crucial for its observers. The signs thus given are frequently mis-read, as Heidegger shows the given sign from Zeus to have been. Heidegger’s audience may identify giving signs with the use of words understood in a semiotic sense. Heidegger was alive to the existence of this sort of sign, had indeed spoken of it in *Being and Time*. But he does voice misgivings about the ontological adequacy of regarding the word as a sign in the semiotic sense: “language can never be thought in an essentially correct way...perhaps even in terms of the character of its signification.” Why? Because “language is the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself.” (Heidegger 1998a, p. 249). Until words can be recognized thus, our understanding of their nature fails to extend beyond the metaphysical.

The Greek gods also point. (Heidegger 1992, p. 40). They share with humans the indicating, or “index” finger, which demarcates (“where demarcation is lacking, nothing can come to presence as that which it is” (Heidegger 1992, p. 82]) and typically designates a goal for an observer’s attention. Heidegger focuses relatively little attention here on divinities or humans pointing in this way, though he does provide an example of it in the *Dichastai*, or pointing ones, “pointing toward order” in Plato’s myth of Er. (Heidegger 1991, p. 99). The forms of pointing on which Heidegger focuses more expansively are those of the gods casting their light, a form of themselves, or “shining,” into beings and thus unconcealing them. Such gods as these Heidegger recognizes as Being itself at work. I have reserved this observation until now as a delayed answer to a question you may have wondered about: the nature of the distinction in essence between

gods and men that we earlier noted Heidegger speaking of without there, as is often the case, following up his observation with a specific identification of what it is that he has in mind. Humans' essence has to do with language; the gods', with looking, giving signs, and pointing. But these latter are divine versions of means of what language also does: unconceal beings and Being.

The form of pointing vouchsafed humans is that embodied in the "indicating" word. It is this form of indicating that, Heidegger several times notes, pertains to *man's* essence. "Writing the word guarantees the "essential" rank of the hand." "The essential correlation of the hand and the word as the essential distinguishing mark of man is revealed in the fact that the hand *indicates* and by *indicating* discloses what was concealed, and thereby marks off, and while marking off forms the *indicating* marks into formations," i.e., letters and words. (Emphases added; Heidegger 1992, p. 84).

We learn, too, of both gods men that they are self-emergent. "Man is...the being that emerges from itself." Again, the whole of what Heidegger will finally bring us to understand with this will emerge only late in the work and in insights that are both unfamiliar and illuminating, and to which we shall shortly come. We are, however, already acquainted with what Heidegger has in mind with an earlier-mentioned form of self-emergence on the part of humans. "According to [the Greek] determination, man is *to zoon logon echon*--the being that emerges from itself, emerges in such a way that in this emerging (*physis*), and for it, it has the word." The *zoon*, or 'living being' of which Heidegger speaks is *physei on*, a being whose Being is determined by *physis*, by emergence and self-opening.

The other way in which both gods and men are self-emergent is through looking. Simply to say this is to have said almost nothing until one sees what Heidegger has in mind, and then, perhaps, to stand astonished, able to comprehend Heidegger's apprehension of divinity in a way quite unexpected. When at earlier points in the work he notes specific ways of Being attributable to gods and men he does not isolate or specify looking, though we have included it above in our introductory gathering of gods' and mens' similar ways of Being. But it is looking that looms largest in the *Parmenides*, being thought in greatest detail, as a way of Being shared by gods and men that, like the other ways of Being they share, also unconceals beings, thus constituting the world and inhabiting the region of *alétheia*, but that also finally and at last fully explains the peculiar self-emergent nature of both gods and men. It is in Heidegger's presentation of this particular phenomenon that he brings us to understand the nature of the gods' means of bringing beings to stand and the gods' attendant self-emergence, both of which take place via a form of looking--the latter understood in terms of the nature and results of human looking. That is, it is human looking that Heidegger will describe first here, allowing these descriptions to serve as means of understanding the looking that belongs to the gods.

Heidegger's presentations of the human look occupy a page. (Heidegger 1992, p. 103). He explains the act and its effects three separate times. Then in the immediately following several pages, the words look and looking come into his speaking over one hundred times. One cannot overestimate the importance of these appearances--references to and descriptions of human looking that will serve as unannounced analogs to, and thus explain, the look, and the effects of the look, of the gods.

What Heidegger calls the human look has the capacity to unconceal beings. It also has the capacity to unconceal the looker. How might this work? The human look is an acknowledging look. Heidegger describes it here as a look at or upon another human, though it is clear elsewhere in the work that man has a reciprocal relation with all beings, all thus warranting humans' Care for them, the Care that Heidegger speaks of

in *Being and Time*. The human look acknowledges the other, the one looked upon and into, and in doing so permits that other to show up or, as Heidegger says, to *be*. Moreover, in this very looking as acknowledging, the looker himself emerges. Heidegger's noting this here at last serves to clarify another part of what he has meant earlier by man's self-emergence. That the looker as well as the looked-at or -upon emerges as a result of a looking appears possible whether the one looked upon extends a gaze in return, a reciprocal gaze, or not. In his three descriptions of this key event (Frank, 2010), Heidegger has it both ways. He does not explain. Twice the reciprocal gaze seems required, once not. Heidegger's description of the Being-engendering encounter with the other via the acknowledging look provides a counter-example to the famed Hegelian *Anerkennung*, in which a dominant being seeks not the enabling of the other, his freeing into Being, but his undoing.

With the nature and effect of the human look clarified, Heidegger has a means of explaining the nature and effect of the gods. Their look, an always already acknowledging look (which may explain the "mildness" on the gods' part of which Heidegger at one point speaks), he describes as a "shining" into beings. In this looking of the gods, Being itself is at work, lighting up the being shined upon, unconcealing it, bringing it into Being, investing it, suffusing it with that aspect of the god's own Being that is the light.

The multiple ways of speaking the light that the gods' looking sheds on the beings of the world, ordinary as well as extraordinary (the light of the gods and thus the gods themselves to an extent are everywhere) dominate the final section of the work. This said, it is important to note also that, as humans' acknowledging look accomplishes a self-emergence on the part of humans, so does the gods' looking effect the self-emergence of the gods. Gods too are self-emergent, and in a way understandable across humans' self-emergence via their look.

Finally, both gods and men "dwell in the region of *alétheia*," of unconcealment and concealment. I reserve this return to this mention until last, in that their dwelling there is not something separable from their other relatively separable ways of Being. *Alétheia* would be a term encompassing those others, each of which is an *alétheic*, unconcealing/concealing way of Being.

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