

EXISTENTIALISM AS A DISCIPLINE



With Heidegger, nihilism began to assume the form of a scientific metaphysics in the true sense. Against this backdrop, a standpoint of what Heidegger calls freedom in the transcendence beyond beings emerges, a standpoint that holds the promise of letting us be fully what we are as human beings.

What Heidegger means by a transcending of beings is not a transcendence away from human existence in the direction of another world beyond or behind the world we know. The transcendence he is speaking of is part and parcel of human being from the beginning; indeed it is what allows us to exist actually and allows the world to disclose itself as world. In this transcendence the totality of beings opens up from its own ground . There is no world apart at the ground of this ground but only an abyss-a ground of nothingness.

In other words, the basic meaning of transcendence is that Nothing is revealed, and thereby the self becomes the true

self, freedom becomes a genuine possibility, and beings are understood in their truth . Heidegger gives us nothing less than an ontology within which nihilism becomes a philosophy. By disclosing the nothing at the ground of all beings and summoning it forth, nihilism becomes the basis of a new metaphysics.

Thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, despite their faith in Existence and life, lacked faith in “academic disciplines,” casting their lot in with the most passionate adventures of thought. For them, the idea of a “science” that would demand objectivity in place of passionate subjectivity would fail to reach any kind of truth. Kierkegaard accused those who philosophize through “abstract speculation” of being dishonest, and Nietzsche dismissed the “will to truth” as a sign of the impotence of life, decadence, and self deception.

The standpoint of Existence they took militated not just against metaphysics but against any “scientific” standpoint. They saw the positivistic and naturalistic philosophies that had moved in to replace Hegel’s metaphysics as merely new forms of dogmatic metaphysics trumpeted under the banner of science . Hence their mistrust of a certain kind of “science .”

Meantime, another battle broke out on a different front. The strategy here was to expose metaphysics and naturalistic philosophy as dogmatically academic and, pursuing the line of critique developed by Kant, to set up philosophy as a rigorous “science.” The neo-Kantian schools, the phenomenology of Husser!, and Dilthey’s philosophy of history belonged to this camp .

In opposition to attempts to absorb the standpoint of science directly into philosophy, they undertook a methodological critique of scientific knowledge of nature and history. Their aim was, on the one hand, to ground scientific knowledge philosophically, and on the other, to mark off its limits. In contrast to a naturalistic philosophy that promoted skepticism regarding the meaning of human life, a new philosophical idealism emerged affirming norms and values. This new idealism argued from the human capacity for science against despair in the human condition.

In their own way, each of these critiques was caught up in the attempt to understand human being objectively as the subject matter of a "scientific discipline," whether through an analysis of the workings of human consciousness or through an "understanding" of historical life.

Subjectivity became reduced to the confines of scientific categories or supposedly universal structures. The more they pursued objectivity, the more the subjective nature of consciousness or life became diluted and distanced from this, my self. It was against this trend that the immersion of the self into passionate thinking, as we see it in Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, took shape.

Heidegger worked his way through the neo-Kantian school, Husser, Dilthey and others, one after the other. Sharing with them the conviction that science is an essential ingredient of human existence, he seems to have realized the danger in the scientific standpoint of divorcing the self from subjectivity and Existence. Hence the need for a radical reconception of

philosophy as a discipline that does not cut the self off from Existence but plants its roots firmly there. This is what Heidegger had in mind in making ontology existential, thus breaking completely with the metaphysics of the tradition from Plato to Hegel.

In Heidegger the passionate thinking of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who repudiated science in the name of Existence, and critical philosophy in the broad sense of a scientific discipline aimed at safeguarding "human being" in the world of nature and history, come together to give his existential philosophy its unique character. This is also the framework within which nihilism reappears as the ground of philosophy.