

## ‡ HEIDEGGER, METAPHYSICS, AND THE UNIVOCITY OF BEING

*By Philip Tonner. New York: Continuum, 2010. pp. 230.*

REVIEWED BY MAZEN SALEH

Philip Tonner's *Heidegger, Metaphysics, and the Univocity of Being* is a book that deserves reading, even if it is because of the problems it touches upon rather than the convincing power of its arguments. The book's aim is to interpret Heidegger's notion of being in terms of univocity, a concept that dominated the medieval philosophical debates and has roots going back to Aristotle. The author's main argument is constructed around two conceptions of being that appeared in the light of medieval interpretations of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: Univocity and Analogy. The book then moves, taking Deleuze's immanence of being as a guide, to associate the analogical interpretation of being with ontotheology and instead attributes a univocal sense to Heidegger's 'concept' of being.

Tonner argues that univocity for Heidegger is when the concept of being has the same sense across all of its intentions. This same sense is nothing else than the temporal horizon of the understanding of being. Motivated by Deleuze's non-hierarchical conception of being, the author claims that Heidegger's philosophy is also a philosophy of immanence that dispenses with any privileging of a being over and above other beings. The tradition of Western philosophy has failed to ask the question of being in a satisfactory way because it has not grasped the ontological difference adequately. This means for the author that time has not been understood as the condition of possibility of revealing beings in their different regions. The privileged being for Husserl was consciousness, for Descartes the cogito, and for Aristotle *ousia*, a term that was translated by Latin scholars as *substantia*. The book classifies

all these traditional conceptions of being as analogical rather than univocal. They failed to see that being is not a being.

The author sets his interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy primarily against that of Thomas Sheehan. Sheehan writes:

[T]alk of "Being itself" can easily lose sight of the analogical character of Being. Heidegger was not after a univocal something that subsists on its own. Over and above the Being of man, the Being of implements, nature, artworks and ideal objects, there is no second level of "Being itself". Rather, the "itself" refers to the analogically unified meaning of Being which is instantiated in all cases of Being this or that.<sup>1</sup>

Tonner does not reject the analogical interpretation entirely, but he claims it is not the whole story. The book moves to show that a univocal sense of being, in terms of time, is present throughout Heidegger's corpus. But what exactly is at stake in the distinction between analogy and univocity? The author approaches this question with the medieval philosophical debate between Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus in the background. Scotus held that there is one sense of being which is applied to all beings, including God. This univocity is contrasted in the book with the Thomist thesis that being is instantiated in many ways. That is, there is a focal reference, embodied by a privileged being, i.e., God, to which all other instantiations of beings refer. This analogical conception of being is "the middle ground between univocity and equivocality".<sup>2</sup> If being is completely equivocal then there is simply no true way of talking about it—we fall into relativism. On the other hand, if being was univocal, then the same concept, or sense, of being can be applied to both a stone and God, a conception which most medieval philosophers could not tolerate.

Against this background, in effect the book attributes an 'atheistic' philosophy to Heidegger by way of the univocity of being in temporality. The temporal univocal sense of being agrees, so the argument's path indicates, with Deleuze's immanent universe. It is thus no wonder that in the Appendix the author says that Deleuze was concerned with providing an ontology of

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1 Thomas Sheehan, *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2010), viii.

2 Philip Tonner, *Heidegger, Metaphysics, and the Univocity of Being* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 23.

modern science through his univocal concept of being. This characterization of Heidegger's philosophy in the terms of non-vulgar atheism and modern science is questionable. The book takes no account of Heidegger's reservation towards the positive sciences. The philosopher more than once expressed his fear that philosophy, or thinking, will one day be merged with the sciences.

One might also ask about the purchase of casting Heidegger's philosophy, a philosophy which explicitly states that its project is to pave the path for overcoming metaphysics, under the light of traditional metaphysical debates. The book's goal is not a mere contextualization of Heidegger's thought in light of the tradition, a project whose necessity no one can deny. The book rather gives the impression of solving a metaphysical problem by way of a metaphysical solution. Perhaps Tonner's reply to this objection would be to reiterate that "[t]his univocal sense of being is time and the point about univocity is a logical one, not a metaphysical one".<sup>3</sup> But it is not clear if Heidegger would take an escape route through a distinction between logical and metaphysical presupposition. This distinction, at least as it stands in Tonner's book, is not sufficiently grounded on non-metaphysical grounds. The distinction could itself be metaphysical, and although Tonner characterizes Heidegger's phenomenology as an investigation into the genesis of philosophical concepts in the concrete life of *Da-sein*, he does not provide such an account to ground the distinction between logic and metaphysics. Heidegger did spend much of his time attempting to re-think logic as *logos*, but he was clear that there is no easy way outside of metaphysics.

That said, Tonner's book, even in its shortcomings, does touch upon this central issue: namely, whether philosophy has moved beyond metaphysics at all. What was at stake in the medieval debate, i.e., the possibility of knowing God, is definitely a matter with which we have not dispensed yet. It is a problem that traditionally has been posited as a problem of immanence and transcendence. If our refined modern senses do not allow us to privilege a being as a focal point of reference, then what should we do? The book clearly struggles to impose a univocal sense of being on Heidegger, but what is more open to question is the equivocality of 'immanence' and 'univocity.' After all, Scotus still held God to be the Supreme Being even if he claimed there is a univocal sense that applies to all beings. If Heidegger read the univocal sense in Scotus as a logical presupposition rather than a metaphysical one, it does

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3 Ibid., 91.

not follow that it is a move which Heidegger will accept before questioning the metaphysical presupposition of logic itself.

It is worth noting that even the analogical account of being in Sheehan's interpretation claims to avoid giving a being a privileged place, a claim which Tonner's argument of univocity subscribes to. Sheehan writes that "there is no second level of Being in itself"<sup>4</sup> under the analogical conception. The book, therefore, unintentionally casts suspicion on the efficacy of univocity and analogy as adequate vocabulary with which one should approach Heidegger's thought.

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4 Sheehan, *Heidegger*, viii.