

## Articles

### **The Face of Things: Heidegger and the Alterity of the Fourfold**

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*ABSTRACT: Moving from Heidegger's suggestion that philosophy has fallen into the Thaletian well because of its inadequate theorization of the essence of things, I retrace in Heidegger's description of things as gathering elements that enable a discourse on things in terms of their alterity; I explore the richness of such an alterity in its differing from Lévinas's otherness of the other person; I suggest the formulation of an ethics of things which, through a reciprocal exposure of Heidegger and Lévinas, might rescue philosophy from its fall into the Thaletian well.*

*RÉSUMÉ: Suite à la thèse de Heidegger selon laquelle la philosophie, depuis qu'elle théorise l'essence des choses, aurait chuté dans le puits de Thalès, j'identifie, à partir de la description heideggérienne de la chose comme rassemblement, les éléments qui rendent possible un discours sur les choses en tant qu'altérité. J'explore la richesse d'une telle altérité en ce qu'elle diffère de l'altérité lévinassienne de l'autre personne. Je propose la formulation d'une éthique des choses qui, par l'éclaircissement réciproque de Heidegger et de Lévinas, pourrait prévenir la chute de la philosophie dans le puits de Thalès.*

According to an anecdote, retold in Plato's *Theaetetus*, the beginning of philosophy is marked by a threefold presence: a philosopher, a well, and a servant girl. Absorbed in the contemplation of celestial entities the first philosopher, Thales, does not notice terrestrial things and their abysses; but the objects of his negligence get their revenge when, because of his lack of attention, he falls into a well, while a servant girl, spectator to the scene,

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laughs.<sup>1</sup> Why did Thales fall into the well, provoking the servant girl's laughter? Because he ignored that "we should first look around thoroughly in this round-about-us,"<sup>2</sup> Heidegger comments.

If we look around we might notice, as Heidegger observes in a lecture he delivered in the early '50, that "near to us are what we usually call things."<sup>3</sup> However, the nearness of things has not facilitated the access to their being, which has remained and remains concealed — to science, which "always encounters only what *its* kind of representation has admitted beforehand as an object possible for science" (T 170); to philosophy, which conceives of things in terms of *substratum*, materiality or ideas;<sup>4</sup> and, one should add, also to Heidegger, who, despite his preoccupation with things ever since *Being and Time*,<sup>5</sup> has never confronted the issue with conclusive determination because always 'on the way' to something else: fundamental ontology, art, *physis*. Hence, the suspicion of his precipitation into the Thaletian well, whereas the maids of all times continue their laughter.

Yet, as in Plato's cave, the reality of things casts its light even at the bottom of the well. Possibly as a consequence of the persistence of things which, in their nearness to us, are reluctant to being banished at the margins of philosophy, the question "what is a thing?" (T 166) imposes itself (once again) to Heidegger, more clearly and resolutely than ever, in a series of later conferences ("Building, Dwelling, Thinking," and "the Thing") in which things are finally granted the honor and dignity of a special inquiry, and where a yet unheard word is told with respect to their being. As Lévinas might rephrase it, the layers of sedimentation through which, in the things, the Saying of transcendence has consigned itself to the said are finally reduced; the said is unsaid and broken open through the interruption of the possibility of coherent thematization produced by the nearing of the Fourfold.

The unsaying of the said coincides with the novelty of Heidegger's results in their standing out against the traditionalism of the example(s) employed. To illustrate the thingness of things, in "The Thing" Heidegger chooses a rather obvious case of things, an artifact — a jug. As a container made of a certain type of soil, a jug certainly requires external production. Although a description in terms of "self-supporting independence" (T 166) may help to differentiate things from technological objects (in which case a jug may *not* be considered a thing, but an artificial object), Heidegger promptly dismisses such a characterization as unable to reach the essence of things when asserting that "from the product's self-support, there is no way that leads to the thingness of the thing" (T 167). The dismissal, which liberates things from any productivistic determination,<sup>6</sup> indicates their essence to be lying elsewhere — in the case of the jug, in its being a vessel (T 169), whereas its being brought into existence is merely a consequence of this primordial being.

The relinquishment of the productivistic interpretation, while releasing from the necessity to consider the affiliation between *techne* and technology in the determination of the nature of things (that is, products *are* things, and not simply objects), also blurs the traditional distinction between art and *physis*, ultimately allowing for a reinscription within artifacts (whether artworks or artificial products) of characters originally recognized only to natural entities; the differentiation among various types of things — artificial, mineral, vegetal, animal; the fact that the universe of things does not constitute a homogeneous horizon is not abolished by Heidegger, but will be regained later at a level different than and uncontaminated by a unilateral determination in terms of the notion of human agency. More fundamentally, however, a yet unheard suggestion is implied in Heidegger's claim that "the jug is not a vessel because it was made; rather, the jug had to be made because it is this holding vessel" (T 168): as if there were something archaically imperative in the essence of things that mandates a course of action; almost as if things were able to place a demand that can go unanswered only at the price of a transgression of their being. The path for an understanding of the thingness of things different from most Western tradition, and from Heidegger's previous approach to it, is opened up.

Reverent, as usual, to the fact that "it is language that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature," Heidegger's long-established passion for etymologies retraces the semantic origin of the word '*Ding*,' the thing, in the high-German term '*thing*.'<sup>7</sup> The reconstruction, more essential than merely "the accidents of an etymological game" (T 124), reveals that originally the word '*thing*' denoted a gathering (T 174); it is such an event of gathering that Heidegger assumes as the being of things. A thing is a thing, rather than an object, insofar as it gathers — when it gathers, the thing things (T 174).

The novel, awkward expression, "the thing things," indicates more than a tautology or a duplication of reality; it announces the self-temporalization of the thing — by thinging, the thing becomes an event. Heidegger offers various illustrations of the eventuation of things — a bridge (BDT), a jug (T), a tree,<sup>8</sup> a threshold (again, L). Their eventuation consists in bringing together *das Geviert*, the Fourfold, the "simple oneness of the four" (BDT 150): earth and sky, divinities and mortals.<sup>9</sup> Although the Fourfold is a "*primal oneness*" by which the Four belong together in one (BDT 149), "enfolded into a single fourfold" (T 173), this oneness (*Einfalt*) is not unity (*Einheit*), but rather a preservation and unfolding of the differences of its participants.<sup>10</sup> Possibly in spite of Heidegger's own intentions, the nearing of the Fourfold brought about by the thinging of things discloses a form of alterity comparable to, although necessarily not identical with, the otherness which Lévinas retraces in persons, but is unwilling to recognize in things, and which Heidegger does

not thematize as alterity, neither in persons, nor in things, because uninterested in the thematization of ethical otherness. It is the presence of such alterity that enables a discourse on things in terms of their faciality, therefore allowing for the possibility of the development of an ethics of things.

The alterity of the thing that Heidegger's account discloses is revealed in a signifying that is not exhausted in its signification. In its thinging, the thing is not immediate presence; in its gathering, it intends beyond itself toward a Fourfold, which, by its same nature, indicates beyond itself — multiplicity in oneness; oneness in multiplicity; sky, mortals, and divinities in the earth; earth, mortals, and divinities in the sky; earth, sky, and divinities in the mortals; earth, sky, and mortals in the divinities. There is always something other to the thing than what its appearance immediately reveals; something which transcends its immediate signification, and yet can only emerge in the immanence of that very first appearance. Only in virtue of this signification beyond itself is an entity to be considered a thing, rather than an object. As Heidegger anxiously remarks, however, the description of things in terms of alterity does not reduce the universe to a symbolic order. In its intending beyond itself, a symbol "expresses something that strictly speaking does not belong to it" (BDT 153); its essence lies elsewhere than in the symbol. Conversely, the being of the thing consists precisely in the immanence of its transcendence, in its, so to speak, transimmanence. In other words, alterity is not simply intended by the thing: it *is* the thing — schizophrenia of things, which, in their being near to us and yet far away from us, immanent and yet not reducible to, and exhaustible in, the immanence of simple presence, reveal an idiosyncratic order of signification — the order of things.

Within such an order, things act as the alethic powers of disclosure of other things, so that, as in Heidegger's example, "the banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream" (BDT 152). From being conditioned by the context, the horizon, whether pragmatic (BT) or artistic (OWA), within which they appear, things achieve the new ontological status of conditioners, both of themselves and of what is gathered within them, in nearness to them; in the first place, the mortals. As Heidegger explicitly remarks, "in the strict sense of the German word *bedingt*, we are the be-thinged, the conditioned ones. We have left behind us the presumption of all unconditionedness" (T 181). The suspicion of a transcendental foundation of things, still present in *Being and Time* and in *On the Origin of the Work of Art*, is vanished through the achievement of the new perspective on things — a thingly perspective, as Heidegger acknowledges when claiming that "the thing things the world" (T 181). The recognition is striking, if compared to previous meditations, where only through the world could the being of things be disclosed.

The conditioning things impose, however, is of a peculiar kind, in its receiving its determination not by the conditioner, but by the conditioned. Philosophical foundationalism introverts itself undermining the solidity of the foundation, exposing it to the shaling and shattering provoked by the intrusion of alterity, and thereby denouncing the impracticability of the foundationalist approach. Despite the gathering performed by things, what is disclosed remains itself — the square a square, the castle a castle, and mortals are not transfigured in their standing in front of the divinities. The lack of transfiguration, that is, the absence of a sublimation of the disclosed within an order pre-established by the disclosure; the refusal to attribute to things a meaning previous to their own donation of meaning preserves the alterity of that which is thus gathered. Since gathering does not achieve unity or assimilation, it is itself shaped, that is, determined, by the differences that it brings together. The way the bridge gathers and the way another thing, even another bridge, gathers, do not result into homogeneous configurations, Heidegger warns.<sup>11</sup> The landscape which the Fourfold originates remains varied, its lines of flight always directing toward new constellations of gathering of the Fourfold. Although the gathering is the Same, the modality and consequently the results of the gathering are different, because "we can only say 'the same' if we think difference. It is in the carrying out and settling of differences that the gathering nature of sameness comes to light."<sup>12</sup> Alterity is thus preserved throughout: in the gatherers, which are not assimilated into one single kind of Being; in the gathered, which are allowed to be in their own way; and in the modality of gathering which, although the same, is always different.

By staging this complex relation of reciprocal conditioning, the thing brings the Four one near to the other in that being that the thing itself is. What the thing as gatherer founds is not reality, but, analogously to Lévinas's understanding of ethics, the place of a relationship. "We should learn to recognize that things themselves are the places, do not merely belong in space," Heidegger writes.<sup>13</sup> According to Heidegger, a space is a "place cleared or freed for settlement and lodging" (BDT 154). By opening up a space, things offer a lodging for the gathering of the Fourfold. Analogously to language, as described by Heidegger, things become the abode of Being; in their being withdrawn from the penetration of all speculations, they disclose a hollow, a niche in which the Fourfold can nestle (T 180). Rather than transcendental founders, things are topological founders: they open up a space that allows for a vicinity. Far from abolishing farness, however, "nearness preserves farness" (T 178), because "nearness brings near — draws nigh to one another — the far and, indeed, *as* the far" (T 177-178). In the nearing, none of the participants needs any transcendental foundation, because each of them exists prior to the relation itself; and yet, each can

achieve its own signification only within the space described by the relation.

Through the relation which is thus instituted the earth, the sky, and the divinities renounce the indeterminateness of what Lévinas names the *il y a*, the anonymous being that constitutes the mythical dimension of existence,<sup>14</sup> and enter a determined relation with mortals and with each other. In things the earth, the sky, the divinities are not “the impersonal, faceless gods with which it is impossible to speak” (TI 142), as Lévinas claims with direct reference to Heidegger, but rather they become the gods of the relation, of the place, of the abode that the thing itself is — pagan gods, maybe, but, as several non Judeo-Christian traditions attest, not thereby faceless, impersonal or indeterminate.

As already prefigured by the scission of things from any economy of production, the complexity and multiplicity of relations characterizing the thinging of the thing precludes any classification of things (whether fabricated, artistically produced, or naturally grown) established on the ground of the relation human beings entertain with them, as if such a relation were the archaic condition of their being. On the contrary, the differing of things from one another becomes a direct function of their own way of thinging, of their own way of eventuating the relation, whereas all different things are nevertheless gathered in the commonality of the same thingness because of their hosting the Fourfold. Although differing among themselves, the qualification of things can thus be applied to both the jug and the desk, the bridge and the plough. “But tree and pond, too, brook and hill, are things, each in its own way. Things, each thinging from time to time in its own way, are heron and roe, deer, horse and bull. Things, each thinging and each staying in its own way, are mirror and clasp, book and picture, crown and cross” (T 182), bread and wine (L 205).

That is, things are conceived of broadly enough to encompass, yet without homogenization, not only artifacts, excluded from the consideration of *physis*, but also natural entities, excluded from the consideration of *Zeuge* as unfolded in *Being and Time*.<sup>15</sup> Only because of the primordial relation of the Fourfold can things be classified as artifacts or natural entities, which are peculiar modes in which the relation configures itself. Rather than resulting in generality, the denomination ‘things’ enhances and legitimizes the possibility of differences — not the chaotic proliferation of unrelated multiplicities, but rather the fertile richness of differences within the same, because the ground for the determination of what the thing is has become the thing itself in its alterity. Each thing remains other in hosting the Fourfold in its peculiar way: other than the Fourfold, other than any other thing, and other than the mortals. The separateness of things from one another and from what they gather is the open circle they describe, which traditional metaphysics has mistaken for their extensionality; it is the continuous tending and dis-tending of a difference that cannot rest upon itself, unless it loses itself. When staticity replaces

eventuation, the thing undergoes an absolutization. The scenario, then, is the well-known panorama of naturalistic realism, which considers things as objects in antithesis to the subjective conscience.

In these later essays the thingness of things has been completely achieved, and has been achieved as alterity: unconditional alterity, because things are unconditioned; absolute alterity, because the alterity of things does not stem from an oppositional confrontation with mortals, or divinities, which are rather appropriated by and relocated within the alterity of things. Undeniably, the alterity things display according to Heidegger’s interpretation of their being lacks the most fundamental feature qualifying Lévinas’s other (*the Other par excellence*) as Other: despite its signifying beyond itself toward the Fourfold, the alterity of things is not their transcendence, because transcendence implies vertical directionality, height, ascension. In “Language” Heidegger states that “the unitary Fourfold of sky and earth, mortals and divinities ... is stayed in the thinging of things” (L 199), where the preposition *in*, locating the thinging *in* the thing itself, cannot be ignored. The ringing of the Fourfold is not a unidirectional movement, whether from the bottom upward or *vice versa*. Rather, the ringing bears closer resemblance to a circular dance (T 180), in which the direction of the ringing moves back and forth, in a deflection that de-centers (but does not raise toward transcendence) the origin of the movement itself. In its ringing the circle is open, abolishing beginning and end, inside and outside. Things are always open to becoming other than themselves, and always resistant to fixation, determination, definition, and therefore, precisely because of the lack of a hard core at their center, vulnerable to appropriation, exploitation, desacralization. At any moment the dynamics of the mirroring may privilege one component over the others, in an overflowing of significations rendering the temporalization of the thing varied, and the meaning of each thing continuously open to new configurations and disclosures. Rather than in their being transcendent, the alterity of things lies in their perennial difference and differing from themselves and from one another (maybe what, with a Derridean term, could be named their *différance*), which render their nature so evanescent, so frail, and so difficult to reach to any philosophical, even phenomenological, description.

The absence of the dimension of height, brought about by the de-centeredness of things, is balanced by the presence of another dimension — that of breadth drifting into depth. It is the breadth/depth originating from the temporalization of the ringing of the Fourfold, from the difference and differing of things from the Fourfold and from other things. The open circle the mirror-play of the Fourfold describes, which Heidegger qualifies as a play bonding in freedom (T 179), constitutes the breadth of things, which traditional metaphysics equates with their spatial dimension. In its being a

mutual betrothing of its participants,<sup>16</sup> such breadth is traversed by lines of inscriptions recording the temporalization of the Fourfold itself. The elements of the Fourfold enter the thing endowed with stories of their own, coming to them from previous relations, from previous constellations, from previous places of encounter they have entered, from their having witnessed the anarchic past preceding the origin of their relation as Fourfold. These stories do they entrust to the thing in its enabling the intersection of “the onefold fourfold into a single space-time” (T 174): by thinging the thing enriches itself with an irretrievable past granting the thing its depth. Things ward the past, becoming the shrine of the past — of the origins. It is this very past, which things bear inscribed in the folds of their breadth, that offers things depth and the possibility of being subjects of narration: as all good storytellers have known ever since a long time ago, things tell stories, as much as they are material for stories. Although there is no height in things, certainly there is the alterity brought by the depth of the irretrievability of the past. Steeped in being, nevertheless things indicate an otherwise-than-being which, inviolable, inviolate, and yet always menaced by violation, is enshrined and expressed within the folds of their being.

The fragility and precariousness of the alterity of things is understood by Heidegger himself, when he notices how, endowed with a modesty and unpretentiousness (T 182) bereaving them of the power to resist domination, things are delicate entities always on the verge of disappearance into objectification — entities whose otherness is dissolved in the heteronomy of their being a representation: a *Gegen-stand* and a *Vor-stellung*.<sup>17</sup> Yet, if let be present in their thinging, things place a demand on mortals to which mortals can only co-respond, releasing the autonomous power of initiative, making themselves passive and responsive. “We are called by the things as things” (T 181), Heidegger claims, acknowledging the reality of their demand, and providing suggestions on how to comply with such an appeal. In connection with such an appeal, he warns, the role of mortals becomes crucial, since things do not appear as things “without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents” (T 181). However, vigilance cannot be a voluntaristic, that is, subjectivistic, shift of attitude. Rather, “the step back takes up its residence in a co-responding which, appealed to in the world’s being by the world’s being, answers within itself to that appeal” (T 181-182). Meditating on this vigilant co-responding (whose laws are dictated heteronomously) under the name of dwelling, Heidegger describes it as the fourfold activity of “saving the earth, ... receiving the sky, ... awaiting the divinities, ... initiating the mortals” (BDT 151). The ultimate significance of this quadruple performance is without doubts: to dwell means to care for the Fourfold.<sup>18</sup> But caring for the Fourfold can be accomplished only if mortals care for things, because things are the

receptacle of the Fourfold. And things can be the receptacle only if they can be let be in their thingness.

The demand, which commands a different approach to things, finds thus its proper answer in the notion of *Gelassenheit*, which offers “the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way.”<sup>19</sup> Neither laxity nor permissiveness, but rather relinquishment of the metaphysical will to power, and therefore acting “which is yet no activity” (DT 61), *Gelassenheit* means to abandon oneself to things, to let things be in the alterity of their mirror-play which, expropriating the mortals, appropriates them to things. Only through this abandonment to things are mortals enabled to locate themselves within things, and be appropriated by them. In other words, mortals are committed to things by things themselves, which, through the mirror-play they host, in turn commit themselves to mortals — the relation is that of a mirrored commitment.

In *Discourse on Thinking* Heidegger asserts that the relation between what he calls *die Gegnet*, that-which-regions, and *Gelassenheit*, as well as that between *die Gegnet* and the thing, “can be thought neither as ontic nor as ontological” (DT 76). What kind of relation is this relation, which, by extension, encompasses also the relation between *Gelassenheit* and things? Although Heidegger’s word is silent, this relation could modestly be called ethics, if, as in Lévinas, ethics is understood as the place of love for what remains and insists on remaining other. Things thus impose an imperative which comes close to an ethical demand. They request an act of love — ethics — which lets things be as things, and which therefore opens up a space for the hosting of the Fourfold. Heidegger, however, will never explicitly thematize the ethical character of such an act.

By welcoming things as things, mortals are welcomed within the things. How to enact the welcome which alone enables things to be in their otherness, and mortals to dwell by them? How to enact *Gelassenheit*? Neither Heidegger nor Lévinas, when taken individually, provide their reader with a direct response: Lévinas loves, but not things; Heidegger thematizes things, but does not love them enough. What neither can achieve separately might be obtained through an exposure of one to the other — exposure which may contaminate the purity of their thought, but may enable the thematization of an ethics of things. Confronted with such an ethics, servant girls might finally stop their millenary laughter.

## Notes

- 1 Plato, *Theaet.* 174a. For an account of the reception of the anecdote within philosophy, see Hans Blumenberg, *Das Lachen der Thrakerin: eine Urgeschichte der Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987).
- 2 Martin Heidegger, *What Is A Thing?* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1970), p. 7. Hereafter referred to as WT.
- 3 Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 166. Hereafter referred to as T.
- 4 Martin Heidegger, "On The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 23ff. Hereafter referred to as OWA.
- 5 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), referred to as BT.
- 6 Heidegger asserts that the thing's being produced does not belong to its essence any more than the material of which it has been produced does (T 169).
- 7 Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 153. Hereafter referred to as BDT.
- 8 Martin Heidegger, "Language" in *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), referred to as L.
- 9 Excluded from the self-emerging domain of *physis*, divinities and mortals are re-introduced in the economy things institute, and thereby brought one near to another.
- 10 On the distinction between the Same and the Identical, analogous to that between oneness and unity, see Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, John Stambaugh trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 45ff.
- 11 Thus, Heidegger remarks, a country bridge gathers differently than a city bridge, which in turn gathers differently than the highway bridge. "The bridge *gathers* to itself in *its own* way earth and sky, divinities and mortals" (BDT 153).
- 12 Martin Heidegger, "... Poetically Man Dwells....," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 219.
- 13 Martin Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum* (St. Gallen: Erker Verlag, 1969), p. 11.
- 14 See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 45-52; *Time and The Other*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), pp. 42-57; *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), hereafter referred to as TI.
- 15 In the essay "Language" it is the falling of the snow and the tolling of the vesper bell that, among other things, gather by themselves the earth and

the heavens, the mortals and the gods (L 199).

- 16 Being-toward-death, which somehow had placed Dasein in a solitary universe, is now replaced by Heidegger with a dimension of ontological community, "of mutual belonging" (T 173).
- 17 When this happens, the Fourfold is denied its place. As Heidegger exemplifies it, when the hydroelectric plant is installed in the current of the river Rhine, challenging the river to unlock and store up the energy concealed in it, the presencing of the Fourfold is blocked; the river as thing has lost its otherness. See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
- 18 This is done "in this way, that mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow, and specially construct things that do not grow" (BDT 151). The notion of building, which in its relation to *techne* and technology had concerned Heidegger in several occasions, is now recomprised as part of the activity of dwelling, which also re-interprets the Being-in-the-World which in *Being and Time* characterized Dasein.
- 19 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J.M. Anderson and E.H. Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 55. Hereafter referred to as DT.