

Interview with William J. Richardson on Heidegger's Being and Time

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Interview & Video: Babette Babich ¹

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Babette Babich: So, if I could just ask you, I'm gonna come very very briefly then move away. This is Babette Babich and this is Father Bill Richardson and we are here at Boston college in St. Mary's for conferences of various kinds but also to have what we're hoping this good discussion right now about Heidegger and Being and Time. I have asked very spontaneously so Bill is not prepared for this. But I have asked spontaneously if there might be a possibility of just, in a general way, saying what element stays with you most about being and time and that's an odd question because it's been such a well-known book and if anybody knows it, it would be you and so at this point what when you look at it as an achievement as a book as a whole or elements of it, passages of it, qualities of it, what stands out to you, not what should stand out, what stands out to you?

William J. Richardson: Well, that's a big question obviously, and to do justice, it will take a big answer. But what struck me about it is what was not in Being and Time. But I mean it was as a book, as work, even though unfinished and in that sense limited, though it is and remains, it was the articulation of something previous, and what remains with me, and grows with time, not to say the years (after seventy years?), is that initial experience that they gave birth to Being and Time, and that was made clear to me when having finished most of my own work, at least on Being and Time, I had the opportunity meeting Heidegger and it was in that meeting that I asked him if it was true what had been told to me, in the scuttlebutt of graduate students, namely, that Being and Time really didn't come first of all from Husserl or Kierkegaard, but basically came from Aristotle, and that the initial experience was basically Heidegger's experience with Aristotle, and so, when I met him, I was given the chance to pose some personal questions to him. That was the question that I posed. it's been rumored that

¹ <https://youtu.be/ab7XkaC6LVU>

Aristotle had a major role in Being and Time, and I'm wondering if that's true, can one say that? And his answer was, in effect, and took the form of the letter that he wrote as a preface to the book itself, that when he was himself a student, namely 19 years old, and therefore, on the last edge of his Gymnasium experience, therefore, it would be in one sense our high school, was in their sense, really it would be about junior fresh, sophomore junior in college. So, he was a mature 19, certainly intellectually mature, and someone whose name was [Conrad] Gröber who eventually became the archbishop of Freiburg when Heidegger became rector of the University of unhappy experience. But the Gröber was a parish priest and Constance at the time where Heidegger was finishing up his Gymnasium, as they called it. And this book was, happened to be the doctoral dissertation of [Franz] Brentano, which carry the name of "The Meaning of Being in Aristotle", or "The Manifold Meaning of Being in Aristotle" where *being*, there, meant Aristotle's, "the meaning of being in Aristotle for Brentano," where being there meant Aristotle's $\acute{\omicron}\nu$ (on [ohn] آن), meaning "that which is". So, that the whole dissertation was based upon the different senses that $\acute{\omicron}\nu$ (on [ohn] آن), namely, "that which is" has in Aristotle. And they are numerous. But concretely, what that suggests to me is the experience of difference (different) meanings that "is" has in our own daily life, namely "this *is* a camera," "this *is* a reception room," and "this *is* the 7th day of October," and "this *is* a chair," and "this *is* a person who is talking to you, who *is* for me a person." So, the "is" has many different meanings, you know. Because each of these things, including ourselves, "is" differently, that's what makes us different, that makes it possible for us to be different. But nonetheless, there is some common denominator, to put it crudely, in that word "is", and Heidegger's question was precisely that what about this "is", as common to all these things that are and even for Aristotle and Brentano and rest of the world, what is the common denominator of that "is". So, his question was precisely that "what is the 'is' that prevails and comes to expression in everything that *is*?" And what's the difference between this "is" that is shared and the "is" that is not shared, but because it is in every case. So, that was his initial question, and for a 19-year-old that's a serious question, and he went to all the sources at his disposal, and that question remained because whomever he read, whether Aristotle himself, or Plato, or Plotinus, or other pre-Socratics, no matter whom he read, each of them used the word "is", in one form or another, but none of them posed the question about "what is the 'is' of these different forms of 'is'?" I think that is the capital "IS" of "what

is”, where “what *is*”, is not simply what is an *ὄν* (on [ohn] آن), a being or a thing, but “what is the case”, which is a formula which is a common noun to describe something that “*is*” but it’s not a thing like other things but nonetheless “*is*”. So, I think of the question of Heidegger as he described it to me, viva voce [he told me orally] so to speak, standing in front his office, he said that’s what really inspired him, and he found no answer to that question. So, it fundamentally is his fundamental question that began and persevered. As far as I know, to the day he died, was precisely that “what is the capital “IS” of what is the case?” So, that was his question, and eventually, he told me that not only that he experienced in that initial epiphany, if you want to call it that, was the fact that no one else posed the question even though these were the giants of our history, namely Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and the rest, every Greek author that he could get his hands on at that time. So, what struck him not only was the fact that it’s a question worth posing, what is the capital “IS” of everything that is, including “what is the case?”, and so, the fact that they did not raise the question although it was so obvious, that suggested to him that, whatever the answer is, there is buried inside that answer something that accounts for the fact that it negates the very exploration of itself. And therefore, this negation that is the ingredient to the experience of the question about the capital “IS” of what is, and including what is the case, is part of the initial experience. So, along with the question about being, as it’s now called, you know, the question itself includes a negative component, that is to say, there is something in this capital “IS”, however we understand it, that includes, somehow, a negation of itself, or a “Not-ation” of itself, a “Not”, a “Nicht” [آلمانی: نیست، فارسی: نیست]. So, that this “Nicht” ingredient to the question itself that somehow, sabotages it from the very beginning, is ingredient to it. And therefore, the question for Heidegger was simply not so much, “what does this capital “IS” of everything that is, mean?”, but also “what is it that includes this negative component, this ingredient “Nicht” that includes the negation of the question even in the posing of the question itself?” So, if you ask me, “What is the most striking about ‘Being and Time’?”, it is the fact that, in retrospect, as I work through it, as you work through it, and continue to work through it, and teaching it again, the importance of that “Nicht” element, which comes down to an element of finitude in the question itself, it includes its own not; and therefore, it’s so moot [مناقشه]. That is the question of being and in going through “Being and Time”, in retrospect, it becomes clearer to me that “Being and Time” is an articulation of that question, beginning

with Dasein, as being in the world, and also that negation of the question, because not only the question, but “being” itself as understood, which being shows up as the world, to which we are open, or some other thing. That is the question that bothers Heidegger, and that is the question about the “Sinn” (سنى معنى), as he calls it at the time, the *meaning* of “Being”, where “Being” is understood as the capital “IS” of what *is*, no matter what it’s called in the tradition. Anyway, that is all I can say about what “Being and Time” means to me.

Babette Babich: Thank you very much, I have a few, if you answer one other question for us. Your work foregrounds in your engagement with Heidegger, and sometimes, I think arguably also in Lacan, your reading with Lacan, foregrounds “*Errancy*”, and that’s a word which a lot of people associate with you, but I don’t think anybody knows a lot about what that means. This is “*idee* [idea], *da idee* [the idea], and *ideen* [ideas]”... the very idea, a complicated word in German, just as complicated in English, and English is great because it’s a very related to German with this word. So, your choice of translation is elegant because it capitalizes on the affinity between English and German in this one sense; it’s not always true, I think it’s true with this case. But could you say one, because this is something that people always ask me about, and I do my best, but I think it would be great if we heard it from you.

William J. Richardson: If I do my best, and I’m equally unsatisfying.

Babette Babich: Do what you can!

William J. Richardson: O yeah, I’ll try. His notion of “*Errancy*” is ingredient to the notion of truth in Heidegger and the move from where we were a moment ago, and this “IS” question. I am obviously taking “Being” to be this capital “IS”, whatever it is called in Greek, in εἶναι [*einai*, ‘ine /ينه/] and οὐσία (*ousia*), whatever. But one other thing that he added in his explanation to me at that time, and comes up again in this letter that serves as preface, that along with that insight into the question, there was an insight into the method of going about it, namely phenomenology as a method, for reasons that you can explain, but will takes us away from the question that you’re asking. But phenomenology was to lay out in the open the beings around us, that are phenomena, and the only method that was alive at the time,

intellectually alive, was the notion of phenomena as proposed by Husserl, who had developed a way of approaching “beings” under the guise of phenomena, that which appears. So, that for him, “being question”, for Husserl, “being question”, became “what is the meaning of these phenomena?”. And for Husserl, the meaning of phenomena is, “What did they appear to be under the stricture of his own optics, so to speak?” Namely, as a former mathematician, an arithmetician, so that the model for certainty, clarity about philosophical issues, such as the question about being, was really mathematics. Because, the reason why it was a model was that mathematical analysis, particularly arithmetic, but it’s true of any form of higher mathematics, both the contents of the material- the classics study, medieval is used to say the material object of the reflection- as we say, the matter that they could deal with, was the matter that was always very abstract, that was in the mind. If they were talking about the properties of a triangle, it was a triangle that was idealized, if that’s the word, but in any sense, proposed in an abstract order from any real triangles, we expect, and therefore, with a purity that it is possible for arithmetician to deal with the relationship between numbers, or the relationships that constitute trigonometry, it constitutes the basis of that tripod. Anyway, the point is that, for Husserl, the real meaning of “what a being is” had to take mathematics as the model, where, for mathematics, the material you are examining and the instrument with which you are examining, are both interior to consciousness, you know, and it’s understandable for Husserl, you know, and that was his main sense of philosophy as a rigorous science, namely, to try and find that same clarity of perception and correspondence between the material that you are judging and the method by which you are examining it could be verified, simply because they verified themselves, and with a clarity that is possible for a mind working in that order. Obviously, he did not mean that philosophy can be reduced to some kind of mathematical formula, where you can find that same correspondence between mind and the object being examined, [which is] also a function of mind, but it was an ideal for him, and what he tried to do in order to be able to take the phenomena of experience, what he tried to do, is to lead that back from normal social experience such as we are having now, back to a point where one could, sort of prescind from the facts, you know, like the fact of that tripod, and just contemplate the notion of a triangular instrument in itself, and strip it from the contingencies of social order, you know, the natural order, and natural way of being, and the way that tripod yields to the contingencies, its composition,

etc. So, what Husserl called a “reduction” was to reduce experiences of common social life back to a level where he could examine just the idea of what that tripod is, or the idea “what it is to perceive a flower out here”, and what is perception as such. And therefore; [to] having made that reduction, Husserl could go ahead with his work and the result of his work, Husserl’s work, would be to try, and discover the real meaning of perception, the real meaning; and therefore, what, let’s, say, “a tripod” be “a tripod”; and therefore, if you could get to that clarity, having made this reduction, and got an insight into this reduced, so to speak, I say reduced to level of conscious knowing, that would yield you, tell you what the being of this object is; and therefore, it was easy to transpose notion of being, for Husserl, to that which is discovered through phenomenology, which now you [call it], that question of discovery is now called an “eidos”, a Greek word, and which is clear enough, but well, I’d say it’s traditional enough. And sometimes translated as “idea” certainly, but an “eidos” for Husserl, it meant more than that. [An “idea” is] that which makes a thing to be what it is. You got at the essence of something, through the idea (ideal?); and therefore, for him, for Husserl, the correspondence between the ideal object of phenomenology was to discern the being of the objects that he [it?] disclosed so that being really meant an object of consciousness. And with all that [it] implies, and all the difficulties that are involved in doing that. Anyway, what was his criterion of truth really for deciding whether you've really gotten to the “eidos”, the essence of things he was analyzing? The evidence itself, you know, the evidence is evidence, the evidence for truth is the evidence it presents in its own name.

Well now, Heidegger grew up in that mentality. So, that what he said that his method was going to be phenomenology, in the sense that he was going to try and decide this “Sinn” [zin], the meaning of this “is” [“IS”] in everything that is by trying to do the same thing, except that the difference was that he didn't want to do that simply in terms of reducing, or drawing the object of examination back in the consciousness. He wanted to examine its matter-of-factness. So, that became the ideal of Heidegger in the phenomenological method. But in doing so, he was stuck with the notion that being is essentially something that can be related to consciousness, not consciousness..., but to human presence, you know, that he called “Dasein”. That’s first of all. And secondly, he was deeply struck by this notion of “evidence”, as is called in Husserl, but for Heidegger, the word that stuck with him was not so much “evidence” as “truth”. So that, he mentions that in his letter, that this is one of the first things

that struck him, that truth is not some kind of statement that we make that conformed to the things as we experience, some kind of conformity, but essentially truth is something that precedes that and makes that possible, namely the shining force for the evidence, you know, what appears in such a fashion that one can make judgments about it. So, the pre-judgmental depth of a phenomenon that Heidegger called not so much evidence, although that was essentially the meaning of evidence, but he calls it "truth". But "truth" he called after the Greeks' ἀλήθεια [alātheiā], and he found that word in Aristotle, in Aristotle's Metaphysics, the word ἀλήθεια [alātheiā], where ἀλήθεια [alātheiā] meant literally, for the Greeks, what did [it] mean for thing to be "unveiled." That is to say, the λᾱθεί (lātheí) of the word is what is hidden in some way. And therefore, what that ἀλᾱθε (alāthe), that is to say, the prefix ἀ (a), which is a negative form in Greek, is a privation of hiddenness.

So that for Heidegger, from the very beginning, the notion of truth has something more than simply conformity in one's judgment. But rather it meant something that is revealed out of hiddenness, that is to say, an un-concealment was the fundamental, or un-concealing, [un-]concealing was a process by reason of which the truth emerges.

So continuing with that early experience of the question about capital "IS" was the fact that the best way to find out what "IS", this capital "IS", means is to use phenomenology to examine precisely the phenomenon, namely human beings who use it, what they understand by it. So, that is [the] early step for it to try and find a way to examine phenomenologically, as best one can, the very phenomenon, namely, a human being, that poses the question both in this positivity as to what actually does it mean for something to be able to be entitled of the word "is" [about], and secondly, somehow the negative component; and therefore, for him simultaneously, the question about being involved the question about truth. Now, in our dealing with "truth" and "Being and Time", and we will have the difficulty or pleasure, at least, of following that particular analysis, but what strikes me, in retrospect, is the importance of that notion of two-faced "is", disclosure and negation, involves simply the question about the meaning of capital "IS", but also meaning of the phenomenology and the meaning of the world of the phenomena that we are dealing, with beginning with human being itself. So that, the analysis of "Being and Time" becomes an analysis really of human being, that he calls "Dasein", and the relationship for the role that truth plays in that process that begins, at least, in "Being and Time." So that after "Being and Time", suddenly asking a

question about you ... but in 1930, now “Being and Time”, obviously, was published in 1927, but he was unsatisfied obviously with the results of his work, by 1930, he began to give publicly a lecture that became “On the Essence of Truth”, and in that lecture, “On the Essence of Truth”, he comes to the point of saying of two things, as I perceive it, that after, you know, knocking his head against this particular wall in 1927, he still wasn't satisfied with the answer and somehow, but this is my fantasy, he want to experience if you keep knocking your head against the wall, soon enough, you get the impression that the wall is heading, knocking itself against you. So, however it happened, whether my opinion if you are going to talk about truth as ἀλᾶθειᾶ [alātheiā] as un-concealment, well, where is the concealment coming from, it must precede the un-concealment, etc. that there is a way of struggling with it. And in any case, by 1930, he had gotten to a point of raising a possibility, suppose it is not we who are projecting, I would say, disclosing, the “is” as truth, but if it were “is”, now, as a process of concealment and revealment, revealing itself to us, what then? And what if that happens, you know, that's a big move, obviously, but just let's make believe, you know, if, any way as an experiment, he began to explore that. And I think it's number 6 of the essay, “On the Essence of Truth”, he comes to the point of saying that this process of un-concealment implies that it derives from something earlier than the experience of “is”, and it's that notion of the earlier dimension of being that allows him to think of ἀλᾶθειᾶ [alātheiā] as somehow revealing itself to us, and he is at that point that, as you know my own thinking, and I think there's some warrant, you know, ... took ..., recognized the first move into another emphasis, at least, of this problem where “being” is not simply what is disclosed by the analysis of Dasein and the “Nicht” conditions of its possibility, but his focus then became on the possibility of the truth as ἀλᾶθειᾶ [alātheiā] was somehow revealing itself to us, and project that, uh, at least, the emphasis of the research assumed that focus, it seems to me, at the beginning of 1930 at least. So, it's at that point where he begins to explain the, or to explore the, both the positive aspect of revealment, and but he said that there's also a negative component, and that negative component of ἀλᾶθειᾶ [alātheiā] includes, on the one hand, what he calls a hiding of beings via one another that he calls kindness, which has its mystery. But so that this experience of mystery is something that has ontological roots, if that's the right word, at least philosophical roots, in the hiddenness or the λᾶθει (lāthei), or the negative component of ἀλᾶθειᾶ (alātheiā). And secondly, there is another form of that

negativity, which in effect, is mysterious to him because there is a certain character about that negativity that occludes the revelation of being, as sabotaged, so to speak, or perverts it somehow, and that so much so that the effect of our endeavor to try and discover what this “is” means is, in effect, an experience of a lot of frustration, a lot of failure, of wondering about. For example, I’m wondering about with the question same time having the wondering betrayed, if you will, as I said, sabotaged by this negative component that confounds even the experience of mystery, and that’s what he calls the “*Irre*”, and the essential thing about it, I think, is the notion of wondering about in confusion, twice confounded, and that confusion twice confounded as a movement becomes “*Irren*”, the “*Irren*”, as the verb, describing this wondering about in the confusion that’s inevitable despite best efforts, and really this is destructed, but not completely, sabotaging is the best word I can think of. In any case, that’s what he means by “*Errancy*” or “*Irren*”, it’s a secondary component of the negativity ingredient to truth understood as ἄλᾱθεΐᾱ [alāthēíā], and that is to me a mystery still because if we take it far enough, we get into other questions as you know ...

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Babette Babich: ... I am going to photograph the tripod as you talked about it ...