

A New Interpretation of Heidegger on the Pre-Socratics¹

WILLIAM WOOD

Charles University, Ovocný trh 5, Prague 1116 36, Czech Republic
williamcarroz@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: In *The Presocratics in the Thought of Martin Heidegger*, W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz presents a new interpretation of this important theme in the later Heidegger. Korab-Karpowicz argues that the relationship between the early and late Heidegger can be understood as analogous to the relationship between a question and an answer; the later Heidegger provides the answer to the question which the early Heidegger posed, but he discovers this answer in the fragments of Anaximander, Heraclitus and Parmenides. I argue that Korab-Karpowicz fails to substantiate his claim and exemplifies both the vices which Heidegger scholarship ought to avoid – obscurantism on the one hand and trivialization on the other. In doing so, however, Korab-Karpowicz performs an important service; he shows what Heidegger scholarship should strive to avoid.

KEY WORDS: Heidegger, history of philosophy, pre-Socratics.

W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz's *The Presocratics in the Thought of Martin Heidegger* presents itself as the first comprehensive study of this important dimension of Heidegger's work. It is generally accepted that Heidegger's early work *Being and Time* is his *magnum opus*; at the same time, it is generally accepted that this work is in some sense a failure, or at least unfinished and abandoned. *Being and Time* is far more systematic than Heidegger's later writings, but it only partially accomplishes the plan set out in the introduction; it is an unfinished system. It is as though Kant or Hegel were to have published only a third of the first *Critique* or the *Phenomenology*, struggled to write the later parts, then abandoned

¹ Julian Korab-Karpowicz, *The Presocratics in the Thought of Martin Heidegger* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

the project altogether and turned to a more unsystematic approach, articulated in occasional lectures and essays (in fact, the careers of Fichte and Schelling were not altogether dissimilar from Heidegger's in this respect). Heidegger's famous "turn" away from the systematic fundamental ontology of *Being and Time* towards a more unsystematic approach was at the same time a turn from a more formal to a more historical approach, a turn from "philosophy" to "thought," and a turn towards the pre-Socratics. Or, as Korab-Karpowicz correctly emphasizes, towards three pre-Socratic thinkers in particular – Anaximander, Parmenides and Heraclitus (Heidegger showed only limited interest in the others).

Heidegger is a notoriously obscure writer and there are many ways to interpret virtually every dimension of his thought. His turn towards the pre-Socratics, themselves notorious for their obscurity (in part, but only in part, due to the fragmentary nature of the sources and their historical distance from us), is certainly no exception. Korab-Karpowicz offers an oddly straightforward, simplifying reading: "If in the period of phenomenological ontology of *Being and Time*, Heidegger fails in his attempt to access being through the analysis of Dasein, in his later period he finds the way to being in the fragments of the Presocratics" (178). For Korab-Karpowicz, the task of *Being and Time*, to elucidate the meaning of Being, was neither abandoned nor transformed; rather, Heidegger came to recognize that this task had *already* been accomplished at the very inception of Western thought, in the fragments of the early Greek thinkers. Together, Anaximander, Parmenides and Heraclitus had answered the question which Heidegger asked in *Being and Time*, albeit in poetic language the meaning of which requires hermeneutic sensitivity to disclose.

Accordingly, Korab-Karpowicz begins with a chapter offering a fairly conventional summary of Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* before turning to Anaximander, Heraclitus and Parmenides respectively in three chapters (Heidegger argues, against the conventional hypothesis that Heraclitus' thought was a response to that of Parmenides, that Heraclitus preceded Parmenides chronologically), then offering a final chapter summarizing the later Heidegger's completion, by means of creative interpretation of the pre-Socratics, of the early Heidegger's project.

In the case of a philosopher like Heidegger who employs a great deal of initially obscure, intractable technical terminology, much of it of his own invention, a central responsibility of the interpreter is to unpack and clarify this terminology. Yet the interpreter must strike a careful bal-

ance. An interpretation of Heidegger in unclarified Heideggerese will not be worth the paper it's written on; at the same time, a "translation" of Heidegger into more familiar language runs the risk of oversimplifying his thought or obscuring its originality (alternatively, one might criticize Heidegger for using unnecessarily obscure language for thoughts which are more conventional than they appear, but then one must defend one's criticisms).

Korab-Karpowicz argues that Heidegger doesn't always use his own terminology consistently (including the more technical, systematic terminology of his early period and the more poetic language of his later thought, which is obscure for a different reason) across different works or even within the same text (220). Yet, nonetheless, Heidegger's thought as a whole is "coherent and self-consistent" (221). Interestingly, Korab-Karpowicz argues that this is particularly true of the later Heidegger, despite the fact that he is outwardly less systematic than in *Being and Time*. However, while Korab-Karpowicz's book gives an initial impression of clarity, as the reader waits patiently for the promised coherence and internal consistency of Heidegger's thought to be unpacked, he gradually discovers that Korab-Karpowicz's work combines the vices of *both* extremes. To be fair, Korab-Karpowicz doesn't indulge in the extreme obscurity of some Heideggerean scholarship, the reverent discipleship of which clarifies nothing in the thought of the master and renders itself virtually unreadable. However, he frequently takes technical distinctions from Heidegger (e.g. between beings and Being or ontic and ontological) and wields them with an outward, formal clarity which leaves the *meaning* of the terms themselves almost entirely unexplained. At the same time, insofar as he *does* clarify the meaning of these terms, he gives the impression that Heidegger is making quite trivial, or at least unoriginal distinctions in unnecessarily obscure, novel terminology.

Korab-Karpowicz adopts the common translation of Heidegger's distinction between *das Seiende* and *das Sein* as "beings" and "Being" as if it goes without saying, and as if the basic meaning of the resultant "ontological difference between being and beings" (142), Heidegger's "fundamental conception" (142), is more or less self-evident. But *das Seiende* is not plural but singular, a substantivized participle, which in English could be translated more literally as "the being" (this is how David Farrell Krell renders it in his translation of Heidegger's *Nietzsche*), although this sounds rather awkward in English (it sounds less awkward, though analogously abstract in other cases, e.g. "the living," as in "the

living and the dead"). *Das Seiende* is a literal translation of the Greek *to on*, which might also be translated "that which is." For Aristotle, the subject of first philosophy ("metaphysics" for later Aristotelians) is *to on he on*, literally "the being as being," or what everything that is has in common merely by virtue of the fact that it is, rather than being virtue of its being qualified in some way (being as changeable is the subject matter of physics, according to Aristotle). All science, then, takes *to on / das Seiende* as its subject matter, but in different ways. *Das Sein* by contrast could more literally be translated as "the 'to be'" or simply "to be." In distinguishing *das Seiende* from *das Sein*, Heidegger doesn't distinguish "beings" in the plural from "being" in the singular, but "that which is" from (the meaning of) "to be" as such. The distinction in this form is indeed foreign to Aristotle.

The question is whether Heidegger's originality consists in having disclosed a more fundamental question, implied in the themes of Plato, Aristotle and their successors but not properly thematized by them, *not* the question of "the being as being" but rather the question of "to be," or whether (as Plato or Aristotle would argue, presumably) the question of "to be" is not more fundamental than the question of being (*das Seiende*) but rather *derivative* from the latter, as a relatively abstract question about the meaning of a verb (thus articulated as an infinitive) rather than as a more concrete question about being itself (thus articulated as a participle – this is also related to the question of whether being must be understood essentially as a kind of activity, as Aristotle seems to imply and as scholastic philosophers such as Aquinas clearly argued). The question is whether Heidegger's originality consists in taking as fundamental what is rather derivative, and thus whether Heidegger (insofar as he is not just another neo-Aristotelian) is on a wild goose chase, or whether Heidegger has truly disclosed a fundamental ontological distinction which Plato and Aristotle missed or at least did not recognize as sufficiently important. One should not prejudge the issue, which (especially in a book written in English about Heidegger's interpretation of Greek philosophy) requires careful dissection of the different ways in which fundamental ontological questions can or should be articulated in English, German and Greek, a discussion oriented not towards "merely linguistic" questions but towards the matter at hand. Korab-Karpowicz altogether fails to address any of these questions. He simply treats the distinction between Being and beings as though it were self-evident (ironically, given that he at the same time praises Heidegger for noticing that the meaning of this distinction

is *not* merely self-evident), failing even to note the questionable character of the translation of *das Seiende* and *das Sein* as “beings” and “Being.” While this may be sufficient when Heidegger’s thought is touched on in some contexts, given Korab-Karpowicz’s themes and the ambition of his book, this neglect is wholly inadequate and robs his analysis of most of its value. Korab-Karpowicz makes a great show of his careful translation of Heidegger’s creative translations of the Greek fragments of the pre-Socratics and claims that earlier studies, e.g. those of Kenneth Maly and Robert Goff (216), failed due to “mistranslation.” But he sidesteps the fundamental issues of translation, which are also issues of interpretation, with respect to the basic terms which are the *philosophical* theme of his entire book. Thus when Korab-Karpowicz castigates those who confuse “Being” with “a being,” it is entirely unclear what he is even talking about. Frequent, repetitive statements along these lines do not help matters: “Being, an ambiguous disclosive process, withdraws itself within its own disclosedness and thus conceals its true nature” (72).

This lack of clarity afflicts Korab-Karpowicz’s approach to Heidegger’s interpretation of particular pre-Socratic fragments. Korab-Karpowicz translates Heidegger’s interpretation of Anaximander that “beings move in continuous interchange and opposition,” but this could more literally be translated as “being moves in continuous interchange and opposition” – an account of the internal character of the whole, rather than a generalization about entities (65). On the other hand, Heidegger himself translates *ta panta* (“all things”) in Heraclitus fragment 64 as *das Seiende* (see 131), which would provide some evidence in favour of a plural translation of *das Seiende* as “beings.” But since Korab-Karpowicz barely unpacks this issue, the internal consistency he claims to find in Heidegger’s later thought is not clarified or brought to the surface. Korab-Karpowicz cites Charles Kahn’s claim that Heraclitus fragment 30 contains a paradox, as the difference between the world-order and the source from which it arises is blurred, and then claims that “this paradox is soon resolved” once we realize “there is no duality here” (139). Heraclitus’ *kosmos* is “neither the world nor a world order, but being, the source and adornment of all beings” (139). Korab-Karpowicz appeals to a distinction which he has left completely obscure in order to resolve an apparent paradox. This is not a helpful approach. Further, the claim that being (whatever that means) is simultaneously the *origin of all beings* and their “adornment” is itself an obscure, indeed paradoxical claim which is left unclarified. Korab-Karpowicz does little to defend

Heidegger from the criticism that he is a rank obscurantist, but rather seems unwittingly to supply evidence for it. In relation to Heraclitus fragment 108, Korab-Karpowicz summarizes Heidegger's interpretation thus: "The interpretation which sees in σοφόν, the Absolute; the highest being, whether in the form of the God, the creator of the universe, or as a cosmic principle, is for Heidegger a metaphysical one. He subjects it to a severe critique" (165). Yet Korab-Karpowicz reproduces nothing of this "severe critique," only a series of dogmatic assertions that "the wise" is none of these things. Throwing around insulting words (like "metaphysical") doesn't amount to "severe critique." One is reminded of the notorious incident in 1960s Paris when Michel Foucault stormed furiously out of a lecture room after the lecturer, Jacques Derrida, referred to him as a "metaphysician."

The obscurity concerning the basic distinction between *das Seiende* and *das Sein* in Korab-Karpowicz's presentation finds its parallel in the obscurity of the way in which he presents Heidegger's distinction between Dasein as the being (to be) of the human and the being of innerworldly entities. Statements like this are typical: "The understanding related to Dasein's projecting against possibilities for being cannot be confused with man's faculty of understanding which is only a derivative phenomenon" (161, footnote 504). This statement is crying out for explanation, but it is supposed to constitute an explanation itself. I have a faculty of understanding, but it is derivative from my "projecting against possibilities for being." What character does this faculty have? In what sense and why is it derivative from such "projecting"? What does such "projecting" consist in? According to Heidegger, we learn, man's "existence is a task to be fulfilled" (163). What does it mean to say that I do not *have* tasks, but rather *am* a task? This claim is supposed to clarify Heidegger's seemingly opaque utterances about Dasein's way of being, but at best it merely raises further questions of its own, while giving us no reason to pursue them.

Korab-Karpowicz appeals to the distinction which Heidegger makes between "philosophy" and "thought." He claims that for Heidegger, it is unclear if Parmenides and Heraclitus are philosophers and not thinkers, or rather thinkers but not philosophers, without any explanation of what this obscure distinction means (58–59 – cf. also 137), so the reader has no idea what is at stake in the resolution of this ambiguity. Korab-Karpowicz repeatedly claims that for Heidegger, these pre-Socratics had a "direct insight into being" (cf. e.g. 99, 103), which seems an oversimplification

of Heidegger's admittedly rather elusive philosophical assessment of these thinkers. I do not know any place where Heidegger ascribes to *any* "philosopher" or "thinker" a direct insight into being. But for Korab-Karpowicz, Heidegger, after preparing all the theoretical artillery of *Being and Time* as a way of methodically answering the question of Being, first gradually began to realize that it wasn't going to reach its goal, then came to the awareness that the answer he was looking for was already present all along as a "direct insight" communicated in the fragments of Anaximander, Parmenides and Heraclitus. The point then was to bypass the history of philosophy and rediscover this insight, an insight which was only partial to begin with (100), but nonetheless authentic, and which Plato and Aristotle lost.

In many of his formulations, Korab-Karpowicz gives the impression that *the* truth about Being (the unchanging, permanently binding truth) was intuited by the pre-Socratics and rediscovered by Heidegger in the 1930s. But these formulations must be balanced against statements of a far more historical character, according to which different interpretations of Being are appropriate to different historical epochs. Korab-Karpowicz is aware of the difficulty, but he doesn't do much to resolve it. He says that philosophy is always both systematic and historical (63), but why does this require that philosophy take an explicitly historical form today, focused on the history of philosophy *as such*, whereas this wasn't necessary for e.g. Descartes? This appears to have *something* to do with the crisis of modernity, the unique character of "the present epoch of being, the epoch of being's oblivion and questionlessness" (108). But the connection is not elucidated.

Korab-Karpowicz claims that Heidegger is "unjustly" associated with historicism, but then gives an account (60) of Heidegger's thought which seems to be very historicist, according to which different philosophies are equally "perfect" but appropriate for different "epochs." He owes us an explanation of why it is not. Korab-Karpowicz frequently (e.g. 220) claims that the early Heidegger's conception of "the history of ontology" gives way to the later Heidegger's conception of "the history of being," without addressing the obvious question which this distinction raises – isn't there a fundamental difference between the history of a science which seeks to understand being and the history of being *itself*, just as there is a difference between, e.g. the history of cosmology and the history of the universe or the history of psychology and the history of the soul? One might argue that Korab-Karpowicz reproduces an ambiguity

in Heidegger himself, but if so, he shows no awareness of the difficulty and does nothing to clarify it. One might argue (and this is surely in some sense true) that the later Heidegger's thought is more radically historical than that of the early Heidegger, but this issue also remains unclarified by Korab-Karpowicz. At any rate, there is no elucidation of the difference, if any, between the history of ontology and the history of being (*Seinsgeschichte*). Sometimes, Korab-Karpowicz speaks as if different, unchanging, permanent *aspects* of Being are manifest in different historical epochs, whereas at other times he suggests that the pre-Socratic thinkers were superior to later thinkers because being manifested itself as "presencing" to them, whereas it did not manifest itself in this way to later thinkers (220). This would seem to imply that Being as such is indeed "presencing," whereas the aspects of Being manifest to later thinkers are not aspects of Being but rather misinterpretations of Being, to which later thinkers were condemned by virtue of the closed horizons of their respective epochs. But then *why* was the true character of Being manifest only to the pre-Socratics – and why is it, all of a sudden, accessible again in our epoch, to Heidegger and then to us, through our reading of Heidegger's reading of the pre-Socratics? In Korab-Karpowicz's presentation these seem like arbitrary theses, while in Heidegger himself, whatever criticisms may legitimately be made of his thought, they are rooted in a profound reflection on the character of modernity. Further – if this is how the pre-Socratics are to be understood, why speak of a history of *Being* at all, rather than a history of the human attempt to grasp Being?

I have dwelt primarily on these formal inconsistencies in Korab-Karpowicz's presentation because his presentation is indeed highly formal; for all the elaborate apparatus, there's not much in the way of substantive philosophical analysis. Insofar as he does touch on the latter, he flounders in incoherence. Let me give just one example. At first, Korab-Karpowicz says, in relation to Heidegger's interpretation of Parmenides (which further develops his more systematic treatment of truth in *Being and Time*), that truth as "unconcealedness" has nothing to do with truth in its "traditional" understanding as "correctness" (184). Then he says that truth itself "means *more* originally" (my emphasis) unconcealedness than correctness (187) and (somewhat differently) that for *propositions* to be true in the sense of "correct," the beings which the propositions are *about* must first be unconcealed, as a prior condition (187): "The correctness of propositions arises [sic] and presupposes the unconcealment of beings." This suggests that the meaning of "truth"

when applied to propositions does indeed mean “correctness.” This kind of false clarity, sloppy argumentation and fundamental obscurity is characteristic of this book.

Finally, Korab-Karpowicz frequently speaks of “the Greeks” in an ambiguous manner, where it is unclear if he means to refer to the Greeks in general or merely to the Greek philosophers or thinkers, e.g. “we must cross over to its [truth’s] essence as originally experienced by the Greeks” (184). But for a philosopher like Parmenides, the difference between Greeks and non-Greeks (known as “barbarians” to most non-philosophers) is far less important than the difference between philosophers and non-philosophers. Korab-Karpowicz doesn’t reflect on this possibility, or the possibility that Parmenides’ speech about the gods may reflect his awareness of the theological-political question. Struggling with the question of how a profound thinker such as Parmenides could have endorsed a crudely anthropomorphic conception of the gods, Heidegger claims that the Greeks did not think of gods in anthropomorphic terms at all (cf. 182–183). But why then did Xenophanes criticize his co-religionists so harshly for this very fact – just as Plato did, in a more elaborate and sophisticated way, in the *Republic*? Korab-Karpowicz often gives the impression that all the Greeks, at least those of the pre-Socratic era (“the tragic age,” as Nietzsche called it) possessed a “direct insight into being,” even as only the philosophers articulated it in books. To be fair to Korab-Karpowicz, this criticism can justly be made of Heidegger himself. But the completely uncritical way in which he reproduces this difficulty in Heidegger, without conveying much of the profound and illuminating dimensions of his master’s thought, is characteristic of his general approach and its severe deficiencies.²

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