

INTERVIEW WITH
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AUTHOR OF
THE REMAINS OF BEING:
HERMENEUTIC ONTOLOGY AFTER METAPHYSICS

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Question: *Your last book, The Hermeneutic Nature of Analytic Philosophy: A Study of Ernst Tugendhat, centered on the German philosopher in order to dismiss the division of philosophy into the analytic and continental schools, while in this new book you seem to engage in a strictly ontological issue: “What remains of Being after the deconstruction of metaphysics?” What is the difference between both books? What is the goal now?*

Santiago Zabala: I don’t think there is a big difference since they both engage in what has become the most important problem for philosophy since Heidegger: how can metaphysics be overcome? While in the first book I gave an answer through the postmetaphysical thought of Tugendhat, in this new book I confront the problem at its root, that is, through the concept of Being. Although in this new book I include a whole section on Tugendhat (as well as sections on Jacques Derrida, Reiner Schürmann, Jean-Luc Nancy, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Gianni Vattimo), its purpose to expose the remnants of Being in Tugendhat’s philosophy, which shows the continuity between both investigations. In sum, the goal of this book is to expose the remains of Being after Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics in contemporary philosophy. The greatest achievements of this destruction are, first, the revelation that Being has always been described as a present object in its presentness and, second, the realization that it is not possible to definitively overcome this objective interpretation without falling back into another descriptive interpretation. In this condition, where metaphysics cannot be “*überwinden*,” (overcome, meaning a complete abandonment of the problem) but can only be “*verwinden*” (surpassed, alluding to the way one surpasses a major disappointment not by forgetting it but by coming to terms with it) it is necessary to start inter-

preting Being through its remains, which is a concept that maintains metaphysics in such a way to also overcome it.

Q: *You talk not only about the “remains” but also the “remnants” of Being. What is the difference? Doesn’t this concept direct your thought toward an archaeological vocabulary where “ruins” would also work appropriately?*

SZ: Although the difference is very small, it is significant. While the “remains of Being” refers to the whole historical corpse of Being after Heidegger’s destruction of it, “Being’s remnants” instead indicates what is left, the traces of Being. The first is really the horizon within which every entity gives itself as something; the latter shows what remains of Being, that is, its survival in fragments (which differ in each of the philosophers I study). Regarding ruins and archeology, this is also a question that Jean Grondin asked me when he read the manuscript, but, as I told him, these fragments have nothing to do with “ruins,” that is, with the ruins situated throughout the Roman Forum, for example. While these once were royal palaces, residencies, and other identifiable structures, the remains I’m talking about all have the characteristic of been “indeterminate,” “unpresentable,” or “ungraspable,” that is, “*abgegriffen*,” “worn-out.” This is an expression used by Heidegger himself in a lecture course delivered at Freiburg in the winter semester of 1941 not to indicate the origin of Being but, on the contrary, to respond to the state, condition, and actuality of Being. Being’s remnants do not presence or represent anything but are instead answers to the new fundamental question that Heidegger announced in 1936 (and later published in *Introduction to Metaphysics*): “*Wie steht es mit Sein?*” “How it is going with Being?” This question will always refer to Being’s original state, and any answer will always refer to its origin when it was intact. In sum, the remains of Being do not represent anything objective except their own traces or remnants, which, although they are not objective and escape all forms of comprehension, are still the condition of such representations. If metaphysics cannot be overcome but must be surpassed, then Aristotle’s “*energeia*,” Descartes’s “representedness,” or Hegel’s “absolute Spirit” of Being must now be abandoned in favor of a Being that includes this “surpassing,” such as Derrida’s traces, Schürmann’s traits, or Vattimo’s events of Being. If I were to exaggerate, I would also demand that science talk about remains rather than the objectivity of its materials since again objectivity is never really present. That science, as Thomas Kuhn explained, constantly changes paradigms actually demonstrates how objectivity is just a desire we never really fulfill. Even science’s hard facts are a result of constructions that might be replaced at any time. In this new postmetaphysical condition, hermeneutic ontology attains a central role.

Q: *Why hermeneutics?*

SZ: Of all the available philosophies in the so called postmetaphysical market, hermeneutics is the only one that does not pretend to an accurate description of Being; that is, it never intends to completely interpret Being. This limit or weakness of hermeneutics is actually its strongest feature since it indicates how it has inherited all the consequences of the destruction of metaphysics. This inheritance, this awareness, is nothing else than “weak thought.” Hermeneutics is the philosophy of “weak thought,” and, following Heidegger in his volumes on Nietzsche, it indicates how “within metaphysics there is nothing to Being as such.” A weakened ontology requires an interpretative philosophy where truth is not the result of descriptions but only the outcome of productive interpretations that are always insufficient. Just as in today’s theological studies Jesus’ factual existence is less important than its historical effects, so in philosophy the remains of Being are much more significant than its objective presence or origin. This is why the motto of the book is: “what remains, not what is, is essential to philosophy.”

Q: *How is the book structured?*

SZ: After going through Heidegger’s revolutionary operation in the first part (“Being Destroyed”) I engage six philosophers (in the second part, “After the Destruction”) who have proposed a way to follow Heidegger’s demand to “work out Being for itself anew.” But the book does not end here. In the third and final part, “Generating Being Through Interpretation,” the remains of Being in Derrida, Schürmann, Nancy, Gadamer, Tugendhat, and Vattimo provide for a “logics of discursive continuities” in order to demonstrate how Being can be generated through interpretation. In this final part I lay out the case for considering hermeneutics a philosophy of “generations” because interpretations (also descriptions) do not “create” but, as Vattimo explained, “generate Being, new senses of experience, new ways for the world to announce itself, different from anything “before.” They join the latter in a sort of discursus whose logic (also in the sense of *Logos*) consists precisely in continuity. This logics is explained through various examples from Plato’s *Symposium*, Luther’s principle of “*sola scriptura*” and Gadamer’s effects of the classic.

Q: *Can readers expect to learn about these authors from your analysis, or should they already be prepared?*

SZ: I do not think the readers need to be experts in contemporary ontology because I structured the book in a way to allow all readers to find themselves engaged systemically in it. I would just hope everyone will read it from the beginning to the end because otherwise one might become lost: I doubt we can understand the remnants of Being in any of the six philosophers without going through Being's destruction in the first part. Nor could anyone understand the "Logics of Discursive Continuities" in the third part without first reading these remains. All my colleagues who read the book had the same thing to say: "Once you start it, it's impossible to stop." While I interpret this just as a very friendly comment, I did make sure all ten sections are systematically interconnected in order to allow the reader to follow a journey rather than reading just to obtain information. Information can be had from reading histories of philosophy, but philosophy comes from engaging critically with original texts. This is a book for those interested in engaging critically with philosophy. This is something I learned from Richard Rorty who, contrary to a first impression is very much present throughout the book. Rorty always hoped that in the future philosophical books will be "less pretentious, less professionalized, less priggish, and less guarded," which is always my own concern even when, as in this case, I'm writing about ontology, which can be such a drastically artificial theme. For these reasons from the start of the introduction I don't explain just the ontology we will outline together but also why certain authors such as Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and Alain Badiou are not studied in the second part.

Q: *Is the remains of Being the ontology of "weak thought."? Why did you choose Derrida, Schürmann, Nancy, Gadamer, Tugendhat, and Vattimo to expose this ontology of remnants? Are they all weak thinkers?*

SZ: While Heidegger indicates the "worn-out" status of Being, Derrida proposes Being's "traces," Schürmann Being's "traits," Nancy Being's "co-presences," Gadamer Being's "conversation," Tugendhat Being's sentences, and Vattimo Being's "event of weakness." All these are interpretations of the remains of Being, not of what Being is. In this way, yes, these are all weak thinkers, although I doubt they would all agree with this definition. But this is secondary; what is important for all of them is Being's worn-out status. In addition, I did not investigate Being in these six philosophers only because they express Being's remains; I also hope to show how Being is never single after metaphysics. There isn't one "remnant" of Being that suits better than the others, but there are authors, such as Heidegger and the six I analyze, who propose an interpretation where the weakness of

Being is deliberate. In this way, ontology is not only necessary, but also requested by Being itself since, Heidegger wrote to Sartre in the *Letter on Humanism*: “*précisément nous sommes sur un plan où il y a principalement l’Être* [we are precisely in a situation where principally there is Being].” What Heidegger was trying to explain to Sartre (and to us) was that Being is always in the “driver’s seat” (this expression was suggested to me by Thomas Sheehan), in other words, it’s Being that guides our destiny.

Q: *Why is a study on ontology necessary today? And what does this work add to contemporary philosophical discussions? Are there other books today that deal with a similar ontological perspective?*

SZ: Ontology as the investigation of Being has always been unique in philosophy and will probably continue to demand our efforts (in the form of recollection or appropriation, as Heidegger requested) not only because it’s what shaped philosophy in its essence but also because it is the only sphere through which we think. Among the first things my teacher, Prof. Vattimo, taught me is that to be “a philosopher means to be obsessed with the verb Being (concerning what is and what is not) because it invites you not to remain satisfied with your own identity and to seek the entire horizon of Being—in other words, to dialogue.” In this book I really took this suggestion literally since it implies that Being requires infinite interpretations rather than definite descriptions, in other words, “conversations instead of truth” as Rorty always requested. Apart from the books by the six philosophers I work through, which are still very much part of the contemporary debate, I think Michael Marder’s *The Event of the Thing* (2008) is a great investigation with similar goals, although he focuses mostly on Derrida. I hope that Marder and this book will remind the contemporary philosophical debate that there is nothing further apart from science or metaphysical thought (such as that of John Searle or Barry Smith) than ontology. Being might also be the meaning of the word Being (as so many analytic philosophers still insist today), but this word has also a history of effects without which it would cease to be a word. These effects are not only linguistic but also social, anthropological, and political. The only “reality” of the word Being is the history of its various meanings, which discards any objective solution. This is why Being is what invites us to dialogue or, which I prefer, “conversation.”

Q: *It seems you are inheriting and developing the traces of Derrida rather than Vattimo’s events of Being?*

SZ: I don't think so (although there wouldn't be anything wrong with that). The reason one might have such an impression is because the terms "remains" and "remnants" sound very much like Derrida's "traces." But I only consider Derrida's "traces" as one possible remnant of Being, not the realm within which Beings appear, that is, the remains. For me Derrida (like Schürmann, who is also a "deconstructive philosopher") is much more significant for his concept of "traces" or the "margins of philosophy" than for the deconstructive procedure. I think his deconstruction has already been brought forward by Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics. Derrida in several places recognize his debt toward Heidegger as far as deconstruction is concerned. My intention was to outline the ontology of "weak thought," which invites us to surpass metaphysics by inheriting the history of its dissolution. In this dissolution or weakening, one finds the remains of Being.

Q: *In the introduction you clarify how this book is the development of a project outlined by both Foucault and Vattimo. How has your teacher responded to this work?*

SZ: While Foucault was the first to coin the term "ontology of actuality" (in order to turn to those "events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying"), it is Vattimo who actually elaborated its consequences after the deconstruction of metaphysics in books such as *Beyond Interpretation*, *Vocation and Responsibility of the Philosopher*, and *Nihilism and Emancipation*. In the first book's preface he announced a book entitled *Ontology of Actuality* (based on a series of lectures at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve in the early nineties, which I attended) that has now become *On Reality*, which is still in progress. While I encourage him to finish it, in our discussions he suggested I do it myself since he noticed I was interpreting this "ontology of actuality" in a different way than he was. He was correct: while he was thinking more about the "actuality" of Foucault's formula, I was focusing more in its "ontology." In sum, the idea for me was to find a concept of Being weak enough to surpass metaphysics in order to continue its journey. While I suggested Being as "conversation" (which I still consider today the most suitable postmetaphysical remnant of Being), I also recognized it was first necessary to outline systematically weak thought's ontology, which Vattimo has been indicating for the past thirty years in terms of ontology of actuality. As it turned out, I produced a book that is very different from what he still has in mind now. For this reason, I'm grateful he encouraged me to develop on my own what I thought was

his idea of the “ontology of actuality.” His reaction to the book was positive (see chapter 42 in his *Not Being God*), particularly considering how I managed to find in Heidegger’s later work notions such as “worn-out” Being, which justifies his “weak ontology.” Although he thinks I gave him and Foucault too much credit by explaining all this in the introduction, I believe it is important to give readers the genealogy of the book they are reading. When philosophical books seem too original, it’s often because the author believes he is writing “from nowhere” when in fact we are all pursuing our teachers, education, or readings and ought to acknowledge it.