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TRUTH AND GENESIS

A review of Miguel de Beistegui, *Truth and Genesis: Philosophy as Differential Ontology*.
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MIGUEL DE BEISTEGUI HAS WRITTEN a forceful and compelling book in defense of philosophy as ontology. This book can be read as a call to arms for the future of philosophy, as a critique of the history of metaphysics, and as an exposition of an ontology grounded in difference. While each of these aspects has its antecedent in twentieth century philosophy, de Beistegui's project is distinctive in many respects. One of the great merits of the book is the clarity with which de Beistegui lays out the nature and aim of his project. In the sections of the book that outline his theoretical framework, de Beistegui writes in a straightforward and jargon-free manner, allowing the reader to readily grasp the targets of the project. This said, the book is by no means easy to digest, for these programmatic sections account for a small fraction of the book's pages. Better than half of the book consists of close readings of portions of Martin Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy* and Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. These readings are dense and challenging—not meant to serve as introductions to either thinker. Along with these sections on Heidegger and Deleuze, de Beistegui offers a reconstruction of the history of the metaphysics of substance from Parmenides to Merleau-Ponty, with special emphasis on Aristotle and Hegel. There is also a chapter on the ontological implications of contemporary science. The sequence of the book runs as follows: the Introduction lays out the parameters of the project; Part One sketches the origins and aporias of classical metaphysics as an ontology of identity; Part Two presents Heidegger's mature alternative to a philosophy of identity; and Part Three provides a detailed exposition of the ontology of Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, most especially in its relation to contemporary science.

Before coming to the "truth" and "genesis" of the book's title, it will be necessary to say more precisely what de Beistegui's project is. At least four distinct levels of the project can be discerned. First, de Beistegui wishes to bring philosophy back

to the thinking of being as its primary task. This, he says, is the most proper object of philosophical reflection, but has become philosophy's least considered topic. (In this, of course, he follows Heidegger, but in a decidedly different manner.) Second, de Beistegui wants to provide an account of the history of metaphysics that reveals its ultimate incoherence. In its commitment to identity, de Beistegui argues, classical ontology (even in its radicalized form in Hegel's work) fails to account for either a real principle of individuation or for the univocity of being. This double failing is, in de Beistegui's estimation, a failure to account both for genesis and intelligibility of the world. Third, de Beistegui strives to return to philosophy a robust connection with science—and not philosophy as the philosophy *of* science, the philosophy that explains how science operates, but rather as a philosophy that thinks the ontology *implicit in* science. Fourth, de Beistegui attempts to show how Heidegger and Deleuze, in different and sometimes irreconcilable ways, provide philosophies of difference that overcome the failings of classical metaphysics.

One of the most intriguing parts of de Beistegui's argument is his account of modern (Newtonian) science in its relation to classical metaphysics. The usual account of this relation is that with Galileo and Newton, as a consequence of the mathematization of nature, science breaks free of the Aristotelian metaphysics that had grounded physics up to and through the Scholastic period. And as de Beistegui himself acknowledges, this breaking free was real and decisive—but only in one respect. The Newtonian standpoint differs from the Aristotelian in two significant respects. First, it brings together those things that Aristotle thought could not be meaningfully aligned: the exactness of mathematics and the imperfection of natural things. Second, in viewing the whole of the phenomenal world—earth and heavens alike—as one continuous realm, modern physics frees itself from the distinctions that ground Aristotelian causal explanations. For example, for Aristotle, free fall is to be explained by recourse to *what* something is. A rock, as an earthy object, falls to the ground because that is its natural resting place. Such an explanation is further grounded in a radical distinction between what is down here and what is up there. Even before such a schema is altered by Christian thought, this framework, as de Beistegui stresses, is a theological one. The important point here is that physical phenomena, for Aristotle, are only explicable in light of certain onto-theological distinctions. Newtonian science strips the material world of such distinctions of *whatness*. (The falling apple and the revolving moon exhibit the same motion, and are indistinguishable *qua* projectiles.)

The compelling aspect of de Beistegui's interpretation, however, is the way in which he shows that modern science continues to operate under certain classical presuppositions—so much so that modern physics can be said to “complete”

classical metaphysics. The essential point here is that modern physics remains grounded in the notion of substance. This is true in two respects. First, inasmuch as Newtonian science is a science that seeks universal laws, it operates with an implicit notion of essence. The laws of nature are the essential ground beneath the accidents of particular phenomena. Second, with respect to physics and chemistry as sciences of the ultimate constituents of material objects, modern science sought to discover the unchanging substrate that would underlie the shifting accidents of individual entities and phenomenal events. In this respect, modern science retains the core prejudices of classical thought, and in the process makes philosophy redundant. (It is no accident that this is the period in which philosophy becomes more and more a philosophy of subjectivity.)

The sixth chapter of *Truth and Genesis*, “Physics beyond Metaphysics?,” while serving in the sequence of the book as a preface to the chapters on Deleuze, can be read on its own in connection with the argument presented in the introduction. In this chapter, de Beistegui shows how the sciences of quantum mechanics and thermodynamics have already implicitly overcome the classical presuppositions of modern science. With respect to quantum theory, the point is rather straightforward. In contrast to an account in which an attempt is made to find the ultimate substrate of all material things—the basic building-blocks of nature, as it were—quantum theory provides an account of matter as *event*. In the Newtonian model, matter and motion are strictly separate. Matter moves only as local motion. The thing that moves from here to there is not itself constituted by the motion; it preexists the motion. Quantum mechanics, on the other hand, reveals that matter is itself only a *consequence* of motion. Matter is not at some ultimate level inert. It is dynamic through and through, and as such radically undercuts the commonsense notion of an object. And where one can no longer think the object in such a manner, objectivity itself is called into doubt. This, for de Beistegui, is the radical conclusion of a reflection on quantum theory. He writes,

The mechanical system is no longer an object, at least in the classical sense of the term, and the scientist no longer a subject. By that, I mean the following: nature cannot be grasped from all sides at once. This is a structural impossibility—an impossibility that is mathematically formulated, scientifically accounted for. Science has itself been forced to step outside its own ideal of objectivity, not for metaphysical reasons, but for scientific reasons: it is nature as such that has proven to defy the objective framework forced onto it. (208)

Note that it is not any metaphysical commitment that *brings* science to this conclusion, rather certain metaphysical commitments are *implicit in* this conclusion. It is the task of philosophy to bring them out.

As per thermodynamics, allow me to limit myself to one point. While Newtonian mechanics treats time as reversible, thermodynamics reveals that the arrow of time is grounded in nature itself as a material process. For Newtonian science, a complex of motions can be, as it were, run forward or backward. Metaphysically speaking, however, such a viewpoint seems to strip the world of any meaningful temporal dimension and is unable to account scientifically for the occurrence of novelty. In fact, its presuppositions disallow anything truly new to appear in nature. Against such a view, thermodynamics, by means of the concept of entropy, gives a material grounding to the arrow of time. In their tendency toward dissipation and equilibrium, material systems, from a statistical standpoint, account for the so-called forward movement of time. On the macro level, the direction of time is manifest as the tendency toward equilibrium. This in itself stands in contrast to the Newtonian model. However, in this framework there also exists the possibility for open systems that, for a time at least, are able to generate order and complexity against the entropic flow. Such is the phenomenon of life. In the wake of Darwin, two conclusions can be drawn. First, the temporal unfolding of the tree of life can only be understood as a process of self-differentiation of nature itself (there are no outside “forms”). Second, the emergence of species (as radically temporally constituted “objects”) cannot be accounted for in advance. Evolution presents us with a future that is open.

Let me make just two brief remarks before moving on. First, if one is interested in this question of science in its relation to philosophy, one could fruitfully read the introduction and sixth chapter of *Truth and Genesis* independently of the remainder of the book. On their own they provide a compelling sketch of an important problem. Second, one must understand that these remarks in no way do justice to the positive ontological project that de Beistegui offers. These considerations are merely one aspect of the conceptual grounding for that project.

I must discuss one more topic before moving on to the chapters on Heidegger and Deleuze. As I mentioned above, de Beistegui not only wants to frame his book in relation to science, but also wants to provide a critique of the inherent shortcomings of classical metaphysics as such, for his position is that the ontology of classical metaphysics is profoundly inadequate at its core. Part One of *Truth and Genesis*, “Onto-tauto-logy: The Aristotelian Legacy,” lays out this critique in detail. These chapters are among the most enjoyable of the book (I will reserve a few critical remarks for the end of this review). De Beistegui provides an insightful, engaging and learned commentary on, and exposition of, the history of the metaphysics of substance from Aristotle to Hegel. I will attempt to reduce his analysis to two issues: the primacy of identity and the impoverishment of difference.

While de Beistegui begins with some remarks about Parmenides and Plato, the real story here is one that begins with Aristotle. In his attempt to comprehend being *qua* being, Aristotle makes two decisive moves. First, he reduces the question of being to the question of substance, *ousia*. What this means is that being will be understood first and foremost as the being of substances. All other instances of being will have to be understood in reference to (*pros hen*) substance. This is the place where Aristotle's metaphysics and philosophy of language converge. Substances are those things that ground both what is and what we can say. The problem that arises is that we cannot say the particular but are limited to speaking in universals. This linguistic restriction finds its metaphysical analogue in the problem of individuation. While Aristotle attempts to grant primacy to sensible particulars, his metaphysics ultimately cannot account for *there being* particulars. Rather, it can only account for their subsumption under universals. This is, for de Beistegui, the first great aporia of classical metaphysics—it cannot account for the genetic emergence of *this particular qua* particular. In a sense, only essence (*eidōs*) survives metaphysical speculation, and being is unable to be truly grasped as what is held in common.

The second shortcoming of classical ontology is its conception of difference. De Beistegui's discussion of the history of this concept after Aristotle is rewarding, but I will not rehearse it here. Let me limit myself to one important point. *Difference for Aristotle is at all times secondary to identity*. While two things can be said to be "other" inasmuch as they do not share a common ground, differences are always derivative of some common genus. In other words, only by being placed within a horizon of a common ground, only by *first* saying how two things are the same, can they then be said to differ. This, more than anything, is the commitment that has been decisive for the history of ontology, for it closes off both the possibility of positing difference as itself the principle of individuation and the possibility of comprehending being univocally. (This story comes to a head with Hegel, who seems to overcome both problems. But de Beistegui argues that Hegel's philosophy itself remains at its core a philosophy of identity.)

Finally we come to the main headings of de Beistegui's project: truth and genesis. These words can be taken to stand in for the names of Heidegger and Deleuze, for de Beistegui will present Heidegger's thought under the rubric of "truth" and Deleuze's under "genesis." The chapters on Heidegger and Deleuze are dense and both terminologically and semantically challenging. Given the clarity with which de Beistegui lays out his project, these chapters come as a surprise and can, on a first reading, feel excessive. (Suffice it to say that this is a book that likely needs to be read twice.) Given the severe density of these chapters I will attempt only to gloss their main motivations and conclusions.

Those familiar with Heidegger's work immediately following *Being and Time* will know that "truth" becomes a key concept in Heidegger's thought alongside of "Dasein." It is also well-known that Heidegger abandons the completion of *Being and Time* because of his conviction that it remains too much a philosophy of the subject—that is, Dasein retains too much the position of the subject in post-Cartesian thought. The emphasis on truth allows Heidegger to move away from the centrality of Dasein. Rather than relying on Dasein to open the space in which being appears, Heidegger slowly works toward a conception in which truth as the clearing of being is not dependent on the ecstatic temporality of Dasein for its disclosure. De Beistegui's entire discourse on Heidegger is an attempt to explicate this shift whereby difference (*Unterschied*) is presented as the anterior condition to both being and Dasein.

De Beistegui attempts four things in his reading of Heidegger: first, he traces the changes in Heidegger's understanding of Dasein from *Being and Time* to *Contributions to Philosophy* (the transition from Dasein to Da-sein); second, he shows how Heidegger arrives at a conception of being in which neither Da-sein nor being are themselves responsible for the clearing (for truth), but that it is difference itself that accounts for the clearing; third, he argues that this difference can ultimately be understood only by comprehending Heidegger's remarks about "time-space" in *Contributions*; and fourth, he shows how it is this difficult work of *Contributions* that allows Heidegger to develop his later thought as a thinking of difference.

One distinction is crucial in order to even get a glimpse of why de Beistegui thinks this work of Heidegger's to be so important. It is no longer the difference (*Differenz*) between beings and beings that Heidegger attempts to comprehend, but rather an originary rending (*Unterschied*) that is anterior even to the onto-ontological difference. I can attempt nothing more than this gesture here. Let me, however, point out the limitation that de Beistegui thinks remains operative in Heidegger's work to the end. Even as Dasein is displaced from the center, being remains in an important sense for Heidegger *for us* (just as we are *for* being). Only with Deleuze does de Beistegui think that philosophy is able to move beyond this general stance. Nevertheless, de Beistegui believes Heidegger's philosophy of truth, in its poetic comportment toward being, presents a genuinely significant standpoint. Here, in the transition from Heidegger to Deleuze, we can see that de Beistegui offers us a double-sided conception of being. Truth must give way to genesis.

The ontology that Gilles Deleuze developed in *Difference and Repetition* is in many ways the heart of de Beistegui's book. While Heidegger's thought in *Contributions to Philosophy* makes it possible to thinking being on the basis of

difference alone, it is only with Deleuze that the twin problems of individuation and univocity will be overcome. The sense of both the concept (or Idea) and actuality is transformed in Deleuze's thinking. The concept is no longer something under which individuals fall, and the actual is no longer enclosed within a horizon of possibility and representation.

Laying out precisely what these and further formulations mean is the work of the final three chapters of *Truth and Genesis*. I will not be able to do justice to them here. But since de Beistegui himself places such emphasis on the notion of *virtual multiplicity*, let me attempt to at least sketch its meaning. Multiplicity has nothing to do with plurality, and the virtual is not to be confused with the possible. These two points alone can take us some distance into what is distinctive in Deleuze's work. (Let me note that Deleuze's ontology borrows a great deal terminologically and conceptually from Bergson. De Beistegui traces this lineage, but also makes clear Deleuze's ultimate divergence from Bergson. These subtleties cannot be taken up here.) Multiplicities can be thought of as tendencies within material systems. They are not actualized (extensive) states of affairs, but rather the anterior principles of actuality. An example will help to illustrate the basic conceptual structure. Both the soap bubble and the salt crystal share a common multiplicity—the tendency for the system to minimize energy. In the soap bubble it is a tendency to minimize surface tension, and in the salt crystal it is a tendency to minimize bonding energy. In each case, the result is the physical actualization of a geometric structure, sphere and cube, respectively. Two things must be noted here. First, the tendency toward minimizing energy is not itself the actual, the given, but is rather the condition of the resulting structure (the conditioned). In this sense the tendency is only virtual. Second, the tendency is not itself either spherical or cubic. *There is no relationship of resemblance between the virtual and the actual.* (A so-called metaphysical explanation of the actualized shapes would be based on the essence of the spheric or cubic themselves.)

This crude sketch gives us both an instance and the basic structure of the ontology that Deleuze develops more fully. Let us note two more things. First, the virtual is not transcendent to the world in the usual sense. The virtual is the field of both actualized and unactualized tendencies of a given material system. It cannot be reduced to the actual and exceeds it, but it does not exist independently of it. Second, it is the task of philosophy to comprehend the basic structure of virtuality as a comprehension of the ground of the actual—it does not search, as science does, for laws of particular phenomena, but rather attempts to construct an account of the possibility of scientific practice on the basis of fields of multiplicities. Ultimately, this is not limited to physical systems in the narrow sense, but will be extended by Deleuze to encompass psychical, social, and political systems as well.

Finally, let me simply note that de Beistegui offers a detailed exposition of *how* Deleuze's ontology is able to solve the problems of individuation and univocity. In other words, he shows how Deleuze's understanding of difference can account for the *genesis* of all phenomena. The following quotation will have to stand in as a promissory note for that detailed discourse.

Whereas for Aristotle, and for an entire tradition after him, difference remained caught up within the identity of the concept (of the genus or of essence), its many forms as specific difference always presupposing the form of identity within generic concepts, and thus was never itself a concept, being is now [with Deleuze] said of difference alone, and this in such a way that the very form of the concept no longer presupposes that of identity. With univocity, ontology frees itself from the primacy of the identity of the concept, which is also always a primacy of the concept of identity. It is the very sense of the concept itself that changes, drawing in its wake a transformation of the relation between difference and identity which ... amounts to nothing less than a reversal and a displacement of the traditional hierarchy governing the two terms. And so, in this double twisting free of what Deleuze calls "representation," an ontology of difference [*qua* genesis and individuation] begins to be articulated, and metaphysics overcome. (238)

Allow me to venture two brief criticisms before concluding. Without calling into doubt the cogency of de Beistegui's analyses, the rhetorical dimension of the book presents two difficulties. The first concerns Part One as a critical reconstruction of the tradition. The section as a whole, while illuminating, feels one-sided. The tradition is not monolithic, and even singular figures, such as Aristotle, cannot be cast in the whole cloth of the "metaphysics of presence." The very tensions present in Aristotle's work, for instance, arise because he is committed to two contrary positions: the primacy of *ousia* as the *tode ti*, the "this," and to the primacy of the *eidos* as a principle of identity. De Beistegui is right to point out how the latter commitment overwhelms the former in the tradition, but it can be misleading to de-emphasize the commitment to the particular that stands at the head of that tradition. De Beistegui's reconstruction of the tradition can, thus, come off more as polemic than exposition.

The second criticism concerns the rhetorical imbalance between the programmatic sections of the book—written in a clear and accessible idiom—and the chapters on Heidegger and Deleuze—written in the dense terminological idioms of the respective thinkers. Before defending this aspect of the book, let me simply point out that the dissimilarity of the various sections in this respect can be disarming, and perhaps discouraging, to the reader. One feels at times that de Beistegui has interlaced two books—one a manifesto for a future philosophy, and the other a detailed argument of what that philosophy is.

Both of these criticisms, however, would have to be measured against the most important question not explicitly raised by de Beistegui, namely, whether what he argues is true. If, in fact, his assessment of the tradition and its overcoming in Heidegger and Deleuze is the right one, then both the structure and rhetoric of the book can be better justified. For in light of such a positive judgment of the book's global argument, a double justification would be granted. On the one hand, the apparent one-sided treatment of the tradition would be more secure as the very truth of that tradition. On the other hand, the difficult expository sections of the book would justify themselves as grounding and carrying through the program as it is laid out. Whether such justification is achieved will be for de Beistegui's readers to decide.

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