

From Reason to Wisdom: Heidegger's Interpretation of Logos

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Abstract

Heraclitus' "all things are one" carries a classic metaphysical structure, which signifies that Being was already concealed at the beginning of Western thought. Heidegger delves into early Greek thought to reveal people's understanding of nature before the deviation between logos (λόγος) and nature (φύσις). He argues that the light of Being flashed at the beginning of Western thought and then immediately vanished. The consequence of the concealment of Being was the formal opening of the path of Western metaphysics centered on rationality, which was taken as the path of wisdom. Western metaphysics ultimately led humanity to the realm of nihilism. Therefore, one possible way to address the nihilism problem caused by rationality is to return to early Western thought (pre-Socratic period), explore the original meaning of logos and nature, re-understand what wisdom is, and gain insight in wisdom to deal with nihilism.

Keywords: Reason, Wisdom, Logos, Nihilism, Metaphysics

1. Introduction

Logos (Λόγος) is an important concept in Western philosophy, which can be translated as speech, discourse, or reason (Liddell&Scott 1977, p.416). The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus was the first to use this concept, viewing logos as a hidden wisdom that serves as a subtle scale and criterion for the changes of all things in the world. According to Aristotle, humans are beings with logos (in the sense of reason), and the difference between humans and other animals lies in their possession of logos (Nicomachean Ethics, 1098a3). Logos is also an essential concept in the philosophy of Heidegger, who reveals through his interpretation of logos why Western thought took a metaphysical path at the beginning of its history. In Heidegger's view, humans living in the modern world have lost their original connection to Being due to being dominated by metaphysical thinking. He argues that modern nihilism is inseparable from Western metaphysics. By exploring early Greek thought, Heidegger reveals how logos (λόγος) and nature (φύσις) were understood at the origin of Western thought. Therefore, understanding Heidegger's interpretation of early Greek thought, particularly his interpretation of the term "logos", is crucial for understanding his philosophy and confronting contemporary nihilism. This paper consists of four parts: first, by reinterpreting Heraclitus' "all things are one", it reveals the metaphysical structure hidden within and argues that Being is already concealed within this structure. Second, building on Heidegger's interpretation of Heraclitus, it discusses the relationship between logos and reason, and how reason is a force that conceals Being. Third, based on the previous two points, it discusses nihilism as a consequence of Being being concealed. Fourth, based on Heidegger's interpretation of logos, we reinterpret the "wisdom" of Heraclitus and argues that returning to wisdom is a possible way to escape nihilism.

2. "All Things Are One" as a Classical Metaphysical Structure

Metaphysics is the foundation of Western philosophy, which inquires into the nature of the world, i.e., the study of all beings, the cause and origin of all phenomena. From the perspective of its subject matter, metaphysics primarily investigates three main questions: first, the inquiry into Being itself, commonly believed to have originated with Parmenides' distinction between the path of truth and the path of opinion; second, the inquiry into the first cause or prime mover of things, referred to as the problem of the first mover; and third, the inquiry into the existence of an immutable entity in this changing world of experience, which serves as the foundation upon which these mutable entities rest. Therefore, the problems explored in metaphysics constitute the foundation of all disciplines.

In the history of metaphysics, we often regard Parmenides as the beginning of metaphysics, as he was the first to consider Being as the object of truth. Parmenides (5th century BCE) stated: "What routes of inquiry alone there are for

thinking: The one-that [it] is, and that [it] cannot not be, Is the path of Persuasion(for it attends upon truth)” (Parmenides 1984, p.55). Parmenides believed that among all things, only the noun form of the verb “be” (εἶναι), which is “being” (οὐσία), is immutable and universal, and therefore, only “being” can serve as the object of truth, making metaphysics the discipline of seeking truth. However, if we examine metaphysics within the broader context of the ontological tradition, we can already see the nascent form of metaphysical thinking in the fragments of Heraclitus.

Heraclitus’ philosophy is commonly associated with dialectics, given his surviving fragments primarily concerning the generation and transformation of phenomena. Examples of such aphorisms include “We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not” (Heraclitus 1987, p.35). “It is not possible to step twice into the same river, nor is it possible to touch a mortal substance twice in so far as its state (*hexis*) is concerned” (Heraclitus 1987, p.55). These aphorisms indicate that Heraclitus’ philosophy does not address the essence of things in terms of ontology, as essence belongs to the immutable and universal domain.

So why is Heraclitus regarded as the starting point of metaphysics? This is because, while discussing “change”, he also introduced a fundamental concept that was later identified as belonging to metaphysics: “One” (ἓν). Due to its highly abstract and speculative nature, “One” is inherently relevant to metaphysical inquiry, which seeks to uncover the ultimate foundations of reality. Consequently, the abstract and speculative nature of “One” gives it a natural advantage in participating in metaphysical contemplation.

To begin our inquiry into the thought of Heraclitus, we can look at one of his surviving fragments, in which he states: “Not after listening to me, but after listening to the account(logos), one does wisely in agreeing that all things are one” (Heraclitus 1987, p.37). In ancient Greek, the term “logos” can refer to “word”, “speech”, “reason”, or “account”, and is a central concept in Heraclitus’ philosophy of the unity of all things. The term “all things” refers to the ever-changing world of experience, implying a plurality of phenomena, while the term “one” usually connotes the unchanging universal essence, i.e., the “general”. Hence, the “one” in the phrase “all things are one” (Ἐν Πάντα) assumes a privileged position in this short sentence. From a logical perspective, it is impossible for “many” (all things) to precede “one”. This implies that “many” cannot be the reason or basis for “one”; only “one” can be the reason and basis for “many”. This proof is similar to Kant’s a priori interpretation of space, i.e., we cannot imagine having “many” before “one”. When we think of the situation of “many”, we must first have the concept of “one”, and only then is the concept of “many” possible. Therefore, in this sense, the “one” in “all things are one” can naturally be regarded as the initial cause or basis of things (all), and wisdom is the recognition of “one”. It can be seen that the internal logical implications of “all things are one” contain a metaphysical question, which is the pursuit of the basis of things.

The relationship between “all things” and “one” in the above discussion indicates a classical metaphysical structure: the distinction between the two worlds of Plato, also known as the Two World Theory. “All things” generally refers to everything that exists, including the material world composed of beings that constitute nature (φύσις), which in ancient Greek meant to blossom and emerge. “One”, on the other hand, refers to the essence, which later came to be understood as the highest Being that points to the absolute, immutable, and eternal world. Therefore, this distinction is a division between phenomenon and essence, falsehood and truth. After Heraclitus and Parmenides, Plato developed the relationship between “all things” and “one” in his theory of Ideas or Forms. “All things” is identified as the world of sensation or experience, referring to general beings, while “one” belongs to the world of knowledge or ideas, referring to the highest Being that constitutes the reason and basis for the material world. The highest Being embodies the highest value: truth, goodness, and beauty. Knowledge about the highest Being is the only knowledge worth pursuing. The distinction between the two worlds eventually led to the history of metaphysics, as understood by Heidegger, namely the history of nihilism. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger interprets this history as the history of the concealment of Being, stating that “it can be covered up to such a degree that it is forgotten and the question about it and its meaning altogether omitted” (Heidegger 1996, p.31).

In summary, we can observe that Being was already beginning to be forgotten in Heraclitus’ philosophy, and that this forgetfulness was not his intention, but rather a misinterpretation of his philosophy by later thinkers. It is undeniable that in Heraclitus’ discourse on the relationship between “all things are one” and “account”(logos), there exists a logical force that equates “logos” with the essential unity of all things. This force is also the power of forgetting Being. In the sense of emergence and blossoming, nature (φύσις) is Being itself (Heidegger 2000, p.15). Therefore, we can say that this forgetfulness is manifested as the separation of logos (λόγος) and nature (φύσις), which means the separation of logos and Being. The force that separates logos and Being is concealed within the relationship and structure between “all things” and “one”. The question now is why Being is forgotten or concealed in the separation of logos and nature. In the following discussion, we will explore this question.

3. Reason: A Force That Conceals Being

Why is Being forgotten? And why did we misunderstand the original meaning of logos? Let's start with the term “nature”

(φύσις). In ancient Greece, the concept of nature was different from our current understanding. Nowadays, we often view nature as a scientific object, in the sense of natural science. Our attitude towards nature is essentially a scientific perspective, which is a kind of natural philosophy. This philosophy “turns into a philosophy of nature, a representation of all things according to which they are really of a material nature.”(Heidegger 2000, p.16) In other words, this nature is a kind of nature that is determined by mathematical and physical principles, and it only exists within the realms of mathematics and physics. However, in the eyes of ancient Greeks, nature in its original sense meant the whole of beings themselves. As a whole of beings, it contains two layers of meaning: first, it is the blossoming and unfolding that comes from itself; second, it is the persistence in the blossoming and unfolding, that is, the preservation of itself. Therefore, Heidegger said, “Now what does the word φύσις say? It says what emerges from itself (for example, the emergence, the blossoming, of a rose), the unfolding that opens itself up, the coming-into-appearance in such unfolding, and holding itself and persisting in appearance-in short, the emerging-abiding sway.” (Heidegger 2000, p.15) In this sense, nature (φύσις) is Being.

However, the understanding of nature (φύσις) gradually deviated in this duality (blossoming & persisting), because the meaning of nature as blooming oneself implies its own manifestation. Manifestation is phenomenon, that is, emerging from a hidden state and entering an unconcealed state, which is the ancient Greek ἀλήθεια. In later philosophy, this unconcealment is depicted as a state that is not moved by any disturbances or changes, and the entire Western philosophical tradition based on Platonic philosophy is founded on this misunderstanding of the state of unconcealment. Therefore, ἀλήθεια naturally leads to the correspondence theory of truth. However, for Heidegger, equating truth directly with unconcealment clearly misunderstands the meaning of unconcealment as truth because this understanding of truth is based on viewing nature as a phenomenon, which means that the error has already occurred at the beginning of Western thought. Therefore, on this basis, truth is seen as a result and becomes an appendage of Being. Being is forgotten, and the era of beings has arrived, thus launching the era of Western metaphysics as a truth about beings.

The birth of the correspondence theory of truth is inextricably and inextricably linked to the misunderstanding of logos. In ancient Greek, logos, written as λόγος, primarily denoted speech, order, fate, reason, and logic. The modern suffix “-logy” evolved from logos. The etymology of logos reveals that its root is the verb λέγω, meaning to speak, arrange, and gather, thus, logos as a noun also means “the laying that gathers”. Heidegger expounded on the meaning of “laying” by stating that “Λέγειν properly means the laying-down and laying-before which gathers itself and others.” (Heidegger 1984, p.60) Therefore, in its original sense, logos is identical to φύσις (nature). In his work *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger emphasized that “logos here does not mean sense, or word, or doctrine, and certainly not ‘the sense of a doctrine,’ but instead, the originally gathering gatheredness that constantly holds sway in itself.” (Heidegger 2000, p.135) Thus, in this sense, logos is identical to nature (φύσις) and Being, and the concealment of Being is also the concealment of logos and nature.

Based on the preceding discussion, we can answer the question of “what conceals Being?” The answer is reason. Returning to this aphorism of Heraclitus: “Not after listening to me, but after listening to the account, one does wisely in agreeing that all things are (in fact?) one (thing).” (Heraclitus 1987, p.37) From this statement we find that the knowledge of the logos can take the form of “hearing”, that is, the logos as “the laying that gathers” can be “heard”. That is to say, Being or nature (φύσις) can be “heard”. The premise of “hearing” implies speech, discourse, language, because no speech means no sound, and how can one hear without sound? So Being needs to be logically spoken through language, and this is where logic comes from. It can be seen that the logos and nature (φύσις) are deviated from each other here, as manifested by the fact that Being as nature is objectified in the logical speech, and Being becomes the objective “things”(beings), while the logical speech is regarded as the logos, which is the origin of the logos as speech. Speech is speech about “things”, i.e. speech needs to have an object of speech, and in ancient Greek, the word λεγόμενον refers to something that is being talked about or mentioned in a particular context. Both λεγόμενον and λόγος (logos) are derived from the Greek verb λέγειν (legein), which means “to speak”. Here the logos touches the level of “being qua being”, the logos talks about the substrate of things, and what is said about the substrate is expressed as the ability to reason. The word “substrate” comes from the Greek word “υποκείμενο”, which means “underlying thing”. To talk about the “underlying thing” is to inquire into the substrate and the cause of something (ratio). Thus, etymologically, rationality is the ability to inquire into the substrate of things. Rationality logically approaches the substrate of things through speech, i.e., the being qua being. This process is shown as the opposition of thinking (rationality) and being (logos), and the original meaning of logos is concealed in rationality.

Heidegger discovered that in Heraclitus’ thought there flashed the light of Being, but this light of Being was only glimpsed by thought and then subsequently obscured. Following this, logos separated from nature (φύσις), and “all things are one” slid inevitably towards a traditional metaphysical structure where the “One” constituted the reason for “all things” and became the supreme being. Thus, we see that the powerful tradition of rationalism in Western philosophy had already begun to germinate in this separation of logos and nature (φύσις).

4. Nihilism: Resulting from the Concealment of Being

The consequence of the separation of logos and nature (φύσις) in Western philosophy results in the domination of reason. Heidegger stated: “Logos and phusis disjoin, step apart from each other. But this is not yet the stepping-forth of logos. This means that logos does not yet step up to the Being of beings, does not yet come forward ‘versus’ Being in such a way that logos itself [as reason] makes itself into the court of justice that presides over Being and that takes over and regulates the determination of the Being of being” (Heidegger 2000, p.190). For Heidegger, logos deviated from its original meaning as Being, and this deviation resulted in a departure in Western philosophy’s understanding of wisdom, where wisdom was regarded as knowledge of The Supreme Being. For instance, in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, wisdom is defined as “scientific knowledge of certain sorts of starting-points and causes.” (Aristotle 2016, p.4) Therefore, wisdom has become the science of investigating the essence of things, and in the metaphysical sense, essence can be viewed as the substrate of things. The ability to investigate the substrate, as we have discussed earlier, relies on reason. Thus, in this sense, wisdom and reason are identical.

So how does reason grasp the essence of things? Reason grasps essence through theoretical means, which involves describing and explaining the world through theory. For example, “all things are one” can be viewed as one of the earliest metaphysical theories. The word “theory” itself, in its etymology, is closely related to logos. The modern-day term “theory” derives from the Greek verb θεωρέω, meaning “to speculate”, “to observe”, or “to contemplate”, and its corresponding noun form is θεωρία (theōría) in Greek or “theoria” in Latin. The verb θεωρέω, in turn, is derived from the noun θεωρός (theōrós), which means “spectator” in English, and is composed of θέα (sight) and ὀράω (I see). Heidegger notes that Plato calls this aspect, in which what presences shows what it is, “eidos”. To have seen this aspect, eidenai, is to know (Heidegger 1977, p.163). Therefore, the term “theory” originally connotes “observation”, which means to know or recognize. As a theoretical activity, “observation” is considered by the Greeks to be the “highest doing”(Heidegger 1977, p.164), and is clearly related to wisdom. In the sense of “observation”, it is also related to logos. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger states, “Logos lets something be seen (φαίνεσθαι), namely what is being talked about, and indeed for the speaker (who serves as the medium) or for those who speak with each other.”(Heidegger 1996, p.28) The verb φαίνω, which means “to show”, “to bring to light”, or “to reveal”, is the root of the verb φαίνεσθαι used here. “Observation” implies revealing things and gaining knowledge. Therefore, “observation” as an inquiry into the basis of things, evolved in later times into what is known as ontology. Etymologically, ontology is composed of “ontos” (being) and “logia” (study or research), and therefore the literal meaning of “ontology” is “logos concerning Being”. Of course, this logos has deviated from its original meaning and progressed towards the path of exploring the beings .

Due to the deviation between logos and Being, the consequences are that logos has been directed towards rationality, language, and logic. Consequently, the totality of beings is constructed within the framework of a Platonic hierarchy that is characterized by rationality, language, and logic. Furthermore, it ultimately manifests as an opposition between the supra-sensory world (ideal world) and the sensory world. The direct domain of the supra-sensory world is the realm of ideas and theology, which is considered the true world, that is, the metaphysical world; conversely, the sensory world is the world of the mundane and the changing, which is also considered an unreal world. This is the basic structure of metaphysics, in which the totality of beings is divided into two domains, and the supra-sensory domain has a dominant position over the sensory domain.

The fundamental structure of beings as a whole, which is the essence of European nihilism, is reflected in the above paragraph. From the origin, the history of nihilism began to sprout from Heraclitus. Heraclitus’ “all things are one” not only suggests a basic metaphysical structure, but also identifies the highest value. In Heidegger’s view, this is also the focus of Nietzsche’s discussion of European nihilism. Heidegger said, “The highest purposes, the grounds and principles of whatever is, ideals and the supra-sensory, God and the gods—all this is conceived in advance as value.” (Heidegger 1977, p.70) Therefore, nihilism means the self-deprecation of the highest value. In *The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God Is Dead’*, Heidegger explored the nature of value based on Nietzsche’s philosophy, and he believed that the essence of value lies in becoming a point of view, that is, a point of view for seeing (Gesichtspunkt). He said, “as a point-of-view, value is posited at any given time by a seeing and for a seeing.” (Heidegger 1977, p.70) “Observation” implies a perspective, and this perspective entails a certain setting of the subject. This setting of the subject ultimately renders value as beings, hence in metaphysics we see the highest Being reduced to a kind of value. Therefore, following the above logic, we can see that after the deviation of the logos from Being, the development of metaphysics inevitably leads to a value-oriented philosophy, which makes people attribute Being to value, and Being becomes beings, and Being is thus forgotten and concealed.

5. Conclusion: Returning to “Wisdom”

The core issue of nihilism is not a problem of values, and a reevaluation of all values cannot overcome nihilism. The answer to this question is hidden in the aphorism of Heraclitus, “one does wisely in agreeing that all things are one.”

(Heraclitus 1987, p.37) We have already analyzed the meaning of “all things are one” above, namely, that when the deviation between logos and nature (φύσις) occurs, the internal logic of “all things are one” will inevitably lead to a metaphysical dualism, in which Being-nature is obscured by reason. Therefore, under such premises, reason is equated with wisdom, and metaphysics based on reason is considered a discipline about wisdom. Philosophy is thus naturally explained as the love of wisdom. It is not difficult to see that this metaphysical history based on reason has set the historical tone for the movement of nihilism from the very beginning.

From Heraclitus’ aphorism, we can gain insight into the idea that redefining wisdom, rather than reassessing all values, is the key to overcoming nihilism. The phrase “all things are one” is particularly inspiring, not for its metaphysical structure, but for the implication that this “one” is unified through gathering. Heidegger argues that as gathering letting-lie-together-before, Λέγειν can be nothing other than the essence of unification, which assembles everything in the totality of simple presence (Heidegger 1984, p.70). In other words, this “one” is logos, which reveals all things in an unconcealed state. In fact, in *Being and Time*, we have already seen a hint of this view of wisdom as an unconcealed state. Heidegger wrote, “and is it a coincidence that in one of the fragments of Heraclitus - the oldest fragments of philosophical doctrine which explicitly treat the logos - the phenomenon of truth in the sense of discoveredness (unconcealment), as we have set it forth, shows through?” (Heidegger 1996, p.202) We can also see this understanding in Heidegger’s *Logos*. When discussing what wisdom is, Heidegger said, “but what does ‘wise’ mean?... They do not refer to a mere grasping, but to a certain kind of behavior. Of what sort? Of the sort that maintains itself in the abode of morals. This abiding holds to what the Laying that gathers lets lie before us, which in each case already lies before us. Thus σοφόν signifies that which can adhere to whatever has been indicated, can devote itself to it, and can dispatch itself toward it (get under way toward it).” (Heidegger 1984, p.68) The “dispatch itself” here refers to the collection and presentation of what is placed before us, which is logos. And logos and unconcealment (ἀλήθεια) are the same, that is, logos is the collection and presentation. Heidegger said, “because the Λόγος lets lie before us what lies before us as such, it discloses what is present in its presencing. But disclosure is Ἀλήθεια.” (Heidegger 1984, p.70) Therefore, In this sense, we can also understand Heraclitus’ saying: “Sound thinking (is) a very great virtue, and (practical) wisdom (consists in our) saying what is true and acting in accordance with (the) real constitution (of things), (by) paying heed (to it).” (Heraclitus 1987, p.65) Here, “truth” is ἀλήθεια (unconcealment). The premise of speaking the truth is to have an understanding of the truth. Wisdom is thus associated with truth, or unconcealment. According to Heraclitus, wisdom is acting in accordance with nature, which means following logos. In this sense, wisdom is the custodian of nature (φύσις). Only in this way can Dasein as a being-towards-death avoid being confined to the beings themselves and lead to nihilism.

Based on the discussion above, we find that Heraclitus’ sayings “one does wisely in agreeing that all things are one” and “wisdom saying what is true” acquire the same meaning in the original sense of logos. Thus, wisdom shows us that we should listen and comply with logos (in the sense of nature), rather than being confined to beings themselves. Being confined to beings manifests as being trapped in the shackles of reason. Only by guarding nature (φύσις) can one avoid being led to nihilism by reason, which is the true wisdom, namely the so-called “thinking” in Heidegger’s later philosophy. Heidegger says, “thinking must first learn what remains reserved and in store for thinking to get involved in. It prepares its own transformation in this learning.” (Heidegger 1972, p.60) “Thinking” is the state prior to the deviation between logos and Being, and it is neither logic nor reason. Therefore, “thinking” is not a metaphysical category but rather the act of thinking upon Being as a shepherd of nature (Hirt des Seins). The history of Western metaphysics, based on reason, is marked by the concealment of Being. According to Heidegger, this history has inevitably led to the emergence of industrial technology, which represents the manifestation of the power of rational metaphysics at the material level. Heidegger argued that modern technology is the ultimate unfolding of metaphysics. In this context, the necessity of “thinking” becomes evident, as scientific problems cannot be solved within science, just as metaphysical problems cannot be solved within metaphysics. Thus, we must return to wisdom and respond to Being through “thinking”.

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