Since its publication in 1953, *Introduction to Metaphysics* has been one of Martin Heidegger’s most widely read works, second perhaps only to *Being and Time* (1927). It was the first book by Heidegger to be translated into English, in 1959, before even *Being and Time* (1962). Heidegger himself signaled the book’s importance in his Author’s Preface to the seventh edition of *Being and Time*: “For the elucidation of this question [of Being] the reader may refer to my *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, which is appearing simultaneously with this reprinting” (SZ, viii/BTRM, 17). Based on lectures delivered in 1935, at the height of Heidegger’s ardent embrace of National Socialism, it has also been one of his most controversial works, with debates breaking out from its first appearance in 1953. We will return to the vexed question of Heidegger’s politics, but it is also worth pointing out what has made this book attractive to readers: its accessibility, at least compared to some of Heidegger’s more obscure works; the sweep of its themes, ranging across 2,500 years of Western philosophy; its powerful interpretation of classic works of literature, most prominently, the “Ode to Man” in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Developmentally, *Introduction to Metaphysics* occupies a transitional position in Heidegger’s path, between the fundamental ontology and the analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time* and the efforts in *Contributions to Philosophy* (1936–8) and later works to find language for a new kind of thinking. In this period Heidegger first begins exploring the poet Hölderlin, and we find here the same incipient attempt to engender a “poetizing thinking” (GA 40, 153/IM, 154) that would break past the nihilism of traditional metaphysics.

**“INTRODUCING” METAPHYSICS**

The first obstacle for a reader new to Heidegger is the deceptively ordinary title, *Introduction to Metaphysics*. This makes it sounds like a conventional primer on a shop-worn field in academic philosophy. At first, Heidegger seems close to the traditional understanding of metaphysics when he begins his course by asking, “Why are there beings at all rather than nothing?” This certainly does not seem like a question that a science like physics could answer. It reaches all the way back, then, to what Aristotle would have called *first philosophy*, which he treated in a body of works later referred to as his *meta phusika*, those texts that come “after the physics” and therefore inquire *beyond* the physical (see GA 36/37, 20–1/BAT, 17–19).
The most pressing metaphysical question asks why something, anything, should go to the bother of existing “at all.” As Heidegger says, this metaphysical question *par excellence* “is not allowed to dwell on this or that domain of nature—inanimate bodies, plants, animals—but must go on beyond *ta physica*” (GA 40, 19/IM, 18). The question is not simply asking about what happens to be the substance and structure of this or that being or even of reality in general, but beyond this, why reality should have this substance and structure in the first place, what its most fundamental and essential cause is. Hence Heidegger writes: “The question we have identified as first in rank—’Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?’—is thus the fundamental question of metaphysics. Metaphysics stands as the name for the center and core that determines all philosophy” (GA 40, 19–20/IM, 19).

The novice reader might well misunderstand Heidegger to mean that he agrees that metaphysics should be central to philosophy. This would be a fatal mistake. Heidegger often spells out at great length a position he will ultimately bring to a dead end and declare inadequate, even if he might have seemed sympathetic to it along the way. Heidegger emphatically distinguishes between the ontological question about Being *as such* and the metaphysical question about beings (GA 40, 20/IM, 19). By asking exclusively about beings, their origin, and substance, Heidegger holds that metaphysics forgets the question of Being by treating it as another version of the question of beings. But as Heidegger has argued in *Being and Time* (SZ, 4/BTMR, 23), there is a difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*das Seiende*): Being is not itself a being, some metaphysical ground for everything that is, even if the metaphysical tradition interprets Being in this way (GA 40, 20/IM, 19). But then what is Being? *That* is the question, and one Heidegger is in no hurry to answer.

Heidegger quite emphatically means his “introduction” to metaphysics in a literal sense as a *leading-in* of his listeners into what is at stake in how the history of metaphysics has obscured the question of Being:

“Introduction [*Einführung*] to metaphysics” accordingly means: leading into [*Hineinführung*] the asking of the fundamental question. . . . Leading [*Führung*] is a questioning going-ahead, a questioning-ahead. This is a leadership that essentially has no following. (GA 40, 22/IM, 21)

Heidegger seeks to awaken the *question* of Being by showing how metaphysics has resulted in a dead end in the two millennia after Plato. At the end of this long history of metaphysics, Nietzsche most prominently, but the West more broadly, has repudiated Being as something no longer worth asking about: “The word ‘Being’ is then finally just an empty word. It means nothing actual, tangible, real. Its meaning is an unreal vapor” (GA 40, 39/IM, 38). But precisely this experience of Being as an empty word, a mere vapor, is what Heidegger wants to question, and from there to reawaken a renewed understanding of Being, yet without simply slipping back into metaphysics.

It cannot be an accident for a thinker so careful about language to speak so deliberately of *Führung* in 1935. Here we have an example of Heidegger attempting to appropriate Nazi terminology for his own use and to construe leadership not as a blind following but as an incitement to one’s own appropriation of what is essential. We see this when Heidegger rejects Nietzsche and asks,
“Is ‘Being’ a mere word and its meaning a vapor, or is it the spiritual fate of the West?” (GA 40, 40/IM, 40) For Heidegger, this question is a question about “our people,” the Germans:

We lie in the pincers. Our people, as standing in the center, suffers the most intense pressure—our people, the people richest in neighbors and hence the most endangered people, and for all that, the metaphysical people. We are sure of this vocation; but this people will gain a fate from its vocation only when it creates in itself a resonance, a possibility of resonance for this vocation, and grasps its tradition creatively. (GA 40, 41/IM, 41)

It seems strange that Heidegger calls the Germans “the metaphysical people,” given his attack on metaphysics, but this must be heard in the overall spirit of the lecture course: that confronting the historical meaning of metaphysics is an inescapable task, that doing this is the vocation of the Germans as part of the restoration of the question of Being. This is why Heidegger makes one of the most startling pronouncements in this course:

This Europe, in its unholy blindness always on the point of cutting its own throat, lies today in the great pincers between Russia on the one side and America on the other. Russia and America, seen metaphysically, are both the same: the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man. (GA 40, 40–1/IM, 40)

For Heidegger, Germany lies “in the pincers” because the metaphysical understanding of the world underlies nations and political systems as diverse as Russia’s communism and America’s liberalism; they are “the same” not because they are identical but because each in its way understands the world metaphysically. Both have forgotten the question of Being. So he proclaims, “To ask: how does it stand with Being?—this means nothing less than to repeat and retrieve the inception of our historical-spiritual Dasein, in order to transform it into the other inception” (GA 40, 42/IM, 41).

It would be hard to exaggerate the ambition couched in this declaration. Heidegger takes the reawakening of the question of Being as a decisive event in the “spiritual fate of the West,” because how we understand what it means to be is the departure for the understanding of our entire existence. By “inception” (Anfang), Heidegger means not a mere chronological beginning point, but rather that which gives an historical epoch its trajectory. The inception to be reanimated, in this moment of national revolution, is the ancient Greek one, but not through rank imitation; Heidegger’s notion of repetitive retrieval (Wieder-holung) does not mean duplicating facts or institutions; it means reawakening lost and neglected possibilities of Being inherent to that first, ancient inception—the one before the incipient nihilism of Plato’s idealism took hold—and making it a fertile ground for bringing on this “other inception,” a new departure for the West, led by Germany.

RETRIEVING THE GREEKS

Chapter 2, On the Grammar and Etymology of the Word “Being,” engages in a Heideggerian “destruction” of the history of Western grammar in order to show how the meaning of Being, as a decisive question, has been obscured by developments in
language and schools of grammar. Without going into the technical details, Heidegger’s point here is that the transition from the Greek to the Latin grammarians distorted the sense of what a verb is, so that what we now call the infinitive, from the Latin *modus infinitivus*, is taken to be the most abstract, least meaningful, and “emptiest” form of the verb (GA 40, 74/IM, 73). On this already attenuated basis of the infinitive, Indo-European languages have formed verbal substantives, such as *das Sein* from *sein*. While English constructs substantives from the gerund rather than from the infinitive, the result, such as “Being,” is then an even further intensification of this generality. Furthermore, this making a substantive, a noun, out of the verb, leads to the most baleful distortion of all for Heidegger, namely, the confusion of Being with beings:

The substantive *das Sein* [Being] implies that what is so named, itself “is.” Being now itself becomes something that “is,” whereas obviously only beings are, and it is not the case that Being also is. (GA 40, 73/IM, 73)

The way to understand the question of Being is to ask what it means *to be*, not what makes up the attributes of some noun-like, big-B “Being,” a being like all other beings except that it somehow causes or explains all the rest of them. What it means *to be* is verbal, or temporal, and for this reason finite, historical, and situated in a context. This is why, when Heidegger looks at the conglomerations of Indo-European roots that make up the morphology of the verb “to be” (e.g. I am, you are, it is, they were, I have been, etc.), he discerns the unifying meaning of “living, emerging, abiding” (GA 40, 76–7/IM, 76). He understands this meaning even more primordially as “coming-to-presence” (*An-wesen*), or presencing (GA 40, 65–6/IM, 64), which does not mean Being is an object eternally present to us, but rather that Being unfolds a world of meaning in which beings come in and go out of presence for us. To use language not too alien to Heidegger, what is at issue in the question of Being is the temporal *whiling* of meaning that makes a historical world accessible.

Heidegger now introduces one of the Presocratic fragments that is of the greatest significance for him in this period, fragment 53 of Heraclitus about war (*polemos*), which he renders as follow: “Confrontation is indeed for all (that comes to presence) the sire (who lets emerge), but (also) for all the preserver that holds sway. For it lets some appear as gods, others as human beings, some it produces (sets forth) as slaves, but others as the free” (GA 40, 66/IM, 65).3 *Polemos* as struggle (*Kampf*) or confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) is the process through which beings become meaningful to us, and so through which Being itself is manifested, by allowing things to take on clear boundaries as discernible, separate entities, each of which can take on a name in language: “Confrontation does not divide unity, much less destroy it. It builds unity; it is the gathering (*logos*). *Polemos* and *logos* are the same” (ibid.). Language is not a consequence of experience or a secondary feature of human understanding; language *assembles* the world as it *divides* it up into intelligible parts that can come into presence for us (GA 40, 93/IM, 91–2). “Where struggle ceases, beings indeed do not disappear, but world turns away” (GA 40, 67/IM, 65): a meaningful world requires the struggle over the interpretation of what things are.
INTRODUCTION TO METAPHYSICS

BREAKING RESTRICTIONS

This emphasis on language as the heart of a hermeneutical struggle helps explain why Heidegger turns to Greek poetry and the Presocratics in this work. Here we see Heidegger attempting to develop a new vocabulary to articulate the recovered question of Being. Chapter 4, The Restriction of Being, encompasses the remaining and largest portion of the book. Heidegger examines four ways in which Western thought has sought to delimit Being: Being and becoming, Being and seeming, Being and thinking, and Being and the ought. The key is that Heidegger is attempting to deconstruct and reappropriate these formulaic oppositions so that they no longer serve as restrictions of Being (GA 40, 100–2/IM, 98–100). For example, in a conventional reading of Parmenides we are used to thinking of Being as "perdurance of the constant," as opposed to the Heraclitean panta rhei ("everything flows") of becoming (GA 40, 104/IM, 102), but Heidegger calls this conventional opposition into question. Similarly, we are used to thinking of Being as opposed to seeming, "the genuine versus the ungenuine" (GA 40, 105–6/IM, 103). But Heidegger insists that "Being essentially unfolds as appearing" (GA 40, 108/IM, 107). He argues that Being unfolds as what manifests itself, as what appears, as the phenomenon that emerges into the truth as unconcealment (alētheia) (GA 40, 109/IM, 107). Truth as correctness is derivative to truth as appearing: only if beings are manifest to us as somehow meaningful can we then determine their "reality." But the history of the West has subsequently condemned seeming as mere seeming.

Only with the sophists and Plato was seeming explained as, and thus reduced to, mere seeming. At the same time, Being as idea was elevated to a supersensory realm. The chasm, khorismos, was torn open between the merely apparent beings here below and the real Being somewhere up there. Christian doctrine then established itself in this chasm, while at the same time reinterpreting the Below as the created and the Above as the Creator, and with weapons thus reforged, it set itself against antiquity [as paganism] and distorted it. And so Nietzsche is right to say that Christianity is Platonism for the people. (GA 40, 113/IM, 111; Heidegger’s brackets)

It is against this nihilistic metaphysics inherited from Plato that Heidegger seeks a revolutionary retrieval of the possibilities covered over in the pre-Socratic origins.

Heidegger devotes the most attention to Being and thinking. He starts with the modern understanding of thinking that represents Being as an object (GA 40, 124/IM, 123). But if thinking represents Being in its reality, then is not logic, "the science of thinking," what we are after here (GA 40, 128/IM, 126)? But Heidegger rejects logic as the final arbiter for thinking and the representation of reality, because "Being as unconcealment . . . is precisely what was lost due to ‘logic’" (GA 40, 129/IM, 127). Logic assumes that the assertion is the locus of truth, but Heidegger holds that truth as alētheia, as unconcealment, must transpire prior to any assertions and representations we make. Hence Heidegger’s focus on logos in Greek not as language, discourse, or reason, but as something more primordial than all of these: gathering (GA 40, 132/IM, 131). Drawing on the fragments of Heraclitus, Heidegger argues that “Logos is constant gathering, the gatheredness of beings that stands in itself, that is, Being” (GA 40, 139/IM, 138). Given that “polemos
and *logos* are the same," this means that the world as we think it is a world assembled in a meaningful way, with differentiations giving things the intelligibility that can be articulated in words and everyday discourse—and ultimately in logical assertions.

Now Heidegger turns to Parmenides to address what thinking itself means, other than the rules of logic that allows us, as subject, to make accurate sense of “Being” as an external object (GA 40, 144/IM, 144). Fragment 5 of Parmenides reads *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*, conventionally rendered “but thinking and Being are the same” (GA 40, 145/IM, 145). *Noein*, Heidegger insists, must be understood as *apprehension*, the way we *take in* the gathered meaning of the world (GA 40, 146–7/IM, 146–7). Heidegger asserts that Parmenides has been so obscured by the history that has made him seem self-evident that it would help to take a detour through the “Ode to Man” choral passage in Sophocles’ *Antigone* (GA 40, 153–5/IM, 154–6). The passage begins “Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing/uncannier than man bestirs itself . . .” (GA 40, 155/IM, 156). The key is the Greek *deinon*, the uncanny, the terrible; human beings are the uncanniest, the most terrible, “because as those who do violence, they overstep the limits of the homely, precisely in the direction of the uncanny in the sense of the overwhelming” (GA 40, 160/IM, 161). Only those whose daring (*tolma*; GA 40, 170/IM 172) undertakes the risk of this uncanny violence “rise high in historical Being as creators, as doers” (GA 40, 162/IM, 163). Against what Heidegger calls the overwhelming sway of Being itself, its capacity to unseat all human endeavors with mortality and finitude, the creators oppose the violence of their *tecnê*, their skillful knowing, in poetry, in statecraft, or in thought (GA 40/IM, 169, 168; also GA 40, 66/IM, 65). The *deinon* has two faces: the overwhelming sway of Being as *dikê*, the justice that constantly threatens to submerge us, and the violence of the creators, who strive to make something that will endure through their *tecnê* (GA 40, 169/IM, 171). Being *requires* the violence of these creative figures so that it may have a site in which to appear. This is Being’s polemical necessity (GA 40, 171–2/IM, 173–4); otherwise, the world sinks into the self-evident, and all meaning gets taken for granted. “Therefore the violence–doer knows no kindness and conciliation (in the ordinary sense), no appeasement and mollification by success or prestige and by their confirmation” (GA 40, 172/IM, 174)—again we see Heidegger’s rejection of anything resembling Christian norms or secular moralism.

Heidegger’s claim now is that “the belonging–together of *noein* (apprehension) and *einai* (Being), which is said in the saying of Parmenides, is nothing but this reciprocal relation” of *dikê* and *tecnê* (GA 40, 174/IM, 176). It cannot be exaggerated how far removed Heidegger’s sense of justice (*dikê*) is from a moral–juridical one; he means it in a radically ontological sense as how Being gives the world its *fit*, its sense of an articulated, structured whole that nevertheless always threatens to exceed us and leave us destitute and at a loss for understanding. As such, *dikê* beckons human creative *tecnê* but also suspends these efforts over disaster “as the deepest and broadest Yes to the overwhelming” (GA 40, 172/IM, 174), for our works can never get out past Being and produce an everlasting dispensation that will bring the becoming of Being to an end. And so: “apprehension, in its belonging–together with *dikê*, is such that it uses violence, and as doing violence is an urgency, and as an urgency is undergone only in the necessity of a struggle [in the sense of *polemos* and *eris*]”
If thinking is apprehension, in this sense of engaging the meaning of Being in a creative polemos, an interpretive confrontation over the constitution of the world, then Being and thinking belong together in a manner prior to logic or to representational thinking. But through Plato emerged a form of thinking that reduces apprehension to the apprehension of an idea (GA 40, 189–90/IM, 192), and so the inception with Parmenides and Heraclitus collapses: “Consequently, what really is, is what always is, ae on. What is continuously coming to presence is what we must go back to, in advance, in all comprehending and producing of anything: the model, the idea” (GA 40, 201/IM, 206). Logic and representational thinking are grounded upon an interpretation of Being as what is always in the supersensory other-world.

We know the final opposition, Being and the ought, well enough: Being, what is, may well be opposed to what ought to be. Heidegger again sees the root of this in Plato’s ideas: “As Being itself becomes fixed in its character as idea, it also tends to make up for the ensuing degradation of Being. But by now, this can occur only by setting something above Being that Being never yet is, but always ought to be” (GA 40, 206/IM, 211). Heidegger deems this a nihilism that manifests the oblivion of Being (GA 40, 211–12/IM, 217), for it has laid the foundation for value-thinking: values become the ground for the ought as what negate Being and set something up in its stead as what ought to be. And this is where Heidegger makes his infamous claim, when, condemning the theories of hack Nazi Party intellectuals, he writes that, “what is peddled about nowadays as the philosophy of National Socialism, but which has not the least to do with the inner truth and greatness of this movement [namely, the encounter between global technology and modern humanity] is fishing in these troubled waters of ‘values’ and ‘totalities’” (GA 40, 208/IM, 213; Heidegger’s brackets). At this point, the reader must decide how far to go with Heidegger in this Introduction: Is the question of Being more than an empty word-play, and if it is, does it really imply the intellectual and political deconstruction of the West that Heidegger demands? Or does the Western tradition retain resources that exceed Heidegger’s apocalyptic confrontation?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

3 For more on this theme, see Gregory Fried, Heidegger’s Polemos: From Being to Politics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).