

BOOK REVIEW

Filippo Casati's
*Heidegger and the Contradiction of Being:
An Analytic Interpretation of
the Late Heidegger*

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Filippo Casati. *Heidegger and the Contradiction of Being: An Analytic Interpretation of the Late Heidegger*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2022. 186 pages.

Needless to go round and round: Casati's text clearly has a provocative intent, and if it has already provoked discussion, it will continue to be a talking point. In fact, the main thesis is that dialetheism, the view that certain contradictions are true, allows one to understand Heidegger's thought (93). Not only that: Heidegger himself is said to have been a dialetheist (100), insofar as he questions classical logic (103–7). Although it is not enough to “question logic” (104) in order to be a dialetheist – a criterion that is perhaps too generous, and what does that mean? – Casati makes it clear that here it is not a question of defending dialetheism as such (97), and is rather cautious in circumstantiating Heidegger's dialetheism, ascribing it only to the thought of “the turn” (108–9), where Being is precisely conceived in contradictory terms.

Yet the juxtaposition of Heidegger with analytic philosophy generates an immediate perplexity, which is not entirely dispelled. By “analytical interpretation” Casati means dialetheism, but there is a lack

of explicit reflection both on this reductive reading and what it means, first and foremost, to interpret Heidegger analytically. This implies that where Casati rightly distinguishes between philosophical and exegetical arguments (27–8), whereby the point is not always to understand what is true, but rather what Heidegger said, he seems to take it for granted that, beyond Heidegger (and thus, on a properly philosophical level), the interlocutor is analytical philosophy, which ascertains what is true or false. That is to say, the dialetheic approach makes sense of Heidegger’s discourse, while, from an exegetical point of view, the question is whether Heidegger was a dialetheist or not. However, that dialetheism makes Heidegger’s thought comprehensible is valid as long as one assumes that one’s interlocutors are analytical philosophers – not all of them, by the way, since not all analytical philosophers are dialetheist. Related to this is the fact that, on the exegetical side, the scholarly literature mentioned is exclusively (with few exceptions) American, yet with a continental background that is not questioned (see 101, where the extensive debate on Heidegger’s “turn” (*Kehre*) is very condensed).

To whom, therefore, is Casati’s text addressed? To continental readers who want to explain Heidegger to the analytics, who will eventually defer their criticism to dialetheism as such. If Casati’s study poses a legitimate doubt to continental readers – in order to reason with the analytics, must we present Heidegger as a dialetheist? – the latter must nevertheless ask themselves to what extent dialetheism improves their understanding of Heidegger. Similarly, the question remains whether dialetheism is sufficient to rehabilitate Heidegger in the eyes of the analytics, i.e., whether we must necessarily assume this superficiality of analytical readers, who need to translate Heidegger into dialetheic terms in order to appreciate him. Ultimately, Casati does well to draw (or make explicit) the connection between Heidegger and analytic philosophy, but it is evident how this attempt requires reflection within a more general context, and it will be seen how this lack invalidates some specific passages in the text under examination.

Turning to the analysis of Casati’s book, the first three chapters serve as a premise for the following ones. With a great deal of clarity and order, Casati reconstructs the main lines of the most recent American

reception of Heidegger; these are, therefore, very useful pages not only for those trying to disentangle themselves in this area, but also for analytics approaching Heidegger for the first time. Simplifying further, Casati identifies a metaphysical interpretation (38), divided into analytic (Priest, McDaniel) and continental (Gadamer, Richardson). According to this interpretation, Being is what makes an entity that specific entity, or what makes all entities be (8–13). Furthermore, there is an epistemological interpretation (Dreyfus, Carman, Haugeland), which makes Being the ground for understanding entities (39). Another crucial point is that entities are for Heidegger the object of an assertion (22, 25–7), as is also the case for Priest (11), as well as being identical to oneself (27).

Although the exegetical intent is driving here, it is regrettable that Casati does not take a position on the plausibility of certain interpretative proposals. As we shall see, this is not part of his strategy, for the point is rather to show how all these variants agree on the paradoxicality of Heidegger's Being, which therefore forces one to embrace dialetheism. However, the discourse would change if these assumptions were recused rather than admitted. For instance, Casati knows that Pöggeler criticises the metaphysical interpretation of Heidegger's thought (9, 13), yet he prefers this to Pöggeler as his own interlocutor. Or, in the case of Priest's reading, of little help is the reference to the enigmatic concept of "outside-being" (*Aussersein*) (11), as well as saying that entity is that which has the property of being an entity. Heidegger's analysis of the meaning of entity is vast; just think of the courses on the meaning of entity for modern thought (i.e., objectivity) or entity as *alethes*, or entity as a work of art, or the exhaustive yet elliptical definitions of *Contributions*, such as "beingness as constant presence" (*Seiendheit als beständige Anwesenheit*). Then, to define entity on the basis of the identity principle is to deliberately subvert the priority Heidegger accords to ontology over logic (103). Which, of course, is not in itself wrong, but it must be discussed: is Heidegger getting it wrong? Or is he unwittingly subordinating ontology to logic? It almost seems to be Casati's prejudice (perhaps because of how he conceives of his interlocutors) that the logical level comes before the ontological one, at least from a philosophical rather than an exegetical point of view. Moreover, understanding the meaning of entity seems

more a difficulty of the literature Casati chooses to deal with than a shortcoming of Heidegger. This also explains the considerable simplification of the relationship between entity and assertion (is language reduced to assertions?), or of the meaning of “grounding” in the principle of reason. It is a considerable simplification to read Being as the ground of entities on the basis of epistemological interpretation (39), if only for the fact that, in Heidegger’s texts, one always has to distinguish between what Heidegger asserts of his own and what Heidegger attributes to other thinkers – just consider the case of Kant. Unfortunately, without these due distinctions, the declared exegetical intent loses bite.

Nevertheless, many of the perplexities that emerged from the exegetical choices begin to be framed within Casati’s strategy between the second and third chapters. Here, in fact, it is recognized that it is the discourse on Being itself that is paradoxical (65), hence contradictory (93). This is given by the ontological difference. Against Katherine Withy (44), Casati identifies two arguments for considering the ontological difference not simply a historical thesis (43), but a philosophical one, namely, the problem of regress to infinity (45–50) and the role of Being as *explanans* for entities (54–9). However, if in the discussion of these arguments it emerges that Being is not an entity, nevertheless there are just as many reasons to recognize that it is. For if Being is the reason for all entities, then it must be something (82, 125); the mere fact that it is the object of assertions alone would be enough to make it an entity (70, 75). The ambiguity also extends to the level of apophantic assertions: Being cannot be shown (86), and it eludes our attempt at understanding (69); yet Being is the object of the vast majority of Heidegger’s assertions (88).

The fourth chapter then opens with the proclaimed contradictory nature of Being. This is the most important and most successful chapter of Casati’s book; here the dialethic reading is proposed, whereby it is true that Being is and at the same time is not an entity, just as it is true that it is and is not an object of assertion (93–5). Moreover, the dialethic reading applies as much to metaphysical interpretation as to epistemological interpretation precisely because it is on the basis of the

admission of the contradiction of Being that the Being/entities relation becomes intelligible (99–100).

A commendable and interesting aspect is the exegetical proposal to identify in the late Heidegger, and specifically in *Contributions*, the solution to the problems inherent in the thought of Being that emerged during the 1920s. In fact, with respect to many common readings of Heidegger's turn, which insist on the complementarity of the two Heideggers, Casati argues that without *Contributions* it is not possible to appreciate Heidegger, since until the 1930s his thought is stuck in the contradictions summarised in chapter 3, while from the turn onwards Heidegger understands that contradictions constitute the very truth of Being (102). In Casati's reading, the event (*Ereignis*) itself is nothing other than Being revealing its own contradiction (154), and thus, in other words, pointing to dialetheism as the way to think Being (113–5).

Probably many scholars of *Contributions* will be dissatisfied with some inaccuracies in dealing with this difficult work by Heidegger, which is always very uneasy to handle in just a few pages. For instance, *Contributions* is not the other beginning itself, but a preparation to it (just as Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* does not expound the doctrine of the "overman" (*Übermensch*)), nor is the decision on Being and Non-being something that is up to the human being. Not to mention even more complex points: is it really permissible to understand the *Ereignis* as an event? Are we certain that the ontological difference of *Contributions* is the same as that of the 1920s? That Being is not an entity is given by the ontological difference, but is it sufficient to say that "Being is an entity too" is given by the fact that Being is the object of an assertion? Does not being an entity on the part of Being, which is at the center of the history of Being, have another meaning in Heidegger's thought?

Yet, if one keeps in mind what has been said above about Casati's intent, it is possible to overlook some inaccuracies in order to appreciate the strength and originality of this study: it is true, indeed, that Heidegger's Being is shot through with contradictions, and it is equally true that the challenge posed by *Contributions* concerns how to think about this contradictory situation. Those who interpret *Contributions* as

an irrational text, i.e., in Casati's terms, devoted to inconsistency, diminish its value precisely by believing they do the opposite. Of course, one can debate whether Casati's dialetheism is really the appropriate way to speak of the late Heidegger to the analytics and, in general, to speak of *Contributions*, just as one can disagree that the contradictions that emerged before the turn are precisely those reconstructed in the first three chapters; the fact remains, however, that Casati gets the point. In other words, we can fleece many details, or we can focus on what is Heidegger's problem, the contradiction of Being, which Casati identifies very clearly. From this point of view, then, it is a truly courageous and disorienting move to move out of the disputes over Heideggerian orthodoxy and into the direction of the analytics, precisely with the text most steeped in Heidegger's thought.

Let us now try to reconstruct the main lines of the argument used to think the contradiction of Being, presented in chapter 5. Heidegger's Being behaves like Priest's Nothing; namely, it is a complement of totality (136). For Priest, Nothing is the totality of everything that is not identical with itself. In this case, a paradoxical situation arises. The complement of this particular set should be that which has nothing in common with its contents; hence, it is the set of that which is identical with itself. But Nothing, although it is the starting set, is at the same time its complement. Indeed, Nothing is still identical to itself. Things are further complicated by considering that what is identical to itself is an entity, so Nothing is and at the same time is not (129–30). It is curious that, in making this argument, Casati states that Being is a transcendental (132), thus taking up the thought of *Being and Time* rather than that of *Contributions*, where we read the opposite. Moreover, again in this text, we do not find that an entity is that which is identical with itself, but rather that it is that which is connoted by "stable presence."

With mereology it is then possible to address Heidegger's Being (128), but it remains entirely open what this contradiction means. That is, Casati's efforts are aimed at showing that the Being of which Heidegger speaks is contradictory, but in making this option acceptable to the analytic, he glosses over its meaning. Consider the fact that Being and

Nothing are the same: what is the meaning of this “same”? A contradictory identity? Casati states that with Priest’s mereological model we can represent the traits of Being (139), but the meaning of this representation remains entirely vague, unless one means a formal representation, i.e., in logical terms. Which is doubly strange, considering that *Contributions* wants to be a text against representational thinking.

The last chapter of Casati’s study concerns the relationship between Being and entities, which is conceived as an inconsistent dependency (156). The main theme is Heidegger’s double reading of the principle of reason, which is interpreted here as a true contradiction (159). Indeed, Being both has and does not have a reason (163). However, one struggles to go beyond reaffirming the contradictory nature of Being: one is silent as to what the foundation relation means (albeit at the center of one of the main chapters of *Contributions*), in order to privilege only its paradoxical nature – which at this point can be taken for granted. Heidegger’s “para-foundationalism” (168–70) thus appears to be an interpretative category that is more functional to the structure of Casati’s book than useful for deepening the meaning of the Being/entities relation; this is indicated, for example, by the fact that the question is presented in terms of “having”: Being has and at the same time does not have ground, when it would be better to say that it is Being itself that is ground. That the dialetheic approach has become too reductive at this point can also be seen in the discourse on the last God, who is understood as a metaphor for Being (173), taking a couple of studies on the subject at face value – although Heidegger always tends to emphasise how the sphere of the divine is devoid of Being, which would otherwise be onto-theology. Heidegger’s discourse on the last God goes far beyond whether or not it is an entity. Here, strategic intent prevails over both exegetical and philosophical intent.

Moreover, that Being is ground (of entities) is the hallmark of the metaphysical interpretation of Being. And here we come to another problematic juncture, namely, the consideration of the historical dimension of Being. Indeed, in Casati’s study this dimension does not emerge, which is strange, given that it is one of the emblematic features of the late

Heidegger. There is a lack of attention to Heidegger's historical sense, who would never have said that for the Greeks the reason for a thing is what enables its reference (58), as well as to the always difficult distinction between what Heidegger says about metaphysics and what he makes it say. Thus, when Heidegger speaks of the metaphysical interpretation of the principle of reason (159–60), he is certainly not subscribing to it, just as when he makes the Greeks say that the meaning of Being is presence.

Generally speaking, it is not true that Heidegger rejects the history of metaphysics because it is onto-theology (40). This is due to several exegetical reasons. One is that Being was not simply misunderstood as an entity: it is an entity. This is not because Being is identical with itself or the object of assertion, but because it has allowed itself to be understood in these terms. To say that Being is an entity is an assertion that lies beyond the exegesis/philosophy distinction, because it rather requires a historical understanding (whereas it seems that the philosophical level is taken for granted to be the logical level, i.e., dialethic and supra-historical). That the “event of appropriation” (*Ereignis*) is “ex-proprietation” (*Enteignis*), that the “concealment” (*Verbergung*) of Being consists in its “custody” (*Bergung*) among entities, that the other beginning is in fact the same first beginning thought differently: all this only reaffirms, yes, the contradiction of Being, but this must be understood on a more historical than logical level. Yet, this is not grasped, and when one reads that ontological difference – which for Heidegger is the space of metaphysics (rather than being what metaphysics did not grasp) – is presented as a thesis more related to the history of philosophy than philosophical (43), Casati actually exchanges history for historiography (i.e., the historiographical narrative of philosophy), excluding that the historical dimension can have philosophical significance in itself. And from history we must move on to time, the other great absentee in Casati's text, so when we read that Heidegger does not answer the question of the meaning of Being (8) we are immediately surprised, since this answer is in fact known, as it is time, or rather presence, that defines the meaning of Being. Indeed, does not the fact that Being both is and is not an entity imply some temporal dimension? Sure, a logical

approach to the principle of non-contradiction dispenses with time: but what about Heidegger's ontological approach? And isn't this diachrony/synchrony the same as that which operates when it is said that Being and Nothing are the same?

If we emphasise this, it is because we believe that these gaps are not simply detriments to Casati's text, but cues to explore the theme of the contradiction of Being, or to point the analytics to a Heidegger that does not necessarily have to be reduced to dialetheism in order to be made comprehensible. Casati, always with great clarity, points Heidegger scholars to one of the most interesting avenues of investigation to follow, beyond many prejudices and disputes over which one tends instead to idle. Therefore, understanding this work as something pioneering and initial – which for Heidegger is always what is decisive and important – it is possible to fully appreciate Casati's study, using it as a starting point for new paths.

