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INTRODUCTION TO METAPHYSICS

Chapter One—

The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics

[1]

Why are there beings at all instead of nothing? That is the

question. Presumably it is no arbitrary question. "Why are there

beings at all instead of nothing?"—this is obviously the first of all

questions. Of course, it is not the first question in the chronological

sense. Individuals as well as peoples ask many questions in the

course of their historical passage through time. They explore, investigate,

and test many sorts of things before they run into the question

"Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" Many never

run into this question at all, if running into the question means not

only hearing and reading the interrogative sentence as uttered, but

asking the question, that is, taking a stand on it, posing it, compelling

oneself into the state of this questioning.

And yet, we are each touched once, maybe even now and then,

by the concealed power of this question, without properly grasping

what is happening to us. In great despair, for example, when all

weight tends to dwindle away from things and the sense of things

grows dark, the question looms. Perhaps it strikes only once, like

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the muffled tolling of a bell that resounds into Dasein1 and gradually

fades away. The question is there in heartfelt joy, for then all

things are transformed and surround us as if for the first time, as if it

were easier to grasp that they were not, rather than that they are,

and are as they are. The question is there in a spell of boredom,

when we are equally distant from despair and joy, but when the

stubborn ordinariness of beings lays open a wasteland in which it

makes no difference to us whether beings are or are not—and then,

in a distinctive form, the question resonates once again: Why are

there beings at all instead of nothing?

But whether this question is asked explicitly, or whether it

merely passes through our Dasein like a fleeting gust of wind, unrecognized

as a question, whether it becomes more oppressive or is

[2] thrust away by us again and suppressed under some pretext, it

certainly is never the first question that we ask.

But it is the first question in another sense—namely, in rank.

This can be clarified in three ways. The question "Why are there

beings at all instead of nothing?" is first in rank for us as the broadest,

as the deepest, and finally as the most originary question.

The question is the broadest in scope. It comes to a halt at no

being of any kind whatsoever. The question embraces all that is,

and that means not only what is now present at hand in the broadest

sense, but also what has previously been and what will be in the

future. The domain of this question is limited only by what simply

is not and never is: by Nothing. All that is not Nothing comes into

the question, and in the end even Nothing itself—not, as it were,

because it is something, a being, for after all we are talking about it,

but because it "is" Nothing. The scope of our question is so broad

that we can never exceed it. We are not interrogating this being or

that being, nor all beings, each in turn; instead, we are asking from

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the start about the whole of what is, or as we say for reasons to be

discussed later: beings as a whole and as such.

Just as it is the broadest question, the question is also the deepest:

Why are there beings at all . . . ? Why—that is, what is the

ground? From what ground do beings come? On what ground do

beings stand? To what ground do beings go?2 The question does

not ask this or that about beings—what they are in each case, here

and there, how they are put together, how they can be changed,

what they can be used for, and so on. The questioning seeks the

ground for what is, insofar as it is in being.3 To seek the ground:

this means to get to the bottom ergründen . What is put into question

comes into relation with a ground. But because we are questioning,

it remains an open question whether the ground is a truly

grounding, foundation-effecting, originary ground; whether the

ground refuses to provide a foundation, and so is an abyss; or

whether the ground is neither one nor the other, but merely offers

the perhaps necessary illusion of a foundation and is thus an unground.

4 However this may be, the question seeks a decision with

respect to the ground that grounds the fact that what is, is in being

as the being that it is. This why-question does not seek causes for

beings, causes of the same kind and on the same level as beings

themselves. This why-question does not just skim the surface, but

presses into the domains that lie "at the ground," even pressing into

[3] the ultimate, to the limit; the question is turned away from all

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surface and shallowness, striving for depth; as the broadest, it is at

the same time the deepest of the deep questions.

Finally, as the broadest and deepest question, it is also the most

originary. What do we mean by that? If we consider our question in

the whole breadth of what it puts into question, beings as such and

as a whole, then it strikes us right away that in the question, we

keep ourselves completely removed from every particular, individual

being as precisely this or that being. We do mean beings as a

whole, but without any particular preference. Still, it is remarkable

that one being always keeps coming to the fore in this questioning:

the human beings who pose this question. And yet the question

should not be about some particular, individual being. Given the

unrestricted range of the question, every being counts as much as

any other. Some elephant in some jungle in India is in being just as

much as some chemical oxidation process on the planet Mars, and

whatever else you please.

Thus if we properly pursue the question "Why are there beings

at all instead of nothing?" in its sense as a question, we must avoid

emphasizing any particular, individual being, not even focusing on

the human being. For what is this being, after all! Let us consider

the Earth within the dark immensity of space in the universe. We

can compare it to a tiny grain of sand; more than a kilometer of

emptiness extends between it and the next grain of its size; on the

surface of this tiny grain of sand lives a stupefied swarm of supposedly

clever animals, crawling all over each other, who for a brief

moment have invented knowledge [cf Nietzsche, "On Truth and

Lie in the Extramoral Sense," 1873, published posthumously].6

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And what is a human lifespan amid millions of years? Barely a move

of the second hand, a breath. Within beings as a whole there is no

justification to be found for emphasizing precisely this being that is

called the human being and among which we ourselves happen to

belong.