HEIDEGGER AND THE METAPHYSICS OF MEMORY

Jeffrey Andrew Barash
(Université de Picardie, Amiens, France)

Abstract: My analysis in the following paper will focus on a subtle development in Heidegger's interpretation of the theme of memory, from the period of his early Freiburg lectures to Being and Time and then in the works of the late 1920s. There is in this period an apparent shift in Heidegger's understanding of this theme, which comes to light above all in his way of examining memory in the 1921 Freiburg course lectures Augustine and Neo-Platonism, then in Being and Time (1927) and finally in the 1928 lectures on the metaphysical foundations of logic (Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz) and Kanti and the Problem of Metaphysics (1929). This shift is of interest, as I will argue, not only in indicating an internal development of Heidegger's thinking, but above all in regard to the problem of the finitude of memory which Heidegger brings into focus and which I will interpret in my concluding remarks.

Keywords: Heidegger, Augustine, memory, finitude

I

If we compare Heidegger's course lecture Augustine and Neo-Platonism, which he presented during his first Freiburg period, with the later work Being and Time, it is remarkable that his early examination of the thought of St. Augustine concentrated on Book X of the Confessions which deals with memory, and not on the topic of temporality which was a central theme of Augustine's celebrated reflections in Book XI of the Confessions, and of Heidegger's own analyses in the years that followed. Moreover, in the context of Being and Time itself, where the question of being is referred to the finite temporality of Dasein, the theme of memory examined in Augustine and Neo-Platonism and in other early course lectures\(^1\), is barely evoked. As the analysis of finite temporality became more

---

\(^1\) See in this regard especially the 1919-1920 Freiburg course lectures, Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 58, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1993, pp. 252-
prominent in Being and Time, the theme of Erinnerung, of memory, receded into the background. How are we to understand this apparent change in Heidegger’s focus?

Let us begin our analysis by making some preliminary remarks about the idea of memory that St. Augustine elaborated in the Confessions. A cursory reading of Book X of the Confessions illustrates that this part of the work marks a significant break in its organization as a whole, since Augustine’s autobiographical recollections give way to a very different kind of endeavor, for he raises the question concerning the meaning of memory as such. In his examination of memory Augustine does not focus on it as a simple capacity of the soul. Far from being considered as one faculty among others, memoria is identified with the soul itself. As Augustine himself emphasizes at various points in the course of Book X: “But [...] the spirit is memory itself [cum anima sit etiam ipsa memoria]” or “it is memory that we call the spirit [ipsam memoriam vocantes animum].”

We recall that this identification of memory with the soul itself indicates for Augustine the interiority of memory which radically distinguishes the soul from a world of sensuous things. As a large and infinite sanctuary (penetrale amplum et infinitum), the soul is capable of rising from the images it retains of sensuous things to their intelligible ground, which is rooted exclusively in the soul and marks its independence from the material world. Here we recognize Platonic and Neo-Platonic presuppositions concerning memory as ὁμιμητικά, reminiscence as the ground of knowledge of true intelligible being which, as Heidegger stipulates, Augustine attempted to reconcile with motifs arising from early Christian religiosity. It is of particular importance to note that through this fundamental identification of memory with the immaterial soul itself, Augustine evoked its relation to the temporal realm. Indeed, Augustine’s examination of memory in Book X of the Confessions evoked the soul’s temporality, in a way which, well before Augustine’s direct analysis of time in Book XI of this work, would prove to be of particular importance for Heidegger.

On the basis of his broad identification of memory with the soul itself, Augustine distinguished his inquiry from the tradition bequeathed by Aristotle and Cicero, which identified memory with the capacity to recognize


3 During this early period of his work, Heidegger made no terminological distinction between the two German words for memory Erinnerung and Gedächtnis. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.


experience of the past. According to this tradition, past experience retained by memory may then be related to present understanding and to deliberation concerning future action. Augustine's identification of memory with the soul marked a wholly different approach to its temporal being: through memory, for Augustine, the soul does not only extend backwards to become aware of past experience; rather, it becomes present to itself. If the past continues to exist in our recollection, memory at the same time configures the present: it assures the presence of images and of reflections flowing from the past which constitute the interior experience of the soul. Without memory, as Augustine insists, "I could not say anything [...] and I could not even name myself."5 It is thus in drawing on the treasures of memoria that the soul encompasses all of the dimensions of time: from past experience it brings the present into being and anticipates the future.

At the heart of these reflections on memory in Book X, Augustine explicitly introduced the theme of temporality which he would fully elaborate in the following book of the Confessions, where the synthetic power of the soul is analyzed in terms of the distentio animi and of the bond that the soul forges between past, present and future. I cite this key passage in Book X which Heidegger evokes in Augustine and Neo-Platonism:

All this do I within, in that huge court of my memory. For there have I in a readiness the heaven, the earth, the sea, and whatever I could perceive in them, besides those which I have forgotten. There also meet I with myself; I recall myself, what, where, or when I have done a thing; and how I was affected when I did it. There be all whatever I remember, either upon mine own experience, or on others' credit. Out of the same store do I myself combine fresh and fresh likelihoods of things, which I have experienced, or believed upon experience: and by these do I infer actions to come, events and hopes: and upon all these again do I meditate, as if they were now present.6

Given Heidegger's later reflection on the temporalizing modes of Dasein in bringing together the ekstases of time, it is noteworthy that he did not dwell at this earlier point in his work on the specifically temporal dimensions of the relation of memory to past, present and future. His concern with Augustine's interpretation of the temporality of memoria, however, lies elsewhere, and must be understood in relation to the vastness of memory in its identification with the interiority of the spirit as self.

In an early section of his analysis in Augustine and Neo-Platonism (§9), entitled "Astonishment about Memory" ("Das Staunen über die Memoria"), Heidegger evokes the vastness of memory in the Augustinian terms of a "large and infinite sanctuary" (penetrare amplum et infinitum). Heidegger notes here

5 Ibid., § 16, pp. 118-119.
that the "treasures" of memory (thesaurus memoriae) stored up in this sanctuary, are not comparable to a wealth of "things" the soul possesses, since in its very infinity, what memory contains extends far beyond anything that the soul may grasp. If memory is the place where I encounter myself (ibi et ipse mihi occurro), this interior space is not indeed a "place," since its infinity is unbounded. The interior treasure of memory opens out to the infinite in rising beyond the confines of personal identity itself. Heidegger writes in this regard, echoing St. Augustine:

Penetrare amplum et infinitum. All of that is mine, but I am unable, myself, to grasp it. The spirit is too narrow to be able to belong to itself. Where might be what, in itself, the spirit is unable to grasp?  

Here we discover the inability of the soul to encompass itself which, indeed, stands at the very heart of Augustine's reflexion on memory. And this reflexion inspires Heidegger's commentary in these lectures where he draws on early Christian motifs concerning the opacity of the soul, interpreted in terms of the "facticity of life" in which it faces different possibilities of approaching or of fleeing from itself. In this context, we find Heidegger's examination of the three modes of tentatio through which life is distracted from itself: concupiscencia carnis, concupiscencia occulorum, ambitio saeculi, and also molestia, Bedrängnis or the feeling of oppression, which brings the facticity of life before the problem of the "I am". We note in passing the adumbration of the analyses of facticity of Dasein in Being and Time, where Heidegger stipulates that Dasein is most often (zunächst und zumeist) not itself; in this context the evocation of the inauthentic mode of existence as "curiosity" is explicitly inspired by Augustine's concupiscencia occulorum which is first examined in this early course lecture.

Although Heidegger focuses extensively on Augustine's analyses of the opacity of self-understanding as the mark of life's radical facticity, he is also aware that Augustine's aim is not to dwell on the facticity of life, but to envision the possibility of overcoming its facticity. The role of memory from his perspective is to guide us, through its very infinity, beyond the scope of the personal self to the presence within us, in our interiority, of eternal being. It is here, indeed, that we find the trace of the Platonic and neo-Platonic interpretation of memory as ἄναμνήσις. And the surmounting of the radical facticity of life leads to the identification of being with eternal "presence," in a temporal framework initially established by Greek antiquity. Heidegger's purpose can thus only be to reappropriate Augustine's legacy while stripping it

---

7 M. Heidegger, "Augustinus und der Neuplatonismus", op. cit., p. 182. "[...] penetrare amplum et infinitum: All das gehört zu mir selbst, und ich fasse es nicht selbst. Um sich selbst zu haben, ist der Geist zu eng. Wo soll es sein, was der Geist an sich selbst nicht faßt?" Referring to St. Paul's famous sentence "For surely now we see through a glass darkly, not face to face as yet," Augustine wrote in Book X, § 5, pp. 84-85, "yet is there some thing of man, that the very spirit of man that is in him, knoweth not".
of Platonic and neo-Platonic metaphysical motifs which it had incorporated. And, at the heart of this metaphysical speculation lies Augustine's theory of memoria which opens out to eternal being.

Heidegger goes so far in this early course lecture as to call for a "destruction" (Destruktion) of those aspects of Augustine's theology which seek to resolve the radical problem of the facticity of the self by means of ancient Greek speculative ideas. In a section of the lecture entitled "Toward the destruction of Confessiones X" ("Zur Destruktion von Confessiones X"), he writes:

Memoria is not radically conceived in existential terms of fulfillment, but in Greek terms which in its content is leveled down [...] what itself is present there, [is] that truth has an unchanging consistency, in terms of which it exteriorizes and systematizes itself [...] .

As Heidegger later elaborated a clearer understanding of the concept of temporality that would be a central theme of Being and Time, he developed an explicit critique of Augustine's famous idea of time examined in book XI of the Confessions. If Augustine's famous notion of the distentio animi as the synthetic power of the soul in its capacity to bring together past, present, and future might seem to anticipate in important ways Heidegger's own reflections on the temporal ekstases of Dasein, by which synthetic temporizing modes of existence weld time into a unity, Heidegger emphasized the distinction between his standpoint and that of Augustine. To the extent that the distentio animi presupposes the soul's presence to itself, opening out to an infinite and eternal presence, Augustine's speculative concepts, from Heidegger's perspective, confined his analysis within the horizon of time as a succession of present moments, "nothing else but a stretching out in length". This is why the sole reference in Being and Time to Augustine's reflection on time compares it to the theories of Aristotle and Hegel as examples of the theoretical approach to time as ordinary or "vulgar" time which, in reducing it to an infinitely extendable series of world-time, skips over the question of the finitude of Dasein's temporal existence. According to Heidegger's well-known interpretation in Being and Time, this idea of time as an infinitely extendable presence neglects the authentic temporal priority as Heidegger interprets it: the priority not of the present but of the future, of the futurity of Dasein's being-toward-death, which makes possible authentic choice. It is thus in this perspective, and in essential accord with his critique of neo-Platonism in the earlier 1921 Freiburg lectures, that Heidegger interprets the traditional idea of eternity as presence which perdures. Although Augustine's memoria is no longer mentioned in this context, it is clear

---

4 M. Heidegger, "Augustinus und der Neuplatonismus", op. cit., pp. 247-248. "Memoria nicht radikal existenziell vollzugslos, sondern griechisch, gehaltlich abfallend [...] was da selbst vorhanden ist, daß Wahrheit unveränderlich 'Bestand' hat, wohin er sich dann wegwirft und einordnet."

that in *Being and Time* the theological notion of eternity and of eternal truth, which the Augustinian memoria revealed in the interiority of the soul, must be radically deconstructed. As Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*:

. The affirmation of "eternal truths" as also the conflation of the phenomenally founded "ideality" of Dasein with an idealized absolute subject belong to the age-old vestiges of Christian theology which has not been radically eliminated within the philosophical problematic.¹⁰

II

While Heidegger explicitly enunciated his critique of the Augustinian theory of time in *Being and Time*, his preoccupation with the theme of memory, both in Augustine's thought and more generally, faded into the background. From the first sentence of this work, we are reminded that Heidegger's primary ontological question concerns not "memory," but forgetting: "The so-called question [the question of Being] has today fallen into forgetfulness."¹¹ And, under the aegis of the Seinsfrage, of ontology, memory is subordinated to forgetfulness, to Seinsvergessenheit, as *Being and Time*’s immediate focus. Memory, indeed, can assume ontological significance only to the extent that it recalls what has fallen into forgetfulness. In one of the rare passages in which Heidegger evokes the topic of memory, Erinnerung, he subordinates it to forgetfulness in stipulating that "memory is possible only on the ground of forgetting and not the other way around."¹² Forgetting, according to Heidegger’s interpretation here, prefigures Dasein’s everyday existence in the world. Forgetfulness envelops the everyday preoccupations of Dasein through which it continually neglects the finite character of its existence as being-toward-death. It is thus on the ground of this ontological forgetfulness of finitude, which is characteristic of inauthentic existence, that Heidegger introduces his brief examination of memory in *Being and Time*. Here the rootedness of memory in the facticity of existence recapitulates the central theme of the 1921 Freiburg course lecture "Augustine and Neo-Platonism".

In this context, it is particularly significant that Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein’s authentic mode of existence centers not on memory (Erinnerung), but on repetition (Wiederholung), which is designated as the authentic existential counterpart to forgetfulness.¹³ The term Wiederholung might at a first


glance seem to shift the theme of authentic retrieval from the Augustinian memoria to that of Kierkegaard’s “repetition,” in terms of which the Danish philosopher explicitly attempted to reformulate the traditional Greek theory of memory as “reminiscence.” According to Kierkegaard’s interpretation, whereas reminiscence in this sense recalls the past, repetition is oriented toward the future: “repetition is forward oriented remembrance.” At the same time, however, Kierkegaard related the temporal dimension of repetition to a “now” which, from Heidegger's perspective, remained within the horizon of world-time. As he stipulated in the 1927 lecture Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, which was presented in the same year as the publication of Being and Time: “Kierkegaard [...] identifies the moment (Augenblick) with the now (Jetzt) according to the vulgar understanding of time. From this standpoint he constructs the paradoxical relation between now and eternity.” If repetition, Wiederholung, for Heidegger, is oriented toward the future, it is not in view of any eternal or infinitely extendable now, but of decision in light of Dasein’s finite being-toward-death. And it is this emphasis on the finite dimension of repetition which leads him to elaborate this concept in its essential distinction from both the Augustinian memoria and Kierkegaard’s repetition. Heidegger was already aiming to reconstruct the metaphysical foundations of memory which became a primary focus of his work during the years immediately following the publication of Being and Time.

III

In Being and Time, Heidegger described his philosophical project as “fundamental ontology,” whereas he tended to reserve the term “metaphysics” to characterize the metaphysical tradition he sought to overcome. During the years following the publication of Being and Time, however, he sought to elaborate a new interpretation of metaphysics, in light of fundamental ontological analysis, which he depicted as a “metaphysics of finite Dasein.” At the same time, this reappraisal of the topic of metaphysics also coincided with a renewed concern with the phenomenon of memory. Most significantly, he refers in this context not only to memory as Erinnerung, but to reminiscence or Wiedererinnerung, which had traditionally been the German term chosen to translate the Platonic ἀνάμνησις. Wiedererinnerung is the

16 This point has been persuasively argued by François Jarre-Duquette in his recent doctoral thesis, La métaphysique du Dasein dans l'œuvre de Martin Heidegger, Université de Montréal, 2006.
German word that Schleiermacher chose in his early 19th century translation of Plato's *Phaedon*. And, following Schleiermacher, Hegel also employed this term “Wiedererinnerung” to translate the Greek ἀνάμνησις in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. In harmony with the perspective of fundamental ontology elaborated in *Being and Time*, Heidegger, however, redefined the concept of Wiedererinnerung by stripping it of its essential trait for the Platonic and neo-Platonic tradition: its temporal reference to eternity. In so doing, he referred it directly to the finite temporality of *Dasein*. As he wrote in a particularly evocative passage of the 1928 course lecture, *Metaphysische Anfanggründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz*:

In conceiving of Being, we grasp nothing new, but rather something that is fundamentally comprehended, that is, something the understanding of which involves our existence as we relate to what we term beings. This reminiscence (Wiedererinnerung) concerns being and hence reveals a primordial time-relatedness of being: it is conceived as always already there and yet always once again returning. This is not the vulgar remembrance of ontic occurrences, of beings, but it is metaphysical remembrance (Erinnerung), in which that primordial time-relatedness of being announces itself. It is in this metaphysical remembrance that humans (der Mensch) understand themselves in their authentic essence: as beings who understand being and who, on the ground of this understanding, relate to beings.  

---

17 Plato, *Phaedon*, trans. F. Schleiermacher, *Werke* in 8 Bänden, vol. 3. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977. It is of particular interest to note that Schleiermacher did not uniformly translate ἀνάμνησις with Wiedererinnerung but tended, for example in his rendition of the *Meno*, to employ the word Erinnerung. The passage in the *Phaedon* (72b) in which Wiedererinnerung appears refers to reminiscence as proof of meaning that preexists in us and thus supports the metaphysical argument concerning the immortality of the soul: "Und eben das auch, sprach Kebes einfalldend, nach jenem Satz, o Sokrates, wenn er richtig ist, den du oft vorzutragen pflegst, daß unser Lernen nichts anderes ist als Wiedererinnerung (ἀνάμνησις), und daß deshalb notwendig in einer früheren Zeit gelernt haben müßten, wessen wir uns wiederinnern, und daß dies unmöglich wäre, wenn unsere Seele nicht schon war, ehe sie in diese menschliche Gestalt kam; so daß auch hiernach die Seele etwas Unsterbliehes sein muß..."


This passage clarifies the interpretation of finite memory, anchored in the facticity of \textit{Dasein}, which brings to full articulation the critical motif of his destruction of traditional expressions of the metaphysics of memory, particularly in their Platonic and neo-Platonic forms, while retrieving the theme of remembrance which in \textit{Being and Time} had been overshadowed by the ontological motif of repetition.

To conclude my brief interpretation of Heidegger's reflection on memory, I will indicate what seems to me to be the problematic character of Heidegger's metaphysical concept of memory which, of course, he himself abandoned in the years following the reversal of \textit{Kehre} in his thinking beginning in the mid-1930s. From my own perspective, Heidegger's understanding of memory, in spite of the importance of his insight, unduly restricts it to the finite facticity of \textit{Dasein}. Where the metaphysical tradition he brought into question evacuated the finite temporality of memory in favor of the temporal permanence of eternal being recalled by the Platonic \textit{ἀνάμνησις}, Heidegger focused exclusively on the opposite tendency: he oriented all authentic possibilities of remembrance in terms of the mortality of singular \textit{Dasein}. Here Heidegger's reflection inverts the fundamental presupposition of the tradition to which he responds, as he substitutes radically singular contingency for unchanging eternal being as the metaphysical basis of remembrance. Yet, when we place in question the metaphysical foundations of the Platonic tradition, we must ask whether finitude understood in terms of the \textit{mortality} of existence, raised to the status of a metaphysical principle, constitutes an adequate basis for understanding the essential expressions of finitude as such. My own work on collective remembrance suggests the existence of communal expressions of finitude that are not simply derived from the singularity of being-toward-death, but arise from autonomous configurations of a shared memory, conveyed by symbols which, at their own level of contingent continuity or "historicity," manifest a perdurability that neither participates in the eternity of metaphysical being nor is derivable from the finite memory of singular \textit{Dasein}. This topic however, which calls for deeper investigation of the articulations of communal finitude, takes us beyond the framework of Heidegger's mode of investigation.

---

See also in this context the description of \textit{Wiedererinnerung} in relation to the finitude of \textit{Dasein} at the end of \textit{Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik}, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1973, p. 227. Here Heidegger stipulates that the "fundamentalontologische Grundakt der Metaphysik des Daseins als der Grundlegung der Metaphysik ist [...] eine 'Wiedererinnerung'".