Grounding and ontological difference in Heidegger’s metontological period (1929-1935)

**Abstract: In ‘Metaphysics, Metontology, and the End of Being and Time,’ Steven Crowell argues: 1) that shortly after *Being and Time*, Heidegger began to develop a positive evaluation of metaphysics, and augmented his phenomenological research with traditional metaphysical concepts; 2) that this evaluation of metaphysics is apparent in Heidegger’s project of ‘metontology’—an attempt to find an ‘ontic’ grounding for ‘ontological’ (phenomenological) inquiry; 3) that metontology is inconsistent with phenomenology and, if intended to have any non-trivial results, impossible.**

**In this article, I show, via an explication of Heidegger’s discussion of ontological difference in his 1929 ‘the Essence of Ground’, that Dr. Crowell’s worries about Heidegger’s project of metontology result not from what metontology could be, but from an antecedent hermeneutical commitment to the category of ‘ground’ as a guiding idea for philosophy. The difference between ontic and ontological inquiries cannot be methodological (e.g. phenomenology vs. positive science), as in Crowell’s reading, but rather concerns two different *kinds* of phenomenological inquiry differentiated by the object of inquiry.**

Keywords: Metontology; Grounding; Ontological Difference; Ontic truth; synthesis.

# Two core theses of this paper

1. The core of Steven Crowell’s interpretation of Heidegger is his interpretation of the ontological difference—that between being and beings—as a difference between meaning and entities.[[1]](#endnote-1)

2. Crowell’s interpretation of the ontological difference is mistaken.

# Five hermeneutical consequences of the first core thesis

1. Because being is conceived by Heidegger as transcendent, Crowell equates ‘Transcendental inquiry’ with ‘inquiry into meaning [being] as the condition for the appearance of entities [beings]’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

2. Because Heidegger equates meaning and being, inquiry into being must be inquiry into meaning. That is, ontology must be phenomenology.[[3]](#endnote-3) Therefore, transcendental inquiry, phenomenology, and ontology all name the same thing.[[4]](#endnote-4)

3. If ‘ontological’ refers to inquiry into meaning as one pole of the ontological difference, then ‘ontic’ must refer to the other pole. Therefore, ‘ontic’ is consistently construed as meaning ‘entity-related; regarding entities’ *as opposed to* ‘ontological,’ which is defined as ‘meaning-related; regarding meaning.’[[5]](#endnote-5) Therefore, ontic inquiry must be a non-meaning-directed inquiry into an entity or region of entities.

4. Consequently, the search for an ontic ground for ontology (What Heidegger refers to as ‘Metontology’) must be an attempt to ground meaning in a given entity or region of entities.[[6]](#endnote-6) This form of philosophizing has already been given a name by the tradition: metaphysics, the essence of which Crowell identifies as *l’esprit de système*—in other words, with that form of philosophy that refuses to be grounded in—or seeks a ground for—*Evidenz*.[[7]](#endnote-7)

5. Therefore, regardless of what metontology *exactly* is, Crowell is antecedently certain that insofar as it is not the self-reflexive grounding of phenomenology, it must be an ontic attempt to ground meaning via an entity or entities—that is, it must be what Husserl refers to as the ‘absurd’ position of *transcendental realism*.[[8]](#endnote-8)

# A Brief summary of Crowell’s argument

In ‘Metaphysics, Metontology, and the End of Being and Time,’ Steven Crowell argues the following points: 1) that shortly after *Being and Time*, Heidegger began to develop a positive evaluation of metaphysics, and augmented his phenomenological research with traditional metaphysical concepts; 2) that this evaluation of metaphysics is apparent in Heidegger’s project of ‘metontology’—an attempt to find an ‘ontic’ grounding for ‘ontological’ (phenomenological) inquiry; 3) that metontology is inconsistent with phenomenology and, if intended to have any non-trivial results, impossible.

Crowell begins his argument with a quote from Heidegger’s 1947 ‘Letter on Humanism,’ where Heidegger states that the third section of *Being and Time* was never completed because ‘thinking failed in the adequate saying of this turning,[[9]](#endnote-9) and did not succeed with the help of the language of metaphysics’ (GA 9:328/231). According to Crowell, this means: Heidegger’s phenomenology had, at the time of the publication of *Being and Time*, failed to attain its philosophical goal of establishing a fundamental ontology; therefore, shortly after publishing *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s philosophy began to incorporate elements of traditional metaphysical thinking, aims and methods, first augmenting and later overshadowing the phenomenological ones already in place in Heidegger’s earlier work.

After laying out his case for this reading of Heidegger’s philosophical trajectory, Crowell briefly spells out the decisive difference between phenomenology and metaphysics as he understands it: phenomenology, according to Crowell, insists a) that philosophical practice must be *grounded*; and b) that the only way to accomplish this grounding is via the practice of phenomenological ‘seeing.’ By contrast, metaphysics refuses to abide by this rule: its methods are often borrowed from the positive sciences, it frequently attempts to answer speculative questions without the content of either the questions or the answers first having been clarified, and it aims at a complete, systematic understanding of the universe.[[10]](#endnote-10)

From here, Crowell’s argument proceeds along the following course: first, in an attempt to ascertain what entity or entities Heidegger is specifically referring to as the ground of ontology, he enumerates possible candidates for this project of grounding; next, he attempts to explain why an ontic-ontological double-grounding is a problem; next, he invokes Husserl’s transcendental-phenomenological reduction—i.e. a return to the single ground of phenomenological *Evidenz*—as a solution to the problem of double grounding; from there, he returns to consider further candidates for the project of an ontic grounding of ontology, dismissing them each on textual and/or philosophical grounds as inadequate; finally, he closes on a happy note, expressing disagreement with Habermas’ claim that Heidegger in his later philosophy ‘retreated ever more into mythical self-indemnification,’ and advancing his own claim that Heidegger, in the attempt of his later work to overcome metaphysics altogether, returns to the methods and strictures of phenomenology.

# Some Problems of Grounding and the Problem of Ground

Without filling in the details of Crowell’s argument further, we can already notice several ways in which problems of grounding are raised.

The most forthcoming problem is one of dialectical consistency. Although Crowell finds his *solution* to the problem of Heidegger’s foray into metontology in recourse to the reduction, his own explication of the problem itself does not stay within the limits posed by the reduction. [[11]](#endnote-11) Crowell’s attempt to ascertain what the project of metontology could be proceeds in hypothetico-deductive fashion, advancing several hypotheses regarding what metontology could be: it could be an attempt to ground phenomenological study via cosmology; it could be a form of naturalism; it could be a historical relativization of ontological knowledge; it could be a project of philosophical theology.[[12]](#endnote-12) What is striking here is not the posits that are put forth; rather, it is striking that Crowell would proceed by posits at all.

Throughout the above, the following claims provide the hermeneutical backdrop to Crowell’s more readily apparent theses: 1) that *whatever* metontology is, it is either a) if within phenomenology, trivial, or b) if outside of phenomenology, objectionable *on those grounds alone*; 2) that the grounding via the reduction itself is supreme, final, and unassailable.

These two claims belong together in their dependence on the following tenets: 1) that the dichotomy between methods within the reduction and those outside of it is exhaustive, with the former being ‘good’ philosophical methods, and the latter being ‘bad’ or ‘objectionable’ ones, which, though they have their place, do not have a place in *philosophy*; 2) that there can only be *one* non-trivial sense of ground—in this case, the phenomenological reduction.

Leaving aside the validity of the dichotomy in the former tenet, it is not clearly the one with which *Heidegger* is working when he embarks on the project of metontology. This only follows if one has antecedently accepted the idea that ontology *=* phenomenology—a claim which ought to be distinguished from, and is not entailed by, the claim that only as phenomenology is ontology possible.[[13]](#endnote-13) Thus:

* The presupposition of identity of type of grounding between ontology and metontology, and, accordingly, the possibility of conflict between them, cannot be given without a clear idea of what metontology *is*.

The second tenet brings us to the question of double grounding. Unfortunately, Crowell spends only a little time explicating why double grounding is a problem at all;[[14]](#endnote-14) rather, he *begins* by claiming that Heidegger equivocates in his sense of grounding when he claims that the factical existence of Dasein presupposes the factical extantness of nature, proceeds to claim that this equivocation is not a problem if the two ‘senses’ of ground (ontic and ontological) are respected, and then gives evidence that Heidegger failed to respect these differences. This method, however, plainly ignores the question: why is double grounding a problem in the first place?

One can begin to see the answer in a later remark that Crowell gives. He writes, ‘Husserl’s breakthrough to phenomenology in the *Logical Investigations* came with the idea that no noncircular explanation of knowledge as a factual occurrence is possible’ (Crowell 2001, p.235). Thus, Crowell’s claim that double grounding—and therefore metontology—is a problem is dependent upon his *prior* commitment to the above stated idea that the grounding via the reduction is supreme, final, and unassailable. For instance, it is on the basis of the finality of the reduction that Crowell provides his distinctive gloss on a passage from Heidegger’s ‘What is Metaphysics’: ‘The distinctive mood of *Angst* is said to reveal the nothing (*das Nichts*), that is, to bring us before the phenomenological fact that reasons—ontic answers to the question of why there is something rather than nothing—*give out*.’ (p.240). ‘Reasons give out,’ because there can be no ‘deeper’ ground than the reduction itself. Any attempt to attain deeper ground would thus make the reduction ‘dependent’ on that deeper ground, which is presumed to be impossible (based on the finality of the reduction). Therefore, every attempt to ground the reduction would be ‘circular’—that is, it would ‘presuppose’ the reduction, which is then interpreted as ‘higher’ because of said relation of ‘being presupposed’. Thus, the reduction itself is construed as ‘reflexively’ grounding itself.

Thus, the following complex is brought forth: The reduction is itself ‘ultimate ground’ (because all other grounds ‘depend’ upon it), yet ‘groundless’ (because ontic reasons for the whole ‘give out’), as well as ‘self reflexively’ or ‘circularly’ grounding.

* These latter aspects of the reduction (groundlessness and self-reflexive grounding) are dependent on the first (ultimate grounding).

The reduction must be circularly grounded because it is that which is ‘deepest’ or ‘highest’. Consequently, there is nothing ‘beyond’ it.

* The first of the above aspects is itself not grounded in ‘the things themselves,’ but only in the appropriation of the traditional ‘metaphysical’ image of ‘grounding.’

In other words, the fact that Crowell sees metontology as a threat to phenomenology is not given within phenomenology, and not by the project of metontology (for Crowell admits that he need not know exactlywhat it is to object to it), but rather by his own insistence on the project of ‘grounding’ philosophy, a project that, based on the very metaphor of grounding in use, tends both toward a) the illusion of conflict between different types of grounding, and b) the striving for some ground that is ‘higher ground,’ which is also construed according to the image of a ‘deepest ground.’

The irony here is that in attempting to avoid metaphysics conceived as a reduction of the sphere of meaning to a being or region of beings, we have run headlong into it: the reduction, itself surely a being,[[15]](#endnote-15) has taken on the qualities of being ultimate, groundless, and even of being a *causa sui* in its reflexive self-grounding. In short, the very project of seeking a highest ground, meant to *defend* ontology from metaphysics, here tends towards onto-theology, i.e. towards metaphysics. Conversely, if this practice of thinking of the reduction in terms of an ‘ultimate grounding’ is abandoned, so too must the worry that Heidegger’s project of metontology represents a challenge to the ‘highest ground’, a kind of sin against the Most High, also be abandoned.

Thus, having laid aside the above worries about metontology’s ‘transgression’ against phenomenology, let us proceed to a deeper analysis of the ontological difference—that is, Heidegger’s distinction between being and beings.

# An Exegesis of Heidegger’s ‘On the Essence of Ground’, I

Truth, Grounding, and Synthesis

We now proceed to challenge this reading via a reading of Heidegger’s ‘On the Essence of Ground,’ a contribution to a *Festschrift* on the occasion of Husserl’s seventieth birthday. This fact gives us reason to believe that Heidegger would have used this paper as an occasion to express his relation to Husserl’s philosophy. If this is correct, then it may also give us occasion to enter into dialogue with Crowell’s own concerns, which often dovetail with Husserl’s. Furthermore, in his 1949 Preface to the third edition of *Der Satz Vom Grund*, Heidegger, contrasting the treatise with his lecture, ‘What is Metaphysics?’ writes the following: ‘The lecture ponders the nothing, while the treatise names the ontological difference’ (H 97). Thus, while the circumstances hint at an engagement with Husserl, Heidegger himself gives us reason to believe that this treatise is primarily concerned with the notion of the ontological difference, central both to Crowell’s own work and that of the early Heidegger. We shall limit our exegesis to part one of the essay.

Heidegger begins part one of his essay by attempting to awaken the problem of ground via an analysis of Leibniz’s *principium rationis sufficientis,*. Heidegger writes that

The usual, abbreviated version of the principle states: *nihil est sine ratione*, nothing is without reason. Thus, Leibniz’s supreme principle makes use of the idea of grounding both by way of its ‘position’ and by way of its content. In other words, the principle of sufficient reason can serve to bring the question of ground to the fore both according to its content—the idea that all entities ‘have their ground’—and according to its own status as a supreme ‘grounding’ principle (H 100).

In spite of the importance of the idea of ‘ground’ for said principle, Heidegger claims that the idea of ground itself remains fundamentally *unclarified* in this principle (ibid).

After quoting a long section from Leibniz’s *Primae Veritates*, Heidegger points out that ‘Leibniz, in a manner typical for him, here provides, *together* with a characterization of the ‘*first* truths,’ a determination of what truth is in general’ (H 102). For Leibniz, truth is *identity*, an accord between the subject and predicate.[[16]](#endnote-16) Furthermore, because the idea of ‘identity’ is perceived to be primitive and self-evident, it cannot be further clarified. ‘Precisely in undertaking this [Leibniz] considers it necessary to point out that the apparent self-evidence of concepts such as ‘truth’ and ‘identity’ forestalls any clarification of them that would suffice to demonstrate the origin of the *principium* *rationis* and the other axioms’ (H 102). Thus, Leibniz’s claim here is close to Husserl’s own claims about transcendental subjectivity: because truth and identity are ‘primitive,’ there can be no non-circular ‘derivation’ of them from other axioms, nor can there be any further ‘clarification’ of their essence.

This idea of truth as identity, says Heidegger, is possible precisely because Leibniz ‘conceives of truth from the outset…as truth of assertion (proposition)’ (H 102). Furthermore, the sameness that Leibniz identifies with truth here is not ‘the empty sameness of something with itself, but unity in the sense of the original unitary agreement of that which belongs together’ (ibid). In other words, identity for Leibniz is closer to our concept of *accordance*, and is therefore more robust than many contemporary notions of identity. Here, however, one can begin to see another similarity to Husserl, who writes the following in his *Cartesian Meditations*:

One most general trait, however, is always present in any consciousness of any sort, as consciousness of something: This something, the particular ‘intentional object qua intentional’ in any consciousness, is there [*bewusst*] as an identical unity belonging to noetically-noematically changing modes of consciousness, whether intuitive or non-intuitive. (Hua 41)

Thus, though Heidegger is explicitly addressing Leibniz, we can see how Heidegger’s remarks *also* address Husserl: Husserl, like Leibniz, conceives of the presentation of objects to consciousness according to the image of either a ‘pure presentation’ (intuitive mode of consciousness) or a ‘connection’—or ‘synthesis’—of ‘simple presentations.’ For Husserl, like Leibniz, identity is constitutive of the notion of truth.

Furthermore, both Husserl and Leibniz, by recourse to identity as a ‘primary’ notion, nurture the idea of a fundamental relation between ‘truth’ and ‘being.’ For Husserl, to be is to be brought to a mode of appearance—either ‘purely’ or via ‘syntheses’—within the sphere of transcendental subjectivity. Truths, then, are syntheses given within transcendental consciousness, which is itself interpreted as the most all-encompassing of syntheses—that is, truth itself.

Heidegger brings this same point, with respect to Leibniz, to the fore by writing the following:

*Verum esse* means *inesse qua idem esse*. For Leibniz, however, *verum esse*—being *true*, at the same time means *being* ‘in truth’—*esse* pure and simple. The idea of being in general is then interpreted by *inesse qua idem esse*. ‘What constitutes an *ens* as an *ens* is ‘identity,’’[[17]](#endnote-17) unity correctly understood that, as simple unity, originarily unifies and simultaneously individuates in such unifying…Leibniz’s derivation of the *principium rationis* from the essence of propositional truth tells us that it is grounded upon a quite specific idea of being in general, an idea in whose light alone that ‘deduction’ becomes possible. [H 106]

Here Heidegger makes two explicit points, from which we may draw one implicit point. The first point is that for Leibniz, there is an essential connection between truth and being. The second point is that this identification of truth and being, and the derivation of the principle of sufficient reason resulting from this identification, is *itself* only possible on the backdrop of a very specific thesis about being: that being = sameness, unity, identity. The implicit lesson that we can gather from these two points is that the very ‘self-evidence’ of the equations made by Leibniz is dependent on something *unseen*; similarly, the fact that something has been brought to intuition (as, for instance, in the reduction invoked by Crowell or Husserl), *cannot of itself guarantee the* ‘*validity*’ *of that intuition*.

However, in this case, seeing that the idea of truth is itself under investigation, something further can be drawn from Heidegger’s remarks—namely, that the very idea of truth as being necessarily forked into ‘synthesis’ and ‘pure intuition’ *is itself only given to phenomenological ‘seeing’ because of a prior, unthought hermeneutical commitment to the priority of propositional truth.* For our own purposes, this says the following:the recourse to *Evidenz* that Husserl and Crowell appeal to in the reduction is problematic not because its opposite (the positive method of the sciences) needs to be appropriated as well (as in Crowell’s interpretation of Heidegger’s middle period), but because the very way of parsing up modes of philosophizing according to these two modes is only ‘seen’ against the backdrop of an unclarified commitment regarding the nature of truth itself.

In summary, in Heidegger’s brief comments on Leibniz, we can witness the following claims: 1) That although Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason makes use of the idea of ground in two unique and important ways, the idea of ground itself remains unclarified. I submit that this is also true of Husserl’s use of the idea of ground in the question behind his own project—namely, ‘how can philosophy, in its character as *strenge Wissenschaft*, serve as an ultimate ground for the sciences?’ 2) that the construal of truth as identity is itself dependent on a prioritizing of propositional truth, and, contrary to appearances, is itself the ‘ground’ of the idea of truth as a ‘simple presentation’ or ‘pure intuition,’ and not vice versa. Thereby, this critique also touches Husserl’s own characterization of truth as a synthesis of presentations given in eidetic intuition.

Phenomenology and Ontic Truth

After expounding Leibniz’s characterization of truth as identity, Heidegger transitions to his own thesis with the following:

However, can anything more originary be brought to bear beyond the delimitation of the essence of truth as a characteristic of the assertion? Nothing less than the insight that this determination of the essence of truth—however it may be conceived in its details—is indeed an uncircumventable one, yet nevertheless derivative. The overarching accordance of the *nexus with* beings, and their consequent accord, do not *as such* primarily make beings accessible. [H 102-103]

For the moment, we need simply point out that by adding the words ‘however it may be conceived in his details,’ Heidegger has indicated to us that the net that he has cast reaches further than Leibniz.

Might one suppose here that Heidegger’s denial of the primacy of the idea of truth as a string of connections is not a refutation of, but an *endorsement* of the view that the pure intuition given in phenomenology as primary? In other words, might not this passage be construed as supporting the view that the pure presentation of meaning is prior to the nexus with beings presented that the natural attitude calls ‘the world’? Briefly put, no. For several lines later, Heidegger adds the following:

The characterization of pre-predicative truth as intuition readily suggests itself *because* ontic truth—supposedly truth proper—is in the first place defined as propositional truth, i.e., as a ‘*connection of presentations*.’ That which is more simple by contrast to truth *thus defined* is then taken to be a straightforward presenting, free of any such connection. Such presentation indeed has its own function in the task of *objectifying* beings, which are of course always already and necessarily manifest. [H 103]

In other words, Heidegger cannot himself be simply hearkening back to a ‘pure intuition’ because he conceives of this idea of truth as itself being dependent upon the delimitation of propositional truth as a ‘connection of presentations.’

Thus, Heidegger’s critique of Leibniz has a wider reach than Leibniz himself, and is rather directed against the very form of thinking that views the connection/intuition dichotomy as primitive. In other words, Heidegger’s cannot mean by ‘ontological difference’ ‘the difference between meaning and beings,’ because in this essay, he prepares the ground for his introduction of that difference by a radical critique of the very kind of thinking that would suggest the above interpretation. Therefore, the dichotomy that Heidegger means to advance between being and beings must refer to something other than the dichotomy between meaning and entities.

Heidegger begins his introduction of the ontological difference by first discussing ontic truth. He writes, ‘Propositional truth is rooted in a *more originary* truth (unconcealment), in the pre-predicative manifestness *of beings*, which may be called *ontic truth*’ (H 103). So even in the matter of ontic truth, Heidegger conceives of truth according to the idea of unconcealment. This is important because throughout the remainder of his essay, he will freely move between the terms ‘truth,’ ‘manifestation,’ ‘unconcealment,’ ‘manifestness,’ and similar words. By linking truth to unconcealment here, Heidegger lets us know that this variety of uses is intended as a unity.

Furthermore, in the above quote, Heidegger is already referring to ontic truth as pre-predicative. Therefore, while Crowell understands ontic truth by *contrasting* it with the pre-predicative manifestation of meaning in ontological truth, Heidegger is claiming that *that* mode of presentation is already inherent to ontic truth. In other words, what Crowell designates as the ‘lesser half’ of the ontological difference already has the virtues that Crowell ascribes exclusively to the ‘more fundamental’ half.

Heidegger then proceeds to name two different kinds of ontic truth: *discoveredness* and *disclosedness*. Discoveredness is conceived as the truth (manifestation) ‘of what is present at hand,’ whereas disclosedness is conceived as ‘the truth of those beings that we ourselves are’ (H 103). Here, we can make two points: first, by referring to discoveredness as ‘the truth of what is present at hand’ Heidegger intends to draw attention to this ‘at hand’ character: truth is ‘pragmatic,’ and never merely given as an ‘intuition’ ‘Not even in ‘aesthetic’ contemplation’ (H 103). Second, we may notice that the disclosedness of ‘the beings that we ourselves are’—the disclosedness of existing Dasein—is itself conceived as ‘ontic.’ Thus, in referring to disclosedness as *one* form of ontic truth, contrasting it with both discoveredness and with ontological truth, Heidegger distances himself from Husserl, according to whom the *telos* of philosophy is the elucidation of transcendental subjectivity. This is no mere semantic disagreement, for it lets us know that Heidegger disagrees with Husserl about the very matter of philosophy. Second, in referring to the manifestation of Dasein as ‘ontic,’ Heidegger distances himself from Crowell’s interpretation of the ontological difference, for whom, the manifestation of Dasein being unquestionably phenomenological, such truth would fall into the ‘ontological’ category.[[18]](#endnote-18) In short, Heidegger’s division of ontic truth into disclosedness and discoveredness, as well as his brief description of these types of truth, shows us that ontic manifestation is itself *already* phenomenological. Therefore, ontic truth cannot be defined, as Crowell defines it, by contrasting it with phenomenology.

Ontology

It is here that Heidegger first introduces the concept of *ontological* truth. He writes, ‘*Unveiledness of being first makes possible the manifestness of beings*. This unveiledness, as the truth concerning being, is termed *ontological truth*’ (H 104). In other words, Heidegger here expresses his claim that our everyday ontic questioning (including those ontic investigations that makes great strides through the use of phenomenological method) presupposes that the truth of being has already been ‘received.’ So in a certain sense, everyone is always already ‘doing’ ontology, although very few explicitly raise the question of the meaning of being. That Heidegger means to say this is given by the direction in which he continues. Let us quote his following remarks at length:

Certainly, the terms ‘ontology’ and ‘ontological’ are ambivalent, indeed in such a way that the problem peculiar to any ontology is precisely concealed. *Logos* of the *on* means: the addressing (*legein*) of beings as beings, yet at the same time it signifies that *with respect to which* beings are addressed (*legomenon*). Addressing something as something, however, does not yet necessarily entail *comprehending in its essence* whatever is thus addressed. The *understanding* of being (*logos* in a quite broad sense) that guides and illuminates in advance all comportment toward beings is neither a grasping of being as such, nor is it a conceptual comprehending of what is thus grasped (*logos* in its narrowest sense = ‘ontological’ concept). We therefore call this understanding of being that has not yet been brought to a concept a pre-ontological understanding, or ontological in the broader sense. [H 104]

Let us call attention to the following points regarding this passage. First, when Heidegger writes that addressing beings need not entail understanding the essence of being, he makes two points: first, he confirms that an understanding of being—that is, an implicit ontology—is always already ‘at work’ in our everyday understanding, although rarely brought to conscious reflection. This understanding is ontological ‘in the broader sense.’ Second, in contrasting pre-ontological understanding, the addressing of beings as beings, with ‘comprehending in its essence,’ Heidegger implicitly reveals the aim of ontology as he conceives of it: to comprehend being according to its essence; to bring being, that which is always already understood, to an explicit concept.

Here, ontology, like the striving after ontic truth, is a meaning directed inquiry. But the contrast between the two endeavors is not a contrast of method, but of *content*. Ontic inquiries can, for instance, ask the question of the essence of time consciousness, of humanity, of music, etc. But ontic inquiries do not ask the question of the essence of *being* (although Heidegger presumes that an unnoticed answer to this question is already at work in all ontic inquiries). Therefore, because of the presumed ubiquity of the effects of answering the question of the meaning of being, Heidegger avers that said question must be asked—and answered—explicitly via the reawakening of the project of *ontology*.

That this is the shape of the project of fundamental ontology—by now apparently something other than phenomenology *simpliciter*—is also clear from Heidegger’s marginal notes on the lecture. For instance, after introducing the term ‘ontological truth’ for the first time, Heidegger writes the following: ‘Unclear! Ontological truth is unveiling of beingness—via the categories—but beingness as such is already *one* particular truth of beyng, one way in which its essential prevailing is cleared’ (H 104). Here, Heidegger explicitly states that ontological truth is the unveiling (truth, manifestation) of beingness *via the categories*—that is, being is forced to appear as a ‘cluster’ of ‘objective,’ ‘most fundamental’ ‘ideas,’ or ‘essences’. Also supporting this reading is Heidegger’s self-admonition given in a note at the title of section 1 of the treatise: he writes, ‘Beingness as *idea* is itself unveiledness’ (H 100), indicating that he had earlier neglected to notice the way in which his method of inquiry itself would have prejudiced the results thereof in a Platonic direction. Lastly, Heidegger writes the following regarding his use of the phrase ‘grasping of being:’ ‘Grasping of being: (a) in categorial-metaphysical terms, or (b) in a quite different manner, as projection of the essential prevailing of the truth of beyng’ (H 104). In this dichotomy, Heidegger is drawing a contrast between his earlier approach, bound by a ‘categorial-metaphysical’ understanding of being, and later thought which ‘lets the truth of beyng prevail.’ In short, there is strong reason, both based on Heidegger’s initial treatise and his later marginal comments on that treatise, for us to believe that Heidegger’s project of fundamental ontology is *not* merely another name for phenomenology, but is an entirely different endeavor, whose closest philosophical kinsman is not Husserl, but Aristotle.

# Conclusion

We began our essay as an engagement with Steven Crowell’s interpretation of the ontological difference. After raising to question the way in which the idea of ‘grounding’ was at work in Crowell’s and the complex of ‘circular grounding’ ‘reflexive grounding’ ‘ultimate grounding’ and ‘non-grounding’ resulting therefrom, we suggested that Crowell’s worries about Heidegger’s project of metontology resulted not from what the project of metontology could be, but from an antecedent hermeneutical commitment to the category of ‘ground’ as a guiding idea for philosophy. We further showed that the uncritical adoption of this idea itself tends toward the development of an onto-theology, or metaphysics. After having ‘bracketed’ both philosophical-hermeneutical commitments to the notion of grounding and prior conceptions of what the ontological difference might refer to, we proceeded to explicate Heidegger’s ontological difference via a detailed exegesis of part 1 of his 1929 treatise ‘On the Essence of Ground.’ We saw that Heidegger began said essay as an engagement with Leibniz, and found that within this engagement, Heidegger opposes Leibniz’s delimitation of truth as identity, and argues that this ‘unthought’ delimitation itself presupposes the priority of propositional truth, and is behind the very ‘primordial forking’ of truth into ‘synthesis,’ and ‘pure intuition,’ a dichotomy apparent also in the work of Husserl. We thus concluded that neither the idea of ‘synthesis’ nor that of ‘pure intuition’ was likely to be found in Heidegger’s understanding of the ontological difference. Noting Heidegger’s splitting of ontic truth into ‘discoveredness’ and ‘disclosedness,’ we remarked that Heidegger’s idea of ontic truth is *already* phenomenological, and therefore cannot be defined by contrast with phenomenology itself, nor can Heidegger mean to equate phenomenology and ontology. After further remarks, we showed that the difference between ontic and ontological inquiries could not be one largely of method (e.g. phenomenology vs. positive science), as in Crowell’s reading of the ontological difference, but rather had to be concerned with two different *kinds* of phenomenological inquiry differentiated by the object of inquiry. Thus, Heidegger’s distinction between ontic and ontological truth divides philosophy into, on the one hand, the seemingly inexhaustible inquiry into different entities or regions of entities (ontic manifestation), and the more rarely attempted quest for the meaning of being (ontological truth), conceived as an endeavor to discover the most fundamental categories of being. Thus, Heidegger’s project of fundamental ontology was not the heir of Husserl’s phenomenology (for in this essay Heidegger problematizes the very notion of grounding inherent in that system by suggesting that a central notion behind the phenomenological project—that of intuition—is based on a derivative delimitation of truth) but was all along the next of kin to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

Although we began by challenging Crowell’s objection to metontology, we have not ourselves given a positive delimitation of what metontology could be. That is beyond the scope of this essay. But hopefully, we have been able to ward off the weeds that would choke that project indiscriminately, and have been able to fallow a ground within which that seed may be planted.

**Abbreviations**

H 9 = Heidegger, Martin. *Pathmarks*. Ed. William McNeil. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Includes ‘On the Essence of Ground,’ trans. by William McNeil.

Hua I = Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations*. trans. Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958.

**References**

Crowell, Steven Galt. 2001. *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths toward Transcendental Phenomenology.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

1. ‘In particular, I have argued that the ‘topic’ of the early Heidegger’s philosophy is the ‘ontological difference’ between meaning and entities’ (Crowell 2001, pp. 119-120). ‘Is it not the express aim of [Being and Time] to clarify an entity’s understanding of *being*? It is, but…since meaning…is the horizon for any understanding, it is this aspect of Dasein that must be rendered perspicuous’ (Ibid., p. 130). ‘The ‘transcendental-ontological differentiation’ [is] a methodological reduction whereby the ‘ontological difference’ between beings and being—the difference between entities grasped naively and the meaning structures that enable such a grasp—is disclosed’ (pp. 195-96). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Crowell writes that the being of entities ‘becomes visible as such only through a reflection that first sets aside or reduces the naturalistic thesis about being inherent in everyday life—the same reflection that, in Heidegger’s earlier work, uncovers the ‘difference’ between entities and their transcendental condition, meaning’ (Ibid., p. 197). ‘[Heidegger’s phenomenology] is concerned with the meaning of entities, a transcendental theme that is clarifiable only through phenomenological reflection’ (ibid., p. 200). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Even though it is to be developed ‘in light of ontology’ (that is, phenomenology), metontology must be a new *kind* of inquiry’ (ibid., p. 230). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘The question of why there is something rather than nothing thus forces a confrontation between a transcendental (ontological or phenomenological) and a metaphysical concept of grounding’ (ibid., p. 231). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘[The] ‘being of entities’ is not itself an entity’ and so not a ground in the ontic sense, an *ens* realissimum or totality of entities of any kind’ (ibid., p. 230). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Yet a metaphysical appeal to entities, such as metontology is said to be, is no less objectionable’ (ibid., p. 235). ‘In asking after an ontic ground of ontology, [Heidegger] seems to want to make this independence [of entities] thematic in such a way that the phenomenological project can be clarified, grounded, in terms of it’ (ibid). ‘Heidegger’s new question appears suspiciously like the search for an ontic ‘explanation’ for beings as a whole’ (ibid., p. 231). See also note 5 above. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Heidegger’s transitory positive evaluation of metaphysics after *Being and Time* results from…an *esprit de système* that originates in his renewed enthusiasm for Kant and brings to the surface a latent inconsistency in *Being and Time* between phenomenological and metaphysical senses of ground’ (ibid., p.228). ‘What must be abandoned in the face of ontic-ontological entanglement is the *esprit de système*…that demands a successor discipline to traditional metaphysics (ibid., p.241). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ‘To suggest that Dasein’s understanding of being presupposes the factical extantness of nature thus implies a shift toward a transcendental realistic perspective that is not supplemental to, but *inconsistent* with, the phenomenological project’ (ibid., p. 237). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I.e. the turning, immanent to the project of being and time, from Dasein’s understanding of being to the *meaning* of being. This turn is not to be confused with the ‘turn’ of Heidegger’s later work, which was not a completion of, but a turn away from *Being and Time*’s project of fundamental ontology. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For instance, Crowell writes that for Husserl, ‘grounding or justification in philosophy ultimately lies in direct confrontation, however achieved, with the matters in question and not in dialectical or logical theory construction concerning these matters’ (Crowell 2001, p.228). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Crowell frequently uses language that implies, regardless of whether he or Heidegger is ‘at fault’ for the problem, that it is not clear what Heidegger’s project of metontology *is*. For instance, he writes that ‘it is not at all clear what status an inquiry into beings as a whole could have within the framework of *Being and Time*’ (Crowell 2001, p.231). In another place he writes that ‘the claim that ‘the factical existence of Dasein’ presupposes ‘the factical extantness of nature’ refers to an [ontic] sense of ground whose relation to [the ontological-phenomenological sense of grounding] is by no means clear’ (Crowell 2001, p.235). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Regarding the interpretation of metontology adhered to by most Heidegger scholars—i.e. that the ontic ground of ontology is to be found in Dasein itself—Crowell writes, ‘The value of this suggestion does not lie in any precise insight it gives into what metontological inquiry could be; it adds—and *can* add—nothing to what we have already considered’ (Crowell 2001, p.240). Regarding the idea that metontology could refer to the grounding of ontology in nature, Crowell writes, ‘By bracketing the validity claims of worldly being, the reduction yields a kind of phenomenological evidence whose significance is prior to the mesh of the world. There is no sense, then, in which such evidence presupposes the factical extantness of nature’ (Crowell 2001, p.237). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. One difference is that the latter claim leaves open the possibility that phenomenology, though it may be pressed into the service of ontology, i.e. the question of the meaning of being, can *also* be pressed into the service of other endeavors e.g. the question of the meaning of love, art, even phenomenology itself. This provides us reason enough to bracket the claim that phenomenology and ontology name the same thing. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In spite of this being the opening question of section 4 of his article. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Though the reduction need not be conceived after the fashion of a *substance*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. ‘Semper igitur praedicatum seu consequens inest subjecto seu antecedenti; et in hoc ipso consistit natura veritatis in universum’ (H 101). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Here one may recall Husserl’s own characterization of the Ego as ‘monad,’ and his claim that ‘the ego can be concrete only in the flowing multiformity of his intentional life’ (Hua 68). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I take this conjecture to be grounded in part in Crowell’s own assertion that the claim that Dasein itself is the ontic ground of phenomenology can add nothing to an inquiry into what metontology could be, ‘because anyone adopting it must already have conceded that there can be no purely metaphysical [i.e. ontic] grounds distinct from phenomenological ones’ (Crowell 2001, p. 240). According to this reading, Dasein (conceived of as ‘subject’) *cannot* be an ontic ground because for it to be so would be for it to ground phenomenology (conceived of as ‘ontology’), which is *already* conceived of as starting with the subject. If, however, ontology is not identical to phenomenology, then there is no obstacle to the *ontic* disclosedness of Dasein itself being phenomenological. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)