

Heidegger's Religious Origins

Destruction and Authenticity

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / ix

ABBREVIATIONS OF PRINCIPAL WORKS / xi

Introduction / 1

PART ONE. HEIDEGGER'S ORIGINS: A THEMATIC SKETCH

1. Heidegger's "Religion" / 15
2. Luther's *Theologia Crucis* / 44

PART TWO. HEIDEGGER'S MOTIVES

3. Inauthenticity / 69
4. The Language of Inauthenticity / 101
5. The Roots of Authenticity / 134
6. Authenticity / 162

PART THREE. HEIDEGGER'S "METHOD"

7. Heidegger on the "How" of Philosophy / 207
8. Destruction / 231

NOTES / 267

REFERENCES / 283

INDEX / 291

one

Heidegger's "Religion"

Without this theological origin I would have never arrived at the path of thinking.

(US 96)

Whoever wants to philosophize with Aristotle without danger must first of all become a fool in Christ.

(WAI 355)

My argument about the relationship between destruction and authenticity in Heidegger's early work is predicated upon a more fundamental claim regarding the general role played by *religion* in his thought. Throughout the remainder of this study, I will make constant reference to Heidegger's discussions of religious ideas and religious figures, as well as to his own indications of the importance of these ideas and figures for his fundamental philosophical project. Accordingly, the aim of this chapter is to provide what Heidegger would call a "preliminary sketch [*Vorzeichnis*]" of the role that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, play in his work.

The theme around which the present discussion will revolve is that of Heidegger's religious "origin [*Herkunft*]." In the passage quoted above, taken from a text composed in the 1950s, Heidegger explicitly highlights his own estimation of the importance of this "origin." I have two principal theses with respect to this thematic issue. First, I contend that religious life, particularly Christian religious life, exemplifies a "basic experience [*Grunderfahrung*]" of human life in general, which, when sufficiently "formalized" in the notion of authenticity, provides Heidegger with a starting point for his phenomenologi-

cal investigations into the pre-theoretical sense of “factual life-experience,” as he was wont to call his topic in the early 1920s. Second, I claim that in the early 1920s, Heidegger began to craft a conception of doing philosophy that aimed at cultivating, preserving, and staying loyal to this “basic experience.” Taken together, these two theses encompass the central claim of this study, viz., that Heidegger’s conception of philosophy as destruction is ultimately motivated by his concern with an authentic way of life. In chapters 3 through 8, I will fill in the details of this account. What I want to accomplish in this chapter, and in the next, is to establish the *prima facie* plausibility of my general approach and to provide necessary background material for a thorough understanding of Heidegger’s religious “origins.” Along the way, I hope to provide a more satisfying account of the religious aspects of Heidegger’s work.

The “Religious Dimension” of Heidegger

Among the most enduring questions that has been posed by students of Heidegger’s thought is the question of what Hans-Georg Gadamer called the “religious dimension.”¹ This is the question, or group of questions, concerning the relations between religion, theology, and philosophy in Heidegger’s life and thought. Heidegger began his intellectual life as a seminarian, and continued, albeit with some degree of ebb and flow, to discuss religious themes and to converse with theologians for the remainder of his life. The facts are now all quite well-known, thanks largely to the work of scholars in the past decade.

There is, unfortunately, no univocal reading of this mass of biographical evidence, for Heidegger’s relationship to religion, though intimate, was ambivalent. The new direction taken by Heidegger in philosophy immediately following the First World War corresponded to a painful break with his Catholic faith.² At nearly the same time, Heidegger began to invoke the “atheism” of philosophy (e.g., G61 197). Near the end of his tenure at Marburg, Heidegger stressed to his friend Elisabeth Blochmann that “[r]eligion is a basic possibility of human existence of a completely different sort than philosophy” (HB 25). In this same letter, Heidegger at one and the same time describes his theological period at Marburg as a thing of the past while admitting that he has not achieved the proper standpoint from which this issue can be adequately investigated.

In the 1930s, Heidegger’s interpretive efforts were directed much more frequently at Nietzsche, Hölderlin, and the pre-Socratics than at Luther or the New Testament. Yet during this same period, Heidegger often spent weeks in retreat at the Benedictine monastery of Beuron, not far from his hometown (see HB 31f., 40f.). Beginning in WS 1934–1935, Heidegger also begins a decades-long engagement with Hölderlin’s poetry, in which the latter’s religious discourse, and religious conception of the poetic vocation, plays a large

role (see G39). In an unpublished text from the late 1930s, Heidegger offers his most lengthy reflections on matters of divinity since his WS 1920–1921 lectures on Paul, while at the same time sharply criticizing the “Jewish-Christian” conception of God (G66 225–256). In another text from this same period, one finds Heidegger offering the following observations about his own work:

But who could deny that a confrontation with Christianity discreetly accompanied the whole path up to this point?—A confrontation which was not and is not some “problem” that was latched onto, but rather at *once* the preservation [*Wahrung*] of my own origin—of the parental house, homeland, and youth—and a painful separation from it. Only someone thus rooted in a really vital Catholic world could have an inkling of the necessities that exerted an effect on the path of my questioning up to this point like subterranean earthquakes. (G66 415)

Not surprisingly, the evaluations of Heidegger's “religious dimension” reflect the ambiguities of the matter. Some of the earliest scholars to receive Heidegger's work in the English-speaking world were theologians, most of whom tended to give a narrowly theological reading of Heidegger in which “Being” was equated with God. A version of this reductive tendency that is less sympathetic to Heidegger can be seen in the commentaries of his students Karl Löwith and Hans Jonas, who read Heidegger's philosophy in a critical vein as crypto-Christianity or crypto-Gnosticism.³ The problem with these readings lies precisely in their *reductive* quality. They fail to do justice to the ambiguities of Heidegger's life and thought, to the balance between resistance to and enthusiasm for religion and theology. Such a reduction also manifestly falsifies the sheer breadth of Heidegger's work, the variety of (non-religious) influences on it, and, most importantly, his virtual silence on obviously theological issues of a systematic nature (e.g., Trinity, soteriology, etc.).

Among more sympathetic readers, a kind of “disciplinary” explanation has been offered for the ambiguities of Heidegger's biography. Some commentators recognize the impact of Christian religiosity on Heidegger's philosophy, yet are faced with the challenge of Heidegger's silence on many theological questions and of his insistence on the incommensurability of philosophy and theology. Commentators as diverse as Rudolf Bultmann and Jeffrey Barash maintain that this situation can be explained with reference to Heidegger's starting point in “philosophy” as opposed to “theology.”⁴

While this is certainly an improvement over the reductive approach, the terms of this explanation remain unclarified. What is to be understood by the alleged distinction between “philosophy” and “theology”? Is this simply an institutional or sociological distinction? If so, does it rule out a more genuinely philosophical or doxographical explanation of Heidegger's “religious dimension”? Surely not, especially since Heidegger himself regarded the interpenetration of philosophy and theology to be a philosophical issue of paramount

importance. Is the distinction between “philosophy” and “theology” a more substantive one, perhaps along the lines of the traditional distinction between reason and faith? If this is indeed the case, then this explanation is even more problematic, for it fails to include an adequate account of what *Heidegger* took to be the substance of the distinction between philosophy and theology.⁵

One might be tempted at this point to relegate this entire issue to the realm of *biography* rather than *philosophy*. Indeed, some of the best evidence for Heidegger’s “religious dimension” comes not from his published works or lecture courses, but from the facts of his education.⁶ This move is, however, out of keeping with the philosophical significance that Heidegger himself attached to this “religious dimension,” as the quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates. The project of finding a *philosophical* answer to the question of the “religious dimension” remains important.

Among recent commentators, there are several who have gone the farthest toward providing such an answer: John Van Buren, Theodore Kisiel, and István Fehér. Fehér approaches the issue through Heidegger’s self-interpretation as a philosopher, arguing that Heidegger “transposes” a specific interpretation of theology onto the “level of philosophy.”⁷ That is, his very conception of what it means to do philosophy rests upon a view about what it means to do theology. The nature of this antecedent interpretation of theology can be seen clearly in Heidegger’s 1927 essay “Phenomenology and Theology” (G9 45–78/39–62). What Fehér establishes is that there are substantive doxographical issues involved in the question of Heidegger’s “religious dimension.”

Van Buren’s *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of the Hidden King* provides a detailed treatment of Heidegger’s theological interests. Most of the facts of the case are also presented by Theodore Kisiel in *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time*. Heidegger was of the opinion that a unique intellectual breakthrough had occurred in early Christianity and that it was subsequently concealed by the importation of Greek metaphysics by the Fathers.⁸ Heidegger was an avid reader of thinkers like Meister Eckhart, Luther, and Kierkegaard, whom he regarded as men who had revived the spirit of original Christianity.⁹ Van Buren describes the results in this way:

He took the Christian experience of such realities as mystery, Parousia, Kairos, wakefulness, and falling to be a specific “ontic” model from which to read off and formalize general and ontically noncommittal “ontological” categories that would make up his new beginning for phenomenological ontology.¹⁰

As Van Buren convincingly argues, it was an important part of Heidegger’s project to “save” this original Christianity from its subsequent falsification.¹¹ He describes Heidegger’s work as a “creative reinscription” of the basic “intentional configuration” of primal Christianity as the basis for a new kind of “metaphysics.”¹² According to Van Buren, Heidegger’s famous critique of the

metaphysical tradition was self-consciously modeled on its earlier foes, such as Luther and Kierkegaard.¹³

As for the more negative side of Heidegger's relation to Christianity, Van Buren and Kisiel are also in agreement. Van Buren argues that Heidegger eventually came to abandon his earlier project of retrieving original Christianity, turning instead to the "Greco-German axis" of the pre-Socratics, Nietzsche, and Hölderlin.¹⁴ Kisiel locates Heidegger's break with Christianity much earlier, around 1922, and argues that Heidegger's interest in religion was always really "philosophical."¹⁵ While Van Buren seems to lament Heidegger's turn away from original Christianity, Kisiel seems to view Heidegger's "Christian" period as a time well-lost, and as one that impairs the alleged universality of Heidegger's fundamental ontology.¹⁶

While both Van Buren and Kisiel have shed some much-needed light on Heidegger's "theological origin," their accounts need to be modified in several important respects. First of all, nothing that Heidegger says clearly indicates that he wanted to give a formal or "neutral" version of Christian faith, one acceptable to "mere reason," in the way that previous philosophers like Kant or Hegel had. To the contrary, Heidegger seems to have rejected the traditional notion of "objectivity" altogether, along with the companion idea that there are timeless truths of reason. He denounces both the paradigmatic status of timeless and dispassionate mathematics for philosophy, as well as the widespread "demand for observation which is free of standpoints" (G63 72/56, 82/63).¹⁷

Thus there is no indication from Heidegger that his interests in early Christianity were purely "philosophical," as this view suggests. Nor is there any reason to think that Heidegger's aim was to articulate some sort of universal philosophical religion, or that he was skeptical about the core doctrines of Christianity.¹⁸ For example, in a 1951 seminar, Heidegger tells a questioner that faith has no need of philosophy (G15 435f.). Indeed, unlike Kant, Heidegger never once objects to Christianity on *epistemic* grounds. His occasional denunciations of "religious ideology and fantasy" and "fanaticism" are not suggestive of some more global doubt about the rationality of religious belief. Indeed, such denunciations are fully compatible with a robust Christian faith.¹⁹

Heidegger's outspoken critiques of religion and theology are always aimed at narrow confessionalism and at an "inauthentic" faith that dodges tough questions (e.g., G40 5f., 80, 132). In a letter to Heinrich Rickert dated February 27, 1917, during a period recognized as lying prior to his "break" with Christianity, Heidegger claims never to have aligned himself with the "narrow [*engen*]" Roman Catholic standpoint, and to profess a more liberal "free Christianity" (HR 42). As in his earliest period, Heidegger continued to maintain later that theology, as it has developed throughout the course of European civilization, was infused with metaphysical assumptions that are fundamen-

tally opposed to the spirit of original Christianity (G65 411; G67 155). Such claims certainly imply a rejection of theology *in its present form*, but are completely consistent with an attempt to provide a new philosophical groundwork for the conceptual articulation of faith. Heidegger himself clarifies the situation in a 1943 essay on Nietzsche:

For Nietzsche, Christianity is the historical, secular-political phenomenon of the Church and its claim to power within the formation of Western humanity and its modern culture. Christianity in this sense and the Christian life of the New Testament faith are not the same. [. . .] a Christian life is not necessarily in need of Christianity. Therefore, a confrontation with Christianity is by no means an absolute battle against what is Christian, no more than a critique of theology is a critique of the faith for which theology is supposed to be the interpretation. (G5 219f./164)

Further, in his *Letter on Humanism* of 1947, Heidegger discusses the religious and theological import of his inquiries into being in a way strongly reminiscent of his views in the early 1920s, though in different language (G9 161/252f., 169/258). In 1951, he told participants in a seminar that he was still “inclined” to write a theology, and that were he to do so, he would purge it of the taint of metaphysics (G15 436).

Van Buren's thesis that Heidegger sought a “retrieval” of original Christianity must be extended beyond the early 1920s to encompass the whole of his career. A further question lingers, however. Given that this thesis is a sustainable one, what does it mean to “save” primitive Christianity? This question becomes more urgent when one turns to the work of Heidegger's colleague Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann's theology of “de-mythologizing” the New Testament proclamation is aimed at a reassertion of original Christianity in language that can be appropriated by citizens of a post-Enlightenment world. Criticisms notwithstanding, Bultmann's work preserves some of the essential doctrinal content of historical Christianity, such as the resurrection and justification by faith.²⁰ If Bultmann's work is taken as a model for “saving” primitive Christianity, then it is hard to see how this project can be genuinely ascribed to Heidegger. One searches in vain for anything like the doctrines of traditional Christianity in Heidegger's thought.

Heidegger's project of “saving” primitive Christianity was not something that could be recognized as being part of the traditional theological disciplines of dogmatics and apologetics. Indeed, Heidegger's understanding of the “atheism” of philosophy signifies that a philosopher, even as a Christian philosopher, simply cannot proclaim a “world-view.” Furthermore, the historical interpenetration of metaphysics and theology led Heidegger to be extremely reticent about speaking as a “theologian.” What Heidegger's project amounts to is a critique of what he called “onto-theology” that points the way to the experience of faith.²¹

During WS 1921–1922, Heidegger records some thoughts “on introduc-

tion [*zur Einleitung*]" (G61 197/148). The core of his philosophical approach is the "actualization of questionability," not in the sense of arid skepticism, but in such a way that "it alone might lead to a situation of religious decision" (G61 197/148). To "save" Christianity, for Heidegger, is not to defend or to clarify the dogmas of a historical faith, but rather to lead into [*einleiten*] the experience that is and remains the essence of religion. If Heidegger's work does not belong to dogmatics or to apologetics, perhaps one could say that it is a sort of "homiletics."

Ultimately, however, Heidegger appears to have been convinced that philosophy alone could not decide the issue. That is, one cannot *reason* one's way to faith. Instead, faith as the acknowledgment of revealed truths provides what Jeffrey Stout has called a "context of reasons" *within which* the intellectual endeavors of theology can be carried out.²² On Heidegger's view, Christian life only gets under way with the reception of the "proclamation" (G60 116). In a deep sense, then, Christianity is an achievement that is beyond the power of human beings (G60 122). The "proclamation" is the message of the "cross," or of the "crucified God" (G60 144). Heidegger's gloss on Galatians 5:11 is especially revealing with respect to his views on this issue: "*to skandalon tou staurou*: That is the authentic foundation of Christianity, *in the face of which there is only faith or unbelief*" (G60 71, emphasis added).

Scholars have shown that the ideas and experiences of original Christianity were of decisive importance for the development of Heidegger's thought. Let us, then, take the old Heidegger seriously when he says, "Without this theological origin I would have never arrived at the path of thinking." What is distinctive about this path of thinking, and in what sense can it be said to have originated in theology? In asking this question, one must put aside biography for a moment (it is, after all, obvious that Heidegger began to study philosophy in seminary) and search for a philosophical sense of the word "origin." My contention is that such a sense can be discerned in Heidegger's hermeneutical methodology. Heidegger asserts at numerous points that his investigations always take their point of departure from life as it is concretely lived. It is here that primitive Christianity becomes Heidegger's philosophical "origin."

Heidegger's Project

In this section, I will explain in general terms Heidegger's philosophical project and his chosen methodology. This methodology is not a technical calculus for generating truths, but it is nevertheless an identifiable practice that Heidegger not only engages in but also explains in considerable detail. The method belongs to a "hermeneutics of facticity," i.e., an attempt to articulate the immediate, pre-conceptual meaningfulness of human life. This articulation begins with what Heidegger calls a "basic experience [*Grunderfahrung*]," a sense of life as a whole that allows one to gain a purchase on the phenomena. Though Heidegger maintains that everyday existence can yield

such “basic experiences,” he is nevertheless committed to the view that primitive Christianity is a paradigmatic instance.

Hermeneutics of Factual Life-Experience

By all accounts, Heidegger found his philosophical voice during the War Emergency Semester of 1919.²³ It was here that he began the break with the synthesis of neo-Kantianism and scholasticism that had defined his earliest work. Before an audience of recently returned war veterans, Heidegger enacts a quest for a science of the “pre-theoretical” sphere of life (G56/57 74–76). The problem Heidegger faces is how to avoid the “de-historicizing” deformations that seem to inevitably stalk attempts at grasping life in a scientific fashion (G56/57 89). How, Heidegger asks, can philosophy achieve a genuine “sympathy for life [*Lebenssympathie*] (G56/57 110)? Heidegger gives his answer at the end of the course:

The gripping [*bemächtigende*] experiencing of lived experience that takes itself along is the understanding intuition, the *hermeneutical intuition*, the originary phenomenological back-and-forth formation of concepts from which all theoretical objectification, indeed every transcendental positing, falls out. (G56/57 117/99)

“Hermeneutical intuition” is the name of the method Heidegger proposes for articulating the immediate sense of life without theoretical distortion. The “intuition” of concrete, lived experience is not carried out from a third-person perspective, but is itself supposed to be a kind of lived experience. Articulate philosophical ideas arise out of this experience, rather than being imposed upon the stream of life “from above.” In this way the procedure is *hermeneutical*. Heidegger hopes to avoid what he calls “transcendental positing,” i.e., the attempt to explain the lived immediacy of life by means of a *priori* concepts. This is why he calls his method *hermeneutical intuition*. He has no interest in the constructions of transcendental philosophy. Rather, he wants to “read” life, to let it speak for itself, as it were, and to articulate the sense immanent to it.

In the following semester (SS 1919), Heidegger first names his style of philosophy “phenomenological hermeneutics” (G56/57 131). A contemporaneous remark from Heidegger’s projected course on medieval mysticism helps to concretize this method of research:

The analysis, i.e. hermeneutics, works within the historical I. Life is already there as religious. It is not such as a natural consciousness of a subject matter might analyze; rather, the specific determination of sense is attended to [*herauszuhören*] in everything. Problem: intuitive eidetics is, as *hermeneutical*, never theoretically neutral, but itself only has “*eidetically*” [illegible words follow] the *vibration* [*Schwingung*] of a genuine life-world. (G60 336)

The character of Heidegger’s hermeneutics emerges quite clearly in this remark. In a concrete investigation, one takes up what is given in life as a

starting point. Each "life-world," or specific, concrete form of life in general, has its own "determination of sense." Heidegger's conviction is that ordinary human life has meaning and that this meaning is not *conceptual*. The passage quoted here clearly illustrates this idea. A hermeneutics of religious life starts with life as *already* religious. Religious life is itself structured by an autonomous web of practices and beliefs that provide its specifically "religious" sense. The task, then, is to make this sense *explicit*. In the long passage quoted above, Heidegger expresses a degree of reticence about the Husserlian notion of phenomenology as an "eidetic" discipline, i.e., one that defines the transcendental "forms [*eidē*]" of pure consciousness. For Heidegger, there just is no such pure consciousness, except as an abstraction motivated by a theoretical bias. Instead, there is only the "historical I," the finite, historically conditioned, immediately meaningful perspective "behind" which one cannot go.

Heidegger gives voice to this basic conviction quite early, during KNS 1919: "Life as such is *not* irrational (which has nothing whatever to do with 'rationalism!')" (G56/57 219/187). Or, as he puts it in supplementary remarks during the winter semester of 1919–1920, "Life is not a chaotic confusion of dark torrents, not a mute principle of power, not a limitless, all-consuming disorder, rather *it is what it is only as a concrete meaningful shape*" (G58 148). Yet in order to arrive at an explicit understanding of this "sense," one cannot simply "observe" a life-world from a theoretically neutral standpoint. On the contrary, "hermeneutics," Heidegger says, "works within the historical I." This is a matter of "sympathetically" following along with concrete life-experience, allowing it to speak for itself and formalizing categories only after having heard what it says.

It is easy to mistake what Heidegger is trying to accomplish here. The best way to avoid such a mistake is to get clear about how his project differs from what has traditionally been called "metaphysics." This term can be understood in two ways: (1) a pre-Kantian or "pre-critical" sense, according to which concepts have a purchase on objective reality; (2) a post-Kantian or post-critical sense, according to which concepts have a purchase on the *a priori* conditions for objective knowledge. In both cases, the goal is to construct, through theoretical reason, an all-embracing explanatory framework. For a pre-critical metaphysician like Descartes, our metaphysical concepts (e.g., "substance") pick out the fundamental structures of reality, which in turn make up the deep explanatory ground for reality as a whole. For a post-critical metaphysician like Kant, our concepts tell us about how rational beings *must* think about the world in order to have objective knowledge of the whole of reality.

A look at Heidegger's remarks throughout the early 1920s reveals that his own project has nothing whatsoever to do with either kind of metaphysics. A letter to Karl Jaspers dated June 27, 1922, reveals Heidegger's attempt to differentiate his project from both varieties of traditional metaphysics. "The old ontology (and the categorial structure that emerges from it) must be rebuilt

from the ground up [. . .]” (HJ 27). This has nothing to do with resurrecting Greek metaphysics, or with some kind of antiquarian eulogy on the grandeur of Greek thought. “What is required is a critique of ontology up till now, in its roots in Greek philosophy, in particular in Aristotle, whose ontology (already this concept is not suitable) is just as much alive in Kant and Hegel as in medieval Scholasticism” (Ibid.). True to his word on this point, Heidegger spends most of the rest of his life in successive confrontations with metaphysics in all its forms, with Aristotle as well as with Kant.

During the early 1920s, Heidegger was particularly occupied with neo-Kantianism. The work of philosophers like Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert dominated the German intellectual scene. In the summer semester of 1919, Heidegger devotes considerable space to the “critical” neo-Kantian understanding of the “categories” (G56/57 160f./135). For Windelband and Rickert, despite their other differences, a “category” is a “synthetic form of consciousness” (G56/57 160/136). These “categories,” along with the synthesizing consciousness itself, form the bedrock of explanation in neo-Kantian theories of knowledge. Rickert, in particular, maintains that reality is an irrational continuum of individuals that can only be understood when it is conceptually grasped (G56/57 171f./145). Heidegger also devotes considerable attention to the neo-Kantian position in the summer semester of 1920. Again, “categories” are the forms under which sensibly given material is synthesized by the spontaneity of the understanding (G59 25). Everything that is “known,” whether scientifically or on the more primitive level of “natural knowledge,” is made up of material that has been “formed” by “rules” built into the understanding (G59 25).

According to Heidegger, the link between the post-critical work of the neo-Kantians with the pre-critical thought of Aristotle and Descartes is the dominance of the “theoretical attitude.” Beginning in the War Emergency Semester of 1919, Heidegger traces out the genesis of this “theoretical attitude” through the “de-vivification” of the immediate lived experience of the world (G56/57 73f./61). “De-vivification [*Ent-leben*]” is Heidegger’s term for the process in which the immediate involvement of human beings in the world is gradually reduced to the point at which it has been transformed into mere “looking,” i.e., detached observation. Heidegger illustrates this with the example of entering a classroom and looking at the lectern. When he himself enters the room, he does not see “sense-data” that has been conceptually synthesized. Instead, he sees a particular object that is intelligible to him by virtue of its place within a web of practical relationships. For example, it appears to him as the place from which he is to speak, but which is too high for him (Heidegger was a relatively short man). He tries to get his students to examine their own immediate experience of the lectern as well, and he imagines what it would be like to a farmer from the Black Forest or a native from Senegal. The meaning the lectern has is, Heidegger concludes, not *concept-*

tual, but instead rests upon the concrete relationships that permeate human experience on the most immediate level.

The "theoretical attitude," by abstracting away from this immediate "environmental experience," is forced to reconstruct it by appeal to the synthetic activity of concepts on raw "sense-data." The privileging of this attitude ultimately leads to what he regards as an "obsession" with "explanation through dismemberment" (G56/57 88/74). The privileging of the "theoretical attitude" is the all-pervasive characteristic of Western philosophy. On this assumption, all knowing is taken to be *conceptual* knowing. Concepts either grasp the objective nature of things (pre-critical metaphysics) or they capture the necessary structures of the "spontaneity" of the understanding.

The philosophical project that Heidegger assigns to himself is one of *articulating* or making explicit the structure of this immediate, meaning-laden experience of the world. "The understanding of life," Heidegger tells us, "is *hermeneutical intuition* (making intelligible, giving meaning)" (G56/57 219/187). Several semesters later, he characterizes the project as one of bringing "to light [zu Tage]," "exhibiting [*am Tage*]," or placing "into the light of day [*Täglichkeit*]" the "categories" that are "*alive in life itself* in an original way" (G61 62/47; 88/66). These "categories" that Heidegger is after are neither the objective features of reality as it is cognized (Aristotle, Descartes), nor are they the *a priori* forms of understanding (Kant). They are not "concepts" that are imposed upon "sense-data" by the spontaneity of the understanding in order to yield objective knowledge, but are the structures and relations that constitute our most immediate experience of the world as meaningful.

Heidegger articulated many of these ideas in an essay written between 1919 and 1922, which was meant to be a critical review of Karl Jaspers's recent book *Psychology of Worldviews*. As he would continue to do throughout his career, Heidegger here attributes the first "breakthrough" in phenomenology to Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (G9 34–5/30). He is, however, critical of the "theoretical" orientation of Husserl's work.²⁴ On Heidegger's view, to carry the phenomenological program to its completion, it is not enough to simply extend Husserl's methodology into other realms of experience such as art or religion. "Rather, we need to see that experiencing in its fullest sense is to be found in its authentically factual context of enactment in the historically existing self" (G9 35/30). Heidegger goes on to describe the "method" that accords with the basic character of life-experience as "the method belonging to our interpretive, historically enacted explication of concrete and fundamental experiential modes of having-oneself in a factually and anxiously concerned manner" (G9 36/31). The interpretation of life-experience is "historically enacted"; it is a peculiar way life-experience "has" itself as an object.

Heidegger means to draw a contrast here between the quietist theoretical perspective that he regards as the hallmark of Western metaphysics since its inception in Greek thought and the kind of "knowing" that is actively engaged

in the historical unfolding of its object. In hermeneutics, life-experience is not an "object" that stands over against a cognizing subject. As Heidegger puts it in his famous "Aristotle Introduction" from 1922, this sort of "fundamental research" is "the *phenomenological hermeneutics* of facticity," in which the genitive is to be read both *objectively* and *subjectively* (NB 16/121). That is to say that hermeneutics is *about* life-experience *and* belongs to it. Hermeneutics is the lived experience of lived experience.

Hermeneutics as such forms one of the central themes of Heidegger's lecture course during the summer semester of 1923, entitled "Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity." Here he gives the following "definition" of hermeneutics: "a definite unity in the actualizing [*Vollzugs*] . . . of the *interpreting of facticity* in which facticity is being encountered, seen, grasped, and expressed in concepts" (G63 14/11).²⁵ Heidegger's method is, put simply, the conceptual articulation of life-experience by life-experience itself. A bit later in the text of this lecture course Heidegger presents a kind of prospectus of the ultimate goal or success condition for a hermeneutical investigation:

Hermeneutics has the task of making the Dasein which is in each case our own accessible to this Dasein itself with regard to the character of its being, communicating Dasein to itself in this regard, hunting down the alienation from itself with which it is smitten. In hermeneutics what is developed for Dasein is a possibility of its becoming and being for itself in the manner of an *understanding* of itself. (G63 15/11)

Hermeneutics is seamlessly intertwined with facticity itself, in that it helps bring to fruition the tendency of facticity to understand itself and to discourse about itself.²⁶ It seeks to do so in a way that does not involve the imposition of some conceptual framework "from above," which only serves to alienate facticity from itself (G63 15/12). In the final analysis, hermeneutics is successful if it makes an articulate self-understanding possible. Whether or not it gives us a theory that can be usefully applied to every area of inquiry is not what is ultimately at issue. Thus, Heidegger asserts, "Hermeneutics is itself not philosophy" (G63 20/16). It does, however, bear a kinship to "philosophy" as it has been known traditionally in that it seeks the categorial structures of a particular subject matter [*Sache*]. It is still "ontology" (NB 16/121), even to the point of being "fundamental ontology" (SZ 13 f.). Heidegger nevertheless recognizes a certain strangeness about his work in comparison with the philosophical tradition. He writes:

I think that hermeneutics is not philosophy at all, but in fact something preliminary which runs in advance [*Vorläufiges*] of it and has its own reason for being: what is at issue in it, what it all comes to, is not to become finished with it as quickly as possible, but rather to hold out in it as long as possible. (G63 19/15)

The Hermeneutic Circle

What can Heidegger's method tell us about the philosophical importance of religion in his thought? In order to arrive at a clear answer to this question, it is necessary to probe more deeply into the nature of his hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a particular way of carrying out what Heidegger calls *understanding* [*Verstehen*]. By this, Heidegger does not mean cognitive activity in general, but rather a more basic disclosure of a human being's "ability to be [*Seinkönnen*]" (SZ 144). Heidegger's point is that the things we encounter in any of our activities take on a certain significance, a kind of ground-level intelligibility, as a result of our prior "projection [*Entwurf*]" of some possibility or other, be it a career, a momentary project, or some grander vision of the purpose of human life as such. On the basis of this projected significance, we can then develop more explicit kinds of understanding in which we actually express and conceptualize the things in question (SZ 148 ff./188 ff.). It is this explicit articulation of what has already been opened up for us in understanding that Heidegger calls "interpretation [*Auslegung*]" (SZ 148/188).

To say that "having an understanding" is an "ontological" feature of human life is simply to say that life is always already meaningful, even at its most immediate level. This primary meaning is, according to Heidegger, available to us in our knowing our way about the world, rather than in any explicit knowing *about* the world. To "understand," in this sense, is to be familiar with a pre-reflective context of practical relations and linguistic usages. To "interpret," then, is to make this context, or rather some aspect of it, *explicit*. Heidegger maintains that this can occur through simply engaging in some activity, and so wordlessly "articulating" our pre-reflective understanding of the world. Alternatively, interpretation may involve actually *saying something* about the world as refracted by this immediate context of meaning. Philosophical hermeneutics is an activity of interpretation in this latter sense.

It is against the background of these claims that the nature of Heidegger's hermeneutics can be brought into more precise relief. According to Heidegger, interpretation is only possible on the basis of "pre-intention [*Vormeinung*]," a kind of antecedent familiarity with a given object or situation.²⁷ This point is made in numerous places throughout Heidegger's works, and it gradually reaches its most developed and articulate form in *Being and Time*. One of the earliest applications of this theory to hermeneutics can be found in Heidegger's review of Jaspers's book.²⁸ Much of Heidegger's review is devoted to uncovering the assumptions that guide Jaspers's investigations. This project is predicated on a more general view about the role that background assumptions play in human understanding:

What these problems indicate and lead us to acknowledge is that preconceptions "are" at work "everywhere" in the factual experience of life (and therefore also in the sciences and in philosophizing), and that what we need

to do is simply, as it were, join in the experience [*mitzuerfahren*] of these preconceptions wherever they operate, as they do, for example, in providing direction for any fundamental type of knowledge about something. (G99/8)

Here Heidegger celebrates what he eventually comes to call the “hermeneutical circle.” On his view, all intellectual inquiry operates with some presuppositions. Indeed, it is precisely these presuppositions that open up the possibility for achieving the conceptual articulation of a subject matter. It is only when one tries to ignore one’s own presuppositions, or when they turn out to be inadequate to the subject matter at hand, that this circularity becomes a definite problem. There is no way, on his view, for one to stand outside of the circle, to light upon some presuppositionless starting point for theorizing, or to find the final “justification” for a given theory. What can, and should, be done is that presuppositions should be questioned, modified, or abandoned if what results from them either fails to “ring true” or else breaks down on some other level.

Heidegger not only highlights the inevitability of presuppositions, but he also counsels their *cultivation*. A cautious investigator will always explicitly articulate the assumptions that guide her inquiry. If she follows Heidegger’s recommendations, she should “project” or “sketch out in advance” a general picture of the subject matter under consideration. This initial “projection” is not fixed or final, but is instead a wholly revisable *hypothesis* about the meaning of that which is to be investigated. Heidegger contends that this initial hermeneutical hypothesis must, on pain of being arbitrary, have its roots in an actual familiarity with the subject matter. He calls this initial familiarity a “fore-having” or “having in advance [*Vor-haben*].” This is the “bedrock” of an interpretation. This ground-level familiarity is what allows one to be confident that the more general hermeneutical hypothesis is not arbitrary.

In hermeneutics of facticity, as in any other interpretation, one must secure an initial purchase on the phenomenon in question. This is something that is “constitutive—and indeed in a decisive manner—of interpretation” (G63 16/13). Heidegger quotes a passage from Kierkegaard’s journals as a kind of graphic illustration of his claim about the necessity of a fore-having: “Life can be interpreted only after it has been lived, just as Christ did not begin to explain the Scriptures and show how they taught of him until after he was resurrected” (quoted at G63 16–17/13).

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger also addresses the charge of “circularity” that might be leveled against this picture of human epistemic activity. For Heidegger, this is motivated by a desire to maintain a pre-existing ideal of knowledge at all costs, regardless of the “facts” of the case (SZ 153/195). For Heidegger, “[w]hat is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way” (SZ 153/195). Indeed, the attempt to escape the circle amounts to a denial of a basic ontological feature of human existence. Instead, one must realize, says Heidegger, that it is precisely this “circle” itself that

makes explicit understanding possible. He then adds suggestively, "In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing" (SZ 153/195).²⁹ The circle of understanding does not present an impediment to philosophical knowledge, provided it is entered into in the appropriate way. This means that the "pre-intention" of a given interpretation must not "be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather . . . in terms of the things themselves" (SZ 153/195). This is precisely where the "fore-having" is supposed to help. A hermeneutical hypothesis not grounded in the "things themselves" risks swinging free of them, i.e., it risks being uprooted from any connection with the matter under consideration.

"Basic Experience [*Grunderfahrung*]"

Later in *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests how this kind of "pre-intention" might be secured. Heidegger argues that it must be secured "in a basic experience [*Grunderfahrung*] of the 'object' to be disclosed, and in terms of such an experience" (SZ 232/275). This is where Heidegger's project of giving a "fundamental ontology" links up with a fundamentally *practical* concern with *authenticity*. Heidegger asserts that "authenticity," a way of being a self (see chapter 6), is a "presupposition" for phenomenological investigation:

But does not a definite ontic interpretation of authentic existence, a factual ideal of Dasein, underlie our ontological interpretation of the existence of Dasein? Indeed. But not only is this fact one that must not be denied and we are forced to grant; it must be understood in its *positive necessity*, in terms of the thematic object of our inquiry. Philosophy will never seek to deny its "presuppositions," but neither may it merely admit them. It conceives them and develops with more and more penetration both the presuppositions themselves and that for which they are presuppositions. (SZ 310/358)³⁰

In what sense can "authenticity" be said to form a "presupposition"? Clearly not in the sense that it is a principle or a proposition from which other propositions are derived *more geometrico*. Authenticity is the kind of presupposition that belongs to a hermeneutics of facticity, i.e., it is a concrete experience that provides the hermeneutician with a purchase on the phenomenon that is to be interpreted; it is, Heidegger says, an "understanding projection" (SZ 314/362). Authenticity, then, is an experience of human life that allows for the phenomenologist to get an immediate, pre-theoretical purchase on it. Heidegger's hope is that once this has been accomplished, the hypothesis or set of hypotheses that guides his interpretation will reflect an actual familiarity with his subject matter. The key, then, to getting the proper "fore-having" in place is locating the right "basic experience."

The notion of a "basic experience" is by no means new to Heidegger's thought with its appearance in *Being and Time*. The idea that life contains moments that, despite their rarity and strangeness, provide insight into the basic character of life is one that can be called Heidegger's most fundamental

assumption.³¹ It emerges clearly time and again in his correspondence and in his lectures. Perhaps one of the earliest and most interesting statements of this view occurs in Heidegger's letter to Elisabeth Blochmann of May 1, 1919. Here, he talks about "graced moments" of life, which are not simply there for our aesthetic enjoyment, but rather present an opportunity to bring our lives as a whole into focus (HB 14). These "graced moments" are "basic experiences" in which "we feel ourselves belonging immediately to the direction in which we live," experiences of "understanding having-of-oneself [*verstehende Sichselbsthaben*]" (HB 14).

More concretely, Heidegger tells Blochmann that he is especially thinking of her "clear commitment [*Verhaftetsein*] in scientific work" (HB 14).³² Heidegger has in mind those moments when we have a special sense of who we are, where our life is going, what we want to make of ourselves, or, more colloquially, of the "meaning of life." It is vital that these are moments of "understanding," not of vague sentimentality. These are moments of explicit familiarity with our own lives, which Heidegger takes to be promising points of departure for a hermeneutics of facticity.

In a contemporaneous lecture course, Heidegger also describes the "intensities" or "intensifications" of life as opportunities for getting a purchase on the structure of the "I-self, the 'historical I'" (G56/57 208/175).³³ According to Oskar Becker's transcript of this lecture course, Heidegger is interested in avoiding the "de-historicization of the I" and cultivating a "primordial science" (G56/57 206/174, 207/145). One key element in this lies in attending to "genuine life-experiences" (G56/57 207/175). Presumably, it is in these experiences that one gains a kind of understanding access to the living, historical "I" without "objectifying" it. Heidegger's suggestion is that such phenomena grant the phenomenologist a unique window into the structure of life.

During the following semester, WS 1919–1920, Heidegger returns to these ideas once more. A recurring question in this lecture course concerns the grasping of an "experiential ground" for a "primal science of life in and for itself" (G58 80). In every science, including phenomenology, the object of research must be "pre-given" in a pre-scientific fashion (G58 70, 76, 79, etc.). Phenomenology must take its point of departure from life itself, not from some limited "extract" of life (G58 79). Accordingly, it is crucial to secure a "basic motivational experience" as way of preparing the "experiential ground" for phenomenological research (G58 94–95). Heidegger identifies this "basic experience" as the "experience of the self-world" in its "standing out [*Abgehobenheit*]" (G58 101). This is a "*special style*" of experience (G58 101).

This "style" of experience is one that occasionally emerges in our daily activities (G58 33). Indeed, Heidegger describes these "fleeting" encounters with ourselves through some concrete examples, such as hiking in the woods, listening to a broken clock-tower, and regretfully reflecting on some careless remarks (G58 96–97). In certain cases, "factual life 'can' be centered in an

especially accented way on the self-world" (G58 57). Heidegger goes on to designate this phenomenon as the "intensifying concentration [*Zugespitztheit*] towards the self-world" (G58 59). In a supplemental remark, Heidegger notes that "this does not take place in a deliberate way, the self does not consciously observe itself, rather it lies in the factual flow [*Ablauf*] of life itself" (G58 206). In other words, moments of intensified reflection on life are *not* necessarily instances of the "theoretical attitude" at work. Heidegger is interested in a more immediate kind of familiarity with life, which, he suggests, can be detected in autobiographies and in religious confessions. It is the task of the phenomenologist to follow up on and interpret the inexplicit "forms of expression" contained in this unique phenomenon. This particular "style" can be seen in significant individuals (Heidegger mentions "artists, scientists, saints"), everyday situations, and in works of literature (G58 85). The task is, of course, to follow up on this, to found a science upon it (G58 86–87).

The precise nature of a "basic experience," and its role within the project of hermeneutics of facticity, receives another treatment in Heidegger's review of Karl Jaspers's *Psychology of Worldviews*. I have already shown how, in this text, Heidegger calls attention to the ubiquity of presuppositions in science and in philosophy. He glosses the relevant presuppositions as "basic experiences [*Grunderfahrungen*]" (G9 3–4/3). Heidegger argues that the "basic experience" that lies at the very roots of Jaspers's theory of human existence is a "basic aesthetic experience [*ästhetische Grunderfahrung*]" (G9 23/20). This "basic experience" is mostly characterized by the "relational sense" that belongs to it, i.e., that of merely "gazing upon something" (G9 23/20). The core of Heidegger's critical review is that the enactment of this kind of experiential foundation ultimately fails to do justice to the "things themselves," in this case, human life. Securing the proper "basic experience" is not a trivial matter, for it is here that one finds the object in question "initially given" (G9 24/21). That is, it is precisely the "basic experience," structured in advance in a definite way, which constitutes the pre-intention of any interpretation.

At this point, Heidegger proposes an alternative "basic experience" as the beginning for a hermeneutics of facticity. We have already met with this possibility as the "highly-strung intensities of life," the "intensifying concentration toward the self-world," and the non-objectifying "having" of the self. Here Heidegger contends that an understanding of the "I" is gained not through theoretical reflection, but rather through "enacting the 'am'" (G9 29/25). Heidegger explicitly designates this kind of "having" of the self as a "basic experience" (G9 29/25). Because it is not a mute intake of "data," this experience is one that can be interrogated, interpreted, and explicated. That is, it is just the kind of thing that grants a hermeneutician the necessary sort of purchase on an object of investigation. Heidegger describes the experience in question as one of "having" the self in an "anxiously concerned" manner (G9 30/26). Heidegger then echoes the comment he made to Blochmann in May 1919:

It is itself not something extraordinary and removed; rather, it has to be enacted in our factual experience of life as such and appropriated from out of such factual experience. And this is supposed to happen not merely once in a momentary and isolated fashion, but rather again and again in a constant renewal of anxious concern that is of necessity motivated by concern for the self as such, and is moreover oriented in a historical manner. (G9 33/28)

Heidegger goes on to give this “basic experience” the resonant designation “conscience” (G9 28/33). This term is perhaps more familiar from its usage in §§54–60 of *Being and Time*. There Heidegger uses it as a “formal indication” for any experience that interrupts the normal trajectory of an “inauthentic” life, thereby enabling a kind of clear-sighted vocational commitment that he calls “authenticity.” I will return to these ideas in more detail in chapters 5 and 6. Here, notice needs to be taken of the role that a certain experience of the self plays in grounding Heidegger’s “hermeneutics of facticity.” Such an encounter with life must form “the starting point of our approach to philosophical problems” (G9 35/30). For Heidegger, hermeneutics stands or falls with the ability to gain an adequate grasp on this phenomenon in a concrete kind of appropriation. For present purposes, it is clear that Heidegger regards a “basic experience” as the *conditio sine qua non* of phenomenological hermeneutics. It is only by means of the actual enactment of a certain experience that Heidegger hopes to avoid the pitfalls of the traditional approach to understanding human existence as an “object.”

Primitive Christianity

The Methodological Role of Primitive Christianity

How does this exposition of Heidegger’s methodology provide the basis for a *philosophical* understanding of the “religious dimension” of his thought? The answer lies in the notion of “basic experience” that is so integral to Heidegger’s vision of his own philosophical project. Particularly during the earliest period of his work, Heidegger was intrigued by the hermeneutical potential of “primitive Christianity [*Urchristentum*].” Primitive Christianity provided just the kind of “basic experience” that was needed for a radical re-envisioning of philosophy by providing an initial purchase on the phenomenon of life. Moreover, this was a concrete “basic experience” into which Heidegger did not have to artificially insert himself, for he was quite familiar with the “life-world” of faith.

I have chosen to use the phrase “primitive Christianity” here because it was Heidegger’s view that the life of the early Christian community, as expressed in the New Testament, was *the* definitive historical form of Christianity. At the same time, he also held that this basic “life-experience” is expressed occasionally during later periods, in the works of Augustine, Bernard

of Clairvaux, Luther, the Spanish mystics of the Counter-Reformation period, and Schleiermacher. Since Heidegger seems to have held that all these various historical expressions could be reasonably regarded as expressions of an identifiable life-experience, the phrase "primitive Christianity" can be used to refer to the content of each. Moreover, as I will show (chapter 8), a "life-world" like primitive Christianity is *not* something that lies in an inaccessible past, but rather is a *possibility* that is capable of being creatively re-enacted, and, indeed, has been thus re-enacted already.

It is, of course, certainly true that primitive Christianity was not the only paradigm for a "basic experience" that Heidegger explored in his career, even during the 1920s. Aristotle's practical philosophy, poetry, art, and Kant's ethics all at one time or another found their way into Heidegger's hermeneutical project. In the 1930s and beyond, Heidegger focused his gaze more intently on early Greek philosophy and dramatic poetry, on Nietzsche, and on poets like Hölderlin, Rilke, and Trakl. Even quite early Heidegger is adamant that "[t]he primordial region of philosophy is no final statement, no axiom. It is also not the idea of pure thinking (as intended by H. Cohen and Natorp). It is also nothing mythical or mystical (i.e., only experienceable in a religious way)" (G58 203). Nonetheless, it is the case that life *can* be experienced "in a religious way" and that Heidegger found such experiences of life to be especially significant and interesting. Indeed, "primitive Christianity" has a kind of paradigmatic status for Heidegger, both as a "basic experience" and as an exemplar of what he comes to call an "authentic" way of life (chapter 6). All the same, Heidegger is something of a committed pluralist with respect to the ways valuable insights into human life can be had. Religious experience is by no means the only one that interested him. Nonetheless, the "basic experience" of religious life had the most profound and long-lived effect on his intellectual development. This is precisely what he urges us to consider when he writes, "Without this theological origin I never would have arrived at the path of thinking. Yet, the origin ever remains that which is to come."

Heidegger's lifelong fascination with religious experience is motivated by a variety of commitments. First of all, it is clearly motivated by Heidegger's own deeply held religious beliefs. Heidegger counsels his friend Blochmann that "primal religious experience [*religiösen Urerlebnis*]" must form the basis for all theorizing (HB 10). His letter to Father Krebs, announcing his break with Catholicism, and his letter to Karl Löwith, announcing his self-conception as a "Christian theo-logian," all testify to his concrete religious life. In a loose page contained in his manuscript for the lecture course of WS 1921–1922, Heidegger reveals his struggle for a kind of authentic religiosity (G61 197–8/148).

Furthermore, Heidegger's focus on Christian experience is also motivated by his understanding of the cultural history [*Geistesgeschichte*] of European civilization. Time and again he illustrates how the situation of the present times has been decisively shaped by the complex intertwining of Christianity

and Greek metaphysics. These reflections take a concrete form in Heidegger's brief "conceptual history [*Begriffsgeschichte*]" of the concepts of "life" and "man" (NB 21 ff./125; G63 21–29/17–24). Heidegger often viewed this relation in a negative light, accusing Greek philosophy of a "disfigurement [*Verunstaltung*]" of original Christianity (G59 91).³⁴ He remarked on the connections between the great period of German Idealism and theology on more than one occasion (G59 95, 141; G61 7/7). Heidegger also makes reference to Wilhelm Dilthey's "theological origins" and comments at length on the significance of this bit of intellectual history (S 151 f.). Heidegger seems to have been particularly impressed with Dilthey's work on the "young Hegel," which showed just how deeply Hegel was motivated by theological issues. It is also worth noting here that Heidegger's favorite poetic conversation partner, Hölderlin, shared the same theological milieu as Hegel and Schelling.³⁵ Heidegger clearly viewed himself as part of this larger tradition of nineteenth-century German philosophy, a tradition that takes seriously the cultural and intellectual significance of Christianity. All of the major figures mentioned and studied by Heidegger from this tradition—Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, Dilthey—struggled to come to terms with the legacy of Christianity or to articulate philosophically defensible versions of it.

It was Heidegger's view that this cultural history impacts contemporary philosophy in ways that are often overlooked. Moreover, consistent with what Heidegger comes to call the "thrownness [*Geworfenheit*]" of human existence in *Being and Time*, it is this cultural history that makes the contemporary situation what it is and makes us who we are. One cannot simply leap out of history, but must instead come to a reckoning with it. This point is born out by Oskar Becker's transcript of Heidegger's concluding remarks on February 25, 1921, during the WS 1920–1921 lectures on Paul:

Only a *particular* religiosity (for us the Christian) yields the possibility of its philosophical apprehension. Why precisely *Christian* religiosity constitutes the focus of our reflection is a difficult question, which can only be answered by a solution to the problem of our *historical* connections. It is the task of arriving at a *genuine* relationship to history, which is to be explicated from our *own* facticity. The question is what the sense of history can mean for us such that the "objectivity" of the historical "in itself" disappears. For there is a history only when it stems from a present, our present.³⁶

Heidegger's claim here is that a constructed *theory* of religion can never provide a genuine foundation for philosophy of religion. Instead, only concrete, historically particular [*jeweilig*] religious *experience* can become the basis for a theory of religion. In this case, the primary reasons for the focus on Christianity are *historical* and *factual*. On the former point, Christianity is part of the history "that we ourselves are." For Heidegger, historical understanding in philosophy has as its chief task the achievement of a self-understanding on the part of historical individuals at a particular time. For Heidegger in the

1920s, it is "our" (European) present, the present shaped by the Greco-Christian tradition, which demands this kind of historical understanding. This is what Heidegger means when he says that "[i]t is the task of arriving at a *genuine* relationship to history." His remark about "our own facticity," which calls to mind the previously mentioned letter to Karl Löwith, uncovers the other dimension of Heidegger's interest in "primitive Christianity," i.e., his attempt to appropriate anew the roots of his own concrete, factual life-experience of Christian faith.

It should be clear, then, why *Christianity* is so important for Heidegger's project. The nature of its importance, however, is the crucial point. A letter to Rudolf Bultmann from December 31, 1927, provides a clear confirmation of the role of Christianity as a basic hermeneutical experience.³⁷ He tells Bultmann that his "ontology" begins with a proper understanding of the "subject," taken as "human Dasein." He points out that "Augustine, Luther, Kierkegaard are *philosophically* essential for the cultivation of a more radical understanding-of-Dasein." The claim here is precisely that primitive Christianity is essential for doing philosophy properly. That is to say, primitive Christianity is the crucial "basic experience" that provides the "fore-having" of hermeneutics.

Heidegger seems to have first gained an intimation of this possibility during the First World War. Around 1917, he was interested in Schleiermacher and the "free Christianity" movement inspired by him.³⁸ Indeed, he credits Schleiermacher with the rediscovery of primitive Christianity (G56/57 134/114). Theodore Kisiel has painstakingly documented Heidegger's first steps toward taking up Christianity as a "basic experience." Notes from 1917 through 1919 reveal Heidegger's growing interest in primitive Christianity in addition to mysticism, as well as his interest in Paul. Moreover, Heidegger seems to have paid attention to traditional devotional literature during these studies.³⁹ In a letter to Elisabeth Husserl from April 14, 1919, Heidegger seems to identify an "authentic" life with a religious life of some sort:

We must again be able to wait and have faith in the grace that is present in every genuine life, with its humility before the inviolability of one's own and other's experience. Our life must be brought back from the dispersion of multiple concerns to its original wellspring of expansive creativity. Not the fragmentation of life into programs, no aestheticizing glosses or genial posturing, but rather the mighty confidence in union with God and original, pure, and effective action. Only life overcomes life, and not matters and things, not even logicized "values" and "norms."⁴⁰

It is in the experience of religious faith, lived with total dedication, that life is "intensified" and brought to a point. It is here that an experience of the self is gained, the sort of experience that, as I have already shown, provides the "fore-having" for Heidegger's radical hermeneutical project. This emerges clearly in the lecture course from WS 1919–1920, "Basic Problems of Phenomenology." One section of this lecture is entitled "Christianity as the historical paradigm

for the shift of emphasis of factual life to the self-world" (G58 61). Heidegger articulates his view thus:

The self-world as such enters into life and is lived as such. What is present in the life of the original Christian community signifies a radical inversion of the direction of the tendency of life—one has in mind particularly world-denial and asceticism (*the thought of the kingdom of God, Paul* (cf. Ritschl)). Herein lives the motive for the development of a totally new context of expression which life itself produces and which we today call *history*. (G58 61)

Heidegger recognizes primitive Christianity as a genuinely unique achievement in the intellectual and cultural history of the Western world. It is here that a new "context of expression" emerges from a total inversion of life's usual tendency. This idea of "inversion" or "counter-movement" will appear again later in connection with Heidegger's conception of authentic existence. As will become clear in subsequent discussions, it is precisely the character of this "basic experience" as a reversal of life's tendency to conceal itself that makes it particularly important for Heidegger's hermeneutical project. Also significant here is Heidegger's revisiting of Dilthey's thesis about the origins of historical consciousness in Christianity. Heidegger places his own particular spin on this thesis, clearly identifying "history" with the life of the self. I will examine Dilthey's views, and their influence on the young Heidegger, in more detail in chapter 5.

Heidegger goes on to argue that this novel achievement was subsequently covered over by the predominance of Aristotle's philosophy in Christian dogmatics and theology.⁴¹ The "inner experiences" and "new attitudes of life" belonging to the earliest era of Christianity were thus "constrained" by Greek ontology (G58 61). Heidegger claims that it is one of the most important tasks of contemporary phenomenology to overcome this process of obfuscation and decline (G58 61). This task is certainly facilitated by historical retrievals of primitive Christianity, including the work of Augustine and the "the practical guidance of life" (G58 62). Heidegger points to "medieval mysticism" here, including Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventura, Eckhart, Tauler, and Luther in this movement.⁴² He then returns to Augustine, whom he regards as a kind of phenomenological mentor. "*Crede, ut intelligas*: really live your self, and then build knowledge for yourself on this experiential basis, your ultimate, complete experience of self" (G58 62). Later, in the main text of the lecture, one finds Heidegger again discussing a "practical" or "intensified" sense of experience. The latter is simply identified with "religious experience: being troubled or concerned in the innermost self. Not only is what is experienced available, but the self is 'immediately itself' available" (G58 68).

Given Heidegger's position during WS 1919–1920, one should not at all be surprised that he turned to religion explicitly one year later. During WS 1920–1921 and SS 1921, Heidegger delivered his now famous lectures on Paul and Augustine. One important aspect of these lectures is their attempt to

get clear about the "basic experience" that Heidegger finds so promising for his hermeneutical project. A few remarks from Heidegger's lectures on Paul will suffice to make this clear. During the course of his discussion of Paul's epistle to the Galatians, Heidegger attempts to pinpoint the experience of "having the self" in Paul's work: "The basic comportment of Paul is to be compared against Philippians 3:13: self-certainty of position in his own life—break in his existence—primordial historical understanding of himself and of his existence" (G60 73–74). Heidegger's position emerges much more clearly later when he presents two preliminary theses that will guide his reading of Paul's letters:

1. Primal Christian religiosity lies in factual life-experience. Corollary: it is authentically life-experience itself.
2. Factual life-experience is historical. Corollary: Christian experience lives time itself ("live" understood as a *verbum transitivum*). (G60 82)

All of this suffices to show that much of the significance of religion for Heidegger lies in its ability to provide a suitable "fore-having" for the hermeneutics of facticity. In primitive Christianity Heidegger sees a genuine instance of living self-understanding that does not privilege a theoretical relation to the subject matter. Thus, it can provide a starting point for a hermeneutics of facticity that avoids the deformations that, for Heidegger, characterize the vast majority of philosophical inquiries into human existence. This does not, however, exhaust the significance of Christianity in Heidegger's thought. As has already been shown, Heidegger held that the "basic experience" that burst forth onto world history in the first decades of the common era was subsequently obscured and misunderstood. It was one of his projects, during the 1920s, to provide the conceptual tools needed to retrieve this experience, not only for the sake of developing a hermeneutics of facticity, but also for breathing new life into theology. During SS 1920, Heidegger repeatedly remarks that the ultimate terminus of his efforts lies in a renewal of theology (G59 12, 91, 95). The kind of theology that Heidegger envisions here must be a *hermeneutical* one, i.e., one that originates in a "basic experience" and then proceeds to develop an explicit conceptual articulation the "context of expression" contained within it.

Philosophy beneath the Cross

The preceding sections have shown that the significance of religious experience for Heidegger lies in its hermeneutical role. The task faced by the hermeneutician is to secure this "basic experience" and to continually return to it in the development of articulate philosophical expressions. The "basic experience" in question is not some inarticulate reception of sense-data, but rather a concrete way of experiencing one's own life. It is a way of being a self that Heidegger will eventually come to call "authenticity." How, then, can it be secured? In trying to answer this question, Heidegger developed his conception of the nature of philosophy. As István Fehér has suggested, this conception

developed in concert with Heidegger's study of theology. Fehér does not, however, provide an account of the specific brand of theology that Heidegger turns to for guidance.

It is, I submit, the theology of *Luther* which provides Heidegger with the basis for his own conception of hermeneutics. As I will argue in more detail later (chapter 2), a central aspect of Luther's early thought is focused around the use of the term '*destructio*' and its cognates. *Destructio* is a name for a way of doing theology that attempts to block the influence of humanity's pervasive urge for self-glorification on the concrete experience of religious life. As I will show (chapters 7 and 8) Heidegger transcribes this program into his own philosophical outlook by developing a practice of "*Destraktion*," which, like Luther's *destructio*, attempts to counter the tendencies toward complacency and conformity that encroach upon an individual's attempts to live an "authentic" life.⁴³

At this point, however, I merely want to lend these claims some initial plausibility by following up on and developing a suggestion first made by Fehér in a recent article. Many of these points will reappear in a later part of this study, but it is important to briefly mention them here. One can look to Heidegger's lecture course on Paul from WS 1920–1921 to find a confirmation for Fehér's thesis about the development of Heidegger's conception of *philosophy*. The greater part of the introduction to his concrete exposition of Christian facticity in Paul's letters is taken up by questions regarding the nature and essence of philosophy.

Philosophy may be a science, says Heidegger, but the usual, commonplace conceptions of what it is to be a science should in no way be allowed to dictate the essence of philosophy (G60 6). Rather, the self-understanding of philosophy can only be reached through philosophizing itself (G60 8). For this reason, it is especially important to Heidegger that one avoid taking over the unclarified "scientific conception [*Auffassung*] of philosophy" (G60 8). For Heidegger, philosophy should be defined in relation to its object, factual life-experience. "The problem of the self-understanding of philosophy is always taken too lightly. Should one take up this problem in a radical way, one would find that philosophy springs from [*entspringt*] factual life-experience. And then it leaps back into factual life-experience itself" (G60 8). It is in factual life-experience that the "inversion" leading to philosophy must take place (G60 11).

Heidegger continued to wrestle with the question of the nature of philosophy in the coming years. In the famous "Natorp Report" from 1922, which contains interesting hints about Heidegger's theological motivations, the primary characteristic of philosophy is its difficulty. First of all, Heidegger argues that philosophy can never relieve future generations of "the burden and the anxious worry [*die Last und die Bekümmernung*] about radical questioning" (NB 3/113). It does not pass down a "system" of results, but instead a context of fundamental questions. All of this accords with the fundamental difficulty of

life itself; the best manner of access to this "object" is, accordingly, that of "making things hard [*Schwermachen*]." This is the "duty [*Pflicht*]" of philosophy. Heidegger castigates the way philosophy all too often conspires with life in its tendency to flee its difficulty:

All making things easy, all the tempting flattery about yearnings, all the metaphysical tranquilizers prescribed for problems which have for the most been derived from mere book learning—the basic intention of all this is from the start to give up with regard to the task that must in each case be carried out, namely, bringing the object of philosophy into view, grasping it, and indeed preserving [*behalten*] it. (NB 4/113)

I have already described the way a "basic experience" forms the starting point of Heidegger's hermeneutics. This experience of "having the self" provides the initial purchase on the phenomenon of personal life, which then opens the way for conceptual articulation. Given the significance of this "basic experience," it is little wonder that Heidegger views one of the tasks of philosophy as holding this in an "authentic safekeeping [*eigentliche Verwahrung*]" (NB 21/124). This requirement emerges still more clearly in Heidegger's conception of philosophy as always already "applied," as seamlessly interwoven with the actual course of a specific style of life: "As such, [philosophy] co-temporalizes [*mitzeitigt*] and helps to unfold the concrete and historically particular [*jeweilige*] being of life itself, and it does this in its very enactment, and not first by means of some subsequent 'application' to life" (NB 5/114).

All of these features of philosophy can be found in Heidegger's 1927 essay "Phenomenology and Theology": (1) it begins and ends in "factual life," (2) it accentuates the inherent "difficulty" of life, (3) it preserves a special possibility of human existence, and (4) it is always already "applied" to life. The significant point of difference, however, is that these features are attributed *not to philosophy, but to theology*. And, as I will now show, the view of theology expressed by Heidegger is thoroughly *Lutheran*.

One of the primary issues faced by both philosophy and theology during the first part of the twentieth century was the question of whether or not these disciplines were "scientific." The problem itself had its roots in the middle part of the nineteenth century, when the philosophical mood in Europe shifted away from the sort of speculative metaphysics that characterized the zenith of German Idealism. Side by side with this shift came new developments in the special sciences of chemistry, physics, and biology, all of which only served to convince more intellectuals that idealist "science [*Wissenschaft*]" was a relic from a more naïve age. In this situation, the natural problem on many minds concerned the nature and rights of philosophical inquiry. In philosophy, there were two basic attempts to answer this question. Some argued that philosophy must model itself in one way or another on the mathematical sciences (positivism, neo-Kantianism, Husserl). Others cast off the mantle of science altogether, opting instead for an enthusiastic "philosophy of life" that tried to address

perennial questions of “world-view.” In theology, there was a parallel attempt to secure “scientific” credentials through critical textual analysis and a new orientation toward the study of the history of religion. Heidegger’s own views on philosophy and theology are deeply shaped by this intellectual situation.

In the 1927 essay, Heidegger claims that theology is a science, yet it should not be determined as such via the concepts of other sciences like physics or psychology: “In no case may we delimit the scientific character of theology by using an *other* science as the guiding standard of evidence for its mode of proof or as a measure of rigor of its conceptuality” (G9 60/49). According to Heidegger, the distinctiveness of theology is that it originates in faith and participates in the existential struggle to maintain faith. Heidegger writes, “Furthermore, faith not only motivates the intervention of an interpretive science of Christianness; at the same time, faith, as rebirth, is *that* history to whose occurrence theology itself, for its part, is supposed to contribute” (G9 54/45). By its very nature, theology is “applied” to life. Utilizing the same vocabulary that he had applied to philosophy during WS 1920–1921, Heidegger states that theology “springs from faith [*aus dem Glauben entspringt*]” (G9 55/46). Furthermore, its task is always to “cultivate [*auszubilden*]” faith (G9 55/46). This does not, of course, mean that theology is supposed to make faith easy:

Likewise, the theological transparency and conceptual interpretation of faith cannot found [*begründen*] and secure faith in its legitimacy, nor can it in any way make it easier to accept faith and remain constant in faith. Theology can only render faith more difficult, that is, render it more certain that faithfulness cannot be gained through the science of theology, but solely through faith. (G9 56/46)

What is Heidegger’s conception of the faith that forms the factual starting point for theology, the faith that it at once preserves and renders more difficult? Faith is determined, for Heidegger, by what is revealed to it, and this is the “crucified God” (G9 52/44). This revelation is an address; it has a specific “direction of communicating [*Mitteilungsrichtung*]” that calls one to participate in the salvation occurrence (G9 52–53/44). This participation is best understood, says Heidegger, as a kind of “rebirth” (G9 53/44). “Rebirth” means enacting the history that begins with the event of salvation and has a definite “uttermost end” (G9 53/44).

A careful reading uncovers the fact that Heidegger’s claims about the meaning of faith and the nature of theology are permeated by manifestly Lutheran commitments. For example, the Lutheran formula “the crucified God” is used to designate the object of faith. The claim that theology cannot *construct* faith, but must instead take its cue *from* faith, is one of the hallmarks of Luther’s polemic against late scholastic theology. These links are by no means speculative, for Heidegger quotes Luther as an authority on the conception of faith which he employs in this essay: “Luther said, ‘Faith is permitting

ourselves to be seized by the things we do not see' (*Werke* [Erlangen Ausgabe], vol. 46, p. 287)" (G9 53/44).⁴⁴ Heidegger no doubt drew this quotation from the texts of Luther that he had received as a gift some years before. It is, however, not only this conception of faith that betrays the influence of Luther. Indeed, the entire "ideal construction" of theology presented by Heidegger, according to which theology is not a contemplative science on the model of Aristotelian *theoria*, but rather a concrete struggle within and on behalf of faith, clearly has much in common with Luther's "theology of the cross."

John Van Buren has clearly shown Heidegger's abiding interest in Luther, illuminating the way his studies of Luther played a large part in the development of Heidegger's self-understanding as a thinker in his own right.⁴⁵ For present purposes, it will suffice to draw attention to Heidegger's own remarks concerning Luther in his lecture courses and published works. His identification of "genuine" theology with the work of Luther is evident in a remark from the introductory part of *Being and Time*:

Theology seeks after a more original interpretation of the being of man, sketched out in advance by the meaning of faith and remaining within it. It is slowly beginning to understand once again Luther's insight that its dogmatic system rests upon a "foundation" that has not arisen from a primarily faithful questioning [*gläubenden Fragen*], and that its conceptual apparatus is not only inadequate for the theological problematic, but it also conceals and distorts it. (SZ 10/30)

This remark is very much of a piece with the conception of theology as the conceptual articulation of faith, found in the essay "Phenomenology and Theology." Here, in *Being and Time*, the insight that theology must have a "factual" origin and must avoid the imposition of "system" is attributed directly to Luther. That Luther was, however, Heidegger's source for much more than this conception of theology emerges from two explicit acknowledgments of the importance of Luther for the project of hermeneutics (G61 182; G63 5). Part of this significance surely lies in Luther's revolt against the encroachments of Greek metaphysics onto the "basic experience" of Christian faith (G60 97).

By far the most frequent allusions to Luther occur in connection with the idea of the "eruption" of a new form of life-experience in primitive Christianity. The claim that Luther represents one such "eruption" seems to have been made first of all in WS 1919–1920, where, as I have already pointed out, Heidegger develops the idea of the "basic experience" required for the development of hermeneutics (G58 62, 205). In some supplemental remarks, found in Oskar Becker's transcript of the course on Augustine from SS 1921, Heidegger develops this thesis in connection with Luther's "Heidelberg Disputation" of 1518, an early presentation of the "theology of the cross," as well as with Romans 1:19 (G60 282). Heidegger seems to have been familiar with Luther's lectures on Romans (recently unearthed at the time), as evidenced by a direct reference to the discovery of this text (G58 204) as well as to the

editorial introduction to it by Johannes Ficker (G60 308–309). There are a number of other points during his lectures where Heidegger describes the “breakthrough” achieved by Luther (G60 310; G61 7; G17 118). Finally, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes reference to Luther’s work in connection with the phenomenon of anxiety (SZ 190n4).

Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence here is that Heidegger actually lectured on Luther on two occasions. One of these was in a seminar, co-taught with Julius Ebbinghaus, on the theological origins of Kant’s position in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). The second instance was Heidegger’s guest lecture on Luther in Bultmann’s course on the ethics of Paul. The text of the latter has recently come to light, and it reveals the depth of Heidegger’s knowledge of Luther. Heidegger freely moves the length and breadth of Luther’s corpus and manifests a keen sensibility for the Reformer’s theological position.

As Heidegger reads Luther, the latter’s whole theological position begins *in concreto*, i.e., with the experience of sin (S 105). Heidegger tries to show how this is true both in Luther’s early, pre-Reformation period and in his later work. He begins with one of Luther’s lesser-known works from 1516. Heidegger outlines Luther’s position as follows: “Man is seized by *horror* [horror] that is based in *quarere iustitiam suam* [seeking his righteousness]. There thus arises *desperatio spiritualis* [spiritual despair], despair before God [. . .] because of the *affectus horrens peccatum* [affect of being horrified at sin]” (S 106).

Here Heidegger clearly finds a model for an intellectual discipline that begins its investigations in the thick of “factual life-experience,” where theoretical cognition is not privileged over affect and emotion. As he puts it a bit later, Luther’s ideal of a “theology of the cross” is of a discipline that “takes its point of departure only from the actual matter (*dicit id quod res est* [it says what the matter actually is])” (S 107). A discipline that begins in this way must, on Heidegger’s view, also reach its terminus in “factual life-experience.” In this seminar paper, Heidegger attributes this position directly to Luther:

The fundamental requirement for all theology is thus to interpret man’s being in the world in such a way that he can get out of this being and come to God. Thus this being may not be presented as something good, for here he does not learn to love God; rather, man must be brought to the point where he grasps his being as a persisting in the world that affords not glories but adversities. God has in His mercy shattered man’s *quarere suam iustitiam* [seeking his righteousness], so that he now knows “I have nothing to expect from the world.” Thus Luther [. . .] arrives at a proposition quite the reverse of Scholasticism: *corruptio amplificanda est* [corruption is something to be amplified]. (S 106)

Luther is, for Heidegger, a paradigm of a thinker whose problematic was motivated not by theory but by concrete human life, by the “basic experience”

of being a fallen, corrupted human being. Luther's *theologia crucis* aims at opening up the possibility of an alternative mode of existence through relentlessly exposing the corruption of human nature. As I will argue in the following chapter, one of the central terms employed by Luther in connection with this conception of theology is '*destructio*,' a term that, Germanized as '*Destruktion*,' plays an equally central role in Heidegger's thought.