In *What is Philosophy?* [Rowman and Littlefield, 1956], Heidegger writes that we find the answer to this question “not through historical assertions about the definitions of philosophy but through conversing with that which has been handed down to us as the being of Being.” This handing down is what constitutes the philosophical tradition, which according to Heidegger has been dominated since Plato by the metaphysics of presence. Being has only been thought in terms of beings; the ontological difference has been forgotten. Yet, we are now – a “now” which was inaugurated by Nietzsche’s insight into the hollowness of the traditional thought of Being – at the end of this metaphysics. The task that Heidegger sets as the central one for philosophy in the post-metaphysical age is to think through, or to think *from within*, this end. Such is the task that Santiago Zabala takes up in *The Remains of Being*.

In this short but rich book, Zabala addresses what he takes to be the philosophical question *par excellence* – “How is it going with Being?” as Heidegger puts it in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* [Yale University Press, 2000] – by way of what he calls an “ontology of remnants.” This is first and foremost a hermeneutical approach, which proceeds by way of considering the way in which both Heidegger and some of the most influential post-Heideggerian thinkers contend with the question of the meaning of Being. Zabala’s position is that such considerations will point the way forward to new possibilities for understanding Being precisely by keeping dialogue with philosophical pasts alive. Hermeneutics, he argues, is just as generative or productive as it is merely exegetical; in fact, it is uniquely suited to our contemporary philosophical situation precisely because of its ability to bring the past and future together. Zabala certainly makes a persuasive argument that the hermeneutic ontology he advocates is highly capable of addressing Being “after metaphysics” (though it is less certain whether this method is unique in its capability).

Zabala begins by framing his topic in terms provided by Heidegger. Throughout the book, the themes of thinking Being beyond the tradition of the metaphysics of presence and uncovering the ontological difference that this tradition has forgotten orient the discussion. Of course, Zabala’s approach is also heavily influenced by that of Gianni Vattimo, with whom he has studied and worked for a number of years (having edited or co-
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edited several volumes of or about Vattimo’s work, as well as serving as his co-author). Key among the philosopher’s ideas that Zabala appropriates is that of “weak thought,” which aims to move beyond the metaphysics of presence (as well as the legacies of both Kantian critique and Hegelian dialectic) by emphasizing the inescapably historical and interpretative nature of both truth and Being. In one of the book’s discussions of Vattimo’s thought, he explains, “we have not been able to answer the fundamental question of philosophy – why is Being, and why is there not rather nothing? – because … there is no sufficient reason to explain why Being is” (93). This ultimate lack of reason is what marks Being as weak, and thus what ostensibly makes the brand of hermeneutics that Zabala has inherited from Vattimo the most appropriate philosophical method for addressing Being. If the primary ontological question is not to be “What is the essence of Being?” or “Why is there Being rather than nothing?” but instead “How is it going with Being?” then, this book argues, our attempt at an answer needs to take into account first and foremost the temporal, historic, and finally indeterminate – that is, weak – nature of Being’s occurrence.

Right at the beginning, Zabala states explicitly, “The thesis of this book is that philosophy since Plato has not only been a ‘forgettableness of Being,’ as Martin Heidegger explained in Being and Time, but an expression of Being’s remnants, that is, the remains of Being” (xi). Of course, the history of metaphysics from Plato through Nietzsche, characterized as it is precisely by its forgetfulness, does not contend with Being as remaining but instead attempts to interpret Being in terms of presence. The titular expression “the remains of Being” and its variation “Being’s remnants” thus play crucial roles in Zabala’s exposition, as he makes the case that Being can no longer viably be thought except as that which has always already departed, “remaining” only in the traces that philosophy must continually reinterpret.

The perpetuity of this task, though, problematizes the notion of the end of metaphysics out of which Zabala’s argument proceeds. He seems to take the idea that philosophy is now situated “after metaphysics” as given. However, he repeatedly emphasizes that the post-metaphysical thinking that is philosophy’s task must emerge from within metaphysics, implying that “within metaphysics” in exactly where philosophy remains. The tension between these two orientations is not a novel product of Zabala’s account, of course; it is characteristic of Derrida’s notion of the closure of metaphysics, and even the Heideggerian account of the end of metaphysics that provides this book’s motivation. The problem is that Zabala does not take address it with the same attention and clarity
of thought that he applies to other, related ideas. His discussions of the ontological difference, of historicity and eventuality, and of the relationship of Being to language exhibit not only careful consideration and rigorous scholarship but also valuable insights. The question of where we stand with regard to metaphysics, however, moves rather quickly into a discussion (no less important) of the distinction between *Überwindung* and *Verwindung* – overcoming in the sense of leaving behind, and overcoming in the sense of “getting over,” (i.e., learning to live with). Following both Heidegger and Vattimo, Zabala claims that it is the latter sense in which we should “overcome” the metaphysics after which the ontology of remnants comes; yet, it is precisely this sense of overcoming which suggests that philosophy may not now, or ever, be finished with metaphysics.

Part of this difficulty does get worked out in the various ways in which Zabala both explains and puts to use the Heideggerian concept of *Destruktion* (and its descendants). In the first chapter of the book, which lays out the Heideggerian background of the work as a whole, he states that “this term [*Destruktion*] is at the center of Heidegger’s philosophy and that all his thought should be understood as a destruction of metaphysics” (26). It is the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics that undoes the traditional interpretation of Being as presence and thus makes it possible to bring to light the ontological difference. Since Zabala argues that an ontology practiced with this difference constantly in mind will be able to think Being only as what remains and never as what is fully present, he sees Heideggerian destruction as the starting point of a trajectory that leads naturally to the project undertaken in his book. Yet, he is also careful to point out the differences between the properly Heideggerian version of destruction later modifications of it – particularly Derrida’s *déconstruction*. While this distinction is important, and Zabala is certainly correct to indicate it, as the book progresses it is not always clear how adamantly he means to apply it. What does remain clear, though, is the relationship between destruction/deconstruction and the object of his ontology of remnants: it is on the basis of these that philosophy can appropriate its past hermeneutically in order not only to come to terms with Being’s remnants but also to generate new remains.

The second chapter focuses on the work of six post-Heideggerian philosophers, making the case that each of these provides an example of the kind of “generation of Being” that is called for after the destruction of metaphysics. Once again, this “after” remains problematic, though, because in the work of each of the six figures – Schürmann, Derrida, Nancy, Gadamer, Tugendhat, and Vattimo – we find a variation on the theme of
destruction itself. Regardless, Zabala’s argument is that from their work emerges (each in its own way) new and decisive approaches to Being as that which remains, approaches that at least point the way toward a “getting over” of metaphysics even if they are still grappling with its legacy. The book’s presentations of these six philosophers are not meant to serve as introductions to their thought, and Zabala forthrightly explains that his readings are not necessarily faithful to their originals. At the same time, he clearly does not assume familiarity with these thinkers on the part of his reader; in each section, his reading includes brief explanations of relevant basic concepts.

Ultimately, what Zabala does in his interpretation of each of these figures is sift out those ideas most pertinent to the ontological question he is pursuing and then utilize them to further his pursuit. Consequently, throughout this chapter the variations on Destruktion offered by each of the philosophers in question get treated with special attention, though not always with consistency. For example, in the first section on Schürmann, while Zabala expertly interprets the idea of anarchic economies in which Being occurs (or “presences”), he claims that Schürmann “sharply distinguishes between ‘destruction’ and ‘deconstruction’” while Derrida does not (58). However, in the next section (much like in the first chapter), he clearly explains the distinction between Heidegger’s “destruction” and Derrida’s “deconstruction” (68) – a distinction that is explicit in the latter’s writing on the subject. Similarly, Zabala does a superb job of concisely explicating Gadamer’s notion of conversation (Gespräch) and Tugendhat’s formal-semantic analysis – as well as, importantly, their relation to Heideggerian Destruktion. However, it is not entirely clear how easily the two can both be appropriated by the same hermeneutical project. Zabala notes both that Gadamer finds fault with traditional metaphysics in that, since its ancient Greek inception, it has focused solely on the meaning of statements rather than the event of conversation (82), and that Tugendhat wants to reformulate ontology precisely by focusing on the understanding of sentences (86). These tensions are not directly addressed, though one does get the sense that further exploration of them may indeed prove to be productive of exactly the kind of generative hermeneutics that Zabala is advocating.

Ultimately, the second chapter has a somewhat transitional feel to it: after establishing the state of ontology in and after Heidegger in the first chapter, the six examples of post-Heideggerian thought in the second chapter form a bridge that guides the reader toward the more constructive part of Zabala’s project that appears most fully in chapter three. It is in this
third and last chapter – regrettably, the shortest in the book – that Zabala begins to offer his own original contributions to the discussion he has been conducting. The most important part of this, in terms of the overall argument of the book, is a fuller explanation of what he has earlier alluded to as the “generation of Being.” Zabala’s understanding of what it means to “generate” Being is closely tied not only to his understanding of the nature and efficacy of hermeneutics but also to his conviction that the remains of Being are disclosed in discourse. Thus, each of the examples that he discusses in chapter two, as well as the Heideggerian thought that serves as their basis, generates Being insofar as it interprets Being in conversation with a philosophical tradition that precedes it. Furthermore, insofar as each interpretation will necessarily differ in some respects, the event of Being that occurs in (and as) each interpretation will differ. “Being is not the same eternally,” Zabala explains, but “it is always becoming through its own remnants” (103). Thinking Being as remaining – and here the active sense of “to remain” is emphasized – thus highlights an unavoidable plurality of Being that in principle cannot be unified by reference to either presence or dialectics. Since Being has always already happened, since it is always already given, it’s the remnants with which it is the business of philosophy to contend are always already multiple. Thus, Zabala argues, a hermeneutic ontology that is anarchic in Schürrmann’s sense (i.e., without a static ultimate principle), discursive in Gadamer’s sense (i.e., modeled on conversation rather than apophantic statements), and above all historic in the weak sense expounded by Vattimo is not only best adapted to take account of the legacy of metaphysics but also best prepared to open up new possibilities for future philosophy from within this legacy.

Zabala’s argument for the efficacy of the hermeneutic ontology that he advocates in this book is certainly strong and clearly articulated. With its emphasis on the inherently plural character of the remains of Being, however, one might expect his approach to be more explicitly open to a plurality of philosophical methods. This may indeed be an implicit consequence of the position staked out in this book, despite the privilege it gives to its own brand of hermeneutics. In the end, though, the criticisms raised here are only minor ones. It is fair to say that the largest complaint to be had about this book regards its brevity, because the project it undertakes – articulated with the utmost erudition and clarity – is an ambitious one worthy of being engaged in at much greater length. This book is certainly a significant and valuable contribution not only to contemporary hermeneutical thought but also to any discussion of post-Heideggerian ontology, and further work from Zabala along the same trajectory should be eagerly welcomed.

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