

## Re-thinking Truth: Assessing Heidegger's critique of Aquinas in light of Vallicella's critique of Heidegger

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### Abstract

In this paper I argue that Heidegger's critique of Aquinas on truth must be seen in light of Vallicella's critique of Heidegger. Heidegger criticized Aquinas for allegedly placing truth in the 'subjectivity' of the human mind via correspondence (*adequatio*). While the accuracy of this reading of Aquinas is highly contested, the criticism itself has sometimes been turned back upon Heidegger. In three forgotten articles in the 1980s, William Vallicella contended that Heidegger reduces Being to truth, and truth to the alleged 'subjectivity' of Dasein. Though Vallicella garnered some minimal attention at the time, his argument was soon forgotten, along with its potential implications for Heidegger's criticism of Aquinas. This paper will first establish the nature of Heidegger's critique of Aquinas, followed by Vallicella's critique of Heidegger, evaluating the former in light of the latter. It will be shown that Heidegger critiques Thomas for a mistake he does not make, then makes that same mistake himself, only to retreat to a position similar to what Thomas actually holds, but in a way that solves nothing, for he lacks Thomas' anchor in a divine mind. These points will coalesce in the ultimate conclusion that Vallicella can be used to both undermine Heidegger's critique and undergird the value of Aquinas' position on truth.

### Keywords

Heidegger, Aquinas, Truth, Vallicella, Idealism, Correspondence

In this paper I shall argue that Heidegger's critique of Aquinas on truth could be illuminated afresh by Vallicella's critique of Heidegger. Heidegger criticized Aquinas for allegedly placing truth in the

‘subjectivity’ of the human mind via correspondence (*adequatio*).<sup>1</sup> While the accuracy of this reading of Aquinas is highly contested,<sup>2</sup> the criticism itself has sometimes been turned back upon Heidegger. In three forgotten articles in the 1980s,<sup>3</sup> William Vallicella contended that Heidegger reduces Being to truth, and truth to the alleged ‘subjectivity’ of Dasein. Though Vallicella garnered some minimal attention at the time,<sup>4</sup> his argument was soon forgotten, along with its potential implications for Heidegger’s criticism of Aquinas. This paper will first establish the nature of Heidegger’s critique of Aquinas, followed by Vallicella’s critique of Heidegger, evaluating the former in light of the latter. It will be shown that Heidegger critiques Thomas for a mistake he does not make, then makes that same mistake himself, only to retreat to a position similar to what Thomas actually holds, but in a way that solves nothing, because he lacks Thomas’ anchor in a divine mind. These points will coalesce in the ultimate conclusion that Vallicella can be used to both undermine Heidegger’s critique and undergird the value of Aquinas’ position.

Heidegger critiques Aquinas for subscribing to the allegedly “privileged paradigm”<sup>5</sup> of locating truth in propositions. Propositions express the correspondence between mind and world; e.g., truth is attained when my mental image of turkey and stuffing accurately corresponds to the food on my plate. However, falsehood occurs when one’s mental picture/proposition does not correspond to reality; e.g., when one fails to notice all the Christmas weight they’ve gained. As Aquinas states (in a passage that Heidegger references):<sup>6</sup>

*True* expresses the correspondence of being to the knowing power, for all knowing is produced by an assimilation of the knower to the thing

<sup>1</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Logic: The Question of Truth* trans. Martin Sheehan (IUP, 2010) and *Introduction to Phenomenological Research* trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (IUP, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, “Philosophy of Mind,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (CUP, 2005); Paul A. Macdonald, *Knowledge and the Transcendent: An Inquiry Into the Mind’s Relationship to God* (CUAP, 2009); James Orr, “Heidegger’s Critique of Aquinas on Truth: A Critical Assessment,” *New Blackfriars*, vol. 95, no. 1055, 2013, 43-56.

<sup>3</sup> See William F. Vallicella, “The Problem of Being in the Early Heidegger,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1981, pp. 388-406; “Heidegger’s Reduction of Being to Truth,” *New Scholasticism*, vol. 59, no. 2, 1985, pp. 156-176; “Kant, Heidegger, and the Problem of the Thing in Itself,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1983, 35-43.

<sup>4</sup> The two main responses came from Quentin Smith, “Reply to Vallicella,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1991, 231-235; M. Zimmerman, “On Vallicella’s Critique of Heidegger,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 30 (1), 75-100.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, *Logic*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> “Thomas characterizes this determination as *assimilatio intellectus ad rem* [assimilation of the intellect to a thing].” Heidegger, *Phenomenological*, 127.

known, so that assimilation is said to be the cause of knowledge...  
This agreement is called the conformity of thing and intellect.<sup>7</sup>

Truth—according to Heidegger’s reading of Aquinas—is not located in things in and of themselves, but in the theoretical propositions of the corresponding mind.<sup>8</sup> Heidegger diagnoses this as a “transferring” of the “being of truth” into the “subject.”<sup>9</sup> James Orr states that Heidegger believes this “anthropocentric subjectivity metastasizes into a theocentric subjectivity,”<sup>10</sup> for if things are *truly true* only inasmuch as they correspond to a mind, then in order to avoid an anthropocentric solipsism there must be a divine mind in whom all things are constantly held. Thus, the relation between human minds and objects is projected upward onto the relation between God and creation, such that “even if there were no human intellect, things would still be called true in the order pertaining to the divine intellect.”<sup>11</sup> As Orr summarizes: Aquinas is accused of “extrapolat[ing] the correspondence relation to the divine level in such a way that truth comes to be a function of the divine plan of creation.”<sup>12</sup> *Veritas* comes to roost in both the divine and human mind, but exists in the things themselves in only a secondary way.<sup>13</sup> Mind becomes the measure of all things, while the *things* are not kept in mind.

In contrast, Heidegger wishes to do justice to the phenomenal things themselves, arguing that if one refers to “*true gold*,” *true* here is not inherent to the mind, but to the gold itself (i.e., the purity of the material).<sup>14</sup> The proposition is “not the place where truth first becomes possible, but the reverse. The proposition is possible only within truth.”<sup>15</sup> Only because the thing *truly* is the way it is can it become possible for a proposition to correspond to it.<sup>16</sup> Being and

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* trans. Robert W. Mulligan (H. Regnery Co., 1952), Q 1, Art. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> Reply.

<sup>8</sup> “Truth finds its formal perfection in the intellect but a thing does not.” *De Veritate*, Q 1, Art. 5, Ans. Diff. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, *Phenomenological*, 129. Heidegger is here referencing back to *De Veritate* Q 1, Art. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Orr, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *Phenomenological*, 130. Heidegger is referencing *De Veritate*, Q1, Art. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Logic*, 313-322. Also see Orr, 50-51.

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, *Phenomenological*, 137-138. The Being of beings and the *res* of reality gets lost in the subjectivity of *intellectu*. For, the “genuine being of the *verum* is not in an *intuitus* [intuition] directed at the *quidditas rei* [quiddity of a thing] but instead, the *intellectus* is true insofar as it is a judging intellect... it is a bearer of the *verum*.” Ibid, 131. Heidegger is here referencing *De Veritate*, Q1, Art. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger, *Logic*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Further, a proposition can be true or false, thus indicating that truth must be inherent to something deeper than the proposition itself. Truth is not located in the mind’s proposition, but in the being to which the proposition may or may not refer. “In this regard, we

truth go together, and the nature of truth is the nature of what *is*.<sup>17</sup> Orr writes that—for Heidegger—when one looks at a picture on the wall, there is “not a correspondence relation between perceiver and mental representation (*Vorstellung*) or picture (*Bild*) of the real thing, but rather one between the perceiver and the picture itself.”<sup>18</sup> What

one has in mind is the Real picture, and nothing else. Any interpretation in which something else is here slipped in as what one supposedly has in mind in an assertion that merely represents, belies the phenomenal facts of the case as to that about which the assertion gets made.<sup>19</sup>

One does not encounter a mental representation of an object, but rather encounters the phenomenological object itself. As such, truth has less to do with propositions of the mind, and more to do with the *uncovering* of the things themselves. Heidegger wants to return to what he believes is Aristotle’s definition of truth (*ἀλήθεια*), which supposedly conveyed precisely this ability of the things to reveal themselves.<sup>20</sup> As Heidegger writes:

these beings are manifested of and by themselves in this uncovering which opens up entirely the beings it encounters. Our gaze is now directed exclusively to the thing to be understood . . . This uncoveredness or unhiddenness of beings is what we call truth . . . The being is present simply in and of itself and as itself . . . [This] nearness contains only the thing we meet in its own self and nothing else; in a radical sense there is nothing else but it, purely in itself.<sup>21</sup>

Heidegger has thus critiqued Aquinas and relocated the truth of Being into the things themselves (in a way that simultaneously rejects the hiddenness of the Kantian noumenal sphere). However, he does not want to make the mistake of conceiving of Being as a real superbeing that exists somewhere in the external world (e.g., Zeus).<sup>22</sup> Being “cannot be understood as *a* being.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, he infamously shifts Being and truth into the disclosure of Dasein.<sup>24</sup> This move becomes the basis for Vallicella’s critique (to which we now turn), for Vallicella claims that Dasein ultimately slips into the very subjectivity that Heidegger was trying to avoid.

must keep in mind that the proposition has a peculiar relation to truth since, as propositional truth, it is necessarily caught in an either/or. It is the kind of speech that is neither true as such nor false as such, but can be either true or false.” Heidegger, *Logic*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Orr, 47.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. Joan Stambaugh (SUNYP, 1996), §44, 201.

<sup>20</sup> Ted Sadler, *Heidegger and Aristotle: the Question of Being* (Athlone, 1997), 118.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *Logic*, 153–154; 6; 152; 153.

<sup>22</sup> Vallicella, *Reduction*, 159.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §1, 2. Italics are my own.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, §1, 2–12.

Vallicella's thesis is that Heidegger fails to balance Scholastic realism and Kantian idealism, thereby sacrificing the world of objects. Vallicella begins with the infamous words of Heidegger: "only as long as Dasein *is* . . . is there Being."<sup>25</sup> Even more explicit is Heidegger's claim that "we cannot say: there was a time when man was not. At all times man was and is and will be, because time produces itself only insofar as man is."<sup>26</sup> Even

. . . Newton's laws, the principle of contradiction, any truth whatsoever – these are true only as long as Dasein is. Before there was any Dasein, there was no truth; nor will there be any after Dasein is no more . . . That there are eternal truths will not be adequately proved until someone has succeeded in demonstrating that Dasein has been and will be for all eternity.<sup>27</sup>

This seems to hint at a Heideggerian idealism. Yet—as Vallicella also concedes—Heidegger nonetheless maintains that:

Beings are independent of the experience, acquaintance and grasping through which they are disclosed, discovered and determined. (*Being and Time*, 183) . . . [Nature] is in no way dependent in its Being upon the fact that it is true, that is, revealed and as revealed is encountered by a Dasein or not (*Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, 313).<sup>28</sup>

The priority of Da-sein over and above all other beings which emerges here . . . obviously has nothing in common with a vapid subjectivizing of the totality of beings.<sup>29</sup>

What sense is to be made of Heidegger's ambiguity? How can beings *be* in a way that is simultaneously reliant upon, yet distinct from, Dasein? To get to the crux of this paradox, Vallicella outlines the premises at work in Heidegger:

1. The understanding of Being is only so long as *Dasein* is.
2. . . . Being "is" only in the understanding of Being.
3. Therefore, there is Being only so long as *Dasein* is. (From 1 and 2)
4. Being is always the Being of beings.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, §44, 212.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 71.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, §44, 226-227.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from Vallicella, *Reduction*, 166-167.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §1, 12.

5. Therefore, beings are only so long as *Dasein* is. (From 3 and 4)
6. But Heidegger asserts that beings, e.g. nature, can be without *Dasein*.
7. Therefore, we have a contradiction. 5 and 6 cannot both be true.<sup>30</sup>

Vallicella contends that the true source of this contradiction springs from an ambiguity in the phrase “Being of beings,” in premise 4. The genitive ‘of’ could be taken as a *genitivus subjectivus* or a *genitivus objectivus* (a distinction that—surprisingly—Heidegger himself seems to acknowledge, albeit with nuances, on pages 61–62 of *Identity and Difference*).<sup>31</sup> For example, the “consciousness of a dog” can refer either to a consciousness that intrinsically belongs to the dog (i.e., his mind festering with memories of puppyhood and dreams of defecating in new places), or some other person’s conscious awareness that there is a dog in front of them.<sup>32</sup> The former predicates consciousness as intrinsically belonging to the dog itself, the latter extrinsically as something projected onto it from the outside. When it comes to the Being of beings, Being can either be seen as something intrinsic to the world of beings (suggesting realism), or as something that is projected upon it from the outside by *Dasein* (suggesting idealism). Vallicella contends that it has both meanings in the early Heidegger, accounting for the contradiction.<sup>33</sup> Being is that by which beings ontologically *are* when it is convenient and a transcendental of *Dasein* when it is not.<sup>34</sup> Heidegger thus externalizes only to internalize, hoping that if he shifts back and forth fast enough no one will notice, and that the knowledge of Being will magically blur with the Being of knowledge. This alleged ambiguity in the early Heidegger—though obviously *not intentional*—allows him to slip unwittingly into an anthropocentric solipsism, for “if *Dasein* is possibly non-existent, and Being depends on *Dasein*, then Being is possibly non-existent, which entails that if *Dasein* were no longer, then nothing else would be.”<sup>35</sup> If Vallicella’s accusation is correct, then the early Heidegger critiqued Aquinas’ subjectivity only to make

<sup>30</sup> Vallicella, *Reduction*, 158.

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* trans. Joan Staumbaugh (University of Chicago Press, 1969), 61-62.

<sup>32</sup> Vallicella, *Reduction*, 160.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 160-165.

<sup>34</sup> Vallicella, *Early Heidegger*, 399.

<sup>35</sup> William F. Vallicella, “Reply to Zimmerman.” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1990, 250.

the same mistake himself, relocating Being and truth into the *there* of Dasein.

Of course, any good Heideggerian would point out that Vallicella's critique assumes the very disjunction of subject and object that Heidegger was trying to subvert. But Vallicella has foreseen this response, reminding us (in a section amusingly titled "How Not to Defend Heidegger") that simply

wanting to get beyond idealism and realism . . . does not amount to [actually] getting beyond them. It is thus a clear non-sequitur to argue that, since Heidegger intends to transcend a certain set of distinctions, it is mistaken to criticize him by using elements from that set. For this assumes that Heidegger has indeed transcended the distinctions in question. But I see no reason to think that he has . . . Mere gesturing in the direction of a dimension in which this terminology fails to apply has no tendency to show that that dimension has been attained.<sup>36</sup>

The Heideggerian might then double-down, retorting that Vallicella is stuck in a binary that simply has no purchase within phenomenology. But the phenomenological method is precisely what Vallicella considers to be the core of the problem. Whereas for Kant the phenomena still causally pointed back to a noumenal realm beyond the mind's grasp, for Heidegger the phenomena *are* the things in themselves, and so there is no realm beyond the mind to point back to.<sup>37</sup> As Heidegger himself wrote: "The being in the appearance is precisely the same as the being in itself."<sup>38</sup> There is no reality beyond the revealing.

However, Michael Zimmerman—in his response to Vallicella—proposed that Heidegger saw this potential pitfall himself, preempting it by moving toward a view of truth as dwelling not in the subject (idealism) nor in the object (realism) but in the relation between. As Heidegger writes:

while truth belongs in a certain way to things, it is not present among things themselves as another present-at-hand entity like them. And on the opposite side, truth is not in the understanding if understanding is thought of as a process within an extant psychical subject. It thus will emerge that truth neither is present among things nor does it occur in a subject but lies-taken almost literally—in the middle 'between' things and Dasein (*The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 305/214).<sup>39</sup>

Growing "dissatisfied even with the way in which questions about truth and meaning were being posed, Heidegger attempted to explain both truth and meaning in terms that went beyond the impasse

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>37</sup> Vallicella, *Kant*, 42-43.

<sup>38</sup> Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (FAM: Klostermann, 1951), 197.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted from Zimmerman, 86.

between subjective and objective interpretations.”<sup>40</sup> Vallicella’s language of the subjective/objective genitive presupposes the very subject/object paradigm Heidegger wanted to escape through his doctrine of relation. Relocating truth to relation is an interesting way around Vallicella’s critique, made all the more fascinating in that it bears a striking resemblance to what Aquinas actually thought (though of course in a different philosophical context). Contra Heidegger’s interpretation, Thomas did not locate truth solely in the mind, but in the form shared by both the subject and object. Knowledge “is utterly direct, to the point of formal identity between the extra-mental object and the actually cognizing faculty in its cognizing of that object . . .”<sup>41</sup> Truth does not simply inhere in the mind or the things, but rather in the correspondence of the form *between* them (and that exists in both). Truth is an

ontological condition of absolute formal identity between knower and known. The same form inheres “naturally” through one mode of existence in the known (*esse naturale*) and “intentionally” through another mode of existence in the knower (*esse intentionale*) . . . This is why adequation is symmetrical: truth resides in the conformity between mind and world . . . each is a truth-bearer.<sup>42</sup>

Hence, Heidegger not only misreads Aquinas’ actual position, but then unknowingly retreats to something surprisingly similar, locating truth somewhere “in the middle ‘between’ things and Dasein.”<sup>43</sup> Even if one still maintains—contra Vallicella—that Heidegger escaped the dualism of subject/object, one should appreciate that Thomas might just escape for similar reasons, as neither of their views on relation quite fit into the rigid either/or of the modern problem.

However, the emphasis on relation (*adequatio*) that worked within Aquinas’ system does not work as well in Heidegger’s, because Heidegger lacks the former’s anchor in a divine mind. If truth dwells in the relation of Dasein and its world, then when Dasein dies the relation of truth dies along with it. Dasein may not be sufficient for the relation of truth, but it is nonetheless necessary, for no relation can exist without the pieces that it is meant to relate. One could respond that the relation is contingent upon Dasein only for the uncovering/disclosure of Being, not for its actual existence. But Vallicella would retort that

anyone who invokes in defense of Heidegger the “metaphysical” distinction between *Sein an sich* and *Sein für uns* cannot turn around and

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>41</sup> Kretzmann, 138.

<sup>42</sup> Orr, 52-53.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: IUP, 1982), 215.



accuse me of criticizing Heidegger from a point of view that the latter has (supposedly) superseded. But more importantly, the distinction in question is simply not available to Heidegger. It is a constant Heideggerian refrain that Being is not itself a being. But if Being could *be* in itself and apart from any manifestation to Dasein, then it would indeed be a being.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, if Dasein ceases then the relation ceases, and with it the very existence—and not just the manifestation of—all truth and Being. In contrast, for Aquinas truth is ultimately rooted in God, and so even if humanity ceased to exist the external world would still participatorily remain in its Being. The world *is* in precisely the same way as the self: primarily in relation to God, and only secondarily in relation to each other.<sup>45</sup> Truth ultimately continues on with or without us, for while the *micro* relation between subject and object may fade, the *macro* relation does not. While one of Thomas' towers may fall the rest of his fortress can remain standing, for it is built on solid ground. Heidegger seemingly wishes to retreat to this Thomistic stronghold, but he refuses to pledge allegiance to the divine mind that reigns from its inner court, and so is denied entry. Vallicella believes the 'turn' in Heidegger is precisely his resigned acceptance of this failure and so the ambiguous dance between idealism and realism in his earlier work soon turns into a solipsistic solo.<sup>46</sup> While there are some intriguing whispers of a divine remnant of Being in the later Heidegger,<sup>47</sup> the overall thrust of the turn seems to abandon the ontological sense in the Being of beings.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Heidegger not only retreats to something similar to Thomas' position, but does so in a way that ultimately solves nothing, for he lacks Thomas' anchor in a divine mind. Vallicella tantalizingly nods in this direction—albeit in somewhat Hegelian dress—writing:

So if Dasein is possibly non-existent, and Being depends on Dasein, then Being is possibly non-existent, which entails that if Dasein were no longer, then nothing else would be. And this is an absurd form of idealism . . . I cannot see that this is a line a reasonable person would want to take. I have nothing against idealism, but if one is going to be an idealist, one must be an objective or absolute idealist and hold that it is Absolute Mind to which all is relative.<sup>49</sup>

While Heidegger sees the problem of truth and Being more clearly than anyone else, his answer to that problem seems to inadvertently

<sup>44</sup> Vallicella, *Reply to Zimmerman*, 247.

<sup>45</sup> Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q.1, Art. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Vallicella, *Reduction*, 157-158.

<sup>47</sup> See *Identity*, 42-76.

<sup>48</sup> Vallicella, *Reduction*, 168-169.

<sup>49</sup> Vallicella, *Zimmerman*, 250.

negate the very world that Dasein was supposed to be a *being-in*. Applying this critique of Heidegger to Heidegger's critique of Aquinas, the following narrative has settled into place: Heidegger critiques Thomas for a mistake he does not make, then makes the same mistake himself, only to retreat to a position close to what Thomas actually holds, but in a way that solves nothing, for Heidegger lacks Thomas' anchor in a divine mind. This dance has revealed the surprising similarities between Aquinas and Heidegger in their accounts of truth as relation, while teasing out their vital distinction regarding the question of a divine mind (though there are perhaps rare hints of a prodigal return in the later Heidegger). Enlisting the help of Vallicella, we have thus undermined Heidegger's critique while undergirding the value of Aquinas' position.

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