

On Beginning *Über den Anfang*

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ABSTRACT: As a taste of the challenge of Heidegger's posthumously published texts, this essay interprets the opening of *Über den Anfang* (GA 70, 1941) – not without some preliminaries that are necessary before we can begin. How can we approach this “treatise” on its own terms? What mood does it call for? How do we get a feel for its idiosyncratic vocabulary, especially if we are discussing it in English? What other texts can come to our aid? What are some questions that arise as we make our way into the dense language of its first section? This initial approach to the text touches on some fundamental themes in Heidegger's later thought, including inception (*Anfang*), event (*Ereignis*), and bearing out (*Austrag*).

KEYWORDS: appropriation; *Austrag*; beyng; event; inception

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The posthumously published texts in the Third Division of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, "Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen," are in a genre of their own. Readers were first exposed to them in 1989, with the appearance of *Beiträge zur Philosophie*. This text is "no longer an edifice of thinking but apparently randomly strewn blocks quarried from bedrock, with the chisels and crowbars remaining invisible. Are the blocks sealed configurations or disjointed pieces for holding up an invisible bridge?" (GA 65: 436/344, tm). This volume and its successors (GA 66, GA 69, GA 70, GA 71, and presumably the forthcoming GA 72) offer thoughts that are grouped thematically, but avoid any systematic form. Often Heidegger packs his sentences with clusters of opaque words, or keeps circling around one word in an attempt to uncover its revelatory potential. These manuscripts are, above all, experiments. Heidegger is thinking on paper and speaking to himself – and, sometimes, to an audience in the indefinite future. We are now that audience.

As we try to digest these texts, we are tempted to look for doctrines that we can extract and coordinate with texts Heidegger published during his lifetime. The widespread availability of unauthorized searchable PDFs makes the hunt for such statements easier, at the risk of disregarding the context or the particular work Heidegger is doing in a passage. Another temptation is to latch on to particular German words or their English counterparts, learn to mirror Heidegger's turns of phrase, and present an imitation as if it were an interpretation.

These texts challenge us to read them closely and in order, gradually getting a feel for Heidegger's vocabulary and concerns – all while avoiding the rush to identify theses, and trying to find our own words that do justice to his thoughts but do more than repeat them. This is a tall order. My goal here is simply to show how challenging the task is, by translating and interpreting the opening of *Über den Anfang* (GA 70, written 1941, published 2005). This initial inroad into this text will touch on some fundamental themes, including inception (*Anfang*), event (*Ereignis*), and bearing out (*Austrag*).

All translations from GA 70 here are my own, because I have challenged myself to interpret the text at the level of individual sentences and words. I also supply the German, so that readers who can read the

original may easily compare Heidegger’s text to my version and perhaps find alternative translations of their own. Peter Hanly’s translation (*On Inception*, Indiana University Press, 2023) is a fine and thoughtful achievement, and often offers viable solutions that I have adopted or slightly modified. Unless otherwise indicated, parenthesized references are to GA 70, followed by references to Hanly’s translation for those who wish to consult his version.

How do we start to read *Über den Anfang*? How do we begin at the beginning of Heidegger’s treatise on beginning – or his treatise *On Inception*, as the English title has it? Or should that be *On the Inception*? I will keep this question open for the moment.

What is the difference between inception and beginning, *Anfang* and *Beginn*? And whatever that difference may be, is this actually a treatise “on” inception, “about” it?

Heidegger warns us, even before the first section of the text proper, that inception cannot be surveyed from above:

DAS VORWORT

THE FOREWORD

Das versuchende Wort vom Anfang kann stets nur im Schein einer Darstellung bleiben und lautet oft wider seine Bestimmung wie ein Bericht.

Deshalb ist solchem Versuch als Titel gemäß nur die Überschrift:

Über den Anfang

Dieser Titel hat den Schein bei sich, als sei das Denken auch noch und schon »über« den Anfang hinaus; während doch dieses nie möglich ist und nie versucht sein kann.

The word that attempts to speak of the inception always has to remain in the semblance of a mere presentation and often, contrary to its purpose, sounds like a report.

This is why the only suitable title for such an attempt is the heading:

On Inception / On the Inception

This title makes it seem as if thinking were already “on beyond” or “over” the inception; but this is never possible, and can never be attempted. (1/xiii)

In this manuscript which was not to see publication for 64 years, Heidegger is already resigned to having it misread in the future as a factual discussion of some object. His title, *Über den Anfang*, or at least its first word, is a concession to this inevitable misreading of the character and intention of the text – much as *Beiträge zur Philosophie* is the most generic, empty title imaginable, while the subtitle (*Vom Ereignis*), enclosed in protective parentheses, is esoteric and mysterious. (Even so, the *vom* can be mistaken for an *über*; rather than a kind of thinking that comes from, and belongs to, its topic: GA 65: 3/5.)

But then, if we speak of “Heidegger’s treatise *On Inception*,” we misspeak. A treatise is a scientific or academic account of some object, a theory about something, which is precisely the approach he is warning us against. It is unfortunate, then, that the entire Third Division of the *Gesamtausgabe* has been titled “Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen,” “Unpublished Treatises.” This is a double misnomer, since as soon as every volume in the Division appears, it *has* been published – and more importantly, these are not *Abhandlungen* at all.

For example, in the very volume that we are trying to begin, Heidegger writes that he does not want to “compose treatises [*Abhandlungen*] on moods and their types, in general, as if mood were a present-at-hand object. The steadfastness in mood first becomes necessary and essential in carrying out [*im Austrag des*] the transition to the other inception” (134/110). Even *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s most systematic *magnum opus*, is no *Abhandlung*, “but rather a ‘domain’ that is to be opened up and into which the *essence* of the human is to be transformed” (143/118).

So what should we call these texts we are trying to read? Rather than “unpublished treatises,” I would prefer “private writings,” but that remains external and accidental. They are not essentially private, since it is clear that Heidegger anticipated their possible publication, and (unlike some passages in the *Black Notebooks*) they never describe his personal experiences. However, they may be essentially esoteric – not as a result of the author’s choice to conceal what he could have said plainly, but due to the intrinsic elusiveness of their theme, which loves to hide.

We are having trouble getting started: we have not yet reached section 1. But these preliminaries to beginning have already offered us a few clues. The text is not a treatise because it belongs to its topic, rather than standing over it, and because it demands a “transition” and “transformation.” To combine these thoughts: the text belongs to a transition; it is part of an attempt at transformation. It is not just *about* an inception, but *is* an inception – insofar as that is possible.

The default academic assumption about philosophers is that they have philosophies – theories about things that they express in their treatises. This assumption seems innocuous enough. But Heidegger says, as early as 1925, “I have no philosophy” (GA 20: 417/301–2). It would be better to say that he *does* philosophy – or still better, that philosophy has (and does) *him*. Or, in late-Heideggerian language, thinking must belong to, and happen together with, what is to be thought. This is *das Erdenken des Anfangs*, the creative or inventive thinking of inception (89/69).

Let’s turn a page in GA 70. We still have not begun the text proper; instead we encounter an epigraph in the form of a poem (3/xv). Or perhaps this is not a *Gedicht*, but *Gedachtes*, as the title of GA 81 has it: a thought, presented in verse-like lines with a touch of rhyme.

Einstige kommen
Vom Seyn übernommen
Sie wagen
Das Sagen
Der Wahrheit des Seyns:
Ereignis des Anfangs
Zum Austrag im Abschied

The last two lines here say “the truth of beyng.” But the new reader hits a wall in attempting to grasp this truth, and dictionaries are of little help. Here is Peter Hanly’s translation:

Sometime coming
 Undertaken from beyng
 They risk
 The saying
 Of the truth of beyng:
 Event of inception
 Toward issuance in the parting

An alternative might run:

Erstwhile ones come
 taken over by beyng
 they venture
 to say
 the truth of beyng:
 appropriation of the inception
 to the bearing-out in farewell

Frankly, neither translation helps much. How are we even to judge the appropriateness of a translation? A reasonable suggestion would be to look at all the contexts in which Heidegger uses these key words, and try to find English words that seem to resonate in similar ways in these contexts.¹ But then, we can't even begin to read the book until we have finished reading it.

Is it *translation* that's standing in the way? Why don't we just read this text in German? *Austrag* means *Austrag*; *Abschied* means *Abschied*. Obviously, that would not help. Even when we stay within one language, we must keep translating. As Heidegger says, "To speak and to say is in itself a translation In every dialogue and in every soliloquy an original translating holds sway" (GA 54: 17/12). And in every reading, he could have added. Without the continual transposition of words into fresh contexts, they die and become mere *Wörterdinge* – objectified corpses of language (GA 2: 214/SZ 161). Some studies of these esoteric texts show that the authors have mastered Heidegger's patterns of usage and can produce very faithful reproductions of his style. That is an impressive achievement – yet these are among the

least helpful, most opaque interpretations. There is almost no interpretation at all, no translation of the original into a context that provides perspective.

As Heidegger likes to point out, “nearness [is] warded off by the restless removal of distances” (GA 79: 3/3-4). True closeness requires separation – and this means risk. It is safe but sterile to repeat Heidegger’s words as if they were terms, or simply to create some counterparts in English and parallel his patterns. We need perspective – but that inevitably means that the perspective may be inappropriate. In this sense, “All interpretation is overinterpretation” (GA 78: 58).

A perspective is especially inappropriate, of course, if it tries to reduce Heidegger’s thought to everyday, common-sense concepts. But there may be other perspectives from which we can leap into his texts, not to transpose them into some alien dimension but in order to begin to read them. Then we have to engage in a hermeneutic circle: we must allow what we discover in the texts themselves to refine our perspectives.

This all means that there is no immediate beginning. So maybe we will be better able to start reading *Über den Anfang* if we do not start with it, but consider some potentially useful perspectives first.

For one, we can look at Heidegger’s less private writings: the texts he published during his lifetime and his lecture courses. But he seems to warn us against doing this. In the epigraph to his *Anmerkungen* IV, he quotes Leibniz: “Whoever knows me only from my publications does *not* know me” (GA 97: 325/276 tm). As for his courses, he claims in Zurich in 1951 that as a teacher, he has focused on interpreting other thinkers and poets because “I hesitate to say directly what I might be able to say.” Speaking about others “is a sort of protective measure. In my 30 or 35 years of teaching, I have spoken about my own things only once or twice” (GA 15: 426).

Certainly, we should not take a lecture course as the ultimate key to Heidegger’s esoteric texts; but fortunately, what he said in Zurich was simply not true. Consider the 1937–38 course *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected “Problems” of “Logic.”* The text overlaps significantly

with portions of the *Beiträge*, and the course discusses the first and the other inception (e.g. GA 45: 124–26/108–110). We also find comments on inception in several other public texts, including the 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics*, which, in 1953, was Heidegger’s first course to be published. Surely comments such as these are potentially helpful:

Whatever is great can only begin [*anfangen*] great. In fact, its inception is always what is greatest. . . . The great begins great, sustains itself only through the free recurrence of greatness, and if it is great, also comes to an end in greatness. (GA 40: 18/17)

The inception is what is most uncanny and mightiest. What follows is not a development, but flattening down as mere widening out; it is the inability to hold on to the inception. (GA 40: 164/173)

The ground of the collapse lies first in the greatness of the inception and in the essence of the inception itself. . . . The inception, as incipient, must, in a certain way, leave itself behind. . . . The inception can never preserve its initiating [*Anfangen*] as directly as it initiates; it can never preserve it in the only way that it can be preserved, namely, by re-trieving it more originally in its originality. (GA 40: 199–200/213, tm)

We meet the challenge of Greek philosophy as the inception of Western philosophy only if we also grasp this inception in its inceptive end [which] covered up the inceptive inception. (GA 40: 188/199–200)

To ask: how does it stand with Being? – this means nothing less than to *repeat and retrieve* the inception of our historical-spiritual Dasein, in order to transform it into the other inception. . . . But an inception is not repeated

when one shrinks back to it as something that once was, something that by now is familiar and is simply to be imitated, but rather when the inception is begun again *more originally*, and with all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity that a genuine inception brings with it. (GA 40: 42/43)

To Heidegger's students in 1935 these remarks must have sounded like unargued expressions of his idiosyncratic opinions on history. They must have seemed tangential to his main goal – explicating the Greek concept of being. But we will learn from *Über den Anfang* that “inception” is actually more important to Heidegger than “being.”

The comments on inception in the lecture courses are small glimpses of a great theme, but they offer some important perspectives. First, they make it clear that *we* are at stake in the question of inception – “we” Westerners, anyway. It is a fair hypothesis that none of Heidegger's sayings about inception should be read as descriptions of some process that we merely watch, a process that is incidental to who we ourselves are. The cover of the translation features a lovely flower in early bloom. But is that the kind of inception at stake? We can *observe* the flower, but we have to *retrieve* the inception as part of our own being.

The phenomenon of crisis – the disruption of selfhood and the question, “Who are we?” – can also help us make sense of Heidegger's middle period.² According to *Being and Time*, Dasein understands being as such because its own being is at issue for it (GA 2: 16/SZ 12). We project into possibilities in terms of which we make sense of ourselves, our world, and the people and things we encounter in the world. We are displaced from the actual into the possible, and return to the actual in the light of possibilities. In turn, these possibilities are drawn from our thrownness, which is not simply a given set of facts but a living “having-been” (GA 2: 431/SZ 325–26). We are thus permanently exposed to the question of who we are, or rather who we will have been: our origins are not a foundation or necessity, but a source of possible self-interpretations that can never be certified as final. Our inception is always capable of becoming an *other* inception.

In Heidegger's middle thought, Dasein itself becomes a possibility: humans may or may not enter a condition in which we fully engage in thrown projection and wrestle with the meaning of being. He wavers on whether and how we have entered Dasein. The second version of "On the Essence of Truth" (October 1930) claims that Dasein involves the "freedom of letting beings be," and that "with this liberation philosophy begins," albeit "before all explicit philosophy" (GA 80.1: 365). The third version (December 1930) claims that the "existence [of Dasein] began at *that* moment when the *first* philosopher *arose* with the *question* of what beings themselves are" (GA 80.1: 393; cf. GA 80.1: 417, GA 9: 189/145). In 1932, he asserts that not all humans "exist" in his sense (GA 35: 84/64). In 1936 he goes farther: *none* of us is yet Dasein. *Being and Time* was purely a description of a possibility into which humanity might leap (GA 82: 56–57). In the *Beiträge*, he hedges his bets: "somehow it is humanity and yet not humanity after all, and always in an extension and a derangement, who is in play in the grounding of the truth of being. Precisely what is thus question-worthy is what I call Da-sein" (GA 65: 313/248, tm).

This line of thought gives us some more clues to inception. However and whenever it happened – perhaps in the "first inception" among the early Greek thinkers – or even if it has never yet happened, the inception is the origination of Dasein, the outbreak and grounding of the "there." This brings inception into the vicinity of *Ereignis*, which is an abbreviation for *das Ereignis der Dagründung* (GA 65: 183/144, 247/195). The there is a place where being can become an issue. The inceptive event is a grounding of a question (Who are we? What does being mean?), a grounding of a problem, a grounding of a displacement. This means that it is an abyssal grounding, an *Ab-grund*, rather than an identity or a certainty.

If the inception is uncertain, and we are even uncertain about whether or when it happens, then thinking of the inception has to be an exploration of a "what if," a subjunctive. This approach might seem to distance the thinker from the thought, but for Heidegger, subjunctive thinking requires *greater* intimacy than indicative thinking

about what is actual and present. This inventive thinking requires us to leap into what we are thinking of. We do not create our topic through an act of will, but we respond to a possibility and enter into it, helping it happen.

Some brief glosses of a few key words can sum up my interpretive approach:

das Sein = *das Sein des Seienden* = the difference it makes that what is, *is*, rather than is not. (This sense of “being” is focused on beings. It is what it means for beings to be: beingness, *Seiendheit*, *ousia*.)

das Seyn = the happening of this difference, the event in which it is granted

Dasein = the condition we enter if that event takes place, becoming those to whom what *is* makes a difference in a “there,” and for whom this difference can become a problem

Ereignis = the grounding of the there, the (abyssal) founding of the place where we belong if we enter *Dasein*

Anfang = the inception of the there, its original and inexhaustible opening

One more point before we return to the text of GA 70: all experience, including reading, is attuned, according to Heidegger. We are always already in a mood. What is the mood appropriate to inception? This difficult question cannot be answered as if it were a matter of objective fact. But when I read this text, I feel something like a longing for a home that I have never known, a nostalgia for the coming dawn. The best German word may be *Sehnsucht*.

Getting us in tune with the appropriate mood is surely one function of Heidegger's epigraphs. Consider the three short epigraphs that are left before we finally begin *On Inception*:

Lernet danken	Learn to thank
Und ihr könnt denken	and you can think

*

*

Nicht ist umsonst	Nothing is in vain
Alles ist einzig	All is unique

*

*

Seyn – ein Ergebnis des Denkens?	Beyng – a product of thinking?
Denken ist stets Ereignung des Seyns	Thinking is always beyng's appropriating

In thinking, we must be grateful for the *Ereignung*, the event of beyng itself. It becomes our own when we become its own. This owning takes place in an atmosphere of supremely significant singularity. Heidegger denies that there is a general rule or law of inceptiveness; each inception is unique (13/6). Perhaps, then, we should translate the *den* in the title of the book: *On the Inception*. (The line “Nicht ist umsonst” is almost surely an error for “Nichts ist umsonst,” as in the very similar lines in GA 13: 30. I have translated it accordingly.)

Now we finally turn to Part I: *Die Anfängnis des Anfangs* (“The Incipience of the Inception”) and to section 1. I offer a step-by-step translation of this section along with brief commentary.

Polt

(translation and commentary begin on following page)

1. *Was sagt »Anfang«?*

Aus einer aufgegriffenen Wortbedeutung läßt sich nichts herausdröseln. Und wenn dies auch gelänge, dann wäre das »Wort« doch nicht das Wort, das hier Wesentliches sagen soll. Das Wort ist hier die Sage der Wahrheit des Seyns. Also muß das Denken des Seyns das Wort sagen und rechtfertigen oder gar fordern, sofern das Seyn selbst in dieses »Wesen«, das Anfang heißen soll, zurückwinkt und mit dem Wesen dessen Wesung und Wesenheit bestimmt.

1. *What Does "Inception" Say?*

Nothing can be squeezed out of some grabbed-up definition. Even if this were possible, that "word" still would not be the word that is supposed to say the essential here. Here, the word is the saying of the truth of beyng. So the thinking of beyng must say and justify the word, or even demand it, inasmuch as beyng itself beckons back into this "essence" that is to be called inception, and with the essence determines its essential happening and essentiality. (9/3)

COMMENTARY: We must begin not with a contrived definition of a word, but with being itself. It has to point the way to this x – this distinctive happening – that we call *Anfang*. Then we may find the appropriate way to speak of it. Heidegger does not define his terms before starting his substantive investigation; the thing itself is to determine the word.

Das Denken des Seyns als Anfang denkt vor in das Wesen des Seyns als Ereignis. Beide Wesungen, Er-eynis und Anfang, gehören zusammen. Durch dieses Denken wird das »Seyn« als Wesenswort nicht ausgelöscht; wohl aber verliert es seinen ausschließlichen Vorrang, der vor allem in der Gestalt der metaphysischen Wesensprägung (»Seiendheit«) jede Wesensfrage nach dem Seyn selbst verwehrt, indem jenes Gepräge den Schein bestärkte, in der Gestalt der Frage nach der Seiendheit des Seienden (worin alle »Ontologie« sich erschöpft) sei alles Bestimmen des Seins enthalten.

The thinking of beyng as inception thinks forward into the essence of beyng as event. Both essential happenings – appropriating event and inception – belong together. Through this thinking, “beyng” as an essential word is not erased; it does, however, lose the exclusive primacy that, especially in the form of the metaphysical characterization of essence (“beingness”), ruled out every essential question about beyng itself, inasmuch as that characterization strengthened the semblance that every determining of being is contained within the form of the question about the beingness of beings (within which all “ontology” plays out). (9/3)

COMMENTARY: *Anfang* is tied to *Ereignis*. (According to the *Beiträge*, “*Inception is beyng itself* as event”: GA 65: 58/47.) These words displace the word “being” (or “beyng”), not eliminating it but relegating it to secondary importance. We need new words because in metaphysics, being as beingness (*Seiendheit, ousia*) blocked the way to the key issue. Metaphysics is ontology: the theory of τὸ ὄν ᾗ ὄν, what *is* as such. This theory presupposes and overlooks the question of what allows the *is* to be available and meaningful to us in the first place. *Being and Time* tried to answer this question by pointing to Dasein’s temporality. Now, *Ereignis* and *Anfang* play that role. These words suggest that meaning arises in an inceptive event, an initiation.

Wenn der »Anfang« die Wahrheit des Seyns sagt, wie wissen wir dann vom Sein? Zunächst durch die Erinnerung daran, daß wir das Sein kennen und verstehen, ohne freilich von diesem Verstehen eine besondere »Kenntnis« zu nehmen. Das Verstehen von »Sein« ist wesentlich entfernt von einem Wissen des Seyns. Denn jenes Verstehen neigt stets dazu, das Sein aus dem Seienden zu erklären. Das Wissen des Seyns kann nur in einem Absprung aus dem Verstehen des Seins vorbereitet, jedoch auch dann nicht geradehin erlangt werden. Das Er-denken des Seyns in seinem Wesen bleibt für den Menschen das Schwerste und dies gerade aus Gründen, die sonst das Gegenteil vermuten lassen. Weil das Wesen des Menschen – allzu verborgen noch – im Bezug des Seyns zum Menschen hängt und schwingt, gelangt das Denken erst nur aus der Ferne in diesen einzigen Wesensbereich des Einzigen, das ist der Wahrheit des Seyns als Ereignis und Anfang.

If the “inception” says the truth of beyng, then how do we know of being? At first, through recollecting that we are familiar with being and understand it, though admittedly without taking any special “notice” of this understanding. The understanding of “being” is essentially distant from a knowing of beyng. For that understanding always tends to explain being on the basis of beings. The knowing of beyng can be prepared for only in a leap from the understanding of being and, even then, cannot be achieved directly. The creative thinking of beyng in its essence remains what is most difficult for the human being, and for the very reasons that otherwise suggest the opposite. The essence of the human – still all too secretly – is suspended and swings in the relation of beyng to the human. For this reason, it is only from afar that thinking reaches this singular essential realm of the singular: the truth of beyng as event and inception. (9/3)

COMMENTARY: Our familiarity with being is far from knowledge. We tend to understand being on the basis of what *is*, but the knowledge of beyng as event requires a new leap. Our very essence lies in our intimate connection to beyng as event, which would seem to make this leap easy; in fact, it makes it supremely difficult. Here Heidegger echoes the thought in *Being and Time* that we are ontically closest to ourselves, but ontologically farthest (GA 2: 22/SZ 16). Thinking about one's own essence is more difficult than thinking about what one is not. This is a thinking that actively *is* what it thinks – yet it is not self-absorption, since we cannot understand ourselves apart from the event of beyng to which we are tied, yet which we do not determine. This paragraph also echoes thoughts in *Introduction to Metaphysics* and elsewhere on the “originary leap,” the *Ur-sprung* in which we leap into our own essence by leaping away from our familiar, seemingly secure relations with beings (GA 40: 8/7).

Dem Wort nach meint Anfang zunächst soviel wie »Beginn« und dieser meint eine ausgezeichnete Stelle und Phase in der Abfolge eines Verlaufs.

Wenn aber hier das Wort »Anfang« das Wesen des Seyns und die Wesenheit des Wesens nennen soll, wenn zugleich das Seyn sich nicht herleiten läßt aus Seiendem, und wenn das Seyn gleichwohl nicht das Absolute und Unbedingte ist, was nur von Seiendem ausgesagt werden kann, dann muß »Anfang« solches nennen, was in sich west und aus dieser Wesung doch gerade verwehrt, das Wesende wie ein bedingnisfreies Ding an sich zu nehmen. Das Seyn und sein Wesen als Anfang (Er-eignis) west (fängt an, er-eignet) außerhalb der Bezirke des Absoluten und Relativen und ihrer Unterscheidung.

Das Hinausdenken in dieses Außerhalb ist das eigentliche Denken und der einzige »wirkliche« Sprung.

Inception, according to the familiar meaning of the word, is just a "beginning," and this means a special position and phase in the course of a process.

But if here the word "inception" is supposed to name the essence of beyng and the essentiality of the essence; if, furthermore, beyng cannot be derived from beings; and if beyng is nevertheless not the absolute and unconditioned, which can be asserted only of beings; then "inception" must name something that essentially happens in itself and yet, on the basis of this essential happening, forbids us to take what essentially happens as an unconditioned thing-in-itself. Beyng and its essence as inception (appropriating event) essentially happens (initiates, eventuates appropriatingly) outside the domains of the absolute and the relative and the distinction between them.

The thinking that thinks out into this outside is thinking proper and is the only "actual" leap. (9-10/3-4)

COMMENTARY: *Anfang* is normally a synonym for *Beginn*, the start of a process within beings. But if *Anfang* can serve as a word for *beyng*, it cannot be part of an ontic process. This means that it lies outside the distinction of relative and absolute: it is neither conditioned (*bedingt*) nor unconditioned, because it is not a thing (*Ding*). Heidegger suggests that the entire tradition of conceiving of events and processes in terms of *causes* will be irrelevant to his inquiry. A cause is normally conceived as a thing that is responsible for other things. The question of beginning then arises in the form of the first cause. If our question is not about things but about their *disclosure*, the unconcealment of what *is* as such, then this thinglike, ontic sense of beginning cannot be relevant.

Der »Anfang« ist daher nicht Anfang von einem Anderen; sondern dies Wort denkt hier das An-sich-nehmen und Auffangen dessen, was im an-sich-nehmen den Aus-langen er-eignet wird: die Lichtung der Offenheit, die Entbergung. Das An-sich-nehmen ist Entbergung und Verbergung zumal.

The “inception” is therefore not the inception of something else; rather, here this word thinks the taking-to-itself and taking up of what is appropriated in the reaching out that takes to itself: the clearing of the openness, the unconcealing. The taking-to-itself is at once unconcealing and concealing. (10/4)

COMMENTARY: This passage illustrates why “inception” is a good translation for *Anfang*. “Inception” stems from Latin *incipere*, from *in-* + *cipio*: to take, catch, or seize. We initiate an act by seizing an opportunity, by catching hold of something. But here, what is caught is not a thing, and we are not the catchers. Some *x* that we can call *Seyn* or *Ereignis* is seizing the clearing, making the clearing its own – hence, an event of appropriation.

The translation of *Ereignis* as “event” is controversial. There are quite a few postwar passages where Heidegger distinguishes *Ereignis* from a process, incident, or happening (e.g. GA 91: 458; GA 97: 382). But it is at least worth trying to think of it as an “event” that cuts deeper than any ordinary occurrence: not a process within what is, but the disclosing of what it means to be. In several texts of the thirties he speaks of “the happening of being,” which certainly sounds like a special *event* (e.g. GA 40: 218–19/233). Is it a continual happening, or an occasional one? We will soon see.

Problems:

Why is the disclosure of the clearing also a closing off?

What does it mean to speak of catching and owning here?

What is appropriating, other than gaining control over an entity?

Der Anfang ist die Er-einigung dieses Einen. Der Anfang ist anfänglich das An-sich-nehmen der Verbergung und d. h. des Ab-schieds. (vgl. der Abschied). Der An-fang ist Er-eignis. Das Anfangen ist das Sichfangen und Sichauf-fangen im Ereignis selbst, als welches die Lichtung west, die durch den Schleier des Nichts überschleiert ist.

Der An-fang ist das Sich-auf-fangen in der Entgänis zum Ab-grund.

The inception is the appropriating unifying of this One. The inception is, inceptively, the taking-to-itself of concealing, that is, of divisive parting (cf. the parting). The in-ception is appropriating event. The initiating is the self-seizing and taking-itself-up in the event itself, as which the clearing essentially happens, the clearing that is veiled by the veil of the nothing.

The in-ception is the taking-itself-up in the egress to the abyssal ground. (10/4)

Das Wesen der Entbergung, darin Verbergung ist als Bergung und Verhüllung, hat seine Auszeichnung darin, daß es das Seiende zu ihm selbst erstehen läßt und so das Seiende als solches auf nimmt; und als dieses Aufnehmende ist es Grund in dem Sinne, wie wir in »räumlicher« Hinsicht von Vorder-, Mittel- und Hinter-grund sprechen.

The essence of unconcealing, within which concealing is as sheltering and veiling, has its distinctive mark in letting beings arise to themselves. Thus, it takes up beings as such; because it takes them up, this essence is a ground, in the sense in which we speak of fore-, mid-, and back-ground in a "spatial" sense. (10/4)

COMMENTARY: Heidegger's language gets more condensed and cryptic here. It may be tempting to take "self-seizing and taking-to-itself" as something that *we* do to ourselves: we wrest ourselves into *Ereignis*. But that sounds too subjectivist and humanist for Heidegger's thinking at this point. We can't pull ourselves into inception by our own bootstraps. What, then, is doing the seizing? The inception is seizing itself.

COMMENTARY: It becomes clearer here that concealment is a question of focus. We focus on beings within the clearing while the origination of the clearing itself fades into the background; we take the clearing for granted. This is a sort of blockage and entanglement that is not our doing, but happens to us – although we may be capable of resisting it. The same could be said of "falling" in *Being and Time*.

In der Einfachheit eines einzigen Entwurfs wirft sich das Wesen des Seyns als Anfang dem Wissen also zu:

Der An-fang ist An-sich-nehmen des Abschieds in den Abgrund.

Dies An-sich-nehmen ist die anfängliche Aneignung und daher Er-eignung der Anfängnis.

Der An-fang ist anfänglich und d. h. abgründig das Er-eignis.

Im anfänglichen Er-eignis fängt sich der Anfang selbst über seinem Abgrund auf und läßt diesen so allein als den Ab-grund in seine Tiefe stürzen und zu seiner Höhe steigen.

Das anfängliche Er-eignis aber hat sein volles Wesen erst darin, daß es, als Er-eignung austragend, die anfängliche Lichtung lichtet und so die Offenheit er-eignet. Solche Er-eignung ist die Dazwischenkunft der Lichtung als Zeit-Raum. Diese übereignet das Inzwischen (als Inmitten und Unterdessen) an das bis zur jeweiligen erst aus ihr wesenden Frist Nichtslose, was dann als das Seiende ersteht.

In the simplicity of a unique projection, the essence of being as inception thus casts itself toward the knowledge that:

The in-ception is the taking-to-itself of the parting into the abyss.

This taking-to-itself is the inceptive owning and thus the appropriating event of incipience.

The in-ception is inceptively, and this means abyssally, the appropriating event.

In the inceptive appropriating event, the inception itself takes itself up over its abyss, thus allowing the abyss to plunge into its depth as the abyssal ground and rise up to its heights.

But the inceptive appropriating event has its complete essence only in that it, bearing out as appropriating eventuation, clears the inceptive clearing and thus eventuates the openness. Such an appropriating eventuation is the coming-amidst of the clearing as time-space. The clearing assigns the in-between (as in-the-midst and meanwhile) to the nothing-less, up to its particular timespan that first essentially happens from the clearing; the nothing-less then arises as what is. (10-11/4)

COMMENTARY: Heidegger now pours out a stream of words that echo each other. This performance can be imitated in English, imperfectly, but cannot be “translated” as if we were flat-footedly declaring “what Heidegger means.” Rather than making assertions as we normally understand them, he is establishing a vocabulary that responds to the matter at issue. The new words here include *Dazwischenkunft*, the coming-amidst-the-there or “inter-vening” (Hanly) involved in clearing as time-space. Betweenness is both spatial and temporal: in-the-midst and meanwhile. The clearing as time-space joins the between to “the nothing-less” in its allotted timespan; this “nothing-less” comes forth as what is.

The word *Dazwischenkunft* is ungainly, but it sums up the idea of an arrival of the there itself, the clearing; within the clearing there is clearance and opportunity, space and time, amidst and among which beings can emerge.⁵ These beings are *das Nichtslose*, “the nothing-less.” This could be taken as a striking way of saying that they are something, not nothing. They have been deprived, as it were, of nothingness by entering an interval in which they can come forth as *something*. But Heidegger will explain the expression in somewhat different terms a few paragraphs later.

Aber dieses aufnehmende und bewahrende Gründen west nur so, daß der Grund selbst nicht mehr Grund ist und wesenhaft sich vom Grundhaften und stets abkehrt und sonach Ab-grund bleibt. Die Verbergung, darin die Entbergung west, ist Entgängnis in den Ab-grund.

But this embracing and protective grounding essentially happens only in such a way that the ground itself is no longer ground, and essentially and always turns away from what is ground-like, thereby remaining abyssal ground. Concealment, in which unconcealment essentially happens, is the egress into the abyssal ground. (11/4)

Das An-fangen fängt den Anfang je anfänglicher an.

Diese »Steigerung« ist keine nach der Art des Seienden nach Graden und Stufen und Folgen. Sie ist anfanghaft und deshalb immer einzig; unstetig; ein Anfangen klafft gegen das andere.

Im Ereignis west das Sich auf fangen in die Klüftung des Abgrundes.

The in-cepting initiates the inception ever more inceptively.

This "increase" is not like that of beings, with degrees, steps, and sequences. It is incipient, and therefore always singular; intermittent; one initiating gapes open against another.

The taking-itself-up into the fissuring of the abyss essentially happens in the event. (11/4-5)

COMMENTARY: Heidegger expands on the idea of an abyssal ground. This idea echoes the earlier thought that the inception lies outside the entire logic of *things*. There is nothing, no thing, that can ground the inception; it takes place, and makes place, without a why.

COMMENTARY: These paragraphs introduce a new idea: an ever more inceptive seizing of the inception – not an ontic progression, and not continuous, but singular inceptions that sometimes run into each other. The image of gaping or yawning inceptions, ever more radical or abyssal, is a striking way to conceive of the relation between the “first” and the “other” inception. This passage strengthens the impression that *Ereignis* – which is so closely associated with *Anfang* – is, indeed, an extraordinary *event*. A few pages later, Heidegger will say that “Beyng is at times [*zuzeiten*], inasmuch as it itself, as appropriating of the in-between, lets the clearing arise as time-space” (15/8). Our displacement into the condition where being is at issue for us takes place rarely and unpredictably. These are also the moments, Heidegger is about to say, when beings enter being – that is, beings as such gain significance.

Das Seyn als Anfang und Ereignis hat einzig jenes Wesen, das erlaubt zu sagen: »das Seyn ist«. Alles Seiende erstet nur in das Sein; das Seiende ist nie; sondern »ist« stets nur das Seiende.

Das Seiende ist nicht, sofern es beim »ist« sein Bewenden und d. h. hier den Anfang haben soll. Das Seiende ist nur als das Seiende; und das sagt: das Seiende gelangt zu Zeiten in das Sein, aber ist es nicht selbst.

Das Seiende bleibt so entschieden gegen das Seyn durch dieses von diesem unterschieden, daß dem Seienden nicht einmal eigen bleibt das Nichts; denn nur das Seyn hat die Wesung des Nichts. Das Seiende ist das Nichtslose.

Im Seienden läßt sich der Anfang nie finden.

Beyng, as inception and event, uniquely has that essence that enables one to say: "beyng is." Beings only ever arise into being; a being never is, but "is" always only a being.

A being is not, insofar as the "is" is supposed to be the last word (that is, the inception). A being is only as a being, and this says: a being, at times, arrives at being but is not itself being.

Beings remain so decisively differentiated from and against beyng, by beyng itself, that not even the nothing remains to them as their own; for only beyng has the essential happening of the nothing. Beings are the nothing-less.

The inception can never be found in beings. (11-12/5)

COMMENTARY: Heidegger expands the thought of beings as “the nothing-less.” Exactly how one interprets these paragraphs depends on how one reads *Sein*, *Seyn*, and *Seiendes*. That which *is* is sometimes allowed to enter being, and by the same token, to enter nothing: in other words, entities come into a space of meaning – and threatened meaninglessness – where they can make a difference to us. Beings are nothing-less and being-less, and in this sense, what is “is” not. This sounds like a contradiction, and it does not fit Heidegger’s usual way of speaking, but here he is experimenting with reserving the word *ist* for *beyng* – perhaps inspired by Parmenides’ ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι (cf. GA 66: 89).⁴

<p>Der Anfang bestimmt sein Wesen nicht aus dem Fortgang, sondern der Fortgang ist eine Möglichkeit des Anfangs. Vom Fortgang aus erscheint der Anfang leicht im Schein des bloßen »Beginns«. Aber der Anfang west auch im Fortgang. Dieser ist nur anfänglich. Und darin beruht allein seine Geschichte.</p>	<p>The inception does not determine its essence in terms of progress; rather, progress is a possibility of the inception. In terms of progress, the inception easily appears in the semblance of the mere “beginning.” But the inception also essentially happens in progress. Progress is only inceptively. And in this alone consists its history. (12/5)</p>
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<p>Der Anfang ist je als Anfang. Die Einzigkeit zerklüftet sich in Anfänge und erreicht so allein das Einfache der Anfängnis. Die Rede von mehreren Anfängen ist richtig, weil sie bereits von außen kommt. Aber sie wird unwahr, wenn die Anfänge historisch aufgerechnet werden. Anfänglich denken, im Sinne der Anfängnis denken heißt eigentlich Denken, wenn Denken hier die Inständigkeit des Entwurfs des Seyns meint, der ein geworfener ist aus dem Wurf, der in aller Ereignung schwingt.</p>	<p>The inception, in each case, is as inception. The singularity fissures into inceptions and only thus arrives at the simplicity of incipience. The talk of several inceptions is correct, because it already comes from the outside. But it becomes untrue if the inceptions are reckoned historiographically. To think inceptively, in the sense of incipience, means properly thinking, if thinking here means the steadfastness of the projection of beyng, a projection thrown by the throw that sweeps through all eventuation. (12/5)</p>
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COMMENTARY: This paragraph presents a thought on *Fortgang*, “progress” or, literally, going forward. Whatever is genuinely historical in progress consists in whatever ongoing inceptiveness it has, even though the inception looks like a mere beginning when judged in terms of progress. We might apply this to modern technical advancement. Those who are caught up in it tend to look back at its origins (if at all) as a primitive stage; but technology has its real meaning as an outgrowth of the first inception of being as presence.

COMMENTARY: “Der Anfang ist je als Anfang.” Does *je* here mean “ever” (as Hanly translates it) or “in each case” (as I translate it here)? Either way, the paragraph challenges our usual ways of thinking about unity, plurality, and singularity. The talk of many inceptions is superficial, since they should not be calculated historiographically, but should be entered into as instances of *beyng*’s singular “throwing.” Although *beyng* “is at times,” this is no license to count up its manifestations as if they were just ordinary incidents.

Wir ahnen den Anfang in der Erinnerung zur Wahrheit des Seyns und nennen diesen so erinnerten Anfang den »ersten Anfang«. Wir ahnen die Anfängnis und denken ihr gemäß vor in die Anfänglichkeit des Anfangs und ahnen so den »anderen Anfang«. Der »andere« soll er heißen, um nicht in das Zählen zu geraten und auch den ersten nicht mit der Nummer 1 zu belegen. Der erste ist der »erstmalige«, von dem alle Wesung des Seyns ausgeht. Der erstmalige Anfang ist »einmal«; er ist zugleich »einst« und »einzig«. Und deshalb in sich bleibend die Austragsamkeit der Lichtung, in welcher Austragung der Anfang den Abschied an sich nimmt.

We intimate the inception in recollecting the truth of beyng and name this recollected inception the "first inception." We intimate incipience and, accordingly, think ahead into the inceptuality of the inception, in this way intimating the "other inception." It should be called "other" in order not to lapse into counting, and so as not to allocate the number one to the first. The first is the "initial" from which all essential happening of beyng emerges. The initial inception is "once"; it is simultaneously "one-time" and "unique." And therefore, keeping to itself, [it is] the clearing's trait of bearing out; in bearing out, the inception takes the parting to itself. (12/5)

COMMENTARY: This paragraph develops Heidegger's expressions "first inception" and "other inception." They do not mean inceptions #1 and #2, to be listed by historians. The first is a unique, singular initiating; the other is intimated through thinking of the inceptiveness of the first. In its very character as an inception, the first inception suggests possibilities that are undeveloped in it and call for the other inception.⁵ This paragraph ends with a difficult sentence featuring the words *Austrag* and *Abschied*, which Heidegger develops in the concluding paragraphs of section 1.

Das Auslangen in den Abschied trägt zu diesem vor und erträgt dieses wesenhafte An-sich-nehmen des Abschiedes. Der Anfang trägt sich aus in seine Anfängnis und bringt so alles Entscheidbare in die Einfachheit der einen Entscheidung (entweder das Seyn oder das Seiende). Der Anfang ist Austrag.

Was dem Anfang zugehört, ist deshalb ausgetragen und reif.

Nur Anfängliches ist Reifes.

The reach out into the parting draws forth to it, and endures this essential taking-to-itself of the parting. The inception bears itself out into its incipience and thus brings all that is decidable into the simplicity of the one decision (either beyng or beings). The inception is bearing out.

What belongs to inception is therefore borne out and ripe.

Only the inceptive is ripe. (12/5)

COMMENTARY: The inception bears itself out by enduring the parting. The inception implies a falling away from itself, a division. But this is also a ripening, a richness, because it opens the field of the decision between being and beings. In this way, it anticipates the other inception (95/75).

Two passages we already cited from *Introduction to Metaphysics* suggest an interpretation of *Abschied*, “parting”:

The inception, as incipient, must, in a certain way, leave itself behind. . . . The inception can never preserve its initiating as directly as it initiates; it can never preserve it in the only way that it can be preserved, namely, by re-tri-ving it more originally in its originality. (GA 40: 199–200/213, tm)

To ask: how does it stand with Being? – this means nothing less than to *repeat and retrieve* the inception of our historical-spiritual Dasein, in order to transform it into the other inception. (GA 40: 42/43)

If the inception “must . . . leave itself behind,” it will have to depart from itself. Parting is thus an essential part of inception. (According to §7, “Parting is not end and cessation, but it is the ultimate [*das Letzte*] in inception, through which it withdraws into itself”: 25/16.) This also means that *we* have left our own inception behind, and are charged with retrieving it. To retrieve it is not to reproduce it, but to find a way to bear its distant legacy and carry it forward into new possibilities.

As for *Austrag*, it is a frequent yet opaque word in Heidegger’s esoteric texts. In everyday German, the word is normally used in the phrase *zum Austrag kommen*, to reach a settlement or resolve a conflict. *Austrag* can refer to the completion of a responsibility, or to an emission or output. More frequent in German is the verb *austragen*, which can mean everything from *staging* or *holding* a competition, to *deciding* a conflict, to a pregnant woman’s *carrying* a child, to *working out* differences. *Austrag* surfaces only occasionally in texts published during Heidegger’s life, but “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of

Metaphysics” (1956–57) helpfully speaks of “thinking the [ontological] difference as *Austrag*” (GA 11: 74). Joan Stambaugh adds a more human interpretation based on her own direct “consultation” with Heidegger. She explains the word as “literally carrying out, holding out. . . . Heidegger pointed out the relationship of this word to man as ‘the stand-in [*Platzhalter*] of nothingness’ (*What is Metaphysics?*). He stated that its basic meaning is to bear, to hold out, but without any connotation of suffering or exertion. The *Austrag* is the carrying out of the ‘relation’ of Being and beings, endured with an intensity that never lets up.”⁶

Two primary senses of *Austrag* thus emerge. First, it is a German counterpart to the Greek *διαφορά* and Latin *differentia*: it is the “carrying out” that differentiates beingness from beings, or world from things. It establishes distance between the particular things that *are* and the context or meaning within which they appear. Secondly, *Austrag* is a task for us. We must carry or bear the differentiation; we must abide the opening of a meaningful space in which beingness differs from beings. The expression “bearing out” may suggest both of these senses.

This has been only a first, concise, and partial reading of the first few pages of a nearly 200-page book, which is only one of several such volumes. Whether or not we adopt Heidegger’s mode of thinking as our own, we have to admire his capacity to produce texts of such density and such intensity.

Where does the beginning of *On the Inception* leave us? Heidegger has invited himself, and us, to strive to recover an opening – the initial eruption of a space where things have sense, where what *is* comes forth as significant. This event of opening, represented in terms of chronology and historiography, took place in ancient Greece, when the first experience of being as presence came to words. But this representation of the inception makes Heidegger’s project seem like the revival of some bygone moment, some neo-classical fantasy. What he wants to experience is not that, but the incipient quality of the inception, which launches possibilities that have never been exhausted and await deeper

exploration. That would require stepping back from our absorption in using and observing what there is, in order to ask about the initial differentiation of what *is* and what it *means* to be – a meaning always shadowed by the possibility of meaninglessness, and always resisting our attempts to ground it on some entity or other.

These thoughts resonate with many others in Heidegger, early and late. But what matters is not a formula that can unlock all his texts; what matters is the attempt to think the inception, to enter it, to get it going – an attempt that can easily be paralyzed by doctrines and theories. A close reading of a short text – especially a text that Heidegger placed at the opening of a manuscript, inviting readers to plunge into his way of thinking – may initiate us into the inception more effectively than sweeping interpretations of his thought as a whole. What will come of Heidegger's attempts, and whether anything will come of them at all, is now up to us – and up to the inception.

NOTES

- 1 For example, *Einstige* is illuminated by GA 55, 288/217tm, where Heidegger works with the double meaning of the adverb *einst*: “what the beginning of thinking *einst* (once) began is *einst* (some-day) coming toward humanity, because what is *einstig* in this twofold sense is always ‘earlier’ than human musing and activity.” The adjective *einstig* usually means “former” or “erstwhile,” but in Heidegger’s sense it characterizes the once and future inception; the *Einstige* may be those who honor it.
- 2 For further justification of this interpretive approach see Richard Polt, *Time and Trauma: Thinking Through Heidegger in the Thirties* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 37–45.
- 3 In what sense do beings “emerge”? Are they “coming into being” in the usual sense, emerging from nothingness into actuality? Or are they emerging into the light *for us*, becoming accessible to Dasein? As Daniel Neumann puts it, “One of the biggest disagreements among interpreters has been ... whether we should take the unconcealment of being as the proffering of a real, mind-independent totality or as a cipher for our transcendental ability to understand and make sense of the appearance of being”: review of *On Inception* by Martin Heidegger, *Review of Metaphysics* 77:3 (March 2024), 549. For Neumann, “To think being as inception puts emphasis on the emergent nature of the opening of the clearing in which beings can come to presence for someone ... ‘inception’ names the very opening up of the possibility to consider the truth of being, that is, to think the event” (549–50). Neumann thus seems to endorse the second option he described. In brief, I agree, with the caveats that Heidegger wants to avoid the subjectivism of transcendental philosophy in the tradition of Kant and Husserl, and that “presence” is a particular understanding of being that, according to Heidegger, originated in the first inception: see Richard Polt, *Heidegger on Presence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

- 4 Is Heidegger expressing a contradiction when he says that being is, and beings are not? According to Filippo Casati, yes – but this is acceptable, since his propositions can be accommodated by a “dialetheist” system of formal logic that offers a circumscribed place for contradictions: *Heidegger and the Contradiction of Being: An Analytic Interpretation of the Late Heidegger* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 94. The flaw in this approach is that Heidegger’s language is not meant as a set of correct propositions, but as a series of gestures that point toward what he insists cannot be said directly.
- 5 As Thomas Kalary observes, “a proper grasping of the first beginning [i.e. *Anfang*] is dependent upon the other beginning”: “Historicality and Inceptualness: The Systematic Place of Der Begriff der Zeit and *Über den Anfang* in Heidegger’s Thinking,” *Heidegger Studies* 22 (2006), 45. Peter Hanly agrees, but reminds us that the two inceptions are interdependent: “the ‘firstness’ of the first is discovered in otherness. Reciprocally, though, the otherness of the ‘other inception’ is to be discovered within the first inception becomes what it is by becoming other”: “Heidegger’s Birth,” *Gatherings* 7 (2017), 47.
- 6 Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 17. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann offers a similar explanation in *Die Selbstinterpretation Martin Heideggers* (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hein, 1964), 34.

