

The phenomenology of Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger was born in Messkirch, Germany, on September 26, 1889. Messkirch was a quite, conservative, religious town in the heart of Germany; growing up here would have an influence on Heidegger's thought. In 1909 he went to the University of Freiburg to study theology, and in 1911 he switched subjects to philosophy. In 1915 the philosopher Edmund Husserl began teaching at Freiburg, and Heidegger became his student and assistant. In 1917 Heidegger married Elfride Petri, the couple had 2 children and never separated, although Heidegger had a well known affair with German-American political theorist and writer Hannah Arendt.¹ Heidegger spent much of his life in the black forest of Germany; he considered the seclusion provided to be the best environment to engage in philosophical thought.

In 1928 Heidegger succeeded Husserl in the prestigious chair at the University of Freiburg. He did not totally agree with his teacher's phenomenological methodology, he had his own ideas. Martin Heidegger began with a question. What is being? "Is" is a conjugation of the verb *be*, the verb of being, so to ask "what is 'is'?" is to ask the question of BEING. This would become Heidegger's most important preoccupation. He wanted to know how "being" could be understood. Since the term "being" is very abstract, Heidegger would need to utilize his language carefully in order to talk about.

¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/>

Heidegger distinguished between being, and beings. BEINGS are entities, which have characteristics that define or determine them. BEING specifies the *being* of these entities, being as such: the fact that they *are* and have an existence. Things like trees, toasters, and people are beings; that those entities exist is being. There are two types of statements that can be made about beings and being. An *ontic* statement is about something that has a physical, real, or factual existence. An *ontological* statement is concerned with the *being* of such entities.² Heidegger was much more interested in ontological statements than about ontic ones, he believed the science and much of western philosophy had a preoccupation with beings, individual entities.

In Aristotle's metaphysics beings come either as substances or as attributes. Substances are things like trees, tables, chairs; all other beings are attributes of these entities, such as the leaf that is green, pliable, shiny, etc. Heidegger's problem is that the statement *the leaf is*, the question of the leaf's being, involves neither substance nor attributes. Aristotle offered no satisfactory account of being, and Heidegger believed that substance and attributes failed to account for the different modes of reality, particularly for abstract things like numbers, emotions, or feelings, and especially *being*.

Edmund Husserl, Heidegger's mentor and creator of phenomenology, believed in a transcendental or universally true consciousness, and he performed

² <http://www.iep.utm.edu/heidegge/>

what was called the phenomenological reduction in order to find it. Heidegger had doubts about the transcendental ego, why should entities only show up to it? There seemed to be a large gap between theoretical modes of consciousness such as the type Husserl was referring to, and ordinary everyday practical modes of life.

Heidegger realized that the ordinary practical world is always there, and it has to come first before anyone can begin performing abstract calculations and theorizing about things like transcendental egos.

Heidegger thought that the lived experience of the practical and social worlds, with all the perceptions, evaluations, and responses that come with it were what being is all about. He thought Husserl's transcendental ego a fanciful fiction. Heidegger believed it was important to address the *totality* of the subject that *experiences* the world and not just some theoretical entity that thinks the world. The field of phenomenology was to receive a new foundation on which to rest its knowledge. Heidegger began using the German word *Dasein* (there-being) to describe what each of us are, the entity in its being known as human life, the "I am", the term is synonymous to "human being". This term Heidegger used to denote the human entity in all its various ways of being. *Dasein* could not be reduced in terms of biological bodies or zoological species, nor to simply mind or consciousness.³

In 1927 Heidegger published his opus *Being and Time*, which attempted to relate *Dasein* in time and offer a general analysis of being as well. He started with

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http://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/WWW/Sheehan/pdf/heidegger_texts_online/1915%20CONCEPT%20OF%20TIME%20and%20SCIENCE%20OF%20HISTORY.pdf

describing Dasein as being in the world, and being with others. Daseins being in the world involves its relations to other entities. Heidegger makes a distinction between what he terms the ready-to-hand and the present-to-hand. Ready-to-hand is something that does not require deep thought. Heidegger uses the example of hammering a nail, if you are an experienced carpenter you will not even think about it. Present-at-hand is when you are merely looking at or observing something, like a scientist or theorist would do.⁴ Only if the hammer breaks or we set it down to look at it would we use present-at-hand.

For Heidegger the practical ready-to-hand has is the primary way we experience the world. If practical understanding comes it will come before science or philosophy. Understanding is not intellectual or theoretical, it is Dasein's first and fundamental way of being IN the world. Heidegger believed Dasein's being in the world involved states, disposition, or moods; he claimed that philosophers and scientists had forgotten that practical understanding and states of mind are fundamental. Descartes made the distinction between subjects and objects, the "objects" are taken to be something outside the mind of the subject. Heidegger says this is wrong, Dasein is already IN the world, the world is not something external or "out there", but part of Dasein's being, as being IN. Heidegger also does away with Descartes's idea of objects existing in geometrically understood space, he says that a place is not just a point on a grid like coordinates. Dasein has the ability to make distance de-geometricized, for instance a caller from the other side of the planet may be closer than someone in the next room you are not paying attention to.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heideggerian_terminology

Dasein frequently has its being as being with others, and this can be a problem. Each Dasein is unique, but Heidegger realized how much we are influenced by the others, in fact he believed that more often than not we are not our own Dasein but the Dasein of others. Heidegger said “In the practical public environment, in utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. One’s own Dasein dissolves completely into the kind of being of ‘the Others’.”⁵ Heidegger believed that when in public the living Dasein dissolved itself into others, and he was not a big fan of the others.

He writes, “In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as *they* shrink back; we find ‘shocking’ what *they* find shocking. The ‘they’, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.”

Heidegger believed that popular culture and the “they” had very negative effects on ones own Dasein. He believed pop culture led to the letting go of ones own being and identifying with the faceless public, also that it led to averageness or mediocrity. He believed the everyday speaking of the public world was about unimportant issues, what we would call “chatter”, also in printed press newspapers and popular fiction there was writing that people wanted and expected to read, it

⁵ <http://specularimage.wordpress.com/2011/07/25/heidegger-and-augenblick-introduction-to-heidegger/>

was absorbing and distracting but not important. Dasein's everyday condition is what Heidegger termed *fallenness*, which is absorption in the world of the them, under "their" sway. Heidegger believed there was a strong temptation to surrender to the them, and Dasein's natural restlessness could be contented by the satisfactions of the everyday world. Of course all of this leads to the alienation of ones true ontological self.

"This averageness, which prescribes what can and may be ventured, watches over every exception which thrusts itself to the fore. Every priority is noiselessly

squashed. Overnight, everything primordial is flattened down as something long since known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes something to be manipulated. Every mystery loses its power. The care of averageness reveals, in turn, an essential tendency of Dasein, which we call the *leveling down* of all possibilities of being.”⁶ Heidegger thought we must take great care to protect Dasein from the powerful influence of the other. But is this everyday life avoidable?

A human being cannot be taken into account except as being an existent in the middle of a world amongst other things, that Dasein is ‘to be there’ and ‘there’ is the world. To be human is to be fixed, embedded and immersed in the physical, literal, tangible day to day world. Dasein is thrown into the world, and this *thrownness* is being in a world which is outside Dasein’s control. But still, Dasein still has room to maneuver, choices to make, responsibility for itself, this is *projection*. Dasein has the ability to look forward onto this or that POSSIBILITY for itself. What or who could it possibly be?

Projection, or looking toward the future, is a fundamental characteristic of Dasein’s being. We have the ability to shape who it is we want to become, what kind of life we want to live. Of course Dasein’s possibilities are limited by the *thrownness*, factors out of Dasein’s control, and also by limited skills or knowledge of Dasein. With the *fallenness* (the influence of *them*), the *thrownness* (things out of Dasein’s control), and *projection* (the huge range of possibilities that exists), it may seem like Dasein is a disconnected and lacking coherency. Heidegger says this is not the case,

⁶ <http://faculty.washington.edu/cbebler/teaching/coursenotes/Texts/selHeid.html>

he proposes the unifying concept of CARE. Care is what brings together the *fallenness, thrownness, and projection*. These things matter to Dasein, and the mattering unifies it. To Heidegger, care is the constellation in which Dasein has its being. There is another way that Dasein has being, and that is in time.⁷

According to Heidegger Dasein has its being in time, its *horizon* is time, in 3 ways. First, Dasein is thrown into the world, this *thrownness* is dealing with what it receives from the *past*. Second, projections, Dasein is living now its projections onto *future* possibilities. Third, *fallenness*, this is the present world Dasein is pre-occupied with, dealing with its concerns as they arise. Heidegger has a conception of time as a gathering, it is not linear, and it is not clock-measurable.

Dasein has its being in all three temporalities, the past, present, and future. In *The Principle of Reason*, Heidegger quotes a letter Mozart had written, concerning how musical ideas came to him during rides in a carriage or walking after a good meal. “soon one part after another comes to me, as though I were using crumbs in order to make a pastry according to the rules of counterpoint. Then it becomes even larger, and the thing truly becomes almost finished in my head...so that afterwards I look over it with one glance in my mind, and hear it in the imagination not at all serially, as it must subsequently come about, but as though all at once...”⁸Mozart and Heidegger think in terms of a gathering of time, not linear or clock-measurable time.

⁷ HEIDEGGER: A Graphic Guide ISBN: 978-184831-174-9

⁸ Martin Heidegger *THE PRINCIPLE OF REASON* ISBN: 0-253-21066-6

Of course, Dasein is mortal, we all die. Death is Dasein's ultimate horizon, the point where Dasein no longer *is*. Heidegger conceived of death as one of the potential modes of being, and since part of Dasein's being *is* its future, death is something it has to live with. It is a future possibility (a certain one actually) that is part of Dasein's being, 'death is a way to be'. Heidegger said that most true recognition of this is absorbed by the *fallenness*. We do not like to accept the fact that we will die and so we speak in euphemisms such as "passing on" or "crossing over". In this manner Dasein avoids accepting the totality of its life, its own being.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests two fundamental way Dasein can be, *authentically* and *inauthentically*, the terms were coined by the Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher, who used them to describe wholeness of human existence. An authentic being consists in the unification of Dasein's different constituent parts, including its being-towards-death. An authentic Dasein is its own and lost in the practical world or influenced by the Them. In inauthentic being Dasein takes up the tempting home offered by the Them, and finds security there. This closes off possibilities, and prevents Dasein's recognition of its unity.

But how can Dasein avoid inauthenticity? Being in the world with Them is unavoidable after all, how are we to not be influenced? Heidegger believed that it could be achieved through different state of mind, but particularly one, ANXIETY. Anxiety, or angst, is unlike fear in that there is no specific target, it is more of a general feeling. For Heidegger anxiety arises in Dasein itself, as an anxiety about its

own being. Dasein experiences itself “called” into a disturbing awareness of that being.⁹ In this state of anxiety, the world recedes, and the Others do with it. Not very much can be done about anxiety, except to run away and escape into the everyday world and into the reassuring influence of Them.

When Heidegger attempted to answer the question “what is being”, he knew it would not be easy and the answer would not be straightforward. To say that being is “X” or “Y” would be to turn being *into* a being, just another entity among others. Instead Heidegger began asking “what is the TRUTH of being”?, and he believed there were two essential ways at arriving at truth. The path to truth is the common one, through ADEQUATION of CORRESPONDENCE. Statements and judgments must conform to an object, they must be like it or correspond in some way. Truth is the correspondence of knowledge to matter, of intellect to thing. If a statement matches its object it can be considered true.

Heidegger’s second road to truth he termed *Aletheia*, which was the ancient Greek word for “truth”. According to Heidegger it also meant unconcealment, so when the Greeks conceived of truth, they thought about unveiling, uncovering, or revealing it. For Heidegger truth means bringing things out of concealment, not matching up statements with objects. This is the primary truth as well, because statements and their objects are beings, and they must first be revealed as such, so *Aletheia* comes before adequation. One of Dasein’s jobs is to disclose entities or reveal them, to encounter and reveal them as entities of this or that kind.

⁹ BEING AND TIME: Martin Heidegger ISBN: 978-0-06-157559-4

Heidegger distinguishes between what he calls the WORLD and the EARTH. The world is the realm of human activity and relations, it is the world of human history. This is may be interpreted as meaning society or culture, but Hiedegger was seeking a more fundamental term that came before those terms. The Earth on the other hand is the realm of plants and animals (non human animals), soil and stone. The Earth is the realm whose happening are not those of human history or relations.¹⁰ Heidegger believed the two realms of World and Earth were in constant conflict. The World seeks to reveal and to unconceal, while the Earth takes the side of concealment, sheltering or preserving. Pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus believed something similar, that the world and its cosmic components were constantly in flux, apparently stable reality occurs only in their strife.

Art was important to Heidegger because he believed it belonged to both the realms of Earth and World at the same time. Works of art are not natural things like stones or soil, which belong to the realm of Earth, but they are also not practical things that can be used, like a pair of shoes.

Much of *Being and Time* develops an existential interpretation of our modes of being including, famously, our being-toward-death. When art works disclose entities, they bring the meeting of earth and world to our attention. In 1930 Heidegger was in Amsterdam and he saw one of Vincent Van Gogh's paintings of old shoes, he invented an imaginary peasant woman to whom the shoes belonged. He saw the shoes as belonging to the Earth realm, syaing "This equipment is pervaded

¹⁰ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>

by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth..”¹¹ At the same time the painting belonged to the ordinary practical realm, the shoes find their place in the human World. By belonging to both the Earth and World, works of art enacts the intrinsic strife and brings it to attention.

While Heidegger appreciated visual artwork, he thought linguistic artwork was supreme. He believed language allowed for entities and their characteristics to be named, thus granting them being. Heidegger was a big fan of certain poetry, poetry that did not use ordinary language but language attuned and responsive to describing the different modes of being. Heidegger was looking for an essential language that he could use to speak of being, a "poetry" of sorts.

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus who said “The *Geschick* of being, a child that plays, shifting the pawns” “the play in which humans are engaged throughout their life, that play in which their essence is at stake.” Heraclitus said “time is a child playing draughts (checkers)..the kingly power is a child’s” ¹² Heidegger remarked “Why does it play, the great child of the world-play Heraclitus brought into view in the *aion*? It plays, because it plays. The “because” withers away in the play. The play

¹¹ [Heidegger on Van Gogh](#)

¹² <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/heraclitus/herpate.htm>

is without “why.” It plays since it plays. It simply remains a play: the most elevated and the most profound.¹³

¹³ <http://allthingsshiningbook.wordpress.com/2010/09/10/heidegger-on-the-geschick-of-being/>