Heidegger: Earth and Sky, Gods and Mortals

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> The mortals are human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death. Only the human being dies. The animal perishes. It has death neither ahead of it nor behind it. Death is the shrine of Nothing, that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself. As the shrine of Nothing, death harbours within itself the presencing of Being. As the shrine of Nothing, death is the shelter of Being. We now call mortals mortal — not because their earthly life comes to an end, but because they are capable of death as death. Mortals are who they are, as mortals, present in the shelter of Being. They are the presencing relation to Being as Being.[1]

It is we who are mortals – we, who are so named because we can die, because we do not merely perish. And in being mortal in this way we are also, so Heidegger – the author of the passage – claims, "the presencing relation to Being as Being". For us to be the "presencing relation to Being as being" is for us to be that by which things are enabled, not merely to exist, but rather to appear – to come to presence – as the things they are. Thus it seems that although we may view death as a form of oblivion, in fact, without our being capable of death as death, all things would remain in oblivion – they would merely exist, but without being brought to light, without being disclosed. Only in the face of death, then – only because we can die – are things brought to appearance.

It is the view of death – and also one might say of life – in Heidegger's work (and also in the work of some other philosophers) that will be the focus for my discussion here. But first I ought to say a little about Martin Heidegger himself.

Of twentieth century philosophers, Heidegger is undoubtedly one of the most famous and influential – indeed, amongst German thinkers, only his teacher, Edmund Husserl, matches him in importance. Not only does Heidegger have a philosophical importance paralleled by few other philosophers in the last hundred years, but Heidegger was also at his most productive during the period from the late nineteen-twenties through to the early nineteen-fifties – during a specially tumultuous time for Germany and for the world: the time of National Socialist control in Germany; the time of the Second World War; the time of the Holocaust. Moreover, like many other conservative Germans who retained strong memories of the First World War and its aftermath, Heidegger was, at least for a time, an active supporter of the National Socialists and of their leader, Adolf Hitler. Indeed, in 1933, Heidegger became Rector of the University of Freiburg under the newly empowered National Socialist government and gave a now famous speech – the Rectoral Address – in support of the Hitler regime. Heidegger's involvement with Nazism has been the focus for a huge amount of controversy. This controversy has extended far beyond any question of Heidegger's personal involvement (in fact, he remained as Rector

for only one year, resigning in 1934, and the real extent of his involvement remains a subject of much debate), but has become something of a marker for the larger question of the extent to which Nazism, and the evils that it brought with it, especially the Holocaust, is something for which European culture in general, and not just that of Germany, should take responsibility.

It is important to take note of this dark side to Heidegger's life – not because it necessarily taints Heidegger's philosophy,[2] but because of its relevance both to understanding the phenomenon of Nazism as such (and Germany's involvement in Nazism) and to understanding the development of Heidegger's thought in the period after 1934. The shift in Heidegger's thinking following his resignation of the Rectorship – a shift that is know as the 'Turning' ('die Kehre') – would seem not to be explicable without some reference to the issues surrounding his involvement with Nazism.

Heidegger was born in 1889 in Messkirch, Baden. His father was a sexton and Heidegger's early training was for the priesthood, but he soon became diverted to philosophy – partly, as it turns out, because of health problems. Although in later life he was strongly oppoosed to Catholic influence within the University, he retained a personal, if perhaps, unconventional religious commitment (when he died, in 1976, he was buried, at his own request, with Catholic rites). During 1918 he served with the German Army on the Marne, but after the War became Edmund Husserl's assistant, before taking up his own positions in Marburg and then Freiburg. After his brief period as Rector in 1933-34 he continued teaching in Freiberg until the end of the war when he was banned from teaching and stripped of his Professorship. In the years after the War, however, Heidegger's philosophy came to be enormously influential - partly because of the rise of Existentialist thinking (though Heidegger's inclusion amongst this group is problematic), and also because of the way in which his work was seen as fruitful in a number of areas from theology through to literary theory and even architecture. His work is fundamental to the work of many contemporary European thinkers including Foucault and Derrida.

Heidegger's early reputation was established as a teacher. Hannah Arendt wrote of Heidegger's reputation as a teacher of Aristotle "spreading like the rumour of a hidden king" and Hans-Georg Gadamer talks of the way in which, in Heidegger's classes, "lecturing as such became something altogether new: it was no longer a 'course of instruction' from a teacher who devoted his real energies to research and publication. With Heidegger book-length monologues lost their usual pre-eminence. What he gave was more. It was the full concentration of all the powers – powers of genius – in a revolutionary thinker who actually seemed himself to be startled by the intensity of the questions growing more and more radical in him."[3] In those days, however, being a brilliant teacher was not enough to get one very far in academic life (times haven't changed that much either) and Heidegger was twice turned down for promotion on the grounds of lack of publications. Finally, in 1927, he published Being and Time – a work presented to the public in an incomplete form in order to secure Heidegger the senior Chair at Marburg. Even unfinished, the book established Heidegger's reputation as a major figure in twentieth century philosophy and it is on the basis of this work that

Heidegger came to be seen as a central thinker in existentialist philosopher (even though Heidegger did not view himself as part of this movement). Being and Time was never in fact completed, since in the period after Being and Time (around 1935-36) Heidegger's thinking underwent the 'Turning' that I mentioned above – it was not, however, a turning away from the problems of the earlier work, so much as a return to them from a new direction.

Whether in Being and Time or in his later work, the central focus for Heidegger's thinking is always the question of being – the question "what we really mean by the word being". But, for Heidegger, this question does not concern some abstruse technical analysis of the verb 'to be' nor does it lead him to some complex metaphysical position. Instead, Heidegger understands the question of being as a question about how things can be disclosed to us as the things they are – that is, as not just some one kind of thing (as food, say, or as harmful, useful or whatever), but rather as encompassing a multiplicity of characteristics and possibilities. The disclosedness that interests Heidegger is the disclosedness of a thing as in all its complexity – as something that we can grasp as standing apart from us, as something about which we may have beliefs and with respect to which we may have certain attitudes, as something that is related to other things in a variety of different ways. One might say that the capacity to grasp things as they are disclosed in this way is the essential characteristic of the sort of 'being' that human beings exemplify – for human beings are just those sorts of beings who can grasp things as the things they are and thereby are able to act with respect to those things in sophisticated and complex ways that are not matched by any other being.

To provide an example of what Heidegger has in mind here, think of some everyday thing - say a pottery jug. Such a jug can have many uses and many different aspects to it, and it is characteristic of the way in which that jug appears to us, that we can grasp all those aspects and uses as belonging to that very jug. The jug can hold wine or water; it can fill a space on the shelf in the kitchen, it can be used to hold down the edge of the paper while reading, it can be admired for the colours in the glaze on its surface, it can even be used as an example in a public lecture. The jug is all of these things and all of these things are found in the jug. The jug's being disclosed is precisely its appearing to us as this unified multiplicity of features, values and uses.

How is it possible for things to be disclosed to us in this way? In Being and Time Heidegger's answer is that the structure that makes disclosedness possible is fundamentally tied to the way in which human being are always already given over to involvement with things – to 'caring' about things. In this respect, human beings are fundamentally constituted as beings given over to activity and it is in relation to such activity – through the projects in which human beings are engaged – that things appear, show up, are disclosed, in various ways. In being given over to involvement with things, human beings are thereby also given over to disclosure – to be human is to be essentially a 'discloser'.

Of course, since human beings are involved in lots of different projects you might think that this means that the appearing of things would be terribly fragmented and disjointed,

whereas the way things are actually disclosed to us is precisely in terms of a complex but unitary structure: things gather together a multiplicity of different features and are themselves interconnected with other things through being part of a single world. Similarly, while we are ourselves involved in a multiplicity of activities, we grasp ourselves as having a certain sort of unity also. Almost certainly, in fact, having a grasp of ourselves as someone, as a single person, is important for being able even to act, for only then can we organize and orient our activities in the right way – only then can we care about things such that we can act in relation to them.

So for things to be disclosed – and that means for us to be able to grasp things and to grasp ourselves and the world – we need to have a grasp of the unity of our activities and our projects. According to Heidegger in Being and Time such a grasp of unity is possible only in relation to a grasp of temporality. But a grasp of temporality here is not just a grasp of some unending linear span of time – instead it is essentially a grasp of temporality as it is given in relation to a history, that is, in the way in which our actions now stand on a past foundation and in relation to a future set of possibilities. And that history is essentially finite – it begins with our growing into the world through our coming into a social world and it ends with the ending of our lives in death.

Death is thus understood, within this Heideggerian framework, not as some incidental breakdown in our physical bodies, but rather as that towards which our lives are oriented. Yet this is not in the sense that death is something we aim for, but rather in the sense that death marks out that outer bound that gives shape and unity to our lives – death is our "ownmost possibility", as Heidegger puts it,[4] because it defines the possibilities of our lives.

In this respect, that we are creatures who die is a basic condition for our being creatures who can be said to live – for our being creatures who do not merely persist, but who are in the world in a way such that our being has a character and identity of its own. In other words, it is because we can die that we can be the human individuals that we are. The bounded character of our lives is not only what enables things to show up in the world as having value and significance; in showing things up in this way what is also shown up are the possibilities that are open to us in terms of what we ourselves are and what we can be. Moreover, because our lives are indeed bounded, so the choices we make in relation to things have a significance too. Freedom, within this Heideggerian framework, is precisely a capacity to choose and to enact who and what we are. And such freedom is dependent on the character of our lives as essentially finite.

Of course, this is part of what lies behind the need for a life to have a certain sort of unity and integration if it is properly to be a life. A life that is fragmented into a myriad of possibilities – that is spread across too great an array of projects and activities – has ceased to be a single life at all. An immortal life – a life that could encompass any and every possibility – would be a life that was thereby emptied of significance. Jorge Luis Borges' describes creatures like this in one of his short stories: creatures in whose infinitely extended lives everything is possible and consequently nothing is of any real importance, no choices matter, and there is no real life to be lived. As Borges puts it "No

one is anyone, one single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a tedious way of saying that I do not exist.”[5]

Death is a crucial notion in Being and Time, but its importance derives, not from a morbid preoccupation with mortality, but instead from the way in which death is itself implicated in life. It is thus not death as such that interests Heidegger, but the role of death in the possibility of life – death is not something that happens as a part of our lives, but understood as marking the finite character of life, it is an essential element in the structure by which a life is constituted. Being and Time is thus far from being a work that celebrates death. It is instead a work preoccupied with the necessarily finite character of life.

The basic ideas at issue here do not change much in Heidegger's later thinking (although Heidegger's emphasis on temporality does shift somewhat). What does change, however, is the focus for that thinking. In his writing after Being and Time, Heidegger comes to concentrate much more directly on the concrete thing, and the place within which it appears, as the central concept in the structure of disclosedness. And in looking to the thing as primary Heidegger no longer takes human beings to be at the center of his account – instead human beings are themselves disclosed only in relation to the world and to the things around which the world is ordered.

At this point, one crucial feature of Heidegger's account needs to be made explicit – a feature that makes it very different from most standard ‘metaphysical’ approaches. Heidegger is not giving an account of disclosedness by pointing to some underlying principle or ground in which disclosedness is founded: disclosedness is not explained by looking to some 'substance' (whether it be God, 'ideas', material existence or whatever) and nor is he appealing to some special faculty or power. Instead he is presenting us with an account of how we are ‘in-the-world’ that presents the structure of that ‘being-in-the-world’ as relational and as established in terms of the interconnection of certain elements, but nothing stands beneath those relations or underlies those elements as some more basic support or ground. Heidegger’s approach is holistic and non-reductionist. In this respect, Heidegger tends to occupy a position that stands outside of most of the major disputes regarding realism, idealism and materialism – and this is no less true of his later work than his earlier.

So let us turn to Heidegger’s later work and see how disclosedness is understood in that work. I said above that in the period after Being and Time, Heidegger increasingly comes to look at concrete things, rather than human beings themselves, as the primary focus for the inquiry into disclosedness. In some of his writings around the mid-'thirties, Heidegger looks to the work of art in this way – the artwork is seen to open up a space within which the work itself appears and thereby also to open up a space in which other things appear too. The artwork establishes a world. A little later, however, it is ordinary mundane things – a jug, a bridge – that take centre stage in the discussion of disclosedness and this is also where I intend to focus the remainder of my discussion here.

The things that Heidegger focuses on are things as they are made or built, or things that are in some way cultivated or cared for. This emphasis on caring and involvement continues from the account in Being and Time, but it is much more broadly understood. Moreover it is not that our involvement with things – our 'building' – makes things what they are; rather our building allows things to show themselves as what they are. Building is only a way of letting things be disclosed in some aspect or other and in being disclosed other aspects of the thing are also freed up. Imagine some of the everyday activities in which one is involved – the things with which one is involved are not simply shaped by what we do, but themselves affect what is done.

Inasmuch as things gather together different aspects of our world and activities so they light that world and the things in it up. Here Heidegger uses the metaphor of 'clearing' – things establish a cleared space within which they and other things appear much as a forest clearing allows things suddenly to be seen within it. Heidegger calls the structure of the clearing in which the thing is placed the 'Fourfold' ('Das Geviert'). And by this he means to direct attention to the main structural elements that make up the world and are gathered together in the thing; elements that are both illuminated by the thing as well as allowing the thing itself to show forth. Heidegger writes:

> The bridge swings over the current of the river "with ease and power". It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the flow… The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream…Resting upright in the river's bed, the bridge piers bear the swing of the arches that leave the waters to run their course… Even where the bridge covers the water, it holds its flow up to the sky by taking it for a moment under vaulted gateway and then setting it free once more… The bridge lets the river run its course and at the same time grants their way to mortals so that they may come and go from shore to shore. Bridges lead in many ways…always an ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to the other banks and in the end, as mortals, to the other side. Now in a high arch, now in a low, the bridge vaults over glen and stream – whether mortals keep in mind this vaulting of the bridge's course or forget that they, always on their way to the last bridge, are actually striving to surmount all that is common and unsound in them in order to bring themselves before the haleness of the divinities. The bridge gathers, as a passage that crosses, before the gods – whether we explicitly think of, and give thanks for, their presence … or whether that divine presence is obstructed or even pushed wholly aside. The bridge gathers to itself in its own way earth and sky, gods and mortals.[6]

The emphasis on gathering here is something that Heidegger takes from the sense of 'thing' in old German according to which it meant a gathering or assembly. The bridge is seen as a gathering inasmuch as it gathers together the elements that make up the world and reflects those gathered elements back into the world itself. Through our encounter with the bridge, in our dwelling and building in relation to it, our own way of being in the world is made apparent to us as is the bridge and all to which it is related. Indeed, Heidegger says of the bridge that it gathers, and in so doing, it opens up a place and a

space within which things are disclosed and brought to appearance. It is in just this space that human beings find themselves.

Since mortals now stand as part of the structure rather than being central to it as in Being and Time, it may seem as if mortality takes a secondary role. But in fact mortality is as important as ever. Indeed mortality is seen as tied to the opening up of a finite place or location that is established by the thing. Our mortality can be viewed as a matter of our boundedness not only in time but also in place. Mortality is not just about having a limited span in time but about being tied to concrete things to the things about us. To the buildings in which we live, the streets along which we walk, the stars that shine above us, the landscape in which we find ourselves, and the particular divinities – the ideals values, histories and fates – that shape our lives. It is because we belong to these things and these places that we have the lives that we do and because we are so bound that we are mortal beings. Outside of our mortality there is neither life to live nor anything to live for.

This means that Heidegger, much like de Beauvoir, rejects the idea of immortality. This is not because he thinks human bodies cannot be made to last forever. That would be irrelevant to the continuation of human life. The finitude of a human life is not a matter of the transience of the human body, but of the fragility of the 'ontological fabric' of a life itself. Since human beings are constituted, not by a body, or a brain, but by a set of involvements; as those involvements are sustained and given unity through their being related to particular things and places; and as that whole structure is an essentially fragile structure that cannot be sustained over too long a span of time; so human life is essential a mortal life. To know death is thus also to know life, and not just that, but to know the world and the things within it. Outside of mortal life there is only oblivion. This as Albert Camus writes "there is no superhuman happiness, no eternity outside the sweep of the days. These paltry and essential belongings, these relative truths, are the only ones to stir me."[7]

The way Heidegger presents many of these ideas – in a somewhat poetic, almost lyrical, fashion – may lead some readers to suppose that this is little more than mystical obscuratism. But one should not let Heidegger's style blind us to the fact that the position he articulates rests on some important and quite solid considerations. One of the basic assumptions that Heidegger is attacking – an assumption that bedevils much discussion of death and mortality – is the idea that life is a matter of the persistence of some thing and death occurs when that thing ceases to persist. But Heidegger's claim is that this is mistaken. Life is about the establishing of a fragile and bounded set of involvements, not about the mere spatio-temporal continuation of some 'thing'. It is, moreover, the boundedness of those involvements that makes for their identity as a life.

This emphasis on life as a set of involvements can be connected up in an interesting fashion with contemporary ideas of the mind or the self as essentially relational structures that are defined in terms, not merely of a internal 'mental' relations, but of relations to aspects of the world external to the mind. On one version of such a view, the mind is indeed constituted through the complex active involvement of an embodied organism in relation to its environment.[8]

Heidegger's insistence on the mortal life as the only place in relation to which disclosedness can occur is often viewed as expressive of a certain form of paganism. Certainly there is a strong theme in Greek culture that emphasizes this point. In Homer, for instance, the only place where anything really is, is in the world of mortal struggle. The Gods have their lives only inasmuch as these are played out in relation to mortals and the dead live only inasmuch as they live off the realm of mortals also. Thus the dead Achilleus tells his still living comrade Odysseus: "spare me your praise of death. Put me on earth again and I would rather be a serf in the house of some landless man than king of these that have done with life".[9] The world of bloodless shadows that is Hades is a world of oblivion and darkness. Only in the mortal world – the world that lies on the earth and under the sky – only in that world is there anything to live for, since only in that world is their anything of value or significance. Only in that mortal world do things stand out as what they are, only in that world do things shine.

Shining is exactly how Heidegger describes things as they are disclosed within the complex unity of the Fourfold. Things shine, and in their shining they illuminate themselves, the world and the humans who care for them. In shining, things illuminate the human communities in which they find their coming to presence.

The desire for immortality is now revealed as a desire, not for life, but for a certain kind of death. Only with the "narrow sweep of the days" is life at all possible. To desire a life that goes beyond that sweep is to desire a life that is as bloodless and as empty as the existence of the Immortals in Borges story or of the dead in Hades as portrayed by Homer. To say this, moreover, is not to make of death more than it is, but only to recognise the true character of life. Heidegger's insistence on the importance of mortality is not, therefore, about the galmorisation of death or dying; it is about nothing more nor less than the recognition the fragility of life and of what we hold dear.

"The mortals are human beings". And human beings are also mortals. They are human because they can die. To recognise our humanity then, is also to recognise our mortality. To deny our mortality, or to suppose we can escape it, implies a denial of what makes us what we are – it is, on Heidegger's account, an attempt to escape from the human.

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[1] 'The Thing', Poetry, Language, Thought, New York, Harper and Row, 1971, pp.178-9.

[2] Although there are clearly elements of his thinking in 1933-34 that enabled him to suppose that he could mould National Socialism to his own ends, many of Heidegger's ideas are nevertheless continuous with the ideas of his teacher, Husserl, as they are with his student, who was also for a time, his lover, Hannah Arendt – both of whom were Jewish; moreover, Heidegger's thought bears comparison with other philosophers from the 1930's and 1940's who were clearly opposed to Hitler (particularly in France) as well as with more recent thinkers working in an Anglo-American context whose political views are quite contrary to Heidegger's.

[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Marburger Errinerungen', in Alma Mater Philippina (Marburg am Lahn: Universitätsbund, 1973), p.23.

[4] See Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), H250-1.

[5] 'The Immortals', in Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths (New York: Modern Library, 1983), pp.114-115.

[6] 'Building, Dwelling Thinking', Poetry, Language, Thought pp.152-3.
[7] 'Summer in Algers', The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), p. 121.
[8] For more on this idea, see my Place and Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[9] Odyssey, Book XI.