

Heidegger, Place, and Contemporary Philosophy

J. E. Malpas

School of Philosophy, University of Tasmania

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger is one of the most important and influential thinkers of the twentieth century. Central to his thinking is a deep-seated and influential critique of a number of aspects of modern thought that together are often referred to under the heading of Cartesianism and that gives ontological and epistemological primacy to the distinction between subject and object. Rather than seeing human being as already apart from the world, Heidegger takes human being as always already in the world, as essentially placed. This has a number of implications for the understanding of mind, meaning, and existence, while also providing the basis for a critique of contemporary technological modernity.

1. Introduction

Martin Heidegger was born in Messkirch, in Southern Germany, in 1889, and died in Freiburg, he was assistant to the founder of modern phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, before taking a chair at Marburg in 1923, returning to Freiburg as Husserl's successor in 1928. In 1933, Heidegger became the Nazi-appointed rector at Freiburg, and although he lasted in the position for only one year, resigning in 1934, his entanglement with Nazism has been a continuing source of controversy. Heidegger's most famous work is his 1927 *magnum opus*, *Being and Time* [1], but he produced a large number of other books, essays and lectures that are now collected in the 102 volume *Gesamtausgabe* (*Complete Works*) [2] Together with Jean-Paul Sartre, Heidegger is a key thinker in the philosophical movement known as existentialism (or, in German, *Existenzphilosophie* – a term also used by Karl Jaspers) which emphasises individual human existence as the primary focus for philosophical inquiry. After Husserl, Heidegger is the most important figure in phenomenology, and although Heidegger departs from Husserl on many key points, his work remains phenomenological in its return “to the things themselves” – that is, to phenomena as such in their original appearance or presentation (phenomenology thus resists the usual assumptions of rationalism, empiricism, materialism, empirical idealism or scientism). Heidegger is also the pivotal figure in the transformation of hermeneutics from a methodology for the human sciences, as developed by Wilhelm Dilthey, into a basic mode of engagement that underpins all understanding and is foundational to human being – an idea taken further by Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer [3].

2. Heidegger's Critique of 'Cartesianism'

Much of twentieth century philosophy can be read as a struggle against the 'Cartesianism' that is often taken to characterise modern philosophy as it develops from the seventeenth century onward. While Cartesianism derives from the work of the seventeenth century French thinker René Descartes, the extent to which Descartes' own work exemplifies all of the features now associated with 'Cartesianism' is debateable – Cartesianism thus names a philosophical tendency rather than a well-defined position. There are a number of elements usually taken to be characteristic of Cartesian thinking. The first, and perhaps most basic, involves the assumption of a basic dichotomy between subject and object. This

dichotomy is in part metaphysical and in part epistemological. Understood metaphysically, the subject-object division refers to the separation of what is into the realm of the mental on the one hand and the material on the other. These are understood as completely separate from one another and as two different substances – it is this that is the core of Cartesian ‘dualism’. Heidegger is no dualist, but he takes issue, not with the specific claims regarding mind and matter as basic substances, but rather with the very idea that one can understand the world, that one can understand “being”, on the basis of any particular being or kind of being. So far as the division between subject and object is concerned, Heidegger takes this to exemplify a not only characteristic tendency of modern thought to understand the world on the basis of some single foundational element (whether mind or matter), but also to understand the world in terms of the contrast between the subject construed as that which knows and the object construed as that which is known or can be known. Modern metaphysics – Cartesian metaphysics – is thus erected on the basis of what is essentially an epistemological conception, namely, the idea that the fundamental relation is that between knowing subject and known object. Heidegger would argue that even materialism remains within this framework – the materialist construal of things rests on a particular ‘objectified’ understanding of things that derives from the epistemological paradigm even though it also reduces the ‘subject’ to the status of an ‘object’. The epistemological paradigm at work here also depends on treating the relationship between subject and object as both causal and representational. Thus objects, or the entities and events that make up the objective world, causally affect the mind, but the subject, or the thoughts and ideas that belong to the subject, also represents the world. The representational character of mental contents – of thoughts or ideas – becomes a key issue for much modern philosophy, since not only does it give rise to the question as to how such representation is possible (what is it for something to represent something else?), but it also raises the question as to the accuracy and reliability of such representation. At this point one encounters the classic Cartesian problem of external world scepticism: could it not be possible that we are entirely deceived in our beliefs about the world – imagine a powerful, but evil genius who can control our thoughts and experiences (this is the scenario that forms the basis for the movie *The Matrix* and many other movies and stories like it, but originally appears in Descartes *Meditations* [4]).

Part of what marks out Heidegger’s work from that of many other twentieth-century thinkers (although it also brings him into convergence with some other key philosophers of the last hundred years or so, including such as John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein) is his rejection of any strong dichotomy between subject and object, and the Cartesian picture within which it is associated. This is already clear in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. In this work Heidegger takes the question of the ‘meaning’ of being as his focus – his aim is to uncover the structure within which it is possible for anything to appear or to be present (sometimes, a little misleadingly, this is taken as the same as the question as to how anything can appear as *intelligible*). Heidegger addresses this question through an investigation of the being of human being, but he refuses to understand this in terms of consciousness, mind, or even ‘subjectivity’. Instead, the being of human being is referred to as *Dasein* – literally, ‘There-being’ or ‘Being-there’ – and *Dasein* is characterised as *being-in-the-world*. The being of human being is thus already treated by Heidegger as inseparable from the world in a way that is sometimes taken to be analogous to the way early ethological thinking took the animal to be inseparable from its environment (although there are also important differences here [5]). Moreover, in contrast to the Cartesian paradigm, Heidegger takes *Dasein* to be in the world, not simply through knowing, but rather through *activity*. *Dasein* is ‘in’ the world through its active involvement and so it engages with things, at least in part, as they are presented in terms of possible modes of action (so Heidegger talks of the world as given in terms of a structure of equipment – of things for use). The emphasis on activity here has led

many to connect Heidegger's thinking in *Being and Time* with the philosophical position known as 'pragmatism' – a view that also takes pragmatic involvement as determinative of human being.

If one takes the sort of approach that Heidegger adopts in *Being and Time*, then the sceptical possibility envisaged by Cartesianism, and by movies like *The Matrix*, turns out to be epistemologically irrelevant. For us to have thoughts or ideas, we must already be actively involved in the world, and while we might get some things about that world wrong, to suppose we could be wrong about just about everything is to suppose that we might not actually be involved in the world at all. To paraphrase Heidegger: who would raise a question about their being in the world but *Dasein*, and yet such a question can only be raised on the basis of *Dasein*'s being already in the world. One might say that part of what motivates Cartesian scepticism is the idea that our it is the limited character of our access to the world – our *finitude* – that puts knowledge in question. What Heidegger's position suggests, in contrast, is that far from cutting us off from the world, our finitude is what makes the world available to us. It is because we are already actively involved in the world, and so have a certain orientation towards things, have a care for them, that we can know anything at all. Knowledge is thus made possible by our finite locatedness rather than being undermined by it. Heidegger emphasises *Dasein* as determined on the basis of its active involvement in the world, rather than through some form of abstracted separation, and as a result, he rejects the idea of any purely 'internal' realm of subjectivity to be set against the external world of objects. There is thus no such thing as the mind understood as a realm of "internal" private states that is immediately known – the conception that is ordinarily associated with Cartesianism. But this does not mean that there is no 'mind' at all, no thoughts or ideas. Instead, we know the mind, and ourselves, only inasmuch as we know the world. One consequence is that, unlike the Cartesian position, the Heideggerian does not allow us to assume that our knowledge of ourselves, or our knowledge of our own thoughts, is automatically more secure than our knowledge of the world and of others. Knowledge, of whatever kind, is itself determined as already in the world, as already part of our active involvement with things – subjectivity, we might say, is thus always bound up with objectivity, and the division between the two cannot be taken as basic or irreducible. Moreover, if we look to inquire into being, then we cannot understand being by reference to anything subjective or objective – being is more fundamental than either of these.

3. Contemporary influences and developments

Heidegger's influence is felt in the European tradition in the work of almost every major thinker of the last half-century, even among those who would deny any direct connection to his work. In recent and contemporary English-speaking philosophy, Heidegger's influence is immediately present in a number of areas, and with respect to a number of philosophers. The work of Richard Rorty, and especially Rorty's 1989 volume, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*[6] draws on Heidegger, among a number of other thinkers (including Gadamer, Wittgenstein, and Dewey) as part of an attack on representationalism, and the epistemological paradigm, understood through the idea of the mind as 'mirroring' nature. Rorty's sympathies are strongly pragmatist, and he reads the history of philosophy as a history largely of consisting of pseudo-problems that derive from mistaken metaphors and linguistic confusions, many of which centre around the subject-object dichotomy, as well as the misplaced desire for a metaphysical and epistemological foundation. Hubert Dreyfus also draws on Heideggerian sources in his critique of what can be viewed as a close relative of representationalism, namely, computationalism – the view that human functioning, including human thought, is best understood on the model of a computational programme [7]. Dreyfus takes Heidegger's

emphasis on our being-in-the-world as a matter of active involvement rather than abstract theorization to show the unviability of many of the standard approaches to artificial intelligence. Dreyfus' critique has now largely been accepted within the cognitive science and AI community (although not all would endorse the full set of implications that Dreyfus draws), and can be seen as a significant influence on the rise of 'embodied cognition' and similar approaches (exemplified, for instance, in the work of such as Andy Clark [8]).

While it is an direct or indirect influence on some, Heidegger's thinking also converges with that of others. Wittgenstein and Dewey are two figures often cited in this regard, but the same also applies to a more contemporary figure, Donald Davidson, also a major influence on Rorty. Especially interesting about Davidson is his explicit rejection of what he has referred to as the 'myth of the subjective' [9], and his adoption of what is often referred to as an 'externalist' theory of content. According to Davidson, mental content is determined by the existing entities and events to which our thoughts and ideas are causally connected through our active engagement in the world. Davidson's work has been particularly important in my own research, not only in relation to the reading of Heidegger, but also in the development of the understanding of place and placidness as key philosophical concepts. Davidson emphasises the way in which the meaning of sentences and the contents of beliefs only arise in the context of a threefold relatedness that encompasses self, others, and world ("subjective, intersubjective, objective" [10]) – which he explicates using the idea, taken from topographical surveying, of 'triangulation'. While Heidegger also emphasises the complexity of engagement in which human being is embedded, he talks in his later writings of the structure at issue here, and the attempt to articulate that structure, in terms of a 'topology of being' [11]. What seems to come to the fore in Heidegger's work, and especially as it connects with Davidson's, is the idea that what Heidegger pursues under the 'question of being' is actually the question of place or *topos*, since it is only in and through place that the world appears as world or that things appear as things. The happening of being, including the happening of human being, is identical with the happening of place [12].

4. Contemporary topology

Outside of philosophy, Heidegger's thinking has also been influential, and especially in disciplines for which place is an important notion. Indeed, the topology that is prefigured in Heidegger's work can be seen as an increasingly important element in a range of areas of contemporary thought across the social sciences and humanities. Place is a particularly important concept in thinking about the environment, and not in thinking about the 'natural', but also the built. Although Heidegger uses 'being-in-the-world' to characterise what is essential about human being in his early work, in his later writing he uses the term 'dwelling' (*bauen*) to refer to the way human beings are in the world [13]. Dwelling refers to a mode of engaging with the world that is attentive to, but also determined by, the complex interaction of earth and sky, gods and mortals (what Heidegger calls 'the Fourfold') that he presents as integral to the unity of any and every place [14] [15]. The concept of dwelling, together with the idea of place with which it is implicated, has been drawn upon by architectural and environmental theorists. It is suggestive of a mode of being-in-place that is essentially relational, and that stresses the interdependence of places, as well as of those entities and elements that appear within a place. Such a way of thinking seems clearly to have ethical implications, and although Heidegger tended to avoid explicit use of the language of ethics or morality, there is no doubt that his analysis of the essential character of human being as it stands in relation to place and world stands in opposition to a range of contemporary approaches that look to emphasise the anonymous, the prudential and the procedural. Although critical of 'humanism' as it arises in modern thought, Heidegger's approach is nevertheless given over to a thoroughly 'humane' conception that aims to return us to a proper

sense of the human in its essential relation to the encompassing structure of place and world. Yet Heidegger's emphasis on the importance of place here should not be misconstrued as mere *nostalgia*, or as a form of backward conservatism (even though it is often read as such). Heidegger's claim is that we only come to be as human beings through our participation in the openness of the world as that arises in and through specific places and only thus do we encounter ourselves as well as others (hence the importance of the Fourfold as bringing together gods and mortals and earth and sky). Moreover, the place that is thereby opened up is always, for Heidegger, a space of questionability as well as of attentiveness. It is a space that addresses us, requiring that we take seriously the matter of our own being, our own existence, our own place.

5. Place and the problems of modernity

Central to Heidegger's later thinking, especially, is his critique of technological modernity – a critique that is itself directly tied to his critique of modern philosophy. Heidegger does not view philosophy as any form of abstract speculation having little or no effect on the world in which it appears, but rather takes the appearance of the world as itself the embodiment of an essential philosophical, or better, *metaphysical*, orientation. The emphasis on the representational, the epistemological, and the subjectivist that characterise modern philosophy thus also characterise the modern formation of the world – a formation that is also inseparable from technology. It is important to note, however, that Heidegger does not identify technology with any technological device or technique, nor with any assemblage of such devices or techniques. Instead, technology is a system of ordering of the world that is essentially determined by an orientation towards nothing other than the perpetuation of such ordering – an ordering that draws everything into a single network of connections, and in which everything is positioned within a single frame of the measurable, the calculable, and the manipulable. Technological modernity thus understands the world in terms only of what is amenable to quantification, calculation, and control, it reduces places to mere locations, and it transforms even human beings into something to be used (already, in 1950, Heidegger had taken note of the appearance of the term “human resource”). From a Heideggerian perspective, the two of the most potent examples of the dominance of the technological are the phenomena of “globalization” (in which the entire world is seen as a network of flows and transformations), and what might be termed “governmentalisation” (the rise of an all-encompassing bureaucratic mode of organisation based around audit, assurance, and accountability). Both of these phenomena can be understood as operating through the abstracting of the concrete forms of human existence from

Acknowledgments

The work that this paper summarises (and that has developed through a number of different projects) has been funded over a number of years by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation as well as the Australian Research Council. The support from both organisations is gratefully acknowledged.

References

- [1] Heidegger M 1962 [1927] *Being and Time* trans J. Macquarie and E Robinson (New York : Harper & Row 1962)
- [2] Heidegger M 1976-continuing *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt : Klosterman).
- [3] Gadamer H-G 2004 [1960] *Truth and Method* rev trans. J Weinsheimer and D G Marshall (New York : Continuum)

- [4] Descartes R 1996 [1685] *Meditations on First Philosophy* trans by J Cottingham (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press)
- [5] Malpas J 2008 'Heidegger, Geography, and Politics' *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2 185-213
- [6] Rorty R 1989 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford : Blackwell)
- [7] Dreyfus H L 1972 *What Computers Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (New York : Harper & Row).
- [8] Clark A. 1997 *Being There: Putting Brain Body and World Together Again* (Cambridge, MA : MIT Press)
- [9] Davidson D 2001 *Subjective Intersubjective Objective* (Oxford : Clarendon Press) pp 39-52.
- [10] Davidson D 2001 *Subjective Intersubjective Objective* (Oxford : Clarendon Press) pp 205-220
- [11] Heidegger M 2003 [1976] *Four Seminars* trans A Mitchell and F Raffoul (Bloomington : Indiana University Press) p 47
- [12] Malpas, J *Heidegger's Topology: Being Place World* (Cambridge MA : MIT Press)
- [13] Heidegger M 1971 *Poetry Language Thought* trans A Hoftstadter (New York : Harper & Row) pp 145-161
- [14] Heidegger M 1971 *Poetry Language Thought* trans A Hoftstadter (New York : Harper & Row) pp 149-151
- [15] Malpas, J *Heidegger's Topology: Being Place World* (Cambridge MA : MIT Press) pp 00-00

Malpas J *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press)

Malpas J 2012 *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* (Cambridge MA : MIT Press)