

7. MARTIN HEIDEGGER

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“The leaf is green”. We find the green of the leaf in the leaf itself. But where is the “is”? We say, nevertheless, the leaf “is” – it itself, the leaf. Consequently the “is” must belong to the visible leaf itself. But we do not “see” the “is” in the leaf... Where and what “is” the “is”? (Heidegger, 1993, p.24). Through the turns of his thinking from the 1910s and 1920s through to his death in the 1970s, the question concerning the ‘is’ – the question of being – was the central focus of Martin Heidegger’s philosophical thought. Yet although this much is simple and uncontroversial, exactly what is involved in this focus on the question of being is much harder to clarify. It is not just that the attempt to answer the question of being is perplexing, but that the question itself can often seem quite obscure. What are we asking about when we ask after being – after the ‘is’? How might one begin to answer that question? Does the question even make sense – might it perhaps rest on a confusion or a logical mistake?

Such difficulties concern the very possibility of engaging in the sort of questioning that Heidegger attempts; they force us, from the start, to attend to concepts and problems that lie at the very heart of his thinking. There are, in this respect, no easy paths into Heidegger’s philosophy – even to begin thinking about Heidegger requires coming to grips with the fundamental issues on which his thought is focussed. Heidegger characterized his own thought, moreover, as always ‘on the way’, rather than in terms of having ‘arrived,’ and himself as a ‘seeker’, rather than one who has found. As a result, not only is there no easy way of getting to know Heidegger, but coming to an understanding of his thought is much more a matter of familiarizing oneself with a certain way of thinking, and a particular space of questioning, than with learning a set of easily specifiable philosophical doctrines. It is partly for this reason, and also because of the undoubted difficulty in penetrating Heidegger’s often idiosyncratic vocabulary and style, that Heidegger has often been viewed, especially by many English-speaking philosophers, as an obscurantist and even a philosophical charlatan.

These difficulties notwithstanding, there can be no question that Heidegger is one of the most influential and significant philosophers of the twentieth century. In collaboration with Edmund Husserl, and in his own early work, Heidegger played a crucial role in the development of phenomenology; in his rethinking of Kierkegaardian themes, he provided a foundation for existentialist thought; in appropriating the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, and in a

manner taken further by his student Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger reoriented and transformed hermeneutics. The ‘deconstruction’ of Jacques Derrida has its origins in Heidegger’s own ‘de-structive’ readings of the tradition, while Michel Foucault declared that, for him, Heidegger was (together with Nietzsche) the decisive thinker in determining the course of his own work. In contemporary English-speaking philosophy, Heidegger’s influence is increasingly felt, not only in the pragmatic appropriation of Heidegger’s thought in the writings of Richard Rorty, but also in the development of Heideggerian ideas in the work of a number of philosophers from within the so-called ‘analytic’ tradition such as Hubert Dreyfus, Charles Taylor and Stanley Cavell. At the same time, Heidegger’s own political entanglement with Nazism during the 1930’s has been an important focus for a searching examination, not merely of the political and moral culpability of Heidegger himself, but of the political and moral culpability of philosophy and of European thought and culture in general.

HEIDEGGER’S LIFE

Martin Heidegger was born on September 26th, 1889, in the village of Messkirch in Baden, South Germany, and throughout his life he remained strongly attached to the Black Forest region from which he came – apart from a five year period in Marburg, he lived and worked in Messkirch, Freiburg and the cottage he built for himself at Todtnauberg. Heidegger’s family was lower middle-class and Catholic. His father was sexton at the village church of St Martin, in Messkirch, while his mother, Johanna, came from a farming family in the nearby village of Göppingen.

One of three children (the family comprised two brothers, Martin and Fritz, and a sister, Marie), Martin Heidegger was identified as a gifted child by the local priest and at the age of fourteen was sent to study at a gymnasium in Konstanz and later Freiburg. Heidegger began theological and philosophical studies in training for the priesthood in 1909, but two years later, discontinued his clerical training to focus instead on philosophy, while also undertaking work in science and mathematics. He completed his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Freiburg, in 1913, with a dissertation on ‘The Doctrine of Judgment in Psychologism’, and his habilitation dissertation, in 1915, on ‘Duns Scotus’ Doctrine of Categories and Meaning.’ In 1915, Heidegger also met Elfriede Petri, an economics student from a North German Protestant background and, in 1917, the two were married, with their first son, Jorg, being born in 1919, and their second, Hermann, in 1920.

After working, from 1915 onwards, in a military postal office in Freiburg – concerns about his health meant that he was classified as having only limited fitness – Heidegger was sent, in 1918, for military training, and posted to a meteorological station at Verdun. At the end of the First World War, he returned to Freiburg to work as Husserl's assistant and, in 1919, finally broke, both personally and philosophically, with the Catholic establishment. In 1923, Heidegger took up a junior chair at the University of Marburg, moving to the senior chair in 1927. The following year he succeeded Husserl at Freiburg, where, after a brief but notorious period as University Rector under the Nazis in 1933-34, he continued teaching, with some interruptions, until the end of the Second World War. In the course of the de-Nazification proceedings at the end of the War, Heidegger's Nazi sympathies during the 1930's led to him being stripped of his Professorship and banned from teaching until 1949. In 1951, however, the University of Freiburg granted him Emeritus status and he was able to lecture once more, continuing to give addresses and seminars into the late 1960s. He died on May 26th, 1976, and was buried in the village churchyard in Messkirch where his father had been sexton.

PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENT

Heidegger's early reputation rested, not on his writings – in fact, in the ten or so years following the appearance of his habilitation dissertation he published almost nothing of note – but on his ability as a teacher. A short, and, in his younger years, relatively slight man, speaking in a provincial accent, sometimes affecting a somewhat 'countrified' mode of dress (and on one occasion, turning up to lecture in a ski-outfit), and with a piercing gaze, Heidegger had an enormously powerful effect on those who attended his classes. Hannah Arendt famously talks of Heidegger's reputation spreading across Germany, from 1919 onwards, like the 'rumor of a hidden king' (Arendt, 1978, p.294), while another witness to Heidegger's early teaching compared Heidegger's impact in the lecture hall with that reported of Fichte and even of Luther (Petzet, 1993, p.10).

Heidegger's success as a teacher was not, however, just a matter of personal style or charisma, but was also due to the character of his teaching as such. Melding together the ideas and approaches of Diltheyan hermeneutics and Husserlian phenomenology, as well as a set of problems and concepts taken from Greek ontology and Medieval mysticism and metaphysics, Heidegger fashioned a way of doing philosophy that was characteristically his own; a way of doing philosophy that involved a transformation in philosophical inquiry, and that opened up the entire philosophical tradition in a new and revolutionary way, bringing his students into close contact with familiar texts as

if they read them for the very first time. As Arendt writes ‘The rumour about Heidegger put it quite simply: Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak, in the course of which it turns out that they propose things altogether different from the familiar worn-out trivialities they had been presumed to say. There exists a teacher; one can perhaps learn to think’ (Arendt, 1978, p.295).

In those days, as now, being a brilliant teacher was not enough to get one very far in academic life and Heidegger’s lack of publications in his early years was a recurrent source of difficulty. In 1927, however, he published Being and Time – a work presented in an incomplete form in order to secure for Heidegger the senior Chair at Marburg. Even unfinished, the book established Heidegger’s reputation as a major figure and it is on the basis of this work that Heidegger’s international fame was established. Being and Time was never completed, however, since in the period after 1927 (more specifically, in the years between 1930 and 1936) Heidegger’s thinking underwent a shift, turning or ‘reversal’ (die Kehre). This turning was not, however, a turning away from the problems of the earlier work, so much as a turn back to them from a new direction – and also, in some respects, a re-appropriation of ideas that were present, though perhaps undeveloped, in his thinking prior to Being and Time. Moreover, while ‘the Turning’ is usually taken to designate the specific shift in Heidegger’s thinking that was connected with his inability to bring Being and Time to completion, it seems that Heidegger’s thought actually underwent a number of crucial turns – it was indeed, always ‘on the way’, or, as Arendt put it, continually returning to its point of origin, continually beginning anew (Arendt, 1978, p.298). In this respect the idea of ‘the Turning’ should be understood as directing attention both to the specific shift in Heidegger’s thinking that occurred in the 1930s as well as to the dynamic character of Heidegger’s thought as a constant turning and returning to the question of being.

Certainly there seem to a number of important points, in addition to the decisive ‘Turning’ that occurred in the 1930s, at which Heidegger’s thinking underwent certain crucial shifts. One such turning-point is marked by the ‘flash of genius,’ as Heidegger himself called it, that occurred around 1922-23, when Heidegger says that he first grasped the real nature of the Greek understanding of being (XXXXX); another seems to have occurred in the course of his reading of the German romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin in the late 1930s. In a famous seminar in 1969, however, Heidegger provided a reading of his thinking as a whole according to which it is seen as oriented around three terms or ideas that characterize what he then saw as the three main stages in his thought (Heidegger, 1986, p.344). Each of these stages involves a particular appropriation of the question of being and while Heidegger

does not identify all these stages with specific works or periods, and they clearly overlap in various ways (indeed, they could be viewed as indicating elements in any approach to the question of being and Heidegger himself seems to intend as much), they do provide a useful way of charting the direction of his thinking from early to late.

The first stage, which Heidegger himself presents as specifically related to Being and Time, focuses on the question of being understood as a question concerning the meaning of being. It seems that it is this way of understanding the question of being that characterizes Heidegger's thinking up to the Turning of the 1930s. The second and third stages are more characteristic of Heidegger's thinking during and after the Turning. The second stage focuses on the question of being understood as a question concerning the truth of being and this focus on truth is especially important in Heidegger's writings during the 1930s and into the 1940s – notably in the 1936 essay, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' – but truth always remains an important focus for Heidegger's thinking in a way that meaning does not. The third stage takes up the question of being understood as a question concerning the place of being. It may be argued that the idea of place was already apparent in Heidegger's writing prior to the Turning, but it is really only in the period from the end of the Turning (around 1935-36) onwards that it comes to real prominence in Heidegger's thinking – most notably in his later writings on the nature of dwelling and the dangers of technology.

Meaning, truth and place thus mark out three stages in the developing path of Heidegger's thought and, as such, they can also be viewed as marking stages in the progressive unfolding of but a single question – that of being – in which all three terms are already contained. As the question of being unfolds itself through these stages, so there is no way of properly coming to grips with that question other than through the stages marked out by meaning, truth and place. At the same time, however, being able to explore those stages in any more detail presupposes that we have already arrived at some preliminary understanding of what is at issue in the question of being itself. So before we proceed any further, let us briefly examine some of the background to the Heideggerian question of being and the nature of that question.

THE QUESTION OF BEING

Heidegger's early career, especially his early career as a teacher, provides a useful starting point for any attempt to gain a preliminary understanding of the overall framework within which the question of being arises, for the character of Heidegger's teaching itself reflects his own understanding of the questions at issue in that teaching.

Indeed, the way in which Heidegger brought thinking ‘to life’, as Arendt put it, is an indication both of the way in which he was able to give new breath to old questions and well-known texts, and also of the way in which he saw philosophy not as something divorced from life or from the existence of the philosopher, but as intimately connected with it. Heidegger saw philosophical inquiry as always grounded in a concern with concrete human existence. Moreover, this grounding in human existence is not a relation to existence conceived in a sense remote from the philosopher, but involves the philosopher’s own existence as such. What seems to have marked Heidegger’s teaching was thus a radical, questioning approach to his subject matter coupled with an intense, personal involvement. Philosophy, in Heidegger’s classes, was no dry, ‘academic’ pursuit, but was a form of ‘passionate thinking’ – a vital and demanding mode of inquiry in which the very character of philosophical inquiry (indeed, of academic life as such, and even of the university), along with the mode of being of the inquirer, was itself at issue.

The personal involvement of the thinker in the task of thinking does not imply, however, that one can learn thinking by looking to the biography of the thinker – thinking is always and only addressed to the matter of thinking itself (Heidegger once introduced a lecture on Aristotle with a summary of the philosopher’s life that consisted simply in the comment ‘Aristotle was born, worked and died’ (Arendt, 1978, p.297). The point is rather that one cannot think without one’s own life and existence being at stake in such thinking. In this respect, truly radical (that is, philosophical) questioning always encompasses the questioner herself. Grasping this point – that the question of being is one in which our own being is always, already implicated – is perhaps the crucial step in coming to understand what might be at issue in the Heideggerian ‘question of being,’ and on the basis of which the successive thematisations of the question in terms of meaning, truth and place can begin to be understood. Yet given that our being is indeed implicated in the question of being in this way, exactly how is it implicated? This still requires clarification – moreover providing such clarification should also help in making the question of being itself a little less obscure.

The idea that the question of being concerns our own being as well as being as such is already present in Heidegger’s early work in medieval philosophy and theology. There the mystical experience of the individual’s relation to God is seen as the necessary background to an understanding of the formal ontological and epistemological inquiries of medieval thinkers – only through relating it to such a background can medieval philosophy be grasped in relation to the living, human context in which it arose. Moreover, the connection between medieval metaphysics and medieval mysticism is also indicative of the connection between the question of being

and the question of our own being. Against the background of medieval mysticism, the question of being is inevitably understood as a question that concerns our relationship to that which is transcendent of our own individual existence – in this respect the question of being does not concern our own being as it might be understood independently of the being of other things, but asks after our being understood as just that sort of being that always stands in a relation to other beings (though the exact nature of that relation has still to be clarified). Moreover, inasmuch as the question of being concerns just this sort of ‘relatedness’, so it concerns the being of things understood, not in terms of their factual existence as mere ‘stuff’, but in terms of their coming to appearance as the things they are –in terms of their presence or presencing (Heidegger uses the German word ‘wesen’ employed often as a verb rather than in its usual noun form) – which always occurs in relation to beings like us. Heidegger uses a number of terms, often drawn from Greek thought, to refer to this idea of ‘presence’ in its different aspects, including, for instance: ‘physis’, the Greek work for the natural ‘emergence’ or coming into being of things; and, perhaps most importantly, ‘aletheia’, often translated as ‘truth’ (though Heidegger later comes to abandon this translation) or else, more literally, as ‘disclosedness’ or ‘unconcealedness’. As Heidegger sees it, being just is the presence or disclosedness of things, and it is thus that the question of being always involves our being, since we are always involved in such presence or disclosedness. In this light, the question of being can be seen as a question that is essentially directed towards, to use a Heideggerian turn of phrase, ‘the disclosing of disclosedness’ or, as it might also be put, ‘the presencing of presence’ – towards, that is, the uncovering of the essential structure of presence or disclosedness. Inasmuch as the possibility of questioning itself rests on the possibility of presence or disclosedness (for only in so far as things are present or disclosed can they be opened to questioning), so one might also say that the question of being concerns the very being of questionability itself.

Yet such talk of ‘presence’ and ‘disclosedness’ may be thought simply to replace one obscurity with another. Certainly, it is all too easy, when writing or talking about Heidegger, to lapse into some form of ‘Heideggerese’ that is often impenetrable to any but a small band of initiates – a phenomenon that can readily be observed in the Heideggerian secondary literature. So what exactly is involved in the ‘presence’ and ‘disclosedness’ that is invoked here? One tempting possibility is to suppose that the disclosedness of things is just their being known. Yet this is definitely not what Heidegger intends. Knowledge, at least in the sense of knowledge that (rather than the practical knowledge associated with ‘know-how’ or skill), is always directed towards some fact, towards something that is the case – we know ‘that the bill has been paid’, ‘that Bucharest is the capital of Rumania’, ‘that

the atomic structure of water is one part oxygen to two parts hydrogen’, ‘that we will have eggplant for dinner’. Knowledge of things in this sense, however, is not the same as the ‘disclosedness’ of things, since such knowledge already presupposes that things have first been disclosed as knowable. Knowing that the bill has been paid presupposes that we have some familiarity with what bills are, with what it is for something to be paid, with the particular bill in question, and ultimately with a whole framework of practices and things – a whole ‘world’ – that can never be completely specified and that cannot be construed purely in terms of any finite set of discrete items of knowledge. It is the grasp of things in terms of the multiplicity of ‘aspects’ and relations that they comprise, or, as we might better put it, in terms of their complex locatedness within a world, that is at issue in Heidegger’s talk of presence or disclosedness. Such a ‘grasp’ of things cannot be construed simply in terms of our ‘knowing’ things, but must encompass the entire range of our worldly engagement with them – including our practical engagement – and so involves our engagement with things as things rather than merely as epistemic objects. Moreover, if we cannot understand the being of things simply on the basis of their being objects of knowledge, neither can we understand our own being on the basis merely of our being as knowers. Our own being must itself be understood in terms of our locatedness in the world, explicated in terms of the full range of our engagement with things and with others like ourselves. We might say, in fact, that when construed as a question concerning presence or disclosedness, the question of being, which is both a question about our being and a question about the being of things, is also a question about the being of the world, since for there to be a world is for things to presence or to be disclosed – for there to be a world is for there to be beings like ourselves.

Understood in this way, the question of being – understood as a question concerning the presence or disclosedness of things – directs our attention to what might be referred to as the ‘structural whole’ within which any particular thing can be present or disclosed and which includes both what is disclosed thereby as well as that to which it is disclosed. To ask about the being of a leaf, to use Heidegger’s example, is thus to ask after the presence or disclosedness of that leaf, but to ask after this is not to ask about any particular feature of the leaf (not its colour, not its shape, not its bio-chemical structure, not its causal properties), and neither is it answerable by reference to any such feature. Instead, it is to ask after that which ‘makes possible’ the being present of any such feature and which ‘makes possible’ the being present of the leaf as such. Presence or disclosedness is thus not to be identified with some particular feature or property of things – not their being of a certain character or type, not their being known, not their being visible, not their being able to be experienced, not their being capable of certain causal

interactions – for not only does this reduce things to what is merely an aspect or part of what they are, but it also misidentifies that which is the presencing or disclosedness of things (that is, their being) with what it is that thereby comes to be present or be disclosed. There is a tendency, nevertheless, to understand presence or disclosedness in just this way, and so to take the presence or disclosedness of the leaf as identical with, for instance, its being a thing of a certain colour and shape, with its being of a certain biochemical nature, with its being of a certain physical constitution. This tendency to understand the presence of things in terms merely of what is present really amounts to identifying being with just some particular being or beings (it identifies being with some particular aspect or feature of the being of things) and, in this respect, it amounts to a forgetting of the difference – the ontological difference as Heidegger calls it – between being and beings (between Sein and Seiendes). Such a forgetting of the difference between being and beings is also a forgetting of being as such (Seinsvergessenheit).

Although Heidegger's early work was largely undertaken within the framework of medieval philosophy and theology, by the early 1920s he had come to see traditional theology, and ontology more generally, as characterised by a forgetfulness of being and so as covering over the difference between being and beings, between presence and what is present. Indeed, according to Heidegger, the history of philosophy is a history of such forgetting. Moreover, inasmuch as philosophical thinking covers over the difference between presence and what is present, so too does it cover over the way in which the question of being is always a question in which our own being is at issue. Thus, in a lecture course in 1923, Heidegger told his students that traditional ontology ‘blocks access to that being which is decisive within philosophical problems: namely, Dasein, from out of which and for the sake of which, philosophy “is”’ (Heidegger, 1999, p.2.). Here Heidegger uses the term ‘Dasein’ (which literally means ‘there-being’ and is used in ordinary German to refer to the fact of something’s existence – ‘the book “is there” on the shelf’) to refer to the sort of existence that is characteristic of beings like ourselves. When philosophy covers over presence in favour of what is present, and so looks away from being to beings, so it also covers over the way in which what is present can only be present in relation to beings like ourselves. The forgetfulness of being is thus also a forgetfulness of our own being.

In this fashion, ontology obscures the way in which the question of being arises out of our own – namely, Dasein’s – situatedness in the world and so out of our relatedness to things within the world; it thereby also obscures the way in which the question of being encompasses both ourselves and the things around us. The result is a way of thinking that is removed from the concrete circumstances that originally give rise to it and that treats the being of

things in a way that severs things from the world and detaches them from any involvement with beings such as ourselves; a way of thinking that does indeed reduce being to beings and presence to what is present. Such a way of thinking also tends towards an understanding of ourselves that views our own being in a similarly ‘de-worlded’, detached fashion – we understand ourselves as mere instances of things present, as bio-chemical systems or complex material objects. According to Heidegger, such a detached, even alienated view of ourselves is characteristic of modernity. In this respect, the modern preoccupation with epistemology does not constitute a reawakening of the question of being as it concerns us, but is itself a symptom of the forgetfulness of that question. Not only does epistemology treat our being in terms only of our being as knowers, but it also presupposes our prior separation and detachment from the world and the things within it – a presupposition that underlies the sceptical concerns that motivate much epistemological thinking. Epistemology thus already depends on having turned away from presence to what is present – on having turned away from being to beings – and as it thereby involves a forgetting of the question of being, so epistemology involves a forgetting of the question of our own being. Inasmuch as reawakening the question of being means reawakening the sense in which that question is a question in which we are always implicated, so reawakening that question is indeed a matter of reawakening exactly the kind of ‘passionate’ thinking that Arendt notes as characteristic of Heidegger himself – a thinking that understands the way in which the question of being arises out of our own situatedness in the world, and so out of the prior disclosedness of things, and that encompasses both our being and that of the things around us.

THE MEANING OF BEING: DASEIN AND AUTHENTICITY

THE TRUTH OF BEING: ART AND POETRY

THE PLACE OF BEING: TECHNOLOGY AND DWELLING

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