



Topic: **Reflection on Martin Heidegger's Philosophy of Being and Existence**

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Abstract

The thought of Heidegger on Being and Existence provides methodological guidance into the possibility of understanding a philosophy which is thoroughly contemporary and yet which does not evade the traditional philosophical problems. He tried to "overcome" the old-style metaphysics, but he hasn't fallen into the error of positivism. He abolishes any supposed invisible world behind the world of phenomena. He replaces God with Being. He substitutes for stable substances and essences the fluid categories of existence. And in all these he finds a wholeness and meaning, a kind of intrinsic transcendence, that characterizes a mere coming-into-being and passing-out-of-being. His philosophy of existence attempts to overcome the subject-object split. It begins from concrete participation in the world, not from either observation of the phenomena "outside" of us or from introspective investigation of our own minds. Heidegger moves from his existentialist starting-point into ontological reflections that may seem far removed from it. He therefore departs from traditional understanding of human nature and states that existence takes precedence over essence, and man is understood in temporal and historical terms.

1. Being and Existence

1.1. Being

The meaning of 'being' was not clearly resolved by earlier philosophers because of the dissenting views on the relationship between mind and matter, or between subject and object. Rene Descartes for instance holds that the mind and the body are distinct and separable.¹ However, with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, this view was challenged. He rather states that man is both subject and object of understanding; he is inseparable.² He coined the

¹ Hart, W.D. *Dualism*, (in A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind, ed. Samuel Guttenplan, Oxford: Blackwall, 1996), 266.

² Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 31.

concept of *Dasein* to reflect the notion of “living being” through their activity of “being there” and being-in-the-world. Although the word *Dasein* is a traditional German word used for “existence” in general, Heidegger restricts it to human existence, and for the kind of Being that belongs to existence. The central activity of *Dasein* is enquiry into being and in particular their ability to question and focus on personal existence. For this Heidegger says “understanding of Being is a definitive characteristic of *Dasein*’s Being”³

Heidegger was careful never to formulate the question of the meaning of Being in the form “what is Being” because to ask this question imply that Being is a “what”, a thing or substance or entity. This was an attempt to break away from the traditional domination of Western thought about the category of substance (thinghood) and this thought makes it so excitingly new and important for the modern world. Thus, he thinks that the meaning of Being can be reached through the process of clarifying and conceptualizing that vague indefinite understanding that we already have. The particular being that has to be interrogated with the respect to his own “is-hood”, is the questioner himself because man is responsible for what he is as Heidegger often says; ‘his Being is an issue for him’⁴. He regards this task of exploring man’s Being as “fundamental ontology” rather than as a self-contained study of man with the goal of bringing out his thought into the question of the meaning of Being.⁵

Being, for Heidegger is the basic constitutive state of *Dasein* or “Being-in-the-world” which is considered in concrete, embodied existence, and not as a bare thinking subject. Being-in-the-world is a unity that determines the shape of the existential analytic. It has three factors that constitute it and these are; 1. “Being-in”; what kind of relation is this? 2. The notion of

³Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32.

⁴John, Macquarrie, *Martin Heidegger*, (John Knox Press, Atalanta, Georgia, USA, 1968), 7.

⁵John, *Martin Heidegger*, 8.

the world/being with; environment or context in which existence is set and 3. The question of self, what does it mean to be a self?⁶

Being-in-the-world for Heidegger is a much richer relation than merely the spatial one of being located in the world. We are therefore not simply located there, but are bound to it by all ties of work, interest, affection and so on. The “Being-in” that characterizes our everyday relation to the world is what Heidegger calls “concern”. It is practical because it entails the way we relate ourselves to our environment in producing, constructing, enjoying and so forth.⁷ This implies that the question of ‘self’ cannot ‘stand out’ as the unique and distinctive character of “who” of *Dasein* that constitute the Being-in-the-world. Here, Heidegger thinks that most part of selfhood gets suppressed in everyday Being-in-the-world and the *Dasein* gets absorbed in that world of its concern and becomes part of the system, to be caught up in the processes which it has originated.⁸ The Being-in-the-world is connected to ‘Being-with’, one other basic existential of the *Dasein*. Heidegger thinks that just as there is no existence apart from a world, so there is no existence apart from other existents which are seen as a *co-Dasein*. We are related to the other existent not in terms of the “concern” by which we relate to things, but in terms of a personal concern or “solicitude” that characterizes relations between selves.⁹

In this peculiar way, man relates to the world, his “Being-in” or “dwelling”, man “exists” and is distinct from entities that are simply within-the-world as parts of it. Man, or more strictly, the *Dasein* is Being-in-the-world, but his Being-in is such that it is also a standing-out (existence); his awareness and responsibility, he has openness to the world and a certain transcendence of the world. Granting that we are already in the world and that our first-hand understanding of it comes by way of participation, striving, practical concern rather than

⁶John, *Martin Heidegger*, 15.

⁷John, *Martin Heidegger*, 15.

⁸John, *Martin Heidegger*, 17.

⁹John, *Martin Heidegger*, 18.

theoretical observation, we still have to inquire into this openness which is indeed what distinguishes *Dasein* from all other entities, its disclosedness.”¹⁰ That is, its ‘transparency’.

For Heidegger, Being-in-the-world is disclosed to itself into two basic and primordial ways; that is, through the effects and through understanding. The affective state is that which at given time, colour our experience. They light up the way we find ourselves. They are elusive and fugitive feelings that come and go, and certainly of no philosophical interest. However, he says these moods may light up our Being-in-the-world because they reveal how we are attuned to our environment. It is an appreciation from the inside because it belongs to the totality of our “being there”, and it lights up the “there” for us.¹¹ The disclosure that comes in affective states is what Heidegger calls “facticity”. That is, the *Dasein* is not just another fact in the world but the *Dasein* always finds itself in a situation where it has ‘to be’. It never begins with wide open horizons, for at every moment there is a great many “givens”. Some of these may arise from the *Dasein*’s own past choices, but others it had not chosen at all, but are determined by society or history or heredity or other agencies.¹² In connection to “facticity”, Heidegger uses the word “thrownness”, the actual situation in which the *Dasein* finds himself; but where he comes from and where he is going remain hidden. Indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the “there”.¹³ These show how moods or affective states are important in Heidegger’s existential analytic.

Another fundamental way in which Being-in-the-world is disclosed is understanding. All understanding has its own moods, and likewise every mood has its own understanding even if this is kept suppressed. If moods primarily help in the disclosure of facticity of the *Dasein*, understanding helps in the disclosure of its possibilities. “Possibility” here does not mean a

¹⁰Martin, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (trans.), (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 171.

¹¹John, *Martin Heidegger*, 20.

¹²John, *Martin Heidegger*, 21.

¹³Martin, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (trans.), (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 174.

bare contingency, something that might happen to the *Dasein*, but rather a way of Being that is open to the *Dasein* in which it can move forward. Since then, understanding discloses the possibilities of *Dasein*, such understanding is founded on practical concern, a kind of understanding which has to do with “being able to manage something”, “being a match for it”, or “being competent to do something.”¹⁴

The characteristic structure of understanding is projection; *Dasein* is always projecting. Heidegger uses this expression, projection in various ways: *Dasein* projects itself into its possibilities, that is, it projects its possibilities upon things that it discovers in their serviceability and usability. These things are incorporated into the significant world, and are understood. The notion of projection helps to understand that the *Dasein* is never complete in its Being but is always on its way, so that we can never, pin it down and grasp its essence. *Dasein* is ahead of itself, for it has already projected itself into some possibilities of its Being.¹⁵

Understanding also implies interpretation. This follows from the fact that the *Dasein* understandingly incorporates things into his world. Whatever he encounters gets related to the totality of understanding that he already has. Whenever we assign the thing a place in our world and relate it to the other things there, we also assign it a meaning. Meanings are not just arbitrarily stuck on to things; they consist in relating things to the world of understanding which we already bring with us.¹⁶ This is an act of interpretation. For understanding to happen two structures or moments of interpretation are necessary;

First, fore-structure: before we can interpret, we must bring along some kind of frame of reference, some way of seeing and conceiving phenomena. “An interpretation is

¹⁴ Martin, *Being and Time*, 183.

¹⁵ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 23.

¹⁶ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 23.

never a presupposition apprehending of something presented to us.”¹⁷ In other words, interpretation always takes place on the basis of a prior understanding.

Second, the as-structure: we interpret something as something, and indeed only then can we say to have appropriated an understanding of it. For instance, we interpret a moving light in the sky as an aircraft or as a meteorite or in some other way.¹⁸

From these structures in interpretation, Heidegger distinguishes two levels of interpretation: The informal interpretation, which is almost unconscious kind of interpretation that goes on all the time. For instance, we rarely or never hear a pure noise; it is heard as already interpreted. This informal kind of interpretation is present not only in the simplest acts of understanding but also in our everyday perception of the world. The second level of interpretation is formal interpretation, which takes place when we take up the explicit task of interpreting an historical event or man himself. This kind of interpretation happens when men try to work out definite principles which Heidegger calls ‘hermeneutical circle’¹⁹.

Heidegger stresses the role of prior understanding that we bring in the interpretation, and to clarify our presuppositions. He says, “what is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential fore-structure of *Dasein* itself because in the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure that we genuinely take hold of this possibility, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conceptions to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions. Rather, we must make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves”²⁰.

¹⁷ Martin, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (trans), (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 191

¹⁸ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 23.

¹⁹ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 24.

²⁰ Martin, *Being and Time*, 195.

The discussion of interpretation leads on naturally to the question of language, that is, to the question of discourse. Discourse here means the actual living communication among existents, which gets expressed in language, that is to say, in words and sentences. Heidegger regards this phenomenon as concrete existential way because he subordinates interpretation of language to the interpretation of existence. Language gives expression to discourse, and discourse, in turn, is said to be equally primordial with states of mind and understanding. It is discourse which articulates the intelligibility of the world. Discourse expresses Being-in-the-world.²¹ The function of language is to light up that which is talked about, and which is both brought to expression and communicated. It is, truth itself that is illuminated in discourse. For this, Heidegger thinks that truth does not lie in the proposition or judgment but rather in the making-unhidden (unmasking) of the thing itself. He talks of truth as “letting-be”; that is understood in a positive way as the act which lets something be what it really is or which “exposes itself to what is as such”.²²

However, Heidegger finds that *Dasein's* possibilities for genuine discourse get diverted in everyday experience; discourse has degenerated into idle talk. There is no letting-be of the thing as it really is. Instead, we understand it in the way that “they” have already interpreted it. There is no genuine communication in this kind of talk either; instead of lighting up what is talked about, the language rather closes it off. The language itself gets passed along, and often it is attended by ambiguity. Instead of leading to disclosure and unconcealment, it rather prevents them. This is what he calls “falling” or “deterioration” of *Dasein*.²³ He therefore describes this falling of *Dasein* as a kind of *tranquillizing*, for it takes away from *Dasein* responsibility and the anxiety that goes with it; it is *alienation*, for it has diverted the *Dasein* from authentic selfhood and also from authentic community.

²¹ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 25.

²² Martin, Heidegger, “*On essence of Truth in Existence and Being*”, ed. W. Brock (H. Regnery, Chicago, 1949), 306.

²³ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 27.

1.2. Existence

This is another aspect of *Dasein*, which Heidegger categorizes in threefold structure, found in existence itself. These are a) *Dasein* is ahead-of-itself, here belong the phenomena of possibility, projecting, understanding; b) *Dasein* is already-in-the-world, here belong the phenomena of facticity, thrownness, affective states; c) *Dasein* is close-to-its-world, so close to it that it is absorbed in it, here belong the phenomena of falling, the “they”, the scattering of possibilities. This threefold structure of possibility, facticity and falling, constituting the Being of everyday *Dasein*, is what Heidegger calls “care”.²⁴ In this, the existential analytic gets confirmation from the way man has interpreted himself through the ages.

To reach authentic existence, Heidegger introduces two phenomena of; death, the consideration which enables us to grasp *Dasein* in its wholeness; and conscience, which discloses to the *Dasein* its authentic possibility.²⁵ He thinks that for *Dasein* to become disclosed to itself, the affective states play an important part in the process. These states of mind light up the situations in which we find ourselves at any given time, for we are always already in some factual situation that delimits the possibilities open to us at that time. In the affective state, anxiety plays a key role as a basic state of mind, or way in which we find ourselves. But when anxiety subsides, then we are accustomed to say that ‘it was really nothing.’ The “nothing” here means more than we are aware of, is already an acknowledgement of the radical nullity and finitude of existence, disclosed in anxiety.²⁶

Anxiety discloses finitude, and the most obvious mark of human finitude is death. It is in terms of death that Heidegger claims that the *Dasein* can be grasped as a whole.²⁷ Death does not complete existence in the sense of bringing it to the ripeness of its potentialities but death sets boundary. It marks off the *Dasein*, as Being-in-the-world. If then there is no thought of

²⁴John, Martin Heidegger, 27.

²⁵John, Martin Heidegger, 28.

²⁶Martin, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Macquarie and E. Robinson (trans.), (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 231.

²⁷John, Martin Heidegger, 30.

death, and the future is regarded as stretching out indefinitely, then there is no great sense of urgency or responsibility in life. However, he does not indeed encourage a meditative brooding upon death, but because death is one's own possibility, the one that belongs to each person inalienably and that marks off his being. Heidegger assigns to the participation of death a special role in his idea of an authentic existence. All existence may be considered as a Being-toward-death, existence in the face of the end. But to anticipate death and to recognize the boundary of one's existence is to achieve an overarching unity that gathers up the possibilities of life as lying this side of the final, decisive possibility of death, in a coherent pattern.²⁸

Just as the phenomenon of death was supposed to overcome the deficiency of the earlier analyses by allowing us to see *Dasein* in its wholeness, so, the phenomenon of conscience will allow us to see *Dasein* in its authenticity. Conscience is precisely the disclosure to someone of what he ought to be, of his authentic self. Conscience is the awareness of how it is with oneself. It has the character of a call or a summon to the self in its actual absorption in the world or lostness in the "they". The call comes to one from inside of himself, the call of conscience can be adequately understood in terms of the complex structure of the human existent himself.²⁹ This conscience which Heidegger speaks is different distinguished from the everyday conscience which is the voice of society, or the superego, that reflects the conventions that "they" have adopted. It is neither authentic itself nor conducive to an authentic existence. Rather it is another way in which "they" stifle and dominate the individual, and take away his own possibilities from him.³⁰ This makes the *Dasein* to get lost in the collective inauthentic mass in his everydayness. So, the only way or step toward his authenticity must be to isolate himself from this mass. And it is the role of conscience to

²⁸ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 31.

²⁹ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 32.

³⁰ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 33.

summon the existent to take upon himself the being that is delivered over to death and to project himself resolutely upon it.

The new model that will come in is temporality, with its three dimensions of the present, what has been, and what is to come. They make care possible, and they correspond to the threefold structure of care, as possibility (the projecting of what is to come), facticity (taking over of what has been) and falling (the concern with the present). This notion of existence as temporality helps to sharpen the distinction between the *Dasein* and the thing or even the animal. Thing (substance) endures through time. But its relation to time is that of moving from one “now” to another, so that at any moment, its past is “no longer” and its future is “not yet”. As projecting, he is already in the future, but as thrown, he is always one who has already been. He is not simply “in time”, moving along from one now to the next; rather, he takes time and has time.³¹ The existent that has projected himself on death has already penetrated to the boundary of what is to come; while in responding to conscience by taking over in responsibility his factual guiltiness, he has appropriated that which has been. It is through this appropriation of both the “ahead” and the “already” that he is freed for authentic resoluteness in the present situation. The authentic *Dasein* displays “the unity of a future which makes present in the process of having been; we designate it as ‘temporality’”.³²

Conclusion

Heidegger in presenting his thought on Being and Existence puts a new twist on the notion of understanding by viewing it less as an intellectual undertaking than as ability. It is more akin to know-how. Understanding is not primarily the reconstruction of the meaning of an expression; it always entails the projecting, and self-projecting, of a possibility of my own existence. There is no understanding without projection or anticipations for Heidegger. He

³¹ John, *Martin Heidegger*, 35.

³² Martin, *Being and Time*, 374.

therefore focuses much on thinking as the most essential faculty of experience that human beings cannot only live in a faculty of remembrance, but need also a future to project oneself into. This shows shift from the interpretation of a text to the interpretation of the human being (*Dasein*). His thought therefore becomes resourceful in the field of behavioural pattern in society and can act as a guide into the fields of thoughts and reflections upon which human life can strive.

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