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THE INTRODUCTION TO BEING AND TIME

David Good

1. Introduction

For Heidegger, everyday experience is saturated with the meaning of Being¹ and yet nowhere has its meaning been properly explicated.² Western philosophy, failing to properly pose the question of the meaning of Being, created a false conception of it and thus covered over and closed off proper access to it. In the introduction of *Being and Time* Heidegger means to properly pose this question such that the meaning of Being can be uncovered. In this essay I will outline Heidegger's primary points regarding his formulation of the question of the meaning of Being. Then, I will raise an objection to Heidegger's philosophy, namely, that it falls into cultural relativism. Finally, I will state why Heidegger's view marks a significant shift in the history of phenomenology.

2. Access to Being: Formulating the Question

Heidegger begins by formulating "the question of the meaning of Being."³ This is to determine the necessary components that structure the question (the "guidelines of the question of Being") which is to fashion the proper hermeneutic to interpret Being's meaning.⁴ These components are: Dasein, time and history.

¹ Being is capitalised to distinguish the primary ontological sense of Being that Heidegger is wanting to uncover: "what is [*ultimately*] meaningfully present in a human context," as opposed to "meaningful *things*," i.e., the being of phenomena and entities as considered uncritically in their mere appearance (Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Heidegger*, 197, 198, 199).

² Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Heidegger*, 197.

³ Martin Heidegger, "Being and Time Introduction," in Heidegger: *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 45.

⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 50, 66.

2.1 Being

Being, for Heidegger, is encountered implicitly in our everyday comprehending of the world.⁵ He states that “everybody understands, ‘The sky *is* blue,’ ‘I *am* happy,’” and this “shows that an enigma [Being] lies *a priori* in every relation and being towards [our meaningful experience of] beings⁶ as beings.”⁷ Being, while mysterious, is what is ultimately meaningful in a human context.⁸ It shows up through our involvement with the world in our lived experience as structured by our *a priori* human comprehension, purposes and interests.⁹ From our experience of the blue sky to our inner states – everything is loaded with human meaning.¹⁰ Thus, Heidegger states, we “live already in an understanding of Being” and yet its meaning “is at the same time shrouded in darkness.”¹¹ Being is vague and implicit and so only through questioning our everyday involvement with the world can its meaning be disclosed.¹² Thus, he states, “beings¹³ [the meaning of things] are ... [to be] interrogated with regard to their Being [their involvement in the ultimately meaningful context of human purposes and interests].”¹⁴

2.2 Dasein

For Heidegger, the disclosing of Being through questioning things is a distinctly human mode he calls Dasein.¹⁵ Heidegger states that Dasein is the mode of Being which questions because

⁵ Stephen Mulhall, *The Routledge Guidebook to Heidegger's Being and Time* (London: Routledge, 2013, 8); Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition).

⁶ Whenever Heidegger “uses the language of ‘being’ he means ‘being’ as ... meaningfulness” (Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Heidegger*, 197).

⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 44.

⁸ Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Heidegger*, 197, 198, 199.

⁹ Thus, Heidegger asserts that Being is not some higher-order entity waiting to be discovered; Being is not a being lurking behind beings – Being is the ultimate meaningfulness of experience in the world (Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger"). According to Thomas Sheehan, Heidegger is primarily concerned with the meaning of being, not the metaphysical, ontological status of being (Mulhall, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Heidegger*, 193, 196).

¹⁰ Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Heidegger*, 197.

¹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 44.

¹² Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger." This could be described as something like the experience of recalling that there is some task one must do today, the precise details of which have been forgotten; the task in mind has a particular, unambiguous character or structure (there is a task to be done today) and yet it is vague (this exact details of this task are currently indeterminate), but nevertheless it presses us to question it to determine its content.

¹³ By “beings” Heidegger means the meaningfulness of *things*, i.e., phenomena and entities, as opposed to the *ultimate* meaning of Being – the sum total of our involvement with *all things* (Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Heidegger*, 197, 198, 199).

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 47; Dreyfus and Wrathall, *A Companion to Heidegger*, 199.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 53, 54; Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time*, 12, 13, 14.

“in its Being this being [Dasein] is concerned *about* its very Being.”¹⁶ That is, Dasein’s Being has the characteristic of *a priori* comprehension (intelligibility) because in order to question itself it must first comprehend its own existence.¹⁷ Dasein, then, at all times implicitly relates to its own Being, it “understands itself in its Being in some way with some explicitness” and this self-relation causes it to reflect on its own Being and to question it.¹⁸ But because Dasein does not comprehend itself clearly its Being is somewhat hidden from it. Thus, Dasein is that questioning mode of its Being that seeks to comprehend itself properly. However, Dasein’s questioning is not self-contained, it also involves the world because Dasein belongs essentially to “being in a world ... and the understanding of the Being of beings accessible within the world.”¹⁹ Dasein’s questioning, then, can be said to uncover the Being of all beings (its own or any entity).²⁰ Thus, Dasein is a mode of its Being which relates to Being – it is “the site, ‘Da’, for the disclosure of [B]eing, ‘Sein.’”²¹ Dasein, then, is the proper means of access to Being and thus it is the first component of the question of the meaning of Being.²² Heidegger states that Dasein, to properly access Being, must question the experience of everyday common living. Heidegger wants to avoid theoretical prejudices of previous Western philosophical schools and sciences which may be “free-floating constructions” not properly connected to Being, he wants access to “the things themselves!” which only everyday experience allows for.²³ Heidegger’s hermeneutic, then, is a phenomenological one.²⁴

2.3 Time

Heidegger then turns to analysing the structures of Dasein’s Being.²⁵ Provisionally, he asserts that “the meaning of the Being of ... Dasein proves to be temporality” and that Dasein is

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 53; Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time*, 15.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 55. “*A priori*” because otherwise an infinite regress would occur whereby something prior to Dasein’s Being would be responsible for its intelligibility. Wheeler quotes Heidegger who states, “[intelligibility]” is ontologically grounded in the Being of Dasein” (Wheeler, “Martin Heidegger”). Wheeler explains that this intelligibility for Heidegger is the “*a priori*, transcendental condition” of “a world ... a sense-making structure within which entities may be found” (Wheeler, “Martin Heidegger”).

¹⁸ Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time* 16, 17; Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 53, 54.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 55.

²⁰ “Thus, it is constitutive of the Being of Dasein to have, in its very Being, a relation of Being to this Being” and “[u]nderstanding of Being is itself a determination of the Being of Dasein” (Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 53, 54).

²¹ W. J. Korab-Karpowicz. “Martin Heidegger,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

²² Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 55; Mulhall, *Heidegger and being and Time*, 15, 16, 17.

²³ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 72.

²⁴ C. Mantavinos “Hermeneutics,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition).

²⁵ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 59; Mulhall, *The Routledge Guidebook*, 19.

structured by “modes of temporality.”²⁶ It follows, then, in some yet to be demonstrated way, that time is “that from which Dasein tacitly understands and interprets ... Being,”²⁷ and so it is from the standpoint of time all of Being is made intelligible.²⁸ Therefore, because Being is uncovered through Dasein, it is “in terms of temporality as the Being of Dasein” that a proper conception of time can be explicated such that the meaning of Being can be made properly intelligible.²⁹ Through analysing Dasein’s structures, then, Heidegger avoids a “free-floating” disconnected view of time by going to the ‘things themselves’ – the prior ontological grounding of which the conception of time arose.³⁰ Because Dasein’s Being is essentially temporal, Heidegger states it is also in some way historical and Dasein, therefore, must enquire into its historicity if it is to properly pose the question of the meaning of Being.³¹

2.4 History

For Heidegger, “Dasein ... *is* its past in the manner of *its* Being.”³² Dasein develops and understands itself within the customs of its generation such that “this understanding discloses the possibilities of its Being and regulates them.”³³ This is to say history sets the terms and scope by which Dasein interprets its Being.³⁴ Thus, Dasein must deconstruct its own history to enable it properly to interpret its Being, which, for Heidegger, is the Western philosophical tradition which has provided the terms for the enquiry about Being.³⁵ Deconstruction involves analysing and extracting those discoveries in this tradition that accord with “guidelines of the question of Being”, those components of the question of the meaning of Being which everyday experience has already revealed: Dasein and time.³⁶ Dasein, time and history, then, are the primary structures of the question of the meaning of Being. They are the “fundamental source

²⁶ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 60, 61; Mulhall, *The Routledge Guidebook*, 19.

²⁷ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 60; Mulhall, *The Routledge Guidebook*, 19.

²⁸ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 62.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 60.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 62, 63.

³¹ Mulhall, *The Routledge Guidebook*, 27.

³² Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 63.

³³ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 63.

³⁴ Mulhall, *The Routledge Guidebook* 20.

³⁵ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 64, 65, 66; Mulhall, *The Routledge Guidebook* 5, 27.

³⁶ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 66, 67, 68.

of an illumination of Being”; the “variable modes of interpreting existence” that form Heidegger’s phenomenological hermeneutic.³⁷

3. Objection: Cultural Relativism

Michael Wheeler argues that Dasein’s historicity as a necessary condition for truth results in a kind of cultural relativism.³⁸ Wheeler quotes Heidegger who states, “[intelligibility] is ontologically grounded in the Being of Dasein.”³⁹ Wheeler explains that this intelligibility for Heidegger is the “*a priori*, transcendental condition” of “a world ... a sense-making structure within which entities may be found.”⁴⁰ Heidegger calls this world a “fore-structure.”⁴¹ This fore-structure allows for the intelligibility of entities and also for propositions concerning entities and their involvement in states of affairs. Thus, Wheeler states, this fore-structure allows for the “correspondence between propositions and states of affairs” which is the foundation of scientific truth.⁴² From this we might grant that Heidegger’s view allows for scientific realism. However, Wheeler states that, for Heidegger, this sense-making fore-structure is culturally conditioned by Dasein’s historicity.⁴³ Hubert Dreyfus states that Dasein can only dwell “in its background familiarity with the available”, the everyday presupposed understanding “‘given’ to Dasein.”⁴⁴ Wheeler states that this background is constituted by historically and culturally conditioned networks in which Dasein is embedded.⁴⁵ Dasein, then, is “historically embedded [in its] ways of thinking” through its culture which sets the terms and so constrains its Being’s fore-structure (intelligibility) such that it is “relativistically tied to a particular culture in a particular time period.”⁴⁶ If this is the case, then all questions, interpretations and understanding that emerge from this fore-structure are those in accordance with the possibilities set by Dasein’s historicity. Scientific truth, then, would thus be relative

³⁷ Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 158.

³⁸ Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

³⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 43, 255, as quoted in Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger".

⁴⁰ Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

⁴¹ Hubert L Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 198, 199.

⁴² Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

⁴³ Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

⁴⁴ Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 202.

⁴⁵ Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

⁴⁶ Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

to culture.⁴⁷ Dreyfus states that Dasein must expand its local historicity through “other types of interpretations of texts, epochs and cultures in which one does not already dwell.”⁴⁸ However, this appears to merely expand Dasein’s historicity into other Dasein’s historicity, not free the results of science from Dasein’s constraints. If the scientific truth is determined by the historicity of Dasein, then this begs the question: who’s Dasein in what period has the right interpretation? Wheeler argues that, for Heidegger, there would seem to be no straightforward way to “subject the truth of one age to the standards of another” such that “contemporary chemistry and alchemical chemistry might both be true.”⁴⁹ Heidegger’s position, then, Wheeler suggests, must reject the notion of scientific progress as dependent not on an “unassailable set of scientifically established truths about nature,” but on cultural relativism.⁵⁰ As Wheeler points out, Heidegger himself suggests that “every factual science is always manifestly in the grip of historizing.”⁵¹

4. Heidegger and Phenomenology

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is considered one of the most significant phenomenological works. It had an immense influence on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, Ortega y Gasset, Levinas, Sartre, Gadamer and Derrida.⁵² Michael Inwood states Heidegger’s influence was not from solutions to the problems of previous philosophy but from the new questions, perhaps unanswerable questions, he posed.⁵³ Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology —the view that we understand Being *a priori* because we are situated ‘within’ it “‘in’ the world” and that therefore we must lay bare its structure through questioning everyday experience —becomes phenomenology proper.⁵⁴ Gadamer and Sartre, for example, both developed this phenomenological hermeneutic in their own way. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer states that the structures of understanding are primarily formed through articulating concepts in everyday

⁴⁷ Dreyfus states that the fore-structure is a pre-suppositional point of view, a “taken-for-granted background ... of understanding,” an interpretive structure that makes sense of how to approach a problem, one that “circumscribes the domain in question and thus already determines possible ways of questioning” (Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 202).

⁴⁸ Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

⁴⁹ Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

⁵⁰ Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

⁵¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 76, 444, in, Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

⁵² Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger;" M. J. Inwood, *Heidegger: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 96.

⁵³ Inwood, *Heidegger*. 96.

⁵⁴ Jeff Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition).

language; we “are ‘in’ the world through being ‘in’ language.”⁵⁵ He claims that language is a hermeneutic experience, a medium of interpretation and comprehension that we encounter in others and ourselves as the universal point from which our fundamental way of being in the world is understood.⁵⁶ Sartre appropriates the form of Heidegger’s hermeneutic to structure his own ‘phenomenological ontology’ whereby we are to question the being of “the phenomenon” (“the thing itself as it appears”).⁵⁷ Sartre also parallels Heidegger’s view that the proper manner of access to being is through a human mode which he considers not to be Dasein, but consciousness.⁵⁸ Subsequently, he will arrive at the goal of “man within the world in that specific union which Heidegger ... calls ‘being-in-the-world,’” a phenomenal ontology that “gives birth to existentialism as a distinctive picture of the self in the world.”⁵⁹ We can see, then, that Heidegger’s view that “ontology [the study of being] is possible only as phenomenology” has been crucial for phenomenology.⁶⁰

5. Conclusion

In this essay I have outlined the primary components (or guidelines) that structure Heidegger’s question of the meaning of Being. Namely, Dasein, time and history. For Heidegger, Being is not a being, rather it is the meaningfulness of one’s lived experience in the world. Only Dasein is the proper means of access to Being because its existence is an issue for it such that it questions and seeks Being (its own and other entities). Dasein is essentially temporal, it is in time and structured by it, and this reveals that it must also be historical. Thus, Dasein must deconstruct its history by deconstructing the Western philosophical tradition and recovering the proper interpretations of Being according to the above guidelines. I outlined one objection, that because the intelligibility of Dasein’s Being is dependent on cultural history this appears to result in cultural relativism. Finally, I outlined the significance of Heidegger’s phenomenological hermeneutic which has become crucial for phenomenology.

⁵⁵ Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer."

⁵⁶ Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer."

⁵⁷ Steven Galt Crowell, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 205, 206.

⁵⁸ Thomas Flynn, "Jean-Paul Sartre," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition)

⁵⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 30, 34, as quoted in Crowell, *Companion to Existentialism*, 208.

⁶⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 82.

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