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Heidegger and his Heirs

ABSTRACT: The point of departure in the paper is the problem of Heidegger's well known *question of being*. The author undertakes the inner analysis of the relationship that man has with his being and with being itself, the Sein-Da-sein relationship. The *question of being* understood as the *question of the sense of being* contains two main relations: the understanding relationship and the existential relation that establish, respectively, the context and direction of the question (*stasis* and *dynamis*). The interplay of under-standing and ex-sistence throws light on the other dimensions of Da-sein, it is its *disclosiveness*, *properizing power* (*Er-eignis*) and *historicity*. The author indicates the fruitful consequences of Heidegger's fundamental questionability of being in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism.

KEY WORDS: Heidegger • question of being • ontology • Dasein • understanding • existence

Steeped in Aristotelian scholasticism as a Catholic seminarian, by which she was instilled with a lifelong passion for the question of being, and educated in the philosophical milieu of neo-Kantianism, Martin Heidegger became an early devotee of Husserl's phenomenology and Dilthey's hermeneutics of life experience, which he fused into a hermeneutic phenomenology and fashioned it into an appropriate method for laying out a fundamental ontology of Da-sein, being-t/here, existence.

It is not enough to say that Heidegger is a thinker of one thought, namely, being. Such an emphasis has prompted commentators to dwell unduly on the idea or concept of being or even on the "truth of being" in exegeses that quickly assume the appearance of utterly abstruse academic exercises. But this is Heidegger's own complaint against 2500 years of philosophy. That "being" has over the centuries come to be considered logically indefinable, self-evident, and the most general and so the emptiest of concepts is for Heidegger a history weighty with consequences for the West, where the question of being first stirred and was subjected to intense scrutiny. Rather, very much in keeping with the finitude of the human situation, Heidegger's repeated insistence falls on the question-of-being as the sole topic that motivates his thinking and defines the scope and limits of his way

of thought. He thus aims to revive the age-old question of being from its moribund state by having it arise from the depths of the human condition, such that the timeworn concept of being comes to life in its full interrogative vigor and assumes an immediate relevance not only to the concrete lives of individuals but also to the historical destiny of nations. This revival is to be accomplished by an ontological elaboration of the most proper locus of the question of being, namely, the questioners themselves involved in incessant questioning in their concrete human situation, being-t/here, Da-sein, which is now to be explicated fundamentally in its very being. The thorough sounding performed by this fundamental ontology of Da-sein aims to elaborate the tendencies that raise as well as suppress the question of the sense of being. Radical interrogative moods like angst and terror serve to move Da-sein with the full interrogative force of this question and expose the most fundamental conditions in which this question is bound to arise. Posing and positioning the question of being within the context of Da-sein, thereby accessing Sein through Da-sein, is Heidegger's claim to novelty in the annals of ontology and beyond, raising the question of being in a gestalt that goes beyond all former ways of raising that question. The interrogative intimacy of the Sein–Da-sein relationship will constitute the heart and core of all of Heidegger's thinking, the "guiding star" that he is bent on pursuing to its abyssal depths in a lifetime of fundamental questioning.

Small wonder then that so much of Heidegger's thought takes place under the sway of the question mark, constantly harking back to fundamentally interrogative experiences like anxiety, concern, guilt, death, Nothing and the "thrownness," ineluctable "facticity" and situatedness of finite historical existence, all of which are inevitably oriented to the fundamental question, to be or not to be. The essence of being-human resides in the passion for fundamental questioning. Man's proper dwelling place is in the aporia of existence. The locus of truth is shifted from the assertion to the existential question. Truly being-human involves a lifelong journey of questioning and discovery at the frontiers of the concealments of mystery and errancy. And the movement of questioning becomes one with the movement of time at the heart of finite being. So central is questioning that even the terms of the question of the meaning of being upon examination soon begin to dovetail and converge to the point of becoming identified with each other in "equiprimordial" relationship. Even in the occasional texts that are not overtly pervaded by the interrogative aura, it would be a gross misunderstanding to neglect its implicit presence as the background of all of Heidegger's thought.

In view of the millennial embarrassment into which it has lapsed, the question of the meaning of being must once again be properly posed, posi-

tioned, grounded, and thereby launched from and toward a new beginning. It must be taken back to its native habitat where it is a genuine and urgent question, not just an idle question conjured by pedants absorbed in pointless academic pursuits. Working out the question of what it means to be thus calls for the exposition of the concrete context that shapes its interrogative moments and sustains the entire process of any inquiry into being. Such a radically new start must get to the very roots of the question by returning to the point of incipience where it first arises and takes hold of us. To bring the question home means to bring it back to its question-provoking source in existence. To breathe life into the question, the questioners themselves are to be questioned in terms of how they are in fact already questioned by their concrete context in being, in their being-there, *Da-sein*.

The basic task of Heidegger's magnum opus, *Being and Time*, is an in-depth analysis of the interrogative relationship that man has with his being and with being itself, the *Sein–Da-sein* relationship. Its opening pages unravel the interrogative relationship into two interrelated axes of the comprehensive relation that is *Da-sein*. If humans question what it means to be, then 1) they must already have some understanding of what it means to be, and 2) they must have a tendency and capacity to question what it means to be. These two dimensions of the interrogative relation to being are designated by the terms *u n d e r s t a n d i n g* and *e x i s t e n c e*. Both terms bear etymological reference to a specific situational stance which makes the more complex interrogative stance possible: *O n e s t a n d s u n d e r* the sway of a particular interpretation of what it means to be and, on this basis, *s t a n d s f o r w a r d* in concernfully going about one's being. *U n d e r - s t a n d i n g* and *e x - s i s t e n c e* thus establish, respectively, the context and direction of the question, provide it with its contextual and vectorial determinants, its *s t a t i s* and *d y n a m i s*. The unity in tension of the two relations is reflected in the very term *Da-sein*, where "da" in German means both "here" and "there," suggesting at once the proximity and the distance of a sense of being which, on the one hand, founds the question and, on the other, directs it to a destination. Context and direction are, moreover, the two essentially equiprimordial *t e m p o r a l* dimensions of meaning and sense, together constituting the very sense of sense. Developing itself between these two temporal parameters, the question of being thus unfolds more fully as the question of the sense of being.

The understanding relationship: Man understands being. But this "understanding of being" is not conceptual in nature; rather, it is first the more matter-of-fact understanding of what it means to be that simply comes from living a life more than knowing about it. First and foremost, we in fact do not know what "being" means conceptually. But we

are familiar with its sense preconceptually in and through the manifold activity of living. If the term “knowledge” still applies to this understanding of life in its being, it is more the immediate “know-how” or “savoir-faire” of existence, a knack and feel for what it means to be and how to “go about the business” of being that comes from life experience. From a long familiarity with its manners and customs, we already know how to “get around” our world, “get along” with others, “get by” with the things in the world, and “get with” ourselves in the fullness of being-in-the-world. We already know how to live, and this pre-understanding of the ways of being repeatedly works itself out and is further cultivated, refined, and explicated in our various forays into the enviroing world of things and the communal world of being-with-others, both of which intercalate and come to a head in the most comprehensive of meaningful contexts, the self-world of our very own being-in-the-world. This reiterated cultivation and explication of our pre-understanding of being into ever renewed articulated contexts of relational meaning is what Heidegger calls a “hermeneutics of facticity,” where the “of” is regarded as a double genitive. That is to say, factic life experience, on the basis of a prior understanding, already spontaneously explicates, articulates, interprets itself, unfolding into the network of meaningful relations that constitutes the fabric of human concerns that we call our historical world. Historically situated existence in its facticity is through and through hermeneutical. Accordingly, any overtly phenomenological hermeneutics of facticity, in its expository interpretation of the multifaceted concerns of the human situation, is but a repetition of an implicit panhermeneutic process already indigenously to historical life.

To be sure, this hermeneutic process by and large takes place behind the scenes “as a matter of course,” without much reflection on the overall nature of living and being, absorbed as we are in its details, where the appearance of obviousness harbors the basic paradox of understanding, namely, the elusiveness of our most familiar experiences and the difficulty of expressing the simplest matters of life as a whole. Augustine’s classic lines on time are exemplary here: “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.” But if familiarity shelters the mysteries of the world, self, time, truth, and being, it also blocks access to them by generating a conspiracy of silence about them. For one thing, what is most familiar to us can in its unobtrusiveness be what is most likely to be overlooked. It is so near and yet, because of this, so far. For another, the very variety of life militates against its simplicity. Life is so daily and, in our concern with the particularities of daily existence, the more comprehensive sense that we have of what it means to be can easily lapse into oblivion. One

might even say that there is a natural attitude that obliterates the difference between particular beings and their being.

To counter this tendency toward oblivion in the multiplicity of our relations to beings, Heidegger calls us back to the simple central core of the understanding relationship of Da-sein to Sein with the oft repeated formula, "Da-sein is an entity which in its being goes about [*geht um* = is concerned with] this very being." This self-referential "circular" movement from being to being, spiraling across and through the multifarious concerns of being-in-the-world, must repeatedly return to its most central concern, namely, the concern for being itself, being pure and simple. This occurs by way of the existential relation, which serves to bring the question of being itself front and center, out of its eclipse by the details of living. It is only in the purity of the existential confrontation that self-referential understanding-of-being can be made to come full circle time and again "to its matter itself," thereby becoming fully itself. In a more temporal context, Heidegger delineates the movement of the understanding-of-being as a thrown projection. The projective character of understanding is precisely its ex-sistential thrust.

The existential relation: Man "ex-sists" his being, i.e., he stands out toward it. Man does not simply understand being; it can also become an issue for him, and indeed a matter of intense concern. The dimension of ex-sistence interjects a more tensed axis to experience that serves to intensify it into an acute concern. The apparently somnolent state of standing in a familiar network of relations articulated by the habit of life is traversed by the tendency to stand out and forward from out of this initial state toward an uncertain future and unanticipated exigencies. If understanding at first is meant to suggest a proximity of being to man, existence serves to open up distances within its context toward the outermost horizons of being, distances that thus open up comprehensive questions regarding the ultimate possibilities and limits of being.

Like understanding, existence is assumed to be the very being of human being as being-t/here. If understanding at first suggests the initial articulated context in which humans find themselves, existence stresses the projected temporal activity of being-here as being-there, being yonder. Considerations of existence thus transpose the discussion from the contextual statics to the temporal dynamics of be-ing. Just as understanding is more an understanding that the human being is rather than has, so likewise in ex-sisting, human being *is* the very possibility of its being, its unique can-be. Accordingly, as a way of existing rather than as a mode of knowing, our understanding of what it means to be is never a mere staring at a fixed meaning but rather the living out of our full temporal possibility. In short, meaning

is first performed before it is conceptually formed. As with other crafts, the “know-how” of understanding life is basically a “can-do,” or better, the “can-be” for the sake of which human being exists. Thrown forward into what they are not but can be, human beings are challenged to work out the implications of their existence, unlocking its deeper structures and coming to terms with it in its entirety. Explication here is indeed the passage from tacitly understood to explicit knowledge, which can assume the character of a historical drama in which an individual or a community works out the destiny of its particular historical situation.

The moment of existence thus sets the human being upon its journey of fundamental questioning, explication, and discovery, articulating the human situation in a gamut of revelations that range from the most routine and commonplace to the extraordinary and uncommon shock of self-recognition in which one is taken aback by all that it means to be here. In point of fact, the secrets of the commonplace tend to surface into the open only in the more exclamatory forms of the experience of being-here, which throw the “matter-of-fact” into question and unleash “the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” “Here I am” can express not only the most mundane and mildest of disclosures but also the event of a major epiphany whose full implications can be drawn only by an entire lifetime of discovery in a life bounded by birth and death and by the historical world into which it happens to be thrown. Of all the “limit situations” that take us to the extremities of the human condition, whose encounter Karl Jaspers took to be the very beginning of art, religion, and philosophy, Heidegger focuses on two to characterize the full scope of the finite experience of being-here: death and the experience of simply finding oneself situated in existence, willy-nilly, as it were. I find myself thrust into a world I didn’t make and a life I didn’t ask for. Allowing oneself to be astonished by this revelation of “thrownness” naturally leads to the most fundamental of questions of being: What am I doing here? Why? What is it all about? What does it all mean? etc. etc. Ex-posure to the ex-tremities of ex-sistence thus launches us on an unending quest for answers to the bottomless questions of our being-here. This extreme ex-position receives its final accounting in a non-static or “ek-static” temporality that is never at an end, albeit toward an end, ever implicated in a never ceasing futuristic and finite transcendence. Ekstatic temporality as the temporality of Da-sein stands in sharp contradistinction to the static temporality of constant presence apropos of finished things that have come into their entelechy. Existentialized understanding thus defines the complete temporal trajectory of Dasein as thrown projection of the originative temporality of a finite lifetime.

Several other significant dimensions of Da-sein have come to light in the above account of the interplay of understanding and ex-sistence in the human situation. Among the most notable are the following:

Dasein is disclosiveness, the locus of truth as unconcealment. This originary mode of truth is already manifest from the tacit dimension of prepredicative understanding that must be repeatedly explicated out of its precedent latency and concealment, first of all in the persistent exercise of the act of living, which can then be more overtly explicated by way of deliberate phenomenological exposition. The hermeneutic situation of factic life itself, unfolding itself against the background context of the environing world of tool usage and product delivery, the communal world of social usage and civic custom in being-with-others, and the self-world of striving-to-be and discovering oneself in one's being, is the initial disclosive arena of fundamental truth.

The comprehensive disclosive capacity of the human being was in fact recognized quite early by the philosophical tradition. Aristotle, for example, observes that "the human soul is, in a way, all beings," that is, it is capable of "coming together with" all being by way of cognitive intellection. But for this tradition that runs from Parmenides to Husserl, the basic mode of knowing is the total transparency of illuminative seeing, intuition, which in temporal terms means a making present, a presentifying. In the context of a hermeneutics of facticity, by contrast, the basic mode of knowing is interpretive exposition out of a background of understanding that by and large remains tacit, latent, withdrawn and, at most, only appresent, a tangential presence that shades off into the shadows of being. Discovering beings and disclosing the self and its world take place in a temporal "clearing" of unconcealing being that displays an overriding tendency to withdraw into concealment. But this very withdrawal is what draws the inquiring human being to unceasing thought in its questioning pursuit of the sense and mystery of being.

Dasein is in each instance mine, yours, ours. As Heidegger first formally puts it: "The be-ing about which this being is concerned in its very be-ing is in each instance mine [yours, ours]"¹. In other contexts, the ontological indexicals of the personal pronouns "I am, you are, we are" are expressed in the more overtly temporal particularities of "my time, your time, our time" to indicate the unique one-time-only lifetime that each of us is allotted as our very own. Coming to terms with my being thus calls for owning up to the temporal situation of being that is uniquely my/our own by becoming responsive to the directives and tasks evoked by

¹ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1927, p. 42.

the temporally particular situation into which I/we happen to be thrust. Responsiveness to the dictates of the existential-hermeneutic situation in which we uniquely find ourselves indicates that our relation to being is a letting, a letting-be, and that our proper stance to the situation that is opening up to us is a reciprocating openness. There is thus a reversal of initiative in the relation between me and my situation of being, my *Da-sein*. It is the situation itself that exacts its demands upon me and questions me in my very being, and my authentic and basic response is to be receptive to what is being asked of me by my situation by “listening” to its “call of care”, acknowledging the shortfall of my finitude, accepting the gauntlet of angst through which I must pass in such basic questioning, and being open to where ever this questioning may lead. This path of questing leads to our most proper selves as temporally situated beings, where we become who we are *to be* by instantiating ourselves in the temporal clearing of being that is properly our own.

Coming into our own (*eigenes*), owning up to what is most our own (*eigenstes*), orienting ourselves toward our most proper (*eigensten*) selves, authenticating ourselves in our most proper being: all of these expressions of our basic desire-to-be trace their origin and inception back to the later Heidegger’s most frequently invoked word for the *Da-sein*—*Sein* relationship, *Er-eignis*, the event of enownment, appropriation, properizing.

A final concretion of the *Da-sein*—*Sein* relationship implied in the above properizing of being is the fact that *Da-sein* is historical through and through. One of the precursor names for *Da-sein* was the historical I, the situation I, in short, the historically situated I. It is an I or We that moreover receives its identity from its unique historical situation. “I am my time, we are our time”. As Yorck von Wartenburg constantly reiterated to his friend, Dilthey, “We ourselves are history”. The context of our being is a historical context that is our very own, a further concretion that takes the abstract edge off the above formal talk of being and the self-referential circular movement from being to being in the understanding-of-being. We have been preceded and preceded and thereby already interpreted, and this historical world of precedent, custom, and tradition is the ineluctable starting point of our own historical existence. It is thus the task of each generation to take up the tradition of its linguistic community and carry it forward for its time in an ongoing act of repetition or re-capitulation that at once involves re-view and re-vision in adapting it to its own situation and time.

But if *Dasein* is historical through and through, so likewise is being. The first version of the history of being that Heidegger depicts is the history of Western ontology, which he accuses of neglecting the question of being and the intimate and deep relationship that this questionability has with

time. A phenomenological deconstruction of ancient ontology reveals that the archontic sense of being for the Greeks is a being of constant permanent presence, reinforced by their belief in an eternal world. Aristotle's basic model for being, which he will superimpose upon all of nature, is produced things and finished products that are always available for immediate use, like household goods and real estate that are passed on from generation to generation, which always already were in the way they are now, ever present, finished, complete, thus perfect. Heidegger's way of posing the question of being within the context of finite, unfinished Dasein thus inaugurates a new beginning in the thinking of being in its fundamental questionability.



The forte of the less radical "philosophical hermeneutics" of *Hans-Georg Gadamer* (1900-2002) is the reapplication of the situational dynamics of Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity" to its more customary loci in the humanities. Gadamer's masterwork, *Truth and Method*, based as it is on the hermeneutic situation of our "thrown" belonging to the project of tradition, proposes no "method" but simply seeks to describe phenomenologically how the understanding (historically contextualized "truth") that is bound by tradition naturally "happens" by way of that tradition in our humanistic experiences of art, history, and language. Unique features of Gadamer's account of this circle (from tradition to tradition) of "hermeneutic experience" are the dialectical encounter between interpreter and transmitted text itself taken as interrogating dialogue partner, the productivity of the temporal distance between them that exposes precedented possibilities mediating present and past into a healing fusion of horizons, the resulting translation of that tradition to a new and thus unprecedented whole, how history itself is at work in restoring our understanding of an initially alien and foreign past, how the "speculative" play of language itself is the ultimate source of this healing productivity ("the medium mediates"), and insistence on the completion of the process of understanding interpretation in the moment of application (to our time, to our language, the two transcendental magnitudes of hermeneutics).



What draws *Jacques Derrida* (1930-2004) to Heidegger is the project of the deconstruction of the history of Occidental ontology, understood as a metaphysics of constant presence, and its concomitant oblivion of the ontological difference between being and beings. Naming it the tradition of logocen-

trism, with *logos* understood metaphysically as “reason” and “ground,” Derrida finds lingering vestiges of this centrism in Heidegger’s monolithic concern for Being. The distinction between Being and beings moreover can be construed as the philosophical distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, that courses its way through the idealistic logocentric tradition from Plato to Kant and, by extension, to Heidegger’s thinking of Being. Derrida’s deconstruction of this sharp distinction and a plethora of other binary oppositions in the metaphysical tradition results in inverting them and joining them in an interactive play that produces a proliferation of further verbal differences, in multitudinous word plays for which Derrida has become notorious. “Differance” itself is thus lifted out of its metaphysical oblivion and made “central” in a disseminative play of language understood structurally as an assemblage of differences. Derrida will eventually admit to the “quasi-transcendental role”² played by language as a differentiated-differentiating field at the margins of philosophy. Heidegger himself, in his deconstruction of the names for being in early Greek thought, notes that *logos* (primal language) was first understood as an articulated “differentiating gathering” and stood in an equiprimordial relation with *aletheia* (truth) as concealing unconcealing and *physis* (nature) as abiding emergence. The difference between being and beings that evokes the fundamental question of being opens onto an abyss of concealment out of which incipient differentiations emerge, gather for a while in free play, and lapse again into the abyss. 

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² J. Derrida, *Glas*, Paris, 1974, p. 182a.