

Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Introductions

Introduction

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Being and Time begins with a quote from Plato's *Sophist*, which Heidegger translates as follows
 For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression "being." We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed."
 (Plato, *Sophist*, 244a) [1]¹

The question pursued in *Being and Time* is the question of being, i.e, the meaning of being. "Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word "being? [*seiend*]" [1] Heidegger seeks to take up this question anew, a question which has become obscured, indeed neglected within the history of metaphysics and ontology in Western philosophy. So he seeks to "awaken an understanding for the sense of this question." [1] As he says, "the question has today been forgotten." [2]

§1 The necessity of an express repetition [Wiederholung] of the question of being

The genetic question. Though the question of being finds its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, stimulating Plato and Aristotle, the history of metaphysics has substantially distorted and deflected the very meaningfulness of the questioning. Heidegger identifies three historically enduring presuppositions which mark out the present investigation:

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* B 4, 1001 a 21. "Being is the most universal concept." Aquinas. *Summa th.* II qu. 94 a 2. "An understanding of Being is already included in conceiving anything which one apprehends in entities." "Aristotle himself knew the unity of this transcendental "universal" as a *unity of analogy* in contrast to the multiplicity of the highest generic concepts applicable to things. (Aristotle identifies four ways in which being is spoken of: (i) being per se (essence) vs. being per accidens (attribute), (ii) being of the categories: substance, quantity, quality, position, etc., (ii) being true, i.e.,

¹ "What do you want to signify when you say *being*? Obviously you've known for a long time. We though we did, but now we're confused about it." (trans. Nicolas White, Hackett Publishing, 1993,34)

predication, and (iv) potentiality and actuality. Being is, in other words, not a single generic concept which includes within its domain all possible beings. For this reason if it is asserted that "being" is the most universal concept, this is not to say that it is one which is clearest or that it needs no further discussion. It is rather the most obscure." [3]

2. Pascal, *Pensées et Opusculs* (e. Brunschvicg), Paris 1912, S. 169. "It has been maintained that the concept of "being" is indefinable." Being is not something like a being, and so the traditional logical conception of definition cannot be applied. "The indefinability of Being does not eliminate the question of its sense; it demands that we directly address it." [4]
3. Being is an obvious concept, self-evident. In every relation to entities of any sort (even a self-relation) is a relation of being. "The very fact that we already live in an understanding of being [*Seinsverständnis*] and that the meaning of being is still veiled in darkness proves the fundamental necessity to bear once again [*wiederholen*] the question of the meaning of being.

This makes clear that the question of being not merely "lacks an *answer* but actually that the question is itself obscure and without direction. To revive once again [*wiederholen*] the question means working out correctly the posing of the question first.

§2 The formal structure of the question of being

A showing of how the question of being is the most fundamental of questions and as such is a special one. Every investigation is motivated by that which is sought out. "Questioning is a knowing searching of being in its being-that (*Daßsein*) and its way of being (*Sosein*)." (5) For all Heidegger's odd language here, his discussion of the investigative dynamic is highly phenomenological. Every act of investigation posits a subject matter investigated. This subject matter is given in this positing not simply as there before us but more so as that which is interrogated, investigated. Yet that which is investigated motivates the drama of investigation. In this particular investigation, we already have some understanding of the subject matter, i.e., Being.

As we have intimated, we always conduct our activities in an understanding of Being. Out of this understanding arise both the explicit question of the meaning of being and the tendency that leads us towards its conception. We do not *know* what "Being" means. But already when we ask: "what *is* "Being"?, we keep within an understanding of the "is", though we are unable to fix conceptually what that "is" means. We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. *This average and vague understanding of being is a factum.* (SZ 25)

I think it's worth pausing here to consider this last sentence. "this average and vague understanding of being is a factum." You'll note I've changed the translation slightly, most significantly to say that this understanding is a factum, not a fact. Heidegger uses the latin expression Factum, whose connotation is not the same as a mere fact of the world. By fact, we a given objective reality or truth. This is not what Heidegger has in mind in this passage. Factum means literally action; and the etymology of the word refers back to a making or doing. In this context, to say that "this average and vague understanding of being is a factum" does not mean that it is an objective truth of human existence, but rather that *Seinsverständnis* or understanding of being is a doing, an activity. The understanding that we have already which informs the investigation at present is vague and average. It is an understanding that one has in the drama of being there in the world. The aim of Heidegger's *Being and Time* is thus to articulate the essential structure of this dramatic being-in-the-world. "If we are to obtain a clue we need for interpreting this average understanding of being, we must first develop the concept of being." (SZ 25)

"The Being of entities 'is' not itself an entity." (SZ 6,) Hence being qua being must be exhibited in a manner dissimilar from the way entities are disclosed. The problem here is that Being [*Sein*], everything we can talk about, and everything we have in view is the being of an entity. "Being lies in its being-that (*Daßsein*) and its way of being (*Sosein*), in reality, present-at-and, substance, holding valid, in the *Dasein*, in "it is" [*es gibt*]. "From which entity should the sense of being be read off?, From which entity should the disclosure of

being take its departure?" (SZ 7). Heidegger's answer to this question is the being qua entity that "each of us is himself" which he denotes by the term *Dasein*. *Dasein* is a being for who asks the question of the meaning of being, and this questioning is the point of departure for the investigation itself. Hence "we must first give a proper explication of an entity (*Dasein*) with regard to its being." (SZ 7) Yet here we seem to encounter a circle. "In working out our question, have we not 'presupposed' something which only the answer can bring?" (SZ 7)

Heidegger is noting the famed **hermeneutical circle**. The interpretation at work here proceeds from the part to the whole and back to the part in an ever continuing movement. Are we not following into a vicious circle here, though. Heidegger's answer is no.

This 'presupposing' of being has rather the character of taking a look at it beforehand, so that in the light of it the entities presented to us are to be provisionally articulated in their being. This guiding activity of taking a look at Being arises from the average understanding of Being in which we always operate and *which in the end belongs to the essential constitution of Dasein itself*. Such 'presupposing' has nothing to do with laying down an axiom from which a sequence of propositions is deductively derived. It is quite impossible for there to be any 'circular argument' in formulating the question about the meaning of being; for in answering this question, the issue is not one of grounding something by such a derivation; it is rather one of laying bare the ground for it and exhibiting them. (SZ 8)

This means, in other words, that we are not engaged in a deductive or axiomatic form or reasoning like occurs in geometry. We don't start from certain definitions and deduce what follows therefrom. The questioning takes its point of departure a being for whom the question of being is already vaguely articulated. The manner by which each one of us "is" in the world suggests an understanding of being. To ask about the meaning of being implies this very factum. If the method of analysis is not deductive, however, what is it? It is philosophical; hence Heidegger's method is ontological, or if you will, phenomenological.

Ontology and phenomenology are not two distinct philosophical disciplines among others. These terms characterize philosophy itself with regard to its object and its way of treating that object. Philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, and takes its departure from the hermeneutic of *Dasein*, which, as an analytic of *existence*, has made fast the guiding-line for all philosophical inquiry at the point where it arises and to which it returns.

We will be engaged, as he says, in a hermeneutic of *Dasein*; that is to say, an interpretation of the being of the there which each of us is. As we have seen, *Dasein* already has a understanding of being, but this understanding is as of yet only vague and indistinct. The "analytic of existence" lays bare the fundamental structures, dynamic manners of being in the world, which characterize this entity. Bringing to clarity the existential structure of this being, this being who is investigating the meaning of being, is the necessary step toward making clear the proper formulation of the question of being generally. Reading from the last paragraph of *Being and Time*, we can see that Heidegger makes clear that this provisional articulation of the existence only opens on to more fundamental questions.

Being has been disclosed in a preliminary way, though non-conceptually; and this makes it possible for *Dasein* as existent Being-in-the-world to comport itself toward entities—toward those which it encounters within-the-world as well as towards itself as existent. *How is this disclosive understanding of Being at all possible for Dasein?* Can this question be answered by going back to the primordial constitution-of-Being of that *Dasein* by which Being is understood. The existential-ontological constitution of *Dasein*'s totality is grounded in temporality. ... Is there a way which lead from primordial *time* to the meaning of *Being*? Does *time* itself manifest itself as the horizon of *Being*? (SZ 437)

§3 The Ontological Priority of the Question of Being and

§4 The Ontic Priority of the Question of Being.

There is an underlying tension in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The fundamental question at issue in the investigation, the question of highest priority ultimately, is the question of the meaning of Being, i.e., Being as this universal concept, Being in the broadest sense. "Ontological inquiry is indeed more primordial, as over against the ontical inquiry of the positive sciences. But it [i.e. ontical inquiry] remains itself naïve and opaque if in its researches into the Being of entities it fails to discuss the meaning of Being in general." (SZ 11) Hence the more "abstract" question of the meaning of being precedes to some extent the question of the being of any particular region of being. In order to study mental reality, psychic being, the meaning of Being in general has to be clarified. In this way the ontological question, that is to say, the inquiry into the meaning of being in general, has priority over the investigation of any kind of being.

The positive sciences are all ontic investigations. In their translation, McQuarrie & Robinson suggest in a note at this point in the text that "Ontic inquiry is concerned primarily with *entities* and the facts about them."² This makes it sound as if ontological inquiry as one subject of domain, i.e., Being in general, and ontic inquiry another, the Being of beings or of some particular domain of what is. though this is true, this is only partially the case. However, this way of expressing the distinction between the ontological and ontic priority of the question of being is open to misunderstanding. Dasein, or if you prefer human existence, has a distinct manner of being that distinguishes from all entities. "Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very being, that Being is an issue for it." There's an interesting transition at this juncture in Heidegger's text. In §3 up to the passage in §4, the discussion has centered on scientific research. This includes all the natural or hard sciences but also the social sciences as well as the investigations at root in the humanities. "The question of being [in general] aims ... at ascertaining the a priori conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine entities as entities of such and such a type ... but also for the possibility of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences" (SZ 11) Who is it that "examines entities of such and such a type?" Of course, it is this special, unique entity for whom its own Being is at stake. In fact, the study of the positive and nomological sciences, i.e., the exact formal sciences of pure mathematics and logic, is undertaken within this orientation to the care for Dasein's ownmost being. These ontic studies are not freefloating investigations but already of themselves express an understanding of Being that is characteristic of Dasein's being on a more fundamental or primordial level. "Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it *is* ontological." (SZ 12). Scientific research, in other words, is a possibility for this being. This is a possibility that can be taken up or not. Science, in fact, has a history which I can bring to life or let alone. This is my choice, but it is a choice having roots in the structure of my own being as a being whose own being is at stake.

This is an important existentialist theme in *Being and Time*. It is worthwhile to pause over the passage in the text in which this is expressed most clearly. This is found in the last full paragraph on page 214.

Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. Dasein has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or grown up into them already. Only the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting. The question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing itself. The understanding of oneself which leads *along this way* we call "*existentiell*". The question of existence is one of Dasein's ontical 'affairs'. This does not require that the ontological structure of existence should be theoretical transparent. The question about the structure aims at the analysis of what constitutes existence. The context of such

² McQuarrie & Robinson. *Being and Time*, 31, n3.

structures we call '*existentiality*'. Its analytic has the character of an understanding which is not existentiell, but rather *existential*. The task of an existential analytic of Dasein has been delineated in advance, as regards both its possibility and necessity, in Dasein's ontical constitution. (SZ 12)

What is the meaning of these two similarly constructed terms: existentiell and existential? Part of the answer Heidegger himself suggests near the end of §4. The work of *Being and Time* is a fundamental ontology worked out concretely as an existential analytic of Dasein. "But the roots of the existential analytic, on its part, are ultimately *existentiell*, that is, *ontical*. Only if the inquiry of philosophical research is itself seized upon in an existentiell manner as a possibility of the Being of each existing Dasein, does it become at all possible to disclose the existentiality of existence and to undertake an adequately founded ontological problem" (SZ 13). That which is *existentiell* is a distinct possibility of a particular Dasein. That which is existentiell is a genuine possible task that can be taken up or neglected by an act of decision.

What, then, is the meaning of existentiality and how is it thus related to this distinct or ontical or existentiell possibility that is each one of us. Heidegger's task in this book in large measure centers on explicating the essential manner of Dasein's being. *Being and Time* is an inquiry into the essential structures of existence. Whether this is an actuality in my own existence is not at issue here. Indeed my own everyday existence might never take up anything more than average understanding of this existence. Then again, Dasein can seize upon in an existentiell manner, as my possibility or range of possibilities, unique and completely ownmost (authentic) possibilities that are open to me. Insofar as I take up or neglect these possibilities, I qua Dasein do so in an existentiell manner. Insofar as these are essential structures of this being that can be in this way, the analytic of these structures is existential.