The question of being: Heidegger's project

An on-the-way in the field of paths for the changing questioning of the manifold question of Being.¹

It may remain forever a matter of debate how much truth there is in the old claim that every important thinker has essentially one fundamental idea. In the case of famous philosophers, its vindication may oblige us to summarize the "one great idea" in such broad terms as to make it almost meaningless. What can probably be claimed with more justification is that for most great minds there has been one question that guided their thinking or research. This certainly applies to Martin Heidegger, and the question that fascinated him throughout his long philosophic life can be stated simply: what is the meaning of being? Ontology, in the widest possible sense, was his main concern throughout his life. This does not mean, of course, that he was forever looking for an answer to the same old question. As his thinking evolved, the meaning of the question changed; but Heidegger to the end of his life remained convinced that the "questionability" of the Seinsfrage was the main thrust of his life's work (d. GA 143 8).²

Impressive as such single-mindedness may seem, the phrase "meaning of being" on careful examination seems so vague that philosophers and nonphilosophers alike may wonder what kind of question this is. The meaning of being? Does this refer to all beings, to whatever we may say that it is—rocks, trees, clouds, colors, sounds, dreams, or irrational numbers alike? Or does the question presuppose some high-flying metaphysical concept like Being as such, as seems to be indicated by the fact that English translations usually capitalize the letter "B"? Heidegger made it his task to show that there is a meaningful concept of the being of all beings, a conception that underlies all our understanding of reality. As he saw it, this conception has been the aim of all metaphysical thinking, even if it was not always properly understood. The search for an answer remained a search for a clarification of the question, as Heidegger's reference to "the changing questioning" in the epigraph to this chapter shows.

It is not possible in one short essay to trace the meaning of this question throughout Heidegger's lifetime—why he continued to think it worth asking, and why it seemed so elusive. The discussion here will have to be confined to a clarification of the sense in which the "question of being" came to vex the young Heidegger, and why he treated its "neglect" after a promising start in early Greek philosophy as the most serious omission in the history of Western philosophy. Basing the origins of the problems he is dealing with in ancient Greek philosophy is more than the conventional homage paid to the Greeks by educated Germans of Heidegger's generation. Understanding Heidegger's reference to that tradition is indispensable for a proper understanding of the question of the meaning of being itself.³ As he never tired of repeating, the problem of the meaning of being, the guiding star of his philosophical thought, started to concern him while he was still a high school student. It began when one of his teachers presented him with Franz Brentano's book On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle.⁴ A brief summary will provide a rough picture of the history of Aristotelian ontology, for in its traditional ramifications, this is the conception that Heidegger pits himself against with his claim that the meaning of the question of being must be revived. This chapter will therefore try to point out in a kind of dialectical discussion how Heidegger relates himself to the tradition.

The question of being in Heidegger's early writings

Certain peculiarities of the Greek language favored the development of ontology, the "science of being," as Aristotle called metaphysics. Even in prephilosophical Greek it was quite common to refer to "beings," to "what there is," both in the sense of "things" and in the sense of what we would call "states of affairs." The fact that there is
a clear linguistic distinction between "beings," ta onta, referred to by the participle with the definite article, the verb "to be," einai, and the abstract noun "being," ou sia [the nature of beings], makes the development of such a philosophical discipline much more natural than our contrived renderings in English (or in German for that matter) would suggest. Once a certain level of abstraction and conceptual reflection was reached, it became only natural to raise the question whether there is a unified meaning of being that accrues to all beings (in contradistinction to "what is not") or whether being has irreducibly many different meanings that fall into different categories, depending on the kind of entity that is under investigation. It became natural to ask whether there is a unitary meaningful concept that demarcates the realm of being as such.

Plato was the first to raise this question explicitly in the Sophist; he calls the problem of being a gigantomachia, a "battle among giants," that has to be settled if there is to be any chance of solving problems about the meaning of not-being. Whether the conception of being as "what has the power to act or be acted on," offered as a compromise in the Sophist [242C ff.], is in effect Plato's own answer cannot be examined here. Heidegger was well aware of Plato's struggle with this problem, since he used the passage in the Sophist as his point of departure in Being and Time [BT 19]. Nevertheless, whatever Plato may have thought about the "unity of being," it was the Aristotelian doctrine of a manifold of meanings of being that came to dominate the history of Western metaphysics. It is Aristotle's doctrine of the categories of beings that Heidegger refers to when he presents his view of the historical development of Western thought that ended in complete "forgetfulness of the question of being." To understand Heidegger's reaction to this tradition that made the conception of "substance" its main focus, we have to take a closer look at Aristotle's theory.

Aristotle distinguished as many meanings of "being" as there are categories of entities. There is the primary category of substance, designating natural "things" that exist in their own right, while all other entities are attributes of substances either inhering in them or standing in some other relation to them [quality, quantity, relation, place, time, action, affection, possession, position]. Although it is not entirely clear how Aristotle arrived at his list of categories of all the things there are, it is fairly obvious that he used linguistic crite-

The question of being

ria as one of his guides. Thus, when we take a naturally existing independent object [e.g., a stone] and try to determine what predicates we assign to it, what characteristics it has, we get different types of answers about its nature in all its respects [its quantity, qualities, place, time, etc.]. That the way we speak about entities provides the guideline for their classification does not imply, however, that Aristotle regarded his system of categories as a man-made conceptual scheme. He regarded the categories as distinctions contained in the nature of things; they are read off nature and are not schemata read into or imposed on nature by us.

Aristotle therefore remained a metaphysical realist with respect to his "discovery" of the natural structure of reality. This structure is based on the primacy of substances, naturally existing independent entities that form the building blocks of Aristotle's universe.

Substances are the only entities that can exist in their own right, while all other entities are attributes that need substances as the substrate for their existence. "To be" then means either to be a substance or to be [one of the nine other kinds of] attributes of a substance. And since the being of a substance, a quality, a quantity, or other attributes are irreducibly different, there is no unified sense of "being" that could be predicated of items in all categories. There is only an "analogy of being" that has in recent years been dubbed "local meaning" to indicate the centrality of the substance, without permitting a univocal definition of the term "being."

Since this focus of the conception of being on substantiality determined the future development of metaphysics, not only in later antiquity but through the Middle Ages into the modern age, "substance" remained the central term in traditional ontology, and substances or "things," natural entities with attributes and the capacities to interact causally with one another, remained the building blocks—and became Heidegger's main challenge.

The young Heidegger's apparent unease at the "untidiness" of this allegedly natural order of things, with its resulting emptiness of the concept of being itself, increased when he immersed himself in medieval philosophy. He could see how heavily Christian doctrine was leaning on Aristotelian metaphysics, as neo-Thomism does to this day. In spite of all changes in the adaptation of Greek philosophy to Christian theology, the handmaiden exerted a decisive influence over her mistress: the substance-oriented ontology of the Aristotel-
lians dominated the medieval discussion and determined what solutions were even considered viable.

It took Heidegger some time to find his own way and to overcome this tradition, founded by Aristotle and carried on by the Aristotelians, a tradition that continued to exert its influence even over Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. We will have to follow some further steps in Heidegger's development to see what he found so pernicious in the “substance ontology” and how he arrived at the solution to the difficulties. His self-attested continued perplexity concerning the question of being helps to explain an otherwise rather surprising feature of his philosophical biography. A contemporary of the young Heidegger who had to evaluate his early published work (before Being and Time) could not have had an inkling that Heidegger would become one of the most important and influential philosophers of the twentieth century. His early work, if not actually dull, is at least rather conventional and must look at first blush as of historical interest at best. Neither his thesis, “The Doctrine of Judgment in Psychologism” (1913), nor his monograph, The Theory of Categories and Meaning of Duns Scotus (1915), would seem to promise great originality, let alone revolutionary thinking. Had Heidegger done no more, he would rightly have vanished without a trace in the archives.

A closer look at these early writings (which we can only touch on here) would show, however, that Heidegger had not been wasting his time. As early as his thesis, his critique of psychologism – at that time still a fashionable trend in the philosophy of mind in Germany – shows that he was firmly convinced that the key to meaning cannot lie in the empirical observation of the actual psychological processes that constitute our thoughts. This conviction formed the basis of his later allegiance to Husserlian phenomenology. The act of judging must not be confused with the meaning of what is judged (GA I 110). If we want to know what our thoughts are about (what philosophers after Brentano call the “intentionality” of acts of consciousness), we must analyze the content of thought itself, as distinct from the psychic events that are at work.

Nevertheless, Heidegger gained valuable insights concerning the Seinsfrage from this discussion of a philosophy that he regarded as fundamentally mistaken. His reflections on the psychologistic philosophers' explanations of how psychological processes constitute the objects of our thoughts forced Heidegger to reflect more on the connection between the act of thinking in contradistinction to the meaning of the thought and on its relationship with the language in which it is expressed. Tentative results of these reflections are found in side remarks which indicate that Heidegger was moving toward a characterization of “being” that is rather different from the one generated in the Aristotelian naturalist ontology.

He envisages the future task of the theory of knowledge to be to “divide the whole realm of ‘being’ into its different modes of reality [Wirklichkeitsweisen]” and regards epistemology as crucial for such a division: “The characteristics of the different forms of reality must be sharply demarcated and determined, including the appropriate method of knowing [Art ihrer Erkenntnis] and its limitations” (GA I 186). The “division of being” into the realms of the physical, psychic, metaphysical, and logical (GA I 160) makes no claims to being comprehensive, however; it is rather tentative, and it follows conventional lines. Heidegger is clearly still far from seeing any way to provide for the possibility of a unified meaning of being. But although he advocates a strict separation of the realm of the psychic and that of logical validity, what is important for him is the question of how meaning as a whole is embedded in the actual life of the person who entertains a thought; the distinction between the different “realms” is not as rigid as his adherence to the terminology might suggest.

A major step forward in the search for a clearer conception of the different meanings of being can be found in Heidegger's second monograph, the discussion of the theory of categories and meaning found in Duns Scotus. What intrigued him in particular was why Duns Scotus came to see the Aristotelian system of categories as only one of several such systems, a subclass that fits one special part or specific realm of being but does not exhaust reality as such. The need for a widening of the ontological categories seems to have occurred to Scotus first for theological reasons. If the most fundamental concepts apply to God at all, then they can do so only in an analogous sense. For God is not a substance like other substances, nor can the concepts of unity, truth, and goodness apply to him in the same sense that they do to other entities (GA I 260, 263). But it was not just a widening and a diversification that separated Scotus's treatment of the problem of the categories of being from the tradi-
tional treatment by the Aristotelians. As Heidegger saw it, Scotus did not just assign different realms of reality to the different subject matters of different disciplines; rather he saw the need for a new conception of reality as such. Behind this revision stands the insight that if different disciplines import different (senses of the) categories, then the categories of reality cannot simply be read off nature, as they were for Aristotle, but they are obviously also read into nature by us, or rather into reality as a whole. The "question of being" becomes then the question of the givenness of the object to the subject. For Scotus, therefore, the conditions of subjectivity (how does the subject grasp or interpret its objects?) attain central importance. If all "objects" depend on the meaning that is bestowed on them by the subject, and if they are always part of a wider network of a referential totality, then it must be the philosopher's task to work out in what sense there is a structure of meaning that stands in relation to or conditions what one might call the structure of reality.

Scotus realized at the same time that all meanings find their expression in linguistic signs, and this explains the importance that he attributed to the reflection on language as the tool to work out the structure of meanings. The question whether language, particularly its grammatical structure, imposes a definite analyzable form on our thinking acquired special importance, since Scotus was aware of the fact that it provides the basic concepts that hold together the different realms of reality, of all that "can be experienced and thought." It is the function of the form in the complex of meaning to give the object its meaning ("It is the function of the form in the complex of meaning to give the object its being" [GA 1 325, cf. 215, 266]. The meaning of the concepts employed, the formal structure of judgments as a functional whole, reveals the givenness of objects.

The discovery of this structure of meaning also brought it home to Scotus, according to Heidegger, that this "logical reality" that is intended by the subject cannot be identical to or isomorphic with the empirical reality of what lies outside the realm of meaning. Scotus therefore distinguishes between the "ens rationis" and the "ens naturae," the being of reason and the being of nature, and he comes to realize that there cannot be any simple correspondence theory of truth in the sense that our thoughts could be a mirror of reality. The signs "stand for" but do not bear any similarity to what they signify, just as the sign that advertises wine outside a tavern need not resemble the wine itself [GA 1 265 ff., 271]. Following Scotus, Heidegger came to dismiss "mirror theories" of language and truth early on. The categories of "all that is" become the categories of our understanding of being: the categories become the "elements and means of the interpretation of the meaning of what is experienced" [GA 1 400]. Aristotle's metaphysical realism has been challenged.

The subtlety of the scholastic philosopher Duns Scotus is not our topic here. If we follow Heidegger's reception of Scotus's theory of categories and meaning, it is because Scotus clearly realized that objective reality is determined by the thinking subject's understanding [cf. GA 1 318–19, 337]. That there can be "objective subjectivity" and that there is an overall order and structure underlying all "object-givenness" is the most important principle in Scotus's structural analysis of what the different parts of language signify. The importance of the interdependence between language, interpretation, and "outside reality" that is to become so crucial in Being and Time may have impressed Heidegger here for the first time. The interconnection between meaning and the intended object also drew Heidegger's attention to the question of what constitutes the "fitting" between the realm of meaning and the real object in the world. So we find here several indications of seminal ideas that will gain major importance in Being and Time, namely that it is our comprehension that assigns a "significance" to the object and that the object in turn must be able to bear such a significance, a significance
“care” as the meaning of our existence, which comprises and unifies in its understanding all the different conceptions of what there is, let alone of temporality as the transcendental horizon of the overall meaning of being as such. What is clear, however, is that the research on Duns Scotus had not put to rest Heidegger’s old concern with the manifold meanings of being, but that it had rather sharpened his perception of its difficulties. The very fact that he found the Scotist schematization and formal structuring inadequate to capture living experience as a whole or to overcome what he calls the “impression of a deadly emptiness of all previous systems of categories” (GA 1 399, 408) shows that he was searching for a way of getting beyond abstract schemes of classification. His conclusion indicates that he was already aware of one major shortcoming underlying all such purely formal categorizations of beings: that they regard the theoretical attitude as the only one that gives shape to reality. He calls it a fateful error (GA 1 406). To remove that error will become one of the main tasks of Heidegger’s mature philosophy.

THE QUESTION OF BEING IN BEING AND TIME

What made the difference? What led to the “breakthrough” that provided Heidegger with the clue for attacking the question of the meaning of being in a new way, so new that he found it necessary to invent an original philosophical language in order to prevent any confusion of his new approach with traditional lines of thought? It is often maintained that the “new Heidegger,” who had not published anything for twelve years before he produced the monumental work Being and Time, owes the incentive for his own philosophy to the influence of Edmund Husserl, whom he met personally only after the completion of his early writings. But this is true only in a very limited sense. First of all, Husserl’s phenomenology clearly (and with Heidegger’s acknowledgment) already formed the background of Heidegger’s critique of psychologism and had supplied him with the necessary conceptual framework for the discussion of Scotus’s theory of language and meaning. Heidegger in fact reports that he had already been intrigued by Husserl’s Logical Investigations when he was a student, but at that time he could not see how it would help him to solve his problem of being. Only when he came into personal contact with Husserl and the practice of the phenomenological method did he see
more clearly what phenomenology could do — and, increasingly over
the years, its shortcomings. As we shall see, it was these shortcomings
that guided him on the way to the ideas he developed in Being and Time.

A short characterization of Husserl’s phenomenology will be neces-
sary to clarify the issue. Husserl had adopted Brentano’s concep-
tion of the intentionality (“directedness toward”) of all mental acts
in order to give a comprehensive depiction of all phenomena as
objects of — or, more precisely, the contents of — different types of
acts of consciousness. Every object is to be interpreted as it is
grasped by an act of comprehension in consciousness; it is some-
thing thought of, wished for, doubted, imagined, seen, heard, or
known. If we want to understand the nature of all phenomena, we
therefore have to work out the precise way in which consciousness
intends its objects.

As Husserl saw it, such a precise description of the working of
consciousness must furnish us with a proper understanding of all
the types or ways of intending the objects of consciousness. This
claim is based on the notion, familiar since Descartes, that the con-
tent of consciousness is transparent and indubitable to the pure I, or
ego, which forms the basis of consciousness, while facts about the
world are at best probable. For Husserl the precise examination of
the intended objects leads to a comprehension of their being or es-
ence; if we want to know what phenomena really are, we have to
look at consciousness itself rather than at the results of the empiri-
cal sciences. He therefore tried to establish philosophy as a strict
ego-centered science that furnishes all other disciplines with the a
priori conditions of their specific modes of cognition. Husserl can
therefore be characterized as a “transcendental subjectivist”; that is,
he held the view that it is the subject that provides the conditions of
all determinations of the objects of experience and thought. Reflec-
tions on the acts of consciousness were supposed to render the es-
ence not only of the acts of consciousness themselves, but also of
the objects, while questions of actual external facts of experience
were to be kept aside. The importance of the actual world that tran-
sends consciousness was not denied by Husserl, but it was “brack-
eted,” or kept out of consideration, for phenomenological purposes;
only the experience of the subject and the content of the intentional
acts of consciousness were to be studied.

The question of being

Heidegger acknowledged with Husserl that the “being” of all en-
tities lies in the sense we gain of them in our understanding. This
much he shared with both Husserl’s transcendental subjectivism
and modern anthropocentrism. What Heidegger saw as crucial dif-
culties in Husserl’s approach (apart from the fact that Husserl’s phe-
nomenology leaves him still with an unanalyzed multiplicity of
meanings of being) can be summed up as three interrelated points.
[1] He objected to treating the subject in whose understanding all
ontology must center as an impersonal and transparent ego that is
infallible in its intuitions about the activity and the content of its
consciousness. That the “I” is in a sense closest to me does not
mean that I comprehend it; we may be very far from possessing any
such self-transparency. As Heidegger takes great pains to show, our
self-understanding in fact is usually not at all authentic. [2] Heideg-
ger questioned the feasibility or advisability of “bracketing” the
world. He regarded Husserl’s “immanentism” as mistaken, since it
came dangerously close to turning the objects of consciousness ex-
cursively into objects in consciousness, and it made Husserl dis-
pense with the question of the ties there are to the actual world that
transcends consciousness. [3] In spite of Husserl’s attempt to capture
all modes of consciousness including emotional attitudes, for Hei-
degger the very fact that the objects of consciousness are assumed as
simply given in the stream of consciousness and to be studied in a
detached “viewing” or “intuition” showed that Husserl’s ontology
remained tied to the traditional theoretical stance and ontology of
the “occurrent.” Since all three of these points are crucial issues to
Heidegger, they can be used as a key to understanding what is charac-
teristic of Heideggerian ontology in Being and Time.

[1] Heidegger’s realization that the picture we form of ourselves
may be influenced (and even distorted) by our personal interests and
propensities, and that it is conditioned by the general historical situa-
tion, made it seem questionable whether there is such a neutral
transcendental “I” that underlies all acts of consciousness. He there-
fore adopted a policy one might call systematic suspicion (to be
distinguished from Cartesian systematic doubt), which takes into
account that we may not be transparent to ourselves — that the “I”
of the intentional act may be rather far from any proper self
understanding (for his critique of the givenness of the “I,” see BT
§25, 150 ff.). That the phenomena may be familiar to us but not
properly understood leads to the special approach Heidegger takes in *Being and Time*, that is, starting with a characterization of human beings in their *everydayness*. His approach has a twofold advantage. First of all, he can avoid “passing over” the peculiar nature of those ties we have with the world that get lost when we take the armchair philosopher’s detached theoretical stance. Second, he can turn the distortions that we are prone to import in our “average everydayness” into the subject of his phenomenological investigation.

Since Heidegger disagreed with Husserl’s assumption that there is an impersonal transcendental ego providing us with incontestable truths, he had to work out *who* that entity really is that in its very nature has a concern with the question of being. Because he did not want to foist yet another artificial construction on this entity in his own interpretation, Heidegger started his phenomenological investigation by capturing the phenomenon that all philosophers before him had “passed over” as trivial and not worth the theorist’s attention, namely, everyday existence. The vocabulary he introduced to characterize the various features of everyday existence and its structure was designed to avoid all associations with common philosophical terminology; it was not designed to turn it into a secret doctrine open only to the initiate. His terminology, though often unusual in German, is much easier to understand than its English counterpart, because Heidegger plays with easily comprehensible etymological family relationships that often do not exist in English.

This method of suspicion explains the special methodological twist Heidegger gives to his phenomenology. While acknowledging his debt to Husserl (his teacher’s painstaking analyses seem to have greatly sharpened his sensitivity to the importance of precision in phenomenological description), he did not think that phenomena can simply be read off from the way they are given in acts of consciousness. Rather, they have to be unearthed as that which might be only implicitly contained in our understanding. So Heidegger was looking at the phenomena behind the surface appearances — at what lies hidden behind what we find familiar and regard as natural “in the first approach and for the most part,” as he expresses it. This method of suspicion explains Heidegger’s predilection for an archaeological vocabulary in his depiction of the phenomenological method: that it is the task of his analysis to “uncover” the phenomena that have been covered up, buried, or hidden, so that they have to be

The question of being

“freed” or “laid bare.” The same conception forms the background of his famous theory of truth as “unhiddenness” and of understanding as a form of “disclosedness” in general. Heidegger’s method of “uncovering” proceeds on two levels. He distinguishes between (a) the “ontic” level of the factual (for human existence Heidegger introduces the special term “existentiell”) that is open to observation, the level of field studies for the phenomenologist, and (b) the “ontological” level, the phenomenological description of the deep structures that underlie and explain the ontic (for the structure of human existence Heidegger introduced the term “existentiale”). Although Heidegger himself gives few examples on the ontic or existentiell level, he always stresses that all ontological claims must find their “ontic confirmation.”

In spite of our tendencies to “cover up” the phenomena, Heidegger saw it as necessary to start with the analysis of human existence, since human understanding is the only entrance and key to the nature of being. For we are always already concerned with both ourselves and our whereabouts (“the world”) and have always already an at least implicit understanding of the being of both ourselves and the world. Because of this self-awareness and world awareness, he introduced the technical term “Dasein” for human beings. Although the term “Da-sein” has become so customary in English that it needs no further introduction, it is useful to keep the literal meaning of the German “being-there” in mind, since it is designed to signify that the “disclosedness” of our whereabouts, and therefore a natural tendency to form at least a preontological understanding, is the most decisive characteristic of humans for Heidegger.

The aim of Heidegger’s phenomenological description of our everydayness is to make explicit what basic structures underlie this preunderstanding. If the key to all understanding of being lies in Dasein’s disclosedness of the world, then an analysis of Dasein must precede a general “fundamental ontology.” As Heidegger indicates, it had been his original plan for *Being and Time* to proceed through a “preparatory fundamental analysis” of Dasein’s being to an explication of how time provides a “transcendental horizon” for the question of being as such. He never finished this task (for the original outline, see BT 63–4); that is, he never got beyond the analysis of Dasein, for reasons to which we will have to return later. The publication of *Being and Time*, with its focus on the analysis of the
conditions of human existence, made Heidegger instantly famous after 1927. It is this focus that justifies, within limits, calling him an existentialist philosopher, a label he always rejected since he regarded fundamental ontology as his real task.

2 If the pure “I” is, then, an abstraction that permits a proper comprehension neither of Dasein nor of the embeddedness of all meaning and understanding in everydayness, it is also clear why Heidegger came to the conclusion that any bracketing of the factual world in phenomenology must be a crucial mistake. For Heidegger, who was concerned with a penetrating analysis of how we are related to the world and to ourselves as beings with a world, all abstraction from the way Dasein actually experiences the world must destroy the phenomenon of “having a world.” For the world is precisely the context in which we encounter beings and ourselves, and it is this encounter that determines what they are for our understanding.

Heidegger’s analysis of the a priori structure of our having a world therefore consists in displaying the way we deal with the world, with the entities in it, as we encounter them in our actual existence. As Heidegger saw it, we are not “thinking things” that may on different occasions entertain different relationships to different items in different intentional acts. Instead, our very being is defined by the fact that we are beings-in-a-world. This existential analysis consists of a two-pronged investigation that elucidates not only in what sense we encounter entities in the world and what makes them fit for such encounters, but also what in us constitutes such encounterings, what in our understanding makes it possible to disclose the entities to ourselves in this way. The analysis is transcendental in the Kantian sense that it unearths the conditions that make it possible for us to encounter whatever we do encounter in the way we make “sense” of the phenomena, because all such encounterings are ways of determining the being of the entities in the world. There is no other “sense” or “meaning of being” than the one we bestow on entities in our understanding. This is how Heidegger time and again defines how he understands “the meaning [or sense] of being”: “Meaning is that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself” (BT 193).

This transcendental investigation is not supposed to supply us with new insights about the world, but to retrace and articulate the way in which we “always already” understand what we are dealing with. If “to be” means “to be already understood as,” then a thorough investigation of all different kinds of understanding that underlie our dealing with the world is called for. This explains the importance that interpretation has for Heidegger, for in all interpretations we give in our activities, we draw on the implicit understanding of the meaning things have without being fully aware of it. The phenomenologist has to trace the different ways in which we deal with the “given” and bring them to articulation. So Heidegger is merely trying to bring to light what we always in a sense know “in our bones,” as Ryle phrased it in his review of Being and Time.13

3 Since our implicit understanding of being is not only the basis of Heidegger’s own interpretation but, as he saw it, the all-pervasive feature that characterizes humankind in general, there has always been an at least dim understanding of the “question of being.” Heidegger makes no claims to originality here. What needs an explanation is, rather, why this dim understanding was never fully developed before, and a good deal of Heidegger’s originality consists in his explanation of what he calls our “forgetfulness” of being.

The forgetfulness is twofold. There is the forgetfulness of our everyday understanding, which does not even try to gain any authentic comprehension but takes over the ready-made interpretations that it finds in its environment, the explanations and evaluations of one’s own society and time. For the most part we simply adopt our mode of living and self-understanding in compliance with the general standards: we behave, speak, and value as “one” speaks, behaves, and values. Heidegger’s depiction of the all-embracing influence of the anonymous public “one” (the impersonal pronoun, not the numeral) is one of the most colorful sections of Being and Time (Div. I, Chap. 4). The English translation of das Man as “the They” is misleading, since it does not show that there is not usually any detachment from this basic mode of existence that “anyone” shares. It takes a special effort to shake off the yoke of this public interpretation in order to gain an authentic understanding; for Heidegger, the experience of coming to terms with our finitude in the anxiety of facing up to death is the crucial situation that forces us to wrench ourselves away from domination by the anonymous public understanding (Div. II, Chap. 1). As he repeatedly affirms, there is no way to live permanently in authenticity, since we have to take the everyday world and its routine for granted in all our practical concerns.
If the "forgetfulness of being" in our everyday absorption in the world seems natural, the special forgetfulness that Heidegger ascribes to philosophers seems much less so, since it is their task to reflect explicitly on this question, and they in fact have reflected on it ever since the Greeks first raised the question, What is being? If philosophers up to Heidegger's time missed the crucial point, there must be a definite reason for this monumental misunderstanding. And Heidegger thought indeed that he could put his finger on the crucial mistake: the mistake lies in the theoretical approach as such.

As mentioned earlier, the stance taken in theorizing allows the thinker to have a detached point of view. The thinker can treat the objects of his investigation as "indifferently occurring" things that exist independent of observation, just as the observer in his turn is at liberty to fasten on any object. So observer and observed, thinker and the object of his thought, are regarded as "indifferently occurring" alongside one another. And this theoretical stance, according to Heidegger, was not overcome by the subject-centered ontology in the Kantian tradition; it was not even overcome by Husserl's insistence that all objects be treated as intentional objects, that is, as objects represented in consciousness. As Heidegger sees it, in Husserl's phenomenological analysis the objects in consciousness retain the status of mere occurrence, just as consciousness itself remains in an ontologically uninterpreted state, for it is treated as an entity that simply occurs. Being in Husserl would therefore have to be defined as the "occurrent" correlate of the series of meanings as they are determined separately by each act of intuiting an essence revealed by phenomenological analysis.

That the theoretical stance does have its justification for the theoretician himself Heidegger does not deny. It would in fact be quite innocuous if scientists, and particularly philosophers, had recognized it for what it is: a derivative mode of being, constituted by their special way of viewing the objects of their research. By mistaking it for the significant mode of being that underlies all entities, however, they become guilty of suppressing the discovery of the other modes of being that Heidegger takes great pains to work out. Besides the "mere occurrence" ("presence-at-hand") of theoretical understanding, there is also "readiness-at-hand" constituting our practical understanding of dealing with equipment, "being-with"

The question of being

other human beings, and "in-each-case-mineness," the relation to and concern for our own selves that we are and have to be.

For Heidegger, our everyday life is determined largely by our understanding of all entities in terms of our practical concerns, purposes, and designs, and this includes our dealings with other human beings and with ourselves. Among the four modes of being, therefore, the theoretical stance fastens on the least characteristic one, the one Heidegger calls "founded" or "derivative" because it comes into focus only when we disregard what he calls the "referential totality" of those practical and personal concerns that make up the everyday world (cf. BT §13).

The mode of being that we assign to different entities is not always fixed, at least not on the "ontic" level. One and the same "thing" can be treated as a piece of equipment with a practical meaning, or as a piece of art, or as the object of scientific investigation. Other human beings can be treated as "scientific objects" (as ciphers in statistics) or as mere tools (something ready-to-hand) instead of as "Dasein-withs." The context therefore determines their "being." There can even be (ontically) a certain indeterminacy as to which of the ontological possibilities will be seized upon in such treatments under a specific aspect. What is not open for decision in the particular context is the preexisting structure of these different possibilities, since it forms the ontological structure of our very nature.

Heidegger's twofold task

If Heidegger has found important supplementary modes of being that determine our existence in the world, one may wonder why he regards the age-old commitment to the ontology of Vorhandenheit (occurrence) as so fateful a mistake that he comes back to it again and again. If his predecessors omitted something of importance, is it not enough to supply what is omitted, without harping so much on the omission? The point, however, is that simply supplying what is omitted will not do. What is needed is rather a complete revision in two respects. The first concerns the interpretation of the history of philosophy; the second concerns the proper search for the conception of "being" itself, that is, Heidegger's actual enterprise. This is in fact the twofold task that Heidegger has set for himself in Being and
philosophy is, to repeat, the orientation toward being as "reality" or prejudice was derived in one way or another from Aristotelian ontology to show the decisive steps that lead to the dominance of Heidegger's view that it is the "most general of generalities" (BT 29).

A clarification of this twofold task, even if sketchy, will provide a better understanding of Heidegger's project as such. Let us start with the second task, the task of destroying the history of ontology. Heidegger is not out to do violence to history or to badger his predecessors for their blindness. The German word "Destruktion" is not as violent as its English counterpart. This "destruction" is not a deconstruction, as some people would have it nowadays, but an analysis intended to show where the decisive steps of the derailment took place in Kant, Descartes, and Aristotle. Heidegger does not have the deconstructionists' detachment from tradition: he thinks it can be mastered and rectified even while acknowledging that the "missteps" were inevitable. His emphasis on continuity in the history of being (through all historical vicissitudes) also speaks against recruiting him for the now fashionable "historicist" camp. A historicist Heidegger could not regard himself as the rightful heir of Parmenides, the discoverer of the tie between being and thinking; he could not look for any continued problems through different periods of history, but would only notice curious doxographical coincidences that are as external and as accidental as the resemblance between a triceratops and a rhinoceros.

Heidegger's concern is rather with "unravelling" the history of ontology to show the decisive steps that lead to the dominance of the ontology of Vorhandenheit and to the forgetfulness of "being," that is, to the prejudice that being has no concrete meaning because it is the "most general of generalities" (BT 29). If in the past this prejudice was derived in one way or another from Aristotelian ontology's view that being transcends the categories and can therefore have no "real" content, today it rests on the view that "being" applies indifferently to whatever we may introduce by the existential operator or include in our universe of discourse.

What Heidegger finds most fateful in the development of Western philosophy is, to repeat, the orientation toward being as "reality" or "thinghood" (BT 96), for this makes the world a sum total of independently existing entities that exist for observing subjects insofar as those subjects manage to make contact with them. He blames this ontological dualism for the "missteps" noted by Heidegger's predecessors for their blindness. The German word "Destruktion" is not as violent as its English counterpart. This "destruction" is not a deconstruction, as some people would have it nowadays, but an analysis intended to show where the decisive steps of the derailment took place in Kant, Descartes, and Aristotle. Heidegger does not have the deconstructionists' detachment from tradition: he thinks it can be mastered and rectified even while acknowledging that the "missteps" were inevitable. His emphasis on continuity in the history of being (through all historical vicissitudes) also speaks against recruiting him for the now fashionable "historicist" camp. A historicist Heidegger could not regard himself as the rightful heir of Parmenides, the discoverer of the tie between being and thinking; he could not look for any continued problems through different periods of history, but would only notice curious doxographical coincidences that are as external and as accidental as the resemblance between a triceratops and a rhinoceros.

Heidegger's concern is rather with "unravelling" the history of ontology to show the decisive steps that lead to the dominance of the ontology of Vorhandenheit and to the forgetfulness of "being," that is, to the prejudice that being has no concrete meaning because it is the "most general of generalities" (BT 29). If in the past this prejudice was derived in one way or another from Aristotelian ontology's view that being transcends the categories and can therefore have no "real" content, today it rests on the view that "being" applies indifferently to whatever we may introduce by the existential operator or include in our universe of discourse.

What Heidegger finds most fateful in the development of Western philosophy is, to repeat, the orientation toward being as "reality" or "thinghood" (BT 96), for this makes the world a sum total of independently existing entities that exist for observing subjects insofar as those subjects manage to make contact with them. He blames this
lating the object, we are led to take this “reification” as the natural way of being of that “object.” Such a dissociated perspective is quite justified for the “theoretical view” so long as we do not forget that it is an artificial isolating perspective and we fully realize that it is neither the only perspective nor one that is even capable of doing justice to the other ways in which things are “given” to us. Because for centuries the theoretical stance had been regarded as the only one worthy of the philosopher-scientist, no other way of understanding, and at the same time, therefore, no other way of being of objects, was ever taken into consideration. The ontology of “merely occurring things” is therefore cut back by Heidegger and relegated to the scientists’ special point of view as a “founded mode” or derivative understanding of being. This derivative point of view, which treats us as initially worldless subjects who somehow establish cognitive contact with separate objects, ought rather to be understood as a special version of the more original way of understanding ourselves as beings with a world that is characterized as a “being-among” or involvement in the world of the ready-to-hand.

The promised “destruction” of the history of ontology, as Heidegger had initially planned it, was never carried out (see BT 64). Part II of Being and Time, which was to contain a discussion of “Kant’s doctrine of schematism and time,” “the ontological foundation of the ‘cogito sum’ of Descartes,” and “Aristotle’s essay on time, as providing a way of discriminating the phenomenal basis and limits of ancient ontology,” never appeared and can be, at best, reconstructed from some of his later publications. It seems clear that the treatment of history itself was not the stumbling block. Heidegger found himself increasingly at a loss as to how to complete his first task, the “laying bare of the horizon for an interpretation of the meaning of being as such,” for he never published the missing Division III of Part I of Being and Time, the division he claimed he had merely “held back” [BT 17] when he was forced to publish his manuscript sooner than planned. This division was to bring the “reversal” of Being and Time, that is, “Time and Being.” Why Heidegger was so dissatisfied with this last part perhaps will never be known, since he did not consent to have it included in his posthumous edition. We will not try to enter into any speculations here, but will try to follow Heidegger in his initial project as far as he took it.

The gravest consequence of the omission of a proper understanding of “being” in the ontology of occurrence is that it does not permit the development of what one might call a dynamic rather than a static ontology. It cannot lead to a proper development of the conception of time or temporality as Heidegger envisions it. To work out this concept is the ultimate task of Being and Time as we have it. We have seen that for Heidegger a human being is never an isolated, worldless subject, but is an entity that in its very essence is constituted by its world. We have to see what is meant by this. So far, the modes of being of the occurrent, the ready-to-hand, being-with, and being-onself do not seem to form a meaningful whole. Nor do they form a unity if one looks at the corresponding kinds of understanding in which they are grounded: theoretical understanding, practical concern, solicitude, and the many ways of comportment toward one’s own self. All these modes of comportment are, as Heidegger explains, different kinds of “-sights,” different kinds of “enlightenment” about the world. Up to this point in his analysis they do not form any unity that would constitute anything like the meaning of being. We seem to have only different ways of understanding beings, just as in Husserl’s phenomenological analysis. If Heidegger had gone no further, the only difference between him and Husserl would be that Heidegger fastened on different “root types” of understanding, with an emphasis on our direct involvement in the world rather than on “intuiting” the essences of beings in consciousness.

But Heidegger did not leave matters here. First of all, he introduced a unifying term — “care” — to designate the basic feature in us that constitutes all our involvements in the world [BT Div. I, Chap. 6]. It is the analysis of the structure of care that allows him to claim that our being is at the same time “being-in-the-world” as an organic whole. This holistic conception of “care” must take account of the overall sense we give to our existence as being-in-the-world by virtue of which it is an integrated whole. The decisive characteristic in our relation to the world as such, which includes ourselves as our ultimate point of reference, is conditioned by the care that allows us to treat everything as part of our project in the largest sense of the word. This feature leads to the temporal interpretation of the structure of our being-in-the-world. We project ourselves, our whole existence, into the world and understand ourselves as well as everything in the world in terms of the possibilities within the design or “projection” that we make of ourselves. (Since the translation of Entwurf as
"projection" [see BT 184] may suggest wrong associations with psychological projection, "design" in the sense of an architect's blueprint is perhaps a less misleading synonym.

Everything we are dealing with finds its meaning within this projection, and things have a meaning only insofar as they form part of it. Within this "project" we make of ourselves, everything has its meaning and thereby its being. The design is, as the term suggests, directed into the future: we project ourselves into an anticipated future as the ultimate aim of our endeavors. But this is not the only temporal dimension that is at work in our projection, because our projection is not a free choice of the future. According to Heidegger, we cannot make any such projections without an existing understanding of the world and ourselves in it, an understanding determined by the past we have been and still are. Therefore, not only do we carry our past with us, as one carries weighty memories, but we always already understand ourselves and our projects in terms of the past and out of the past.

The absorption by the here and now constitutes our (for the most part) inescapable involvement in the inauthentic, or "falling," way of understanding the world in terms of the One [BT §§27, 71].

This, in a nutshell, is the structure Heidegger calls our "temporality." By temporality he does not mean that we are, as are all other things, confined to time, nor that we have a sense of time, but rather that we exist as three temporal dimensions at once: it is being ahead of ourselves in the future, drawing on our past, while being concerned with the present that constitutes our being. The way we project ourselves into the future (ahead of ourselves) while taking with us our past (being already in) in our immersion into the present (being at home with) is what Heidegger designates as the "ekstases" of temporality. There is nothing "ecstatic" about this. All it means is that we are already "extended" outward in temporal dimensions and so are never contained in a "punctual" here and now (see BT 370 ff.).

Since we are neither static points in a preexisting indifferent universe nor confined to a segment of an infinite arrow of time, but are instead entities whose very understanding makes up the temporal dimensions of our existence, this temporality is the transcendental condition of Dasein's having a universe of meaningful beings. The
terminology as "disclosedness" and "unhiddenness," show that we do not create our own universe, not even its meaning. The intelligibility resides as much in the "things" encountered themselves as in the understanding residing in us, and this "fittingness" is not due to any merit of ours. Enlightenment [Lichtung] is something that simply happens to us, and in this sense "being" is quite out of our control. It is an "opening," a "free gift," as Heidegger liked to say later in his life; all we can try to do is "appropriate it" in an authentic understanding. Heidegger always insisted that there is "being" only as long as there is the understanding of being in Dasein, but that the entities themselves do not depend on that understanding [BT 269 ff.]. That we are passive recipients of "being" seems to be a strong argument against recent attempts to interpret Heidegger as a predecessor of the "new pragmatism" that would make "being" a matter of social construction. Heidegger would agree that ontically every epoch articulates [constructs] its own interpretations, but that does not justify a pragmatist conception of ontology itself. He in fact warned against our present-day submission to the spirit of technology. What sense can such warnings and the wistful claim that "only a God can save us" make in the mouth of a pragmatist?

Why we are enlightened entities, why being "speaks to us," is shrouded in mystery for Heidegger, a mystery he tended to express in increasingly mystifying terms in his later years. It is undeniable that Heidegger reaffirmed that "the road it has taken remains even today meaningful" (BT 17). Who is to contradict this testimony?

NOTES

1. Heidegger's last comments on his lifework, found in his unfinished notes for a preface to the edition of his collected writings [Gesamtausgabe letzter Hand] written shortly before his death in 1976, in Frühe Schriften [GA 1 437]. All translations or paraphrases are my own.

2. Since space is limited, this essay gives only a very rough sketch of Heidegger's development without any detailed discussion of the formative influence on him of the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, the Scholastics, Descartes, Kant, or Husserl. Nor does it deal with the question of whether his reading of these philosophers does justice to them.

3. Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles [Freiburg: Herder, 1861], trans. Roll George (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975). Brentano's book has remained a classic (he was the first in modern times to stress the importance of the special relationship of the "focal meaning" of being as centered around substantiality; see 56 ff.), and Heidegger was fully aware of its importance. He could not have come across a better introduction to Aristotle's metaphysics. For Heidegger's acknowledgment, see GA 1 56: "The question of the unity of the manifold of being that stirred then, darkly, unsteadily, helplessly, remained throughout many reversals, wanderings and indecisions, the persistent source leading up to Being and Time, which appeared two decades later." His early admiration for Brentano's work on Aristotle was not diminished by his critical stance toward Brentano's later work in the tradition of psychologism [see GA 1 155 ff.]

4. For a comprehensive discussion of the different meanings of "being" and the importance of the distinction between the copulative, existential, and veridical senses of "is" for the development of philosophy, see C. H. Kahn, The Verb 'Be' in Ancient Greek [Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973].

5. What Plato meant by his claim that "being" is the "kind that pervades everything or combines with everything" [Sophist, esp. 251d ff.] is still very much a matter of debate, so it is difficult to say whether the being that accrues to all that is has one definable meaning for Plato.

6. "So we say that not only animals and plants and their parts are substances, but also natural bodies such as fire and water and earth and everything of the sort" (Metaphysics Z 2, 1028b9 ff.). By the latter Aristotle does not mean "stuff" but individual "pieces" that actually exist and display their own characteristic functions.

7. The unreflected identification of "being" with "thinghood" or "reality"—derived from the Latin word "res" (the same etymology applies to the German term "Realität") designating "thing" as an indifferently occurring independent entity or a carrier of attributes—is the main point of criticism of traditional ontology in Being and Time (see BT 245, passim). It is in this sense only that Heidegger refused to be called a "realist."

8. By "logical" Heidegger usually means conceptual analysis, in accordance with the German tradition that goes back to the scholastics; the same meaning is to be found in Kant and Hegel and is still presupposed.
by Husserl. Formal logic is usually called "logistic" or "mathematical logic."

9 The theory itself can be called " Scotist" only in a qualified sense, for Heidegger (following the distinguished linguist H. Steinthal, Einleitung in die Psychologie und Sprachwissenschaft; see GA I 303–4) uses as one of his main sources the Grammatica speculativa, now by common consent regarded as the work of Thomas of Erfurt, as well as the equally spurious De rerum principio. But Heidegger's interpretation is also based on genuine writings by Duns Scotus: extensive references are given to the Quaestiones subtillisimae super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis, the Reportata, and the Ordinatio. Heidegger is aware of the fact that his attempt to demarcate reality may go beyond the scope of what Scotus clearly saw and worked out systematically himself, but he claims that he is following at least Scotus's intentions (GA I 211).

10 We find here already some of the terminology that Heidegger used later in Being and Time, e.g., "Bewandtnis" for "significance" (see GA I 223, 346, 387).

11 He stresses the need to allow for "the peculiar mobility of meaning that is constituted through live speech and assertion" - "eine durch die lebendige Rede und Aussage gegebene eigentümliche Beweglichkeit der Bedeutung" (GA I 336). This emphasis may have made Heidegger skeptical about Husserl's rather abstract phenomenological approach from early on.

12 Since Husserl worked and reworked his conception of phenomenology throughout his long life, there are quite differing accounts of it. For the uninitiated, the most accessible depiction is a short article that appeared in the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1927. Husserl had prepared no less than four German versions, three of which are reprinted, with comments by Heidegger, at Husserl's request, in Phänomenologische Psychologie, Husserliana, Vol. 9, ed. W. Biemel (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962), pp. 237–301.


14 I prefer to translate "Vorhandenheit" as "occurrence", even though "presence-at-hand" (see BT 67) has become customary and preserves the etymological connotations as well as the parallel with the "readiness-at-hand" of equipment. But the parallel between "Vorhandenheit" and "Zuhandenheit" cannot be imitated in English. In German, "Vorhandenheit," though originally signifying being "on hand," has lost all connotation of nearness [one can say of any distant star in the Milky Way that it is "vorhanden"], hence my preference for "occurrence." In contrast, "Zuhandenheit" signifies the "handiness" of equipment for use. "Ex-

The question of being

tant" has replaced "present-at-hand" in some recent translations (e.g., Basic Problems of Phenomenology), but it might wrongly suggest a contrast to what has become extinct.


16 It is impossible to render adequately in English all the terms Heidegger derives from the German roots "Licht" and "Sicht." There is the "sight" by which we deal with equipment [Umsicht = circumspection], or with others [Rücksicht], and the perspective of our projection into the future in foresight [Vorsicht]. Light metaphors are used when Dasein is compared to a "clearing" [Lichtung] or is "lit up" [gelichtet]. Heidegger sees himself in an old tradition, for he refers to the ancient lumen naturale theory as an anticipation of his own view of our natural disclosedness (see BT 171).

17 A revised later version of his lectures in 1927, The Basic Problems of Phenomenology, supplements Being and Time but does not carry the promised "reversal" or "turn" much further. Heidegger's late remarks, On Time and Being, trans. J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), contain some comments by the later Heidegger on the difficulties of the younger one: "[It] must still in a way speak the language of metaphysics."