

on the 'Letter on Humanism,' by Martin
Heidegger.

By Sam Penman

“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.”¹ (BT: 1)

In the ‘Letter on Humanism’ [1947] Martin Heidegger [1889-1976] attempts to deal with the question of ‘Humanism’ in such a way that he distances himself from the existentialism popular at the time promoted by Karl Jaspers [1883-1969] and Jean-Paul Sartre [1905-1980] (among others); the ‘Letter’ is intended as an informal response to Sartre’s ‘Existentialism is a Humanism’ prompted by French philosopher Jean Beaufret when he asked the question: “*Comment redone un sens au mot ‘Humanisme?’* [How can we restore meaning to the word ‘Humanism?’] (LH: 239).

However, along with a distancing from ‘Existentialism’ Heidegger’s intention is to also distance himself from the very foundations of metaphysics in general, by suggesting that the language of metaphysics has been misappropriated, misinterpreted and misused, leading to fundamental errors of investigation. Heidegger suggests that the areas with which metaphysics busies itself never get to the fundamental question of ‘Being’. According to Heidegger metaphysics has, since the time of Plato, satisfied itself with questioning the ‘being-ness’ of beings and that the reason for this is from early on in the metaphysical tradition thinking had become the domain of the subject/object whereby the one *thinks on* the other, and because of this Metaphysics has forgotten the original question of ‘Being.’

In this essay I shall attempt to outline Heidegger’s ‘abandonment of subjectivity,’ why he makes this move and the problems it raises.

¹ This is from Aristotle’s ‘Metaphysics’ and appears in the first few lines of Heidegger’s ‘Being and Time.’

From the time of Descartes western thought has developed the idea of a non-physical, acting, willing self identified linguistically as the 'subject.' This 'subject', as conceived by metaphysics, is that 'substance' which stands in opposition to the objective world; it is free, through its thinking and willing, to act upon objects and manipulate them for its own ends. In fact, the subject/object distinction is older than Descartes, Kant or Hegel, it is imbedded within the very grammar of the language we use. One is shown from an early age that sentences such as "the boy plays with the red ball" contain a subject, "the boy", and an object, "the ball." From this simple sentence, and sentences of its kind, one is made aware that there is a distinction between the subject-manipulating and the object passively manipulated. The opposition of the object to the subject is most evident in the German word for object 'Gegenstand' where 'gegen' means 'opposed to' or 'against' and 'stand' means 'to stand', hence, 'Gegenstand' literally means 'standing against' or 'standing in opposition to.' It is seen as the job of the subject to continually dominate the beings, conceived as objects, around it.

Man is thus defined as subject, his dominance and manipulation of objects, through his free willing and acting, his goal.

It is Heidegger's contention that it is this subject/object terminology that is instrumental in the original 'question of Being' being forgotten. Heidegger states that philosophy has primarily concerned itself with 'beings.' Beings are, for Heidegger, 'things' in the world such as mountains, books, atoms, etc. which are there to be used as means to ends. Yet, in thinking of beings one fails to ask the question of "the truth of Being² itself." (LH: 243) If one questions the being-ness of beings then one is

² In order to distinguish between 'beings' and 'Being' I shall capitalized 'Being' in to better highlight the distinction.

presupposing Being itself. That is, with the advent of metaphysical thinking, one no longer questions Being itself, but simply presupposes it in order to answer questions about beings as such.

“Metaphysics does indeed represent beings in their Being, and so it thinks the Being of beings. But it does not think the difference of both. Metaphysics does not ask about the truth of Being itself... Metaphysics has not only failed up to now to ask this question, the question is inaccessible to metaphysics as such.” (ibid.)

If metaphysics makes no distinction between Being and beings then it can never gather the momentum to ask the question of Being itself. The question of Being itself is outside the metaphysical framework of questioning.

With this in mind one should not be too disappointed to find that Heidegger will not give us a definition of Being in terms of some-thing that can be quantified, a definition that conforms to the language of metaphysics (or, indeed, any kind of logically acceptable definition at all). That is, Being is not conceived by Heidegger as a being among beings, a thing among things.

So it is that up to the point when Heidegger's *magnum opus* 'Being and Time' was written thinking had lost its way, becoming sated with the question of beings rather than the question of Being, and this is because up until this point man's essence had been defined in terms of the 'subject.' Man had been clearly defined by Descartes as 'a thinking thing.' Heidegger contends that this way of thinking of man is again older than Descartes, and that it comes from the Greek definition of man, *animal rationale*. It is the *ratio* that has come to stand for the defining characteristic of man; it

is the *ratio* that metaphysics considers to be the essence of man. *Ratio* is Latin for 'calculation,' with the connotation of 'reasoning.' Metaphysics thus reduces man to a calculating machine (a 'ghost in the shell') set to produce results for the manipulation and domination of the beings surrounding it. Even if one is to take into account the physical and the spiritual elements associated with man man then becomes mind-body-soul; each aspect having its very own method of questioning its own being-ness: logic, physics and ethics, respectively; again, this is to forget the question of Being itself which stands as the foundation for all beings.

For Heidegger, to define man in this way is to overlook the special relationship he has with Being; and so, Heidegger introduces a new term, far above that of the mere 'subject,' a mere 'thinking thing,' the German word 'Dasein.'

Dasein literally means 'being-there' in English ('Da' means 'there' and 'Sein' means 'being') and it is not to be understood as simply a different word for the same old definition of 'subject' - it does, however, stand grammatically in its place (that is, instead of the pronouns 'I,' 'he,' 'she,' etc., Heidegger uses 'Dasein').

The previous remarks have served as a brief introduction of some of the key objections Heidegger makes with regards to metaphysics; namely, that metaphysics has not the sufficient linguistic tools to deal with the question of Being, or, to even ask the question of Being itself in its proper manner. Metaphysics concerns itself with beings and the being-ness of beings as opposed to Being itself because of a fundamental misappropriation of the word subject, and its counterpart, object; that is metaphysics does not *think* the original relation between subject and object but only the dominance of subject *over* object. Heidegger contends that the subject/object categories have reduced man simply to a 'thinking thing,' a 'rational animal,' that which presides over the appropriation of objects, and thus, the question of Being has

been lost, drowned out amidst the constant din of beings.

However, with a lack of alternative to the notion of 'subjectivity' and a clear definition of 'Being' one may wonder if these are not, at bottom, pseudo-problems without any place in the highly sophisticated and well cultivated realm of philosophical investigation. What does Heidegger mean by 'Being itself?' What is 'Dasein,' and how exactly does it replace the 'subject?' What is the 'real' essence of man? And, how is it possible to even question Being when the very foundations of philosophy, that have taken thousands of years to perfect and refine, have been swept away?

“Yet Being - what is Being? It is It itself.” (LH: 248)

This seemingly absurd circular definition of Being offered by Heidegger does not bode well in the face of those critical of Heidegger's philosophy. However, one will not find a traditionally clearer definition of Being throughout the 'Letter.' This is because the 'Letter on Humanism' is primarily concerned with the *questioning* of Being and how it has been lost to metaphysics. Heidegger is not trying to give us a definition of Being per se, but, rather an authentic method of questioning Being itself.

Hence, Being *is*. It is not a thing, it is a no-thing, not a being. Therefore, as metaphysics deals with things, with beings “with [only] a glance in passing toward Being,” it can never get into a position to question Being itself - yet, the presupposition of Being is the very foundation for all metaphysical enquiry. It is Being that is the 'clearing' whereby all thinking on beings can take place. It is this clearing and man's (Dasein's) relation to it that metaphysics has no power to question.

According to Heidegger, the Da of the Dasein consists in man's 'nearness' to

Being. This nearness to Being is man's essence. Heidegger uses the term 'Ek-sistence' to represent this essence.

“'Ek-sistence,' in fundamental contrast to every *existentia* and '*existence*,' is ecstatic dwelling in the nearness of Being.” (LH: 255)

For Heidegger, the term Ek-sistence means a 'standing out' in the truth of Being, in the clearing of Being, a 'standing out' that is unique to Dasein. Man is thrown from Being into the 'truth of Being' and this 'thrown-ness' is Ek-sistence. The truth of Being is experienced through Dasein as an unveiling that Heidegger terms 'alethia.' In this unveiling beings are revealed as the beings they are. Yet, in this unveiling Being itself can be experienced in the clearing.

Thus, Man is claimed by Being and it is only when man comes to experience this claim that man experiences his essential relation to Being. Hence, it is this relation to Being, the relation of the Dasein to Being, that is for Heidegger the fundamental essence of man. That is, the relation of Dasein to Being is that which is the ground of man's 'way of being.' Properly understood, it is not man's objective to create and manipulate beings, as the 'subject' term prevalent in metaphysics would imply, but to simply let beings be. In our Da-sein, and as da-sein, our role is to allow the "here," the "da" of our Da-Sein, to be a place where Being itself can come to be more fully, to show itself, to become more completely present for us. Heidegger calls this place 'the clearing.' In this clearing alone, Being can show itself.

Heidegger sees a problem with the metaphysical concept of the 'subject' in that once all the objects of the world have been turned into expedient means, then all that is left is to turn people into objects too - using other people as one would use

objects, to dominate and to control them. Instead of using objects and, ultimately, people, manipulating them and dominating them, we should 'stand' in this privileged position and let them be.

So, now we have at least a crude outline of a replacement for both the 'subject' and man's essence in the Dasein and Ek-sistence along with some of the reasons why Heidegger thinks the rejection of the 'subject' is an important move.

However, one may suggest that as there is no way of validating Heidegger's claims on what basis can we determine the truth of Heidegger's premises? This may not seem much of a problem from Heidegger's point of view as proofs and validations are tied up in the system of logic that Heidegger is rejecting from the start. It is this very mode of 'truth' that Heidegger is trying to get away from. Yet, is this not a little counterproductive in the sense that if one stops looking for validation, stops looking for the empirical truth or falsity of statements then doesn't everything that can be possibly said become equal in terms of its value? If one cannot empirically verify the claim that 'Dasein is the nearness of Being,' (along with other such claims), or even that it is logically verifiable, then what is the basis for accepting it? Maybe A. J. Ayer was right when he claimed that Heidegger is a pontif (the worst kind of thinker in Ayer's book), someone making outrageous claims that ultimately render any of Heidegger's work literally senseless.

Bibliography

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