

MARTIN HEIDEGGER
(1889-1976)



Introduction

As Thomas Sheehan tells us there are two incontestable facts about Martin Heidegger: “first, that he remains one of the century’s most influential philosophers and, second, that he was a Nazi.”¹ Heidegger’s influence on the development of 20th century Continental philosophy is immense

Heidegger’s first work, *Being and Time*:

- *set out from the phenomenological starting point of his teacher, Edmund Husserl, and ended up reshaping Phenomenology, influencing later thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty
- *also profoundly influenced the development of Hermeneutics, influencing Hans-Georg Gadamer
- *was immediately recognized as a major work of Existentialism and had a profound impact on Jean-Paul Sartre
- *also had an impact on the Frankfurt School (Critical Theory) affecting the critique of instrumental reasoning

Heidegger’s later work also is a major influence on the development of poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism. His “destruction” of metaphysics had a profound influence on Derrida’s notion of deconstruction. As John Caputo has put it: “In the broadest sense, every important Continental movement today stands under Heidegger’s shadow and has to define itself in terms of his ‘destruction’ of metaphysics.”²

And yet Heidegger was very definitely a Nazi, a dues-paying member of the National Socialist Party from 1933-1945. He used his considerable reputation to lend support to the Nazi’s in the early 30’s when the Party was just coming into power, and, as Rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933-34, he actively participated in the Nazi suppression of Jews and other opponents of the Party from the university. So what do we make of Heidegger’s philosophy? Does his political activity undermine and discredit the philosophy? This would obviously be much too simple a response. Why otherwise would Hannah Arendt, a Jew whose own work focused on the darkness of the Nazi regime, play such a significant role in the resurrections of Heidegger’s academic reputation after the war? Certainly it was a respect for his philosophy and not some vestige of feeling from their personal relationship. Then there is the case of Derrida, also a Jew, whose writings are also deeply indebted to Heidegger.

¹ Thomas Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis.” *The New York Review of Books*, 35: 10 (June 16, 1988), pp. 37-48.

² John D. Caputo, “Heidegger,” in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, Simon Critchley and William Schroeder, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 223-233.

What about Heidegger's influence upon Existentialism?

It is known that Sartre lectured on Heidegger to his fellow prisoners while imprisoned in a Nazi prison camp. Heidegger's notion of authentic existence certainly had an impact on Sartre; and this notion of authentic existence is surely one of the most important existentialist themes. Is there something wrong with Heidegger's notion of authentic existence which allowed him to make such a grievous error in his support for the Nazi's? Or is it simply the case that Heidegger himself failed to live up to his concept of authentic existence? Or is it, as Richard Rorty put it, just that Heidegger's is an extraordinary case of good books being written by bad men?

The debate over Heidegger's thought, and the dark shadow cast over his thought by his political life, is a very heated debate in contemporary Continental philosophy. Is it possible to read and learn from Heidegger without either condoning or making light of his involvement with the Nazis? There is no way to begin to respond to these questions without first attempting to come to grips with Heidegger's thought.

Heidegger's thought is generally considered to consist of two periods: the early "Existentialist" thought marked most significantly by *Being and Time*, and a "later" thought marked by a "turn" (*kehre*) in his thinking. When exactly this turn takes place is a matter of debate. Some point to the 1947 "Letter on Humanism," while others suggest the turn was already underway in "The Origin of the Work of Art" and the lectures on Nietzsche from the 1930's.

Writing in the late 1950's while Heidegger was still producing his later work, William Barrett did not see a turn in Heidegger's thinking. What seemed to mark a turn was an obvious shift in the topic of Heidegger's writings, from the dramatic and moving descriptions of human existence, of death, care, anxiety, guilt, etc. in *Being and Time*, to the later work with its focus on poetry, art, language and the problem of technology. Barrett argues that it is a mistake to see such a "turn":

... for the singleness and continuity of Heidegger's thinking is such that all his later writings can be considered as commentaries and elucidations of what was already in germ in his *Being and Time*. He has never ceased from that single task, the "repetition" of the problem of Being: the standing face to face with Being as did the earliest Greeks. And on the very first pages of *Being and Time* he tells us that this task involves nothing less than the destruction of the whole history of Western ontology—that is, the way the West has thought about Being.³

In a sense there is something to what Barrett says, as Heidegger's thought, early and late, is concerned with the "question of Being" and with overcoming the history of Western metaphysics or ontology (ontology is branch of metaphysics, it is the discipline that investigates what it is to exist). This attempt to question the whole history of Western philosophy, to open up a new path of thinking beyond "the history of metaphysics," is certainly a theme that Heidegger shared with Nietzsche (consider the "History of an Error" from *Twilight of the Idols*).

³William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962), p. 211.

However, there is also something to the notion of a “turn” in Heidegger’s thought. Though he remains constant in his questioning of Being and seeking a pathway of thinking beyond the history of metaphysics, the point of access to the question of Being does shift, and the turn does seem to be a turning away from Existentialism. *Being and Time* was initially recognized as a landmark text in Existentialism and is still read as a major work in Existentialism; yet in the “Letter on Humanism” Heidegger explicitly distances himself and even *Being and Time* from Existentialism. Clearly for the most part this distancing of himself from Existentialism is a distancing himself from Sartre. Since Sartre so clearly embraced the label “Existentialism,” Heidegger would distance himself from “Existentialism.” From Heidegger’s point of view, Sartre was still too close to Descartes, and thus also to the “history of metaphysics” from which Heidegger sought to break free. Derrida and other more recent French philosophers are more influenced by the later Heidegger and thus also distance themselves from Sartre. It is for this reason that Sartre has not remained as important a thinker as Heidegger in contemporary Continental philosophy.

Suffice it to say that there is a continuity to Heidegger’s thought and also something of a turn in his thinking. There is an element of Heidegger’s thought that is “Existentialist” and also something that influences more recent “postmodern” developments. We shall attempt to have some grasp of both the continuity and the turn, both the existentialist and postmodern elements of Heidegger’s thought.

Collections of Heidegger’s works in English Translation)

Basic Writings, Edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

Contains the Introduction to *Being and Time* and nine key essays: “What is Metaphysics?,” “On the Essence of Truth,” “The Origin of the Work of Art,” “Letter on Humanism,” “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics,” “The Question Concerning Technology,” “Building Dwelling Thinking,” “What Calls for Thinking?,” and “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking.”

Poetry, Language, Thought. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Contains “The Thinker as Poet” (a few of Heidegger’s attempts at poetry), and the essays “The Origin of the Work of Art,” “What are Poets For?,” “Building Dwelling Thinking,” “The Thing,” “Language,” and “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .”

The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays. Translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

Contains “The Question Concerning Technology,” “The Turning,” “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is Dead,’” “The Age of the World Picture,” and “Science and Reflection.”

Key Works in English Translation in Chronological Order

Being and Time. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927.]

Being and Time. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, ????. [this is the new translation of *Sein und Zeit* that is used in our reader]

Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics. Translated by James S. Churchill. Bloomington, Indianan: Indiana Univerisity Press, 1962. [*Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 1929.]

- “The Origin of the Work of Art,” complete in *Poetry, Language, Thought* and abridged in *Basic Writings* [*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 1960.] [A Lecture given in 1935 and 1936] *Nietzsche. Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. [*Nietzsche*, 2 vols., 1961.] [Lectures on Nietzsche given from 1936-1940]
- Nietzsche. Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, 1984. [*Nietzsche*, 2 vols., 1961.] [Lectures on Nietzsche given from 1936-1940]
- Nietzsche. Volume III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell, and Frank A. Capuzzi, Edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, 1987. [*Nietzsche*, 2 vols., 1961.] [Lectures on Nietzsche given from 1936-1940]
- Nietzsche. Volume IV: Nihilism*. Translated by Frank A. Capuzzi, Edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, 1982. [*Nietzsche*, 2 vols., 1961.] [Lectures on Nietzsche given from 1936-1940]
- “Letter on Humanism.” Translated by Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray, in *Basic Writings*. [*Brief über den Humanismus in Wegmarken*, 1967.] [Heidegger wrote the “Letter on Humanism” as a response to Sartre’s *Existentialism Is a Humanism* in 1947]
- “Nietzsche’s Word: ‘God is Dead.’” Translated by William Lovitt in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. [“Nietzsche’s Wort ‘Gott ist tot’” from *Holzwege*, 1950.]
- Early Greek Thinking*. Translated by David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. [“Der Spruch des Anaximander” from *Holzwege*, 1950, pp. 296-343; “Logos (Heraklit, Fragment B 50),” “Moirai (Parmenides VIII, 34-41),” and “Aletheia (Heraklit, Fragment B 16)” from *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 1954, pp. 207-282.]
- An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Garden City, New York: Doubleday-Anchor Books, 1961. [*Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 1953]
- What Is Called Thinking?* Translated by Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray. New York: Harper & Row, 1968. [*Was heisst Denken?* 1954]
- “The Question Concerning Technology.” Translated by William Lovitt in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. [“Die Frage nach der Technik” from *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 1954.]
- The Question of Being*. A bilingual edition. Translation by William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde. New Haven, Connecticut: College & University Press, 19958. [*Zur Seinsfrage*, 1956.]
- What is Philosophy?* A bilingual edition. Translation by William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde. New Haven, Connecticut: College & University Press, 19958. [*Was ist das—die Philosophie?* 1956.]
- Discourse on Thinking*. Translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund. New York: Harper & Row, 1966. [*Gelassenheit*, 1959.]
- On the Way to Language*. Translated by Peter D. Hertz and Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. [*Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 1959.]
- What Is a Thing?* Translated by W. B. Barton, Jr. And Vera Deutsch. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1967. [*Die Frage nach dem Ding*, 1962.]
- On Time and Being*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. [*Zur Sache des Denkens*, 1969.]

Husserl and Phenomenology

One of the central questions of 19th century Continental philosophy was the question of whether one could do for the “human sciences” what Newton had done for the “natural sciences.”

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was concerned throughout his career “to resist the imperialist tendencies of natural scientific reason, particularly in the area of moral and cultural value.”⁴

Positivism and other forms of “naturalism” sought to impose the methods of natural sciences in questions of value that are the concern of the human sciences. Husserl certainly appreciated the achievements of “the theoretical attitude” and he wanted to make the human sciences just as rigorous as the natural sciences, but he thought that the human sciences needed a different method. The “theoretical attitude” of the natural sciences only led to scepticism and relativism in the questions of value. Husserl was thus concerned to overcome the problem of relativism. He did not think that Hegel’s attempt to overcome relativism had succeeded. Husserl’s project was thus still firmly an Enlightenment project—he wanted a rigorously grounded philosophy which encompassed morality as well.

Husserl’s aim and starting point is thus still very much Cartesian: he would start with a methodical doubt in order to reach a point completely free of all presuppositions (and thus try to take this even further than Descartes who had all sorts of hidden presuppositions). Husserl also accepts the Cartesian starting point of modern epistemology: that our only certain knowledge is the contents of consciousness. If Descartes had the correct starting point, Kant’s transcendental idealism came closest to the correct method. Kant also accepts the Cartesian starting point that we can only have direct knowledge of a ‘phenomenal’ world, the world as it appears as a phenomenon of consciousness. But Kant’s radical insight was that the contents of consciousness must be organized by the mind. Experience must be organized in terms of the categories (causality and substance for example) in order for experience to make any sense. For Kant we know that we inhabit a world of causally interrelated objects in space and time because we simply must experience the world in that way. What Kant derives from this, however, is an argument for the necessity of the structure of the objective world discovered by natural science.

Husserl’s response to this problem was a “phenomenological” method of examining consciousness itself. The idea was to pay strict attention to the phenomena of consciousness as it appears in consciousness while rigorously avoiding all assumptions about the existence of physical objects in an external world. This involves a “bracketing” (*epoché*) or suspension of all assumptions (like causality) about existence which occur in natural science and common-sense explanations of events. He thought that this method gets us back to a standpoint prior to that which is the result of philosophical concepts which lead to an unsolvable epistemological problem. He thought that phenomenology gets us “back to the ‘things themselves.’” In short, Husserl thought that a more adequate understanding of consciousness will not allow the sceptical argument to even get going.

In the end Husserl’s ambitious hopes for grounding the human sciences more rigorously on the phenomenological method proved to be unfulfilled; however, his idea of going back to the things

⁴David West, *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.87.

themselves, back to things as they are experienced before the analysis of science and philosophy proved influential. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), for example, employs this phenomenological method, though not in the hopes of solving Husserl's ambitious project, but in trying to explore a pre-conceptual level of perception. Merleau-Ponty thus develops interesting philosophical discussions on the body, perception, sexuality, and gender. It is in Heidegger's work, however, that Husserl's phenomenological method found its most influential development.

The Question of Being

Heidegger begins *Being and Time* with a question "so bizarre to our ears as any we have heard."⁵ The Introduction to the book bears the title: "Exposition of the Question of the Meaning of Being." The first section begins thus:

§1. *The Necessity for Explicitly Restating the Question of Being*

This question has today been forgotten. Even though in our time we deem it progressive to give our approval to 'metaphysics' again, it is held that we have been exempted from the exertions of a newly rekindled "battle of the giants concerning being" . . .⁶

In raising the "Question of Being" Heidegger's task in *Being and Time* is one of "fundamental ontology." This was the task Aristotle set out in the book that came to be known as the *Metaphysics*. In that book Aristotle's broadest and deepest question demanded an account (*logos*) of the Being of beings (*onta*), and thus this question became known as the question of *ontology*. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle states: "All human beings by nature reach out for understanding." For Aristotle, it is natural for humans to try to understand how things add up or what things are all about. Thus "metaphysics" is defined as the attempt to make sense of what things *are* in the broadest sense. Thus metaphysics involves ontology, trying to understand what these things are, to understand their "Being."

The reference to the "battle of the giants concerning being" is to Plato's *Sophist*. There Plato is referring to the battle between Heraclitus and Parmenides over the question of whether reality, or the Being of beings, is changing or unchanging. Heidegger's thesis is that since Plato the battle of the giants has been considered to have already been decisively won by Parmenides. According to Heidegger, the whole question of Being has been forgotten ever since and thus the whole history of philosophy ("the history of metaphysics") since Plato has developed out of a forgetfulness of the question of the meaning of Being. Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* is thus to restate this question, and thus to reopen this ancient battle of the giants. Heidegger's project from the very outset thus bears a resemblance to Nietzsche's view expressed in *Twilight of the Idols* that the whole history of philosophy since Plato has been a "History of an Error."

⁵ Charles Guignon and Derek Pereboom. *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), p. 183.

⁶Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962.), p. 21. (*Existentialism: Basic Writings*, p. 211)

We are told that the question of the meaning of Being is the most basic question we can ask; yet most of us will feel that nothing we have ever thought about or studied can prepare us for it. What does the word “Being” refer to? What is it to ask about the *meaning* of Being? What is the *ontological difference* between being and Being?

William Barrett offers a pretty good explanation of the *ontological difference*⁷
the difference between being and Being
the word ‘being’ is ambiguous in English
has characteristics of both verb and noun
as a noun it is a name for beings, things
as a verb ‘being’ signifies the “to-be” of things—for which we have no word in English
other languages, however, make this distinction
between the being (the thing which is) and the Being (the “to-be” of things)
Greek: *to on* and *to einai*
Latin: *ens* and *esse*
French: *l'étant* and *l'être*
German: *das Seiende* and *das Sein*
Heidegger suggested the difference in English could be rendered
as the difference between *beings* and *Being*

It is Heidegger’s contention that the whole of Western philosophy
has focused exclusively on the first of these pairs
and thus obscured the very question of Being
from the beginning the thought of Western man has focused on things, objects
trying to sort out, classify, enumerate the different kinds of beings (ontology)
but not ever really grasping the prior question of Being
the question of what it means to be in the first place

Heidegger’s general aim in *Being and Time*
is to thus restate the question of Being and thus reopen the battle of the giants
and thus turn our attention back to Heraclitus’ thought
In his later writings Heidegger will devote considerable attention to
translating and reflecting on various obscure fragments of Heraclitus’ writings
Being and Time sets out to show that perhaps Heraclitus was right all along
that to be is to be in time
that time is the Being of beings

but Heidegger never really gets there in *Being and Time*
for the text was never completed
it is itself, like all of Heraclitus’ writings that have come down to us, a mere fragment
Being and Time is only the first, preliminary part of what he sets out do to
in trying to do “fundamental ontology” and answer the question of Being

⁷*Irrational Man*, pp. 211-212.

An Existential Analytic of Dasein

this preliminary part of his broader project is what Heidegger refers to as “the *existential analytic of Dasein*” (*Existentialism: Basic Writings*, p. 215) *Dasein*, literally “Being-there,” is the ordinary German word for “human existence” In scholastic German philosophy *Dasein* is the word for “existence” while *Sosein* is the word for “essence”

Heidegger’s thought here is that we can best get access to the broader question of Being by asking the question concerning what it means to be as a human being his analysis, however, will not start by trying to determine the “essence” of human being but rather, with trying to understand the “existence” of human being—*Dasein* As *Being and Time* sets out to do an existential analysis of human existence, it is obvious why it was immediately recognized to be a work of *Existentialism* One of the key themes of Existentialism is that *existence precedes essence* we exist as human beings first essence is not given but is something determined through the process of existing

thus, *Being and Time* sets out to do an analysis of what it means to exist as a human being and the basic idea of *Being and Time*, as Simon Critchley puts it, is extremely simple:

. . . being is time. That is, what it means for a human being to be is to exist temporally in the stretch between birth and death. Being is time and time is finite, it comes to an end with our death. Therefore, if we want to understand what it means to be an authentic human being, then it is essential that we constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death, what Heidegger calls “being-towards-death”.⁸

Why does Heidegger seek to raise the more general question of Being through inquiring into the question of what it means to be as a human being?

like Aristotle, Heidegger finds the “question of Being” to be the basic determinant of human existence: “Dasein is an entity that 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” (*Existentialism: Basic Writings*, p. 213)

or as he emphasizes a few lines later:

“*Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being*” (*Existentialism: Basic Writings*, p. 214)

in other words, we human beings already have some understanding of the Being of entities and yet we are all trying to get a better, clearer understanding of what things in general are because it is our nature to ask the “question of Being” the project of working out a “fundamental ontology” a basic overall account of the Being of entities in general is merely a more rigorous version of what we are doing all the time

⁸ Simon Critchley, “*Being and Time*, part 1: Why Heidegger matters” (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/jun/05/heidegger-philosophy>)

everyone has some vague and unformulated grasp of things
more so in our skilled practices rather than explicit thoughts
Heidegger calls this prior sense of things our “pre-ontological understanding of Being”
a pre-reflexive “know-how” we have in everyday activities
but that understanding has not been articulated or conceptualized
to ask the “question of Being” is to try and conceptualize and clarify the grasp of things we have
to ask about the *meaning* of Being is to ask about how things come to show up as counting for us
as in “This book meant a lot to me” or “that affair didn’t mean a thing”
or perhaps we might consider Duke Ellington’s theory of meaning: “it don’t mean a thing if it
don’t have that swing” (just a little joke)

philosophers have formulated number of ontological theories
at different times philosophers have suggested that Being is to be accounted for in terms of
cosmic functions, God’s creation, monads, unknowable-things-in-themselves, atoms in motion
and in causal interactions, etc.
and in general assume that an item’s existence consists in its being a substance or an attribute of
a substance
Heidegger feels these theories have attempted to give us a distorted and narrow view of reality
pervasive tendency to think of reality as a collection of objects of various types
objects that are just there, existing independent of us and our practices

thus a tendency to think that people exist in the same sense as rocks:
both are objects with various properties
objects that are “present-at-hand” (*vorhanden*)
as continuously existing things occupying positions in space
a conception of Being as the enduring presence of things
this follows from Parmenides’ view that reality is unchanging
this is the conception of Being at the root of different conceptions of *substance*
according to Heidegger, when philosophers have asked about Being
they have tended to answer the question with some version of a substance ontology

Heidegger raises the question of the meaning of Being again because
he thinks that our understanding of ourselves and our world has come to be shaped by
a way of thinking that is so all-pervasive and powerful that it is difficult to even question
the dominant understanding of reality in contemporary life is that which emerged with
the rise of modern science, the pivotal event of the modern worldview in the West
led to an “objectified” view of reality
the universe is understood as a vast aggregate of material objects in causal relations
these material objects have quantifiable properties—the so-called “primary qualities”
mass, space-time position, velocity, etc

objects do not have meanings and value in themselves
many scientifically oriented thinkers have assumed that reality consists only of
intrinsically meaningless and valueless objects
on this view, it is natural to assume that values and meanings if they exist at all

do so only in our minds, not in objective reality itself
the objectified view of reality is correlated with a particular view of human beings
we are objects among others in the causal order
but we are also subjects who can represent objects in our ideas
a “subjectified” view of the self—we are essentially conscious beings or subjects
who form ideas about the external world
who try to get a “correct” view of the world in order to function in it efficiently
thus important to distinguish between what is really out there in objective reality
from what is purely subjective, projections of our own feelings and desires

Heidegger is well aware this objectified view of reality has been a tremendous cultural achievement: it opened innumerable doors to technological advances
would be a mistake to think of Heidegger as anti-science
but he does think the modern understanding of reality inherited from modern science
has generated a number of problems for contemporary life

G&P summarize these problems:

1) the modern worldview tends to assume we need sharp distinction between subject and object
between what is within human minds and what is out there in material world
subject-object problem leads to serious problems for theory of knowledge
if we have access to the world only through mediation of our ideas
how do we know that those ideas are accurate mirrors of nature
this subject-object model was tied up with a mind-matter ontology
two kinds of stuff in the universe: mental (known through introspection) and physical (senses)
even when philosophers reject dualism and reject the notion of the mind as a distinct substance
they still assume a more general distinction between mind and matter
still tend to assume that no account of human phenomena is complete unless it explains
the physical side of action by what goes on in the mind

2) another problem is pervasive sense of “loss of meaning” in life
modern outlook tends to assume that values and meanings are purely subjective constructs
products of our needs and desires
difficult to see how there could be any solid basis for forming notion of a genuinely
“higher” or “better” way of life beyond just coping and doing what feels good
no notion of a cosmic order that defines right and wrong, good and bad
one of main aims of *Being and Time* is confronting this wide-spread sense of a loss of meaning

Heidegger rejects Husserl’s view that the source of these modern problems was “naturalism”
—the view of reality given by modern natural science

Heidegger suggests the problems has a much older origin in the forgetfulness of Being
the outlook of modern science is itself just a modern version of an age-old tendency
to see the world from a point of view that gives us a distorted and concealed understanding
the real problems is not naturalism but the tendency to focus on how things show up for us
when we adopt a theoretical attitude toward to the world
when we adopt a detached, theoretical stance toward things

trying to be dispassionate and disinterested in the way that both Plato and Descartes recommend
Heidegger thinks that such a theoretical outlook is only one specialized view among others
one “regional” way of looking at things—with no privileged access to the truth about reality
this theoretical outlook gives us a one-sided and distorted view of reality that is out of touch with
concrete, lived realities of everyday life
the dominance of this worldview in contemporary life reflects a deep-seated tendency toward
“forgetfulness” or “concealment” in humans
we lose sight of the background conditions (what Heidegger calls “worldhood”)
which make it possible to encounter anything at all
suggests that the pre-Platonic Greeks had some insight into worldhood
in their understanding of Being as *physis*
which Heidegger renders as “coming-into-presence” or “emerging-into-Being”
we today have lost sight of this older way of understanding Being
the only way to overcome this forgetfulness is to recover a more basic understanding of the world
and our place within it which has concealed by the objectified view of modernity
this recovery of a more basic understanding of the world and our place within it is the aim of the
question of the meaning of Being

Heidegger thus sets out to ask how things in general come to show up for us as mattering in
determinate ways—how they come to *mean* something to us in relation to our lives
but we need to start not with the detached reflection of the “theoretical attitude”
thus Heidegger employs Husserl’s phenomenological method
a starting point prior to theory and abstract reflection
he attempts to describe without obscuring preconceptions what it means to be

Heidegger takes the word “phenomenon” back to the Greek sense of “revealing” or
“that which reveals itself”
Heidegger sees the aim of “phenomenology” as looking for the “hidden ground and meaning”
of what ordinarily shows up in the world of everydayness

this phenomenology of everydayness raises fundamental questions about the dominant view of
reality in our contemporary world
in *Being and Time* Heidegger attacks the subject-object model, and mind-matter dualism
in criticizing dualism does not try to show that the mental is reducible to matter
tries to show instead that the whole assumption to understand reality in terms of substances
either mental or material is suspect
his account of being-in-the-world calls into question the mind-body dualism
from the standpoint of Heidegger’s new view of the Being of entities
the problems created by the modern worldview seem to dissolve
in this respect Heidegger’s thought shares some very basic affinities with other 20th century
thinkers (Wittgenstein and Dewey) who try not to solve the fundamental problems of modern
philosophy, but dissolve or “get over” them

Human Being (Dasein) as Being-in-the-world

what comes out of this phenomenological description is a picture of Dasein as *being-in-the-world*
 the aim of this description is to deflate both the subjectified view of the self as a mind
 and the objectified view of worldly entities as brute, present-at-hand objects

which is one of the principle themes of Existentialism

as Barrett puts it, this description of Dasein as *being-in-the-world*

“destroys the Cartesian picture at one blow”⁹

Barrett here draws an interesting comparison with Einstein’s Field Theory of Matter

to what he calls Heidegger’s “Field Theory of Man”

the human being is not a static, unchanging essence

but rather “a field or region of Being”

Being and Time is thus a phenomenological description of this field of Being that is Dasein

Or, as Critchley puts it:

“If the human being is really being-in-the-world, then this entails that the world itself is part of the fundamental constitution of what it means to be human. That is to say, I am not a free-floating self or ego facing a world of objects that stands over against me. Rather, for Heidegger, I am my world. The world is part and parcel of my being, of the fabric of my existence.” (*Being and Time*, part 3: Being-in-the-world”)

G&P note that this description of the world of everydayness is one of Heidegger’s most original contributions to philosophy

in this analysis Heidegger emphasizes the background that is overlooked

that makes it possible for us to encounter entities in any specific way

they also note a similarity to Wittgenstein:

“The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity” (*Philosophical Investigations* 129) (*Existentialism: Basic Writings*, p. 190)

Heidegger is trying to call attention to features of the world that are so familiar and all-pervasive that they are hardly ever noticed

his basic claim is that the world we encounter, the world that is the fabric of my existence, is not the world of “present-at-hand” objects that is the result of theoretical reflection, but rather a world of handy and useful objects we encounter as *equipment*

This is what Heidegger means by “readiness-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*)

Again, as Critchley puts it: “My proximal encounter with the table on which I am writing these words is not as an object made of a certain definable substance (wood and iron, say) existing in a geometrically ordered space-time continuum. Rather, this is just the table that I use to write and which is useful for arranging my papers, my laptop and my coffee cup.” (*Being and Time*, part 3: Being-in-the-world”)

the everyday life world presents itself initially (but generally unnoticed)

in a “context of significance” that is not reducible to mere “present-at-hand” things

⁹*Irrational Man*, p. 217.

the plausibility of Heidegger's novel view is our getting a feel for his detailed descriptions of our everyday practical involvements
his own example is the sense of things a skilled craftsman has in his workshop
think of what it is like when working at some activity you are quite familiar with

one way of being in ordinary situations is "concernful absorption"
cases in which we "lose ourselves" in the world of our current concerns
what is "given" in such ordinary situations is a holistic web of means-ends relationships pointing toward the work to be accomplished
the way that things show up as "significant" or "relevant" determines the *Being* of those entities and our *own* Being when we are engrossed in such activities is defined by our ways of being "out there" with the project, caught up in the flow of things
for the most part we have no sense of ourselves as being minds distinct from objects
no distinction appears between what is "in here" in the mind, and what is "out there" in the world

when equipment is genuinely ready-to-hand in this way, things are normally unobtrusive only when there is a breakdown in the smooth flow—when the hammer breaks or the nail bends to we begin to explicitly attend to items in the work context
only then do we begin to pay attention to what is in front of us
only then do we begin to see things as present-at-hand
the view so central to traditional philosophy, that what has been there all along has been mere present-at-hand things existing independent of us
because the present-at-hand obtrudes and captures our attention
we begin to think that what is most basic in the world is mere present-at-hand objects
but this is an illusion that comes only as a result of the breakdown of smoothly flowing contexts of activity
what Heidegger calls the "disworlding of the world"

to say that the ready-to-hand is *more primordial* than present-at-hand it to make two claims:
1) our ability to encounter present-at-hand things is derivative from and parasitic on our prior ways of dealing with contexts of what is ready-to-hand
2) that there is no way to account for ready-to-hand solely in terms of what is present-at-hand

if this is right then it follows that the view of reality we get from modern natural science the view that the world at the most basic level consists of inherently meaningless objects that we humans come to endow with significance and value
does not reveal the most basic way of Being of entities
on the contrary the world at the most basic is initially and most fundamentally a meaning-filled context

Heidegger's description also aims to show that there is a reciprocal interdependence between the world of everyday activities and our own identity as agents
it is the concrete stands we take on our lives in our everyday activities that determines the *relevance* or *significance* things can have for us
thus, for example, the blackboard is different for the teacher, the student, and the custodian

our skillful comportment in the world Heidegger calls “understanding”
the understanding that articulates life-worlds is something that is *shared*
this “pre-ontological understanding” of things is a tacit know-how
our self-understanding as agents comes to be realized in specific ways of handling things
such ordinary ways of dealing with things are called “interpretation” (*Auslegung*)
Auslegung means literally “laying out”
in interpretation we “take apart” what is grasped in understanding
interpretation is what lets entities present themselves *as* the sorts of things they are

what Heidegger is suggesting is that a basic feature of *Da-sein*, of “being-there”
or “*being-in-the-world*” is interpretation
this is why Heidegger’s sense of phenomenology involves hermeneutics (interpretation)
“The phenomenology of Dasein is a *hermeneutic* in the primordial signification of this word,
where it designates this business of interpreting.” (*Existentialism: Basic Writings*, p. 219)

this reciprocal interdependence shows why being-in-the-world is a unified phenomenon
and thus why the “problem of knowing the external world” turns out to be a pseudo-problem
in order to get away from traditional conception of the isolated subject
Heidegger proposes that we think of Dasein not as a thing
but as a “clearing” or “lighting” in which both practical contexts and roles
show up in determinate ways
there is no gap between ourselves and ready-to-hand entities

on Heidegger’s view, science comes to be seen as derived from and parasitic on
the background of everyday being-in-the-world
in Heidegger’s view the “truth” revealed by science is possible only against the background
of the more primordial truth understood as the “clearing” opened by our shared, practical life-
world

The Structure of Human Agency

Heidegger says we must avoid the rather specialized interpretations of things
found in such “regional” sciences as biology, psychology, and epistemology
these theories tend to uncritically presuppose an objectified view of humans
as substances or objects of a particular sort
precisely these assumptions are called into question by fundamental ontology
in order to avoid slipping into this traditional presupposition
Heidegger focuses on our being as *agents* doing things
rather than on our ways of being when we are subjects engaged in self-reflection

in order to simplify Heidegger’s complex account of human existence G&P present his view as a
series of interrelated claims:

- 1) the first claim is that humans are beings who *care* about what they are
we care about what our lives are amounting to, and because of that
we care about our surroundings and what happens to us

Dasein is the entity whose being is *at stake* or *in question*
I care about whether my life makes sense, whether it adds up to something
or whether it is really my own
and it is because my own life in the world is of concern to me
that things in general *mean* something to me

2) the second claim is that because humans care about who and what they are
they have always taken some *stand* on their lives
in living out our lives we have all seized upon some set of roles, personality traits, lifestyles
it is through taking a stand that we come to have an understanding of Being
in Heidegger's special sense of the term

3) the third claim is that humans just *are* the stands they take in living out their lives
humans *are* what they *do*
no fixed human essence given to us in advance
Heidegger makes this key Existentialist point:

1. The "essence" of this being lies in its to be. Its Being-what-it-is (*essentia*) must, so far
as we can speak of it at all, be conceived in terms of its Being (*existentia*). . . . *The*
"essence" of Dasein lies in its existence. . . . (Existentialism: Basic Writings, p. 220)

humans just are what they make of themselves in growing up
within the context of a particular historical culture
even our existence as "selves" is simply one way of being among others

4) the fourth claim follows from this non-essentialist picture of humans
if we *are* what we make of ourselves in our lives
then what is definitive of our "Being" is not the continuing presence of a substance of some sort
the self is an *event*
Heidegger calls it a "becoming" or a "happening"
that is defined by what one *does* throughout one's life
I am what I become in living out my life story as a whole
the self is something that is discovered not through self-reflection or introspection
but through what one does as being-in-the-world

this conception of the being of the self as defined by concrete agency in the world
leads to a way of understanding action that is different from traditional conceptions
contrasts with standard view accepted by most philosophers today
on this standard view, action is understood as physical movement caused by inner impetus
inner mental cause—the agent's intentions or motives
strong distinction between mental and physical, inner and outer

Heidegger puts forth an "expressivist" view of agency
distinctions between mind and matter, inner and outer, have no play
on this view, what I actually do is not derivative

something understood only by tracing to inner mental cause
 instead, what I do is seen as *defining* and *bringing to realization* the person I am
 one's behavior is not just an external sign of something inner going on beneath the surface
 one's behavior defines one's Being

Heidegger's view is radically opposed to some of the deepest assumptions of the modern outlook
 modern thought tends to assume that recourse to the mental is always necessary
 if we are to understand human phenomena
 Heidegger's view rejects this
 questions about "what is really going on in one's mind" arise and make sense
 only when there are breaks in the otherwise smooth flow of behavior

Heidegger is not denying that mental events occur or that they are sometimes very important
 but he does want to say that our being as subjects with minds or fields of consciousness
 is only one specialized way of being for humans among others
 and that it is parasitic on a more primordial way of being as being-in-the-world

5) The fifth claim is that human existence has a distinctive temporal structure
 there are two main temporal structures of Dasein's existence
 the first of these is "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*)
 Dasein always finds itself "thrown" into a particular cultural setting
 with certain choices it has already made and obligations it has undertaken
 this thrownness into specific situations is encountered as a *task* that I must take up
 we are "delivered over to ourselves" as something we must be
 our facticity is revealed to us in particular moods that tune us in to the world in specific ways
 the German word for mood (*Stimmung*) also means "being in tune"
 these moods color the way the world show up for us
 they determine how entities will show up as "mattering" for us
 thrownness defines Dasein's Being as "already" in a world
 it makes up the temporal dimension of pastness, of "having been"

Here's how Critchley puts it:

"This is another way of approaching his central insight: that we cannot exist independently of our
 relation to the world; and this relationship is a matter of mood and appetite, not rational
 contemplation." (*Being and Time*, part 4: Thrown into this world")
 this is another key Existentialist theme: that the human being is not simply a rational animal, but
 one that is passionate, a being that is tuned to the world through various moods

the second temporal structure of Dasein's temporal Being determines the element of "futuraity"
 the future-directedness of Dasein's life story
 we are always already "ahead of ourselves" to the extent that each of us
 has taken a stand on our thrownness, and through our actions, is accomplishing something
 each of my actions points toward a realization
 in everything I do I am moving toward a final realization of my identity
 our directedness toward the future Heidegger calls "projection"

it is my being as a “thrown projection” that constitutes my identity as an agent
in this temporal structure of a human life-happening
the most basic dimension is the future
because our Being is something that still remains outstanding,
still impending as long as we are alive
this is the sense in which what is definitive of our lives is best thought of as
“being-toward-the-end” or “being-toward-death”
just as the events of the story gain their meaning from the contribution they make to the outcome
of the story as a whole
so the events in one’s life gain their meaning from their relation to the overarching projects
that define one’s life story as a totality
that means that my actions in the present have to be understood in terms of what they
undertake for the future, i.e., in terms of the commitments I make
as to what kind of being I am “in the long run”

our futurity as agents in the world lets our pasts become meaningful
as resources for our current activities
also lets entities in the world stand out as significant in relation to our projects
our projection toward the future opens a leeway (*Spielraum*) or clearing
in which things can stand forth as counting for us in some determinate way or other

6) the sixth claim about human existence is that the temporal unfolding of a life
is always embedded in a wider communal context
from which it draws its possibilities of self-interpretation and self-assessment
we are participants within a shared context
it is by becoming initiated into the contexts of shared practices circulating in our public world
that we pick up both our sense of how things count for our community
and our grasp of what is at stake in living in the world
an example is our sense of modesty, our attitude towards our bodies and public nudity
it is a cultural trait and not “natural”
consider also our response to cases of cruelty to animals or children
this is so deeply ingrained that it seems “natural” and we are appalled when we learn
that other cultures do not share our sensibilities

these examples show how our shared sense of reality
is something that is largely shaped by our enculturation into a public world
Heidegger does not see this tendency to step in with the crowd as something entirely negative
our attunement to the social practices of a culture
is what first gives us an understanding of the world
the “they” (*das Man*) is a “*primordial phenomenon that belongs to Dasein’s positive constitution*”
I can be a parent in my community only because I am tuned into the standardized ways of
handling situations involving children established by my society

it is the practices of the social world in general that define how things can count

and what sorts of self-interpreting activities will make sense for a people
the content that we take over for our lives
are all taken over from the pool of possibilities circulating in the public

Authenticity

one of most influential aspects of *Being and Time* for existentialism
the notion of authenticity is spelled out in second half of the work
Heidegger's ideal is a matter not so much of being in touch with oneself
as of becoming more intensely engaged in the world of one's historical culture
[this is where Heidegger's Nazism comes into focus](#)

can first get a sense of what authenticity is
by recalling the description of Dasein as “thrown projection”
all our concrete possibilities of understanding and interpretation
are drawn from the available pool of interpretations given in a culture
it is only by taking over the concrete roles and possibilities circulating in our communal life
that we can even become human in the sense of being agents capable of making
meaningful choices and understanding what is at stake in life

Heidegger also suggests this absorption in a social world can have a pernicious effect
getting lost in the rituals and mundane chores of the they
resulting in a “dimming down of the possible as such”
becoming engrossed in latest fads, drifting along with the crowd
becoming so engrossed in what is directly in front of us
that we are blind to the larger background that makes our actions possible

leads to a forgetfulness of everyday life
in his view, a certain forgetfulness is unavoidable if we are to throw ourselves into what we do
what is insidious is the way in which this first order forgetfulness
gets compounded by a second-order forgetting
lacking any wider sense of what life is all about
we come to accept the current, socially accepted outlook as the ultimate truth about reality
we end up adrift on the seas of what is called “proper” by the they
we assume that our lives make sense and are justified as long as we do what “one does”
we lose the ability to take a coherent, focused stand on our lives as a whole
this absorption in the everyday social world is called “falling” (*Verfallenheit*)
not just a slip or occasional bit of carelessness
but an “existential” structure definitive of our Being
what we forget in falling is our existence as an ongoing future-directed happening
we lose sight of the fact that our life stories will be completed at some point
that each of our current actions is contributing to realizing our Being in its entirety
what can shake us out of this complacent drifting through life is the mood of anxiety (*Angst*)
anxiety brings us face to face with a fundamental fact about the human situation
a fact so distressing that we usually try to avoid confronting it—our finitude

as Barrett points out, Heidegger's analysis of death is one of the most powerful and celebrated passages in *Being and Time*

Barrett says this passage reveals in thought the truth brought out in Tolstoy's story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which he regards as perhaps the most powerful description in any literature of what it means to face death

the anxiety that comes with the confrontation with our finitude forces us to confront the fact that we alone are responsible for making something of our own lives

anxiety is characterized by "uncanniness" (*unheimlich*, literally homelessness)

as the world loses its familiarity and at-home-ness

we confront our own "naked Dasein" as something we have to take over as being-in-the-world

anxiety reveals to us our "thrownness unto death"

Dasein finds itself face to face with the nothing of the possible impossibility of its existence

anxiety can make us realize that our normal throwing ourselves into publicly approved roles

is actually a form of *fleeing* or *evasion*

fleeing from death, from the fact of death

from the fact that each of our actions is contributing

to the final configuration of meaning our lives will have in the end

Heidegger thinks that recognizing our finitude

can bring about a transformation in our way of living

[echoes of eternal recurrence?](#)

When we face up to our "being-toward-death" we are forced to confront

the fact that it is up to us to make something of our lives as a whole

instead of merely losing ourselves and drifting into public roles

we can begin to take over our own lives and make them our own

we can become authentic in the sense of *owning up* to our lives

(German for authenticity is *Eigentlichkeit*, comes from stem *eigen* meaning "own")

thus it could be read as "owned-ness")

to become authentic, we must first accept that

we are ultimately *responsible* for what our lives are adding up to

if one faces up to finitude and takes responsibility for one's own existence

Heidegger thinks one will achieve a level of clear-sightedness and intensity

lacking in inauthentic everydayness

this confrontation with finitude might not change the content of one's life

no reason to think that one necessarily has to change one's career or lifestyle

may not entail any change in *what* you do

it could transform the *way* you live

seems to involve a capacity for self-focusing that is lacking in everyday falling

once anxiety makes us realize we are "delivered over to ourselves"

and that it is up to us alone to make something of our lives

we will “simplify” our lives with direction and focus
Heidegger calls this more focused stance toward life “resoluteness”
such resoluteness involves “choosing to choose”
what is important is *how* one takes over one’s life, not what specific things one does

if we think of living out our lives as composing our own autobiographies
then authentic self-focusing might be thought of as a way of
imparting narrative continuity to our life stories
life comes to be organized around a coherent set of commitments that
shape past, present, and future into a unified flow
not a matter of pigheaded commitment to a life-defining project come what may
must be open to “taking back” that commitment if conditions make that unavoidable

Heidegger often criticized for not giving any specific information on how we ought to act
or what choices we should make
the picture of authenticity seems to be consistent with any number of concrete lifestyles
including many that we would see as profoundly immoral
a number of critics have taken this as an indication of something
pernicious or immoral about Heidegger’s conception of authenticity

it is certainly true that this concept of authenticity does not entail any particular moral position
suggests that even though Heidegger does not make any pronouncements about morality
a closer look at his concept of authenticity suggests it might have some substantive things to say
about what constitutes a good life
first, it points to certain character traits and individual must have to be authentic
necessary traits for making coherent, meaningful choices
about what sort of person one wants to be
authenticity is said to require such traits as
resoluteness, clearheadedness, steadfastness, integrity, openness to change
as well as courage, the willingness to take a stand despite the uncertainties of life

a person who is authentic would thus be less likely to slip into the kinds of self-deception and
dishonesty involved in hiding behind roles
or thinking that one’s actions are justified just because they are what “one does”
there is also the deep sense of indebtedness to the wider community

a second way that the ideal of authenticity can define higher ideals for us is found
in Heidegger’s concept of “historicity”
this idea arises from the description of human existence as an unfolding life course
or “happening” that is enmeshed in the wider drama of a community’s history
“authentic historicity” a mode of existence that bring about a transformed
understanding of one’s historical context
one grasps the past of one’s community as a “heritage” or “legacy”
that is a “sending” that is filled with promise and potential
brings with it a sense of our future as a shared “destiny”

how shared? Did Heidegger see his destiny as shared with the Jews?

Heidegger holds that we need to have some notion of a shared historical purpose if we are to have any basis for criticizing and reforming the practices of “today” sees as an example Martin Luther King’s attempt to recover an appreciation of the biblical ideals central to American culture in order to achieve equality for all humans

idea of authenticity points to an alternative to what Heidegger saw as the flattened out life of modernity

it is a matter of being more fully and lucidly engaged in the shared “co-happening” of one’s historical community

becoming an authentic individual is being a committed participant in the wider social and historical context

this is a crucial part of the ideal he has in mind in echoing Nietzsche’s phrase when he says “become what you are”