

Martin Heidegger: “The Letter on Humanism”

A series of lectures by Paul Livingston, Villanova University
March 2, 2005

The *Letter on Humanism*, written in 1947 in response to questions circulating about the relationship of Heidegger’s philosophy of Being to humanism, Christianity, Marxism, and the new “philosophy of existence” expounded by Sartre, Jaspers, and others, has been called Heidegger’s “greatest effort.” It was written at a time of great personal struggle for Heidegger: he had just been indefinitely banned from teaching following the Nazi war-crimes hearings, and he had undergone a kind of emotional breakdown as a result. Nevertheless, the *Letter on Humanism* virtually catalogues the most important strands of Heidegger’s entire later philosophy – the meaning of the history of Being, the way Heidegger sees to the re-awakening of that history, its relation to the philosophical tradition, the meaning of action, the role of technology, art, and language in the historical destiny of Being, and above all the need of a new thinking to prepare that destiny. The essay contains some of Heidegger’s most memorable language. In it, we can see especially clearly the role of reflection about language in preparing a new consideration of Being that will make the leap outside the tradition of metaphysics, which has hitherto determined all of our language. The quest for a new language will be so important to Heidegger that he will even spell important words, like Being, in antiquated and strange ways, to show that he uses them outside the closure of metaphysics.

“Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man. It does not make or cause the relation. Thinking brings this relation to Being solely as something handed over to it from Being. Such offering consists in the fact that in thinking Being comes to language. Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of Being insofar as they bring the manifestation to language and maintain it in language through their speech. Thinking does not become action only because some effect issues from it or because it is applied. Thinking acts insofar as it thinks.” (p. 217)

“Language is the house of Being.” What does this mean? It means that language is more than a tool, ready-at-hand for our use. It means that we live in our language; we live the lives determined by it and we think insofar as we bring Being to language. “**Thinking is the thinking of Being.**” (p. 220). In the “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger will attempt to bring Being to language in new and unanticipated ways.

Because he thinks of thinking as the bringing to language of Being, Heidegger thinks of thinking as more fully *action* than acting that is not determined by thought. Traditionally, we put action above thought, thinking that thought never accomplishes anything. But Heidegger asks us to consider that thinking may be the most important action of all. For it changes our relationship to Being. And because thinking brings Being to language, our thinking is not separate from the language we use. Heidegger, in fact, now believes that his own earlier thinking about Being – the thinking of *Being and Time* – failed because it, too, remained stuck in the language of metaphysics. From this time forward, Heidegger will oppose the widespread “devastation” that he sees in the use of language around him. And he will begin to forge a new kind of language along the path of a thinking that attempts the leap outside the tradition of metaphysics. In this case, this will lead Heidegger to critique the centuries-old distinction between subject and object at the heart of the philosophy of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, and preserved linguistically in the grammatical *subject/object* distinction. Reconsidering the difference between subject and object will lead him to reconsider the idea that man himself is a subject among objects, yielding an entirely new kind of thinking about humanism and the nature of the human.

Officially, the essay responds to some questions asked of Heidegger by a student, Jean Beaufret, following the influential article and lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism” by Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre, himself a student of Heidegger’s work before the war, had worked in the French underground during the German occupation, and gained fame immediately after the war with his advocacy of the new philosophy of existentialism. In the chaotic intellectual atmosphere of post-war Europe, everyone seemed to be looking for a new philosophy to make sense of the downfall of European civilization, and many found the answer in Sartre’s existentialism.

In his essay – which students of Heidegger are well-advised to read – Sartre had defined existentialism as the doctrine that “existence precedes essence.” Though it develops from antecedents in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger himself, this doctrine was meant to revolutionize philosophical thought. For traditional philosophy, Sartre thought, conceives of essence – what something is – as prior to existence – that it is. For instance, in traditional philosophy we think of the essence of an animal, its plan or idea, as prior to the fact that it exists. Perhaps we think of the idea of the elephant, for instance, as an idea in the mind of God, prepared before the existence of any particular elephant itself. In the case of human beings in particular, we have thought of the essence of man – human nature – before the existence of man himself. Sartre urges a revolution in this view; we should think of man first of all as an existing being. This means that man has no “human nature,” either biologically given or determined by God. Rather, it is up to us to determine our nature, and we are completely free in this creative determination. Man, accordingly, is an ongoing “project,” we are both a never-completed work and one that is pro-jected – thrown forward – in time. Yet in the challenge to determine, and create, what we are, we can do so either authentically – with integrity and honesty – or inauthentically. We act inauthentically when we forget our own difficult freedom, and rest with pre-established patterns for life or pre-given answers to the question of what we should be, whether we draw these answers from science, religion, or psychology. We act authentically, by contrast, only when we experience our process of self-creation from the perspective of our fundamental freedom.

In the remainder of his essay, Sartre defends the claim that existentialism, so defined, can legitimately be considered a humanism – that it exalts the dignity of man and that it does not simply abandon us to a chaotic world of total freedom. For, Sartre says, though existentialism gives us no ready-made “values” or “principles” with which to begin, it articulates the true meaning of the idea of freedom, so important to the Western ethical tradition. In this, it shows us the true legitimacy of the philosophical concept of man as a free agent, an actor in the world with free will, whose actions need not be determined by any pre-existing set of assumptions or values. Accordingly, existentialism, Sartre thinks, holds up and defends the traditional concept of man, the concept responsible for the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, as well as for the continuing freedom of man from the domination of a Christian or theo-centric worldview.

Though he shares much with Sartre, Heidegger’s aim in the *Letter on Humanism* is to distinguish himself from – rather than endorse – Sartre’s existentialism and his associated concept of humanism. For Heidegger thinks that this concept of humanism is still within the tradition of metaphysics. Of Sartre’s reversal of the traditional priority of essence over existence, Heidegger says:

“...Sartre expresses the basic tent of existentialism in this way: Existence precedes essence. In this statement he is taking *existentia* and *essentia* according to their metaphysical meaning, which from Plato’s time on has said that *essentia* precedes *existentia*. Sartre reverses this statement. But the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement. With it he stays with metaphysics in oblivion of the truth of Being.” (p. 232).

By contrast, Heidegger thinks his philosophy of Being can discover a still older and more original meaning for man. To this end, Heidegger rejects everything that Sartre calls “humanism” – but only in the service of the higher dignity of man. “... **The highest determinations of the sense of man in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of man ..**” (p. 233). This “proper dignity” can only be discovered if man is thought of – as Sartre does not think of him – in his fundamental relationship to Being and its meaning and truth.

What is the meaning of Heidegger’s rejection of “*humanism*,” and what is at stake in this rejection? To understand this, we need to think more about humanism and its meaning in the history of Western thought. In defending the traditional concept of “humanism,” Sartre says that he defends the basic conception of man that is already defined by Descartes. As is well known, Descartes made the “*cogito, ergo sum*” – the idea that “I think, therefore I am” – the center of his philosophy. Descartes thought he could doubt everything but this simple proposition, which alone could be the source of certain knowledge. Accordingly, he sought to build up all other knowledge from the undoubtable certainty that because I think, I am as an existing being. Accordingly, Descartes makes the idea of “*cogito, ergo sum*” the center of his idea of the human being as well. Man, for Descartes, is primarily a thing that thinks. But what are we, if we are essentially things that think? Descartes distinguishes the nonphysical mind – which is defined by its ability to think – from the physical body, which does not think. For Descartes, we are really nonphysical minds, or souls, living in physical bodies. (The twentieth-century philosopher Gilbert Ryle would later describe this doctrine as the doctrine of the “ghost in the machine.”) As nonphysical souls, we have free will in the sense that we can, by thinking and willing, cause actions and behaviors to happen that are not themselves caused by physical matter. Thus, at the time of Descartes, man is already defined as a nonphysical, thinking soul, capable of freely willing and imposing his will upon matter.

In the philosophical tradition, one usual name for this being – the nonphysical, acting, willing self – is the “*subject*.” From Descartes to Kant to Hegel, Western philosophy has developed the description of the relationship of the thinking subject to the world. From subjects we distinguish objects, things that the thinking subject can understand and upon which the thinking subject can act. But this way of conceiving of man is in fact, Heidegger thinks, much older. We can see this by reflecting on grammar itself, on the way in which the grammar of our language reflects metaphysics. In elementary school, you probably learned to distinguish, within a sentence, between the subject and the object. “The man reads the book”: when we distinguish between subject and object, we distinguish between man and the thing upon which he acts. The subject is the thing which can formulate thoughts and plans, and in so doing act upon objects, make them conform to his will. In this way, we think of thought as prior to action, and we think of our thought as preparatory for acting upon beings, manipulating them, and effecting our plans. This relationship between subject and object – whereby thinking subjects plan, imagine, and freely choose their increasing domination over the manipulation and control of objects – is itself a deep part of the tradition of metaphysics, and its historical forgottenness of beings. In this relationship, subjects increasingly concern themselves with the manipulation and domination of beings, understood as objects. At last, there are no more objects to manipulate, so we set in order and manipulate other people as well, coming to treat people – subjects – as objects. In this, the fundamental relationship between subject and object – and between beings and Dasein – is forgotten.

When we think of man as subject, we think of his relation to beings as the relationship of subject to object. The subject is set off against the object, and it becomes man’s goal to think of ever-new plans for the creation, manipulation, and control of material objects. Heidegger wants us to see our way to a new thinking of man’s being, according to which he is not in this kind of

relationship to other beings. But this is only possible insofar as man is thought of, and thinks of himself, in his fundamental relationship to Being.

We talked last time about how Heidegger wants to rethink the very concept of the human being that Sartre finds, and celebrates, in Descartes' writings. For Descartes, the human being is a subject among objects, a nonphysical soul or mind within a physical body. Objects are then things set over against us, the recipients of our calculation and control (This shows up even more clearly in German; the usual translation of "object" is *Gegenstand*, that which stands over against); and the freedom of the human being is then the freedom to act upon and manipulate objects. The distinction between subject and object already contains the roots of the technological outlook that Heidegger criticizes in "The Question Concerning Technology." It arises from the same forgottenness of being – and in particular, from the same failure to investigate and understand our own being. This forgottenness is, in turn, inseparable from the tradition of metaphysics, and the language that it determines.

Our fundamental concept of man, determined by the fundamental forgetting of being, determines our usual way of thinking of the relationship of man to beings. This way of thinking takes over our language itself: **"Much bemoaned of late, and much too lately, the downfall of language is, however, not the grounds for, but already a consequence of, the state of affairs in which language under the dominance of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity almost irremediably falls out of its element. Language still denies us its essence: that it is the house of the truth of Being. Instead, language surrenders itself to our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings. Beings themselves appear as actualities in the interaction of cause and effect. We encounter beings as actualities in a calculative businesslike way, but also scientifically and by way of philosophy, with explanations and proofs."** (p. 222). Here, Heidegger includes even science and philosophy within the kinds of "trafficking ... over beings" that technology exhibits.

In what specific way is humanism linked to metaphysics, not only in its Cartesian version, but in an older sense as well? To show this, Heidegger goes back to some of the earliest determinations of the meaning of the word "human." Man was first called "*humanitas*," Heidegger explains, by the Romans. For the Romans, "humans" were distinguished from "barbarians," those who were not Romans and did not share the virtue [*virtus*], education [*paideia*] and scholarship [*eruditio*] of the Romans and the Greeks. This definition survives in the way we, today, refer to the field of studies that are concerned with human beings: the humanities. Before that, man had been defined by Aristotle and the Greeks as *animale rationale* – the rational animal. In this description of man that privileges rationality, we can already see the roots of Descartes' definition of man as the thinking thing. Since then, man has been understood as the anima (soul) who is capable of rational thought. This is the underlying definition of man that the Western tradition has constantly presupposed. Subsequent versions of humanism – Marxism, which objects to the unchecked spread of capitalism on the ground that it fails to provide for the human needs of its human workers – and even Christianity, which assumes that man is essentially defined by his nonphysical soul – assume this basic definition of man.

As long as we stick with this definition of man, we will always fall back into metaphysics and the forgottenness of being. In fact, we will fall back to this forgottenness whenever we think of man as one kind of being among other kinds of beings at all, as long as we do not think of the special and different relationship man has with Being itself.

"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. Nor does it

therefore ask in what way the essence of man belongs to the truth of Being. Metaphysics has not only failed up to now to ask this question, the question is inaccessible to metaphysics as such. Being is still waiting for the time when it will become thought-provoking to man ... Above and beyond everything else, however, it finally remains to ask whether the essence of man primordially and most decisively lies in the dimension of *animalitas* at all. Are we really on the right track toward the essence of man as long as we set him off as one living creature among others in contrast to plants, beasts, and God?" (pp. 226-227).

Heidegger finds that metaphysics always defines man as the rational animal; in this way "Metaphysics thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas*." The proper dignity of man will be found, instead, only in a new kind of thinking about man that begins with the idea that we are Da-sein. As Dasein, it is our special relationship to Being (Sein) that most essentially defines what we are. For Heidegger, we are not subjects among objects; we are not *existentia* before *essentia*, or vice-versa. Instead we are essentially the kind of being that Being itself has a claim upon, the kind of Being that has a special kind of role to play in the unfolding and protecting of Being.

Unsurprisingly, Heidegger's key to a thinking of man that befits his dignity lies with the possibility of rethinking – or thinking for the first time – the relationship of man and Being. What is this relationship? Unlike Sartre, Heidegger does not take existence as the first fact of man's being. The idea of existence, Heidegger thinks, is still part of the metaphysical tradition from which he is trying to break. Rather than invert the traditional priority between essence and existence, Heidegger wants to transcend this distinction by thinking back to its original ground. To do this, he invents a new term for what man does: he *ek-sists*.

"Ek-sistence ... does not coincide with existentia in either form or content. In terms of content ek-sistence means standing out into the truth of Being ... As ek-sisting, man sustains Da-sein in that he takes the Da, the clearing of Being, into "care." But Da-sein itself occurs essentially as "thrown." It unfolds essentially in the throw of Being as the fateful sending." (pp. 230-31). For Heidegger, Ek-sistence means that we are given over to Being, that we stand "out into" its truth; that we are both inside and outside Being; that we are essentially fated and delivered over to Being. In this relationship, our proper role is not to be the creator and manipulator of beings, but instead to let Being itself – be. It is in this sense that Heidegger says that **"man is the shepherd of Being." (p. 234).** 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.

"Man is rather 'thrown' from Being itself into the truth of Being, so that ek-sisting in this fashion he might guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are. Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being. But for man it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in his essence that corresponds to such destiny; for in accord with this destiny man as ek-sisting has to guard the truth of Being. Man is the shepherd of Being." (p. 234)

Developing the idea of "thrownness" already present in *Being and Time*, Heidegger resists the metaphysical definition of humanity because it fails to respect the thought that our essence, what we are most of all, relates us to something that is not ourselves – namely, to Being. We experience this relationship when we experience the claim of Being upon us – in oblivion, when we allow modern technology to set upon us in its challenging way, and in clarity, when we allow beings to unveil themselves to us in the light of truth. As Being unveils, or refuses to unveil, itself in history, we experience its advent as a destiny. (Recall the etymological connection

between history – *das Geschichte* – and “destining” or sending – “*schichte*”). Though we cannot choose whether Being appears or withdraws, Heidegger suggests, we can and must decide whether we will find ourselves in the right sort of relationship to Being, whether we will let it reveal itself or, in our continuing pursuit of beings, further forget and ignore it.

Heidegger’s thinking about the destining of Being, and our relationship to its unfolding, depends on the new conception of *truth* that he has begun to develop since the analysis of *Being and Time*. Normally, caught within the metaphysical tradition, we think of truth as correctness or adequacy. To say that a sentence is true is to say that it represents something correctly, that it corresponds to its object. The possibility of speaking the truth is dependent on the possibility of a subject to accurately represent how things are with objects. We picture truth as happening “in our heads,” as being a matter of whether we experience the world truthfully or falsely. All of this is, Heidegger thinks, fully determined by the metaphysics of subjectivity. Instead of thinking of truth as correct representation, Heidegger will replace the representational idea of truth with an older idea, the Greek notion of truth as *aletheia*. *Aletheia* can perhaps best be translated as “unveiling” or “unveiledness”; it expresses the idea of truth as something’s coming to light, appearing as it is. (Etymologically, *aletheia* means the undoing of *lethe*; *lethe* was the mythological river of sleep or oblivion, across which the dead must pass before entering Hades). Heidegger’s new conception of truth as *aletheia* intends to replace the representationalist, objectifying notion of truth as correctness with a picture on which the relationship of man to Being is revealed, rather than obscured. When truth “happens,” as *aletheia*, beings show up, not as objects of representation, but as the beings they are. More importantly, perhaps, Being itself shows up, reveals itself, “happens” or propriates (*Ereignet*) in the space proper to it, the space of the clearing which is the place of Being itself.

At the beginning of the week, we discussed Heidegger’s critique of the existentialism of Sartre, and of the “humanism” that Sartre draws from Descartes, as being within the metaphysical tradition with which Heidegger seeks to break. We’ve begun to work our way into Heidegger’s new way of thinking about man and Being, through the new language that he invents to talk about the mutual relationship of the two. Today we will work more with this new language, attempting to understand what Heidegger is now saying about Being and its meaning and truth as it emerges for us.

“Yet Being – what is Being? It is It itself. The thinking that is to come must learn to experience that and to say it. “Being” – that is not God and not cosmic ground. Being is farther than all beings and is yet nearer to man than every being, be it a rock, a beast, a work of art, a machine, be it angel or God. Being is the nearest. Yet the near remains farthest from man. Man at first clings always and only to beings. But when thinking represents being as beings it no doubt relates itself to Being. In truth, however, it always thinks only of beings as such; precisely not, and never, Being as such ... This means that the truth of Being as the clearing itself remains concealed for metaphysics. However, this concealment is not a defect of metaphysics but a treasure withheld from it yet held before it, the treasure of its own proper wealth. But the clearing itself is Being.” (p. 234-35).

With the new thought in place of Being as the clearing where the propriative event (*Ereignis*) of beings happens, it becomes possible to understand the history of metaphysics as the history of partial and failed attempts to grasp this thought. In Plato, Being is identified as *eidos* or idea; what truly is, what really exists, more so than the particulars that participate in them, are the ideas with their own special kind of eternal being. But Heidegger reminds us that *eidos* originally means “the look,” the outward appearance of the thing. Plato transposed the “outward appearance” of a thing – the way it shows up in the light of truth – to an imagined realm of purity and eternity, making ideas the perfect or divine exemplars of the categories of things. This

location of Being as the realm of eternal ideas also set the stage for the Christian metaphysics of man and the world as created representatives, the same metaphysics which Sartre criticizes as the precedence of essence over existence.

Descartes and Cartesian metaphysics then takes the revolutionary step of making the idea, rather than a “divine exemplar” or a pattern in God’s mind (as it had been for some of his predecessors), something that can occur in the mind of a human being, and is the basis for our understanding and knowledge of the worlds. After Descartes, ideas become the stuff of a subject’s thinking and perception; and the truth of a thought is the adequacy or correspondence of an idea to its object. The thinking, willing subject – rather than Being’s place of the clearing – now becomes the central location of the happening of truth. This conception of the subject, and the conception of freedom that goes along with it, then becomes developed and eventually absolutized in Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, culminating in Nietzsche’s metaphysics of the will to power. For Heidegger, Nietzsche’s idea of the totality of the will to power brings to completion the metaphysical journey of the truth of Being from the time of the original loss of the explicit question of Being in Plato. Nietzsche’s “revaluation of all values” sets the priority of the divine over the earthly, the eternal over the temporal, on its head; but much like Sartre’s existentialism, still remains within the closed system of metaphysics that it inverts.

To begin to move outside this system, we need to begin to think, Heidegger suggests, of the “simple relationships” among Being, man, and language. In these relationships, thought authentically, man “stands out” into the truth of Being. In *ek-sisting*, man is “ecstatic;” he stands outside himself, stretching himself along toward the future and essentially relating to his own past. **“Because man as the one who ek-sists comes to stand in this relation that Being destines for itself, in that he ecstatically sustains it, that is, in care takes it upon himself, he at first fails to recognize the nearest and attaches himself to the next nearest. He even thinks that this is the nearest. But nearer than the nearest and at the same time for ordinary thinking farther than the farthest is nearness itself: the truth of Being.”** (p. 235).

Heidegger develops this thought by considering the simplicity of the “it is”; he seeks to return our thinking to the simplicity of the original thought of Parmenides, who said, at the beginning of thought, *“esti gar einai;”* which means, “for there is Being.” We have seen that **“the primal mystery of all thinking is concealed in this phrase.”** (p. 238). We have not thought whether and how Being is, indeed, since the time of the first thought of Being that Parmenides expresses. Our ability to think it today will depend on our being able to think of *Da-sein* as the special being who dwells between Being and beings, in the space or place of the *Da*, the place of the clearing where the light of Being shines and unveils beings into their truth. How, though, do we experience this place of our dwelling? **“What throws in projection is not man but Being itself, which sends man into the ek-sistence of Da-sein that is his essence. This destiny appropriates as the clearing of Being – which it is. The clearing grants nearness to Being. In this nearness, in the clearing of the Da, man dwells as the ek-sisting one without yet being able properly to experience and take over this dwelling.”** (p. 241).

As *Da-sein*, we dwell in the space between beings and Being, the space of the *clearing*. But within the tradition of metaphysics, we dwell here without properly or completely experiencing such dwelling, without knowing that we dwell here. Heidegger calls this dwelling in forgetfulness *“homelessness.”* He says that such homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world. In homelessness, not only ourselves, but our essence, is lost to us. (Heidegger refers, as well, to the older sense of “homelessness” or alienation described by Marx, in which the worker is said to be alienated from the means of production and from bourgeois society. He suggests that Marx’s idea simply reflects a broader phenomenon, one that occurs already in Hegel: that beings are thought of as a totality of material for labor, and hence that our distinctive relation to their

being, as *aletheia* or unveiling, is lost). To understand the roots of this homelessness, we need to understand metaphysics, which itself is, Heidegger says, **“a distinctive and up to now the only perceptible phase of the history of Being.”** (p. 244).

On the basis of his understanding of human being as Da-sein, Heidegger now rejects the philosophy and worldview of nationalism; every nationalism, he says, is simply an expansion and elevation of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity. For the nation is precisely a collective of subjects, with the essential goals and interests of the subject. Next week, we'll be in a position to contrast this claim with some of the claims Heidegger makes for the notion of a people or *Volk* at an earlier time, when he thought of nationalism as a potential expression of the historicity of Being and appears to, for a brief time, have thought of the Nazi party as potentially achieving a turning point in this history.

“But the essence of man consists in his being more than merely human, if this is represented as “being a rational creature.” “More” must not be understood here additively, as if the traditional definition of man were indeed to remain basic ... The ‘more’ means: more originally and therefore more essentially in terms of his essence. But here something enigmatic manifests itself: man is in thrownness. This means that man, as the ek-sisting counter-throw of Being, more than animal rationale precisely to the extent that he is less bound up with man conceived from subjectivity. Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being. Man loses nothing in this ‘less’; rather, he gains in that he attains the truth of Being. He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being’s truth.” (p. 245).

At the end of the “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger draws out the consequences of his new way of thinking of man as Da-sein for the question of values and ethics. We'll see that Heidegger apparently rejects any ethics of values; for he wants to return us to an older sense of “ethics” that is not characterized by the metaphysical determination of man as the thinking, acting, valuing being. We will be considering whether Heidegger succeeds in developing anything that can rightly be called an “ethics,” or whether he is simply, in his brief remarks, avoiding this task. But we'll also begin to see how Heidegger's defense of a new conception of man fits within the beginning of his new thinking as well, a thinking which inherently contains a new way of understanding what thinking itself is.

"ethos anthropoi daimon"

-Heraclitus

We have seen that in the "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger distances himself from both existentialism, as it has recently been defined, and all the versions of humanism, as they have been defined so far. Yet he emphasizes that in recoiling from humanism, he does not endorse "inhumanism" or inhumanity. He sees the basic character of his time as one of "wandering" and "homelessness" - yet he searches ceaselessly for the thinking of Being that will show man the way to language, the house of Being. This new thinking of Being, outside the tradition of metaphysics, causes Heidegger to reject much of what has traditionally been thought under the headings "ethics," "values," and "logic." Yet he claims that he is not in favor of unethical thinking or behavior, or in favor of irrationalism. To understand this, we need to understand the basis for Heidegger's position in his new way of thinking of Being.

Let's begin with *"logic:"* " **'Logic' understands thinking to be the representation of beings in their Being, which representation proposes to itself in the generality of the concept. But how is it with meditation on Being itself, that is, with the thinking that thinks the truth of Being? This thinking alone reaches the primordial essence of logos, which was already**

obfuscated and lost in Plato and Aristotle, the founder of 'logic.' To think against 'logic' does not mean to break a lance for the illogical but simply to trace in thought the logos and its essence, which appeared in the dawn of thinking, that is, to exert ourselves for the first time in preparing for such reflection. Of what value are even far-reaching systems of logic to us if, without really knowing what they are doing, they recoil before the task of simply inquiring into the essence of *logos*? If we wished to bandy about objections, which is of course fruitless, we could say with more right: irrationalism, as a denial of ratio, rules unnoticed and uncontested in the defense of 'logic,' which believes it can eschew meditation on logos and on the essence of ratio, which has its ground in logos." (p. 251). Heidegger wants to reject logic, thought of as the determination of the rules for correct or proper thought, because logic, so conceived, fails to consider and reflect on the original, broader meanings of its own subject, *logos*. We have seen that *logos* originally had a broader meaning; its meaning was, in fact, so broad that we need a number of different English terms to cover it. *Logos* means "the word"; it also means a "gathering" in which something appears. If Heidegger rejects "logic" as the determination of rules for correctness in thought, he does so to allow us to recover the possibility of reflecting on the original meaning of the *logos* itself.

This critique of logic helps to show what Heidegger is critiquing when he seemingly rejects all traditional ethical thought as well. Does Heidegger have an ethical view? Perhaps more importantly, do his views on Being, technology, and politics stand up to ethical scrutiny?

Here, in the space of a few brief pages, Heidegger seems to reject every traditional concept that characterizes ethical thinking and behavior. What is going on here? Heidegger in fact is rejecting every traditional concept of ethics, for he is rejecting ethics as it has been traditionally, that is metaphysically, understood. He aims to replace ethics, like "humanism," with his own thinking of Being. The question of whether Heidegger's replacement of ethics can itself be considered ethical - especially in view of the thinker's own life, his engagements with the Nazis and his subsequent lack of apology for this behavior - is a difficult and engaging one, calling upon all of our abilities of philosophical understanding and criticism.

Perhaps the first thing to understand is exactly what Heidegger finds objectionable about the traditional - the metaphysical - conception of ethics. Recall, from last time, that Heidegger wants to reject, and learn to think beyond, the whole traditional concept of mankind and human behavior that the metaphysical tradition expresses. According to this traditional view, man is the rational animal: the kind of animal that also has the ability to reason and to will, to determine rationally the best course of action by thinking and to impose this course upon the world. Accordingly, rational ethics has developed as the study of what general principles, or rules, one should follow in order to act correctly or justly or to do the good. (Even today, if you take a course from this department on ethics, much of the material will focus on the question of what principles justify rational action, what the status of these principles are, etc.).

But Heidegger thinks that the pursuit of rules for rational action cannot be the authentic essence of ethical thought. One reason for this, expressed also by Sartre and other existentialists, is that an action derived from fixed, rational rules of good behavior cannot be genuinely ethical. Such an action, insofar as I need simply consult fixed rules to choose it, is not genuinely free; in simply following a fixed rule, I do not experience the difficult burden of thought and choice that is needed to make a genuinely free, and accordingly genuinely ethical, decision. Perhaps for this reason, Heidegger had already said in *Being and Time* that every authentic decision must be made in view of the particular situation and context surrounding it: general rules cannot guide our appropriate action in all cases. Additionally, in the "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger suggests that the rule-based approach to ethics is simply a symptom of the technological attitude that he is

so concerned to reject: **"The greatest care must be fostered upon the ethical bond at a time when technological man, delivered over to mass society, can be kept reliably on call only by gathering and ordering all his plans and activities in a way that corresponds to technology."** (p. 255). For Heidegger, the rule-based approach to ethics is just another of the many ways in which we seek to define and pre-delimit the world in a fixed, absolute way, without looking at the particularities of individual situations and their kinds of being.

But Heidegger is obviously against more than just rules as a basis for behavior; he clearly rejects the idea of a basis of ethics in "values" as well. Today, when we constantly hear about "values" (family values, core values, basic values, etc.) in the ethical discourse of the nation, this rejection will seem particularly mysterious. What could be wrong with values?

Heidegger says: **"...It is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as 'a value' what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings be. Rather, valuing lets beings be valid - solely as the objects of its doing."** (p. 251).

To see this, it is helpful to consider the underlying meaning of the word "value." This word, importantly, is cognate to "evaluate;" to evaluate is to determine the value of something. But how do we evaluate? To evaluate is to measure, weigh, or compare against a standard. In so measuring an object, situation, or person, we stand before it and act upon it; we reduce it to a single aspect - its value. Heidegger complains that in doing this, we do not allow this object, situation, or person to be. Rather, in focusing on its value - what it is or what it means to us - we forget to think about its being. In this way, beings (including people!) become, once more, mere objects of our calculating, evaluating decisions.

Moreover, Heidegger thinks that the activity of evaluating is itself incapable of serving as a basis for ethics, for there is no hope of establishing universal ethical standards of value against which things, situations, and persons could be measured. Nietzsche - an important precursor of Heidegger - thought that the death of God meant the illegitimacy of what was previously the highest value. As a result, Nietzsche thought that for a period of several centuries, all values would be in constant flux and turmoil. For Heidegger, though, the rejection of all "values" does not mean simply the inversion of existing values. It means that God should no longer be thought of inside a system of values at all, either as the being with the highest value or as any other particular being. For Heidegger, in fact, thinking about Being is the necessary preparation for any possible thinking about God.

The transcendence possible for Da-sein is not transcendence toward any particular being, or toward any level or kind of reality outside of our own. Here Heidegger refers to *Being and Time's* discussion of being-in-the-world as a basic structure or mode of Da-sein. The "world" of being-in-the-world, he explains, is not thought in opposition to "spirit" or to "extrawordly" existence. **"For us 'world' does not at all signify beings or any realm of beings but the openness of Being. Man is, and is man, insofar as he is the ek-sisting one. He stands out into the openness of Being."** (p. 252). For Heidegger, the transcendence that we can achieve consists precisely in acknowledging and recognizing what we are. This kind of transcendence is itself the only possible basis for any further determination of our relationship to God.

"Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word "God" is to signify." (p. 253). Prior to any decision about our relationship to God, prior to any decision about whether He will depart or return, we must learn to think of ourselves in the special light of our special relationship with Being. This special kind of thinking is not, Heidegger says, a surmounting of metaphysics in the sense of climbing higher than it or surpassing it, but rather a "climbing back down" into the "nearness of the nearest." (p. 254)

What, then, is Heidegger's view of ethics? If Heidegger rejects both rules and values, what is left? Does Heidegger give us anything like an ethical view that could serve as the basis for our own ethical thought and decisions? Unfortunately, Heidegger's discussion of his own thoughts about ethics seems extremely vague. Heidegger asks us to reflect on the original meaning of the word ethics, and the Greek cognate *ethos*. Aristotle used this term to mean something like the character or spirit of a person or a community. Characteristically, though, Heidegger wants to go back farther, to reflect on what was meant by the word *ethos* in the sayings of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. Heraclitus said, in Greek: "*ethos anthropoi daimon*" (p. 258). As we usually understand it, '*anthropoi*' means 'man' (compare: 'anthropology' and 'anthropomorphize'), and *daimon* means something like 'god.' (Socrates famously said, in the *Apology*, that he was told how to philosophize by his personal 'daimon'; the word was subsequently used by Christians to refer to pagan gods; hence our "demon.")

"Thinking is on the descent to the poverty of its provisional essence. Thinking gathers language into simple saying. In this way language is the language of Being, as clouds are the clouds of the sky."

We saw last time that Heidegger rejects all traditional ethical thought because he sees it as dominated by the tradition of metaphysics, and in particular the metaphysics of subjectivity. In the tradition of metaphysics, rational ethics becomes the systematic attempt to derive and understand rules or maxims for decision which will ensure that the rational, thinking subject does the good. On the basis of his new conception of man as Da-sein, Heidegger wants to cut clear through this tradition, to return to a much older way of understanding "ethos." He quotes the phrase spoken by Heraclitus: "*ethos anthropoi daimon*" and translates it as follows: "Man dwells, insofar as he is man, in the nearness of God." This should remind us, Heidegger thinks, of the humbleness of Being, of its simplicity and everydayness. For Heidegger, then, "ethics" means simply dwelling in closeness to Being, recognizing our special privilege as Dasein by recognizing the place – the place of the clearing – in which we live.

As an "ethics," this might well be considered unsatisfying in a number of ways. It doesn't obviously give us any guidance as to how to make difficult decisions. Indeed, to say that ethics means dwelling in the nearness of Being doesn't even give us any obvious help in knowing where to look for the good. Heidegger would have thought that Plato's idea of the Good is just another being, thought with the prejudice in favor of the timeless and unchanging that characterizes metaphysics. Heidegger often says that even if there are such eternal, timeless ideals or values, our access to them depends on our kind of being, as the temporal and historical beings that we are. The story about Heraclitus is meant to show that as this kind of being, our "ethics" consists in the simple everydayness of the thought of Being, in our being related, through this thought, to Being itself. For Heidegger, then, ethics is not the thinking of a subject about how to act. Indeed, because of this, Heidegger does not tell us much about how to act. Though he again and again tells us to resist metaphysics, technology, and calculational thinking, he very seldom tells us what to do about these things in any concrete terms.

But at the same time, the story about Heraclitus shows us something about the relationship between thought and action as well. Traditionally, we think of action as a two-stage affair: first we formulate plans in thought, and then we carry them out in the world. First there is theory, then practice; we even think of theory and practice as opposed, and worry about solutions that are fine “in theory” but impossible “in practice.” We might easily think, therefore, that Heidegger’s thought about Being is simply theory: in what way, we might be tempted to ask, does it yield concrete results, measures that we can take or changes we can make to help our society and the world? Instead of either admitting to or disputing the objection directly, Heidegger seeks to undercut it by exploring its ground. For he asks us to remember that theory – *theoria* – is itself simply seeing (compare: theater (where something is seen), thesis (something shown)). (p. 262). Since the Greeks, theory has meant the seeing of things. But in what light are things seen? The light of Being. So if we undertake Heidegger’s thinking of Being, we think in a way that is more basic than theory and more basic than the distinction between theory and practice. What the fundamental thinker does is already an action, because it takes up a relationship to Being. What does thinking do in this action? **“[It] merely brings the unspoken word of Being to language.” (p. 262).** From this point on, Heidegger will be obsessed with the way in which a new thinking can leave its marks in our language, sowing the seeds of a change that will bring back the possibility – unglimped since the time of the Pre-Socratics and forgotten in the long heritage of metaphysics – of a language that will, once more, speak the word of Being.

“The thinking that is to come is no longer philosophy, because it thinks more originally than metaphysics – a name identical to philosophy. However, the thinking that is to come can no longer, as Hegel demanded, set aside the name ‘love of wisdom’ and become wisdom itself in the form of absolute knowledge. Thinking is on the descent to the poverty of its provisional essence. Thinking gathers language into simple saying. In this way language is the language of Being, as clouds are the clouds of the sky. With its saying, thinking lays inconspicuous furrows in language. They are still more inconspicuous than the furrows that the farmer, slow of step, draws through the field.” (p. 265).

Source:

http://www07.homepage.villanova.edu/paul.livingston/martin_heidegger%20-%20letter%20on%20humanism.htm