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Heidegger





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History and Truth in Being and Time

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PHOENIX

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INTRODUCTION

Universities often seem more like asylums for the protection of deluded academics than workshops producing real knowledge. Take a glance, for example, at this heavy bible-black volume issued in Halle in 1927: *Jahrbuch für Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Forschung*, Vol. 8. It is 800 pages long, and contains just two philosophical treatises, divided into numbered sections like insurance regulations. Unreadable, you will conclude: just another meaningless monument to academic pride and grandiosity.

Back in 1927, however, the German philosophical public leapt on the *Jahrbuch*. It was not Oskar Becker's meticulous discussion of 'Mathematical Existence' that attracted them, but the other article, even longer and more forbidding. The author was only an assistant professor at Marburg in Hessen at the time, but he already enjoyed a strange notoriety. It was said that he was not just a philosopher, but – on the contrary – a *thinker*, and that he cared nothing for the cosmopolitan elegance of the German intellectual aristocracy, preferring the gruff peasant manners he had been born to 37 years before, in the Catholic village of Messkirch, down in Baden. Instead of frequenting professorial dinner tables, he liked to stay with his wife and two young sons in the mountain hut he had built above Todtnauberg in the Black Forest a few years before. There he could ski across country, chop wood, gaze into the distance, and think. But he needed a better-paid job – ideally, a Chair at his old university in Freiburg-im-Breisgau, an easy car-journey from his hut – and he could not get promotion unless he published a substantial article. He sent off some manuscripts to the *Jahrbuch*, and so it was that *Being and Time: First Half* by Martin Heidegger made its entrance into the world.

The philosophical issue of the day was the relation between truth and history. Enlightenment faith in science and progress had been devastated by the war of 1914–18, leaving the field open to corrosive 'relativism'. Beliefs, it seemed, depended on the fickleness of history, not on some transcendently trustworthy absolute truth.

Heidegger's big argument would be that, if the concepts of historical particularity and scientific truth are clearly thought through, then the apparent conflict between them disappears: that our individual peculiarities are not a chrysalis that we leave behind in order to rise to an exalted realm of truth, but the origin and anchor of all our knowledge. It was going to be a hard lesson, however, since it ran counter to our most immediate sense of ourselves – to the dichotomy between mind and world or subjectivity and objectivity which, as well as being built into the brickwork of western philosophy, is woven into the fabric of our everyday self-understandings. The necessary task of clarification would require not only intellectual virtuosity, but a labour of self-transformation as well.

AN ONTOLOGY OF OURSELVES

At first it is a disappointment to move from these tantalizing expectations to the treatise Heidegger actually wrote. For a start, what title could be more outdated than *Being and Time*? Was Heidegger unaware that the philosophical study of being – ‘ontology’, in the jargon of the academy – had been definitively discredited by Kant at the end of the eighteenth century, and replaced by empirical natural science? And had no one told him that, following Einstein’s special theory of relativity of 1905, the concept of time now belonged to physics rather than philosophy?

But we should take care. Philosophers often write with a canny sense of paradox, and eventually make fools of those with too little wariness about their own unclarified and unironic certitudes. Heidegger may not be about to bore us with some foolhardy new solutions to the problems or pseudo-problems of traditional ontology – philosophical equivalents to perpetual motion or squaring the circle. He may have something rather subtler up his sleeve.

Still, our hearts will sink again when we turn the page and discover a quotation in Greek – a remark addressed by the mysterious Eleatic stranger to the radiant youth Theaetetus in Plato’s dialogue *The Sophist*: ‘for manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression “being”’.¹ So it will be just another debate over the meanings of words, we sigh. Heidegger pursues the quotation: ‘we, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed’.² Here is a twofold surprise. ‘We *used to* think we understood it’: but surely our certainties are meant to grow with age, not diminish? And ‘*now* we are perplexed’: but is it not perpetual truth, rather than mounting perplexity, that is supposed to be the daughter of time?

At least we can be reassured that Heidegger is not going to lay down the law about the nature of being as such. His theme is less portentous

whose every moment is already structured in terms of existing between birth and death.

Dasein does not fill up a track or stretch 'of life' – one which is somehow present-at-hand – with the phases of its momentary actualities. It stretches *itself* along in such a way that its own being is constituted in advance as a stretching-along. The 'between' which relates to birth and death already lies *in the being* of Dasein ... It is by no means the case that Dasein 'is' actual in a point of time, and that, apart from this, it is 'surrounded' by the non-actuality of its birth and death. Understood existentially, birth is not ... something past in the sense of something no longer present-at-hand; and death is just as far from having the kind of being of something ... not yet present-at-hand but coming along ... Factual Dasein exists as born; and, as born, it is already dying, in the sense of being-towards-death. As long as Dasein factually exists, both the 'ends' and their 'between' *are*, and they *are* in the only way possible on the basis of Dasein's being as *care* ... As care, Dasein *is* the 'between'.¹¹¹

Authentic temporality belongs to us as much as we belong to it; it is not a force of nature so much as the way our existence 'temporalizes' itself and its world. It is not an infinite sequence of uniform self-contained now-points, but a finite structure of differentiated 'moments'.

The moments of authentic temporality are 'ecstatic' in the sense that they 'stand outside of themselves'. They are linked to each other by countless pathways of memory and anticipation: they are not positions fixed on a bridge over time, but indefinite fields that reach out into both past and future.¹¹² Moments are 'futural', but not in the sense of being oriented towards infinite times to come. Each moment is magnetized by finitude, anticipating death like a compass needle pointing to the North pole.

By the term 'futural', we do not here have in view a now which has *not yet* become 'actual'... [but] the coming in which Dasein, in its own most potentiality-for-being, comes towards itself ... Only so far as it is futural can Dasein *be* authentically as having been. The character of 'having been' arises, in a certain way, from the future ... and in such a way that the future which 'has been' (or better, which 'is in the process of having been') releases from itself the present. This phenomenon has the unity of a future which makes present in the process of having been; we designate it as *temporality*.¹¹³

delimited in terms of this projection. The 'grounding' of 'factual science' was possible only because the researchers understood that in principle there are no 'bare facts'.¹²⁰

The truths discovered by Newtonianism depend, in other words, not only on nature's regular habits, but also on the conjectures of those seventeenth-century investigators who chose to 'project' it in a way that brought themes like motion, force, time and location into focus and made them available for objective knowledge. The 'thematization' performed by scientific inquirers is not so much the effect of objectivity as its precondition:

Its aim is to free the entities we encounter within-the-world, and to free them in such a way that they can 'throw themselves against' a pure discovering – that is, that they can become 'objects'. Thematizing objectifies.¹²¹

Different thematizations (Newtonian and Einsteinian for example) deliver different aspects of nature to scientific knowledge, and the choice of thematization depends on scientists rather than on nature itself. Scientific progress does not follow a path predetermined by nature itself: like all our activities, science always has an open future.

But what if the object of inquiry is ourselves, as entities whose existence consists in our temporalization of temporality and hence in our interpretations and misinterpretations of ourselves and our world? The clue, according to Heidegger, lies in the 'fundamental existential ontological assertion' that 'Dasein is historical'. If we are essentially temporalization, then we are essentially 'historicality' too. Only by understanding our historicality existentially, and making it our own, can we ever hope to construct a 'science' of history.¹²²

On first hearing, this suggestion sounds similar to the traditional doctrine of 'historicism', according to which human affairs are 'essentially historical' and therefore not representable with that peculiar combination of universality and precision that characterizes the natural sciences. Historicism can be divided into two diametrically opposed forms. The first is associated with the historian Leopold von Ranke, and states that human events can be understood only in terms of their own specific place and time; the other, associated with the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, insists that they

cannot be grasped in their full significance unless they are set in the context of the overall progressive sweep of history as it moves towards its final goal. But the two kinds of historicism have a great deal in common, and both of them are very congenial to common sense. For we are all everyday historians in our own case, rather as we are all our own ontologists. We can scarcely exist without having some sense of history and our place in it – of the oddity of ‘the past’, the historically distinctive features of ‘the present’, and the dangers and opportunities of the ‘coming age’.

But even if historicism in its various forms joins with existential analysis in trumpeting the theme of historicity, their interpretations of it are fundamentally opposed. From the existential point of view, historicism attributes a false objectivity to history: it not only forgets that the historian’s existence is itself historical, but also insists on slicing the historical record into separate ‘epochs’, thus locking past existences inside closed temporal cells as if their significance were a matter for their age only. Just as scientism reduces temporality to the self-enclosed instants of ‘now-time’, so historicism reduces historicity to the sealed epochs of ‘world-history’.¹²³

Historicism adapts history to the tastes of our they-self, which is not only anxious to keep up to date and conform with the norms of its epoch, but also susceptible to the charms of anything quaint and old-fashioned. The they-self finds in historicism a mechanism for evading authentic historicity.

It cannot repeat what has been, but only retains and receives the ‘actual’ that is left over, the world-historical that has been, the leavings, and the information about them that is present-at-hand ... Lost in the making present of the today, it understands the ‘past’ in terms of the ‘present’ ... When ... one’s existence is inauthentically historical, it is loaded down with the legacy of a past which has become unrecognizable, and it seeks the modern.¹²⁴

If Descartes offered the supreme philosophical expression of inauthentic spatiality, then Hegel performed the same service for inauthentic temporality. He interpreted history as the work of ‘the negative’, which required us to pass wearily from error to error, negating each one on our way, until eventually we would arrive at the single great truth that had always been awaiting us at the end. Hegelian progress, as Heidegger

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