

Restoring the Question of the Meaning of Being:

The Fundamental Concepts of Heidegger's Existential Phenomenology

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These reflections were published in [Apropos of Nothing: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, and the Coen Brothers \(SUNY, U.P.\)](#). They can be cited here as: Buckner, Clark. "Restoring the Question of the Meaning of Being: The Problem of Nihilism and the Fundamental Concepts of Heidegger's Existential Phenomenology." www.clarkbuckner.com. Web. March 1st, 2019.

As a philosophical concern, the problem of nihilism is first formulated in Friedrich Jacobi's 1799 "Letter to Fichte." The immediate background for his argument is the transcendental turn in philosophy, accomplished by Immanuel Kant, who argued that a critically rigorous philosophy ought not to make metaphysical claims concerning the essence of things or the foundations of the self, but rather should limit itself to expositing the conditions of the possibility of experience as we know it, as defined by the categories of reason. Jacobi denounces Fichte's elaboration of this critical turn in philosophy as nihilistic, insofar as it denies access to anything beyond the ken of subjectivity.^[i] He writes,

If the highest upon which I can reflect, what I can contemplate is my empty, pure, naked and mere ego, with its autonomy and freedom: then rational self-contemplation, then rationality is for me a curse – I deplore my existence (Cited in Critchley, 1997; 4).

In keeping with the common reaction against Existentialism in the 20th Century, what Jacobi denounces as nihilistic in Fichte's reworking of Kant, might better be understood as precisely what Kant was working to *address* in the impasse between rationalism and empiricism. While the critical rigor of the empiricist repudiation of metaphysical speculation couldn't be denied, the result undermined the validity of reasons' claim to knowledge, and reduced ethics to merely pragmatic prescriptions and, what ultimately would be conceived as, the hedonistic calculus of quantifiable goods. Rather than formulating a nihilistic philosophy, Kant, and the German Idealists who followed in his wake, thus worked to address the specter of nihilism that haunted the rise of modern science, by integrating the failure of speculative metaphysics into their concept of philosophy and trying to accommodate the inherent tendency in reason to over-extend and so undermine its own judgment – what Kant calls "the antinomies of reason." However one understands this philosophical history, the roots of the problem of nihilism thus can be traced to the advent of modernity. While the development of a scientific self-consciousness held out the promise of potentially grounding knowledge and morality on rigorously objective grounds,

simultaneously it threatened to undermine altogether the projects of epistemology and ethics: not only by displacing the Aristotelian worldview of the scholastics, which previously had provided the framework for their formulations, but more radically by revealing reason to be rent by contradictions.

As anticipated by philosophical responses to the French Revolution, in the subsequent development of German Idealism and its Marxist aftermath, these problems concerning the theoretical foundations of science and morality, furthermore, came to be embroiled with the social turmoil of the early modern world, and the crises engendered by the rise of industrial capitalism, which not only undermined the agrarian forms of life that had sustained people for centuries, but also subjected the modern populous to unprecedented exploitation. While it would be a mistake therefore to collapse the diverse theoretical and social problems of the age into a single, over-arching philosophical concern, the problem of nihilism thus recurs throughout the intellectual, cultural, and social history of the nineteenth-century, reaching an apex in the catastrophe of the First World War, which marks its end. How would society be restored and sustained? The problem registered in the artistic, philosophical, and political modernism of the early twentieth-century was not abstract, but rather integral to the project of literally re-building the world.

At this juncture, in philosophy, the problem of nihilism finds one of its most systematic and enduring formulations in the work of Martin Heidegger, who registers and responds to it as a matter of what he calls, *the forgetting of the question of the meaning of Being*. In his 1935 lecture course, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he writes,

But where is authentic nihilism at work? There, where they cling to familiar beings and believe that is enough, as heretofore, to take beings as beings, since that is after all what they are. But with this they reject the question of Being and treat Being like a nothing (*nihil*), which in a certain way it 'is' insofar as it essences (*west*). To cultivate only beings in the forgetfulness of Being – that is nihilism (Heidegger, 1959; 203).

Heidegger first formulates this problem of the forgetting of question of the meaning of Being in his early magnum opus, *Being and Time*. While the ontological question was seminal to Western philosophy in its ancient Greek origins, Heidegger argues that it was obscured almost as soon as it appeared, in so far as it was formulated – and so ostensibly answered in advance – with reference to an ontic being. The Greek concept of essence (*ousia*) already has a two-fold significance: referring at times to the Being of an entity and at other times to the entity itself. As a result, as early as Parmenides, Being was understood both in a dynamic sense – anticipating Heidegger's understanding – as "a pure 'making-present' of something;" while, at other times, it was equated with the static immediacy of the objectively present (Heidegger, 1962; 26/48). The Scholastic translation of the Greek concept of essence (*ousia*) as substance

(*sustantia*) further reinforced this tendency to conflate the ontological concept of Being with an ontic being, by connoting a stratum underlying the changing appearances of things. And Heidegger traces the sedimentation of this substantialization, up through the origins of modern philosophy in Descartes' critical turn to the subject, arguing that despite the radicality of his assertion of the *cogito sum*, he failed to interrogate "the *meaning of the Being of the 'sum'*" (Heidegger, 1962; 24/46).

When addressing the problem of nihilism in terms of this collapse of "the ontological distinction" between Being and beings, Heidegger elaborates upon the critique of *objectivism* that his mentor Edmund Husserl first formulates in response to the rise of psychologism. As characteristic of nineteenth century, ideological positivism – which, of course, still persists today in both popular and professional guises – psychologism argues that, because science and logic belong to consciousness, their principles ought to be amenable to empirical explanation as elements of psychology. As an echo of Kant's response to the problem of empiricism, Husserl argues that psychologism firstly entails a category mistake, which fails to do justice specifically to the objects of logic and mathematics. However, insofar as it entails basic assumptions concerning consciousness, Husserl contends that the problem of psychologism reveals the need for a broader suspension of the theoretical presuppositions underlying empirical science – which he refers to as, an "epoché" – and for a renewed investigation of experience, in light of this methodological naïveté, as registered by his famous call "to the things themselves." Specifically, Husserl insists upon suspending the presupposition of "third person" objectivity, as the standard of human knowledge, and instead analyzes experience from a first person, phenomenological perspective, as not merely relative in its subjectivity, but rather as defined by consistent structure and dynamics, which inform the very constitution of experience. Consciousness is, according to Husserl, always consciousness *about* something; and, as such, rather than opposed to its object plays an integral role in its composition. Against the objectivist reification of both subject and object in psychologism, Husserl thus conceives knowledge as a process, whose foundations he works to clarify with particular attention to the structures and dynamics of this conscious *intentionality*.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger adopts Husserl's phenomenological method as his own. At the same time, however, he criticizes Husserl's continued emphasis upon disinterested knowledge (Dreyfus, 1991; 46). When working out the methodological approach to his problem, Heidegger thus proposes addressing the question to "Dasein," as the being for whom "in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it" (Heidegger, 1962; 32). Dasein is a vernacular German expression that means "*existence*," and translates literally as "being" (*sein*) there" (*da*). Heidegger appeals to the term, not only to bracket the associations evoked by the classical concept of the subject, but also to ground his analysis in the structure and dynamics of *lived experience*. In this regard, when introducing Dasein as the being for which its Being is a question, Heidegger contends that

his motivating problem is integral to existence. Rather than an esoteric philosophical concern, it is a question raised by everyone, as part and parcel of being alive. Only as such, in fact, might it provide a proper foundation for science as a human pursuit. However, Heidegger's concept of Dasein's "pre-ontological understanding" of Being goes further: Dasein reflects on who it is, and what it is doing, as an integral part of doing what it does. Rather than simply given, the determination of Dasein and its surroundings depends upon a tacit answer to this question of the meaning of being, which Heidegger contends is integral to its pursuits. As a further distinction from Husserl, Heidegger thus qualifies his phenomenology as *hermeneutical* – a term originally pertaining to the reception of religious texts – and he formulates his analysis, as a radicalization of the *interpretive* understanding, integral to Dasein's everyday being-in-the-world.^[ii]

Being-in-the-World

Against the commonplace concepts of the world as an aggregate of empirical objects, or a substantial geometrical foundation – like Descartes' *res extensa* (extended thing) – Heidegger argues that the world is grounded in Dasein's being-in-the-world as the *Da*, the "there," of its being-there. While one might presume that things exist in the world, out there, as factual objects, only secondarily to be taken up within the framework of human pursuits and so attributed significances, Heidegger argues the contrary: things appear firstly and fundamentally, as the things they are, within the framework of their use. The hammer is what it is in nailing – in the solidity of its handle, the weight of its head, the force of its impact. Rather than merely given as an object, it exists in, what Heidegger calls, its "readiness-to-hand." Only secondarily and derivatively, is it a mere thing, a brute fact. When its use is somehow interrupted, when it goes missing or breaks, when it is left idle on the floor and gets tripped over: then it appears in the stasis of its presence-at-hand. However, even then, its mere presence remains rooted in its readiness-to-hand, insofar as it is first and foremost unusable.

According to Heidegger, the world thus amounts to a referential context; the hammer exists as such only in relationship to nails, to tool-belts, to two-by-fours. Outside of this network of relationships, these things cease to be what they are. Expositing Heidegger's example, Charles Spinosa explains, "[The craftsman] understands nothing, not even himself, independently of everything else in the shop that has some role in pursuing his occupation, his involved activity" (Spinosa; 2005, 486). However, the world is not thereby exhausted by the network of ready-to-hand things of which it is comprised, any more than it consists of an aggregate of empirical, present-at-hand objects. As a referential context, the world is held together by Dasein's projects, which implicitly define the relationships between things, in the pursuit of a common end. Beyond the network of tools that comprise it, the worldhood of the world thus lies ultimately in Dasein, insofar as the interpretive understanding integral to its pursuits, reveals things for the first time as the things that they are, in the light of its being-there.

Das Man

While Heidegger's analysis of the worldhood of the world concerns, the "there" of Dasein's being-there, he addresses "who" Dasein is, in its everyday involvements, as, what he calls, *das Man*. In common usage, The German expression, *das Man*, functions most often as an impersonal pronoun, connoting an anonymous generality, as in, "one does, one says..." Hubert Dreyfuss commends this translation of the term, for its normative implications, as if to say, "this is how things are done." (Dreyfuss, 1991; 143) By contrast, in their English version of *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson translate *das Man* as "the They," which Dreyfuss contests as implies that "I," as Dasein, am different from "them." As a further aspect of his departure from the Cartesian concept of subjectivity as an interiority withdrawn from the world, Heidegger's argues that *Dasein* does exist not as an atomized individual, who fundamentally stand apart from things and people, and only secondarily develops relationships with them. Instead Dasein takes up projects that have long been pursued by others and adopts their ways of doing things. As a result Dasein firstly exists, and understands both itself and the world, through this collectivity, as a generic, even anonymous subject. While Dreyfus' translation of *das Man* as "one" emphasizes the collectivity of Dasein as a social-historical subject, immersed in a world of other people, and informed in its everyday involvements by the enduring legacy of the past, at the same time, it risks effacing the fact that, for Heidegger, *das Man* nevertheless is a alienating: the inauthentic state of Dasein's existence, predicated upon a blind acceptance of generic conventions. Macquarrie and Robinson's admittedly awkward translation of *das Man* as "the They" thus has its own virtue. Translating the term as "one," takes it in the direction of the first person plural, as if to connote, "this is how we do things."^[iii] However, Heidegger does not conceive the collectivity of *das Man* in the first person: as a self-determining social body. Instead, as a form of subjectivity, *das Man* is objectified. In the first person of its self-understanding Dasein originally identifies with *the third-person plural*: the They.

Arguing that Dasein's everyday existence as *das Man* is objectified, of course, is not to argue that Dasein is simply reduced to the brute facticity of a thing. Instead the objectivism of *das Man* is subjective: the alienation of subjectivity into the third person plural of the cliché, which assumes the form of an immediate given, and, as such, inhibits Dasein's dynamic engagement with the world, in the stasis of a movement that goes nowhere. In language, this takes the form of, what Heidegger calls, "idle talk" (*Gerede*). While language, in principle, brings things to light – articulating their qualities and sharing them with others – most of the time, making oneself understood requires appealing to an "average intelligibility," whose readily available meanings occlude the critical reflection that gives language its clarity and precision. (Heidegger, 1962; 168/212) Similarly Heidegger describes understanding as "a kind of knowing... just in order to have known." (Heidegger, 1962; 172/217) He explains this "curiosity" (X) as privileging the immediacy of sight, insofar as it sanctions moving on to the next thing, ad

infinitem. *Das Man* is not indifferent, but wants to know, if only to be “in the know.” However, precisely through this busy activity, curiosity sustains the subject in a state of *distraction*, which paradoxically holds the world at bay. Through this curiosity, and its intersection with the chatter of idle talk, Heidegger argues that Dasein is held in a state of suspended indecision, which he calls “ambiguity.” He writes, “When in our everyday being-with-one-another, we encounter the sort of thing which is accessible to everyone, and about which anyone can say anything, it seen becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in a genuine manner and what is not.” (Heidegger, 1962; 217) In the ambiguity of *das Man*, Dasein’s circumspective interpretation of the world – and, by extension the world itself – thus remains formless, indecisive in its very determination, as qualified by, what Heidegger calls, “a non-committal just-surmising-with-someone-else” (Heidegger, 1962; 218).

Anxiety Has No Object

What wrenches Dasein from this fallenness into the everyday objectivism of *das Man* is, according to Heidegger, anxiety, which confronts one with the burden of existence, introduced at the outset of the chapter, as care. Whereas fear pertains to something potentially detrimental, whether it is immediately threatening or only imagined, Heidegger argues, *anxiety has no object*. What provokes anxiety is indeterminate. It’s hard to pin down, seemingly emanating from everywhere and nowhere in particular. Anecdotally, Heidegger recounts, in the wake of an anxiety attack, “we are accustomed to say, ‘it was really nothing’” (Heidegger, 1962; 187/231). Still further, Heidegger contends, anxiety renders things in the world and even other people momentarily inconsequential. Anxiety overwhelms one’s experience entirely, nullifying the significance that any particular person or thing might otherwise have in one’s life. Any gesture or object offered as a palliative is dismissed. Nothing suffices to calm one’s nerves.

While initially formulated privatively, Heidegger affirms this lack of any definitive object as a positive, existential determination of anxiety. “What oppresses us,” he writes, “is not this or that... it is the world itself.” (Heidegger, 1962; 187/231) Asserting this, of course, Heidegger does not contend that anxiety brings us face to face with the world as a brute, physical fact. After all, for Heidegger, the world is not at thing, but rather a potentiality integral to Dasein. The void revealed in the nothing and nowhere of anxiety is the defining horizon of this potentiality: the nullity that circumscribes the world in Dasein’s projective understanding. Disclosing the world as world, anxiety thus throws the subject back upon *itself*. Heidegger writes,

In anxiety, what is environmentally ready-at-hand sinks away and so, in general, do entities within the world. The ‘world’ can offer nothing more, and neither can the Dasein-with of others. Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself as it falls, in terms of the

world and the way things have been publicly interpreted (Heidegger, 1962; 188/232).

Interrupted in its everyday immersion in the world, Heidegger contends that Dasein experiences the uncanniness of its existence: the unfathomable groundlessness of its being at all. The German word, *unheimlich*, translates into English literally as “not-at-home.” For Heidegger, this too is a further, positive determination of anxiety’s indeterminacy as an experience of nothing, nowhere. Anxiety renders Dasein “not-at-home,” by interrupting its everyday existence, and instilling in it a state of, what Heidegger calls, “existential solipsism” (Heidegger, 1962).

Anxiety thus exhibits an analogous dynamic to the heuristics of dysfunction in Heidegger’s analysis of the worldhood of the world. Within the framework of the world as a referential context, informed by the circumspective concern of Dasein’s practical pursuits, objects are withdrawn from conscious awareness in the readiness-to-hand that characterizes their use. However, when Dasein’s projects are interrupted, the world as a relational totality collapses and objects come to appear conspicuously, albeit still only indirectly, in matter-of-factness of their mere presence-at-hand. Similarly, in the fallenness of its everyday pursuits, Dasein remains unaware of itself as being-in-the-world – self-conscious certainly, but only in the distraction of *das Man*. When interrupted by anxiety, the world withdraws into the nowhere and nothing, confronting Dasein with the burden of its existence. He writes,

Uncanniness reveals itself authentically in the basic state-of-mind of anxiety; and, as the most elemental way in which thrown Dasein is disclosed it puts Dasein’s Being-in-the-world face to face with the ‘nothing’ of the world; in the face of this ‘nothing,’ Dasein is anxious with anxiety about its ownmost potentiality-for-Being (Heidegger, 1962; 321).

If the dynamics of this irruption of the uncanny is analogous to the disruption of Dasein’s concerned involvement with the world, their revelatory effects move in contrary directions. In the interruption of Dasein’s practical projects, objects come to appear for the first time in the derivative and ultimately deficient mode as merely present-at-hand; whereas, in anxiety, Dasein is brought face to face with itself for the first time as being-in-the-world, and so opened to the possibility of assuming responsibility for its existence authentically.

Being-Towards-Death

Heidegger elaborates upon this ethical normativity in anxiety, when working to resolve an apparent contradiction in his preliminary exposition of Dasein. In its constitution as a totality, Dasein anticipates the yet to come. It exists as always ahead of itself in its potentiality, and so as always outstanding, comprised of an inherent lack. To address the issue, Heidegger turns his attention to the

existential determination of death as definitive of Dasein's being at an end. In different ways, throughout our lives, we experience the death of others. However, the question of death's determination of *Dasein's* end precludes its reduction to such an objective concern. To the contrary, Heidegger contends, "death is in every case mine" (Heidegger, 1962; 284). In any role that one might adopt in life, another person might just as well take one's place. In death, however, no one can take my place. Correlative to this radical singularity of death, in its existential significance, Heidegger contends that it must be understood, not objectively as a matter of fact, but rather in the dynamism of a relation – as "something that stands before us – something impending" – which he captures in his concept of Dasein's totality as *being-towards-death* (Heidegger, 1962; 250/294). Dasein anticipates death as a possibility. At the same time, however, death is not merely one possibility among others, as a series of underdetermined actualities that might or might not transpire. Death gives Dasein "nothing to be actualized; nothing, which Dasein as actual could itself be." Instead, death is "the measureless impossibility of existence... It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, or every way of existing" (Heidegger, 1962; 307). As a possibility, the impossibility of death thus provides the limiting condition of Dasein's being-in-the-world – as, what Heidegger calls, "Dasein's ownmost possibility" – qualifying the whole field of the possible and the actual, and constituting Dasein's potentiality-for-being, as the being, for which its Being is an issue (Heidegger, 1962; 307).

Resoluteness

When explaining being-towards-death as the ultimate horizon of Dasein's potentiality, Heidegger simultaneously establishes the conditions of its comport itself in the authenticity of, what he calls, resoluteness. (*Entschlossenheit*). Heidegger conceives Dasein's resoluteness as the responsibility of a decision born of the confrontation with the singular, groundlessness of one's existence in the anxiety of being-towards-death. Nevertheless, the notion must be distinguished from the facile existentialist cliché that, in a world devoid of absolute values, one is responsible to decide for oneself the meaning in life, insofar as it implicitly equates value with perspective, as Heidegger argues against Nietzsche, and reverts to a classical concept of the autonomous subject, as set apart from the world. Grounded in the structure of its being-in-the-world, resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*) rather is "a distinctive mode of Dasein's disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*)" (Heidegger, 1963; 297/343). Prior to the 16th-Century, the German term, *entschliessen* meant "to unlock, open;" and the contemporary sense of *Entschlossenheit* as "resolve, decision" developed from the reflexive "*sich entschliessen*," to mean "to unlock one's mind, clarify, make definite one's thoughts" (Farrell, 1997 / Cited in Inwood, 1999; 186). Beyond the perspectivalism of "deciding the meaning of life," resoluteness thus characterizes Dasein's projective understanding in light of the negativity of being-towards-death, as a matter of being open to experience in its phenomenological underdetermination, and so "letting beings be" (Heidegger, 1963)

Emphasizing the groundlessness of resoluteness, Charles Scott writes, “authenticity means the disclosure of human being-in-question without the possibility of resolving the question” (Scott, 1993; 77). In the everydayness of *das Man*, Dasein remains blind to the groundlessness of its existence, denying death, not by assuming itself to be assured of life eternal, but rather by taking the certainty of death to be an *actuality*, and so failing to discern its immanence as a possibility, integral to the constitution of the present. As an actuality, the certainty of death always has yet to transpire and so is “deferred to ‘sometime later.’” What thus gets effaced is the existential dynamism of death, which thus qualifies all actuality as contingent (in the immanence of its imminence). Heidegger continues, “Thus the ‘they’ covers up what is peculiar in death’s certainty – *that it is possible at any moment*. Along with the certainty of death goes the *indefiniteness* of its ‘when’” (Heidegger, 1962; 302). Correlative to his concept of its possible impossibility, as conditioning the field of both the possible and the actual, Heidegger thus conceives the “indefinite certainty” of death as the limiting conditioning of both the certain and uncertain in the groundless contingency of existence.

Through this analysis of being-towards-death, Heidegger thus explains the paralyzing effect of anxiety, which he first described as confronting Dasein with the uncanniness of existence. “In this state of mind, he writes, “Dasein finds itself face to face with the ‘nothing’ of the possible impossibility of its existence. Anxiety is anxious *about* the potentiality-for-Being of the entity so destined [*des so bestimmten Seieden*], and in this way it discloses the uttermost possibility.” At the heart of this confrontation, he contends, “Dasein opens itself to a constant *threat* arising out of its own ‘there.’” And, further commending Scott’s paradoxical equation of resoluteness with an unresolvable question, Heidegger describes the encounter with this threat as not only the precipitating condition of Dasein’s authentic resoluteness, but also as integral to its pursuit. He continues, “In this very threat Being-towards-the-end must maintain itself. So little can it tone this down that it must rather cultivate the indefiniteness of the certainty” (Heidegger, 1962; 310).

At the same time, however, Scott’s equation of Dasein’s resoluteness with an unresolved question is potentially misleading. While the groundless indeterminacy of death’s impossibility indeed defines the horizon of resoluteness, it discloses experience in the concrete determination of a decision, an answer. Heidegger writes, “*The resolution is precisely the disclosive projection and determination of what is factually possible at the time* (Heidegger, 1963; 299/345). As opposed specifically to the suspended indecision of *das Man*’s “ambiguity,” resoluteness reveals the world with the clarity and precision, born of a decisive judgment. Correlative to restoring the question of the meaning of Being, in the face of Dasein’s being-towards-death, resoluteness entails assuming the burden of existence as the concrete determination of oneself, the world, and the others with whom one engages in relationship to one’s committed projects. Heidegger continues, “The ‘world’ which is ready-to-hand does not

become another one 'in its content,' nor does the circle of Others get exchanged for a new one; but both one's Being towards the ready-to-hand understandingly and concernfully, and one's solicitous Being with Others, are now given a definite character in terms of their ownmost potentiality-for-Being-their-Selves" (Heidegger, 1963; 298/344).

Endnotes

[i] Of course, in contradistinction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, Kant typically has been understood rather as a romantic, precisely because his critical articulation of the limits of reason holds *open* a place for religious faith.

[ii] David Hoy explains, "Heidegger conceives of Dasein and world as forming a circle, and he thus extends the traditional hermeneutic circle between a text and its reading down to the most primordial level of human existence" (Hoy, 1993; 179).

[iii] Dreyfuss explicitly entertains this translation and only rejects it because he deems that it does not sufficiently convey the normativity of *das Man*. (Dreyfuss, 1993; 152)

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Buckner, Clark. "Restoring the Question of the Meaning of Being: Heidegger's Existential Phenomenology as a Response to the Nihilism in the Modern World." www.clarkbuckner.com. Web. September 20, 2017