

Being and Time

"Why are there beings at all instead of nothing? That is the question ... Of course it is not the first question in the chronological sense ... And yet ... we are each touched once, maybe even every now and then, by the concealed power of this question, without properly grasping what is happening to us. In great despair, for example, when all weight tends to dwindle away from things and the sense of things grows dark, the question looms."

"We have defined the idea of existence as an ability-to-be, as one which is in each case mine, is free either for authenticity or for inauthenticity or for a mode in which neither of these has been differentiated."

In a nutshell

Human existence is a mystery, and the authentic person is one who reflects on that mystery and yet lives in the real world, making the most of their possibilities.

In a similar vein

- Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (p 16)
- René Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy* (p 86)
- Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (p 156)
- Søren Kierkegaard *Fear and Trembling* (p 162)
- Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness* (p 266)

Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger is often seen as the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, and his forensic approach to apparently obvious questions or topics continues to have a big impact on contemporary philosophy. *Sein und Zeit* is his signature work, but it was famously preceded by a 12-year "period of silence" and seemed to come from nowhere. In fact, Heidegger had been lecturing to rapt audiences for years, building up an underground fame among German students as a truly original thinker. As Hannah Arendt (once his student) famously noted, "There was hardly more than a name, but the name travelled all over Germany like the rumour of a hidden king."

Being and Time was published to assist Heidegger's application for the chair of philosophy at Freiburg University, and was planned as the first part of a much larger work. With the book came international acclaim, and he rose to be Freiburg's Rector, replacing his mentor Edmund Husserl. Yet the position showed up Heidegger's naïve (or just plain dark, depending on your point of view) understanding of politics, for he became a public supporter of the Nazi party. After the humiliations of the First World War, he (along with many) wanted Germany to be great again, but whether he was truly anti-Semitic remains an open question. He had a campus affair with the Jewish Arendt, and she remained a loyal supporter throughout his life. However you see the controversy, that Heidegger's philosophy became caught up in his politics was, as it happens, a demonstration of his view that humans can never be divorced from their social environment, no matter how individuated they seem.

Notoriously difficult to understand, the best way to tackle *Being and Time* is to read around it with one of the many excellent commentaries. If you read it cold, you might find it a quicksand-like experience.

Being and personhood

At the start of *Being and Time*, Heidegger notes that the question of "being" had certainly been addressed by ancient and medieval philosophers, but that no one had explored it properly. It was almost taken for granted, because everyone "is" and therefore we know what it is to "be." Yet in terms of philosophical analysis, he writes, "the meaning of being is shrouded in darkness."

Commentators have struggled with Heidegger's answer to the question, as he wrapped it up in a variety of German terms that do not translate easily into English. The most important of these is *Dasein*, which in its literal translation is "being there," but which Heidegger took to mean a unit of self-reflective consciousness, of which a person is the most obvious example. His big question was: What is personhood? What is it like to be a human being in the world, bounded by space and time?

For him, philosophy's preoccupation with whether the external world exists and questions of what we can really know were a waste of time. What matters is "being-in-the-world," or the fact that we exist in a world rich in meaning and possibility. While previous philosophers had seen the self as an observing consciousness, Heidegger's placement of the self *in* the world led him on a completely different path, influenced by his study of medieval Christian theology. Whereas for Descartes the motto for the self was "I think," Heidegger's was "I care" – not the conventional meaning of emotional sympathy, but more like searching, exploring, making, dealing with, building something; that is, my place among others in a social or political sense (which includes concern for others) and my own development or unfolding.

For Heidegger there are three modes of seeing the world: *Umsicht*, "looking around"; *Rücksicht*, "considerateness" for other beings; and *Durchsichtigkeit*, "looking through" into our own selves. Each is fundamentally different and goes beyond the simple Cartesian duality of "mind" and "matter." Through such distinctions we begin to see why Heidegger felt there was much more to "being" than meets the eye.

Thrown into the world

Heidegger was a student of, and later assistant to, the founder of phenomenology (the philosophy of consciousness), Edmund Husserl. In his usual forensic way, Heidegger went back to the root of this word, the Greek *phainesthai*, meaning "to show itself," which in turn is derived from *phaino*, to bring something to light. Heidegger's phenomenology became an explication of how things show themselves, specifically how human beings "show" themselves in the world. In this he moved away from any kind of theological conception of a person being the manifestation of some eternal essence or soul, toward Being as it manifests itself now, in the theater of human life. The nature of *Dasein* is to be continually self-questioning and exploring its place, having to deal with uncertainties and yet affirming its identity. Part of this nature is showing or disclosing itself to the world, in the case of human beings through speech and action. Life is about exploring our possibilities within the environment in which we find ourselves.

"Thrownness" is a crucial idea in *Being and Time*. A human being is cast into a particular place, time, and family not of their choosing, and life about making sense of this fall into the realm of space and time. How do I get here? Why am I here? What do I do now? Part of this perplexity is a built-in sense of "guilt" or "owing." We feel some responsibility to do something with our lives, and fortunately come equipped with the capacities for speech and action. In using them we find the meaning of our life; indeed it would be impossible for life *not* to have meaning, given the raw materials of consciousness and environment before us. Death is also important to Heidegger, because it marks the end of one's self-showing. The nature of one's death can itself be a disclosure.

What are moods?

Heidegger presents a view of moods and emotions that is completely different to a conventional psychological interpretation. He sees the nature of Being for humans as a constant state of varying emotion. Our feelings and moods are not something to pass over or belittle in relation to our real life or world; rather, they are central to our being. At any one time we are experiencing an emotion, or at least are "feeling our way toward something."

Moods, either in a negative or a positive way, are enablers of our response to the world. With moods we cannot remain neutral; they make us ever mindful of what it is like to exist right now. Indeed, our understanding of the world does not happen through some neutral logical reasoning, but springs *from* our dispositions or moods. As Heidegger scholar Tom Greaves has noted, Heidegger would not support the idea of "emotional intelligence" as one of several kinds of intelligence. Rather, *all* intelligence emerges from the ground of feeling and disposition; or, as Heidegger puts it, "Understanding always has its mood."

In German the word for mood is *Stimmung*, which once meant the tuning of a musical instrument. A mood is an "attunement" of our being to the world around us. We may be out of tune with it (experiencing fear, anxiety, or dread), or in tune (things are going well), or we may come across an event or place or person that instills in us a new mood (a great speech or a beautiful forest). We are constantly attuning ourselves.

The authentic self

For Heidegger, authenticity means recognizing the unlikely fact of having consciousness, and yet still proceeding to "make sense" of our existence. Whereas the inauthentic person's life is shaped by a social "They," the authentic individual fully grasps their freedom to be master of their own Being, at least as far as the boundaries of time, space, and community allow. Authenticity is always:

question of degree, for no one ever truly separates themselves from the communal or social voice, which Heidegger also calls the "One."

The essential nature of existence, Heidegger remarks, is that it is *mine*. There is an enormity to this realization; indeed, the weight of it is such that few people can grasp what an authentic life would mean for them. The more natural mode of being for a human is to exist as one among many, not to opt for a path of self-realization or tough self-examination. However, even for those who do, there is no such thing as a fully "self-made" person.

The appropriate response to life is to throw ourselves into it, along the way coming to conclusions about what is real or true, separate from public opinion. Paradoxically, it is only in admitting that we are very much part of the world that we can shrewdly see the points where we can make a difference. Only humans can help *form* a world, as well as simply existing in it.

Angst and resoluteness

The feeling of anxiety, Heidegger observes, is a natural result of the not-being-at-homeness that humans experience in the world. Yet angst is also part and parcel of an authentic life, because the nature of authenticity is not that we nullify or reduce this sense of isolation, but that we recognize it as a fact and carry on regardless. In fact, it is a sign of *inauthenticity* when a person is fully at one with life and feels totally at home, because it suggests that they are not fully aware of their existence as being contingent and utterly mysterious. Greatness lies in questioning the mystery of our being, and yet taking that uncertainty (with all its fears) and choosing to do something with life in any case.

"Conscience" in Heidegger's terminology is not something moral, but is there to remind us continually to keep on the path of self-examination and original action. "Resoluteness" is the decision not to be subsumed by the "They" or the "One" of public mores and opinion, but to be clear about the unique role that we may play in relation to the world and to others.

Beings in time

For Heidegger, the crucial point about being is that it is played out within time. The nature of being human is our future orientation. Therefore, to be a being in time is the feeling of always moving toward something; the nature of being human is a future orientation. While we are creatures of the past and we dwell on the past, the true nature of man is to look ahead. We are our possibilities.

Heidegger rejected the idea that philosophy must be based on only what can be perceived by the senses, or on logic alone. He totally rejects the Schopenhauerian idea that the world is merely a projection of our minds. We

clearly do exist in the world, and it is impossible for us to exist without our being having meaning in relation to the world: I love, I act, I have an impact – this is the nature of my being, and the sense of it becomes apparent across a lifetime.

Final comments

Heidegger was a big influence on Sartre and other existentialists, though he denied that he was himself one, saying that his focus was not man and his existence, but rather Being itself, of which man was the most advanced articulation. The general scholarly view is that Heidegger's exploration of Being was not designed to be useful for living. *Being and Time* is not a self-help book. However, it is difficult not to receive some inspiration from it.

Common sense would seem to bear out his distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of being. At one level we demand that a person is social, accepts the mores of the time, and plays a part in political life. On the other, we accept that an authentic life is one where the person seizes what possibilities they have and makes something out of them. Indeed, despite its clinical style, running through *Being and Time* is a vein of passion about human possibility and the privilege of being. It is possible to forge a strong self in time, overcoming the perplexity at being thrown into existence.

Martin Heidegger

Heidegger was born in 1889 in the small southwestern German town of Messkirch, into a conservative Catholic household. At 14 he entered a seminary with a view to the priesthood, but left to pursue studies in literature, philosophy, and science. At 18 he had an epiphany reading a dissertation by the philosopher Brentano on "the manifold sense of being in Aristotle." This led him in turn to Husserl's writings. In his twenties he had articles published in Catholic journals and he received his philosophy PhD in 1913. His habilitation (postdoctoral thesis) on the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus was completed two years later.

In 1918, Heidegger became a Privatdozent at Freiburg University and assistant to Husserl. In 1923 he was made an assistant professor at the University of Marburg, and in 1928 he gained a professorship at Freiburg University. A strong German nationalist, he was attracted to the strident "national socialism" of the Nazi party. As Rector at Freiburg he went along with Nazi guidelines to reorganize the university, which involved discrimination against Jewish students. Yet in "de-Nazification" hearings after the war, Hannah Arendt helped him form a defense that he had been a naïve believer in national socialism and had not foreseen what the Nazis would do in power. The two remained in contact until Heidegger died, in 1976.

