

HZT4UE – Theory of Knowledge

UNIT 4: LANGUAGE

4.6 Heidegger (1829 – 1976)

Martin Heidegger

In 1900, Edmund Husserl used the term “phenomenology” in his book *Logical Investigations* and noted that consciousness is usually directed toward something. Husserl dedicated his book trying to describe the structures of experience as they present themselves to the mind.



Heidegger was Husserl's student, and despite this early and profound interest in Husserl's work, Heidegger began to develop his own phenomenological project in a direction that ultimately rejected some of the basic tenets of Husserlian phenomenology. Heidegger's first major publication, *Being and Time* (1927), was dedicated to Husserl and earned him the Chair of Philosophy at University of Freiburg on Husserl's retirement in 1928.

However, *Being and Time* was most emphatically never intended by Heidegger to follow a development of strictly Husserlian phenomenology. From the outset, Heidegger defines his project in *Being and Time* as an attempt to revive the question of the meaning of Being, which has been concealed and ignored by the Western philosophical tradition as represented by **Plato** (perfect forms), **Descartes** (*cogito ergo sum* (mind-body)), **Kant** (phenomena and noumena) and Husserl. The tradition has relied on an ontology [a theory of objects and their ties/relationships – Mr. V.] privileging ‘substance,’ which, in turn, has led to a ‘metaphysics of presence’ that, according to Heidegger, has resulted in an unfortunate mind/matter duality. He maintains that any efforts to understand ‘reality’ along that path are doomed from the start.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard accepted the paradox of being defining itself. As a scientist, Heidegger could not accept this paradox. According to Heidegger, a concept must be defined without using itself as reference. The difficulty of definition was confronted by defining "Being" as a collection of concepts. Without being something, there is no existence.

As with Kierkegaard (before him) and Sartre (after), Heidegger believed the existence of a physical body preceded the essence of self. At some point in the development process, a being becomes aware that it exists. This pivotal point in time is when essence begins to form; the individual decides to acknowledge and embrace an essence at this moment. [Vitzthum note: Because ‘existence precedes essence,’ we get the word ‘existentialism.’]

Because Man is the only known being in which essence and existence do not appear simultaneously, Man is a unique creature on this planet. All things Man creates have essence, or definition, before they exist. In other words, an individual thinks about a creation and its purpose before the creation exists.

Using a word that originally simply meant 'existence' in German, Heidegger plays on the etymological root of *Da-sein*, or 'being-there' as way to understand Being-in-general. Heidegger claims that his focus on Dasein is a strategic move, designed only as a point of entry into his philosophical anthropology on the nature of 'human being.' For the early Heidegger, Being is accessible only through our practical engagement with a world already understood. This world, or community, he calls the 'One.' For Heidegger, each person is constituted by the One or the community, instead of by some universal synthetic a priori human character. For each Dasein in a particular world, there are three different ways of existing, or attitudes Dasein have about the world.

The undifferentiated mode is when an individual blindly accepts the existence that the One (community) has given them, not questioning the meaning of their existence or understanding that they have been arbitrary thrown (*geworfen*) into a world not of their own choosing.

The inauthentic mode is when an individual recognizes the thrown-ness of their existence, or decides to go against the life that they were born into, they move to become their own person by taking on a different role in relation to the One or the community. For example, a gay daughter of a conservative politician realizes that she disagrees with her father's beliefs and then moves to live the life of an out-and-proud lesbian. She rejects the role that society has given her, and takes on another role that, although different, still exists as part of the One. At this point, individuals are capable of recognizing both their thrown-ness and the omnipresence of the One. In other words, they realize that they have been born into a particular role in community, but will still exist in relation to some community (the One) regardless of what role they move into—everything has already been defined by the One, and no lives are unique.

This double realization produces an anxiety in Dasein, which Heidegger famously termed *angst* (now an accepted English word), as they realize that their life exists only in relation to the One, and that they will one day pass into the Nothing (they will die). Upon realizing this, Dasein can do one of two things:

If they cannot bear the possibility of the Nothing, they can move into a state of fallenness, refusing to recognize the situation and moving back into a role in the world of the One. They can move back or stay in the inauthentic mode of existence.

Or, they can face up to the Nothing, taking responsibility for the life they lead and being accountable for their actions. They become what Heidegger calls a being-toward-death, realizing that as each Dasein is responsible for themselves, the aggregate of Dasein (the One) is also responsible for its overall existence. They begin to care for the world. When

a Dasein lives as a being-toward-death and exhibits care for its world, they are said to exist in an authentic mode.

Although the greater part of this introduction has been written using the selections chosen from *Being and Time*, it must be noted that the later Heidegger does not privilege Dasein to the same degree. After his essay 'On the essence of truth' (1930), we find fundamental ontology replaced by a history of Being that emphasizes the participation of human beings in the 'happening' of Being.

Language, especially poetic language, emerges to play a crucial role as the 'house of Being.' Such works as *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), 'Letter on Humanism' (1946) and *On the Way to Language* (1951), to name a few, remain focused on the question of Being, but develop this theme in a new way. Because language is a major force in the creation and development of the One, and therefore Being, in Heidegger we see the confluence of phenomenology, existentialism and hermeneutics that has made his impact particularly powerful in 20th C. Continental philosophy. Hence, Heidegger's quote, "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while, in fact, language remains the master of him."

Sources: *The Continental Philosophy Reader*. Ed. Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater. London: Routledge, 1996. and "Heidegger" <<http://www.tameri.com/csw/exist/heideg.asp>>.

Questions on Heidegger:

1. Why was Heidegger dissatisfied with the traditional ideas of "Being" and whose previous ideas did he essentially reject? What, according to Heidegger, was their problem with their ideas?
2. What is the paradox that Heidegger was unwilling to accept? Explain how/why it operates as a paradox.
3. What is the relationship between Dasein and the "One?"
4. What are the three components of Dasein?
5. An example of a Dasein living in an "inauthentic mode" has been provided in the reading. Consider another example from your own experience.
6. How has Heidegger been important for both existential phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology?