

Heidegger's Primacy of Ontology over Epistemology: An Analysis

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Abstract: Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) employed the phenomenological method in investigating the meaning of Being (*sein*), which he believes should have been done long back in the western tradition of philosophy. So, based on this assumption when he set out to expound, he found out that the tradition was insufficient in dealing with the issue of Being due to which the tradition was falling behind the explanation for Being. And accordingly, in his writings, he maintains that these shortcomings could be overcome when an ontological investigation is given primary importance over other disciplines like science, and traditional theory of knowledge. The paper carefully studies Heidegger's position of expounding ontology as a primary scope of getting to know the human world as against the theory of knowledge which sees humans as fundamentally a knowing consciousness. The paper also attempts to critically analyse Heidegger's position from a common point of view.

Keywords: Existence, Human, Knowledge, Ontology, Understanding

I. Introduction

Heidegger's central claim is that man must be seen as a wholeness, not just as a knowing consciousness, for a proper philosophical explanation of human existence to make sense. When Heidegger makes this claim about his philosophical ancestors, he is specifically taking aim at Husserl. On the other hand, the philosophical description of human life was not Husserl's main objective, just as it was not for Descartes or Kant. Husserl shared their preference for knowledge, truth, and the procedures for establishing certainty. He did, however, also give an implicit account of the nature of humans, emphasising their capacity for knowledge discovery. Heidegger, on the other hand, claims that man's being-in-the-world precedes the establishment of knowing, that "knowing is a mode of Dasein founded upon Being-in-the-world."¹ This is logical. It is unquestionably true to say that if knowledge is to be defined as the "objective" knowledge revered by philosophical tradition, a child cannot properly be said to "know" anything at birth. It seems to apply to the evolution of culture historically in a similar manner. Nobody gave "objective" knowledge much thought prior to Descartes, or at least prior to the beginning of the scientific "revolution" in the second half of the sixteenth century. Furthermore, prior to Socrates, there is no conclusive evidence that "knowledge" was ever regarded as a problem in any way. We can assume that the distinctions between wisdom and knowledge emerged relatively late in the history of humanity. Since knowledge was never more than one way of being in the world, both historically and in the sense of the individual and of culture, we can all agree that human existence came before knowledge.

Heidegger, however, does not use history as a justification for his viewpoint. Therefore, it is appropriate to question whether the phrase 'Being precedes knowing' is meant in a merely logical sense. According to his claim, logic must have its origins in experience just like any other science. This is a stance that must call into question his use of concepts like 'a-priori', his goal of identifying essential elements of human existence, and his assertion that he is clarifying what is generally true. However, because Heidegger makes no appeal to either of these, the phrase 'knowing is founded on being' cannot be understood simply in either a historical or a logical sense. Instead, he makes use of the phenomena of experience. Which brings us to the main issue facing the entire phenomenological movement: how do you use the phenomena of experience as a point of appeal? What is a phenomenon, exactly? How can you be sure you have the right one (s)? that you've accurately described them? And that your conclusions are accurate and applicable to all situations? To put it briefly, what is the correct phenomenological approach?

Husserl, on the other hand, developed a fairly clear idea of what to do and how to do it - though it's true that his approach changed over time. You set out to explore a concept; you observe or imagine some suitable application of it; you describe the appearance to which the idea is correctly applied in an impartial manner, and you inquire as to what is necessary in that appearance that makes it a proper application of the idea. So, a phenomenon is any aspect of the appearance that I wish to identify, though Husserl originally envisioned phenomena as 'simples' similar to sense-data.

This understanding of the appeal to experience is not shared by Heidegger. His goal is to define the fundamental structures of (human) beings, not to discover new ideas. Husserl's theories are already known, in the sense that we are already familiar with them: since we can all recognise a cube, we can all examine the cube's phenomenal appearance and attempt to come to an understanding about it. However, Heidegger offers concepts like 'Being-in-the-world', 'Worldhood', 'Falleness', 'Temporality', etc. that are very dissimilar from Husserl's more concrete illustrations. We are unable to conduct the investigation ourselves because we are unsure of what constitutes a 'State of Being' or 'Falleness'. We have no choice but to follow Heidegger's analysis of experience and compare it to our own. How Heidegger himself chooses the relevant phenomena to pay attention to is something that is utterly unclear. It is in fact unclear what Heidegger views as the phenomenal appearance of 'Falleness', whereas Husserl considers the visual appearance of three cube faces to be a phenomenon.

II. Heidegger's View on Knowledge and Knower

The question of whether Heidegger is properly referred to as a 'phenomenologist' may not matter all that much, though. He is unmistakably making an effort to explain experience in some way. In actuality, the 'primordial understanding' that he keeps returning to is not some isolated portion of the stream of phenomenal experience (such as the sight of a cube). In his thinking, this is what is actually in opposition to knowledge. The highest court of appeal is this one. It is what takes the place of Husserl's pre-established ideas in directing the inquiry. Heidegger, who never put it quite so eloquently, holds that there is an inadequately articulated, pre-theoretical understanding of the world and its contents and that the goal of the philosophical activity is to provide this with an adequate expression. To express what we all already 'understand' is hermeneutic of human life. And since we already grasp it, even though we lack the language and conceptions to express it, it should be sufficient for Heidegger to create the idea for us to realise its validity. Heidegger's argument, therefore, draws on what we already know but are unable to express.

Let's assume that human existence comes before knowledge for whatever reasons—historical, logical, or otherwise—and that any theory that considers man solely as a knowing awareness would be gravely flawed. Given that man is always and everywhere embodied—a state that involves action, motivation, feeling, etc.—we might even be able to accept that he is not fundamentally a knowing consciousness. However, Heidegger wants us to go one step further and acknowledge that man is fundamentally not a knowing consciousness and that to interpret him as such is not only inadequate but also incorrect.

Heidegger's assertion is only tenable because he never explicitly discusses it; it is based on an image of 'knowledge' that he alludes to. He uses the term 'knowledge' to refer to the 'objective, rationalistic outcome of scientific, particularly experimental, investigations'. And, in common with many intellectuals, he believed that such scientific knowledge was not only incomplete and distorted, but actually dangerous. It is certain that Heidegger does not mean anything very specific when he uses the word 'knowledge'. He specifically leaves out 'practical' knowledge of the kind that a craftsman possesses and that an apprentice aspires to learn.

So, let's assume Heidegger was correct when he said that it is incorrect to interpret man as an objectively investigating, scientific consciousness. Remember that man pursues natural science as well, and that there is no reason to believe that this goes against his nature. Natural scientific knowledge does exist, and it is true or right in some sense—a sense that Heidegger must define before he can show that it is inferior to or false in comparison to his higher concept of truth. But Heidegger cannot just dismiss all other fields of knowledge with the same brush, regardless of whether natural science is true or not. He believed that reading classic literature, learning about linguistics, and studying history were all worthwhile conventional humanistic endeavours. But he preferred the word 'understanding' to 'knowledge' when describing what could be usefully learned.

III. Heidegger on "Understanding"

Heidegger's definition of understanding fundamentally differs from traditional conceptions of knowledge in two key ways: it is not cumulative and cannot be truly transmitted. The difficulty lies in the fact that the term "understanding" can be used to describe both the pre-theoretical, ill-defined ability to function in reality and the articulated theoretical interpretation of it. Insofar as the description is appropriate, Heidegger contends that there is no fundamental distinction between the act and the description.² All that occurs is that I consciously express what, in a sense, I've 'known' all along. Understanding is non-cumulative since there is no increase in its quantity following articulation. In a similar vein, understanding cannot really be passed from one person to another. All I could do is express my understanding in the hopes that it serves as a sufficient expression of yours.

When viewed from this angle, the conventional idea of knowledge as developing, accumulating, and being passed down from one generation to the next is a complete fantasy. Heidegger's idea of truth is not only unchanging and extremely conservative; it is also fundamentally mediaeval in its rejection of change. Heidegger does not simply avoid creating an epistemology because he does not value it: he is forced to dismiss knowledge entirely because he lacks the foundation necessary to provide an adequate account of it. We will see that this caused him to encounter insurmountable challenges when describing historical knowledge and practical understanding, both of which he rates highly.

According to Heidegger's own account, all he is doing is expressing his own fundamental understanding. If we agree with that assertion, then we can at least say that we have gained knowledge and that, as a result of reading Heidegger, we now "know" more than we did before. In fact, it is difficult to understand why anyone would read Heidegger if they did not hope to learn something from him. They can probably state what they learned from Heidegger, for example, 'I now realise that the scientific detachment from things is based upon a more primitive practical engagement with them'. Regardless of what we refer to this as 'knowledge', 'understanding', or 'wisdom'—it is obvious that something has been learned, regardless of what it was, it has been transmitted, that it affects what I will say about whether certain claims are true or false, and it may result in additional accusations about what I know, understand, or whatever.

In essence, the point is that even according to Heidegger, there must be a distinction between 'primordial' understanding and understanding that results from successful experience articulation. If there weren't, Heidegger's writing *Being and Time* and a philosopher sincerely attempting to demonstrate solipsism to someone else would both present stark practical contradictions because the logic of the belief in each case should be designed to silence the believer. This reasoning at least tempted Heidegger, though he was never fully persuaded. Then, he maintains an inconsistent stance that is unable to explain the current state of his philosophical argument. He claims that reading the book won't provide the reader with any new knowledge while also attempting to persuade, instruct, and transmit something. Furthermore, he insists that there is no acquisition of understanding because it already existed. As a result, he lacks the ability to explain the change that should take place in the reader as a result of reading the book. Husserl recommends: consider a cube or visualise one. You can only see three sides, isn't that true? What does this teach us about visual objects and vision? In the public realm of the 'one', according to Heidegger, curiosity and idle conversation belong. Husserl attempts to lay out a process, the output of which we can assess and analyse, and which ideally culminates in knowledge that builds up

through time. That is all a waste of time, according to Heidegger, and its outcomes are an illusion. All we can do is reflect on what it is and try to recognise what was there all along. Philosophy is only an attempt to go closer to the truth.

If Heidegger lacks methodological criteria and fails to describe what happens when we know anything, and is unaware of the status of his own probe, what does he mean when he states that 'ontology' is so crucial? How do we accomplish ontology if it is to come before epistemology? And, if the goal of ontology is not to collect knowledge, how can it be called a science or a serious study? What about Husserl's argument that knowledge of Being is knowledge, and hence epistemology must be fundamental? It seems that Heidegger is not only urging us to do ontology, but also feels himself to be doing it. He certainly feels he is opening the door to the Question of Being.

IV. Ontology of *Dasein*

Heidegger sees *Dasein*'s ontology as primarily based on the explication of purposeful human activity, typically in the workplace. Our first encounters with things are as tools and materials that we can employ. And, because the work situation is primarily about other people, our interactions with things relate to our interactions with others. Therefore, ontology must begin from our actual doing rather than merely knowing, from our inherent unity with things and the world rather than from our dissociation from them. After elucidating the structures of human existence demonstrated in doing, we can focus on the Being who shows up (only) in human existence. Then, hopefully, we'll be able to talk about Being.

Only by linking to Heidegger's notion of 'understanding' does this strategy seem plausible. The idea is that although the "understanding" of the situation at work is one of intense sympathy, it is theoretically unarticulate. It is completely adequate for the job, for being fully human, and for the object itself. It creates a level of intimacy that simple scientific manipulation, which only deals with surface issues, can never hope to match. Therefore, we live in a world where superficiality (science) is theoretically articulated and profound understanding is quiet (craft). To articulate the profound insight is the ontological job.

It is true that I will perspire more if I use an axe to cut wood, rather than a chain saw to slice it. It might also be significantly superior on a variety of aesthetic and practical reasons, including being far less obnoxious to the neighbours, stinky, noisy, and offensive to me, as well as being far healthier. There is no reason to believe, however, that just because I use a crude hunk of steel rather than a creation of cutting-edge scientific logic, I will be more in touch with the 'being' of the wood. There is therefore no reason to believe that, in either of these situations, I am having a "truer" interaction with the wood than my friend, who cuts a portion of it with a scalpel and looks at it under a microscope (no sweat).

But Heidegger begins by conceiving of true being as that which happens to unreflexive consciousness inadvertently. For him, those who are in touch with the essence of things are often artists, craftspeople, and poets. We must go to their experience, not to that of the scientific researcher, for the basis of ontology. Or, to put it another way, we should consider the characteristics of our own experience that are similar to those of the craftsman, etc. Heidegger has a selection principle from facts of experience, but it is one that is predicated on a very shaky assumption about what makes an actual being.

V. Ontology and Poetry

Heidegger views ontology as the expression of our fundamental understanding of what is, which is founded on experiences like those of the craftsman, artist, or poet. In the same way that the artisan already knows what he is doing, and the artist and poet already know what they are seeing, so too do we already grasp the being that ontology is supposed to unveil. Ontology does not improve upon the revelation of existence, just as the poetry does not contribute anything to the scenery it portrays. Just as the intensity of a poetry stems from the content of the vision it represents, the intensity of ontology as a discipline is drawn from the gravity of its object, i.e. 'being'. Ontology can be both deserving of serious study and essentially non-cumulative, in Heidegger's opinion, in this sense. Similar to poetry, only the consecutive insights of various poets may accrue. Therefore, thinking of a poetry tradition as a gradual accumulation of information would be incorrect.

Heidegger's comparison of ontology and poetry—or, as he occasionally claims, their near identity—highlights a strength of his view. For him, it is improper to assume that a specific philosophical statement is true or false in separation from the work of which it is a part, just as it is improper to choose a specific sentence from a poem and ask whether it is true or not. A vision is expressed in the philosophical work, just like in the poem. It is possible to discuss the reality of the vision, the truth of the poetry, or the truth of the intellectual work. But one must comprehend a vision's reality in its entirety: it cannot be evaluated using any 'criteria' - regardless of how many individuals can subscribe to it.

This idea may be appealing to certain people, but it does have definite limitations on what ontology can and cannot be. The idea that knowledge is created through the presentation of our fundamental understanding is rejected by Heidegger. It doesn't clarify anything that we previously knew, much like poetry, its value comes from the fact that it reveals what was already there, much like a poem. As a result, ontology is a serious subject that deserves equal respect to Being. He would oppose the claim that practising ontology and disputing its claim to knowledge discovery is in any way incompatible.

VI. Conclusion

The very way of knowing things, says Heidegger, is the mode of human beings' way of living in the world. Our way of knowing things and presenting them is compared to that of a poet who in the works of poetry explicates things as they are without any measurable criteria and without any quantity of knowledge. So, what is important in Heidegger's philosophy is not knowledge but the ontological dimension where beings(entities) surface. Heidegger discards epistemology, science and reason and resumes like a mystical thinker when the issue of Being is to be addressed. In other words, the way how Being is to be made intelligible is left to poets or those who can inculcate 'genuine thinking'³. This attempt by the student of Husserl who seeks rigorous science for the sake of "back to the things themselves"⁴ is somewhat disappointing. So, this is what the other side of Heidegger's project could be seen as.

Consequently, what remains of Heidegger's ontological project? In the name of the supremely crucial quest for Being, Heidegger challenges epistemology, science, and reason. However, his strike does not eliminate them. He is left with little choice but to discard all knowledge—scientific and otherwise—as illusory, despite the fact that it is still present, and to advocate for the development of 'understanding'. Since we already have this concept, cultivating it doesn't result in the discovery of any new knowledge. It only serves as the setting up for the moment of vision, in which the reality of Being is made manifest. Heidegger is not willing to discuss any use of interpersonal or public standards to assess the reality of the object that has been experienced. Therefore, the success or failure of his enterprise depends solely on faith: Nothing matters unless you look for it if you believe in Being; else, you are lost.

Actually, other than mystical meditation, this isn't really a project for a philosophical exercise. In fact, Rosen felt sorry for Heidegger's effort at a Poetic approach to Philosophical enterprise and considers "it to be a defective version of Platonism."⁵ Heidegger admitted to himself after *Being and Time* that what he was doing wasn't really philosophy; instead, he termed it 'thinking'—about the Being Question. His later works return again and again to the 'Question of Being' without it ever being formulated, let alone answered. Heidegger didn't get to the nonsensical conclusion that there was nothing to formulate in the face of this continuous failure. Instead, he chose to assume that the entire situation was incomprehensibly profound, i.e. indefinable and incomprehensible. This attitude of Heidegger, switching from one position to another, shows us that "he is unable to say, within the limits of his own ontology, whether we receive meaning or create meaning."⁶

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (7th ed.). (J. Macquarrie, & E. Robinson, Trans.) New York, United States of America: Harper & Row. p. 90.

² Waterhouse, R. (1981). *A Heidegger Critique: A Critical Examination of The Existential Phenomenology of Martin Heidegger*. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press INC. p. 154.

³ Scholars all over the world use terms like 'genuine thinking', 'meditative thinking', 'originative thinking', and 'essential thinking' to mean the same thing. Sometimes it is simply referred to as 'thinking'. Also see Bartky, S. L. (1970). Originative Thinking in the Later Philosophy of Heidegger. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 30(3), 368-381. Retrieved April 26, 2017, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2105602>. p. 368.

⁴ Generally regarded as the Phenomenologists' slogan.

⁵ Rosen, S. (1991). Is Metaphysics Possible? *The Review of Metaphysics*, 45(2), 235-257. Retrieved August 13, 2018, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20129174>. p. 256.

⁶ Bartky, S. L. (1970). Originative Thinking in the Later Philosophy of Heidegger. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 30(3), 368-381. Retrieved April 26, 2017, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2105602>. p. 379.



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