

# Why Heidegger Matters

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Critchley argues that we must see *Being and Time* as a radicalization of Husserl's phenomenology, particularly his theories of intentionality, categorial intuition, and the phenomenological concept of the a priori. This leads to a reappraisal and defense of Heidegger's conception of phenomenology.

## Part 1: Why Heidegger matters

**The most important and influential continental philosopher of the last century was also a Nazi. How did he get there? What can we learn from him?**

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was the most important and influential philosopher in the continental tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Being and Time*, first published in 1927, was his *magnum opus*. There is no way of understanding what took place in continental philosophy after Heidegger without coming to terms with *Being and Time*. Furthermore, unlike many Anglo-American philosophers, Heidegger has exerted a huge influence outside philosophy, in areas as diverse as architecture, contemporary art, social and political theory, psychotherapy, psychiatry and theology.

However, because of his political commitment to National Socialism in 1933, when he assumed the position of Rector of Freiburg University in south-western Germany, Heidegger continues to arouse controversy, polemic and much heated misunderstanding.

The hugely important matter of the relation between Heidegger and politics is the topic for another series of blogs entries. Indeed, to my mind, the nature and extent of Heidegger's involvement in National Socialism only becomes *philosophically* pertinent once one has begun to understand and feel the persuasive power of what takes place in his written work, especially *Being and Time*.

The task I have set myself in this series of blogs is to provide a taste of the latter book and hopefully some motivation to read it further and study it more deeply. But once you have read *Being and Time* and hopefully been compelled by it, then the question that hangs over the text, like the sword of Damocles, is the following: how could arguably the greatest philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also have been a Nazi? What does his political commitment to National Socialism, however long or short it lasted, suggest about the nature of philosophy and its risks and dangers when stepping into the political realm?

### Being and Time

*Being and Time* is a work of considerable length (437 pages in the German original) and legendary difficulty. The difficulty is caused by the fact that Heidegger sets himself

the task of what he calls a “destruction” of the philosophical tradition. We shall see some of the implications of this in future entries, but the initial consequence is that Heidegger refuses to avail himself of the standard terminology of modern philosophy, with its talk of epistemology, subjectivity, representation, objective knowledge and the rest.

Heidegger has the audacity to go back to the drawing board and invent a new philosophical vocabulary. For example, he thinks that all conceptions of the human being as a subject, self, person, consciousness or indeed a mind-brain unity are hostages to a tradition of thinking whose presuppositions have not been thought through radically enough. Heidegger is nothing if not a radical thinker: a thinker who tries to dig down to the roots of our lived experience of the world rather than accepting the authority of tradition.

Heidegger’s name for the human being is *Dasein*, a term which can be variously translated, but which is usually rendered as “being-there”. The basic and very simple idea, as we will see in future entries, is that the human being is first and foremost not an isolated subject, cut off from a realm of objects that it wishes to know about. We are rather beings who are always already in the world, outside and alongside a world from which, for the most part, we do not distinguish ourselves.

What goes for *Dasein* also goes for many of Heidegger’s other concepts. Sometimes this makes *Being and Time* a very tough read, which is not helped by the fact that Heidegger, more than any other modern philosopher, exploits the linguistic possibilities of his native language, in his case German. Although Macquarrie and Robinson, in their 1962 Blackwell English edition, produced one of the classics of modern philosophical translation, reading *Being and Time* can sometimes feel like wading through a conceptual mud of baroque and unfamiliar concepts.

## The basic idea

That said, the basic idea of *Being and Time* is extremely simple: being *is* time. That is, what it means for a human being to be is to exist temporally in the stretch between birth and death. Being is time and time is finite, it comes to an end with our death. Therefore, if we want to understand what it means to be an authentic human being, then it is essential that we constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death, what Heidegger calls “being-towards-death”.

Crudely stated, for thinkers like St Paul, St Augustine, Luther and Kierkegaard, it is through the relation to God that the self finds itself. For Heidegger, the question of God’s existence or non-existence has no philosophical relevance. The self can only become what it truly is through the confrontation with death, by making a meaning out of our finitude. If our being is finite, then what it means to be human consists in grasping this finitude, in “becoming who one is” in words of Nietzsche’s that Heidegger liked to cite. We will show how this insight into finitude is deepened in later entries in relation to Heidegger’s concepts of conscience and what he calls “ecstatic temporality”.

*Being and Time* begins with a long, systematic introduction, followed by two divisions, each containing six chapters. I have just finished teaching the whole book in a 15-week lecture course at the New School for Social Research in New York and I estimate that I spoke for about 2 hours a week. As they say here in New York, just do the math! Therefore, in the following 7 short blog entries, I can only give a taste of the book and offer some signposts for readers who would like to explore further.

## Part 2: On ‘mineness’

**For Heidegger, what defines the human being is the capacity to be puzzled by the deepest of questions: why is there something rather than nothing?**

As Heidegger makes clear from the untitled, opening page with which *Being and Time* begins, what is at stake in the book is the question of being. This is the question that Aristotle raised in an untitled manuscript written 2500 years ago, but which became known at a later date as the *Metaphysics*. For Aristotle, there is a science that investigates what he calls “being as such”, without regard to any specific realms of being, eg the being of living things (biology) or the being of the natural world (physics).

*Metaphysics* is the area of inquiry that Aristotle himself calls “first philosophy” and which comes before anything else. It is the most abstract, universal and indefinable area of philosophy. But it is also the most fundamental.

With admirable arrogance, it is the question of being that Heidegger sets himself the task of inquiring into in *Being and Time*. He begins with a series of rhetorical questions: Do we have an answer to the question of the meaning of being? Not at all, he answers. But do we even experience any perplexity about this question? Not at all, Heidegger repeats. Therefore, the first and most important task of Heidegger’s book is to recover our perplexity for this question of questions: Hamlet’s “To be or not to be?”

For Heidegger, what defines the human being is this capacity to be perplexed by the deepest and most enigmatic of questions: Why is there something rather than nothing? So, the task of *Being and Time* is reawakening in us a taste for perplexity, a taste for questioning. Questioning – Heidegger will opine much later in his career – is the piety of thinking.

The first line of the text proper of *Being and Time* is, “We are ourselves the entities to be analysed”. This is the key to the crucial concept of mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*), with which the book begins: if I am the being for whom being is a question – “to be or not to be” – then the question of being is mine to be, one way or another.

In what, then, does the being of being human consist? Heidegger’s answer is existence (*Existenz*). Therefore, the question of being is to be accessed by way of what Heidegger calls “an existential analytic”. But what sort of thing is human existence? It is obviously defined by time: we are creatures with a past, who move through a present

and who have available to them a series of possibilities, what Heidegger calls “ways to be”. Heidegger’s point here is wonderfully simple: the human being is not definable by a “what”, like a table or a chair, but by a “who” that is shaped by existence in time. What it means to be human is to exist with a certain past, a personal and cultural history, and by an open series of possibilities that I can seize hold of or not.

This brings us to a very important point: if the being of being human is defined by mineness, then my being is not a matter of indifference to me. A table or chair cannot recite Hamlet’s soliloquy or undergo the experience of self-questioning and self-doubt that such words express. But we can.

This is the kernel of Heidegger’s idea of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*), which more accurately expresses what is proper to the human being, what is its own. For Heidegger, there are two dominant modes of being human: authenticity and inauthenticity. Furthermore, we have a choice to make between these two modes: the choice is whether to be oneself or not to be oneself, to be author of oneself and self-authorising or not. Heidegger insists, as he will do throughout *Being and Time*, that inauthenticity does not signify a lower or lesser being, but many readers have had reason to doubt such assurances. Theodor Adorno, famously critical of Heidegger, asks: doesn’t authenticity end up being a jargon that we are better off without? Let’s just say that the point is moot.

Regardless of the twin modes of authenticity and inauthenticity, Heidegger insists early in *Being and Time* that the human being must first be presented in its indifferent character, prior to any choice to be authentic or not. In words that soon become a mantra in the book, Heidegger seeks to describe the human being as it is presented “most closely and mostly” (*Zunächst und Zumeist*).

Note the radical nature of this initial move: philosophy is not some otherworldly speculation as to whether the external world exists or whether the other human-looking creatures around me are really human and not robots or some such. Rather, philosophy begins with the description – what Heidegger calls “phenomenology” – of human beings in their average everyday existence. It seeks to derive certain common structures from that everydayness.

But we should note the difficulty of the task that Heidegger has set himself. That which is closest and most obvious to us is fiendishly difficult to describe. Nothing is closer to me than myself in my average, indifferent everyday existence, but how to describe this? Heidegger was fond of quoting St Augustine’s Confessions, when the latter writes, “Assuredly I labour here and I labour within myself; I have become to myself a land of trouble and inordinate sweat.” Heidegger indeed means trouble and one often sweats through these pages. But the moments of revelation are breathtaking in their obviousness.

## Part 3: Being-in-the-world

**How Heidegger turned Descartes upside down, so that we are, and only therefore think**

I talked in my first blog entry about Heidegger's attempt to destroy our standard, traditional philosophical vocabulary and replace it with something new. What Heidegger seeks to destroy in particular is a certain picture of the relation between human beings and the world that is widespread in modern philosophy and whose source is Descartes (indeed Descartes is the philosopher who stands most accused in *Being and Time*). Roughly and readily, this is the idea that there are two sorts of substances in the world: thinking things like us and extended things, like tables, chairs and indeed the entire fabric of space and time.

The relation between thinking things and extended things is one of knowledge and the philosophical and indeed scientific task consists in ensuring that what a later tradition called "subject" might have access to a world of objects. This is what we might call the epistemological construal of the relation between human beings and the world, where epistemology means "theory of knowledge". Heidegger does not deny the importance of knowledge, he simply denies its primacy. Prior to this dualistic picture of the relation between human beings and the world lies a deeper unity that he tries to capture in the formula "*Dasein* is being-in-the-world". What might that mean?

If the human being is really being-in-the-world, then this entails that the world itself is part of the fundamental constitution of what it means to be human. That is to say, I am not a free-floating self or ego facing a world of objects that stands over against me. Rather, for Heidegger, I am my world. The world is part and parcel of my being, of the fabric of my existence. We might capture the sense of Heidegger's thought here by thinking of *Dasein* not as a subject distinct from a world of objects, but as an experience of openedness where my being and that of the world are not distinguished for the most part. I am completely fascinated and absorbed by my world, not cut off from it in some sort of "mind" or what Heidegger calls "the cabinet of consciousness".

Heidegger's major claim in his discussion of world in *Being and Time* is that the world announces itself most closely and mostly as a handy or useful world, the world of common, average everyday experience. My proximal encounter with the table on which I am writing these words is not as an object made of a certain definable substance (wood and iron, say) existing in a geometrically ordered space-time continuum. Rather, this is just the table that I use to write and which is useful for arranging my papers, my laptop and my coffee cup. Heidegger insists that we have to "thrust aside our interpretative tendencies" which cover over our everyday experience of the world and attend much more closely to that which shows itself.

The world is full of handy things that hang together as a whole and which are meaningful to me. In even more basic terms, the world is a whole load of stuff that is related together: my laptop sits on my desk, my spectacles sit on my nose, the desk sits on the floor, and I can look over to the window at the garden and hear the quiet

hum of traffic and police sirens that make up life in this city. This is what Heidegger calls “environment” (*Umwelt*), where he is trying to describe the world that surrounds the human being and in which it is completely immersed for the most part.

Heidegger insists that this lived experience of the world is missed or overlooked by scientific inquiry or indeed through a standard philosophy of mind, which presupposes a dualistic distinction between mind and reality. What is required is a phenomenology of our lived experience of the world that tries to be true to what shows itself first and foremost in our experience. To translate this into another idiom, we might say that Heidegger is inverting the usual distinction between theory and practice. My primary encounter with the world is not theoretical; it is not the experience of some spectator gazing out at a world stripped of value. Rather, I first apprehend the world practically as a world of things which are useful and handy and which are imbued with human significance and value. The theoretical or scientific vision of things that find in a thinker like Descartes is founded on a practical insight that is fascinated and concerned with things.

Heidegger introduces a distinction between two ways of approaching the world: the present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) and the ready-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*). Present-at-hand refers to our theoretical apprehension of a world made up of objects. It is the conception of the world from which science begins. The ready-to-hand describes our practical relation to things that are handy or useful. Heidegger’s basic claim is that practice precedes theory, and that the ready-to-hand is prior to the present-at-hand. The problem with most philosophy after Descartes is that it conceives of the world theoretically and thus imagines, like Descartes, that I can doubt the existence of the external world and even the reality of the persons that fill it – who knows, they might be robots! For Heidegger, by contrast, who we are as human beings is inextricably bound up and bound together with the complex web of social practices that make up my world. The world is part of who I am. For Heidegger, to cut oneself off from the world, like Descartes, is to miss the point entirely: the fabric of our openness to the world is one piece. And that piece should not be cut up. Furthermore, the world is not simply full of handy, familiar meaningful things. It is also full of persons. If I am fundamentally with my world, then that world is a common world that experienced together with others. This is what Heidegger calls “being-with” (*Mitsein*).

## Part 4: Thrown into this world

**How do we find ourselves in the world, and how can we find our freedom here?**

As I already tried to show, Heidegger seeks to reawaken perplexity about the question of being, the basic issue of metaphysics. In *Being and Time*, he pursues this question through an analysis of the human being or what he calls Dasein. The being of Dasein is existence, understood as average everyday existence or our life in the world,

discussed in the last entry. But how might we give some more content to this rather formal idea of existence?

Heidegger gives us a strong clue in Division 1, Chapter 5 of *Being and Time*, which is a long, difficult, but immensely rewarding chapter and where things really begin to get interesting. The central claim of this chapter — which is deepened in the remainder of *Being and Time* — is that Dasein is thrown projection (*Dasein ist geworfener Entwurf*). Let me try and unravel this thought.

Heidegger tends to advance his investigation in concept clusters. One cluster contains three concepts: state of mind, mood and thrownness. State of mind is a rather questionable rendering of *Befindlichkeit*, which William Richardson nicely translates as ‘already-having-found-oneself-there-ness’. OK, it’s not particularly elegant, but the thought is the human being is always already found or disclosed somewhere, namely in the ‘there’ of its being-in-the-world. This ‘there’ is the *Da* of Dasein.

Furthermore, I am always found in a mood, a *Stimmung*. This mood is the strong Aristotelian sense of pathos, a passion of the soul or an affect, something befalls us and in which we find ourselves. The passions are not, for Heidegger, psychological colouring for an essentially rational agent. They are rather the fundamental ways in which we are attuned to the world. Indeed, musicologically, *Stimmung* is linked to tuning and pitch: one is attuned to the world firstly and mostly through moods. One of the compelling aspects of Heidegger’s work is his attempt to provide a phenomenology of moods, of the affects that make up our everyday life in the world.

This is another way of approaching his central insight: that we cannot exist independently of our relation to the world; and this relationship is a matter of mood and appetite, not rational contemplation.

Such moods disclose the human being as thrown into the ‘there’ of my being-in-the-world. As Jim Morrison intoned many decades ago, ‘Into this world we’re thrown’. Thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) is the simple awareness that we always find ourselves somewhere, namely delivered over to a world with which we are fascinated, a world we share with others.

We are always caught up in our everyday life in the world, in the throw of various moods, whether fear, boredom, excitement or – as we will see in the next entry – anxiety.

But, Heidegger insists, Dasein is not just thrown into the world. Because it – we – are capable of understanding, we can also throw off our thrown condition. Understanding is, for Heidegger, a conception of *activity*. It is always understanding how to do something or how to operate something. Understanding is the possession of an ability (*etwas können*) and the authentic human is characterised by the ability or potentiality to be (*Seinkönnen*).

So, the human being is not just a being defined by being thrown into the world. It is also one who can throw off that thrown condition in a movement where it seizes hold of its possibilities, where it acts in a concrete situation. This movement is what Heidegger calls projection (*Entwurf*) and it is the very experience of what Heidegger

will call, later in *Being and Time*, freedom. Freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept. It is the experience of the human being demonstrating its potential through acting in the world. To act in such a way is to be authentic.

## Part 5: Anxiety

**Anxiety is the philosophical mood par excellence, the experience of detachment from which I can begin to think freely for myself**

As I showed in the last blog, moods are essential ways of disclosing human existence for Heidegger. Yet, there is one mood in particular that reveals the self in stark profile for the first time. This is the function of anxiety (*Angst*), which Heidegger calls a basic or fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung*). Safranski rightly calls anxiety “a shadowy queen amongst moods”.

Anxiety makes its appearance in Division 1, Chapter 6, where Heidegger is seeking to define the being of Dasein as what he calls “care” (*Sorge*). It would take many more blog entries than I have at my disposal to lay out in adequate detail the structure and meaning of care. But we can get more than a hint by looking at anxiety.

Dasein is being-in-the-world. Our everyday existence is characterised by complete immersion in the ways of the world. The world fascinates us and my life is completely caught up in its rhythms and activities. The question Heidegger asks in Chapter 6 is: how is the being-in-the-world as a whole to be disclosed? Is there an experience where the world as such and as a whole is revealed to us? Is there a mood in which we pull back from the world and see it as something distinct from us? Heidegger’s claim is that being-in-the-world as a whole is disclosed in anxiety and is then defined as care. As such, anxiety has an important methodological function in the argument of *Being and Time*.

But the existential resonance of anxiety is much more than methodological. The first thing to grasp is that anxiety does not mean ceaselessly fretting or fitfully worrying about something or other. On the contrary, Heidegger says that anxiety is a rare and subtle mood and in one place he even compares it a feeling of calm or peace. It is in anxiety that the free, authentic self first comes into existence. It was, of course, the mood that launched a thousand existentialist novels, most famously Sartre’s *Nausea* and Camus’s *The Outsider* (although Heidegger was very critical of existentialism).

In order to understand what Heidegger means by anxiety, we have to distinguish it from another mood he examines: fear. Heidegger gives a phenomenology of fear earlier in *Being and Time*. His claim is that fear is always fear of something threatening, some particular thing in the world. Let’s say that I am fearful of spiders. Fear has an object and when that object is removed, I am no longer fearful. I see a spider in the bath and I am suddenly frightened. My non-spider fearing friend removes the offending arachnid, I am no longer fearful.

Matters are very different with anxiety. If fear is fearful of something particular and determinate, then anxiety is anxious about nothing in particular and is indeterminate. If fear is directed towards some distinct thing in the world, spiders or whatever, then anxiety is anxious about being-in-the-world as such. Anxiety is experienced in the face of something completely indefinite. It is, Heidegger insists, “nothing and nowhere”.

But let’s back up for a moment here. Heidegger’s claim earlier in Division 1 of *Being and Time* (discussed in blog 3), is that the human being finds itself in a world that is richly meaningful and with which it is fascinated. In other words, the world is homely (*heimlich*), cosy even. In anxiety, all of this changes. Suddenly, I am overtaken by the mood of anxiety that renders the world meaningless. It appears to me as an inauthentic spectacle, a kind of tranquilised and pointless bustle of activity. In anxiety, the everyday world slips away and my home becomes uncanny (*unheimlich*) and strange to me. From being a player in the game of life that I loved, I become an observer of a game that I no longer see the point in playing.

What is first glimpsed in anxiety is the authentic self. As the world slips away, we obtrude. I like to think about this in maritime terms. Inauthentic life in the world is completely bound up with things and other people in a kind of “groundless floating” – the phrase is Heidegger’s. Everyday life in the world is like being immersed in the sea and drowned by the world’s suffocating banality. Anxiety is the experience of the tide going out, the seawater draining away, revealing a self stranded on the strand, as it were. Anxiety is that basic mood when the self first distinguishes itself from the world and becomes self-aware.

Anxiety does not need darkness, despair and night sweats. It can arise in the most innocuous of situations: sitting in the subway distractedly reading a book and over-hearing conversations, one is suddenly seized by the feeling of meaninglessness, by the radical distinction between yourself and the world in which you find yourself. With this experience of anxiety, Heidegger says, Dasein is individualised and becomes self-aware.

Anxiety is the first experience of our freedom, as a freedom from things and other people. It is a freedom to begin to become myself. Anxiety is perhaps the philosophical mood par excellence, it is the experience of detachment from things and from others where I can begin to think freely for myself. Yet, as Heidegger was very well aware, anxiety is also a mood that is powerfully analysed in the Christian tradition, from Augustine to Kierkegaard, where it describes the self’s effort to turn itself, to undergo a kind of conversion. Heidegger’s difference with Christianity is that the self’s conversion is not undergone with reference to God, but only in relation to death, which is the topic of next week’s blog.

## Part 6: Death

**Far from being morbid, Heidegger’s conception of living in the knowledge of death is a liberating one**

As I said some 6 weeks ago, in my first blog on Heidegger, the basic idea in *Being and Time* is very simple: being is time and time is finite. For human beings, time comes to an end with our death. Therefore, if we want to understand what it means to be an authentic human being, then it is essential that we constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death. This is what Heidegger famously calls “being-towards-death”. If our being is finite, then an authentic human life can only be found by confronting finitude and trying to make a meaning out of the fact of our death. Heidegger subscribes to the ancient maxim that “to philosophise is to learn how to die”. Mortality is that in relation to which we shape and fashion our selfhood.

There are four rather formal criteria in Heidegger’s conception of being-towards-death: it is non-relational, certain, indefinite and not to be outstripped. Firstly, death is non-relational in the sense in standing before death one has cut off all relations to others. Death cannot be experienced through the deaths of others, but only through my relation to my death. I will contest this criterion below.

Secondly, it is certain that we are going to die. Although one might evade or run away from the fact, no one doubts that life comes to an end in death. Thirdly, death is indefinite in the sense that although death is certain, we do not know when it going to happen. Most people desire a long and full life, but we can never know when the grim reaper is going to knock at our door.

Fourthly, to say that death is not to be outstripped (*unüberholbar*) simply means that death is pretty damned important. There’s no way of trumping it and it outstrips all the possibilities that my power of free projection possesses. This is the idea behind Heidegger’s famously paradoxically statement that death is the “possibility of impossibility”. Death is that limit against which my potentiality-for- being (*Seinkönnen*) is to be measured. It is that essential impotence against which the potency of my freedom shatters itself.

At the end of the introduction to *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes, “Higher than actuality stands possibility”. *Being and Time* is a long hymn of praise to possibility and it finds its highest expression in being-towards-death. Heidegger makes a distinction between anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) and expectation or awaiting (*Erwarten*). His claim is that the awaiting of death still contains too much of the actual, where death would be the actualisation of possibility. Such would be a gloomy philosophy of morbidity. On the contrary, for Heidegger, anticipation does not passively await death, but mobilises mortality as the condition for free action in the world.

This results in a hugely important and seemingly paradoxical thought: freedom is not the absence of necessity, in the form of death. On the contrary, freedom consists in the affirmation of the necessity of one’s mortality. It is only in being-towards-death that one can become the person who one truly is. Concealed in the idea of death as the possibility of impossibility is the acceptance on one’s mortal limitation as the basis for an affirmation of one’s life.

So, there is nothing morbid about being-towards-death. Heidegger’s thought is that being-towards-death pulls Dasein out of its immersion in inauthentic everyday life and

allows it come into its own. It is only in relation to being-towards-death that I become passionately aware of my freedom.

Despite its baroque linguistic garb, Heidegger's analysis of being-towards-death is exceptionally direct and powerful. However, it is open to the following objection. Heidegger argues that the only authentic death is one's own. To die for another person, he writes, would simply be to "sacrifice oneself". To that extent, for Heidegger, the deaths of others are secondary to my death, which is primary. In my view (and this criticism is first advanced by Edith Stein and Emmanuel Levinas), such a conception of death is both false and morally pernicious. On the contrary, I think that death comes into our world through the deaths of others, whether as close as a parent, partner or child or as far as the unknown victim of a distant famine or war. The relation to death is not first and foremost my own fear for my own demise, but my sense of being undone by the experience of grief and mourning.

Also, there is a surprisingly traditional humanism at work in Heidegger's approach to death. In his view, only human beings die, whereas plants and animals simply perish. I can't speak with any expertise about the death of plants, but empirical research would certainly seem to show that the higher mammals – whales, dolphins, elephants, but also cats and dogs – also have an experience of mortality, of both their own and of those around them. We are not the only creatures in the universe who are touched by the sentiment of mortality.

## Part 7: Conscience

**For Heidegger, the call of conscience is one that silences the chatter of the world and brings me back to myself**

After the existential drama of Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death, why do we need a discussion of conscience? As so often in *Being and Time*, Heidegger insists that although his description of being-towards-death is formally or ontologically correct, it needs more compelling content at what Heidegger calls the "ontic" level, that is, at the level of experience. Finitude gets a grip on the self through the experience of conscience. For me, the discussion of conscience contains the most exciting and challenging pages in *Being and Time*. Let me try and sketch as simply as possible the complex line of Heidegger's argument.

Conscience is a call. It is something that calls one away from one's inauthentic immersion in the homely familiarity of everyday life. It is, Heidegger writes, that uncanny experience of something like an external voice in one's head that pulls one out of the hubbub and chatter of life in the world and arrests our ceaseless busyness.

This sounds very close to the Christian experience of conscience that one finds in Augustine or Luther. In Book 8 of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes the entire drama of conversion in terms of hearing an external voice, "as of a child", that leads

him to take up the Bible and eventually turn away from paganism and towards Christ. Luther describes conscience as the work of God in the mind of man.

For Heidegger, by contrast, conscience is not God talking to me, but me talking to myself. The uncanny call of conscience – the pang and pain of its sudden appearance – feels like an alien voice, but is, Heidegger insists, *Dasein* calling to itself. I am called back from inauthentic life in the world, complete with what Sartre would call its “counterfeit immortality”, towards myself. Furthermore, that self is, as we saw in blog 6, defined in terms of being-towards-death. So, conscience is the experience of the human being calling itself back to its mortality, a little like Hamlet in the grave with Yorick’s skull.

What gets said in the call of conscience? Heidegger is crystal clear: like Cordelia in King Lear, nothing is said. The call of conscience is silent. It contains no instructions or advice. In order to understand this, it is important to grasp that, for Heidegger, inauthentic life is characterised by chatter – for example, the ever-ambiguous hubbub of the blogosphere. Conscience calls *Dasein* back from this chatter silently. It has the character of what Heidegger calls “reticence” (*Verschwiegenheit*), which is the privileged mode of language in Heidegger. So, the call of conscience is a silent call that silences the chatter of the world and brings me back to myself.

But what does this uncanny call of conscience give one to understand? Conscience’s call can be reduced to one word: Guilty! But what does *Dasein*’s guilt really mean? It means that because, as shown in blog 4, the human being is defined in terms of thrown projection, it always has its being to be. That is, human existence is a lack, it is something due to *Dasein*, a debt that it strives to make up or repay. This is the ontological meaning of guilt as *Schuld*, which can also mean debt. As Heidegger perhaps surprisingly writes, although it should be recalled that he was also writing in troubled economic times, “Life is a business whether or not it covers its costs”. Debt is a way of being. I owe therefore I am.

Heidegger goes on to show that this ontological meaning of guilt as indebtedness is the basis for any traditional moral understanding of guilt. Heidegger’s phenomenology of guilt, and here he is close to Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, claims to uncover the deep structure of ethical selfhood which cannot be defined by morality, since morality already presupposes it. Rejecting any Christian notion of evil as the privation of good (*privatio boni*), Heidegger’s claim is that guilt is the pre-moral source for any morality. As such, it is beyond good or evil. Is guilt bad? No. but neither is it good. It is simply what we are, for Heidegger. We are guilty. Such is Kafka’s share of eternal truth.

Heidegger insists that *Dasein* does not load guilt onto itself. It simply is guilty, always already, as Heidegger liked to say. What changes in being authentic is that the human being understands the call of conscience and takes it into itself. Authentic *Dasein* comes to understand itself as guilty. In doing this, *Dasein* has chosen itself, as Heidegger writes. This is very interesting: what is chosen is not having a conscience, which *Dasein* already has because of its ontological want or indebtedness, but what

Heidegger calls, rather awkwardly, “wanting to have a conscience” (*Gewissen-haben-wollen*). This is, if you like, a second-order wanting: I choose to want the want that I am. Only in this way, Heidegger adds, can the human being be answerable or responsible (*verantwortlich*). Thus, responsibility – which would be the key to any conception of ethics in relation to Heidegger’s work, which is, to say the least, a moot point – consists in understanding the call, in wanting to have a conscience. To make this choice, Heidegger insists, is to become resolute.

## Part 8: Temporality

**Time should be grasped in and of itself as the unity of the three dimensions of future, past and present**

To try and compress 437 dense pages of *Being and Time* into eight brief blogs was obviously a difficult exercise from the start. But, I must admit, this was also part of the attraction. Despite the limits of this virtual medium, I hope that something of the book has been conveyed in a way that might encourage people to read more and further. *Being and Time* is extraordinarily rich, difficult and systematic work of philosophy that repays careful reading and rereading.

That Heidegger continues to arouse controversy and heated misunderstanding is evidenced by some of the responses to these blogs. All I would ask is that Heidegger’s detractors (you know, the “this is bullshit” brigade) take the trouble to read his work with a little care and to pause before reacting.

Although there is so much more we could say about division two of *Being and Time*, there is one final topic that I’d briefly like to explore and which some readers think is the climax of the book: temporality. Let me begin by describing what Heidegger is trying to avoid in his discussion of time.

Firstly, he is trying to criticise the idea of time as a uniform, linear and infinite series of “now-points”. On this model, which derives ultimately from Aristotle’s *Physics*, the future is the not-yet-now, the past is the no-longer-now, and the present is the now that flows from future to past at each passing moment. This is what Heidegger calls the “vulgar” or ordinary conception of time where priority is always given to the present. Heidegger thinks that this Aristotelian conception of time has dominated philosophical inquiries into time from the ancient Greeks to Hegel and even up to his near contemporary Bergson.

Secondly, he is trying to avoid any conception of time that begins with a distinction between time and eternity. On this understanding of time, classically expressed in Augustine’s *Confessions*, temporality is derived from a higher non-temporal state of eternity, which is co-extensive with the infinite and eternal now of God.

In order to understand what Heidegger means by temporality, we have to set it in the context of the existential analytic of *Dasein* that I have sought to describe. The discussion of being-towards-death in blog six led to the idea of anticipation, namely that

the human being is always running ahead towards its end. For Heidegger, the primary phenomenon of time is the future that is revealed to me in my being-towards-death. Heidegger makes play of the link between the future (*Zukunft*) and to come towards (*zukommen*). Insofar as *Dasein* anticipates, it comes towards itself. The human is not confined in the present, but always projects towards the future.

But what *Dasein* takes over in the future is its basic ontological indebtedness, its guilt, as discussed in the previous blog. There is a tricky but compelling thought at work here: in anticipation, I project towards the future, but what comes out of the future is my past, my personal and cultural baggage, what Heidegger calls my “having-been-ness” (*Gewesenheit*). But this does not mean that I am somehow condemned to my past. On the contrary, I can make a decision to take over the fact of who I am in a free action. This is what Heidegger calls “resoluteness”.

This brings us to the present. For Heidegger, the present is not some endless series of now points that I watch flowing by. Rather, the present is something that I can seize hold of and resolutely make my own. What is opened in the anticipation of the future is the fact of our having-been which releases itself into the present moment of action.

This is what Heidegger calls “the moment of vision” (*Augenblick*, literally “glance of the eye”). This term, borrowed from Kierkegaard and Luther, can be approached as a translation of the Greek *kairos*, the right or opportune moment. Within Christian theology, the *kairos* was the fulfilment or redemption of time that occurred with the appearance of Christ. Heidegger’s difference with Christian theology is that he wants to hang on to the idea of the moment of vision, but to do so without any reference to God. What appears in the moment of vision is authentic *Dasein*. To put the matter mildly, it is a moot point whether Heidegger can inhabit these Christian forms without accepting or at least aping their content.

The key to Heidegger’s understanding of time is that it is neither simply reducible to the vulgar experience of time, nor does it originate in distinction from eternity. Time should be grasped in and of itself as the unity of the three dimensions – what Heidegger calls “ecstases” – of future, past and present. This is what he calls “primordial” or “original” time and he insists that it is finite. It comes to an end in death.

For Heidegger, we are time. Temporality is a process with three dimensions which form a unity. The task that Heidegger sets himself in *Being and Time* is a description of the movement of human finitude. As many readers have pointed out and Heidegger himself acknowledged, *Being and Time* is unfinished. The question that he leaves hanging at the end of the book is the issue that began the whole enterprise, namely the question of being as such. We have been given an answer to the question what it means to be human, but no sense of how we might answer the question of being as such. The task that Heidegger set himself, from the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927 to his death nearly a half-century later in 1976, was the elucidation of that question.

The Ted K Archive

Simon Critchley  
Why Heidegger Matters  
8 Jun 2009

<[www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)>

An updated edition of this series of blog entries was likely published by Routledge in 2020, in a co-authored book called *On Heidegger's Being and Time*.

We're archiving this analysis of Heidegger's philosophy here because it has an influence on many leading anti-tech thinkers today such as John Zerzan. Though it should be noted that Heidegger's private notes show that "Metaphysical anti-semitism" and antipathy toward Jews was central to his philosophical work. Heidegger considered Jewish people to be agents of modernity, disfiguring the 'spirit of Western civilization'. He therefore held the Holocaust to be 'the logical result of the Jewish acceleration of technology', and thus blamed the Jewish genocide on its victims themselves.

Check out *Heidegger and the Jews* for further reading.

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