

Heidegger

Towards the end of our last discussion the conversation turned to the magazine Private Eye which regularly printed the sections Birtspcak 2.0 and Pseuds Corner mocking unnecessarily incoherent and convoluted language by BBC employees and journalist amongst others. Surely, nothing that was ever found in these articles could come close to the semantic spaghetti that is Heidegger's 'Being and Time.' According to Wikipedia, Bertrand Russell wrote about Heidegger that he was, "Highly eccentric in its terminology, his philosophy is extremely obscure. One cannot help suspecting that language is here running riot... this is a psychological observation made to pass for logic."

Heidegger was highly eccentric in his terminology: "The essence of Dasein lies in its existence."

Heidegger was obscure: Heidegger characterizes Dasein as Dasein by the phrase "Ahead of itself, Being already in the World, as Being, alongside entities encountered within the World."

Heidegger's language does indeed seem to run riot: "Dasein is a Being that does not simply occur among other Beings. Rather it is 'ontically distinguished by the fact' that in its being, this Being is concerned about its very being. Thus it is constitutive of the Being of Dasein to have, in its very being, a relation of being to this Being."

It is little wonder, the first time Sartre tried to read 'Being and Time' he admitted he gave up after only fifty pages.

It should be clear from the above quotes that it not easy, from just reading Heidegger's work, to get everyone, or indeed anyone, to agree on what Heidegger actually meant. Heidegger also had a habit of expressing conflicting views on (apparently) the same topic and that he often does not explicitly define his neologisms but rather leaves the reader to work out their meaning from the way he uses the term. His views also evolved over his life, what became known to scholars of Heidegger as 'The Turn'.

So I intend to discuss Heidegger's philosophy by approaching it in as plain English as possible. For those who might be familiar with Heidegger I am going to try to do this by passing over as much of Heidegger's novel language as possible to give those who might not have read Heidegger a better chance to understand his ideas and engage with the discussion. Heidegger has really powerful insights into how we learn, how we see the World and why the World has meaning for us that are interesting to discuss even when you may not fully understand Heidegger's arguments in full. The downside to this approach is that it forces me to interpret the text in ways that others, who have read the text, might not agree with. There are certainly multiple, radically different, interpretations of Heidegger out there. The one I am taking is based on a (spectacularly unimaginatively entitled) commentary by Michael Gelven, "A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time." (1989)

The first point to make is Heidegger's philosophy is an extension of the German tradition that went before him from Kant to Schopenhauer to Nietzsche. Heidegger's starting point is Kant's famous distinction between things-as-appearance and things-in-themselves. Kant argued we can only know things as they appear to us (what Kant termed the Phenomena) not the thing-in-itself (the Noumena). Schopenhauer countered that whilst we can only know most things Phenomenologically we can in fact know one thing Noumenologically. We can know ourselves as a thing-in-itself because we have access to our own minds and bodies. He termed the Phenomenological reality as the World of Representations (ideas) and the Noumenological as a universal monolithic Will that resides in everything, including ourselves, and drives us to live a life of striving and suffering. Nietzsche rejected this view of the Will and instead sought to analyse this Will from a Psychological perspective. If one actually reads Nietzsche he constantly refers to himself as a Psychologist, even though the concept of what we would recognize today as a psychologist had not yet developed in the Nineteen Century. Nietzsche held Dostoevski in a higher regard than any other thinker.

Heidegger seeks to make a further distinction between the Psychological and the 'Existential.' By Psychological he means mental states directed towards distinct entities. By Existentials he means those higher level mental functions and states of being that are necessary preconditions to be able to think in the first place, i.e. we must exist, we must be aware of our own existence, we must be aware of temporal time, we must be aware of the World around us, we must be aware of our possibilities, we must be aware we will die, we must be aware of what it means to be authentic. Basically we must be aware of the meaning of phenomenon, as a Noumena, even before we can think at all. He argues that, even if we are not aware of these Existentials in the fully Heideggerian sense

we are at least aware of them in a loose, everyday sense which we can use as a starting point to understand them more fully.

Secondly, Heidegger gets his method from a line of thinkers from Hegel to Kierkegaard to Husserl. He gets the idea to analyse phenomenon Phenomenologically, via his teacher Husserl, from Hegel. By this he means to analyse a phenomenon in a disinterested manner in its everyday appearance from as many perspectives as possible before intuitively abstracting the essence of the phenomenon, (it's Noumena) as best we can. The idea is to let the phenomenon speak for itself. From Kierkegaard he got the idea that we must delve deep into our own psyches to analyse our Existential Being to discover what it means to be. One point in particular he gets from Kierkegaard was the central importance of our shared mortality. Heidegger terms his method as an 'Existential Analytic' using 'hermeneutic phenomenology'. Hermeneutics at its most simple means to interpret.

However, Heidegger rejects rationality as a valid means to interpret Existentials. For Heidegger rationality is secondary to Existential analysis. We can Will ourselves to remove ourselves from the World of actual experience and take an independent God-like perspective to analyse entities in an independent objective manner to more efficiently comprehend the World but this is not how we primary experience the World. Thus, unlike for Kant, rationality is not the source of our morality. Instead he takes a more intuitive, inductive, and a consciously circular approach. The best way to understand this is to give examples of children, or for that matter adults, learning something new in a non-rational way. Take for example someone learning to play an instrument. No one learns an instrument by studying the theory and then applying it rationally. Instead they first learn to play one note and then repeatedly practice that one

note. Then when they have mastered that note they learn another and repeatedly practice that note. Now they are in position to combine the notes and practice a simple piece of music, all the time noticing new subtleties in how they move from one note to the other and how the instrument reacts. Then they learn a new note and repeat the process again, and again, until at some point they have mastered the instrument and can just pick up the instrument and play without thinking. Alternatively think of someone learning a new language. They would start by just learning a few simple words and repeatedly practising them until they master those words. Then they would learn some more words and practice those. After a while they will know enough words to practice with a native speaker and repeatedly practice speaking and listening, each time adding a few new words. After enough practice the learner will somehow master the language and get to the stage where they can just think in the new language without effort. It is as if you just go round and round in a circle until you speed up enough to move off in a different direction a bit like a helicopter's blades rotating round and round until they pick up enough speed until the helicopter lifts upwards. This is the approach Heidegger takes when analysing Existentials. Because these Existentials precede language you can not just approach them rationally by deductive logic. You have to let them roll around in your head until you make the leap and intuit them non-linguistically. Of course, this makes life much harder for the reader trying to follow Heidegger's thought process by reading a book which is limited by being written in a language and, in the case of an English reader, a book written in a foreign language at that.

Michael Gelven uses the term Heideggerian revolution to describe Heidegger's break with the traditional approach to Philosophy. Instead of asking whether entities such as God exist, or how do our minds relate to our bodies, or how do you live a good life, etc. Heidegger would ask "What would it mean for God to

exist 'as' a God, to me" or "What would it mean to live a good life as a good life, for me etc." Specifically Heidegger focuses on the question, "What would it mean for me to exist, as me, to me." What is more, to even ask this question implies the question, "What does it mean to exist at all." Or to put it another way "What is the meaning of Being." Heidegger terms this the 'SeinFrage', the being question, and asserts that this is the most important question we can ask.

An insight that can help to clarify Heidegger is to note how he inverts Descartes's famous dictum of 'Cogito ergo sum' i.e. 'I think therefore I am'. Heidegger instead asserts 'I am therefore I think' which is self-evidently more logical. I first need to exist to be able to think. The obvious question to then ask is, 'but what does this statement mean.' Indeed, it is the only question we can logically ask about this statement, and with that Heidegger has you trapped. Heidegger's whole approach going forward is to address, 'the meaning of I think therefore I am,' by breaking this down into three parts: 'What does it mean to think', 'What does it mean to be' and 'How does the meaning of thinking relate to the meaning of being.' The meaning of Being being the 'SeinFrage' or 'die Frage nach den Sinn von Sein' (to question what it means to be) which Heidegger frames, again, as the most fundamental question it is possible to ask. To answer the 'SeinFrage' is the whole point of the book because, Heidegger argues, if we can answer the 'SeinFrage' by showing 'to be' entails meaning and we 'care' about this meaning then Being itself, in all its forms, 'matters' and so the spectra of Nihilism Nietzsche raised will have been banished. This is vital because if Nihilism is allowed to stand and we accept that whether we, or anything else, exists, (or not,) does not matter then there is no point to Philosophy.

For Heidegger to ask what something means is to ask what a priori conditions must be in place to make something be able to be what it is. Or more precisely, since it is always an 'I' who thinks, what something means 'to me' is to ask what a priori conditions must be in place so 'I' can perceive something as being what it is.

What Heidegger is striving for is a 'fundamental ontology' based on meaning. Ontology being the study of what is real. Or to be more precise, a 'fundamental ontology' based on what is perceived to be real by me. Think of it this way, if one takes a walk in the countryside one may notice the existence of a path you walked down before, or a bench where you took a picnic, or a tree where you sheltered from the rain on a previous walk. You notice these things exist because they have a meaning to you. You do not notice a particular stone, or a bush, or a leaf on the ground as these things have no meaning to you, so unless these are brought to your attention for some other reason they don't even exist from your perspective. Things have to have a meaning to you for them to have an existence from your perspective, in a sense they are not real, they don't exist, unless they mean something to you.

Nonetheless, Heidegger does recognise that we can, through an act of will, give things meaning, and as such give them existence (present-at-hand). Or sometimes, things can force us to accept their meaning against our will (readiness-at-hand). We can happily drive our cars for years with the fact a car has a fuel filter being completely meaningless to us until the day it does not work. It is only then that we become aware that a fuel filter is a real (i.e. a meaningful) thing. Before it just did not exist for us, after it stops working and we realize its meaning it becomes real.

So to skip through Heidegger's argument ridiculously briefly:

Heidegger claims 'To Be' is to have meaning.

The Being that interprets this meaning has to be a Being that is self aware that it is a Being that has meaning. This is the Dasein. Dasein is that part of our 'Own Being' that is aware it has meaning. We are all Daseins. He emphasises, though, that for me, Dasein is always 'My' Dasein.

When we Be in a way that is 'true' (Heidegger uses the word *treu*) to our own meaning we are being AUTHENTIC. When we are not being in a way that is 'true' to our own meaning, because we are not aware of it, or focused on other things, or trying to please others, etc.) we are being INAUTHENTIC.

Heidegger lets the reader infer it is better to be authentic but at no point develops an ethical position with regards to this. He uses the term being a THEY to describe when we are being inauthentic (or in a state of Fallenness.)

He claims that part of our Dasein is to be in a World that exists independently of us and we have no option but to accept this. What he means by World is the infinite possible ways we have of being. We are thrown into a world with meaning at birth and have to deal with new meanings thrown at us throughout life (Being-in-the-world). However this Being-in-the-world is still MY Being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world refers both to the external entities in the World that impact our Being and our pre-existing Existentials. (Our State-of-Mind or moods: our having a body, our self-awareness, basically any state that we require a priori to think.)

The other part of our Dasein is that part of the World that we freely give our own meaning to by freely interpreting the prior possibilities that are available to us.

Meaning means to interpret an entity or Existential in the 'as structure' by which he means selecting from all the possible interpretations of something, say a cat, 'as a cat'. Roughly speaking we could give multiple meanings to the being of a cat: a black thing, a furry thing, a thing with four legs. However these are not essential meanings. An essential meaning might be a four legged feline, which makes a meow noise and hunts mice. For an inanimate object such as a hammer, we interpret the possible meanings according to how we want to 'use' it for the purpose that means something to us at that moment, in a specific situation. (i.e. a hammer means a thing we use to bang nails in.) However, if there was an intruder in the house the hammer might mean a weapon we use to defend ourselves. Therefore meaning is situation dependant.

Heidegger uses the following table to summarise his approach:

Object of Inquiry	Being (Sein)	Entity (Das Seiende)
Type of Inquiry	Ontological	Ontic
Terms of Inquiry	Existentials	(Kant's) Categories
Status of occurrence in Inquiry	Factual	Factual
Type of self-awareness in Inquiry	Existential	Existentiell

All we need take from this is that Heidegger divides reality into a secondary Ontic reality of entities, concepts, ideas and basically objective or subjective 'things'. This Ontic reality is secondary to the Ontological reality and is 'Willed' into existence (i.e. given meaning by our cognitive functions) or forced upon us by being-in-the-world. As such, reason, rationality, logic, language and even science are all secondary to a more fundamental Ontological reality. These Ontic entities all exist in a limited and defined way, either in space, or by substance or are mentally discrete. The primary Ontological reality deals with non-discrete, non-definable Existentials that lay outside the bounds of language. These are modes of Being and make possible cognitive analyse.

The best way to explain Existentials is to give an example. Image someone is depressed. Some people are depressed about something: their partner died, they have cancer, they lost their job, they have financial problems etc. These people are then Ontically depressed, their depression can be rationalised and is explainable. Heidegger would say these people are psychologically depressed. A psychologist could help them think through their depression to get better. Other people are just depressed, they are not depressed about anything, indeed they might state their life is good, but they are just stuck in a depressed state of mind all the time. Conditions like the morbidly depressed, Parkinson's disease and autism often fall into this category. Heidegger would say they are ontological depressed. For these people, speaking to a psychologist is unlikely to help. Instead they would seek help from a psychiatrist who might prescribe medication. Interesting Heidegger's analysis suggests an alternative. If they could be encouraged to have more meaning in their life, or do more things that mean a lot to them, then they might be able to convert their Ontological depression into an Ontic depression and deal with it psychologically with a psychologist. It is important to note, however, that Heidegger doesn't see

depression (or any other Existential) as good or bad it is just a natural state of being.

This leads on to the last Existential that we need to discuss. (There are many, many more that Heidegger goes into in great depth.) This is the importance of the Dasein being aware that one day it will no longer exist, i.e. it will die. If you are aware that one day you will die, and you take this realisation seriously, honestly and most importantly authentically then it will fill you with the Existential state of Dread. (If you deal with it inauthentically you are filled with the Existential state of Fear.) If a Dasein is in a state of Dread then the dread will not only give the Dasein's Being more meaning it will also create an Existential state of Care. It is when we care that the factual that we mean something shows us most clearly that we matter. Again, if we are aware we matter then we can not Authentically be Nihilistic. Care is the most important Existential for Heidegger. This makes sense as it is impossible to reason with someone who doesn't care. In fact, Philosophy itself is pointless if the reader does not care. The first task the teacher must perform when a child starts school is to get the child to care. If the child doesn't care, the teacher can not teach them anything. If the child cares enough, it is almost impossible to stop the child learning. Heidegger has a lot to say on this point in other books and ties it into the whole history of Philosophy's development since Socrates.

There is much, much more in Heidegger, that many have found insightful not least his Theory of Knowledge, his Theory of Time and his Theory of Truth but I will leave these for another discussion.

One last point, however, is that although Heidegger's ideas are completely rooted in the Western Tradition of Philosophy where he ended up was strikingly similar to the position of many Eastern Philosophers, especially those of the Zen-Daoist-Buddhist Tradition. The only difference being that whilst the Eastern Traditions tend to reduce reality to a Consciousness that creates Being Heidegger reduced reality to Being that then creates Consciousness.

From Wikipedia: "The scholar Chang Chung-Yuan stated, "Heidegger is the only Western Philosopher who not only intellectually understands Tao (Dao), but has intuitively experienced the essence of it as well."

This path that Heidegger provides into Eastern Thought is one aspect of his writing that has always interested me personally.