

**J. Willard Marriott Library**  
University of Utah  
Electronic Reserve Course Materials

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction, which is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses a photocopy or reproduction for or purposes in excess of "fair use", that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

# The Dasein as a Whole

Hubert L. Dreyfus

When *Being and Time* burst upon the philosophical scene in 1927 it seemed to drop out of the blue. Why, in the heartland of neo-Kantian and phenomenological epistemology, was Heidegger asking a seemingly empty and unmotivated question concerning the meaning of being? Only his own students, many of whom like Heidegger himself had grown up with Husserl's phenomenology, were in a position to understand. Now, thanks to the publication of his 1927 course, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, we can place the ontological orientation of *Being and Time* in its philosophical context. In Albert Hofstadter's excellent translation, we can listen in as Heidegger clearly and patiently explains why one must deconstruct traditional epistemological concern with the relation of subjective content to transcendent object in the name of a distinction, never before made in philosophy, which he calls the ontological difference.

The students in Heidegger's course on phenomenology would have been familiar with Husserl's latest work, *Ideas*, 1914, in which Husserl developed his analysis of the intentional content of mental states, begun in *Logical Investigations*, 1900, into a total account of the structure of the meanings by which a transcendental subject purports to refer to any sort of object whatsoever. Husserl argued that since our mental contents — our desires, beliefs, perceptions, assumptions, etc. — can be studied regardless of whether they successfully refer to things, indeed, of whether the notion of reference to mind-independent objects even makes sense, the phenomenologist can remain neutral as to reference, and simply study the structure of sense immanent in consciousness. This crucial methodological move, in which Husserl "suspended" the "natural attitude" in order to reflect on its intentional content, was called "bracketing existence". But, once we start talking about intentional content the most we can conclude is that our mental content purports to refer to independent referents, not that there *are* any such referents, or even whether there is anything more to being independently

---

\*A review of: Martin Heidegger: *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. 396 pp. Indiana University Press. Reprinted here from *Times Literary Supplement*, September 17, 1982.

real than to be so taken. "The question how directive sense, the understanding of being, belongs to intentio, and how intentio itself is possible as this necessary reference, is not only unanswered in phenomenology but not even asked."

Heidegger's basic problem is how reference to mind-independent entities is possible. He takes a running start by approaching the question historically, critically investigating why, for Kant, existence is not a predicate but, rather, "absolute position"; what, for the Scholastics, constitutes the difference between essence and existence; and, how, according to Aristotle, Hobbes, J. S. Mill and Lotze, assertions refer to objects. The discussion returns to the present with a quotation from *Ideas* in which Husserl accepts uncritically the "most radical of all distinctions of being—being *as consciousness* and being as being that 'manifests' itself in consciousness, 'transcendent being'". After a "phenomenological clarification" of the problems raised by these earlier thinkers, Heidegger concludes that "violence is . . . practiced on the Dasein [human being] by preconceived notions of ego and subject drawn from the theory of knowledge." Indeed, "what is called immanence in theory of knowledge is a complete inversion of the phenomenological facts. . .". His point is that human beings are not basically ego-subjects with mental states which are directed toward objects in the world. They are, indeed, sometimes correctly described as having private mental states, but they are always, and thus more basically, a kind of concerned activity which is inseparable from a public world in which every sort of object (tools, nature, people, numbers, etc.) can be manifest and directly encountered. In this natural everyday activity, which Husserl mischaracterized as an intentional attitude, "Self and world belong together in the single entity, the Dasein. Self and world are not two beings, like subject and object, or like I and thou, but self and world are the basic determination of the Dasein itself in the unity of the structure of being-in-the-world."

Heidegger gives a concise summary of his argument, which, of course, needs a lot of explaining:

To intentionality, as comportment towards *beings*, there always belongs an *understanding of the being* of those beings to which the intention refers. . . . This understanding of the being of beings is connected with the *understanding of world*, which is the presupposition for the experience of an intraworldly being. But, now, since world-understanding is at the same time an *understanding of itself by the Dasein*, . . . the understanding of being that belongs to intentionality *embraces* the Dasein's being. . . .

The question now becomes: What does Heidegger mean by the understanding of the being of beings and the understanding of world and how are they supposed to be related to each other and to Dasein?

We will never get an answer if we try to map Heidegger on to what we already take for granted as sensible philosophy. Heidegger admired Aristotle as "the last of the great philosophers who had eyes to see and . . . the energy and tenacity to force inquiry back to the phenomena. . . ." His idea of phenomenology, unlike Husserl's, was to stop ringing changes on the trusted notions of immanent and transcendent, conscious and unconscious, implicit and explicit, reflective and unreflective, subject and object, and get back to everyday experience. Heidegger is definitely *not* saying what Sir Peter Strawson, in his *New York Review of Books* review of George Steiner's Heidegger book, rather condescendingly finds "plausible", viz, that we each have an "unreflective and largely unconscious grasp of the basic general structure of interconnected concepts or categories in terms of which we think about the world and ourselves". This would be to make our understanding of being and of the world a belief system entertained by a subject, exactly the view Husserl held, which turns reality into a correlate of our conceptual scheme. Pouring ontological wine into epistemological bottles, Strawson's gloss makes Heidegger's concern with being seem "perfectly general" and thus amenable only to "formal or trivial answers, however portentous we may be tempted to make them sound". But, even granting his rejection of epistemology, what could Heidegger mean by our understanding of being if not some very general assumptions about reality? We must return to the lectures.

To explain the understanding of the being of beings which constitutes the self and world as a single entity, Heidegger begins by describing the classroom, contrasting his approach with Fichte's (a possible stand-in for Husserl):

The ontological distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, between ego and non-ego, cannot in any way be conceived directly and simply, as for instance in the form that Fichte uses to initiate the problem when he says, "Gentlemen, think the wall, and then think the one who thinks the wall." There is already a constructive violation of the facts, an unphenomenological onset, in the request "Think the wall." For in our natural comportment towards things we never think a *single* thing, and whenever we seize upon it expressly for itself we are taking it *out* of the contexture to which it belongs in its real content: wall, room, surroundings. . . . Sitting here in the auditorium, we do not in fact apprehend walls — not unless we are getting bored.

Nevertheless, the walls are already present even before we think them as objects.

The “equipmental whole” Heidegger is describing is “non-conceptually understandable”. Our understanding of it is not a theory, or a set of beliefs about how things will behave, but a set of interrelated skills, a kind of know-how. “In Germany we say that someone can *vorstehen* something. . . . This is equivalent to saying that he *versteht sich darauf* [understands in the sense of being skilled or expert at it, has the know-how of it]. The meaning of the term understanding [*Verstehen*] as defined above is intended to go back to this usage in ordinary language.”

What makes particular entities intelligible, then, is not our thoughts -- Husserl’s intentional contents — but our shared skills for coping with things in a shared context which Heidegger calls the world. As socialized into these public skills and practices we *are* this world prior to knowing about particular things and even prior to using them: “The world, within which . . . beings are encountered, is . . . always already a world which the one shares with the other . . . because the Dasein is antecedently constituted as being-in-the-world. . . .”

Heidegger’s response to Kant and Husserl is, in effect, that if one supposes that realism is a posit or a thesis or a presupposition of our conceptual scheme, one is doomed to epistemological scepticism (we can never know if the thesis is correct) and worse, to transcendental idealism (all that realism could ever come to is our thesis plus whatever we decide to count as its confirmation). We can avoid these conclusions only by giving up the view that all our experience is mediated by intentional content. We must, therefore, abandon the Husserlian dogma that our relation to the world is *exhaustively* captured in terms of a subject perceiving, believing, making assumptions, etc., about objects and their contexts. We have to ask, rather, about the conditions of possibility of this whole Cartesian, intentionalist account. Heidegger claims that we can encounter objects as real (manipulate them, perceive them, avoid them, etc.) only on the basis of discriminations, reactions, manners of coping, etc., which cannot be analysed in terms of explicit and implicit intentional content.

The equipmental contexture stands at first, completely unobtrusive and unthoughtful. . . . “Unthought” means that it is not thematically apprehended for deliberate thinking about things; instead, in circumspection, we find our bearings in regard to them. . . . When we enter here through the door, we do not apprehend the seats, and the same holds for the doorknob. Nevertheless, they

are there in this peculiar way: we go by them circumspectly, avoid them circumspectly, stumble against them, and the like.

This understanding in our practices required “a more original conception of intentionality . . . unknown to all previous philosophy”.

On this account, realism is not a thesis or a theory but a function of the manifold, non-intentional shared skills just discussed. As Wittgenstein puts it in *On Certainty*, “Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc., etc. They learn to fetch books, sit in chairs, etc., etc.” Such skills fit into a whole system of shared practices, but these practices, as ways of doing things and ways things matter, are not correlated with any intentional content. Thus it makes no sense to ask whether this intentional content is satisfied, i.e., whether the content correlated with these skills and practices corresponds to reality. We can ask of specific beliefs whether they are true or not, and, about specific perceptual experiences whether they are veridical, but we cannot ask such questions about our ways of dealing with things and people which make such beliefs possible. The *thesis of realism*, i.e., the claim that our mental contents are directed to independent objects, distorts our basic way of being in the world which, as the condition of *all* mind/world relations, is no relation at all.

Our practices embody specific ways of treating things as important and trivial, public and private, perceptual and imaginary, all of which adds up to a non-intentional understanding of what counts as real. Only in so far as we acquire this understanding of being do we become human. “The Dasein understands itself from the ability to be that is determined by the success and failure, the feasibility and unfeasibility of its commerce with things.” Only as thus socialized can we have intentional relations to people and things, both apparent and real. (It is interesting to note that Heidegger here makes this point without recourse to “existentialist” notions such as death, guilt and anxiety, which have an unfortunate, and, it now turns out, unnecessary prominence in *Being and Time*.)

In his later works Heidegger is interested in the specific, changing understanding of being or reality in our cultural practices, as opposed to that of other cultures and even our own past. But in 1927 he had not yet made his turn to “the history of being”, and was seeking, rather, the most general understanding of being in all human practices. Still this understanding of being is far from empty. Heidegger distinguishes the handy, the nonhandy, and the merely on hand, and notes: “Even in a rough analysis a multiplicity of intrinsically founded levels of being are manifested within the being of things and of equipment alone.”

Wittgenstein thought of the background of social practices as a “hurly-burly” which defied systematization:

How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. Not what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action.

Heidegger, however, claims to find the unifying structure of world, and indeed, of all intelligibility, in the structure of temporality. This is the most difficult and also the most dubious aspect of his early work. In Part II of *Basic Problems* (as in Division II of *Being and Time*) he seeks to lay out the temporal structure of our comportment towards beings and to ground this in the ultimate horizon of what he calls primordial temporality, which is supposed to be the structure of understanding itself and account for “the immediate unity of the understanding of being and comportment towards beings”.

The first move is relatively easy to follow. The equipmental totality is not “a jumbled heap of things but an environs, a surroundings, which contains within itself a closed, intelligible contexture”. Our pragmatic activity is structured as purposive (though not necessarily in terms of intentionalistic goals), we take over what is already given (although not necessarily remembered) and we orient ourselves “circumspectively” in a current context (which we take account of without necessarily noticing). In Heideggerian terms “the temporality of dealing with equipment is retentive-expectant enpresenting (*Gegenwartigen*)”. For this temporal openness, which is his “more original conception intentionality”, Heidegger takes over from the tradition the name “transcendence”. “The Dasein . . . in its being is out *beyond* itself . . . . Transcendence means *to understand oneself from a world.*” He can then conclude:

[Husserlian] intentionality is founded in the Dasein's transcendence . . . . Transcendence cannot conversely be explained in terms of [traditional accounts of] intentionality.

The Dasein is intentional only because it is determined essentially by temporality.

What is harder to understand is Heidegger's attempt to show that this temporality [*Zeitlichkeit*] is in turn, grounded in an even more primordial three-dimensional openness which he calls *Temporalitat* (translated, out of desperation, as Temporality with a capital “T”). In other words, Heidegger wants to show that

the temporality of the understanding of the being of equipment is grounded in the Temporality of the understanding of being itself. Just as temporality is supposed to be the structure of everyday, local, pragmatic activity, Temporality (with a capital “T”) is supposed to be the structure of the background or world “upon which” such activity takes place. This ultimate structure must account for the possibility of practical understanding and so must be structurally similar to (but not identical with) the temporal structure of pragmatic activity; yet it must also leave open the possibility of all other kind of activity as well. What this most basic structure is, remains, in spite of Heidegger’s sincere and heroic efforts, almost totally incomprehensible.

This may not be the reader’s fault, however. As Heidegger admits:

Faulty interpretations of transcendence, of the basic relationship of the Dasein to beings and to itself, are no mere defects of thought or acumen. They have their reason and their necessity in the Dasein’s own historical existence. . . . Without knowing where the faulty interpretation lies, we can be quietly persuaded that there is also a faulty interpretation concealed within the Temporal interpretation of being as such, and again no arbitrary one.

As Wittgenstein saw, laying out the structure of the background is well-nigh impossible. It soon became obvious that Temporality was too closely tied to the structure of equipment to account for our ability to encounter other entities such as natural things and works of art. Heidegger spent the rest of his life trying to work out the topology of what he called the clearing, the open, the regioning, etc. On the way, he abandoned his early account of temporality as too metaphysical. What remains central in his thought to the end, however, is the fundamental difference between the world, clearing, or background of shared historical linguistic practices — our understanding of being — on the one hand, and mental states and their objects, on the other. At the end of *Basic Problems* Heidegger calls this basic difference the ontological difference, and claims it as his contribution to philosophy. He remarks that “the distinction between reality and existentia, or between essentia and existentia, does not coincide with the ontological difference but belongs on the side of one member of the ontological difference”. All the problems of traditional epistemology, culminating in



Husserl's phenomenology, come from failing to see this distinction, and failing to sort out the complex structures of the background practices which embody our understanding of every sort of being. "Thus we see. . . . that the ontological difference is not as simple . . . as it appears in its plain formulation, but what ontology aims at, that which *differs* here, being itself, reveals an ever richer structure within itself." What might at first seem an empty and unmotivated fascination with being, is in fact Heidegger's attempt to call attention to the complex unity and intelligibility of our shared background practices, and to show their importance for philosophy.