

PHIL 181: Lecture #6 - Heidegger

Background

If Nietzsche is the philosopher of the Bacchanalian revelry, and Kierkegaard of the passionate religious fervor, then Martin Heidegger is the philosopher of the morning after and the hangover. Unlike his predecessors, Heidegger is an academic philosopher, a university professor. His work is careful, technical, often droning, and rarely passionate. But still, his task is in a sense the careful working out of the aftermath of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, a bringing of their insights to full fruition.

His life is relatively banal, with only a few exceptions. He intended to become a priest, but later settled on studying philosophy, where he originally wrote on meaning, intentionality, and the foundations of logic. He was a student or assistant of Husserl, and published *Being & Time* in 1927, which helped him succeed Husserl at Freiburg. He became a university rector, and shortly after joined the Nazi party. After the war, he was banned from teaching though he was re-instated in 1950. Aristotelian and medieval philosophy was of lasting influence on him, and we can see his interest in questions about "Being," so unusual for his time, as a reflection of this. He was also influenced by Kant, by Dilthey's appropriation of hermeneutics, the method of biblical interpretation, for understanding human behavior, and by Husserl's phenomenology, and of course by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Problems of Contemporary Life

For Heidegger, the dualism of subject and object, or the mind and the material world, assumed by the modern worldview is a large problem. The assumption that access to the world was only achievable through the medium of ideas and interpretations was dominant, even materialists who place the mind in the physical brain make the distinction. This leads to intractable problems in epistemology: how can we ever be sure that our ideas give us correct information about the world itself, and how can we even be sure there is a world? The dualism gives rise to skepticism, relativism, subjectivism, and other such philosophies.

This worldview also suffers from a pervasive sense of a lack of meaning and value in life. With the objective world being all neutral matter, described by science, values and meanings become subjective. Since the evaluations are subjective and based on needs and desires, there is no sense of a "higher" or "better" life, it is just about getting along and feeling good.

The source of the problem is the objectified worldview of modern science and the corresponding *theoretical* attitude people adopt towards the world. Heidegger is not anti-science or anti-theory in his philosophy, but he thinks that these are limited, specialized, "regional" perspectives and interpretations. He thinks the problem

originated early with the Greeks, specifically Plato, and their obsession with theory and reason. Ultimately, the problems are with our fundamental ontology, with our explicit conceptualization of what kinds of being there are and what existence itself is.

Heidegger's Project

This project consists of 3 parts: the Question of Being, The Destruction of the History of Ontology, and the Phenomenology of Everydayness.

Fundamental Ontology, or the Question of Being

The basic question is "What is the meaning of Being?" Heidegger thinks that we already begin with a basic understanding of Being. An example is the that we know how to use verbs of being like am, are, is, to be, etc. When someone says, "Today *is* Monday," we have a sense of what the meaning of *is* is, but might be hard-pressed to come up with an explicit definition. This sense of things that guides our ordinary interactions in the world is what Heidegger calls our "pre-ontological understanding of Being." What we want to do is to conceptualize and clarify our inchoate grasp. One cannot have a theory of Being that is scientific, which has hypotheses and makes predictions. What we do want to know is how it is that specific things *count* or *matter* in our lives.

The Destruction of the History of Ontology

Many theories of existence or *ontologies* have been formulated in the last 2500 years of philosophy: cosmic functions, divine creation by God, Hegel's Absolute Mind, Leibniz's monads, Kant's unknowable noumena, physicalism, and more. Heidegger thinks that all of these ontologies stem from a distorted and narrow view of what Being is. They are all forms of a substance ontology. These ontologies posit various types of things that are just *there*, independent of us and our practices. Heidegger refers to this view of objects as enduring objects in space as "present-at-hand." But this is not the fundamental way that objects present themselves to us.

Anti-Dualism and the Phenomenology of Everydayness

The main problems that Heidegger seek to address is the dominance of the objectified, theoretical outlook and the existence of the pernicious dualisms. The source of these problems can be found in the "forgetfulness" of our basic understanding and how we lose sight of background conditions. This loss of sight is necessary to focus and complete certain tasks, but when it becomes entrenched it leads to a distorted view of reality, one that is out of touch with concrete, lived experience and the reality of everyday life.

The only way to overcome this forgetfulness is to get back to our more basic understanding of the world and ourselves. The idea that the objectified/theoretical stance is the only way to interact with the world needs to be avoided, and things should

not be started with as they appear in reflection and theorizing. Heidegger thinks that this perspective is actually derivative of a more basic, practical view of the world. It starts out with ordinary lives as they normally act in the world, dealing with practical tasks. It focuses on contexts of activity prior to theory and abstract reflection.

Phenomenology is the method that Heidegger thinks can accomplish this task. The method is taken from Husserl's *transcendental* phenomenology, but altered for Heidegger's purposes. Husserl's method was one of describing what is given in experience without preconceptions. It gets at the structure of *consciousness* and its *intentionality* (world-directedness) and is essentially epistemological. Heidegger's *hermeneutic* phenomenology, on the other hand, is a method of letting *things* show themselves. It focuses on a more basic, non-subjective intentionality of everyday activity *prior to* the reflective separation between subject and object, and is essentially ontological. It is a Phenomenology of Everydayness; an analysis of everyday, practical life. With the goal of uncovering of what lies hidden within it.

In this philosophy the assumption of understanding reality in terms of substances is questioned. Heidegger looks at the experience of "being-in-the-world" as a *unified phenomenon*. Here one can see the connection to pragmatism and to Nietzsche's "History of an Error" in this opposition to the separation of the experience into "real" and "apparent" worlds and to its general opposition to all such dualisms. The dualisms of subject-object, mind-matter, and inner-outer play no role in Heidegger's account of making sense of the world. He is even so careful as to avoid even the use of "man" or "human" in his discussion of human existence. But this careful avoidance of these problematic dualisms and basic assumptions accounts for the difficulty of his style and writing.

A Description of the Everyday

An example that Heidegger likes to use to explain the "Everyday" is that of the workshop. Suppose you are working on a familiar activity (e.g. a carpenter in her workshop), and that you are building a bookcase and everything is going well. In this situation the hammer, nails, and boards don't show up as objects of explicit attention to you. They don't show up as things with properties that must be recognized and understood in order to use them. What you are aware of is the smoothly flowing activity of *hammering*. That activity takes place in a totality of functional relationships organized around our purposes. Insofar as the *hammer* shows up, it shows up in functional relationships: *in* hammering, *in order to* fasten these boards together, *for* building a bookcase. It is *equipment*. Heidegger refers to this state as *concernful absorption*, where we lose ourselves in the world of our current concern. How things present themselves depend on what you are doing with your life, and when everything goes well tools show up as "ready-to-be-used." The hammer only becomes part of your explicit attention if something goes wrong, like if it is too big or small, or if its head breaks off.

Another such example is that of navigating a crowded room. Suppose you are at a crowded social event, in a room full of people and tables. You need to get from here to

the buffet table at the back of the room. What you do *not* do is form a map of the objects in space and then plot a course. Things show up instead in the context of getting across the room as obstacles, as barriers, as pathways, and you're able to navigate without any explicit theorizing or reflection just based on how things present themselves. Things only come to explicit attention if they force themselves on you, such as someone who insists on talking to you.

Key Concepts

Heidegger has many key concepts and terms that will be explained more here.

1. The Primacy of the Ready-to-Hand

The ready-to-hand objects are how we encounter objects in our normal, practical interaction with things, while the present-at-hand emerges only later, and is derivative from our dealings with the ready-to-hand. He thinks that there is no way to "reduce" ready-to-hand to present-to-hand, that the detached interaction of objects that are present-to-hand are dependent upon the engaged interaction with the ready-to-hand.

2. Purposes and Projects are Definitive of Being

The stands we take, our everyday activities, determine the *relevance* or *meaning* of things, which is in relation to our projects. This involvement of things in our projects is ontologically definitive of the Being of such entities.

3. Dasein is being-in-the-world (Dasein in German literally means "being-there"). Being-in-the-world is not the self as traditionally conceived, but a unity of self and world, where the world is made up of the totality of the relationships that form the background of our activities.

4. You are what you do.

5. Self is a two-part temporal event or process. The first is *thrownness*, or facticity. We are attuned to and disposed in the world. This limits and conditions our experiences but also provides the basis from which we can assign meaning. These limits can be the result of either social context or our own choices or both. The second is *futurity*, or possibility. Actions in the present have to be understood in terms of the commitments that they make towards the future. People act for the sake of being *something*: a teacher, a student, a father, a philosopher, etc.

6. Self is embedded in and dependent on a wider social context

7. *Inauthenticity* is the result of the tendency towards *forgetfulness* that comes with adopting social roles and getting lost in our work. Heidegger calls it "Falling" - an absorption in the everyday social world. This ordinary forgetfulness of work compounded by forgetting that one has forgotten things in the first place. One comes to unquestioningly adopt socially accepted views and ways of life.

8. *Anxiety* is a mood that shakes us out of complacency. In such a state the familiar world of equipment collapses into insignificance and everything seems to be fragile and contingent. We come to realize that our everyday roles are interchangeable, that they are "anyone's roles." Anxiety reveals our "thrownness unto death" by making us realize our individual, finite existence, that it will come to an end, and that fulfilling an "anyone role" by itself cannot serve to define our individual existence.
9. "Death" for Heidegger is not our physical demise, but is a condition of Dasein. On the metaphor of life as constructing one's autobiography, "death" refers to the end of a life story; it is the coming-to-an-end of a guiding self-understanding. Recognizing our "being-towards-death" awakens us to our responsibility to make something of our lives, to make commitments with this fact squarely in mind.
10. *Authenticity* is the taking responsibility of our lives (The word for authenticity in German is *Eigentlichkeit*, which literally translates as "ownedness"). We still take up materials from the public world, but we take clear stand on them rather than unthinkingly accepting them.

Discussion - Passages and Notes

Passage: p219 - "Phenomenology is our way of access ... Covered-up-ness is the counter-concept to 'phenomenon'"

- There is a disagreement with Kant, in that there cannot be some reality that is "behind" the phenomena
- Q: Matt asked about what is hidden or can be hidden if not this reality?
- Some phenomenon are hidden, but not inherently hidden. Our particular perspective blinds us to certain phenomena, and it takes an effort, using the method of phenomenology, to uncover aspects the world that are potentially visible but usually unseen.
- Phenomenology helps get at the truth by revealing and recovering what is hidden. It changes the focus.
- An example of this type of hiddenness is that of the iceberg. People usually only see the very top of it without realizing how large it really is, since the top is the only part visible. But there is a much more beneath the surface, which is not forever hidden and unknowable (like Kant's noumena) but can be grasped by a change of focus and perspective.

Matt also explained the difference between what Heidegger means by the different terms he uses:

Ontic: having to do with entities

Ontology or ontological: having to do with Being

Existence: our Being (Dasein)

Existential: about our Being

Existentiell: some aspect of us as an entity

Passage: p225 - "Equipment - in accordance with its equipmentality ... *Before* it does so, a totality of equipment has already been discovered."

- Things never show up by themselves, rather always in relation to other things. A single entity is not experienced, but requires a whole background of other things and past experiences which allow this particular experience to occur.
- Q: What is the greater purpose of this passage, of totality showing up first?
- Things that are prerequisites for a current experience, the totality in which an experience occurs, are not noticed because they are not relevant to normal activity. But they can be uncovered upon reflection.

Passage: p238 - "A mood assails us ... because this disclosedness itself is essentially Being-in-the-world."

- This seems counterintuitive. Moods seem to be internal states, a perfectly psychological entity. What is Heidegger's point?
- A mood is just how one acts, and comes from an interaction between a person and the world, and so is not internal to a self. It presupposes a person as an entity surrounded by the world full of other entities.
- The way I act is the way I exist, a mood is determined by how I act towards the world
- Being-in-the-world is an interaction between the traditional self and the world, and a mood is a part of that being which is not wholly internal. Traditional psychology regards moods as internal states that have causal relationships to other internal states and to events in the external world. Heidegger regards "mood" in the more basic sense as a way of being-in-the-world, a pervasive coloring of that activity, prior to internal or external.
- A point was made that moods allow Dasein to direct activity because it make certain things relevant; it allows one to assign values.

Passage: p249 - "But along with this tranquillization ... *alienates* Dasein from its ownmost nonrelational potentiality-for-Being."

Q: What is the difference being made here between anxiety and fear?

- Fear has an object, while anxiety is a general mood without a focus on any specific object
- Fear can in some sense be more rational, as it can be directly related to an object of concern that impacts a particular activity

Q: What is meant by his use of "they"? What does it stand for?

- It stands for something very much like what Kierkegaard meant by the public. It stands in for social expectations and norms that no person or group is responsible

for. "They" stands in for everyone but no one concrete person is directly associated with it. It is not a separate group of people, but an abstract entity.

Q: Why does the public not like thinking about death?

- Death is unavoidable, and perhaps thinking about it would be a waste of time. It is a fact to which one should be indifferent and tranquil.
- It is clear that Heidegger views this position with contempt. Death is a part of Dasein, we exist as Being-towards-Death. Death is not an something about which to be indifferent, but is very personal. That our Being has an end is what allows us to give our life meaning and coherence, a point to which we can direct our lives and make our stories, using Heidegger's metaphor of treating our life like the making of an autobiography.

There was some discussion over the ethics of authenticity. Could not people be authentic and act in a manner that is against everything we hold to be moral, when there is no information given on how one ought to act? Heidegger himself was a member of the Nazi party, although the extent to which his sympathies ran is a matter of debate. The introduction to Heidegger in the anthology does mention some norms that authenticity has: one cannot be self-deceptive, one needs integrity and resoluteness, etc. (see introduction, p208-210). These are second-order, as opposed to first-order values, in that they do not give specific directions for action or on how to assign values (whether one should be utilitarian or libertarian for example). But that Heidegger's ideal of authenticity does not give us such a guide should not be a cause to reject it, as Heidegger was never attempting to give a complete guide to life in the first place.