

Heidegger on Human Finitude and Normative Governance

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May 7, 2013

In the beginning of his work, *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger indicates that if we wish to gain a meaningful philosophical purchase on the topic of being *qua* being, we must begin by seeking an understanding of the way of being exhibited by the entities that can conduct this inquiry. We must, in other words, seek to understand what lies in our own metaphysical structure that makes us capable of conducting metaphysical inquiry. For Heidegger reasons that when we understand what it is about ourselves that makes us capable of asking about being, we will put ourselves in a position to grasp *how* being is understood, and thereby what resources are necessary for conducting metaphysical inquiry in a rigorous and perspicuous manner. And so Heidegger sets about the task of articulating the way of being of the inquiring entity (what he calls *Dasein*), in an account which he calls the ‘Existential Analytic of Dasein’s being.’

This way of framing the project of *Being and Time* makes it clear that if we wish to follow the train of thought pursued by the work, we must grapple with two questions:

- (1) What does it mean, in the first instance, to describe some entity or object as possessing a distinctive “way of being”?
- (2) What is it necessary to *explain*, in order for us to credit ourselves with having given an account of *how* we are capable of understanding being?

Strikingly, although the answers to these questions clearly delimit the shape of Heidegger’s account, they are not easily extracted from the text. For the structure of Heidegger’s inquiry prevents him from giving any kind of *systematic* answer to the question of how ‘ways of being’ can be distinguished: to do so would be to render his account *viciously* circular, as it would rely upon a prematurely determinate articulation of what unifies the ways of being *qua* ways *of* being. Moreover, Heidegger tends to elaborate his own answer to the second question in exclusively polemical terms. In consequence, it is easy for readers to lose sight of the systematic unity of the account of *Being and*

Time. My dissertation aims to recover this unity by attempting to situation the metaphysics of *Being and Time* in a broader philosophical context.

Attending to this broader philosophical context urges the thought that Heidegger's metaphysical project is motivated by the desire to address a *lacuna* in our understanding of the intelligence exhibited by action and thought. When we act or think intelligently, we do so under the auspice of a grasp we have of the objects that our action and thought variously deal with. Indeed, even when we act skillfully and habitually, our action seems nevertheless to issue from a grasp we have of the quality of the means we employ: a fact that is evidenced when we are able, without any hesitation, to give an account of what we are doing when we are interrupted in the middle of our work. Yet the governance of our intentional activity by understanding poses a familiar problem. For on the one hand, the relationship between our understanding and our activity appears crucially to be one of prescription. When our efforts are intelligent and unimpeded, the way in which we act is the way we understand that we *should*. On the other hand, talk of our action 'issuing from' some understanding clearly suggests an efficient-causal process, in which some mental goings-on in some way produce our action. Yet these two thoughts are difficult to put together. For it appears to be *precisely* the prescriptive character of our understanding—a consequence of understanding's proper grasp of its object—that secures its efficacy. As such, any attempt to make sense of reasoned action by appeal to familiar notions of causality—e.g. by appeal to natural laws or mechanisms—will threaten to undermine the sense in which the governance of our action by thought is prescriptive. But equally, any attempt to make sense of thought in exclusively teleological terms—e.g. as tending to accord with rational prescription—will fail to make sense of the way that intentional activities actually happen.

Heidegger confronts the efforts to render thought intelligible in causal or teleological terms under the respective banners of psychologism and anti-psychologism. But he concludes that these

positions, and the unhappy stalemate that arises between them, are the result of adopting a mistaken metaphysical starting point. This starting point is that of conceiving of the mind whose operations include action as thought as a substance. By Heidegger's lights, we can only understand the realities of thought and action if we begin by conceiving of the mind as a capacity—and indeed, as a capacity of a distinctive sort. We can understand the unity of Heidegger's project, I argue, if we realize that all of the topics that fall within the Existential Analytic contribute to an analysis of the structure and conditions of realization belonging to the capacity to understand being. When we do so, however, and when we appreciate the necessity of pursuing the analysis phenomenologically, we come to see that a capacity to understand being is one that can exist only on the basis of a continual effort to renew and maintain itself. As such, for entities who discover themselves in the exercise of such a capacity, the precarious claim to being-capable attains the status of a causal principle, continually necessitating that Dasein act to preserve its capacities in the face of the threat of their withdrawal.

I thus identify, as the central claim of Heidegger's metaphysics, that Dasein is both a primary subject of predication and an entity which is properly understood as a distinctive species of capacity. In so doing, I identify the source of Heidegger's 'anti-Cartesian' metaphysical stance. The modern, uncritical application of the Aristotelian analysis of being-in-capacity to the case of agency *in its self-consciousness*. This Aristotelian inheritance, on Heidegger's view of the history, is the source of the thought that the object of self-consciousness is a *res*, a *substance*, a self-subsistent, independent existence which must, by means of certain intrinsic endowments, *establish* a relationship to external objects and a mastery of its bodily capacities for movement. We thus appreciate the distinctive way of being that we possess in appreciating that the 'self' that we encounter in *finding ourselves in the world* consists in our capacity to interpret entities, that achieving a genuine grasp of this capacity *involves* its further exercise, and that the necessity of sustaining the capacity to understand being gives the form of agency's normative governance.

I elaborate my case for this reading of Heidegger in three phases. The first phase undertakes to give a critical account of the exegetical shortcomings of the standard interpretations of the substance and force of Heidegger's anti-Cartesian metaphysics. Having found these standard interpretations wanting, I turn to give a systematic account of Heidegger's approach to metaphysical questions, which highlights a connection between 'ways of being,' forms of intentional fulfillment, and senses of the question, 'Why?' I then apply this account of Heidegger's pluralist metaphysics to the case of intentional agency in order to show how Heidegger's analysis involves a critical departure from the received, Aristotelian view of the relationship between capacity and activity, which delimits the range of 'Why?' questions that may be put to entities in the category of substance. Finally, in the final third of the dissertation, I relate Heidegger's account of agency's distinctive way of being to the problem of normative governance, above all by showing the sense in which a 'capacity to understand being' is one that is exercised through encounter with its essential finitude.

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I begin, in chapter one, with a critical assessment of the most influential interpretation of the substance and significance of the existential analytic, developed by Hubert Dreyfus. According to this interpretation, the distinctive metaphysical character of Dasein lies in the fact that Dasein is a *self-interpreting* entity, which has no natural, general 'what-content' beyond what it supplies for itself through its social activity. The significance of this metaphysical insight, for Dreyfus and his allies, lies in displacing a conception of agency that gives pride of place to distinctively *mental* or conscious capacities as the source of the distinctiveness of human beings. The philosophical significance of this account lies in showing that, because Dasein is not in the first place realized through mental operations, its primary relationship to objects and the world is innocent of any form of representational or quasi-representational content. The value of this conception, then, lies in its

power to overcome the Cartesian skeptical problematic in epistemology, and in anticipating the shortcomings of certain cognitivist accounts of explanation in the human sciences.

In spite of its pervasive influence, I show that this interpretation falls afoul of Heidegger's own program in two respects. First, I show that the refutation of skepticism that this reading attributes to Heidegger fails, radically, to achieve its conclusion, precisely insofar as it fails to recognize a moment of the structure of intentional action that Heidegger himself regards as essential. This is the sense in which the exercises of agency pervasively exhibit what Heidegger calls 'self-findingness.' Self-findingness, or *Befindlichkeit*, registers the sense in which, in acting in whatever way I might, I find it immediately and constantly manifest what I am up to, how things are going, and what I might have to do next. But this affective self-relation cannot be understood apart from attributing cognitive content even to the most basic forms of agential interaction with the world. Relatedly, Dreyfus and his allies conceive of Dasein's tendency to seek unselfconscious 'absorption' in the world in terms of Dasein's *flight* from the recognition of its own essential essence-less-ness that occurs in the mode of self-findingness that Heidegger calls 'anxiety.' This account of the role of anxiety in Dasein's constitution, however, characterizes that constitution in inappropriately psychological terms. Moreover, I argue that the account fails to recognize that the relationship between 'anxiety' and other modes of engagement with the world is not best understood on the model of a stimulus and a response, but rather as the relationship between a determinable genus and its determinate instance. All of Dasein's ways of engaging with the world and of finding itself within that world are properly understood as *modes* of anxiety. That is, they are ways in which agency takes its very being to be 'at issue' in its exercise—this being the fundamental characteristic of Dasein's way of being.

Having undermined this broadly influential interpretation of the substance of Heidegger's anti-Cartesianism, I turn, in chapter two, to consider a second interpretive gloss on the explanatory

ambitions of the Existential Analytic, which seeks to situate Heidegger's aims in relation to *normativity*, rather than knowledge. Like the interpretation propounded by Dreyfus, this second interpretation (championed especially in the work of Steven Crowell and Mark Okrent) locates the central insight of Heidegger's account of human existence in the thought that human being is essentially self-interpreting. However, on this 'metanormative' reading of the purchase of the Existential Analytic, the metaphysical import of Dasein's self-interpreting character lies in conceiving Dasein's characteristics as self-ascribed abilities to be in the world in a certain way (e.g., by inhabiting a social role, or embracing a 'practical identity'), and in understanding the relationship that Dasein bears to these capacities to be essentially normative in character. Heidegger's metaphysical insight is thus cast as an insight into the basic form of determinability proper to Dasein. Heidegger's interpretation of human existence, on this reading, begins by recognizing that the lives of agents are given structure by an underlying commitment to some conception of how one's life should fit together, and that this basic fact about the determinability of human agency provides for an explanation of the source of normativity of the prescriptions that guide our conduct.

This metanormative reading of the Existential Analytic, I suggest, makes progress in urging the thought that the acts of agents must exhibit a certain form of coherence in order to count as manifestations of the capacity to understand being. Yet the analysis that the metanormative reading provides is, I argue, unsatisfying. In the first place, an appeal to contingent practical identity cannot provide any kind of explanation of normative authority, as proponents of the metanormative reading have themselves acknowledged. But more worrisome is the problem that proponents of the metanormative reading commit Heidegger to a viciously circular account of the capacity to act: for commitment to a practical identity is, on their reading, both constitutive of intentional effort, and an object *of* such effort. To save Heidegger from the latter problem, moreover, we must reinterpret his account of the teleology of action as suggesting the very opposite of the common account of Dasein

as a self-interpreting entity. Far from it being up to Dasein to determine what is essential to it in each case, I argue that Heidegger conceives of the exercise of our intentional capacities *in general* as possessing a single formal object: the capacity to be-in-the-world as such. On this suggestion, to describe Dasein as essentially self-interpreting is not to leave it up to Dasein in each case to determine *what* or even *who* it is, but instead to insist that it is the responsibility of every case of Dasein to work out what it takes *to be* the entity *that it is*.

Acknowledging that the foregoing critical analyses have made appeal to notions of metaphysical fundamentality and form that remain crucially unexplicated, I seek to make a new start at analyzing the pretensions of the Existential Analytic in chapter three, by drawing attention to Heidegger's obscure claim that intentional agency, Dasein, is distinguished most basically in terms of its 'way of being.' In order to seek clarity about exactly what it means to distinguish an entity's way of being, I offer a reconstruction of Heidegger's pluralist metaphysics by showing how the methodology which generates Heidegger's account is justified. On my reconstruction, Heidegger's account takes its inception from a recognition not just of the plurality of ways in which 'being' is said, but of the plurality of ways in which, in deploying (whether explicitly or merely tacitly) a notion of 'being,' our comportments with the world can achieve fulfillment, coincidence with their objects. For it is a thought basic to Heidegger's famous account of ready-to-hand entities that we meet with these entities only in the context of a specific form of intentional bearing toward the world: properly, we find ready-to-hand entities *only* when we are actively pursuing some end. The way of being of readiness-to-hand is thus a correlate of a specifically practical mode of 'truth': the 'truth' that we grasp when our practical intentions are realized in the completion of a work. I suggest that a proper construal of the relationship between truth and being in these contexts reveals Heidegger's metaphysical pluralism to possess a rigorous foundation: for the distinction between 'ready-to-hand' and 'present-at-hand' is thereby at least as well-founded as the distinction between 'practical' and

‘theoretical’ reason. But we cannot be satisfied, in general at distinguishing ways of being simply by distinguishing different metrics of ‘truth’ according to which our comportments can be thoroughly measured: for these metrics may well be arbitrary. I suggest that the way to avoid arbitrariness is to show that the metric at issue makes contact with our ability to say *why* things are the way they are: for in that case, the standard of truth for a given comportment is shown not merely to consist in success in a self-contained exercise, but in a way we are beholden to the world in which we dwell.

In chapter four, I turn to the question of how this phenomenological apparatus for justifying distinctions in ways of being informs Heidegger’s account of the distinctive way of being of Dasein. Taking my cue from Heidegger’s insistence that we realize the ‘truth’ of existence in the form of comportmental bearing that Heidegger calls ‘authenticity,’ I seek to read off the primary phenomenal realization of Dasein from Heidegger’s distinction between inauthentic and authentic comportment. I locate the difference between inauthentic and authentic forms of Dasein in a difference in the way our comportments reveal and attest to our capacity to interpret entities. Specifically, authentic Dasein comportments itself in such a way as to reveal the capacity from which its comportments issue as a capacity to grasp the being of entities *as such*; whereas the comportments of inauthentic Dasein reveal the capacity from which those very comportments issue as a capacity to grasp the being of entities in some determinate way (e.g., in terms of a determinate, antecedently established set of concepts, or the like). That inauthentic and authentic manifestations of Dasein, as representing ways in which Dasein can relate to itself falsely or in truth respectively, variously reflect upon the capacities from which those very manifestations issue, and taking heed of Heidegger’s repeated insistence that (at least for Dasein) possibility is metaphysically ‘higher’ than actuality, I suggest that the phenomenological ontology of Dasein depicts Dasein as existing *primarily* in the mode of being-in-capacity. This suggests a divergence of Heidegger’s account of Dasein not just from Descartes’ account of *res cogitans*, but from Aristotle’s account of substance.

Noting that Aristotle's account of the relative priority of being-in-activity vis-à-vis being-incapacity serves primarily to ground a standard of intelligibility for processes of generation, I turn, in chapter five, to arguing that the primary significance of Heidegger's metaphysical reversal lies in availing new resources for making sense of the *productivity* or *causality* of understanding. Noting that we ordinarily understand the way in which our activities are informed by a grasp of the character of their objects by appeal to the structure of rational inference, I suggest that we may see the seeds of the Existential Analytic as emerging from Heidegger's response to the controversy over the status of the laws of logic and their relation to psychology which had occupied much attention at the turn of the century. On one side of this controversy, psychologism attempted to regard the principles of rational inference as the causal principles governing the healthy human intellect. Recoiling from this suggestion were anti-psychologistic thinkers, who took the principles of rational inference to register ideal relations among propositions, sometimes *instantiated* by the actual judging or acting of agents. On Heidegger's view, neither one of these views can be successful. For the psychologistic thinker wins the causal efficacy of the premises of an inference at the expense of the scope of their normative authority: for the conclusion is, on this reading, at best prescribed for a certain empirically given species of thinker. By contrast, the anti-psychologistic thinker secures the normative authority of the premises of inference at the expense of their causal efficacy. But Heidegger, in insisting that capacity, and not substance, enjoys metaphysical primacy in relation to Dasein, is in a position to show how the premises of inference are both normative *and* efficacious, insofar as the premises of an inferential relation go to show what it would take to preserve the capacity to intend the objects described by the inference.

In order to make sense of how our own understanding can be governed by rational necessitation, however, we need to appreciate the sense in which we are conscious of our understanding as imperiled or at issue. I thus bring my account to conclusion, in chapter six, by

considering the basis Heidegger believes we have for regarding our understanding as *essentially* finite, and for seeing this finitude of understanding as grounding the understanding's continuous exercise. In the language of *Being and Time*, this means grasping the sense in which intentional agency, Dasein, is *essentially* being-toward its death. To elucidate this sense, I argue that our comportments exhibit the form of exercises of a capacity to understand being, but in problematic terms. For a given activity can only *count* as the exercise of a capacity to understand being in light of a comprehensive grasp of being as such and as a whole—a grasp, that is, of the *sense* of being just as such. But we are generally unable to supply this sense, and so generally unable to *certify* that our activities *are* the very exercises of the capacity to understand being that they purport to be. This is not, of course, because individual activities of ours bear no intelligible relationship to the sense of being as such and as a whole: far from it, for each activity, in embodying a grasp of its object, *points toward* some way in which an agent's world as a whole may make coherent sense. Heidegger registers this relationship by appeal to the notion of attunement: individual interpretive activities of ours attune us to a way in which the whole may make sense. But this attunement is a product of a definite encounter we have with an object: if it supplies the ground on which we are capable of grasping our own capacity to interpret entities, then this capacity for self-cognizance is itself dependent upon an object, and (indeed) in such a way that it stands pervasively at risk of *failing* to be attuned toward the whole. As a consequence of this, our understanding stands 'in need of entities.' But this neediness corresponds to the sense in which our understanding capacity must be actively and continuously maintained in order to be. I conclude that Heidegger's achievement lies in showing that a capacity to understand being must take its own possibility as the formal object of its every exercise, that it must constantly seek to preserve itself in the face of the ineradicable threat of its withdrawal. For in the finitude of this essential search for the sense of matters as a whole, the responsibility we bear as agents finds its proper home.