

Homesickness and Homecoming: Heidegger and Our Uncanny

Thomas Rule

The American University in Cairo

Winner of the NMTX Award

1. INTRODUCTION

Heidegger's thought is dominated by the idea that modern humanity is "homeless." Our modern lives are characterized by our steady entrapment in a self-reinforcing technological nihilism which finds us increasingly likely to be alienated from ourselves, our world, one another, and being as a whole.¹ But, if this is so, then what is the remedy? What is necessary for one to become "at home" in being, and what might such an existence look like?

In what follows, I argue that, for Heidegger, concretely understanding ourselves as existentially free, creative, and, perhaps most importantly, existentially *responsible* beings—as realized through what he calls our "dwelling poetically"—is the proper way to "be at home" in our existence and hence the path to overcoming the shadow of nihilism which threatens modern humanity. Embodying this poetical way of being involves adopting an authentic orientation toward the essential "uncanniness" [*Unheimlichkeit*—literally "Un-home-likeness"] of our nature. The result should find us reinterpreting what initially presents itself as existential dread [*Angst*] and in turn rediscovering a wonderful, "enchanted" world imbued with significance.

2. THE BACKGROUND AND THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM: ON UNCANNINESS

In order to make sense of Heidegger's response to this question, we must first understand a few things about the terms in which he understands the question of existential meaning or "being-at-home".

For Heidegger, the human being is "Dasein" [lit. "there-being"]. Dasein is the being who "exists" in the etymological sense of always 'standing out' (ex-sisting) toward, taking some stance toward, being—and in the first place its own being—in interpreting it. As he puts it, Dasein is the being for whom "in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it," (SZ 12 [H's emphasis]). Dasein perpetually attempts to understand itself, and this concomitantly involves understanding its world, which appears to it as shaped through the lens of a given projected self-understanding.

Hence, we could say that, for Heidegger, we are beings essentially on a perpetual quest for self-knowledge, which is reflected in our every thought, word, and action—all constant attempts to make meaning of our world and existence as a whole.

However, Heidegger holds that we for the most part misunderstand ourselves; our common-sensical, everyday conceptions of ourselves and our world amount to a pernicious self-objectification. In short, even as we carry out the process of interpreting ourselves, we in various ways interpret ourselves as non-interpreting beings. Indeed, we have for the most part forgotten how to even ask the question of the meaning of "being" (or recognize that we have already provided ourselves with one particular conception of "being" among what may be multiple options), a fact which in turn influences all of our further interpretations of any "beings" (35).

This self-objectification is exacerbated by the non-incidental rise of a modern technological worldview, characterized by its attempt to interpret being itself—and hence all beings including ourselves—in terms of maximally efficient calculation, assignment, use, and disposal (i.e., as resources and commodities) (QCT 17).

The status of modern humanity's dilemma is attested by certain forms of possible experience, such as an experience of *Angst* (i.e., existential dread or anxiety), which could be described as a breakdown of our everyday common-sensical meaning-making activity—an experience of meaninglessness (SZ 184-91). In this experience of having our previously familiar world drained of its significance and now appearing alien to us, we are made to recognize the role we had played up to this point in having made meaning of it. Here the sheer fact of our "uncanny" existence, in all its unsettling strangeness, obtrudes to us (187-8). The dread inspired by this alien face of what on closer examination will turn out

to be our own nature typically causes us to flee back into our pacifying everyday world of familiarity as soon as possible and try to forget all about the disturbance.

Heidegger asserts, both amid his account of *Angst* and elsewhere, that it is part of the human being's essence that they are "uncanny" in this manner. A struggle to find our "home" or "place of belonging" in being is shown by such experiences as that of *Angst* to disclose something about our nature; our essential question of self-knowledge is in turn our essential question of how to "find our place" in being. After all, in order to understand and relate to being, we must first be able to distinguish ourselves from it—to set it at a distance—and so in some sense "not be at home" in it.

Yet, Heidegger implies that this apparent dilemma can nevertheless be satisfactorily navigated in some way. For example, in his later work, he approvingly interprets Hölderlin's poetry, which speaks of a "journey home through the foreign", to allude to a proper "poetical" dwelling (HH 20-1, 27-31). Simultaneously, he argues that Sophocles' *Antigone* properly connects the essential "uncanniness" of human nature to this same notion of "homecoming" (61-73, 92-104).

3. HEIDEGGER ON BELONGING

A human being of course cannot "belong" in being in the same fashion that, for example, a tool belongs put away in its toolbox when not being used. But then in what sense can a human come to have "their proper place" in being?

This question is addressed in multiple parallel ways in both Heidegger's early and later work in accounts which usefully elucidate one another, but it is perhaps most explicitly addressed in the latter, notably in the lecture entitled "Identity and Difference" [ID].

Here, as in some other areas of Heidegger's later work, humanity's "belonging-together with being" is described in terms of a relation Heidegger designates as "the event" [*das Ereignis*]. This relation "from which man and Being have already reached each other in their active nature [*Wesen* (essence)—meant to evoke the dynamic meaning of the Greek *phusis* ID 33f]" is one in which they are "appropriated to" [*übereignet*] one another (33).

We are told that this relationship is a sort of "(being-)toward-one-another" of man and Being such that they are "face to face"; "...thus man remains referred to Being and so answers to it," (31, 33). Heidegger continues, "Man is essentially this relationship of responding to Being, and he is only this," (31).

If the readiness to respond to Being is man's role in this relationship, the role of Being is as follows: "Being is present and abides only as it concerns man through the claim it makes on him. For it is man, open toward Being, who alone lets Being arrive as presence. Such becoming present needs the openness of a clearing, and by this need remains appropriated to human being," (31).

Heidegger often exploits etymological connections to draw attention to his intended meaning. By tracing the etymologies of the terms Heidegger uses here—*Er-eignis* arguably being associated with “ownership” hence “appropriation”, or in context perhaps more correctly “the pledge or offering of property (such as in gift-giving)”, while the term for belonging [*gehören*] has roots associated with hearing and listening [*hören*]. Attending to context, Heidegger appears to be describing our proper relationship of “belonging together with” being as one of *responsibility*.² This belonging constituted of responsibility consists in humanity and being simultaneously “offering gifts” to one another (in the form of making possible the revealing-via-interpretation of one another’s essences) and in the same motion placing “claims” upon one another, as well as listening to and responding to those claims, in certain senses.

In his use of language associated with “ownership”, “property”, and the like, and associating these with the revealing of “active natures” or “essences”, I take Heidegger to indicate that we respond to being’s “call” appropriately when we “come into our own”, that is, reveal ourselves and being “as they truly are”, when we take up an “authentic”—a word meaning not only “true” but “proper” in the sense of “(self-)owning”—self-understanding, as he puts it in his earlier work (SZ 46), or one of ourselves as “poetical” (i.e., “[self-]creative”) beings, to pull a phrase from his later work (QCT 34).

In the earlier work of *Being and Time*, the process of assuming an authentic existence entailed confronting the uncanniness attested in *Angst* in a “resolute” manner. This in turn meant confronting our finitude—i.e., keeping a secure view toward the horizon of death, understood as the defining limit to our possibilities of self-interpretation, one which allowed Dasein to thereby individuate itself from others as well as simultaneously place itself in a position to choose responsibly between its own possible ways of being and interpreting itself (SZ 264).

Keeping a view to death as this sort of generative limit, Heidegger emphasizes, means casting aside our everyday interpretations of ourselves which misinterpret death, and in turn life, as thoroughly mundane, instead embracing the inherent peculiarity and mystery of human existence (246-67).

Here Heidegger seems to imply that our uncanniness, the same peculiarity of our existence which in *Angst* was experienced as a disturbing, dreadful, and alienating strangeness, might be reconciled after all via a responsible confrontation which takes ownership of that peculiarity, reappropriating it as the awesome or wonder-inspiring nature of our existence as beings who are self-“creating”, self-interpreting and hence essentially un-objectifiable. But what might this look like concretely?

4. TOWARD A WONDROUS HOME

Though Heidegger does not explicitly draw such a connection, it follows from the

structure of his philosophy that any change in Dasein's self-conception (including to one as an authentic, poetical being) must be accompanied by a corresponding change in how the world shows itself to such a being viewing it through this lens.

I wish to argue that taking up this self-conception entails taking up a "mood" of what could be appropriately labeled "awe" or "wonder" (where every "mood" for Heidegger is understood to come with a world-interpretive dimension). Heidegger in some places describes such a mood, which he also associated with philosophy itself as a "creative possibility of Dasein", wherein Dasein experiences a world of entities which seems to "flicker" and "waver" between "possibilities of being and not-being" (IM H21-4). In contrast with its previous everyday mundanity, this is a world in which everything individually and everything taken as a whole appear question-worthy, peculiar, mysterious, miraculous, remarkable (in a sense closely bound up with our appropriate relationship to language), in a word: wondrous.

In welcoming this mood of awe or wonder, having "passed through the foreign" by responding to the initially alien uncanniness of our nature and concretely embracing it as an essential aspect of ourselves, we hence not only "come into our own", we also respond appropriately to the "call" of being by—in the same motion—revealing being itself as essentially mysterious. In our "everyday" mode of being, we fasten the various beings in our world ever more tightly to the technological framework of our projected interpretive schema, such that they are disallowed from revealing any visage of genuine alterity to us. We hence pass them over, dismissing them without thought as already thoroughly pre-understood, thoroughly mundane, at best of interest only as resources for equally mundane ends. In contrast, in the extramundane mood of awe or wonder, worldly beings are allowed instead to glimmer with the mystery of all being as such. In this they reflect and participate in the objectification-resisting nature of the dynamically self-creating being which reveals them (i.e., Dasein).

Admittedly, Heidegger consistently suggests that learning how to be receptive to such a mood, let alone actively resolve ourselves upon this poetical way of being, is no easy task—one which is becoming more difficult by the day due to the subtle and pernicious encroachment of the technological worldview. And it is perhaps a rare and fleeting achievement among humanity in our time for an individual to be able to take up and sustain such a poetical mode of being. Though Heidegger does gesture at various possible catalysts which might start us upon the path to fostering such poetical "thinking", among which are included engagement with and reflection upon art and poetry (and their intrinsic relationship with technology) (QCT 34), as well as philosophical questioning in an all-encompassing and concrete sense (IM H1-9), along with careful meditations upon death³ and the meaning of being. And beyond this, we may each be required to practice self-critical awareness, deconstruction, and reinterpretation of the everyday ways of thinking and perceiving which we always already find ourselves

adopting, attempting to see for ourselves how they express objectifying self-conceptions and yet presuppose a more proper, non-objectifying one. Finally, Heidegger emphasizes that our “responsibility toward being” is chiefly realized through our ability to continually renew, nurture, and preserve a view to our own existentially-creative potential, especially via the attentive use of language, as our words ultimately bear with them the meaning of this essential “poetical” way of being.

Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home.
(LH 239)

5. CONCLUSION

It seems that for Heidegger we come to make ourselves at home in the world by embracing and assuming responsibility for the very uncanniness of our dwelling which, from the perspective of a naïve lack of self-knowledge, appeared threatening and alienating, as if it were the abyss of meaninglessness itself. This requires a certain resolve to confront the proper defining limit of our being taken as a whole (which Heidegger holds to be the horizon of the possibility of “death”), even while a secure view to this finitude in another sense reveals our share in infinity.

As we welcome the peculiarity, the otherness, of being—this transformative heightened state of self-knowledge frees us from our self-imposed bindings of objectification and infuses the world with an abundance of significance. In light of a mood of awe, a newly “re-enchanted” world shows itself, one hospitable and welcoming to the authentic essence of the human being.

And yet, this poetical dwelling upon the earth can be a homecoming precisely to the extent that it perpetually remains a journey.

WORKS CITED

- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. (SZ) Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. London, 1962.
- . *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”*. (HH). Translated by William McNeill & Julia Davis. 1996. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- . *Identity and Difference*. (ID). Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Harper & Row, 1969.
- . “Introduction to Metaphysics”. Introduction to *Metaphysics: Second Edition*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- . “Letter on Humanism”. (LH). Translated by Frank A. Capuzzi. 1949. *Pathmarks*. Edited by William McNeill. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

- . “The Question Concerning Technology”. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. Edited by William Lovitt. Publisher: Harper & Row, New York. 1977.
- Rule, Thomas. “The Homely and the Foreign: Heidegger and Thinking the Question of Existential Meaning”. Doctoral Thesis; UC Santa Cruz. Defended June 2021.
- . “Meaning as Horizon”. *Journal of Philosophy of Life Vol.15, No.1 (January 2025):57-72*. Open Access URL: www.philosophyoflife.org/.

