

AN EXPLICATION, CRITIQUE, AND APPLICATION OF HEIDEGGER'S DOCTRINE OF HISTORICAL TEMPORALITY

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Scholarly monographs and seminars on Heidegger's *Being and Time* usually devote little attention to his crucial notion of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*). In the first part of this essay, I would like to provide a general explication of this concept and to show its function in the context of Heidegger's thought; in part II, I will reveal a problem that Heidegger's idea of historicity poses for the methodology of socio-historical research; and finally, in Part III, I propose to show that the doctrine of historicity is intended, in part, as a critique of historicism, which Heidegger perceived as a threat to his metaphysical enterprise as a whole.

We may begin by noting that the German philosophical term *Geschichtlichkeit* cannot be adequately rendered into any English equivalent such as "historicity," without reference to the complicated meaning in the context of Heidegger's total philosophy. However, initially in Heidegger's thought the term refers to the claim that the very "being of man" (which he technically designates as "*Dasein*") is radically temporal in its nature, i.e. man's unique way of being in time is historical. Not only is historicity essential to Heidegger's philosophy of man, but the concept is central in his later attempt to develop a more general statement of the meaning of Being. So important is this concept of historicity that it has been claimed that if Heidegger comes to occupy a major place in the history of philosophy it will be due to his illumination of the historical nature of human existence.¹

How may we understand this so-called human Being (*Dasein*) and its purportedly essential relation to historical time? To answer this question, it is important to note that for Heidegger philosophical interpretation itself must be pursued in a temporal horizon. Indeed, his phenomenological interpretation of *Dasein* contradicted the claim of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology that philosophy must originate in a presuppositionless and historically unconditioned present. Heidegger's analysis, on the other hand, joined the radical historicity first developed in the thought of Wilhelm Dilthey to Husserl's attempt to describe the primordial phenomenon of man's conscious existence. We find this conjunction most evident in the second half of *Being and Time*, and especially in Part V of that treatise, where Heidegger constructed the concepts of time and historicity and related them to his earlier explanation of the unique way that *Dasein* exists.

In normal philosophical discourse the term "existence" usually refers to whatever "is," but in Heidegger the word is restricted to the "human existent." Here the focus is on the fact that the human being stands out or "exists" as the being in the world which is responsible for what it is and becomes, that its own being and the understanding of that being are an issue for it. The adjectival derivation from the term "existence" is rendered by Heidegger as *existential*, this latter term referring in his philosophy to the universal structures or aspects of human Being (*Dasein*). As such it is an ontological term. On the other hand, his derivation *existentiell* refers to the unique particular existents in the world. Heidegger terms the status of this latter existence "ontic." However, the fundamental concern of the *Being and Time* is not ontic but ontological analysis, i.e. Heidegger wants to reveal the fundamental universal, or existential characteristics of *Dasein*, those aspects without which *Dasein* could not be.

For Heidegger the most fundamental existential or ontological characteristic of *Dasein* is care (*die Sorge*). Care possesses a three-fold structure, itself temporal, which he calls "facticity," "falling," and "possibility." This three-fold structure of care is claimed to be the basic constitution of human existence. "Facticity," for example, denotes all those elements in human existence that are simply given, not chosen. Facticity also refers to the unchangeable givenness of our past, and to the fact that we must accept and appropriate that past to our present and future. "Falling" refers to Care's concern with the present, to its being alienated and "turned away" from the actuality of its own possibilities. Possibility is *Dasein's* open future, and its care-ful anticipation of that future. It refers to the fact that *Dasein must decide on some mode of its own future*. In the second half of *Being and Time* the question is asked if there is an existential structure or medium which makes the care structure possible and dynamic. Heidegger tells us that this medium is time. *Dasein's* existence involves radical temporality because its three-fold structures are themselves temporal. Past, present and future, — what Heidegger calls the three *ekstases* of time — are correlated to the three-fold composition of care: facticity is correlated to the past, falling to the present, and possibility to the future. Temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) with its dimensions of past, present and future emerges as the second basic characteristic of human existence, for it is the presupposition necessary for the threefold care structure of human existence. Man's being, then, is a being in time.

The assertion that man's being (*Dasein*) is fundamentally care and temporality indicates that human existence is not a "soul substance," nor a ready made, objectified "entity at hand" (*Zuhandensein*), but a temporal existence which must be in a care-ful and anticipatory relation to the world. In addition, *Dasein* is not simply a physical or natural object in time, for the past, the present and the future belong to it in a different manner than

they belong to a physical thing. In man the three modes of temporality are meaningfully interrelated and constitute a unified field of existence. To designate man's unique mode of temporality, a mode different from that of a thing, Heidegger introduces still another existential component, i.e., "historicity" (*Geschichtlichkeit*). This concept implies that man is "historical by nature," not simply because he is in time as a thing (*Innerzeitlichkeit*), but because he is constituted by past, present, and future in such a way that his being is always involved in the medium of a meaningful, interrelated and temporal world. In natural or public time a physical thing has no world and its temporality consists of the movement from one "now point" to another, its past vanishing at each moment, and its future referring to a distant "now" not yet attained. But the temporality of *Dasein* is not so constituted, for it meaningfully anticipates its own future, appropriates its own past, and orients its existence to its own possibilities. For Heidegger, then, man is not merely in time, but takes time and possesses time as his "own-ness." Thus far our explanation of historicity represents only a partial unfolding of its composition. To represent the concept fully we must now turn to the mode of the future, for in Heidegger it is the future which provides the basis for history itself. Indeed, Heidegger makes the apparently odd claim that man is historical because of the fundamental role of futurity in his actual existence. One might normally assume that it is because of his past that man is a historical being. But for Heidegger it is the orientation of man's being into the future, his projection into his own possibilities, that man's existence differs in its temporality from that of a thing. He is historical, not because he passes through space from one now point to another, but because he takes hold of the future in such a manner as to make it his own. It is man's conscious attainment of his possibilities that makes him a historically significant being. Historical action necessarily entails the mode of the future. History is the study of the humanly possible,² and such possibility always requires a future. But it must be remembered that *Dasein* projects itself into the future only from the context of its own past, and the careful resoluteness of its own present. In sum, the being of man is *ab initio* historicity, i.e., he is always a temporal possibility ahead of himself, plus a past which he appropriates as his own, and a present from which he projects himself into his future.

Heidegger refers to the fundamental historicity of human existence as the "primarily historical," because it is the *existential* condition or foundation for the "science of history" (*Historie*.) This science of history along with its subject matter of records, artifacts, and documents Heidegger calls the "secondarily historical." These latter elements are "secondarily" historical because they take on their significance only by reference to the primary historicity of *Dasein* to whose world they belonged and were "at hand" (*Zuhandensein*) for man's use. The science of history, (*Historie*), then, is

not founded upon a neutral, objective series of facts, nor on a merely ancient status of things, nor on the relationship between an isolated historical knower and some objective facts to be known. Rather, history is founded on a "hermeneutical situation" i.e., on a world of previously existing significance. In this situation the interpretant is the historical artifacts and materials at hand for *Dasein's* world, and the interpreter is the essentially historical being (*Dasein*) who projects his understanding on to the historical materials and attempts to understand them. The science of history is possible because the interpreter and the interpretant share a common world. This means that the evidences of the past are in principle transparent to the interpreter because he, as *Dasein*, knows what sorts of authentic and repeatable possibilities belong to *Dasein* and its world. In summary, then, of Part I of this paper, we have noted that Man's way of being in time is through the existential of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*), that it is in his orientation to the future from the past and present that man is historical, and that the science of history (*Historie*) is founded in the "primary historicity" of *Dasein*.

PART II

At this point I would like to introduce at least one problem of historical methodology that results from Heidegger's analysis of *Geschichtlichkeit*. The outline of this problem can be discerned when we note that for Heidegger *Dasein* is *eigentlich* or truly itself only under certain conditions. *Dasein* is authentic only when it takes hold of the direction of its own existence, whereas in inauthentic existence this direction is determined for *Dasein* by such external factors as institutions and groups. To be its "ownness" *Dasein* must rise above the mass (*das Mann*) or out of what he calls "everydayness" (*Alltäglichkeit*) to its own authentic possibilities. Everydayness is the routine mode of existence in which man moves from one activity to another in accord with habit, convention and indecisiveness. Contrary to these modes of being, Heidegger claims that the individual's behavior rises to historical significance only when he consciously chooses to appropriate the future and to free himself for "authentic resoluteness" (*Entschlossenheit*) in the present. Resoluteness refers to an individual's decision for his future. This moment of decision differs from the mode of inauthentic everydayness in that *Dasein* recognizes the reality or facticity of its own past and the future possibilities that remain open to it. The end of this resoluteness is the attaining of authentic selfhood in historical time.

In Heidegger's texts man's institutional or group activity is usually characterized by irresolution, i.e., a situation in which man jumps from possibility to possibility. These possibilities are usually determined by social or conventional prescriptions which the individual does not himself choose.

But here we *may* ask — and the historian *does* ask — if it is not precisely in such inauthentic socio-systematic contexts that much historical action is effected? The science of history, (*Historie*) it might be claimed, is ontic. It must deal with the concrete and factual issues that arise in any empirical discipline. For example, the practicing historian must ask how it is possible to select from the mass of past human possibilities, those actions and creations which are both historically significant and explanatory of the historical process. But as we have seen above, Heidegger's criterion for the determination of the "historical" refers only to that individual resoluteness which rises above everydayness and serves as a model of repeatable behavior for contemporary man. This is basically Nietzsche's criterion for the historically significant. But the methodological problem is that this criterion is overly individuated and vague, that it does not provide any clue for our understanding of the ontic question of the explanatory role of collective or institutional phenomena. In other words, how is it possible for *Dasein* to be both authentically historical and socially situated?

While it is true that Heidegger has developed in *Being and Time* the existential which he calls *Mitsein*, or the "being with others" as an inherent property of *Dasein* (a kind of inherent sociality), and while he claims that the temporality of each individual existence is joined to the destiny of his age, his ontological analysis still does not illuminate the secondary, ontic question of how we explain collective, social, or institutional behavior in the historical process. Heidegger's distinction between historicity and historical science suggests that such ontic or particular entities as states, groups, laws, or institutions are an issue for methodological, not ontological analysis. But the individuated nature of *Daseinanalysis* leaves us unsure of the ontic, historical status of the supra-personal elements in historical reality.

I would like to suggest that one reason for this lacuna in Heidegger's method is to be found in his negative response to some philosophical developments in the very tradition from which he comes. We may recall that Heidegger has accepted from his predecessor Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) the idea of the historicity of man, but not Dilthey's concern with the methodological distinctions between the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (though Heidegger acknowledges the distinction and its importance⁴). Nor does he utilize Dilthey's contributions to systems theory, ideal types, or the *Verstehen* method of sociohistorical explanation. Addressing himself to such explanatory elements could have allowed Heidegger to retain his insights into historicity, but also allowed him to approach such ontic methodological questions as the status of collectives. This failure, I believe, is due to Heidegger's (and later Hans Gadamer's claim in his *Truth and Method*) that Dilthey's thought is merely "naturalistic," that it fails to

rise to the level of fundamental ontological analysis, and finally, that it is prone to "historicism" — an issue to which we must now turn.

PART III

Historicism may be defined as the assertion that philosophical questions have been superseded by historical ones, that the distinction between philosophy and history cannot be maintained. In this context metaphysical and axiological claims are seen to be relative to the cultural-historical situation in which they originate. In addition, the permanence of human nature is usually denied, and it is asserted that its status is to be defined by the variety of its differing expressions in historical time.

Odd as it may at first seem, Heidegger's doctrine of historicity actually implies that the traditional distinction between a permanent human nature and a human nature that is in historical flux is a misleading one. While Heidegger has replaced the concept of human nature as a substance, or an "entity at hand," with his doctrine of the historicity of *Dasein*, his theory of man purports to be a metaphysical thesis, i.e., historicity is an ontological characteristic of man's being. As such he believes that his doctrine is not historically relative. Historicity remains in the timeless mode of metaphysics and constitutes, he believed, at least a partial refutation of the historicist attempt to dissolve metaphysics. Also he believed his analysis of *Dasein* was secure against the implications of historicism. This interpretation is justified at p. 396 in *Being and Time* where he repudiates historicism as a symptom that the scientific study of history attempts to alienate *Dasein* from its authentic and ontologically disclosed nature.

We have noted above the hypothesis that this doctrine is meant in part as a reply to Dilthey's belief that only history (and here Dilthey refers to history as an ontic, not ontological science) can reveal the potentialities of man, and that human nature is itself a product of history.⁵ Dilthey's claim here is stronger than the traditional Aristotelian position that the potential of an entity is revealed in time, for Dilthey's claim suggests to Heidegger, against his ontological analysis, that human potential itself changes with history.

If this analysis of Dilthey's were acceptable, then Heidegger's *Daseinanalysis* in *Being and Time* would be undermined as a metaphysical enterprise. The constancy of human nature would be dissolved into historical determination. Heidegger has responded to this possibility by his ontological assertion that the historicity of human nature as an existential is itself a trans-historical reality. Dilthey's analysis of man dissolved into historicism, he thinks, because it remained only on the ontic or naturalistic level. But the problem indicated earlier is that by graduating the question of man's being to fundamental ontology, Heidegger neglected such methodological

questions of factual history as the historical status of collectivities. In other words, in order to avoid a historicist conception of man, Heidegger formulated the question of man's being in the context of metaphysics (ontology). But in so doing Heidegger's analysis seems incapable of dealing with such ontic, factual, or methodological questions as the historical status of collectivities.

In summary, I have tried in this paper to explicate a crucial and little examined element in Heidegger's *Being and Time*: the doctrine of the historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of man. Second, I have attempted to show that this doctrine, while ostensibly providing an ontological basis for historical science, has actually created at least one explanatory problem in the ontic science of history, i.e., the question of the status of collective entities in the historical process. This problem has resulted from Heidegger's emphasis on *Dasein's* individuated, self-contained, and self-projecting nature, and from Heidegger's tendency to see *Dasein's* participation in the "they" or collective mode as an inauthentic mode of being. Last, his doctrine of the historicity of man is set against the tendency of historicism — especially Wilhelm Dilthey's "naturalistic" or "ontic" method — to dissolve the transhistorical claims of metaphysical doctrine. For Heidegger the historicity of man enjoys a metaphysical status which he hoped would resist the temporal flux so celebrated in his philosophy.

NOTES

1. David C. Hoy, "History, Historicity, and Historiography in *Being and Time*". M. Murray, ed., *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 329.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers), 1962, p. 394.
3. Heidegger, p. 39
4. Heidegger, pp. 398 ff.
5. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1962), Vol. V, p. xci.