

Martin Heidegger and the Limits of Formal Thinking

Few aspiring philosophy students would challenge logic and mathematics as reliable instruments for acquiring truth or, perhaps, “the Truth.” These two formal disciplines have long been accepted as necessary philosophical propaedeutics. And yet, Martin Heidegger – sometimes designated the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century – seems to question their status. Those who defend the work of Heidegger seem to be placed in a dilemma: Accept Heidegger’s goal, method, and conclusions with the de-emphasis of logic; or retain logic and abandon the German thinker. Perhaps the dilemma is false. Characterized by his analytic critics as a mystic, a word magician, an irrationalist, and/or a nihilist, Heidegger nonetheless continues to attract followers and disciples throughout the world. The difference between detractor and disciple often hinges on the place of formal thinking within the philosophical enterprise.

For the purpose of this paper, nothing more complex than a logic of the syllogism, *modus ponens*, and number theory are considered. The young Heidegger was neither indifferent to nor ignorant of the developments of the disciplines in question. He began his graduate studies by specializing in logic and mathematics. Indeed, Heidegger’s first publication, “New Findings in Logic” (1912), gives a clear account of the then recent trends within the two formal sciences. Heidegger mentions Frege’s *Basic Principles of Mathematics* (1893-1903) and the first volumes of the Whitehead-Russell *Principia Mathematica* (1910). Parallel to this article, his 1916 qualifying thesis on Duns Scotus again discusses Frege as well as Husserl’s *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891). Especially attracted to Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901), Heidegger relates that as a beginning student he “read the two volumes many times.”

In the following paper, I shall attempt to contrast Heidegger’s methods, procedures, and conclusions with those of mainline Western logicians. The account will revolve around five areas of questions:

1. In what ways does Heidegger’s recommended procedure differ from the assertions, judgments, and inferences in logic?

2. If ontology is the abiding goal of philosophy, then how do the processes of implication, definition, and demonstration carry out this goal?
3. What if the laws of contradiction, identity, and excluded middle do not hold?
4. In what sense are humans appropriately designated "rational animals?"
5. Is there a difference between scientific communication and poetic communion?

Heidegger and the logicians are both alike and different. Each agrees that the pursuit of Truth – certain or probable – is a worthy objective and that such a pursuit is possible and capable of accomplishment. The method which Heidegger employs to uncover what is true, however, exemplifies a purpose, an agency, a criteria, and a matter seldom found in formal procedures. As it stems from Aristotle, logic assumes subjects which relate to predicates according to the canons of coherence and consistency. A logician further assumes that these contents of thinking may be arranged to correspond to things as they are. The result is meaningful sequence patterns which demonstrate "truths."

To provide a target for Heidegger's reservations concerning Western philosophy's matrix of accepted calculations, I shall utilize the work of Irving Copi. Copi's *Introduction to Logic* has now gone through ten editions. It is widely used in academic institutions: public and private, large and small, prestigious and obscure. This text provides a framework model for students to emulate. Copi defines "logic" as "the study of the methods and principles used in distinguishing good (correct) from bad (incorrect) reasoning" (Copi 1982: 03). To him, correct reasoning appears as arguments: premisses from which conclusions are drawn. To designate behavior as illogical or to speak of a logical mind or a "correct" explanation rests upon the definition given. The study of logic separates agents who think from what is thought about. Copi asserts that the theories established and operations practiced hold whether one is dealing with classical logic, informal logic, formal logic, or critical thinking. If mathematics is based on logic, then it too is grounded by similar techniques. In each of these university courses, the student learns and evaluates a variety of procedures suggested by Copi or the instructor. The ingredients of argument are terms, propositions, and inferences all of which must follow the accepted rules. Deviations from such rules result in

mistakes or fallacies. The benefits of logical study enable the student-subject to ascertain the worth of combinations of propositions. To the master logician and to apprentice, the discipline provides the necessary ingredients for meaningful communication between and among subjects. The crucial assumptions for Copi's approach are the universality of formal rules, their teachability, and their applicability. Without the acknowledgment of this recommended framework, Copi asserts correct thinking is impossible. Heidegger's reservations concerning this approach will become apparent. For him, neither induction nor deduction provides conclusive proofs and the results are not necessarily satisfying. "School" logic is neither adequate, autonomous, nor rewarding. There are for Heidegger two kinds of thinking: representative/calculative, and meditative/intuitive. His sympathies are with the latter.

Why Think?

For the conventional logic instructor, every human being must think in order to meet practical or theoretical situations. He/she strives to improve the skills for doing so. To analytic thinkers, demonstrating the connections between subject and predicate with implications for classification is the basis for science and philosophy. To Heidegger, such connections – even if accurate – are futile. The application of logic to human experience is inevitably abstract, limited, and sterile. This mode of thinking is not multi-purposed; in philosophy there must be a supplement to logic by intuition and/or meditation. The singular direction of the thought process is revelation or unconcealment of Being. Such revelation for Heidegger does not solve problems, improve the human condition, or deduce the most intriguing theories about beings. The motive for much routine ontic reflection is recreation. The motive for ontological reflection is serious. Games are products of desires; meditative thinking is more than mere confrontation, refutation, or confirmation however pleasant. Being-as-process emerges from a contextual background. To Heidegger, intellectual play seldom rests upon a background of ontological clarity. Ontological insights are embedded in a field holistically surveyed, intuitively grasped, and synthetically received. To analyze, to fragment, or to place isolated things and events in linear progression is to degrade the "To-Be" process. Only the philosopher using the meditative approach, distinguishes "things-which-appear" from the "To-Be." The derivative thinking, advocated by logicians, forces judgments about arbitrary characteristics into accepted formulae. At best, such formulae are second-order truths. Combining or separating the properties of classes of things and entities

—however useful and orderly — omits the Being process. Discourse about classes is to Heidegger closer to gossip or free-association than to meaningful philosophical inquiry. To extol the abstract over the concrete is to confuse the real and the frivolous. Borrowing from early Greek philosophy, Heidegger uses the term *aletheia* (uncovering, unconcealing, or unforgetting) to refer to Being revealed as truth. By dwelling with what presents itself, the Heideggerian philosopher participates both in what-is, and in the truth.

Who Thinks?

For Heidegger the agent of thought is *Dasein*: that aspect of human being-in-the-world. The “who” of *Dasein* is not designated as a pronoun, but as a verb:

Dasein is the being which I myself always am. Mineness belongs to existing *Dasein* as the condition of the possibility of authenticity and inauthenticity. (Heidegger 1996: 49)

It is neither a human personality nor a transcendental ego. As an existential process the center changes continuously. The logician — whether materialist, idealist, or pragmatist — recognizes the human subject as that entity which observes, thinks, and judges. Such a subject or ego is distinct from the content of objects thought about. *Dasein* on the other hand is to Heidegger a co-implicit and co-relative part of the Being-process. The authentic identity of agency is not a given, it must be achieved. The thinking-subject of logic claims to be metaphysically innocent. To Heidegger this is not the case. The agent who thinks initiates judgments and connections. *Dasein* responds to Being. Meditative thinking to *Dasein* is an elucidation of existence. Calculative thinking is a control over existence. To presuppose that an individual’s reflecting precedes ontology is to risk the fallacy of psychologism. Traditional logic has no defense against this particular reductionist fallacy. Humanity can dwell in the presence of Being, but also humankind may choose not to do so. To Heidegger the agent who thinks in conventional logic is a psychological entity. It is not a *Dasein*. The psychological entity differs from all those appearances not-itself. *Dasein*, in contrast, dwells within such differences. *Dasein* — whether a gracious gift, a fortuitous accident, or a willful accomplishment — is grounded in the “To-Be” process. *Dasein* is neither a “thing,” a mere objective “something,” nor an isolated manifestation of consciousness. The agency of meditative thinking appears as an on-going revelation of the whole of Being. This is a

gathering wherein phenomena are brought into a pattern. *Dasein* recognizes, acknowledges, and gathers such emerging patterns. *Dasein* brings together the earth, the sky, the immortals, and its own mortality into a world of continuous activity. Particular ingredients of this fourfold can only be isolated from the whole through artificial separation. Yet, academic logic encourages a distinction between subject and object, thing and symbol, and form and content. Heidegger’s approach avoids these cleavages.

To define humans as animals capable of rationality is for Heidegger a distorted anthropology. The meditating agent sojourns reflectively in the presence of Being. He/she is more than a quantum bit, a biological cell, a psychological personality, or an aspect of a sociological configuration. Moreover, supposed calculative ability is not the crucial distinction between human beings and other entities. Rather, the mark of *Dasein* is the ontological imperative: What is the meaning of “To-Be?” To extol instinctive urges for survival as learning to think is to confuse *Dasein* with that which is at-hand or before-hand. As *Dasein* remains focused upon the “To-Be” process, neither humanity as a whole nor particular human beings obtain worth through rational cleverness. When reasoning is equated merely with means/ends calculation, such accomplishments are empty. To Heidegger the criteria of humanness is not simply ontic positioning. The holistic context into which *Dasein* fits is revealed by sensing, feeling, imagining, and speaking as well as understanding. To separate mere ratiocination off from other “as-structures” is a truncation of being human. *Dasein*’s dignity and prowess would then be replaced with a calculating apparatus.

The Measure of Thinking

The logician and Heidegger use different standards for thought and thinking. The logician pronounces as adequate, good, valid, and proper those mental products achieved by manipulative ingenuity. Logical analysis is a dull status quo. Heidegger, likewise, recognizes that “the-they” can remove excitement from mental activity. But to become authentic, opens-up or exposes Being-as-source and restores enthusiasm. The exposure of Being for *Dasein* illustrates both freedom and acceptance. The resultant anxiety and dread in the face of death and nothingness are aspects or examples of meditative thinking. To the uncompromising logician, emotive states have no place in enquiry since the sole value in thinking is formal. Destiny, freedom, and fallenness are irrelevant. The logician is only concerned with the interconnections of objective true/false validations. To Heidegger, on the other hand, philosophizing as acts and confirmations is never wholly

devoid of feeling. For fundamental ontology the criteria of adequate thinking cannot be mere connectiveness, sheer assertion, dubious consistency, or public demonstrability. It is appropriate to elucidate the emotive overtones of every situation.

The Matter of Thinking

Equating Western philosophy with classical and formal thinking is an unfortunate accident to Heidegger. This pairing has been and continues to be distorting, destructive, and forgetful of Being. To ignore Being and to replace the search for Being in favor of an elaborate discourse concerning the properties of beings is a falling-away from the mission of philosophy. For Heidegger, the pre-Socratics approach the Being question directly. There is no need for simple or complex intervening logical scaffolding. Plato and Aristotle, on the other hand, represent Being with the aid of such scaffolds. To Plato, Being is a pattern among Forms. To Aristotle it is a hierarchy of substances. The "metaphysics" which Plato and Aristotle bequeath to their followers becomes a search for a privileged being among beings or for an orderly combination of beings. This procedure guarantees cosmic, social, and epistemological reliability but at the sacrifice of ontology. The reliability of beings is achieved by replacing Heraclitus with Parmenides. Heidegger resuscitates the Heraclitean *Logos* with its flux.

Subsequent formalists – both idealists and naturalists – who follow the Greeks perfect logic and mathematics while relegating metaphysics to the superficial, the unessential, and finally the meaningless. The task of philosophy as perceived by the formalists is to breakdown the universe into parts and to recombine these parts according to rules and laws. The result is a catalog of actual, possible, and ideal beings with no need for an overall ontological canopy. The early Greek naturalists suggest as material water, air, earth, fire, or a combination of these. The Greek idealists rely upon dialectic. Both naturalists and dialecticians develop metaphysics in accordance with their presuppositions. Christians account for the objects of thought as ideas in the mind of a God-creator. Descartes and the rationalists assert a mind/body dualism. Galileo and the empiricists proclaim atoms, energies, and forces as the basic categories for objective science. To Heidegger each of these philosophical positions is imprisoned in a logic which substitutes various kinds of being(s) for Being Itself. To alleviate the mischief perpetrated by conventional logic, each of the resulting positions requires deconstruction. Heidegger sees himself carrying out this deconstruction.

To Heidegger following Heraclitus, the matter of thinking is *Logos*. It is language which articulates this *Logos*. The differences between the logicians and Heidegger with regard to language is that the former insist on a subject/predicate grammar whereas the latter accepts language as a holistic field. *Logos* is the progenitor of both formalized logic and spontaneous speaking. Symbols arranged formally in accordance with pre-established rules remain manifestations of the *Logos*. Poetic symbols – metaphors, similes, and analogies – are presentations of this same *Logos*. Heidegger stresses the second alternative but does not completely reject the first. Poeticizing is the use of language to name Being-as-such and to maintain the phenomenological process within which Being appears. Thomas Fay explains this response:

[S]ince it is *Dasein's* nature to stand in the truth of Being and by co-responding to the voice of Being to help to bring to pass the truth of Being which is held in the openness of its disclosure by language, language is the only appropriate abode for man, wherein he, as an existing being, *i.e.* a being who can grasp Being in its truth, may dwell. (Fay 1977: 33)

Heidegger designates Hölderlin, Trakl, and Rilke as guardians of Being. In their poetry, speaking is a flexible presentation of that-which-is. This contrasts with the objective chains of reasoning associated with formal discourse. Heidegger characterizes the adaptation of a poetic mode as a "home-coming" toward Being. Poetry is a revelatory return to warm participation with that-which-appears entailing a move away from contemplative aloofness. The poetic use of language invites *Dasein*, To-Be-Here in Being, rather than as a mere language product of a removed consciousness contemplating beings that have been, are now, will be, or may be. This participatory thinking, however, is often disparaged, frequently ridiculed, and resolutely avoided by traditional logic. Heidegger re-registers a suspicion of calculative reasoning. He advocates the reinstatement of those deep and broad intuitive and interpretive powers which are poetic description and philosophic elucidation. He is not concerned with destroying logic, the ability to formulate analogies, or to display ratios. His mission is to preserve the fragile tendencies of intuitive meditation. By so doing Heidegger sees himself as presencing the phenomenal world.

Heidegger does not reject formal thinking *in toto*. However, he does relegate calculation to a subordinate position. Calculation is an aspect

of science, technology, and common sense; ratiocination is not the whole of philosophy. It must be supplemented by the reflective implementation of meditative methods. Mere calculation devoid of meditation ignores ontology and the ways such ontology is refracted in the human being.

References

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