

## Chapter 34

### Martin Heidegger: The Question of Being

#### Key Words:

Phenomenological ontology, descriptive psychology, forgetfulness, *Dasein*, fundamental ontology, Being, destruction or dismantling of the tradition.

This chapter introduces the philosophy of the great 20<sup>th</sup> century German thinker Martin Heidegger. He was born on September 26th, 1889. During his early days he was influenced by Franz Brentano's descriptive psychology. But the most important influence was from Edmund Husserl with whom he worked several years as an academic assistant. Husserl encouraged him to turn his attention to mathematics and philosophy and since 1919 he worked very closely with the former and everyone considered Heidegger as Husserl's intellectual heir. During this period Heidegger carried out Husserl's original project of getting back to things themselves, but with the publication of his *Being and Time*, he deviated from Husserl's project and developed his independent philosophy which treated the question of being and its forgetfulness as the most significant philosophical problems of 20<sup>th</sup> century European thought. Heidegger wants to employ phenomenology in order to overcome this forgetfulness of Being and he developed a phenomenological ontology, which would clearly distinguish Being from entities. He complained that western metaphysics failed to make this distinction and proposes a destruction of this metaphysical tradition that would eventually conclude in the regaining of Being.

Heidegger was no doubt one of the most important philosophers of 20<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy. Politically he supported the National Socialist Party of Hitler and though he disassociated with it later, never apologized for his involvement in its political programmes. Nevertheless, he was widely respected in the academic circles as an original thinker, who has substantial contributions to the history of European philosophy. His thoughts influenced many important philosophical developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century like existentialism, post structuralism and even postmodernism. Heidegger died in Friburg on May 26th, 1976.

Heidegger affirms that phenomenology is much older than Husserl and was essentially a Greek way of thinking. The early Greek thinkers have encountered and framed the question of being for the first time during their philosophical contemplations and this problem remained at the core of the Greek philosophical thinking. This problem was raised by Parmenides who eventually distinguished being from non-being. He claimed that Being is one and non-being is impossible. Afterwards, in Plato's idealistic thought we come across a distinction between the being which is known by rational thought and beings which are objects of opinion we derive from the senses. Aristotle maintained that there was a special science that studies being and its properties, which is different from other sciences.

### **Husserl and Heidegger**

Heidegger, though begins his intellectual career as a phenomenologist who shared the Husserlian objectives that aim at getting back to things themselves, later deviated from this and pursued a different path. Phenomenology, according to him, is not a mere study of the intentional structures of consciousness. Though Heidegger acknowledges Husserl's role in shaping his ideas he was not satisfied with Husserl's characterization of phenomenology as a study of the objects of consciousness and also in the latter's transcendental project. According to him phenomenology is a fundamental study of the relation between *Dasein* and Being. While Husserl emphasized on transcendental reduction and the concept of pure ego in his transcendental phenomenology, Heidegger's primary objective in philosophy dealt with a concern with Being and instead of Husserl's pure transcendental subjectivity, he focused his attention on the being of man which is a being-in-the-world. He replaced Husserl's transcendental phenomenology with a form of anthropology that would approach the question of being by relating it with the being of man. Husserl in his *Ideen III* says: "The wonder of all wonders is the pure ego and the pure consciousness." Heidegger on the other hand affirms in his *What is Metaphysics?* that "Man alone of all existing things... experiences the wonder of all wonders: that there are things-in-being." [Spiegelberg, p.87 and p.284]

Heidegger considered answering the question of Being as his lifelong project. But this necessarily involves another exploration; the being of man. In order to understand Being, one must first understand the being of man, the *Dasein* or the being-in-the-world. This is because, *Dasein* is the kind of Being who raises the question of Being. But to even ask the question implies that at some level the answer is already understood. Hence as a prelude to the question of Being the ontological structure of *Dasein* needs to be uncovered. Again, the study

of Being should primarily differentiate Being from beings. Therefore, the study of Being is an ontology, which will distinguish Being from beings.

Heidegger says that phenomenology is the only method by which to do *ontology*. He complains that Being has been concealed from us, which has amounted to a kind of forgetfulness of it. Hence Being has to be uncovered from its forgetfulness with phenomenology. Its primary task is to uncover Being. Heidegger affirms that the essence of truth is the disclosing of the meaning of that which we call Being.

Etymologically, the German word *Sein*, which is translated as being, corresponds to the English expression *to be*. It stands, either for the being of something in particular and in this sense refers to its existence or for its essence, in the sense for the being of something. For example, of *Dasein*. We can also speak of Being in abstract, as being in general. In this sense we cannot specify it as What or That-being. It is simply Being, and therefore, the most general feature of everything that is. It is thus the most universal concept, which is indefinable in terms of other concepts. It is thus a self-evident concept, which is mostly taken for granted. Heidegger then says that the meaning of Being is veiled in darkness and hence the question of the meaning of being needs to be restated. It has to be brought out of its forgetfulness.

### **QUESTION OF BEING AND ITS FORGETFULNESS**

Heidegger complains that traditional metaphysical approaches have resulted in a forgetfulness of Being, which is the primordial topic of philosophical and other intellectual reflections. Metaphysics misunderstood the nature of beings by understanding them as things, as that which is simply there, as present at hand. Heidegger stresses the need for overcoming this attitude. Being has to be distinguished from the thing-in-being or what has being or beings.

According to Heidegger, in the metaphysical contemplations of the medieval and modern philosophers the meaning of Being was covered up, as they failed to recognize the important ontological difference between Being and thing-in-being. Instead of a contemplation of Being traditional metaphysics has initiated a study of the technical use and subjugation of the things-in-being. In other words, the great metaphysical tradition neglects the fundamental ontological difference between Being and the thing-in-being, between Being and entities. It is this failure that primarily resulted in a general forgetfulness of being. Heidegger maintains

that this forgetfulness is responsible for the decline of western civilization and the crisis of man. He suggests a phenomenological ontology in order to overcome this forgetfulness.

This phenomenological ontology deals with the study of Being. This is different from metaphysics that deals with the study of things in being. Heidegger complains that, we have neglected this fundamental ontology in our encounters with Being and endeavours like metaphysics, science and technology that deal with entities take the place of ontology. He was of the opinion that their domination in history and culture leads to the above-mentioned forgetfulness and crisis. Modern philosophy too had forgotten the question of Being, as it has become concerned with the *ontic* i.e., on beings. Modern sciences also fail to give an account of Being. Phenomenology is therefore expected to delineate the structures of Being and explicate its meaning. Heidegger says that phenomenology primarily involves ontological analysis and it intends to return to the original data of man's experience. Phenomenological ontology thus does two things. On the one hand it reveals the essential structures of Being and on the other hand it also involves an analysis of *Dasein*, to the being of man to whom the essential structures of Being are revealed.

As mentioned above, there is a fundamental distinction between Being and entities, a fact which is not properly recognized due to forgetfulness. This can be elaborated with an example. When I listen to music, read a book, perceive an object, I relate myself to something and comport myself to it. In this context, it is the music or the object I perceive. I comport myself to them as an entity. It is something that is there. Heidegger now says that, what it is for something to be is not itself an entity. In other words, the Being of entities itself is not an entity. But any form of comportment to anything presupposes an understanding of Being, as without such an understanding there cannot be a comport to entities as entities. Before we raise the question of Being we have an understanding of Being. This Being is neither an entity, nor a class of entities. It is not even the most general or universal concept. The question of the meaning of Being is raised in this context. This primarily involves two things. Firstly it involves the phenomenological project that involves a destruction of the metaphysical tradition that had led to the forgetfulness of being and secondly an ontological analysis of the being of man to whom the meaning of Being is unraveled.

## The Phenomenological Project

Heidegger underlines the need for strictly adhering to the phenomenological formula, back to the data themselves. This is important for overcoming all abstract constructions and formulations that many mislead us. It is also important for us to avoid positing of pseudo-questions. Heidegger writes:

If the question of Being to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by taking the question of Being as our clue, we are to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being – the ways which have guided us ever since. [*Being and Time*, p.44]

The phenomenological project therefore, involves the destruction or dismantling of the tradition of the history of philosophy. Since the understanding of Being belongs to the being of the entity, which we ourselves are, it is important to analyze the specific thing-in-being – the human being or *Dasein*. Here too Heidegger proposes a returning to the tradition in order to regain the original attitude. We have to recover the original existential ways of conceiving of phenomenon of human existence and for this we have to go back to the Greek roots. We have to set aside the Kantian and Cartesian elements that dominate the history of philosophy and metaphysics. The destruction of the metaphysical tradition therefore, involves the destruction of tradition, by means of a proper analysis of the traditional metaphysics.

Heidegger thus proposes to discard all the traditional ways of asking questions. What is required is a radicalization of ontology. Since the tradition conceals real issues, we have to destruct it and go back to the origins. In *Being and Time* Heidegger asserts that the traditional content of ancient ontology has to be destroyed until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being. Here Heidegger thinks much in terms of the spirit of the phenomenological tradition advocated by Husserl. He adds new dimensions to the phenomenological project with this approach, but of course, does not subscribe to its transcendentalism.

This destruction will also involve a rejection of metaphysics, as metaphysics approaches the question of Being in wrong ways. According to Heidegger, metaphysics has understood the nature of beings by understanding them as things. It simply describes things as they are. Here he reminds us that the approach of metaphysics is not pure but is based on

certain assumptions. Metaphysical understanding is affected by the way we are drawn down into everyday existing. In metaphysics the everyday set of assumptions about reality dominates and it misconceives reality as present at hand. Here too Heidegger's approach does not contradict Husserl's project, which insists on overcoming the natural attitude. But Heidegger carries this out in a different manner. He begins his phenomenological explorations with an analysis of the ontological structure of the being of man. The right method, according to Heidegger, consists in exploring the question of human existence and trying to understand it in its own terms. The method of fundamental ontology is expected to facilitate this. He says that, since the phenomena of existence require interpretation, its method should be phenomenological as well as hermeneutical. The meaning of being is therefore explored with a focus on the etymology and grammar of the word *Sein*, which is the sense or final end of Being or the destination of Being. It is the final end of a thing that makes it intelligible. Hence the meaning of Being or its destination needs to be found in the being of man. This is because, only human existence can be with or without meaning. Being has meaning only insofar as it has import for a human being or *Dasein*. Hence Heidegger proposes an existential analytic of *Dasein*. The structures of Being are revealed through the structures of human existence. Heidegger's method is therefore, phenomenological, ontological, existential and hermeneutical. It is phenomenological, because it looks for the directly given, ontological: as it distinguishes the ontology of Being from the realm of things, existential: as it explores the existential structure of man and hermeneutical, as it involves interpretation.

## Quiz

1. What according to Heidegger was the primary reason behind the general forgetfulness of being?  
(a) Failure in distinguishing between metaphysics and ontology (b) Failure in recognizing the ontological difference between Being and the thing-in-being (c) Failure in recognizing the ontological difference between Being and *Dasein* (d) Failure in differentiating between philosophy and religion.
2. Which of the following is among one of the major concerns in Heidegger's project?  
(a) Destruction of the ontological question (b) Radicalization of ontology (c) Reviving the Cartesian and Kantian elements in philosophy (d) Reviving the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition.
3. What according to Heidegger has not done by metaphysics?

- (a) Approached the question of Being in wrong ways (b) Understood the nature of beings by understanding them as things (c) Simply describes things as they are (d) Explores the question of human existence and tries to understand it in its own terms.
4. What is the subject matter of phenomenological ontology?  
(a) Study of Being (b) Study of things in being (c) Study of being-in-the-world (d) Study of metaphysics.
5. Where does Heidegger locate the destination of Being?  
(a) In the world (b) In the being of entities (c) In the being of man (d) In human social relationships.

### **Answer Key**

1. [b]  
2. [b]  
3. [d]  
4. [a]  
5. [c]

### **Assignments**

1. What does Heidegger mean by the forgetfulness of being?  
2. Discuss the destruction of the metaphysical tradition.

### **Books**

### **References**

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3. *Ereignis*, Information on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and links to related web pages in English, available at: <http://www.beyng.com/>.

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