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# Re-Thinking the Human: Heidegger, Fundamental Ontology, and Humanism

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**Abstract** This essay engages with Heidegger's attempt to re-think the human being. It shows that Heidegger re-thinks the human being by challenging the way the human being has been thought, and the mode of thinking traditionally used to think about the human being. I spend significant time discussing Heidegger's attempt before, in the final section, asking some critical questions of Heidegger's endeavour and pointing out how his analysis can re-invigorate contemporary attempts to understand the human being.

**Keywords** Heidegger · Humanism · Being · The human being · Ontology · Metaphysics

At the start of his seminal work on Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Hubert Dreyfus notes that "Heidegger claims that the tradition has misdescribed and misinterpreted human being. Therefore, as a first step in his project, he attempts to work out a fresh analysis of what it is to be human" (1991, p. 1). Importantly, however, while the human being plays a crucially important role in Heidegger's project, it does not have fundamental importance; as we will see, a study of the human being is a necessary precursor to the study of that which Heidegger holds to be fundamentally important: being. Heidegger's attempt to re-think the human being in-line with the question of being leads him to criticise traditional conceptions of the human on two related accounts: first, that they forget the question of being; and secondly, that they are underpinned by a binary logic that forestalls any thinking of being.

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To correct what he sees as the fundamental failing of traditional accounts of the human being, Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, emphasises the primary importance of being. However, the means through which being can be understood is by first analysing a specific type of being, namely, the human being; what Heidegger calls “Dasein” (1962, p. 27). This brings Heidegger to propose an ontological analysis of the human being as the means to understand being. As Tom Rockmore (1995, pp. 95–96) notes, however, frequently the second movement to being was forgotten or ignored and Heidegger’s thought was interpreted as a philosophical anthropology of the human being. For Heidegger, however, while philosophical anthropology can tell us something about the human being, it can not tell us the whole truth. Disclosing the truth about the human being requires that the being of the human being be disclosed.

But Heidegger does not simply suggest that traditional philosophical accounts of the human being have forgotten and/or ignored the question of being. He goes further by suggesting that traditional philosophical accounts of the human being cannot think of being because their thinking is constrained within a logic of binary oppositions. Most notable of these binary oppositions is that between essence and existence.

For Heidegger, the human being has traditionally been thought to possess a fixed defining essence that either determines human being or that exists as a potential to be made actual. The problem with this conception of the human being is, according to Heidegger, that it fails to understand that the human being is defined by existential “possibility” (1962, p. 33). Its existential possibility means that the truth of the human being cannot be captured within fixed conceptual boundaries; the open-ended “nature” of the human being is defined by its “existence” (Heidegger 1962, pp. 32, 68).

However, the problem with defining the human being in terms of its existence was that it appeared to many commentators that Heidegger was simply inverting the privileging of essence constitutive of traditional conceptions of the human being. Such thinking misinterprets Heidegger’s thought. It assumes that Heidegger’s notion of existence is the existence that has been thought to exist in opposition to essence. For Heidegger, defining the human being by its existence does not mean that the human being is simply defined by its actions; by existence, Heidegger means something very specific. This specificity can only be understood by remembering his privileging of being. Defining the human being by its existence means, for Heidegger, not that the human being is what it does, but that the human being exists in such a relation to being that it, and it alone amongst beings, is able to disclose being.

To correct what he saw as a fundamental misunderstanding of his thought, Heidegger changed focus in subsequent works. No longer is the focus on providing an existential analytic of the human being to discern being; the focus now becomes being “itself.” Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* outlines this so-called turning in his thought both forcibly and clearly.

Understanding the content of Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* is, however, somewhat difficult given its wide ranging nature. It not only aims to correct misinterpretations of his early work, criticise alternative conceptions of the human

being that posit a fixed defining essence or maintain that understanding the way of life of the human being can discern what it truly is, and critique the logic of binary oppositions, but it does so by discussing a range of issues including Marxism, indeed “isms” in general, history, ethics, thinking, language, action, metaphysics, and philosophy’s relation to science. The result is, as John Wild (1963) points out, that the *Letter on Humanism* plays a crucial role in Heidegger’s *oeuvre*.

Within this paper, however, I do not aim to discuss all aspects of this important text; I will limit the discussion to Heidegger’s critique of traditional, what I will call “metaphysical,” conceptions of humanism and his subsequent re-evaluation of this topic. Heidegger’s thought on this issue is important because it not only relates to crucial aspects of his own thought, but his critique of metaphysical humanism played a crucial role in clearing the path that allowed subsequent thinkers to engage with the issue of the human being in new and novel ways. While I will not engage with the ways in which Heidegger’s re-thinking of the human being has influenced subsequent thought, I think we should be aware that Heidegger’s critique of metaphysical humanism laid the foundation for the so-called “anti”-humanism of structuralist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist thought and, more contemporarily, of debates relating to the posthuman (Hayles 1999) and the transhuman (Hefner 2009).

To engage with Heidegger’s comments on humanism, this paper is split into four sections. The first sets the scene by briefly outlining Heidegger’s understanding of the ontological difference between being and beings; the second discusses Heidegger’s discussion and critique of metaphysical humanism; the third section outlines Heidegger’s re-evaluation of humanism; and the fourth section concludes by identifying some of the questions that arose from, and continue to revolve around, Heidegger’s attempt to re-think the human being.

## In Search of Being

Hans Ruin (2008) notes that Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the work that established his reputation, “is animated by a sense of crisis. From its inception, the question which it seeks to answer has already been lost, and is in need of being reawakened” (p. 279). The “crisis” to which Heidegger’s thought addresses itself is the question of being. This question aroused the interest of both Plato and Aristotle but, according to Heidegger (1962, pp. 22–23), has since been long forgotten or dismissed as vacuous and/or impossible to answer. Indeed, modern attitudes towards being are perhaps best summed up by Hegel (1969, p. 82), for whom to talk of pure being is to talk of nothing. For Heidegger, however, because “everything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way, is being” (1962, p. 26), understanding all else, including ethics, religion, and humanity (1978a, pp. 258, 253, 254), requires an inquiry into being. Only once the question of being has been addressed can all else be properly addressed. For this reason, Heidegger holds that “it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*” (1962, p. 1). The problem with Heidegger’s search for being, however, is that, as he recognises while “‘being’ is

the most universal concept, this cannot mean that it is the one which is clearest or that it needs no further discussion. It is rather the darkest of all" (1962, p. 23). Heidegger notes that the difficulty of understanding being is not only that our thought is not used to thinking of "it," but also that being itself does not easily lend itself to thought. This is because being cannot be defined in the manner of traditional logic through which thought tends to think because "it" does not conform to fixed logical categories (1962, p. 23). Nor can being "be conceived as an entity" (1962, p. 23). Rather,

Being, as that which is asked about, must be exhibited in a way of its own, essentially different from the way in which entities are discovered. Accordingly, *what is to be found out by asking*—the meaning of Being—also demands that it be conceived in a way of its own, essentially contrasting with the concepts in which entities acquire their determinate signification. (1962, p. 26)

Whereas entities can be understood through concepts, being cannot in any way be understood conceptually. While being and beings are intimately connected, Heidegger's valorisation of the primordial importance of being leads him to hold that the two are not synonymous; there is an ontological difference between being and beings. However, as he recognises, thinking this ontological difference is not easy because being and beings are "caught in a curious and still unravelled confusion" (1978a, p. 242). It is Heidegger's aim to unravel this confusion. To do so, he notes that being "is" what allows beings to be. But being does not exist in a transcendent realm; being is not "God [or] a cosmic ground" (1978a, p. 234). While being "itself" is not an entity, "Being is always the Being of an entity" (1962, p. 29). But while being is always the being of an entity, being is not synonymous with beings; "it" is "something" fundamentally different. Being is the excess that defines entities and, in the case of the human being, allows the possibility that defines the human being to "exist." But, importantly, while being is the fundamental aspect of beings, "it" is dependent on the existence of beings, and, as we will see, one particular type of being in particular, for its disclosure.

The relation between being and beings is, therefore, subtle and complex. But understanding the relation between being and beings leads onto, and so requires that I engage with, the following question: is being one or many?

While it is tempting to think of being in terms of this either/or one/many binary opposition, I want to suggest that a subtler analysis is required that remembers and takes into consideration what Heidegger is trying to achieve with his critique of metaphysics. In accordance with his attempt to overcome the binary logic of metaphysics, and while admittedly to my knowledge he never explicitly says this, I want to suggest that, for Heidegger, being is both a common feature of all entities *and* "something" unique to each particular entity. Put differently, for Heidegger, being is both one *and* many.

This is because, on my understanding, Heidegger holds that being is that which is common to all entities in so far as each entity "is." But, importantly, Heidegger's rejection of the notion that being delineates an ahistoric, transcendent God-figure or cosmic ground, and his insistence that being is always the being of a particular

entity, points to the conclusion that the existence, or being, of each entity is unique to that particular entity. Thus, while two tables share the commonality of being by virtue of both existing, the being of each table will differ because of its size, shape, and position in relation to other entities. Similarly, while two human beings share the commonality of being because each exists, the being of each human being differs by virtue of its unique socio-historical situation, activity, and social relations.

This allows Heidegger to hold that: (1) because each entity shares the commonality of being, the question of being is of primordial importance; and (2) the way each entity exists is unique to that particular entity. Therefore, while the primordial importance of the question of being means that disclosing the truth of each particular entity requires that the being of that particular entity be inquired into, Heidegger exhorts us to remember that the way each particular entity exists is unique to that particular entity.

But while Heidegger holds that all entities share the commonality of being, or put differently, the commonality of existence, he insists that it is only by analysing one particular type of being, the human being, that the importance of being can be disclosed. This is because, according to Heidegger, the human being has a “special distinctiveness” (1962, p. 32) based on its difference from other beings. For Heidegger, the human being, or as he calls it “Dasein,” is not just another being but a distinct being whose “Being is an *issue* for it” (1962, p. 32). Because the human being is interested in its being in a way that other beings are not, Heidegger insists that only the human being can disclose the importance of being.

What is clear from this is that, for the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, the question of being is primary but the means to answer this question are to be found in, and through, an existential analytic of the human being. But, at the same time, the ontological entwinement between being and beings ensures that the disclosure of the importance of the question of being that the existential analytic of the human being uncovers also discloses the truth of the human being. There are, therefore, two related aspects to Heidegger’s attempt to disclose being: (1) an existential analysis of the human being; and (2) the use of this existential analysis to disclose the importance of the question of being.

As noted, however, frequently the second movement of Heidegger’s analysis was forgotten and/or ignored and his thought became interpreted as a philosophical anthropology of the human being. However, this is not and never was the Heideggarian project. Heidegger is not interested in providing an anthropological account of the human being; “the analytic of Dasein remains wholly orientated towards the guiding task of working out the question of Being” (1962, p. 38). The movement from analysing the ontology of the human being to that of being must be continued if the human being, and all else, is to be understood. As Heidegger explains, “*basically, all ontology, no matter how rich and firmly compacted a system of categories it has at its disposal, remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task*” (1962, p. 31, italics in original). For this reason he calls an inquiry into the being of beings “*fundamental ontology*” (1962, p. 34) as opposed to the “naive and opaque” (1962, p. 31) ontology that

simply focuses on beings. Only fundamental ontology can disclose the truth of the human being.

To correct misinterpretations of his thought, clarify his position, as well as to criticize alternative accounts of the ontology of the human being, Heidegger changes focus in his later works. Rather than focus on an analysis of being mediated by an existential analytic of the human being, Heidegger focuses on being directly, un-mediated by other entities. While not unimportant, the human being becomes a secondary consideration. The *Letter on Humanism* highlights this so-called “turning” in his thought both forcibly and clearly. But to redefine the human being in terms of his valorization of being, Heidegger also provides an analysis and critique of humanism as he insists it has hitherto been thought.

### Metaphysical Humanism

The history of humanism is a complicated affair. The topic is resurrected in apparently different forms throughout western history. Indeed, such is its dominance that James L. Battersby (1996) maintains that “humanism is inescapable” (p. 557) for any inquiry into western thought. In order to show the importance of humanism for our thought, Heidegger provides a summary genealogy of it. This leads him to maintain that the first *explicit* version of humanism, as that which is opposed to barbarism, “was first considered and striven for in the age of the Roman Republic” (1978a, p. 224). More specifically, Roman humanism arose from its encounter with the late Greeks (1978a, p. 224). Humanism in the Roman context embodied the Greek spirit of *paideia*, meaning learned, philosophical scholarship and training in good conduct and manners. This ensured that the affirmation of a *culture* of reason and education became synonymous with the essence of humanity (1978a, p. 224). While Heidegger does recognize that there have been many other “humanisms,” including Renaissance, Scholastic, and modern versions, he maintains that each version embodies the Greek spirit of *paideia*. For Heidegger, therefore, each version of humanism hitherto thought shares a common underlying notion of humanity. Each holds that the essence of humanity accords with the affirmation of a culture of reason and education.

However, Heidegger’s understanding of the homogeneity of the different versions of humanism has not been uncontested. Gail Soffer (1996) argues that it is “an over-simplification and distortion of historical detail,” while, in a similar vein, Vito R. Giustiniani (1985) criticises Heidegger’s insistence that “every ‘historical’ humanism cannot be anything else than a resurgence of Greek *paideia*” (p. 184). While it may be accurate to describe modern versions of humanism as sharing the Greek’s emphasis on culture, according to Giustiniani, this does not fit well with Roman or Renaissance versions. Giustiniani holds that Heidegger misinterprets the homogeneity of the different versions of humanism because: (1) he over-values Greek antiquity; and (2) his translation of *paideia* as synonymous with “*humanitas*” leads him to hold that each version of humanism maintains that the essence of the human is held to be the affirmation of a culture of education or reason. This, however, fails to appreciate that there are two senses to “*humanitas*”:



one that corresponds to *paideia*'s emphasis on an affirmation of a culture of education and reason and the other that relates to the cultivation of specific individual character traits. According to Giustiniani, Heidegger's translation reduces "*humanitas*" to that of the affirmation of a culture of education and reason inherent to *paideia* and fails to appreciate that it also describes the affirmation of specific individual character traits. Giustiniani's point seems to be that, contrary to his reading of Heidegger, there are different versions of humanism because each differs in terms of how it structures the relation between the dual senses of the term "*humanitas*."

Evaluating whether or not these criticisms of Heidegger's interpretation of the homogeneity of the various humanisms are accurate is not something I will engage with here. After all, even if these criticisms are accurate, the interpretation of the human being that arises from Heidegger's (mis?)-interpretation perhaps emphasises that error can lead to the unveiling of new insights and paths of thought. The point has been to note the contentious nature of Heidegger's interpretation and, having done so, to "bracket" this discussion and follow Heidegger to see where his interpretation leads him.

Heidegger accounts for the homogeneity of traditional accounts of humanism by identifying three different, but related, features shared by the various traditional accounts of humanism. These common features ensure that, while they may *appear* to be different, each traditional version of humanism is, in actuality, grounded in the same structures of thought. First, Heidegger argues that each traditional version of humanism shares a common understanding of the essence of the human being. Each "has presupposed the most universal 'essence' of man to be obvious. Man is considered to be an *animal rationale*" (1978a, p. 226).

Secondly, Heidegger maintains that each traditional version of humanism is grounded in a logic of binary oppositions. Heidegger identifies two binary oppositions that have dominated western thought: (1) the subject/object opposition; and (2) the essence/existence opposition which "completely dominates the destiny of Western history and of all history determined by Europe" (1978a, p. 232).

Thirdly, each traditional version of humanism presupposes certain truths to be self-evident. Thus,

however different these forms of humanism may be in purpose and in principle, in the mode and means of their respective realisations, and in the form of their teaching, they nonetheless all agree in this, that the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, beings as a whole. (1978a, p. 225)

Heidegger pejoratively calls thinking that works within binary oppositions and/or simply presupposes certain truths to be self-evident "metaphysical."

Heidegger rejects all three of the common features of metaphysical humanism because they fail to inquire into the being of beings and, by comparing the human being to animals, do "not set the *humanitas* of man high enough" (1978a, pp. 233–234). While recognizing that comparing the human being to other beings "will [...] always be able to state something correct about man" (1978a, p. 227), Heidegger



holds that such a comparison will never disclose the essential aspect of the human being. This is because whenever “we do this we abandon man to the essential realm of *animalitas* even if we do not equate him with beasts but attribute a specific difference to him” (1978a, p. 227). Thus, metaphysical humanism always “thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas*” (1978a, p. 227). For Heidegger, disclosing the essential truth of the human being requires that the human being be analyzed on its own terms rather than in relation to other beings. Similarly, while recognising that reason is an aspect of the human being, Heidegger maintains that it is not the essential aspect of humanity (1978a, p. 229). As we will see, Heidegger holds that *ek-sistence* is the essence of the human being. This, however, can only be disclosed by analyzing the question of the being of the human being; a question that “metaphysics closes itself to” (1978a, p. 227). By failing to look to the being of human beings, metaphysical humanism’s valorization of the human being fails to “realise the proper dignity of man” (1978a, p. 233).

Heidegger goes to great lengths, however, to explain that his critique of humanism is not a glorification of the inhumane (1978a, p. 233). As he notes, “because we are speaking against ‘humanism’ people fear a defence of the inhuman and a glorification of barbaric brutality” (1978a, p. 249). Heidegger’s questioning of the logic of binary oppositions is informed by a stance that holds that simply speaking against something does not immediately mean the valorization of its opposite. As he explains, we must not “immediately assume that what speaks against something is automatically its negation and that this is ‘negative’ in the sense of destructive” (1978a, p. 250). For Heidegger, the negation of something is akin to a clearing that then allows a position with regard to the issue in question to be taken. In other words, criticising humanism does not automatically mean that the inhumane is valorized; it means that a space is opened up within which the human can be discussed unencumbered by previous thought. The clearing of thought inherent to critique allows thought to think about the issue in new and novel ways. Thus, “it ought to be somewhat clearer now that opposition to ‘humanism’ in no way implies a defence of the inhuman but rather opens other vistas” (1978a, p. 250).

Questioning the logic of binary oppositions that underpins metaphysical thought ensures that Heidegger’s critique of metaphysical humanism is not simply a critique of the way the human being has been previously thought; it is also, as Françoise Dastur (2000, p. 127) notes, a critique of the metaphysical assumptions on which thinking has been based and through which thinking has thought. Heidegger questions the logic of binary oppositions with a view to instantiating a new, non-binary logic.

Linked to Heidegger’s notion that critique undertakes a clearing that opens up new paths of thought is his insistence that being: (1) must be thought on its own terms; and (2) transcends metaphysical binary oppositions. This is a crucial aspect of Heidegger’s valorization of being and his attempt to re-think the human. For Heidegger, metaphysics remains caught in an either/or subject/object dichotomy because of its reliance on conceptual thought. But, as I noted, being cannot be thought conceptually; to think of being requires that we “recognise that there is a thinking more rigorous than the conceptual” (1978a, p. 258). Heidegger recognizes

that our conditioning to think in terms of fixed oppositions means that the new non-conceptual form of thinking he brings to our attention is both difficult to think and/or may seem nonsensical. However, he is adamant that to think of being, that which truly “is,” requires that we abandon thought that operates through fixed ontical boundaries. This is possible and indeed necessary because being escapes such logical oppositions.

This is because Heidegger holds that these logical oppositions are themselves grounded in being. Subject and object, essence and existence, and the notion of a binary opposition are simply different forms of being (1978a, p. 252). As the ground of logical oppositions, being is not subject to those logical oppositions; as Pattison (2000) notes, being is “beyond traditional oppositions of subject vs. object, of humanity vs. God” (p. 10). Because of this, being must be thought on its own terms. Thus, while John McCumber (1999, pp. 13–15) recognizes that Heidegger’s attempt to awaken us to the question of being is subordinate to his attempt to overcome the logic of fixed oppositions, I understand that the two endeavours cannot be separated in this manner. Heidegger’s critique of fixed logical oppositions is dependent on his valorization of being. It is because of the non-relational transcendence of being that it is possible to think beyond fixed metaphysical oppositions.

To give the human being back its dignity by instantiating a new method of thinking that is unconstrained by the metaphysical focus on beings or that is trapped within the logic of binary oppositions requires, according to Heidegger, a focusing on being and the human’s relation to being. As Heidegger explains,

the question about the essence of Being is intimately linked to the question of who the human being is. Yet the determination of the human essence that is required here is not a matter for a free-floating anthropology, which at bottom represents humanity in the same way as zoology represents animals. The question about human Being is now determined in its direction and scope *solely* on the basis of the question of Being. (2000, p. 219)

This demonstrates the so-called “turning” in his thought. The method to discern being is no longer, as it was in *Being and Time*, an existential analytic of the human being to disclose being, but a focusing on being to disclose the ontological truth of the human being. This focusing on being is accompanied by a re-thinking of the human being.

### Re-Thinking Humanism: The Human Ek-Sistence

To re-think the essence of the human being is not, for Heidegger, to abandon concepts such as the “human being,” “essence,” or “humanism;” it is to redefine the human being through a questioning and reformulation of the categories traditionally used to describe the human. Miguel De Beistegui (2003) is, therefore, perfectly correct to note that Heidegger’s re-thinking of the human being is both a critique of previous conceptions of the human being and a questioning of the categories that have been used to describe the human: “the history that Heidegger recounts is that of man’s relation to his essence, the history of the *essence* of man, in

which the concepts ‘man,’ ‘essence,’ and ‘history’ come to be reformulated radically” (p. 13).

Heidegger’s attempt to think a beyond metaphysical humanism does not rely on nor does it attempt to instantiate a fundamental rupture with humanism that annihilates humanism from thought or discourse. Heidegger holds that thought must clear previous understandings of the human being, both in terms of its normative content and logical underpinnings, before coming to re-examine the issue under discussion unencumbered by presuppositions. Not only does Heidegger’s attempt to re-think the human being explicitly engage with the essence of humanity, but he engages with traditional versions of humanism to show where they went wrong and to use their failings to instantiate a new beyond-metaphysics humanism.

This discloses that Heidegger’s so-called anti-humanism is not, in actuality, a critique of the human being *per se*; it is a critique of a particular understanding of the human being that he holds is, and has been, dominant. Heidegger’s critique and attempted correction of metaphysical humanism does not lead him to abandon the human being, but to re-engage with the human once more. Jacques Derrida (1969) calls this continued work of Heidegger’s on humanity, “the magnetic attraction of that which is the ‘property of man’” (p. 45). Even when he seeks to affirm the question of being, Heidegger can not help but affirm the importance of the human being. As Derrida explains,

the thought of Being, the thought of the truth of Being in whose name Heidegger de-limits humanism and metaphysics nevertheless remains a thought of man. In the question of Being as it is raised in metaphysics, man and the name of man are not displaced. And they certainly do not disappear. There is, rather, a sort of re-evaluation or revalorisation of the essence and the dignity of man. (1969, pp. 49–50)

This is perhaps not surprising for, as Keith Ansell-Pearson (2009) explains, “the promise of the over-human forces us to return to man, to recollect his memory, while the discovery, or invention, of that memory reveals to us this promise of over-human features” (p. 20).

Heidegger’s thought on the human being unashamedly seeks to establish a “new” beyond-metaphysical humanism in which humans are given, what he considers to be, their proper status. But Heidegger warns that “thinking does not overcome metaphysics by climbing still higher, surmounting it, transcending it somehow or other; thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest” (1978a, p. 254). Metaphysical humanism is not overcome by constructing more elaborate abstract metaphysical schemas; overcoming metaphysical humanism requires that thought comport itself to that which is both nearest to itself, but also furthest from its comprehension: being.

Thus, to surmount metaphysics and ascertain the proper essence of the human being, Heidegger explains that thought must “make clear how Being concerns man and how it claims him” (1978a, p. 233). Only by directing itself towards and focusing on the being of the human being will thought be able to uncover the truth of the human being.

While metaphysical humanism tends to think of the human's essence as "something" that resides within the human, Heidegger's re-thinking of the human being leads him to argue that thinking of the essence of the human being in this manner fails to properly understand its essence. For Heidegger, the essence of the human being is not found *within* the human being, whether this is thought as something fixed and determining or as potential that needs to be made actual (1978a, p. 231); Heidegger decenters the essence of the human being from the human itself and holds that the essence of the human being lies in its unique *relation* to being. Heidegger calls the human being's unique relation to being, its "ek-sistence" (1978a, p. 228). Thus, "the essence of man lies in ek-sistence" (1978a, p. 248).

That Heidegger defines the human being by its ek-sistence is, at one and the same time, a new development in his thought and a continuation of the description of the human being found in *Being and Time*. In *Being & Time*, Heidegger maintains that the human being is defined in terms of its "existence" (1962, p. 32). The problem with this formulation was, however, that commentators understood that Heidegger's emphasis on the human being's existence was simply opposed to the essence of metaphysics. These commentators understood that, rather than privileging essence in opposition to existence, Heidegger's thought was simply privileging existence in opposition to essence. This led Jean-Paul Sartre (1948) to famously state that, in relation to consciousness, "*existence* comes before *essence*" (p. 26). However, Heidegger remarks that understanding that the affirmation of existence necessarily means the denigration of essence is grounded in a thought that conforms to the binary logic of metaphysics. Merely reversing the term privileged in a metaphysical dichotomy does not overcome metaphysical thinking; it "remains a metaphysical statement" (1978a, p. 232). For Heidegger, Sartre's interpretation of his thought simply re-instantiates the logic of binary oppositions he attempts to overcome.

To correct this misinterpretation of his thought and critique what he saw as Sartre's metaphysical thought, in the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger re-writes "existence" as "ek-sistence." This is supposed to make it clear that holding that "the essence of man lies in ek-sistence" (1978a, p. 248) "is not identical with the traditional concept of *existentia*, which means actuality in contrast to the meaning of *essential* as possibility" (1978a, p. 229). Ek-sistence is not trapped within metaphysical oppositions. It is the space within which the human being lives in relation to being.

Because only the human being ek-sists in "the clearing [that] grants nearness to Being" (1978a, p. 241), only the human being is able to disclose being. This is because, as Heidegger notes in *Being and Time*, out of all beings only the human being is interested in its being (1962, p. 32). Other beings, most notably animals, remain ignorant or uninterested in being or are simply unable to disclose being because "they lack language" (1978a, p. 230). But the human being's relation to animals is a complex one for Heidegger. On the one hand, as conscious beings, living creatures are "in a certain way most closely akin to us" (1978a, p. 230), but on the other hand, and at the same time, they are "separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss" (1978a, p. 230).

We may wonder what exactly this abyss entails or whether it is true that there is an abyss between humans and animals, but in terms of Heidegger's thought, the

abyss between the human being and other beings means that while the human being stands above other beings, its ek-sistence means it stands under being. But again, it must not be thought that this “under being” means being is anything or that it exists in a transcendent realm to which the human being is subservient. Heidegger’s insistence that the human being ek-sists under being should be taken to mean that the human being exists below being in terms of its importance. Because being is above all else (1978a, p. 217), only an inquiry into being can disclose the ontological truth of the human being. But, as noted, only the human being, not animals, can inquire into and hence disclose being. Thus, while being is that which is highest in importance, the human being’s ek-sistence means that Heidegger’s ontology privileges it over other entities.

But does the human being’s ek-sistence as that entity that exists between animals and being mean that when it comes to trying to understand the human being it does not matter whether thought focuses on the human being’s relation to other beings or to being? In other words, does it matter whether thought’s attempt to understand the human being focuses on the human’s relation to animals or to being? Not surprisingly given his valorization of being, Heidegger warns that to understand the human being, thought should not focus on the abyss that separates the human being from other beings; the human being’s relation to being is what is most important. He exhorts us to instantiate a mode of thought that recognises and affirms that “man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being” (1978a, p. 245). Thus,

man’s distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as the being who thinks, is open to Being, face to face with Being; [...] man remains referred to Being, and he is only this. This ‘only’ does not mean a limitation, but rather an excess. A belonging to Being prevails within man, a belonging which listens to Being because it is appropriated to Being. (1969, p. 31)

The excess that accompanies its ek-sistence means that, even while Heidegger holds that the importance of the human being is subordinate to being, such is the importance of being, that his re-evaluation of the human being’s place does not debase the human being; it glorifies the human being like never before. Indeed, Heidegger holds that such is his glorification of the human being that his beyond-metaphysics humanism should be thought of as “‘humanism’ in the extreme sense” (1978a, p. 245). But how do humans disclose being?

Humans disclose being through both thinking and language. Thought enables being to be understood. Indeed, thinking is always accompanied by being and indeed always concerns being; “thinking is the thinking of Being” (1978a, p. 220). Because thinking discloses being to the human being, thinking is also capable of disclosing “the relation of Being to the essence of man” (1978a, p. 217).

But Heidegger warns that the thinking he describes here, the thinking that discloses being, is not the technical thinking of calculation and instrumental rationality. Heidegger maintains that “we must free ourselves from the technical interpretation of thinking” (1978a, p. 218) because such thinking is metaphysical in so far as it limits itself to beings and maintains a predetermined ground of inquiry; it is, therefore, incapable of thinking of being. True thinking, for Heidegger, thinks of

being not beings and, by going beyond the binary oppositions of metaphysics, “is a thinking more rigorous than the conceptual” (1978a, p. 258).

But thought is intimately linked to language. While thinking thinks of being, the disclosure of being occurs through language. Language thus plays a crucial role in disclosing to humans the status and nature of being. Indeed, without language’s disclosure of being, being would remain concealed. But Heidegger’s conception of language is not that of an instrument the human being uses to disclose its thought. Rather than holding that language resides within the human being as a tool to be used as and when it pleases, Heidegger holds that “we are within language” (1978b, p. 398) and that as we reside within language it is not us that speaks but “*language* that speaks” (1978b, p. 411).

Heidegger’s decentring of language from the human being is designed to re-enforce his decentring of the human being from the prime position accorded to it by metaphysics. Not only is the human being subordinate to being, it is also encased by language. But at the same time, “the ability to speak is what marks man as man” (1971, p. 112); animals do not reside within language (1978a, p. 230). Language is, therefore, a constitutive aspect of the human being; “we can [...] never step outside it in order to look it over circumspectly from some alternative position” (1978b, p. 423). As the means through which being discloses itself, “language is the house of Being” (1978a, p. 217). As the house within which being resides, the importance of language to the disclosure of being cannot be over-estimated.

But several questions arise at this point: is language capable of undertaking this crucial role? Does the conceptualization of language not threaten to undermine Heidegger’s attempt to disclose that which cannot be disclosed conceptually: being? Is it not possible that language may disclose being in an objectified, devalued form akin to an entity? If language is unable to disclose being, how else can Heidegger hope to disclose being?

Such is the important role that language plays in Heidegger’s valorization of being and his accompanying attempt to instantiate a new beyond-metaphysics humanism that I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Heidegger’s entire attempt to disclose being depends on whether language is capable of disclosing being non-conceptually. Admittedly, these are potential problems Heidegger was aware of and sought to deal with. While he recognises the threat language poses to the disclosure of being, he maintains that it “remains an open question whether the nature of Western languages is in itself marked with the exclusive brand of metaphysics” (1969, p. 73). His attempt to disclose a form of language that escapes the language of metaphysics led him to a deeper engagement with language.

Thus, while language plays a role in the *Letter on Humanism*, it is in his later writings that we see a specific and sustained engagement with the issue of language and its relation to being. Unfortunately, a detailed discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this essay. The purpose of this brief discussion of language’s relation to being has not been to provide an in-depth discussion of this relation; it has been to highlight certain questions that arise from Heidegger’s account. With this in mind, and by way of conclusion, I will continue this critical questioning by turning to briefly explore some of the questions that arise from Heidegger’s valorization of being.



## The Importance of Being

As I have argued throughout, Heidegger's philosophy is grounded in the attempt to "raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*" (1962, p. 1). Heidegger's attempt to raise anew the question of being is manifested in his attempts to re-think humanism and the human being in the *Letter on Humanism*. For this reason, Perez Zagorin (2003) is correct to note that "the *Letter* [...] rests on a primordial concept of Being, the conviction of Being in Western philosophy, and the necessity of overcoming metaphysics" (p. 90). The fundamental importance Heidegger affords being gives rise to the following questions: why the privileging of being over beings? Why is the question of being the most fundamental question of all? Why does fundamental ontology have this privileged place in relation to metaphysics? How can Heidegger talk about difference, indicating a neutrality of privileging, and then specifically defend the privileging of being? How, if at all, does Heidegger justify his valorisation of being?

To his credit, Heidegger recognizes that his valorization of being will necessarily be questioned if and when his thoughts on humanism, metaphysics, and being are properly thought. In response, he argues that "whether the realm of the truth of Being is a blind alley or whether it is the free space in which freedom conserves its essence is something each one may judge after he himself has tried to go the designated way, or even better, after he has gone a better way, that is, a way befitting the question" (1978a, p. 247). Only once we have travelled along the path Heidegger opens us to with his re-instantiation of the question of being can we properly judge whether his valorisation of being is justified or not. Heidegger's attempt at justification is, therefore, somewhat democratic; it asks the thinker who has engaged with his thought to decide for him or herself whether the question of being has the importance Heidegger gives it. Until then Heidegger asks us to reserve judgment and trust his valorization of being. But can we trust Heidegger? Should we trust him? And how does Heidegger's exhortation to reserve judgment on his valorization of being sit with his insistence that genuine thought is presuppositionless?

But there is another line of questioning that I wish to engage Heidegger on: what is the relation between the binary opposition Heidegger holds to be constitutive of the logic of metaphysical thinking and the apparent opposition inherent to the ontological difference between being and beings?

I have argued that while an aspect of Heidegger's critique of metaphysical humanism engages with the ontological analysis of the human being produced by the different versions of metaphysical humanism, his analysis is more profound than this in so far as it criticizes the logical foundations and assumptions on which the arguments of metaphysical humanism are built. In contrast to metaphysical humanism, Heidegger wishes to establish a new "beyond-metaphysical" (or beyond dualistic-thinking) humanism based on an opening up of thought to think of the relation the human being has to its being. Heidegger achieves this because his insistence that being comes before, or instantiates, metaphysical oppositions allows him to hold that inquiring into being escapes the binary oppositions of metaphysics.

The escape that the inquiry into being facilitates opens thought to alternative ways of thinking, including alternative ways of thinking about the human being.

However, the reader who chooses to follow Heidegger's re-instantiation of being may wonder whether defining being in terms of an ontological difference to beings does not result in the same binary structure, albeit between different terms, as the thinking he seeks to dissipate. In other words, we may wonder whether Heidegger's attempt to establish a new-beyond metaphysical (or beyond dualistic-thinking) humanism does not simply re-assert another dualism between being and beings? By positing an ontological difference between being and beings, does Heidegger's attempt to think beyond metaphysics not re-instantiate a form of the metaphysical thought he seeks to overcome?

Heidegger insists that because being grounds all binary oppositions, it cannot be subject to the logic of binary oppositions. There are, at least, two reasons for this. First, Heidegger holds that being escapes the logic of binary oppositions because being is always the being of an entity. As such, being cannot be posited in opposition to an entity. While there is an ontological difference between being and beings, being and beings do not and cannot exist in strict opposition to one another. For this reason, we cannot speak of a binary opposition between being and beings.

Secondly, Heidegger holds that, because we speak of binary oppositions, they exist in some sense and are, therefore, merely a particular form of being. Because being is that which is common to the two terms of the binary opposition and that which makes it possible to speak of a binary opposition in the first place, being cannot be reduced to one of the terms of a binary opposition; being grounds and so escapes the constraints of binary logic. But the question that needs to be addressed, which ultimately relates back to the question about how Heidegger justifies his valorisation of being is: is being the ground of binary oppositions?

This line of thought informs Derrida's (1982) valorization of difference, or as he writes it "*différance*," in his critique of Heidegger's valorisation of being. While Derrida recognises that Heidegger holds that, because being is always the being of an entity, being does not exist in strict opposition to beings and so does not establish a simple binary opposition between being and beings, he holds that Heidegger's positing of being as the ground of binary oppositions fails to realise that by defining being through its difference from beings, being is not the ground of all binary oppositions but is subject to a binary opposition in terms of its difference from beings. This leads Derrida to argue that

since Being has never had 'a meaning,' has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings, then *différance*, in a certain and very strange way, (is) 'older' than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being. (1982, p. 22)

Because Heidegger defines being in terms of its *difference* from entities, Derrida argues that, strictly speaking, being cannot be said to exist "before" all else in a way that allows it to ground all else; being is actually dependent on a prior and more fundamental "thing:" difference. Thus, while Derrida recognises that Heidegger understands the limitations of thinking within the constraints of binary oppositions, he holds that the means through which Heidegger attempts to overcome the logic of

binary oppositions do not go far enough. For Derrida, the way to overcome the fixed oppositions of metaphysical thought is not to affirm the primacy of being; it is to affirm *différance*.

In response, however, Heidegger would, I think, retort that difference is: (1) dependent on being, in so far as it is only possible to speak of difference in terms of differences between beings; and/or (2) merely a form of being, in so far as to speak of “difference” posits difference as something in some sense, which as noted, means that it is “has” a being of its own which must be disclosed to fully understand difference. In this way, Heidegger would, I think, try to re-affirm the primacy of being over Derrida’s privileging of difference.

It is not my aim to resolve this dispute here; I will leave it to the reader to decide on the validity of Heidegger’s and Derrida’s arguments. The purpose of this discussion has been to reveal some of the critical questions that were opened up by, and continue to revolve around, Heidegger’s effort to re-think the human being. Continuing in this vein, and by way of conclusion, I want to suggest some of the ways in which Heidegger’s attempt to re-think the human being can continue to inspire us today.

In general terms, what I understand to be original and of continuing use in Heidegger’s deconstruction of previous conceptions of the human being is the example it sets to us. Heidegger’s effort does not simply aim to employ traditional philosophical methods to disclose an aspect of the human condition hitherto ignored; it aims at nothing short than a revolution in our understanding of the human being. To achieve this, Heidegger questions our deepest held convictions and presuppositions, inquires into what defines us as human beings, engages with our relation to the external world and the beings we encounter therein, looks for ways in which we can look at ourselves and our world differently, and re-thinks our understanding of ourselves in a way that recognises and releases our creative energies. By undertaking this difficult endeavour, Heidegger not only shows us that it is possible to re-think how we think about ourselves, but also implicitly exhorts us to follow in his footsteps and radicalize our thinking about the human being. To this end, Heidegger’s effort brings to our attention the need to engage afresh with the following questions: what does “essence” mean and delineate? Does the human being possess a fixed essence or potential? What is the relation between essence and existence? What is the relation between the human being and other beings? Can binary oppositions capture the fluidity of human existence or, indeed, the ontological truth of the human being? What is the relation between language, thought, and consciousness? Is the human being the Archimedean point of existence or is the human being dependent on “something” else?

Whether we agree or not with the conclusions he arrives at concerning these questions, following Heidegger’s lead and thinking afresh about the human being unencumbered by previous conceptions will, I think, not only allow us to challenge our deepest held convictions about what it is to be human, thereby allowing us, in our capacity as philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, biologists, and anthropologists, to disclose truths about the human being that might otherwise remain unnoticed, but will also allow us to better engage with what is unique, if indeed anything is unique, about the human being. For these reasons, I want to suggest that, rather than holding that Heidegger’s attempt to re-evaluate the human being offers

us a final solution to the question of the human being, we think of it as an original and innovative attempt to awaken our thoughts on and to this question. To my mind, this conclusion sits well with his provocative insistence that what is “most thought-provoking for our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking” (1968, pp. 5–6). Whether we rise to Heidegger’s challenge is up to us.

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