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Heidegger, Phenomenology and the Essence of Technology

By Paul Gorner

In *Being and Time* Heidegger lays the ground for answering the question about the meaning of being. This is not understood as linguistic analysis. The understanding of being is what makes possible any kind of having to do with entities, anything that *is*: sticks and stones, chairs and tables, numbers, works of art and, most importantly, ourselves. What sets us apart from all other entities is that we *are* in such a way that we understand being. Heidegger has no wish to deny the other things which have been taken to distinguish human beings from other beings: consciousness, self-consciousness, reason. It is true that he thinks that there are other more basic ways of comporting ourselves to things, including ourselves. But more radically he thinks that even these more basic modes of comportment presuppose something which is not a mode of comportment to *entities* at all, namely, the understanding of *being*. It is because he sees this as what distinguishes human beings from all other entities that he uses the ontological term of art *Dasein* to refer to this entity. *Dasein* is in such a way that it understands being, its own being, the being of entities other than itself to which it comports itself, and being as such. The meaning, the sense (*Sinn*) of being is not the meaning of the word 'being' (or 'Sein') but rather that on the basis of which we understand being. And it turns out that this 'on the basis of which', the horizon which makes possible the understanding of being, which in turn makes possible all comportment to entities, is time. Not however time in the sense of a series of 'nows' but time in the sense of the temporalisation (*Zeitigung*) which makes comportment to past, present and future possible.

When Heidegger wrote *Being and Time* he still described himself as a *phenomenologist*. However what he understood by phenomenology was already very different from what Husserl understood by it. For Husserl the subject-matter of phenomenology is consciousness and the intentionality of consciousness. Phenomenology thus understood describes the

essential structures of consciousness independently of questions of the reality of its objects. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time* the subject-matter of phenomenology is Dasein or, what comes to the same thing, the understanding of being. In his Marburg lectures of 1928, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, he describes phenomenology as the science of being, but because being is only accessible in the understanding of being this does not contradict the assertion that the subject-matter of phenomenology is Dasein. It would be unfair to suggest that what Heidegger calls phenomenology is wholly unrelated to Husserlian phenomenology, that in effect he is simply cashing in on the power of the *name*. He was in fact passionately committed to the basic ideal of phenomenology of letting things show themselves rather than having them dictated to by a 'system'. And it is not the case that what he chooses to call 'Dasein' bears no relation to Husserl's 'consciousness'. In Heidegger's view intentionality, though not only the 'theoretical' kind, is an essential structure of Dasein. It is however a structure which requires an understanding of being as a condition of its possibility.

Now it is customary to maintain that Heidegger's thinking underwent a radical change, which is sometimes called *die Kehre*, the turn. Insofar as there is a turn it concerns the relationship between Dasein and being. (Although I have chosen to write 'being' with a small 'b' I can understand why some prefer 'Being': it makes it easier to mark the difference between being and beings, *Sein* and *Seiendes*. On the other hand, *all* nouns in German are written with a capital letter so there is no linguistic reason for giving 'being' special treatment.) What I want to do is to offer some reflections on this turn by focusing on some of the differences between *Being and Time* (1927) and Heidegger's 1955 lecture, *The Question Concerning Technology*. The lecture on technology, which Heidegger gave in the context of a series of lectures organised by the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts on the theme of 'the arts in the age of technology' (another of the contributors being Heidegger's friend the physicist Werner Heisenberg who spoke on the picture of nature in contemporary physics) is concerned with the *essence (Wesen)* of technology. Now just as the essence of 'tree' is 'not itself a tree that can be encountered among all the other trees', so the essence of technology is not itself something technological. This would be true even if Heidegger's understanding of *Wesen* were the standard one according to which it means *what* something is, its what-ness. What a tree is is not itself a tree. But what Heidegger understands by essence in this context is the understanding of being which makes technology possible. In the ordinary sense of essence it is clear that technology is a human activity and a means to an end. By specifying what kind of activity it is and what kind of ends it realises and by what means one would have given its essence. Now one can say of this activity and its products that they profoundly influence every area of human life so that it is not surprising that people call this age the age of technology. One may think that technology is entirely beneficial to mankind or, more sensibly, that it brings both benefits and harms. One may reflect that although it is a human activity it is one which is beyond the control of individuals, perhaps even of the human

race. And this may lead one even to demonize technology. But this is not what interests Heidegger. There is a sense in which, for Heidegger, technology is the supreme danger to man. The *essence* of technology, in the Heideggerian sense, is the supreme danger because it prevents us from having a proper understanding of our own being. The essence of technology, in the sense of the understanding of being which makes it possible, is such as to exclude other ways of understanding being, for instance, those involved in creating and engaging with works of art. It is not just understanding being, but understanding being *in manifold ways* which makes us human.

The essence of technology, in the Heideggerian sense of the understanding of being which makes it possible, is what he calls *das Ge-stell*, enframing. Explaining the linguistic motives for the choice of this word would require an essay on its own. Suffice it to say enframing is not an activity in any ordinary sense nor is it itself something technological. It is a way of understanding being or what Heidegger also calls a way of revealing (*Entbergen*). The essence of technology, *Ge-stell*, is a way of revealing (disclosing, uncovering, bringing out of concealment) of what is (*Seiendes* or *das Seiende*) as *Bestand* (standing-reserve). It is a distinctive feature of Heidegger's philosophy that all ways of having to do with things, all modes of comportment to entities, and not just perception and observation, let things show themselves in some way. But what lets things show themselves is what normally does not show itself. What lets things show themselves is the understanding of being. Getting being to show itself, letting it be seen, is the task of philosophy.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger called this letting be seen of being phenomenology. *Being and Time* is 'fundamental ontology' (fundamental because the ontology of Dasein, the study of the being of Dasein, is held to provide the foundation for all other ontologies, though not in the absurd sense that the being of everything is to be modelled on that of human beings.) The method of ontology is phenomenology. Philosophy as Heidegger conceives it after the 'turn' is called *Seinsgeschichte* (history of being), of which the essay on technology is an example. By the time he wrote it he had long ago ceased to use the word 'phenomenology' to describe what he was doing. Indeed he had come to distrust all talk of *method* in philosophy. However, as Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann has pointed out he still uses phenomenological language in his later philosophy. For example, in the work under discussion Heidegger says of the 'challenging (*Herausfordern*) that sets upon (*stellt*) man to order (*bestellen*) the actual as standing-reserve (*Bestand*)' that it must be taken 'as it shows itself' (*wie es sich zeigt*). The 'phenomenon' of Heidegger's phenomenology as he defined it in the Introduction to *Being and Time* is 'that which shows itself'.

At no stage on his 'path of thinking' does Heidegger take himself to be constructing a system. Thinking is dictated by the matter, the things themselves, *die Sache*. Now as regards the *explicitly* phenomenological thinking of *Being and Time*, if

asked the question how does Heidegger know that what he says about human *being* and its structures is true (and to avoid being accused of being un-Heideggerian we can understand a true statement as one which lets something be seen as it is rather than as one which 'corresponds' with a fact) there is a ready answer. He knows what he says is true because he is able to let this being and its structures be seen. For us to accept that what he says is true it is not enough just to read his words and sentences, we must ourselves 'see' the matter they disclose, that is to say we must read the text phenomenologically.

If we now ask: how does Heidegger know that what he says about the essence of technology is true? things become more difficult. I have talked about enframing as though it were simply an understanding of being. As such it would not be a human activity but something which makes possible a human activity. But it would still be something about *us*. The question of whether we do understand reality as *Bestand*, standing-reserve, is one that can in principle be answered. The claim is open to phenomenological verification. The problem is, however, that according to Heidegger enframing is not *just* an understanding of being. It is also what Heidegger calls *ein Geschick*, a sending. As an understanding (a revealing, uncovering, disclosing) it is something we, in a sense, do. But that we understand being in the ways we do is, Heidegger maintains, not of our making. Ways of understanding being, ways of revealing are necessary because what is understood in the understanding of being, namely, being itself, sends them. In understanding being Dasein is being used by being. It is claims of this kind which resist any kind of phenomenological verification. If Heidegger were using 'being' as another term for God then claims about what being 'does' to and with human beings might be established, not phenomenologically, but by *arguments* of the kind used in philosophical theology. But to equate being with God would be to ignore the ontological difference. For Heidegger, early and late, the recognition that being is not any kind of entity is the beginning of wisdom.

In *Being and Time* everything is in principle open to phenomenological verification. Its propositions are ontological rather than ontic, that is to say they are about the being of entities (e.g. the being of Dasein is being-in-the-world) but they are still verifiable inasmuch as being is not something over and above the understanding of being. There is a problem about the verification of some of the statements in *Being and Time* but it is of a different kind. When Heidegger draws a distinction between authentic and inauthentic ways of existing he claims not to be engaged in evaluation. It is not that he does not believe in evaluation, though he does reject the account of evaluation which involves the positing of *values* as a peculiar kind of object. But it is difficult to accept his claim not to be evaluating when we read his analysis of 'the They' (*das Man*) or his account of authentic being-towards death. The problem is that of understanding how, in the absence of values, there could be a phenomenology of what *ought* to be, a letting what ought to be *show* itself.

Paul Gorner is Lecturer in philosophy at the University of Aberdeen

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Philosophy, School of Philosophy, Divinity and Religious Studies

University of Aberdeen · Old Brewery · High Street · Aberdeen · AB24 3UB

Phone: 01224 272380 Fax: 01224 273750 email: philosophy@abdn.ac.uk

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