

Chapter One

Introduction

The distinctive original contribution to modern thought of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is in his ontological interest in the existential question of the meaning of Being. This initial formulation of Heidegger's accomplishment contains two fundamental assertions, both highly disputable: firstly, that Being has a meaning, and secondly, that ontology must be grounded in an analysis of human existence. This thesis will explore Heidegger's philosophy with the aim of showing that the intrinsically ethical character of his ontology emerges from his treatment of these fundamental questions.

At first reading, it must however be admitted that his overwhelming focus on 'pure' ontology gives the impression that his writings have little relation to the problems of ethics. His primary interest is in fundamental ontology for its own sake: this is shown by the startling recurrent claim that the question of the meaning of Being has been forgotten by philosophy and must be rekindled. The question of the meaning of Being initially appears to focus on the realm of thought, in which understanding and interpretation are emphasised, rather than on the realm of action, where ethical applications and consequences can be addressed. Indeed, some interpreters¹ insist that the ethical is in no way germane to the problematic of his thought. Heidegger never directly broached the questions usually recognised as most pertinent to the subject matter of ethics, such as "What is the good?", or "What should I do in a moral dilemma?". He did not even consider key ethical terms such as love, happiness or justice. Indeed, if these questions were all the philosophy of ethics could discuss, Heidegger's ontological ideas could not be treated as arising primarily from an ethical impulse. As one commentator has observed,

"there is apparently no place for ethics in his philosophy. . . Heidegger hardly ever employs the term 'ethics', and when he does, it is mostly to reveal the term's inability to disclose the basic truth of Being. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that in the whole of Heidegger's thought readers constantly hear ethical undertones."²

The goal of this thesis is to show how these 'undertones' mean that Heidegger's writings can and must be interpreted in ethical terms. Heidegger's pure ontology, for all its lofty abstraction and universality, was centred on humanity as the ground of interpretation. Overcoming the long-standing dualities between mind and matter, between thought and action, through the phenomenological analysis of human existence, was central to his

¹ e.g. Richardson: Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought, 1963, p. 531

² Bernard J. Boelen: 'The Question of Ethics in the Thought of Martin Heidegger', pp 76-105 in Frings, M.S.: Heidegger and the Quest for Truth, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1968

philosophical purpose. Although his main concern was how to arrive at an understanding of Being, rather than how such an understanding should be applied, he was not interested in Being 'in itself', in the Kantian sense of some imaginary noumenal reality independent of human understanding. Instead he held that understanding the human situation is the only way to approach the wider question of the meaning of Being as such, that authentic ontology must be based on the existential analytic of Dasein³. He thus maintained that the only sense in which the 'in itself' has meaning is in terms of relationship of things to human purposes, an argument which contains an essential ethical dimension.

Existential ethical themes such as decision, care, conscience, anxiety, guilt, authenticity, alienation and involvement are central to his work, at least in Being and Time. His discussion of such themes led to his thought being widely considered⁴ as an articulation and diagnosis of the condition of an important phase in our culture, along the lines of Nietzsche's belief, reinforced more recently by Rorty⁵, that philosophers should abandon abstract speculation and become "physicians of culture". Heidegger's use of these 'therapeutic' ideas distinguished his thought from the detached 'beholding' valued by earlier philosophies, but the ethical meaning of words like 'decision' and 'involvement' is by no means as clear as at first appears. The critique he developed of the confident rationalism and naturalism of modern thought put him among the founders of the 'post-modern' tendency in philosophy, but his own writings were devoted to consideration of the ontological implications of this critique, rather than its ethical and epistemological dimensions.

Heidegger's work is most closely associated with the modern philosophy of existentialism, the resolute confrontation of the thinking individual with a meaningless world. Despite his criticisms of some who accepted that label, Being and Time must be regarded as the greatest source-book for a comprehensive existentialist philosophy. When thinking of existentialism, the images that spring to mind include Jean-Paul Sartre stepping from the plane to inform waiting journalists that God is dead, an idea that arose out of the Nietzschean ethos which felt that since God had been murdered by science modern life had become absurd. Yet a more positive aspect of Heidegger's existentialism, and one that derives directly from his central themes, is its essential ethical dimension. Heidegger is an existentialist, and as John Passmore observes⁶, "in so far as it has been discussed, existentialism has been taken seriously as a stimulus to ethico-religious thinking". Despite his protestations about being classified as an existentialist, Heidegger's view that finite human existence is the only possible horizon for philosophy makes this description of him

³Dasein' (Being-there) is the German word for human existence. Because of the distinctive way he uses this term it is commonly left untranslated.

⁴ cf. p.12, n.29 R. May: The Meaning of Anxiety, Ronald Press, 1950

⁵ R.Rorty Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature

⁶ p. 459, A Hundred Years of Philosophy, Duckworth, 1957

correct and necessary; indeed he may well have been the most systematic and penetrating of all the philosophers of this school.

This thesis examines how and whether a distinctive ethical perspective emerges from Heidegger's primary interest in the philosophical discipline of fundamental ontology. To extract an answer to this question, Heidegger's unusual and idiosyncratic ideas must be considered in the light of how ethics is generally understood. The issue for ethics is how people ought to behave: as Bacon said,⁷ ethics seeks to ascertain firstly which practices are morally good, and secondly, how to encourage people to adopt these practices. Heidegger only approached this problem indirectly. He analysed the human situation in terms of a phenomenological analysis of human temporality, presenting the ontological structure of existence as temporal, finite and relational. In consequence he presented a profound critique of the metaphysical psychologies, such as the Christian doctrine of the immortal soul and the Cartesian doctrine of the mind as 'res cogitans', which had effectively pretended that men are infinite individuals. The ontology of Dasein is built around the observation that human existence is essentially temporal, which means that time is the only horizon within which we can understand the nature of our being and that we are thrown into a world not of our making. Heidegger sought to interpret this horizon by designating the temporal structure of our existence as 'care' (Sorge), a notion he defined as "ahead of itself Being already in a world, as being alongside entities encountered within the world".⁸ As ahead of ourselves we anticipate possibilities by projecting upon the future, as already in a world we are immersed and engaged by factual involvements. The greater part of Heidegger's major treatise Sein und Zeit is devoted to showing how care is structured in terms of the complex historical relatedness of human temporality.

'Care' functions as a central technical term in Heidegger's existential ontology, but the ethical dimension of the doctrine of care is unclear. It certainly seeks to move philosophy towards an 'incarnational' understanding of truth by delimiting the horizon of meaning in terms of human purposes, but Heidegger's use of the term is difficult and, if care is not taken in interpretation, misleading. As the definition above indicates, and as we shall see when we return to a more detailed discussion of care, the normal understanding of care as helping and nurturing is only one part of its signification for Heidegger. He presents as virtual fact the argument that human existence (Dasein) must be understood as care. The task, at least in terms of the Humean standards of skepticism by which philosophical ethics are judged, is to examine what truth there is in the claim that the Being of Dasein is care, and to consider whether the various 'oughts' Heidegger derived from this

⁷ p.154 The Advancement of Learning Everyman, 1934.

⁸ Sein und Zeit: 192 (Page numbers refer to the pagination of the German original - in the margin of the English text)

claim, concerning such aspects of behaviour and life as empathy, conscience, authenticity and resoluteness, are justified.

The specific unifying question to be addressed in assessing the rigour and worth of Heidegger's ethics is in what sense the 'value' of authenticity can be derived from the 'fact' of temporality. If it can be shown that authenticity is fundamental to a valid practical ethics, and that Heidegger does demonstrate an organic basis for this theme in an exposition of the way things are, namely his analysis of the fact of human historicity, then it will have been shown that his contribution to ethical thought, though presented as incidental, actually indicates the way to a real advance on the dichotomous logic which had been dominant hitherto.

Heidegger himself presented the primary function of his central ideas as ontological, maintaining that any ethical importance is secondary. However, by minimising their ethical significance he may actually have hindered our understanding of his basic ideas. As we shall see, ethics is peremptorily subordinated to ontology in Heidegger's scheme of thought, but the fact remains that his ontology is profoundly ethical. To indicate why this is so, we may take as a clue his own sanctioning of this sort of imaginative interpretation. In Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics he wrote that the most important thing in philosophy is that "interpretation must be animated and guided by the power of an illuminative idea. Only through the power of this idea can an interpretation risk that which is always audacious, namely, entrusting itself to the secret *elan* of a work; to penetrate through a writer's work to wrest from the actual words that which these words 'intend to say".⁹ So just as Heidegger sought to show that Kant's "secret *elan*" is to be found in his laying of the foundations of metaphysics in the transcendental imagination, my aim is to show that the "secret *elan*" which must be 'wrested' from Heidegger's philosophy, and which illuminates its underlying intent, is his ethical message. In Plato's Doctrine of Truth, he wrote that "the 'doctrine' of a thinker is that which is left unsaid in what he says".¹⁰ Heidegger's ethical doctrines may be left unsaid, but their presence in his thought is certain.

Heidegger's principal goal of establishing and articulating our relationship to Being has a clear ethical potential by virtue of its capacity to confront the pervasive modern situation of alienation, and thereby help humanise the dominant modern worldview. However this potential can only be realised if the transformative consequences for human action of this method are thematised through the development of an ethics. Heidegger's failure to do this is surprising, considering that Being and Time points so clearly in this direction. It may be that he 'got his fingers burnt', so to speak, by his involvement with the

⁹ Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics : 207

¹⁰ p.1 Plato's Doctrine of Truth. in Philosophy in the Twentieth Century, Volume Two, edited by W. Barrett & H.D. Aiken.

Nazis in 1933 and as a result decided to forswear practical commitments in favour of a concern for the philosophy of language. This would at least explain the talk of a 'reversal' (Kehre) in Heidegger's thought dating from about 1935, away from the existential analytic of Dasein, the theme of his earlier writings, towards a more meditative, linguistic approach. Certainly this is borne out by his statement in 1954¹¹ that "prevailing man has for centuries now acted too much and thought too little". Perhaps this turning was wise, given his spectacular mistake of believing that any good could come from the evil of fascism, but it leaves open the question of whether an ethics implicit in Being and Time was left undeveloped. His philosophy does not exclude the possibility that a new approach to the practical questions of ethics might be implicit within it, and it is this implicit ethical dimension that I will seek to present as a natural and continuous extension of his system, in application to a network of problems he only partially addressed.¹² This thesis is based on the premise that Heidegger's efforts to ground ontology in care, and thereby reconcile being and existence, means such an ontological ethics is not only possible and necessary, but is contained implicitly in his work.

The word 'place' in the title of this thesis has a double sense; firstly, it calls us to identify the ethical presuppositions and contents, as well as the ethical implications and omissions, of Heidegger's ontology. Secondly, and more importantly, 'place' has the more general meaning of the location, both metaphysical and spatial, where philosophy resides. This second meaning has particular significance in assessing Heidegger's contemporary relevance, because of the urgency of addressing the problem of alienation - the lack of roots and the absence of a sense of meaning and belonging that characterises so much modern life. Beginning with a discussion of aspects of his method and the positive content of his approach, this thesis will outline the problematic status of ethics in Heidegger's thought, not only intellectually in terms of his system, but also morally and historically in terms of his association with Nazism. After then examining his epistemology and his attitude to Descartes, the thesis will seek to assess how Heidegger's fundamental ontology, based as it is on specific ethical themes in his philosophy including care, angst, openness, conscience and authenticity, can form a basis for a new ethics. The overall aim is therefore to appraise the paradigmatic significance of Heidegger's ethical ontology.

Unavoidably this involves a specific and partial interpretation of what Heidegger is saying, rather than a simple exposition, because especially with regard to questions such as the place and meaning of ethics or metaphysics, any attempt at exposition will be fraught with ambiguity.¹³ To illustrate this difficulty, a theme throughout Heidegger's

¹¹ Basic Writings 346

¹² cf: p. 80 John Richardson: *Existential Epistemology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986

¹³ Charles Birch, in *On Purpose*, xi, tells how Charles Hartshorne contrasted Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, saying Russell sought to be clear at almost any cost, while Whitehead

writings is the need to overcome metaphysics, but in the early works this need remains within the context of the recognised goal that philosophy must seek to account for beings in terms of their ground. However in some later texts this whole idea of foundations becomes a problem itself, to the point that some readers, such as Richard Rorty,¹⁴ claim the critique of foundational logic is a central aspect of Heidegger's contribution to philosophy. There have been conflicts of interpretation over this issue, with the 'deconstructionist' school, notably Jacques Derrida, using Heidegger's work to support their own vision of critique without foundations, of philosophy as a fluid articulation of contingent relationships without substance or necessity. Others have accepted that Heidegger did not seek to abolish foundations per se: it is true that he rejected the metaphysical theology of God as a Creator Being and eternal infinite first cause, but his purpose in criticising this old idea was to develop his central thesis of the existential analytic as the source of meaning. As such he only advocated a shift in foundations from God to existence, not the complete abolition of the need for foundations. This shift itself is however not without its own tensions and even inconsistencies, in that at one moment Heidegger appears to value 'average everydayness' as the horizon within which philosophy can find its authenticity, but at the next moment he tells us that authenticity requires the explosion of the false values of everyday life. Nevertheless, as this thesis will hopefully make clear, the doctrine that human existence is the source and judge of meaning remains the guiding theme of both the content and the method of his thought, and as such is central to the place of ethics in Heidegger's ontology.

The object of this thesis is to show that the purpose of Heidegger's ontology can only be understood in terms of basically ethical motives. The context of his thought is his perception that the question of the meaning of Being, which he understood in terms of human temporality as the finite horizon of existence, has been neglected and forgotten. The task of recollection is primarily an ontological one: setting out how the schematism of the understanding can be rigorously grounded in the framework of existence, rather than in the Kantian arena of establishing the necessary conditions for conscious knowledge. The broader perspective arrived at through explicitly restating the question of Being also has an ethical dimension. If this perspective is excluded from consideration, we very soon find that it is forgotten and repressed. Forgetting and repressing the attempt to understand Being in the world as a whole is the inevitable consequence of adopting the false ground on which all metaphysical methods have relied. Only by placing the concerns of metaphysics on the basis of a rigorous phenomenal and temporal understanding can we avoid the debasement of our ethics and values, for such an understanding is an essential foundation for the proper grounding of ethics.

preferred to be "adequate to the richness and many-sidedness of reality", even at the expense of neatness and clarity. Heidegger is certainly much more in line with Whitehead on this score.

¹⁴ Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature