

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Place of Ethics - I**

#### **5.1 Heidegger and Traditional Ethics**

As our discussion so far has intimated, there is a definite ethical undercurrent informing Heidegger's work, but it is not made explicit and remains at the level of a hidden 'elan', an impulse giving direction and meaning to his ideas. That his ethics take the form of such an unsaid elan, rather than an explicit teaching, can be attributed both to his wish to re-establish thought on the foundations of existential ontology, and to his serious criticisms of the way ethics has functioned in philosophy in the past. The nature of this ethical elan will therefore become clearer if we contrast Heidegger's approach with those of traditional ethical philosophies.

The existential analytic of Dasein, which as we have seen is central to Heidegger's ontology, is built around a fundamentally unitary vision of human existence: state of mind, understanding and language are the 'existentialia' which equiprimordially constitute our authentic being. The corresponding inauthentic modes, characteristic of forfeiture to the anonymous mass, are respectively ambiguity, curiosity and chatter. We may contrast this vision of the structure of existence with Plato's doctrine of the three parts of the soul, in which mind, spirit and appetite are presented as the distinct components of motivation. Plato's argument is that the control of passion by reason is at the foundation of ethics, so the nobility of mind, where alone thought is in its element, must harness the unruly and dangerous impulses of the lower desires. However for Heidegger, ontology is just as much concerned with states of being - how we find ourselves (Befindlichkeit) - as with the supposedly higher plane of eternal truth to which Plato would confine it. There is never any sense of one authentic existentialia requiring subordination to another; as we have said, state of mind, understanding and language are equiprimordial. As he says:

"the phenomenon of the equiprimordiality of constitutive items has often been disregarded in ontology, because of a methodologically unrestrained tendency to derive everything and anything from some simple 'primal ground'.<sup>1</sup>

The point is that each of the existentials of Dasein can either be authentic or inauthentic: authentic language attends to what matters, but inauthentic chatter fastens on to whatever the day may bring; we can authentically confront an 'affect' such as anxiety, to consider what it tells us about our being, or we can inauthentically retreat to the pallid lack of mood characteristic of ambiguity.

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<sup>1</sup> Sein und Zeit: 131

A factor conditioning Heidegger's attitude to the problem of the relation of ethics to ontology, illustrated by this comparison with Plato, was therefore his opposition to the way the cognitive distinction between the rational and affective realms became determinate for previous philosophies. The traditional approach, clearest in Plato and Descartes, split rational ontology from what were seen as the unpredictable dispositions of human concern; the contingent nature of such phenomena as emotions and feelings was thought not to possess the 'dignity' of the supposedly eternal truths with which ontology was concerned. Heidegger's criticism of this schema, which conceived of time as a metaphysical criterion demarcating 'absolute' eternal truth from the merely contingent truth of temporal events, was based on his understanding of temporality as the horizon of ontology.

On the basis of his view that existence, rather than knowledge, is the key to understanding, his treatment of actual existence as the essential ground for any universal conceptions rejected the old dualisms. The ethical implication is that the existential analytic must necessarily address the wellsprings of action; in its concern about dispositions and attitudes, moods and emotion, the existential analytic immediately confronts phenomena which are key motivations of human behaviour. If these existential phenomena are excluded from the domain of philosophical truth, as demanded by traditional metaphysics, the search for truth will be forced to relegate major practical areas of ethical concern to the status of passionate opinion and will be unable to comment. The traditional separation of ontology and ethics underlying this attitude was formalised by David Hume, whose doctrine that reason is the slave of the passions implied that interest, rather than logic, was the basis of morality, and that statements of fact, the only proper concern of ontology, can provide no guidance about what we ought to do. In similar vein, Kant, who held that the twin sources of philosophy are "the starry heavens above and the moral law within", held that these two are respectively the objects of separate critiques of pure and practical reason.

These received frameworks meant the notion that there could be an ontological ethics appeared to require the integration of two radically distinct areas of thought. The suggestion that ethics should be grounded in ontology had no apparent correlate in ethics as it was understood and practised. However it is precisely such an integration that is implied by the ethical elan which inspired Heidegger's work. His focus on integrating the rational and the affective, bringing moods and dispositions within the horizon of thought as essential constituent 'existentials' of Dasein, was based on the premise that existential ontology can provide a more primordial access to the truth of existence than the usual path of logical reason. Indeed, Heidegger's argument that rational metaphysics cannot attain to true openness to Being led him to the contention that in the existential analytic of Dasein as Being in the world, "the idea of logic disintegrates in the turbulence of a more original questioning".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Basic Writings 107

For Heidegger, such openness to Being is the key to an authentic comportment towards life, and is only possible within the framework of the existential analytic. It involves our authentic response to existential phenomena such as engagement, anxiety and conscience. Because rational metaphysics denied the legitimacy of such phenomena for thought, it inevitably became liable to the charge of operating on the basis of a partial, and even false, representation. Heidegger formulated this critique in his discussion of 'Being and the Ought' in the Introduction to *Metaphysics*:

"For Kant that which is nature, i.e. that which can be determined in mathematical-physical thinking. To nature is opposed the categorical imperative, also determined by reason and as reason. In relating it to the mere entities of nature Kant calls it explicitly the ought. Fichte proceeded to make the opposition between being and the ought the express foundation of his system. In the course of the nineteenth century the priority passed to entities in the Kantian sense - the empirical world of the sciences which now took in the historical and economic science. this predominance of entities endangered the ought in its role as standard and criterion. The ought was compelled to bolster up its claim by seeking its ground in itself. . . . The values as such now became the foundation of morality. But since the values are opposed to the being of entities in the sense of facts, they cannot themselves be. Therefore they were said to have validity. . . . With the being of values a maximum of confusion and uprootedness was achieved."<sup>3</sup>

This criticism of metaphysics, based on the demand that the disclosure of truth can only occur within the unified horizon of existence, rather than the dichotomous logic of the fact/value distinction, is not to reject reason as such. Coherent discussion of any phenomena can only proceed within a logical structure, but our philosophical outlook about what is true (facts) always does condition both our existential states of mind and our practical decisions (values), and vice versa, whether or not we recognise an organic link. This will be explored further as a thematic key to this thesis when we come to consider how authenticity may be grounded in temporality.

Ethics can obtain an authentic foundation in actual existence only by dismantling the false views of metaphysics and moving towards an authentic perspective attuned to actual existence, which is the aim of Heidegger's temporal vision of authenticity presented in terms of the finite transcendence of *Dasein*.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger's attempts to achieve such an authentic temporal understanding, based on his efforts to overcome the alienation of modern subjectivity, sought to retain a sense of the vision of the whole which gave the impetus to

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<sup>3</sup> Introduction to *Metaphysics*:198

<sup>4</sup> We will return to this theme of the connection between ethics and metaphysics when we consider Heidegger's definition of care in terms of temporality.

traditional metaphysics, while insisting that this whole must have an organic relation to human life. The situation now is that "Being is still waiting for the time when it will become thought provoking to man".<sup>5</sup> For Heidegger it will only be when this happens that humanity will find our destiny and overcome our alienation.

Heidegger's phenomenological scepticism about the applicability of traditional philosophies, and also about the grounds of popular opinion, meant there was no question of any theoretical schema similar to those developed in previous systems of philosophy or religion occupying a central place in his thinking. His frame of reference arose partly from the influence of Nietzsche, the philosopher who had done more than anyone to express the existential tone of the period by articulating salient features of the new situation, a situation Heidegger came to understand as "the abyss of the world's night".<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche's thoughts on the genealogy and social function of morality, as well as his writings on the felt experience of the death of God and the contingency of values previously considered immutable, had cast radical doubt on all previous doctrines of ethics. Common products from writers on ethics had been of the form of a code of morals, or a set of rules of conduct, or a statement of duties and obligations, premised on an ostensibly universal (or openly restricted) notion of human edification. When all values had been dismantled and shown up as mere covers for subjective will to power, as appeared to be the case after Nietzsche, the pressing need was for a new approach able to provide some basis and direction for thought. Heidegger considered that the theme of Dasein as Being in the world provided such a new approach. Hence his refusal to thematise ethics arose from the fact that he was only interested in ethical ideas in so far as they were consequential to his primary aim of uncovering the meaning of Being.

Although his perspective can appear to lack an adequate sense of values, or even, in its opposition to metaphysics, to seek to demolish such a sense of values, if we dig deeper into Heidegger's ontology the true meaning and importance of his thought reveals itself as containing a burning desire to penetrate to the authentic foundations of morality, standing in the light of Nietzsche's challenge to transform older systems of values from the viewpoint of an authentic humanity. The definition of philosophy in the Introduction to Metaphysics as "a thinking . . . that threatens all values"<sup>7</sup> by breaking the paths and opening the perspectives of the dominant cultural systems of knowledge, clearly has its ethical dimension, precisely because of its criticism of the empty values of society, and indeed, the groundless values of philosophy. This thinking is developed in the essay What are Poets For?, where Heidegger suggests that we are now living in a destitute time.

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<sup>5</sup> Basic Writings:203

<sup>6</sup> What Are Poets For? Poetry, Language, Thought: 92

<sup>7</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics: 10

"Not only have the gods fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history".<sup>8</sup> "In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be endured".<sup>9</sup> "The essential episodes of the darkening of the world are the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the standardisation of man, the pre-eminence of the mediocre".<sup>10</sup> "The time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality. . . . The time is destitute because it lacks the unconcealedness of pain, death and love".<sup>11</sup>

Here we see why Heidegger had to reject the traditional visions of ethics as the path of human goodness: in the traumatic and meaningless situation of the collapse of everything previous thought had relied on, it had become essential to begin anew to establish a phenomenal ground for meaning. Only by genuinely confronting indisputable truths, such as pain, death and love, can we break free from destitution and start to again become "capable of our own mortality". With this last statement, the ethical message implicit in his ontology starts to break out of the restraints he has placed around it. The disclosure of pain, death and love, the hardest truths of life, is only possible on the basis of a resolute authenticity which is at once caring, open and true to itself. An important factor for the development of a possible ethical meaning for Heidegger's ideas is thus that becoming "capable of mortality", in all its anguish and limitation, is an essential precondition for authenticity.

The discussion so far, while suggesting how Heidegger's writings may be useful for the establishment of a framework for ethics, nevertheless indicates the problematic status of his employment of ethical concepts. There is a definite ambiguity, if not a real lack of consistency, in the relation between the ethical dimension of his thought and his denial of the significance of ethics for his ontology as a whole. This tension emerges from the fact that Heidegger's existential ontology started from a broader framework than that of ethics, or of any so-called ontic discipline, alone, and that the 'place of ethics' in his philosophy is not in any mutual or equal relationship with ontology, but in service to it.

Ethics, together with "psychology, anthropology, political science, poetry, biography and history", are all only treated as side issues in the overall plan of his thought, because the traditional methods used for the study of these disciplines have "not been carried through with a primordial existentiality comparable to whatever existentiell primordiality they may have possessed".<sup>12</sup> By this he meant that these disciplines have restricted themselves to answering limited tangible questions, but that the real fundamental

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<sup>8</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought: 91

<sup>9</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought: 92

<sup>10</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics: 45

<sup>11</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought: 96

<sup>12</sup> Sein und Zeit:16

questions of philosophy, the questions of 'primordial existentiality', have been systematically avoided and neglected. As we have discussed above, this was the basis upon which Heidegger distinguished the 'existentiell', which is associated with the everyday and the ontic, from 'existential' or ontological questioning. Whether ethics is understood as the tabulation of codes of moral conduct or the practical application of values and principles, we are told that it is among the ontic "existentiell"<sup>13</sup> disciplines, which are defined as such because they have bypassed ontological questioning in favour of an exclusive interest in entities.

Ethics has often sought to understand the broader questions of being and life in terms of clear rules and principles, for example in the schools of deontology and utilitarianism. Kant, the principal figure of deontological ethics, held that the criterion of the moral worth of an action is whether I can will that the principle on which it is based should be a universal law. He held dutiful application of this maxim, the categorical imperative, to be the foundation of the moral law of practical reason, that we should treat humanity as an end, never as a means. The utilitarians, notably Mill and Bentham, believed that maximising human happiness holds a roughly similar place at the foundation of ethics. Plato, long regarded as among the greatest of ethical thinkers, held that ethics can only be developed in the context of the recognition that pure reflective thought is the source of knowledge of absolute truth. Plato considered that pure formal intelligence possesses a divine dignity, and taught that moral ideas like the just and the good, the equal and the real, can be defined according to their true nature only through pure contemplation of their ideal essence. Traditional systems of ethics have based their prescriptions on such sources as the Word of a mythical Creator, on duty or utility, or, at least with Plato's idea of the good, on the ontological domain of pure thought. Certainly there is a strong ontic dimension to all these approaches in their concern about actual practical consequences for human action, as is the case with Heidegger's own ethics. However it is wrong to say, in Heidegger's terms, that their existentiality has always been subordinate to their existentiellity, meaning that they have all neglected the question of Being and thereby forfeited their authenticity, because this is simply untrue.

To illustrate by example, limited codes of ethics, such as those of the Institute of Engineers or the Retail Traders Association, do not base their prescriptions on disclosure of the relation of humanity to Being, because, as Heidegger says, they are exclusively concerned with practical principles governing relationships between entities. However this limitation does not apply to real ethical thinkers like Kant and Plato, whose purposes are associated more with fundamental transformations in people's inherent being. Kant's doctrine of the categorical imperative and Plato's doctrines of the soul and the virtues have the establishment of a transformative relation between humanity and Being as a clear

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<sup>13</sup> Sein und Zeit:12

underlying theme. For Kant, duty is distinguished from inclination by its inherent nature: duty simply is, and ethics consists of discovering what our duty is and doing it. As such, the basis of Kantian ethics is no mere subjective caprice but seeks to find its ground in the structure of reality. Heidegger actually recognised this when he described Kant's metaphysics of morals as "an ontology of Dasein and existence".<sup>14</sup>

For Plato, the pursuit of truth is conceived in the schema of the divided line as involving the ascent from illusion through belief and reason to absolute pure intelligence. The divided line sets out the division between illusion, concerned only with entities and images, and intelligence, whose concern is true Being, culminating in the idea of the good. Although Plato's teaching that the good does not change can be interpreted as indicating a disdain for questions of morality, the notion of a relationship between human beings and ultimate reality is nevertheless central to his system, if we credit his notion of intelligence with any validity. Similarly, Hegel's teaching that freedom is the recognition of necessity grounds the moral idea of freedom in a conception of ultimate truth.

Heidegger's contention that ethics as such does not deserve a central place in the original effort to rekindle the question of Being is therefore out of step with the way Plato, Kant and Hegel have treated similar themes. Furthermore it does not cohere with his own central argument that ontological understanding must be grounded in the existential analytic of Dasein, nor with his statement that the essence of truth is freedom.<sup>15</sup> His grounding of ontology in existence, although presented as purely ontological, actually establishes a relation which is ethical in essence, because taking it seriously effects a transformation in our conduct, away from the false values of both metaphysics and ignorance, towards the authentic values of truth, care and openness.

## **5.2 The Transcendental**

Our characterisation of Heidegger's method as a systematic existential phenomenology can be interpreted as developing a 'middle way' for philosophy, in the spirit of the Kantian critical method, which sought to steer the fragile craft of metaphysics between the respective excesses of rationalism and empiricism. Heidegger's Scylla and Charybdis however, are rather different from Kant's; they are the ontic and the transcendental. In the attempt to create an authentic, finite and ethical ontology, Heidegger sought to distinguish his own method from traditional systems of ethics and metaphysics, attacking both the merely 'ontic' view of the function of thought and the method of transcendentalism, seeking instead to steer a way between these contrasting paths.

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<sup>14</sup> Sein und Zeit:293

<sup>15</sup> Basic Writings:125

We have devoted attention to Heidegger's attitudes to various ontic methods, so to consider the opposite conception against which his ontology finds its reference, we shall now discuss his relation to transcendentalism. Transcendentalism is the method of idealism, philosophical and religious. Heidegger criticised this method, or at least its mythic tendencies, in many ways, although it must be said his own thought was not without its mythic dimension. A central theme of his philosophy is the analysis of the relation between human life and truth, and his efforts to deconstruct the ways this problem had been previously treated led him to a sharp critique of transcendental metaphysics. The critique of transcendentalism, not, it must be said, of transcendence, is developed in Heidegger's efforts to sustain a basis in truth, while vigorously criticising the way the relation between humanity and absolute truth has been interpreted in the past.

For example, in his treatment of the way time has been used as a criterion to distinguish 'absolute' eternal truth from the merely contingent truth of temporal events, Heidegger says that the old idea from Plato and Augustine,<sup>16</sup> that there is a 'cleavage' between 'timeless' eternal propositions on the one hand, and 'temporal' assertions and entities on the other, is very dubious. Time has come to have the distinctive ontological function as the criterion separating realms of Being, the transcendental and the worldly, and is therefore basic to the foundations of understanding, yet as Heidegger observes, no one has hitherto troubled to investigate how time is able to perform this function. Temporality is the phenomenon where human existence comes into view as a whole, but neither the partial glimpses given by scientific methods nor the sweeping vistas of transcendental metaphysics can enable us to secure an adequate view of it. Heidegger's thought about temporality derives from Kant in important ways, for example in his tendency to treat time as the 'form of the inner sense', but he differed from Kant by placing a new emphasis on temporality in his treatment of actual existence as more significant than any universal conceptions, on the basis of his view that existence, rather than knowledge, is the key to understanding. Heidegger was certainly interested in formulating propositions about existence that would be universally true, but his perception was that the frameworks for comprehending universal truths developed historically by philosophy, and also by both religion and science, fell short of the demands of authenticity he took as the only justifiable criterion. His own attempts to achieve such an authentic understanding, based on his efforts to overcome the alienation of modern subjectivity, sought to retain a sense of the vision of the whole which gave the impetus to traditional metaphysics, while insisting that this whole must have an organic relation to human life.

Heidegger's definition of philosophy as "universal phenomenological ontology, which takes its departure from the hermeneutic of Dasein"<sup>17</sup> has inevitable ethical implications,

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<sup>16</sup> Sein und Zeit: 18

<sup>17</sup> Sein und Zeit: 38



because the 'hermeneutic of Dasein', or more simply, the interpretation of human existence, is a topic which cannot be pursued unless the ethical questions surrounding human freedom and action are addressed. Heidegger went close to recognising that the philosophy of Being cannot avoid the issues surrounding these themes with his statement that Being "is the incipient power gathering everything to itself, which in this manner releases every being to its own self. The being of beings is the will".<sup>18</sup> Such gathering can only be done by power of will, which is to say things really come into Being only in the context of human freedom and action or as something willed. The fundamentally idealist character of Heidegger's position reveals itself here, with this definition of the Being of beings in relation to human existence. Together with his claims that "it is in words and language that things first come into being and are",<sup>19</sup> and that in the existential analytic "the 'substantial Being' of entities within the world (has) been volatilised into a system of relations and . . . dissolved into pure thinking",<sup>20</sup> this statement of the centrality of will reinforced the mediating role of human thought he had established in the existential analytic of Being and Time. In a way which appears to contradict his claim that "the priority of Dasein . . . has obviously nothing to do with a vicious subjectivising of the totality of entities",<sup>21</sup> he went on to indicate support for the idealist orientation with his argument that "only as long as Dasein is, 'is there' Being".<sup>22</sup> Because "Being can never be explained by entities, . . . idealism affords the only correct possibility for a philosophical problematic",<sup>23</sup> even if previous forms of idealism have gone astray by focussing on epistemology rather than securing their theories on the basis of an existential analytic.

The essential goal of Heidegger's method of thought is to speak the truth of Being - a mystery if ever there was one - in such a way as to comprehend and dynamically interrelate past, present and future, and then to act on the basis of this reflective knowledge. The authentic comportment towards this temporal goal is located in the resolute anticipation of finitude: "in resoluteness, the Present is not only brought back from distraction with the objects of one's closest concern, but it gets held in the future and in having been. That present which is held in authentic temporality and which thus is authentic itself, we call the moment of vision."<sup>24</sup> For Heidegger, "the history of Being is never past but stands ever before; it sustains and defines every human condition and situation".<sup>25</sup> The history of Being is a whole which can only be apprehended in terms of the understanding of destiny.

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<sup>18</sup> Poetry Language Thought: 100

<sup>19</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics:13

<sup>20</sup> Sein und Zeit: 87

<sup>21</sup> Sein und Zeit: 14

<sup>22</sup> Sein und Zeit: 212

<sup>23</sup> Sein und Zeit: 208

<sup>24</sup> Sein und Zeit:338

<sup>25</sup> Basic Writings: 194

To "get a hold on this destiny, . . . means thoughtfully to reach and gather together what in the fullest sense of Being now is",<sup>26</sup> recognising that no metaphysics, whether Christian, idealistic or materialistic has achieved this synthetic integration of meditative reflection on the past with active involvement in the present situation in order to shape the future destiny of the world. Ideally, such an immanent philosophy would succeed in integrating the everyday experience of human nature with reflection on the divine or absolute nature, in order to establish a relationship between the message of eternal truth (if this problematic phrase can be used) and the situation of life in the here and now.

The ethical purpose underlying this project is the development of a systematic philosophical framework able to comprehend and participate in the processes of transformation occurring in the world today. Holistic philosophies have often sought to present themselves as having achieved such a developed ethical vision, but have often failed to bring enough clarity and rigour to the task or have erected barriers of prejudice or method that have prevented them from reaching their goal. Heidegger places the effort to think the truth of Being at the very centre of his understanding of what it is to be human. As such his philosophy demands recognition of the importance and meaning of ethics, but is at odds with Christianity, in that the temporal horizon of his thought contradicts the Christian notion of a God who is both eternal and personal. Heidegger characterised the beliefs at the basis of most religious ethics in terms of their transcendentalism, on account of their acceptance of 'eternal truths' and life after death. As such, religion is a part of the metaphysical tradition which his phenomenology sought to deconstruct.

To develop our discussion of Heidegger's approach to traditional metaphysics, we may consider his attitude to Christian morality as indicative of his whole attitude towards the ethics and metaphysics developed in Christian contexts. The ten commandments written on the tablets of stone brought down from Mount Sinai by Moses are accepted among Jews and Christians as the basis of ethical law; the nature of the divine commandments as moral dogma - effectively 'eternal truth' - obliges adherents to accept them without question, whatever the complexities of the situation. Heidegger's response to such systems was predicated on his existentialism, his belief that essence can only ever be understood in terms of existence. The freedom and originality of his perspective thus completely negated any dogmatic acceptance of traditional theology. From an existential point of view, the prohibitions enjoined by the ten commandments are assessed with a view to their actual consequences, which might of course turn out to be perfectly good. Their claim to divine origin may be true, but Heidegger's attitude was that such claims, based as they are on transcendental sanction, are outside any philosophical assessment and cannot be considered in the development of phenomenology.

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<sup>26</sup> Basic Writings: 221

Heidegger considered the suggestion that the so-called 'eternal truths' of religious faith could provide a foundation for thought, and therefore for action, to be an abdication of intellectual responsibility. He made numerous scathing remarks about religion, for example condemning the very contention that there could be such things as 'eternal truths', saying that this belief belongs "to those residues of Christian theology within philosophical problematics which have not as yet been radically extruded."<sup>27</sup> Because truth is bound up with disclosure, and therefore with human understanding, Heidegger contended that the idea "that there are eternal truths will not be adequately proved until someone has succeeded in demonstrating that Dasein has been and will be for all eternity",<sup>28</sup> an obvious impossibility. He brought the traditional doctrine of transcendence into radical question: the "inadequate ontological foundations"<sup>29</sup> of Christianity are at the root of "the idea of transcendence - that man is something that reaches beyond himself". But this dogma "can hardly be said to have made an ontological problem of man's Being".<sup>30</sup>

In the Introduction to Metaphysics the rejection of the doctrines of established religion was carried even further. Christian faith has its own answers to the question of Being, but to say "In the beginning God created heaven and earth", and then refuse to expose this dogma to question, is to deny the possibility of a genuinely philosophical stance. It is for this reason Heidegger described a Christian philosophy as "a round square and a misunderstanding",<sup>31</sup> not because there can be no thinking elaboration of faith, but because theology must be clearly demarcated from philosophy. Heidegger thought Christian theology conceals the true intellectual force of the most elemental words,<sup>32</sup> such as the Greek words *logos* and *aletheia*, by allowing a merely dogmatic understanding to pass off its interpretation as fundamentally correct. This argument is developed with his description of the Latin translation of the Greek language as a deformation and decay from an originally unimpaired strength.<sup>33</sup> The framework provided by theology, a framework closely associated with the Latin categories which inform the scholastic tradition, must therefore be rejected if philosophy is to be true to its task. The elaboration of faith by theology can never replace philosophy, because faith dogmatically prevents itself, for example with its belief that God created the world, from proceeding according to the open methods of ontology. Heidegger therefore said Being is "not God and not a cosmic ground",<sup>34</sup> and that it would be "the ultimate error" to explain his theories about the

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<sup>27</sup> Sein und Zeit:229

<sup>28</sup> Sein und Zeit:227

<sup>29</sup> Sein und Zeit: 48

<sup>30</sup> Sein und Zeit:49

<sup>31</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics:7

<sup>32</sup> Sein und Zeit:220.

<sup>33</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics:13

<sup>34</sup> Basic Writings: 210

essence of humanity as though they were "the secularised transference to human beings of a thought that Christian theology expresses about God, namely that God is his Being"<sup>35</sup> in the Thomist sense.

Heidegger's criticisms of Christianity tend to revolve around the otherworldliness of theology. Consider for example his comment that for Christianity, "man is not of this world, since the 'world', thought in terms of Platonic theory, is only a temporary passage to the beyond".<sup>36</sup>

There are many such criticisms of religion sprinkled through Heidegger's writings, but it must be said they all ignore the ethical message at the origin of the churches' teachings by focussing on the limits of modern piety as if that were all there is to the Christian perspective. Indeed, the central doctrine of Being and Time, that the meaning of Being is care, appears to attribute precisely the sort of anthropomorphic purpose to ultimate reality that Heidegger's claims about the rigorous destruction of metaphysics are designed to counter. To say that Being is a transcendental universal providing the ground of the existence of all entities, and yet that it can be clearly distinguished from God, has been a source of much contention.<sup>37</sup> If Being is not identified with God it is hard to see how it can have a 'meaning'. Confinement of meaning to the framework of care excludes any reference to a beyond, a limitation against which Heidegger frequently chafes.

It should be an open question whether there is something essentially sacred about life and reality, whether the things we come into contact with are sustained by and move within a divine whole that confers meaning and value. Heidegger recognised this with his observation that the mechanistic causal view which denies any animation or purpose to being faces insurmountable difficulties. Part of the value of his work is in his efforts to establish a humanistic compromise between the opposing camps of religion and science, accepting the centrality of purpose to any coherent account of meaning while demanding that such purposes could only be philosophically cogent if restricted to the finite horizon of human temporality. For example in his discussion of death, he said "the existential analysis is superordinate to the questions of a biology, psychology, theodicy or theology of death".<sup>38</sup> Similarly with respect to conscience, "the ontological analysis . . . lies outside of any 'biological' explanation' of this phenomenon (which would mean its dissolution). But it is no less distant from a theological exegesis of conscience or any employment of this phenomenon for proofs of God".<sup>39</sup> With his emphasis on finitude, temporality and relativity, Heidegger was concerned to avoid speculative themes which cannot be grounded with phenomenological precision. Ethical ideas such as the good, justice, duty and love are in

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<sup>35</sup> Basic Writings: 207

<sup>36</sup> Basic Writings: 200

<sup>37</sup> see for example J. Macquarrie, *An Existential Theology*, SCM 1955

<sup>38</sup> *Sein und Zeit*:248

<sup>39</sup> *Sein und Zeit*: 269

this category; despite all having been major concerns of traditional philosophy, none of them are discussed thematically in Being and Time.

The significance of transcendence is still a difficult issue for Heidegger. His criticism of the Christian conception of the 'beyond' contrasts with his own positive characterisation of the transcendence of Being in terms of the individuation of Dasein:

"Being, as the basic theme of philosophy, is no class or genus of entities; yet it pertains to every entity. Its universality is to be sought higher up. Being and the structure of Being lie beyond every entity and every possible character which an entity may possess. Being is the *transcendens* pure and simple. And the transcendence of Dasein's being is distinctive in that it implies the possibility and the necessity of the most radical individuation."<sup>40</sup>

The world, Being, human existence and language are all transcendent, because Dasein has a kind of Being which is different from that of any object or thing. This does not however mean that our essence is to be found in an immortal soul to which a body is only incidentally attached, or as a mind to which spatial existence is inessential. As Heidegger says,

"on the contrary, because Dasein is spiritual, and only because of this, it can be spatial in a way which remains essential impossible for any extended corporeal thing".<sup>41</sup>

Dasein's transcendence of the unreflective present is achieved by existential projection upon our possibilities in the resolute anticipation of the future. The doctrine of authenticity thus treats transcendence within a finite and immanent horizon, because unlike traditional approaches, Heidegger's conception of authentic transcendence is not towards an infinite unknown. Instead, transcendence is a finite capacity of Dasein as Being in the world. Part of the basis for the entire existential analytic is the effort to make mortality rather than immortality the context in which thought must operate. By making resolute anticipation of death the basis for the most fundamental way we can relate to the totality of being, Heidegger introduced a finite humanistic dimension that reinterpreted the Christian doctrines of transcendence and eternity in terms of the temporal horizon of human being in the world.

This finite temporal horizon is limited by death. The possible truth of life after death is consequently irrelevant to existential analysis: "the this-worldly ontological interpretation of death takes precedence over any ontic other-worldly speculation" because the "clarification of evil" in the sense of original sin, etc., "lies outside the domain of an existential

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<sup>40</sup> Sein und Zeit:38

<sup>41</sup> Sein und Zeit:368

analysis".<sup>42</sup> Heidegger's critique of transcendence is in terms of human existence as a finite whole, which leads him to an emphasis on death as the event where this finite unity is made manifest.

The Greek lawmaker Solon told the wealthy king Croesus of Lydia not to call a man happy until he is dead,<sup>43</sup> because without the vision of the whole life it is impossible to make a just assessment. Heidegger accorded a similar role to death when he describes it as illuminating our historicity. Death is the limit in terms of which we can envisage the totality of our Being as a unity, but immortality and eternity are outside this finite limit of existential ontology because unlike death they cannot be phenomenally disclosed.<sup>44</sup> Heidegger thereby dismissed immortality and eternity as metaphysical projections without real grounds in Being. Although Being "is the transcendens pure and simple", it is not disclosed through idealistic speculation but through the existential analytic of human being in the world.

Despite this emphasis on finite immanence, there is much in Heidegger's philosophy that compels the comparison of his ideas with the religious tradition, and the problematic nature of Heidegger's discussion of transcendence points inevitably towards a religious dimension in his thought. For example, he described his interpretation of the basic structure of care as

"an attempt to interpret the Augustinian (i.e. Helleno-Christian) anthropology with regard to the foundational principles reached in the ontology of Aristotle",<sup>45</sup>

thereby placing himself within the Catholic tradition of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a tradition whose scholastic and social ideals shaped his own upbringing as a pastor's son. Heidegger's religious dimension is most clear in his claim that illumination of Being is the only source of access to the holy:

"the holy, which alone is the essential sphere of divinity, which in turn alone affords a dimension for the gods and for God, comes to radiate only when Being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation has been illuminated and experienced in its truth".<sup>46</sup>

This formulation is noteworthy as a strong affirmation of the significance of central religious themes. In its statement that vision of the holy must be based on experience of Being, it affirms the need for this dimension of life to be recognised, but denies the possibility that these religious ideas could have a purely transcendental meaning. For Heidegger it is only in the immanent realm of Being that talk of God and the holy can find

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<sup>42</sup> Sein und Zeit: 248

<sup>43</sup> Herodotus: the Histories 1:32.

<sup>44</sup> cf.: Sein und Zeit:18, 227, 247

<sup>45</sup> Sein und Zeit:199,n. vii

<sup>46</sup> Basic Writings: 218

an authentic human meaning. The understanding of human spatiality as dwelling within the spiritual horizon of concern was developed in his later essay Building, Dwelling, Thinking into the doctrine that “man is insofar as he dwells”, which “also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for”.<sup>47</sup> Heidegger developed this ethic of human life as ‘dwelling’ in a distinctively spiritual way. As dwelling, people’s occupation of space is no mere physical subsistence, but is bound up with memory and relatedness to context. Heidegger came to understand this context in terms of the framework of earth and sky, mortals and Gods, which he called the fourfold <sup>48</sup>, the elemental constituents of Being as dwelling. As we have seen in our discussion of Heidegger’s analysis of the Heraclitean notion of ethos, a theme which has strong connections to this idea of the fourfold, projection onto a transcendental horizon is essential to Heidegger’s formulation of what it is for humanity to authentically dwell upon the earth.

Yet the problem with accepting these transcendental ideas as a sufficient foundation for philosophy is that life is not authentic; people believe untrue ideas and accept the lack of any genuine relation to divinity as normal. The tendency on the part of the ‘they’ to cover up any expectation of death “confirms our thesis that Dasein, as factual, is in the ‘untruth’”.<sup>49</sup> Heidegger felt in his own time that this inauthenticity manifested itself in terms of the age being “too late for God and too early for Being”. In the essay What are Poets For he wrote of the age as needing to endure the “abyss of the world’s night”:

“The default of God means that no God any longer gathers men and things unto himself, visibly and unequivocally, and by such gathering disposes the world’s history and man’s sojourn in it. The default of the Gods forebodes something even grimmer, however. Not only have the gods and the God fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world’s history. The time of the world’s night is the destitute time . . . The time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality. Mortals have not yet come into ownership of their own nature. Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of pain remains veiled. Love has not been learned. But the mortals are. . . . To be a poet in a destitute time means to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world’s night utters the holy.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought p.149

<sup>48</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought p.149

<sup>49</sup> Sein und Zeit: 257

<sup>50</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought p.91-96

One of Heidegger's own poems is worth presenting here for the concise insight it gives into the tone and goal of Heidegger's thought as finite transcendence:

"The world's darkening never reaches  
to the light of Being.

We are too late for the gods and too  
early for Being. Being's poem,  
just begun, is man.

To head towards a star - this only.

To think is to confine yourself to a  
single thought that one day stands  
still like a star in the world's sky."<sup>51</sup>

### **5.3 Ethics as Elan: Tensions in Being and Time**

Heidegger's ethics are not specifically articulated in Being and Time; indeed, he described his own interpretation as "purely ontological in its aims, and far removed from any moralising critique of everyday Dasein".<sup>52</sup> For example, care (Sorge) is the central theme of Heidegger's whole philosophy, and the term in which Dasein finds its meaning,<sup>53</sup> but perplexingly, it is a term he is at pains to divest of ethical content. So he writes that care is not to be understood primarily as a positive ethical term, along the lines of 'devotedness' or 'the cares of life', although these do come into it. Instead, 'care' is "the existential condition for their possibility".<sup>54</sup> As he wrote in Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, "if one takes the expression 'care' - despite the specific directive that the term has nothing to do with an ontic characteristic of man - in the sense of an ethical and ideological evaluation of 'human life' rather than as the designation of the structural unity of the inherently finite transcendence of Dasein, then everything falls into confusion".<sup>55</sup> The reasoning behind this designation of care, as the unifying theme of Dasein's finite transcendence, is that

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<sup>51</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought: 4

<sup>52</sup> Sein und Zeit: 167

<sup>53</sup> Sein und Zeit Chapter 6

<sup>54</sup> Sein und Zeit: 199

<sup>55</sup> Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics: 245. We shall return to this quotation in our final chapter when the meaning of care will be discussed in more detail.



Heidegger uses care as a technical term which can only be grasped as a whole by beginning from the temporal horizon of the ontological analytic.

The statement above that his thought is 'removed from any moralising critique' is followed by an analysis of this "everyday Dasein", about which he does not want to moralise, in terms of the concept "Verfallensein", a German word which is most accurately translated as 'forfeiture' but which also has the meanings of 'fallenness' and 'decadence'. The analysis of 'forfeiture' is presented as a basic constitutive item in the temporal structure of Dasein as the normal mode of relating to the present. His effort to present such an apparently evaluative term as without moral connotations, as part of an abstract ontological schematism, is just one example of the complex attitude Heidegger had towards the moral undertones of central themes in his work.

The everyday character of such fallen existence is constituted by idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity, and is an essential part of the existential analytic of Dasein as the usual mode of being for normal social life. Heidegger maintained, perplexingly, that his interpretation of human life as having forfeited its authenticity in favour of the idle chatter and ambiguity of anonymous mass existence, "does not express any negative evaluation".<sup>56</sup> Despite his apparently scathing indictment of the destitution of the age,<sup>57</sup> Heidegger said we would "misunderstand" forfeiture if we thought it indicated a "bad or deplorable property of which more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves".<sup>58</sup>

Heidegger maintained that forfeiture "does not signify the Fall of Man understood in a 'moral-philosophical' way",<sup>59</sup> but rather the "absorption of Dasein in the world of its concern". He says

Far from determining its nocturnal side, forfeiture constitutes all Dasein's days in their everydayness. It follows that our existential-ontological interpretation makes no ontical assertion about the 'corruption of human Nature', not because the necessary evidence is lacking, but because the problematic of this interpretation is *prior* to any assertion about corruption or incorruption. Ontically, we have not decided whether man is 'drunk with sin' and in the *status corruptionis*, whether he walks in the *status integritatis*, or whether he finds himself in an intermediate stage, the *status gratiae*.<sup>60</sup>

It is almost as though we are not to condemn Dr Faustus for having forfeited his soul to the devil. One explanation might be that here we see Heidegger's insight into the

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<sup>56</sup> Sein und Zeit: 175

<sup>57</sup> for example his description, Introduction to Metaphysics: 37, of "this Europe, in its ruinous blindness forever on the point of cutting its own throat" and of America and Russia as exhibiting "the same dreary technological frenzy, the same unrestricted organisation of the average man"

<sup>58</sup> Sein und Zeit: 176

<sup>59</sup> Basic Writings: 212

<sup>60</sup> Sein und Zeit: 179

genuine predicament of modern life - having cast in our lot so completely with the means and ends of modern technology, we live in an existential condition of forfeiture against which moral denunciation is irrelevant. Forfeiture, says Heidegger, is not intended as a term of moral condemnation, but a recognition of the ontic fact that humanity exists as thrown into a world not of its own making, and that we must immerse ourselves in everyday involvements and concerns. Certainly this refusal of a moral dimension to the critique of forfeiture, based on the claim that any such moral assertions must come back to the existential analytic if they are "to make a claim to conceptual understanding",<sup>61</sup> raises a whole series of complex questions for the place of philosophy. For example we may ask whether the goal of phenomenology is merely to be descriptive or whether it also has a normative imperative. It may also be asked whether authenticity, as the means to the recognition and overcoming of forfeiture, is genuinely worth striving for if it lacks such a moral dimension. The answer I shall suggest to this difficulty is that Heidegger's opposition to ethics is more methodological than fundamental: that ethics is subordinated to ontology more out of a desire to emphasise the centrality of ontology for thought than any ambivalence to questions of practical moral guidance. The discussion of forfeiture betrays the tension in Heidegger's work between its underlying ethical elan and his surface denial of this motivation. The nature of this tension will be come clearer if we consider Heidegger's attitude to the public morality of those he calls the 'they'.

Rather than suggesting moral degeneracy, forfeiture indicates to Heidegger "the character of Being-lost in the publicness of the 'they'".<sup>62</sup> The 'they' (das man) is Heidegger's term for the "average being of everydayness". Ideas holding currency among the 'they' are characterised by inauthenticity: we encounter 'them' when we base our values and judgements on what 'society' considers appropriate, as in commonly heard suggestions, based more on cultural acceptability than reason, that "one shouldn't do this or that". 'They' "restrict the possible options of choice to what lies within the range of the familiar, the attainable, the respectable - that which is fitting and proper. . . The average everydayness of concern becomes blind to its possibilities, and tranquillises itself with that which is merely 'actual'. This tranquillising does not rule out a high degree of diligence in one's concern, but arouses it".<sup>63</sup> "They" are the 'who' of public life, responsible for "the noiseless suppression of every kind of priority and the levelling down of all possibilities of Being".<sup>64</sup> Heidegger criticises the way people get lost in "the tasks, rules and standards, the urgency and extent of concerned and solicitous Being-In-The-World", saying that if these tasks, rules and standards are not consciously chosen by the individual, "Dasein makes no choices, gets

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<sup>61</sup> Sein und Zeit: 180

<sup>62</sup> Sein und Zeit: 175

<sup>63</sup> Sein und Zeit: 194

<sup>64</sup> Sein und Zeit: 127

carried along by the nobody, and thus ensnares itself in inauthenticity".<sup>65</sup> In "clinging to what is readily available and controllable even where ultimate matters are concerned, . . . man goes wrong as regards the essential genuineness of his standards".<sup>66</sup> "The common sense of the 'they' knows only the satisfying of manipulable rules and public norms and the failure to satisfy them. It reckons up infractions of them and tries to balance them off. It has slunk away from its ownmost being guilty so as to be able to talk more loudly about making 'mistakes'".<sup>67</sup>

While Heidegger may claim that his existential analytic places a new value on 'average everydayness', his treatment of forfeiture to the 'they' suggests this value is hardly positive, because he blamed the 'they' as primarily responsible for the destitution of the age. Against this everyday falling existence, Heidegger presents a vision of authenticity in terms of finite existential openness: "When resolute, Dasein has brought itself back from falling, and has done so precisely in order to be more authentically 'there' in the moment of vision as regards the situation which has been disclosed."<sup>68</sup>

This gives us the rather strange picture of everyday society as having forfeited its authenticity in favour of a shallow and inauthentic alienation, but as not deserving any censure from the cool and apparently value-free ontology of the existential analytic. Presumably, this also means Heidegger's call for us to heed the voice of conscience, which he defines as the call of care<sup>69</sup>, is not intended to be primarily evaluative, nor to point the way towards possible advances in the level of culture. This despite the role he gives conscience, through anxiety, of impelling us toward such virtues as authenticity, openness, care, self-constancy, transparency and resoluteness. The conclusion that encouraging these practices will not require any moral evaluation of popular behaviour is untenable, but to show its error we must demonstrate a positive ethical message in Heidegger's thought. Several notions commonly associated with ethical virtue are significant structural components of Heidegger's ontology, so after inquiring further into his understanding of the relation between ethics and ontology as presented in the Letter on Humanism, we will be in a better position to consider what they each mean.

#### **5.4 The Development of Heidegger's Ethics: The Letter on Humanism**

The discussion in the Letter on Humanism<sup>70</sup> about the relation of ontology to ethics provides the only direct exposition of an ethical dimension in Heidegger's thought,

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<sup>65</sup> Sein und Zeit 268

<sup>66</sup> Basic Writings: 134

<sup>67</sup> Sein und Zeit: 288

<sup>68</sup> Sein und Zeit: 328

<sup>69</sup> Sein und Zeit, section 57

<sup>70</sup> Brief über den Humanismus, 1946. translated in Basic Writings, RKP 1978

with its development of the existential analytic into the suggestion that ontology is itself the original ethics.<sup>71</sup> The Letter was written in response to a request from the French philosopher Jean Beaufret that Heidegger answer several questions on such topics as the meaning and place of humanism, the relation of ethics to ontology, and how philosophical research could preserve its essentially adventurous nature. At the time Heidegger was under the constraint of an order from the occupying forces in western Germany forbidding him from teaching because of his involvement with the Nazi Party, so the request from Beaufret appeared as an excellent opportunity to explain his perspective on humanism, to consider its nature and validity, and to reflect on its relation to the broad questions raised by the general philosophical inquiries into ethics and truth. The specific 'humanism' in question is the philosophy of the metaphysics of subjectivity, which has exercised a pervasive historical dominance especially through the influence of Kant and Descartes.

One of the key arguments of the Letter on Humanism is a development of the thesis presented in the Introduction to Metaphysics that 'the ethical' has become the degraded modern moral counterpart of what the ancients understood as the 'ethos'. If our ethics are effectively to assist the understanding of truth and the improvement of the human situation, they cannot be only a matter of arbitrarily decided rules and norms, but must be anchored in the ground of our Being. Only ontological thought can identify such grounds, because ontological attunement to Being as a whole is indispensable to the grounding of our actions in the primal subsistent basis of life. For Heidegger, this primal subsistent basis is identified with the 'ethos'. He therefore suggests that ethos "denotes not mere norms, but 'mores' based on freely accepted obligations and traditions".<sup>72</sup>

The 'ethos' is interpreted in the Letter on Humanism as the creative foundation of authentic ethics. In his essay 'Gelassenheit',<sup>73</sup> this was taken further with the statement that for "human work to flourish, man must be able to mount from the depth of his home ground up into the ether. Ether here means the free air of the high heavens, the open realm of the spirit." The notion that ethics must establish a foundation in ethos relies on the figurative paradox of finding a ground in something heavenly, in so far as the ether is the environment of the ethos. It is noteworthy that Heidegger's use of 'ethos' is designed to retain a phenomenal content for ethics, grounding it in something that can appear to us, in a way wholly transcendental ideas cannot.

The way ethics can be 'grounded' in the phenomenon of ethos, and the sense in which ethos can be phenomenal, become clearer if we consider Heidegger's analysis of Heraclitus' saying, "*ethos anthropoi daimon*", usually translated as "a man's character is his

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<sup>71</sup> Basic Writings : 235

<sup>72</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics:16

<sup>73</sup> Discourse on Thinking, Harper & Row, New York 1966, p.47

guardian angel", or more succinctly, "character is fate".<sup>74</sup> The traditional lesson drawn from this aphorism is that a person's character determines his or her destiny: if you are good you will succeed but if you are bad you will fail. This interpretation brings out the ambivalence in the word 'ethos', for if 'ethos' is understood to mean character, or even the moral climate or cultural atmosphere of the place we live in, we may speak just as easily of an ethos which is noble and fair as of one which is violent and greedy. Ethos will then come to mean whatever norms or rules prevail in a particular situation.

However "*ethos anthropoi daimon*" should not be interpreted as such a straightforward moral observation, but as an admonition to live according to an ethos which truly befits human existence. Heidegger takes ethos to mean more than character, as it signifies "abode, dwelling place . . . the open region in which man dwells".<sup>75</sup> The translation of ethos as 'dwelling place', which Heidegger calls the 'primordial element' of existence, introduces a positive ethical content to the saying, which remains hidden when the usual definition of ethos as character is accepted. Similarly, the word 'daimon' cannot be simply defined as 'fate'. Daimon is translated by Heidegger as 'nearness to God', to suggest the possibility that there may be some purpose acting as the driving force in human destiny, perhaps imparting some grace as a part of our essential nature. Daimon is more universal than individual destiny, as its meaning here signifies that humanity has a spiritual relation with Being as a whole.

One of the most famous instances of the 'daimon', Socrates' guiding light in the *Apology* and the *Phaedrus*, can easily be understood in accordance with Heidegger's interpretation. For Plato, Socrates' 'divine element' is 'the sign of the god'.<sup>76</sup> It is not a force at his disposal or the blind hand of his fate, but an external call determining his mission. It therefore appears that daimon is somewhat akin to conscience, a suggestion we will return to when we come to discuss Heidegger's treatment of that topic. For example in the *Phaedrus*,<sup>77</sup> after Socrates has spoken slightly of love, the daimon insists Socrates must make amends to the God of love by making a speech doing justice to the truth of this divinity.

If ethos and daimon truly impart a normative sense to the meaning of *anthropoi*, the usual translation of "*ethos anthropoi daimon*", which is merely descriptive, will not express the full meaning. Heidegger translates the saying as: "man dwells, insofar as he is man, in the nearness of God", from which he concludes that the final meaning is that "the familiar abode (ethos) is for man (*anthropoi*) the open region for the presencing of God (*daimon*)".<sup>78</sup> He thus makes an essential point that reinforces the ethical dimension in his

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<sup>74</sup> This translation has been attributed to Novalis: cf Guy Davenport, Herakleitos and Diogenes.

<sup>75</sup> Basic Writings: 233

<sup>76</sup> *Apology* 31d & 40b

<sup>77</sup> *Phaedrus* 242c

<sup>78</sup> Basic Writings: 233

thought: if 'ethos anthropoi', the dwelling place of humanity, is bound up with the authentic spirit of truth (daimon), it must be seen as wrong to permit conduct which arises from an inhuman spirit simply to be observed without censure. Such conduct can only occur in situations where the true essence of humanity pointed to in Heraclitus' saying is unknown or denied.

Such an understanding of the ethos of humanity prevents the acceptance of inauthentic values; for example Heidegger says curiosity, which together with alienation and idle chatter make up the principal inauthentic modes of existence, gives popular beliefs the quality of rootlessness, a "never-dwelling-anywhere".<sup>79</sup> From this we may infer that the curious and the ambiguous arise from modes of 'anthropoi' which deny its ethos and so prevent Dasein from hearing the voice of its 'daimon'. Heidegger argues that the overcoming of the aimless stumbling of homelessness, and the associated task of reversing the abandonment of Being by beings, can only become possible when we recognise the syndrome of never-dwelling-anywhere as symptomatic of the problem of alienation and its oblivion of Being. The main feature of this alienation is that man observes and handles only beings and thinks that is all there is to life,<sup>80</sup> instead of seeking to dwell in the truth of Being.

In the light of these considerations, ethics, as the study of the ethos, must ponder the abode or dwelling place of humanity, but if this is so, ethics becomes identical with ontology: "That thinking which thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of man is in itself the original ethics. However this thinking is not ethics in the first instance, because it is ontology".<sup>81</sup> The goal of this new ethics is to formulate a fundamental ontology that will recognise a thinking more rigorous than the conceptual,<sup>82</sup> based on the claim that "the thinking that thinks from the question concerning the truth of Being questions more primordially than metaphysics can".<sup>83</sup> The purpose of seeking to advance thinking into the truth of Being is to "bring that wholly other dimension to language".<sup>84</sup> Such a thinking is neither ethics nor ontology, as they are currently understood, so "the relation of each to the other no longer has any basis in this sphere".<sup>85</sup> The effort is to stand forth "into the the open region that lights the 'between' within which a relation of subject to object can be",<sup>86</sup> so thinking may return to the poverty and simplicity of its origins. Such thinking will not

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<sup>79</sup> Sein und Zeit:173

<sup>80</sup> Basic Writings: 218

<sup>81</sup> Basic Writings: 235

<sup>82</sup> In similar fashion the interpretation of truth as disclosure in the existential analytic of Dasein presented the 'existentials' of Being in the world as more primordial than the ideas of reason.

<sup>83</sup> Basic Writings: 230

<sup>84</sup> Basic Writings: 235

<sup>85</sup> Basic Writings: 236

<sup>86</sup> Basic Writings: 229

necessarily produce anything grand or exciting, but it will ensure that philosophy is more truthful.

Consider the other story about Heraclitus related in the Letter on Humanism. Cosmopolitan travellers visited him, hoping by visiting the famous thinker to encounter evidence of the exceptional or rare to provide material for their tales, but they were astounded to find him warming his hands by the stove in his hut, in the most common and insignificant place possible. Heidegger says of the situation that "he stands there merely to warm himself. In this altogether everyday place he betrays the whole poverty of his life. The vision of a shivering thinker offers little of interest. At this disappointing spectacle even the curious lose their desire to come any closer".<sup>87</sup> But the words of the philosopher transform the situation. He says, "Here too the gods are present", to indicate that the supreme reality is manifested in the most ordinary place. As with the birth of Christ in the food trough, it is not by ascending to the eternal that thinking will find the greatest truth, but by recognising the manifest presence of that truth in ordinary life.

So too, "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".<sup>88</sup> Heidegger aims to provide a radical investigation into the foundations of metaphysics, an investigation that will critically examine the old schemas used to ground understanding and provide a way forward with more authenticity than the conceptual inventions of subjectivist metaphysics. The difficulty is not however in the ascent to the truth. "The descent, particularly where man has strayed into subjectivity, is more arduous and dangerous than the ascent. The descent leads to the poverty of the eksistence of homo humanus".<sup>89</sup> To understand the humanitas of homo humanus is the essential task facing the redefined and non-metaphysical humanism Heidegger seeks to allow to emerge by showing that the essence of humanity lies in our existence as finite temporal relational beings for whom Being is an issue. Such an understanding will also explode the rationalist logic based on the false subject/object dichotomy.

An implication of this grounding of ethics in the 'ethos' is that when such popular ideas as God and value are accepted as absolute, as they must be in order to perform their public function in the 'they-world', their true significance is often obscured as a result, and people act on the basis of a partial and degraded interpretation. As Heidegger writes, "Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivising. The bizarre effort to prove the objectivity of values does not know what it is doing. When one proclaims 'God' the

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<sup>87</sup> Basic Writings: 234

<sup>88</sup> Basic Writings: 231

<sup>89</sup> Basic Writings: 231 Heidegger's neologism 'eksistence' is discussed in Section 7.5

altogether 'highest value', this is a degradation of God's essence".<sup>90</sup> So, for example, rather than accept 'humanism' on face value as the most practical and progressive moral viewpoint, Heidegger demands that along with all other ways of thought it must be examined in terms of whether it is open to the truth of Being. Certainly he is seeking to reinforce the value of humanity, but the point is that the value of humanity is not necessarily the same thing as the values of humanism.

Heidegger's opposition to humanism is not based on support for the inhuman or the barbaric; it arises instead from the conviction that "the highest determinations of the essence of man in humanism still do not realise the proper dignity of man".<sup>91</sup> For humanism, man's essential worth is as the sole subject among beings, the Cartesian thinking substance who has power to decide about the correctness of propositions. Heidegger thinks this makes man "the tyrant of Being", whose arrogation of objectivity claims technocratic control over fate, whereas the real situation is that Being 'throws' us into life. "Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the lighting of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being".<sup>92</sup>

In the Letter on Humanism the spur driving Heidegger's reflections is the question of the proper place of humanism in the philosophy of Being. He argues that because humanism as a philosophy has been blinkered by the metaphysics of subjectivity, especially through the influence of Kant and Descartes, it has failed to penetrate through its preconceptions to a full understanding of the essence of humanity. Because it has been so caught up with particular concerns, humanism has failed to realise there is Being, a truth beneath, before and above, both nearest to and furthest from the things we touch and use, but whose ultimate reality is the historical destiny of all we know and all that is beyond our knowledge. This notion of being as destiny is central to Heidegger's thought, as is the related vision of the meditative task of philosophy as opening humanity to understanding of the historical truth of being as destiny, something impossible for the calculative methods of humanism. The aspiration to understand truth is the distinctive sign of the essence of humanity, but modern humanism, the legacy of enlightenment rationalism, has failed in this aspiration by accepting subjective metaphysical preconceptions about the nature of truth as final, instead of opening itself to the disclosure of being in the world.

This limitation is not confined to modern thought: Heidegger contended that it had an ancient origin in Plato's transformation of thinking into philosophy, and of philosophy into epistemology and a matter for schools, when "science waxed and thinking waned".<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Basic Writings: 228

<sup>91</sup> Basic Writings: 210

<sup>92</sup> Basic Writings: 210

<sup>93</sup> Basic Writings: 232



As thought under the ascendancy of Aristotelian logic became directed more towards the ontic goal of technical mastery than the ontological aim of pure understanding, the stringent separation of disciplines actually prevented understanding of the true foundation of ethics in ontology.

Paradoxically, the essence of humanism, which Heidegger defined as the concern that man should become free for his humanity, can only escape its confinement within the errors of metaphysics when the Aristotelian definition of man as the rational animal is discarded. Heidegger claimed that authentic understanding of human freedom and nature can only overcome the deficiencies of metaphysics if the first thing it discards is the ancient tradition that begins by defining man firstly as a rational animal, as the "*zoon logon echon*".

The problem about the definition of man as a rational animal is its context within the ontology of the present at hand which defines logos purely as assertion,<sup>94</sup> and which thus lacks the openness Heidegger sought to introduce with his theme of Being in the world. As Heidegger put it, the "*zoon logon echon*" "is grounded in a metaphysics which presupposes an interpretation of Being without asking about the truth of Being".<sup>95</sup> It may seem that with this claim Heidegger is joining those 'despisers of the body' for whom Nietzsche reserved such withering contempt, but this is not so. The problem with the location of our essence in the realm of 'animalitas' is its sanctioning of the neglect of the question of Being by giving pride of place to technological mastery over beings and the cult of practical reason, which according to Heidegger has been the main impediment preventing philosophy from coming to a proper appreciation of where the real essence of humanity is to be discovered.

So he regarded our "bodily kinship with the beast" as "appalling and scarcely conceivable",<sup>96</sup> arguing that however distant it may appear, divinity is closer to our existent essence. Even in their closeness, animals and plants are separated from our essence by an abyss, because lacking language they lack a world, as distinct from an earth or a habitat. While remaining in their environment they are unable at the same time to stand outside their being into the truth of Being. It is this capability that is the distinctive feature of the *humanitas* of *homo humanus sapiens*, that we are the only beings able to relate to a transcendent truth. The essence of humanity is located in our capacity for openness to the truth of Being, revealed through language. Heidegger reinforced the mediating role of human thought he had established in the existential analytic of Being and Time by relating being to language. He reveals his essential humanism, albeit a humanism quite different from that of

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<sup>94</sup> cf: *Sein und Zeit*:165

<sup>95</sup> *Basic Writings*: 202

<sup>96</sup> *Basic Writings*: 206

subjectivist metaphysics, with his claim that "it is in words and language that things first come into being and are".<sup>97</sup>

A clue to what Heidegger is driving at with these ideas is his claim that the poet "Holderlin does not belong to humanism because he thought the destiny of man's essence in a more original way than 'humanism' could".<sup>98</sup> The poet who took it upon himself to say, and thus embody, the destiny of the west, did so in the first instance by standing forth into Being, rather than by looking at the visible realities of physical nature as the primary source of the essential truth of existence. The value of this effort to understand the essence of man as *humanitas* is that our real essence emerges in our relationship to the entire context of life as a whole.

For Heidegger, Being is "the destiny that sends truth . . . heralded in poetry".<sup>99</sup> As Holderlin said, "Full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells on this earth" .<sup>100</sup> Merit is the criterion of conduct often accepted by humanism, and it is usually accorded to the technical capability to get things done. Yet such merit, the sign of positive accomplishment and control, does not tell the whole story of what it is to dwell on the earth, for it is through poetry and thought, as well as action, that philosophy encounters and reflects on Being.

Heidegger's critique of humanist philosophy arose from his basic stance regarding thought; its nature, meaning, role and goal. For Heidegger it is an absolute certainty that the ultimate purpose of thought can be summed up in the statement that "thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man".<sup>101</sup> The meaning of this a priori conviction is expressed in the oft-quoted aphorism; "language is the house of Being",<sup>102</sup> which means that truth is only revealed to human knowledge through words, even if it is never created by them. For Heidegger, those who think and those who create with words dwell in the home of language and are its guardians.<sup>103</sup> Despite the inherent ambiguity that language hides the truth as often as it brings it out of concealment, there is a fundamental authenticity about this approach to the meaning of Being.

Despite the talk about a 'turn' (Kehre) in Heidegger's thinking, dating from some time in the 1930s and marking an abrupt departure from the concerns in the early writings about the existential analytic of Dasein towards a distinctly different interest in issues arising within the philosophy of language, there is a basic continuity in his thought regarding the importance of continual recollection of the meaning of Being. The shift from a conceptual focus on existence to the focus on language is bound up with the implications of ontological

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<sup>97</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics:13

<sup>98</sup> Basic Writings:201

<sup>99</sup> Basic Writings:219

<sup>100</sup> Basic Writings:236

<sup>101</sup> Basic Writings:193

<sup>102</sup> Basic Writings: 193

<sup>103</sup> Basic Writings:193

hermeneutics: already in Being and Time he expressed this vision of the primacy of language when he asked the question whether, given that "the Being of the ready to hand (involvement) is definable as a context of relations, and that even worldhood may be so defined, then has not the substantial being of entities within the world been volatilised into a system of relations? And inasmuch as relations are always something thought, has not the Being of entities within the world been dissolved into pure thinking?"<sup>104</sup>

Such a system of relations cannot be the creation of human freedom alone, but must emerge as the framework of historical development, the truth in which freedom establishes itself. While in Heidegger's later writings pure thinking, openness to logos, became more and more a preoccupation, and talk of the role of language assumes a central function, it is always of language as "the house of Being". The question of the meaning of Being retains its centrality, although the analytic of human Being in the world sometimes retreats to the background in the later writings as the exploration of other dimensions of this multifaceted question takes priority. Man nevertheless remains on centre stage, even if Heidegger sometimes claims to have dethroned him in favour of Being, because if language is the house of Being, man is always needed to shepherd and guard this house. For Heidegger "language is the language of Being, as clouds are the clouds of the sky".<sup>105</sup>

### **5.5 Stoicism?**

It may be mentioned here that Heidegger's portrait of the ideal life appears to take a lot from the ancient school of the Stoics. Like Heidegger, the Stoa resigned themselves to the impossibility of broader social change and focused their attention on the individual pursuit of excellence. Their philosophy is strongly echoed in Heidegger's doctrine that resolute anticipation of death is the ground of freedom, and his argument that authentic freedom must spring from the recognition of finite mortality rather than from imaginary myths such as the immortality of the soul.

Heidegger said that "Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it *is* ontological".<sup>106</sup> Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Stoic philosopher and Emperor of Rome in the Second Century A.D, puts a similar idea in these terms: "God has distinguished man, for he has put it in his power not to be separated at all from the universal",<sup>107</sup> and calls us to "let thy intelligence also now be in harmony with the intelligence which embraces all things".<sup>108</sup> Antoninus believed that a central task for the intellectual faculty is to observe that death is no more

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<sup>104</sup> Sein und Zeit:87

<sup>105</sup> Basic Writings: 242

<sup>106</sup> Sein und Zeit: 11-12

<sup>107</sup> VIII.34

<sup>108</sup> VIII.54

than "a dissolution of the elements",<sup>109</sup> and "an operation of nature".<sup>110</sup> It is possible on the basis of such an attitude towards death to discern "what value everything has with reference to the whole, and what value with reference to man".<sup>111</sup> Such a Stoical comportment will also enable us to recognise that "all things are implicated with one another, and the bond is holy".<sup>112</sup>

Whether or not Heidegger's agreement with Antoninus would extend to his suggestion that "everything which happens, happens justly",<sup>113</sup> there is a basic commonality regarding the place of man, and the attitude to death and the whole. For Heidegger, "Dasein is authentically itself in the primordial individualisation of the reticent resoluteness which exacts anxiety of itself".<sup>114</sup> This individualisation is interpreted in terms of the constancy of the Self, which "gets clarified in terms of care",<sup>115</sup> and has "the double sense of steadiness and steadfastness". While the moral connotations of this perspective are once again left implicit, it is still possible to see the connection between Heidegger's emphasis on authentic individualisation as the ground of steadfast care, and Antoninus' view that the mind can only maintain its proper good when self-collected and unperturbed.<sup>116</sup> Antoninus exhorts us to "look within, for within is the fountain of the good, and it will ever bubble up, if thou wilt ever dig";<sup>117</sup> he suggests "a perpetual fountain" is to be found in "freedom conjoined with benevolence, simplicity and modesty".<sup>118</sup>

The central place given in Being and Time to Seneca's view that "the good of God is fulfilled by his nature but the good of man is fulfilled by care"<sup>119</sup> also attests to the influence of the Stoics on Heidegger's thinking. So too the tracing in the Letter on Humanism of the history of humanism to its origins in the Roman Republic, where 'homo humanus' was contrasted to 'homo barbarus' through the exaltation and honouring of Roman virtue, which was embodied in the Hellenistic education consisting of scholarship and training in good conduct.<sup>120</sup>

Even more than these similarities, Heidegger's use of the Greek word 'physis' reveals his debt to Stoicism. While critical of the translation of physis through the Latin 'natura' as 'nature', on the ground that it "destroyed the actual philosophical force of the

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109 II.17

110 II.12

111 III.11

112 VII.9

113 IV.10

114 *Sein und Zeit*: 323

115 *Sein und Zeit*: 322

116 IX.41

117 VII.59

118 VIII.52

119 *Sein und Zeit*: 199

120 *Basic Writings*: 200

Greek word",<sup>121</sup> he suggested there is "a desideratum which philosophy has long found disturbing but has continually refused to achieve: to work out the idea of a 'natural conception of the world'".<sup>122</sup> Being in the World is a more natural idea than is commonly supposed, considering that "envirning nature is the very soil of history".<sup>123</sup> Heidegger's discussion of physis indicates his debt to the Stoic ideal of living according to natural reason, which regarded life in harmony with physis as the foundation of ethics. From the time of Zeno, who founded the Stoic school in Athens in 320B.C., the stoics understood physis as the natural spirit of evolution which makes the world grow and progress .<sup>124</sup> For Heidegger, physis denotes "self blossoming emergence", discovered through "a fundamental poetic and intellectual experience of Being".<sup>125</sup> It is the "elemental power" which can be captured for humanity by "creators, poets, thinkers, statesmen".<sup>126</sup>

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121 Introduction to Metaphysics: 13

122 Sein und Zeit: 52

123 Sein und Zeit: 381

124 cf. Gilbert Murray, The Stoic Philosophy

125 Introduction to Metaphysics: 14

126 Introduction to Metaphysics: 62