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## Heidegger's Approach to Being: Man as the Fundament of Ontology

### Abstract

In contrast to the metaphysics of presence or substance ontology of traditional metaphysical thinking, this paper is an analysis of Martin Heidegger's approach to Being where the individual or *Dasein* is the route to, the illuminator of, and the shepherd of, Being via his transcendence into Nothing, his meditative thinking, and his use and mastery of language and discourse. It also highlights on the import of such an approach to Being where man is the fundament of ontology.

### Key Words

Being, Heidegger, Transcendence, Fundament, Man, Nothing.

## Heidegger'in Varlık'a Yaklaşımı: Ontolojinin Temeli Olarak İnsan

### Özet

Mevcudiyet metafiziğine ya da geleneksel metafizik düşüncenin töze dayalı ontolojisine karşıt olarak bu yazı, bireyin ya da *Dasein*'in kendi aşkınlığını hiçliğe bırakması, derin düşünmesi, söylem ile dile yönelik yetkinliği ve kullanımı aracılığıyla yöneldiği, aydınlattığı ve çobanı olduğu Varlığa ilişkin Martin Heidegger'in yaklaşımını analiz edecektir. Yazı, aynı zamanda insanın ontolojiye temel olduğu böylesi bir Varlık yaklaşımının önemini vurgulamaktadır.

### Anahtar Sözcükler

Varlık, Heidegger, Aşkın, Temel, İnsan, Hiçlik.

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## Introduction

Traditional Western metaphysical thinking is basically preoccupied with substance ontology or the metaphysics of presence where by all that is real is reduced to, or become attributes of, some substance or entity. As Charles B. Guignon says, substance ontology is the view that what is ultimately real is that which underlies properties—what ‘stands under’ (*Sub-stantia*) and remains continuously present throughout all change. Because of its emphasis on enduring presence, this traditional ontology is also called the ‘metaphysics of presence.’ It is found, for example, in Plato’s notion of the Forms, Aristotle’s primary substances, the Creator of the Christian beliefs, Descartes *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, Kant’s *noumena*, and the physical stuff presupposed by scientific naturalism (Guignon 1996). Such presupposed substance becomes the basis or fundament of ontology.

This paper, however, attempts an analysis of a radical deviation from this sort of metaphysical thinking about Being inherent in traditional metaphysics. This radical deviation is seen in the works of the twentieth century philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). In contrast to the above, his analysis of the meaning of Being places the individual as the fundament of ontology, the shepherd of Being, the route to Being. The paper also examines the implications of such a conception of Being

## Heidegger’s Project: The Question of the Meaning of Being

The question that fascinated Heidegger throughout his long philosophic life can be simply stated: what is the meaning of Being (Frede 1996)? The search for a concrete interpretation of the meaning of Being guided Heidegger’s philosophical thought and this was first brought to fame in his work of 1927, *Sein un Zeit* (trans. *Being and Time*). Thus, in the first pages of this work, he states the nature of his enterprise aptly.

“Do we in our own time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word ‘being’? not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of being*. But are we nowadays even perplexed by our inability to understand the expression ‘Being’? not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of the question. Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of *Being* and to do so concretely” (Heidegger 1988).

Evidently, Heidegger intends to reawaken modern man to the significance of the nature of Being, and to provide an account of its nature. This is a bold enterprise and one which belongs in the mainstream of Western philosophy (Anderson 1966). But what does Heidegger imply by the ‘meaning of Being’? Does this refer to all beings to whatever we may say that is—rocks, trees, clouds, colours, sounds, dreams or irrational numbers alike? Or does the question presupposes some abstract metaphysical concept like ‘Being as such’, as seem to be indicated by the fact that English translation usually capitalize the letter ‘B’? Being (*Das Sein*) for Heidegger is not any *thing*. It is not a being at all. The question of Being inquires into the happening, the event, in which all beings become accessible and understandable to us as beings. Being is thus essentially verbal and temporal. Literally translated, *das Sein* would be ‘the *to be*’ but this would be

far too clumsy a rendering. Among Heideggerian scholars there is considerable controversy on how best to translate *das Sein* into English. Many prefer the lowercase 'being' in order to fend off the impression that Heidegger means some Supreme Being standing before, above or holding up all other beings; *das Sein* must not be mistaken for a subject deserving the substitution that capitalization can imply in /English. (In German all nouns are capitalized so there is no such implication). Still, to render *das Sein* as 'being' risk confusion especially with 'beings' as for the *das Seiende*, and so we resort to the capitalized term (Freid and Polt 2000).

Heidegger made it his task to show that there is a meaningful concept of the Being of all beings, a conception that underlies all our understanding of reality. As he saw it, this conception has been the aim of all metaphysical thinking, even if it was not always properly understood. The search for an answer remained the search for a clarification of the questions (Frede 1996). He says therefore that,

“Basically, all ontology, no matter how rich and firmly compacted a system of categories it has at its disposal remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task” (Heidegger 1988).

How does Heidegger intend to go about this? First, he 'destroys' traditional metaphysical thinking or ontology which he characterizes as the 'forgetfulness of Being' in order to reconstruct it in the being of *Dasein* as the only access to Being itself. As he says succinctly,

“If to interpret the meaning of Being becomes our task, *Dasein* is not only the primary entity to be interrogated; it is also that entity which already comports itself, in its Being, towards what we are asking about when we ask this question. But in that case, the question is nothing other than the radicalization of an essential tendency-of-Being which belongs to *Dasein* itself...” (Heidegger 1988).

*Dasein* is the horizon in which something like Being in general becomes intelligible; this is fundamental ontology which must begin by clarifying the possibility of having any understanding of being at all— an understanding which itself belongs to the constitution of the entity called *Dasein* (Guignon 1996). Therefore Heidegger's project involves basically the destruction of traditional ontology, the analytic of *Dasein's* own being, his mode of thinking his mysterious relation to time, his inevitable bond with language (Krell 1977), and his transcendence into Being in order to pave way for the understanding of the meaning of Being.

### **Heidegger on the 'Forgetfulness of Being' in Traditional Western Ontology**

As identified earlier, Heidegger's main tasks are (i) the ontological analysis of *Dasein* as laying bare the horizon for an interpretation of the meaning of Being in general and, (ii) the task of 'Destroying the History of Ontology' (Heidegger 1988). In this section, we focus on the second task. But what does Heidegger mean by 'destroying the history of ontology'? Heidegger is not out to do violence to history or to

pick on his predecessors for their blindness. The German word '*Destruction*' is not as violent as its English counterpart. This destruction is not a deconstruction as some people would have it nowadays but an analysis intended to show where the decisive steps of the derailment took place in the history of Western ontology. Heidegger does not have the deconstructionists' detachment from tradition: he thinks that it can be mastered and rectified even while acknowledging that the 'missteps' were inevitable. His concern is with unravelling the history of ontology to show the decisive steps that led to the dominance of the ontology of *Vorhandenheit* and to the forgetfulness of Being (Frede 1996).

Heidegger begins his work, *Being and Time* with an exclamation that "this question—the question of the meaning of Being—has today been forgotten" (Heidegger 1988) What is this forgetfulness of Being? Forgetfulness, or oblivion is the kind of concealment that fails to safeguard a thing from the harsh light of the obvious, that neglects the unconcealment of things and so remain blind to the essence of truth" (Krell 1977). How did the history of ontology forget Being? One of the reason Heidegger gives is their preoccupation with "beingness" (*Seiendheit*) understood as the essential property of actually existent entities (Guignon 1996). *Seiendheit* (beingness) in traditional ontology is that which characterizes beings as beings in general. For Heidegger, much of the history of philosophy has focused on this beingness rather than inquiring into the happening of Being itself (Freid and Polt 2000). This preoccupation with beingness, Heidegger says, is a particular way of understanding the nature of reality that arose at the dawn of Western history and dominates our thought to this day as substance ontology. J. Glenn Gray says succinctly that,

"... Being in the Greek tradition came to be understood as substance, *ousia*, and substance in turn was equated with *parousia*, presence. That which is truly present is the enduring, the unchanging, to which both past and future are irrelevant. So Being became in Plato, Aristotle and the later Christian philosophy identified with the timeless and supreme, and ontology passed into theology. Heidegger keeps clear of this traditional pattern" (Gray 1952).

Heidegger was particular in this respect about Aristotle's doctrine of the *categories* of beings when he presented his view of the historical development of Western thought that ended up in complete forgetfulness of the question of Being. Aristotle distinguished as many meanings of 'being' as there are categories of entities. There are the primary categories of substance designating natural 'things' which exist in their own right, while all other entities are *attributes of substances* either inhering in them or standing in some other relation to them (quality, quantity, relations, place, time, action, possession, position). He regarded the categories as distinctions contained in the nature of things; they are read-off nature and are not schemas read into or imposed on nature by us. They are natural structure of reality based on the *primacy of substance* naturally existing *independent* entities that form the building block of the universe. Substances are the only entities that can exist in their own right while all other entities are attributes that need substance as the substrate for their existence. And since the being of a substance, a quality, a quantity, or other attributes are *irreducibly different* there is no unified sense of 'being' that could be predicated on items in all categories. There is only an 'analogy of being' that has in recent years been termed 'focal meaning'

to indicate the centrality of the substance without permitting a univocal definition of the term 'being' (Frede 1996).

Substance ontology went a long way in determining the future development of metaphysics not only in later antiquity but through the Middle Ages into the modern age; substance remained the central term in traditional ontology and substances or things, natural entities with attributes and the capacities to interact causally with one another, remained the building blocks and became Heidegger's main challenge (Frede 1996). Ever since Descartes, this substance ontology has bred a covey of either/ors that generate the so-called problems of philosophy: either there is mind or everything is just matter; either our ideas do represent objects or nothing exists outside the mind; either something in me remains constant through change or there is no personal identity; either values have objective existence or everything is permitted (Guignon 1996).

A second reason that Heidegger gives for the forgetfulness of Being in the history of Western thought can be located in their preoccupation with what they regarded as the opposites of Being rather than with Being itself. This is one of his major preoccupations in *Introduction to Metaphysics* that appears immediately after the seventh German edition of his *Being and Time*. Here, he shows how the tradition of European philosophy has concerned itself with an analysis of the opposites of Being, such as becoming, appearance, and so on, and that he tried to transcend these opposites to arrive at Being (Anderson 1966).

In this distinction between Being and its opposites, what Heidegger calls the 'distinction between 'Being and its other' (Heidegger 2000), Being is seen as self-evident, universal and indefinable (Heidegger 1988). One such distinction cited by Heidegger is that between Being and becoming. His words:

"This division stands at the inception of the questioning of Being. Even today, it is still the most familiar restriction of Being through an other; for it is immediately obvious, due to a representing of Being that has hardened into the self-evident. What becomes, is not yet. What is, no longer needs to become. That which 'is' has left all becoming behind it. If indeed it ever became or could become. What 'is' in the authentic sense also stands up against every unslaught of becoming" (Heidegger 2000).

He traces this distinction to Parmenides and Heraclitus. For instance, Parmenides, he says, set forth the Being of what is in contrast to becoming. Being, according to Parmenides, is permanence, the One unchanging and when we speak of Being we must look away from all *generis*, passing away, and so on, and look beyond them in an active sense: in our seeing, we must hold them away, expel them (Heidegger 2000). Other such distinctions he examines in details include 'Being and Seeming,' and 'Being and Thinking'.

Therefore, the history of metaphysics is a history of forgetfulness or 'withdrawal' in which entities obtrude as actually existing and as having essential properties while Being— that which first makes it possible for anything to show up in its *existential* and *essential* — remains concealed. This withdrawal is evidenced in Plato's interpretation of the beingness of entities as the aspect (*idea*) or perfect prototype, knowable through pure rational contemplation that produces those diverse

material things that comes to be in our visible world. Later developments lead to a conception of entities as 'what has been produced' and of Being as 'being produced' (by nature or by God). In the modern age, this production is seen as what 'stands before' (*vor-stellend*) a subject or a Will. To be, then, is to be the stably persisting outcome of a productive act —that which 'lies before' the producer as his or her product (Zimmermon 1996).

Due to this covering-up of Being in the unfolding and the event (*ereignis*) of the history of metaphysics (See Rosen 1993), Heidegger took an essential step to confront the question of the meaning of Being through the analysis of human existence since human understanding is the only entrance and key to the nature of Being.

### ***Dasein* as the Route to Being**

"But there are many things which we designate as being (*'seiend'*)... Everything we talk about everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way, is being; what we are is being, and so is how we are. Being lies in the fact that something is, and in its Being as it is, in Reality; in presence-at-hand; in substance, invalidity; in *Dasein*; in the 'there is'. In *which* entities is the meaning of Being to be discerned? From which entities is the disclosure of Being to take its departure?... to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of Being; and as such, it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of Being, we shall denote with the term "*Dasein*." If we are to formulate our question explicitly and transparently, we must first give a proper explication of an entity (*Dasein*) with regard to its Being" (Heidegger 1988).

In these lines, Heidegger makes it clear that to work out the question of Being, the analysis of *Dasein* is our route. What does he mean by *Dasein*? *Dasein* denotes that being for whom Being itself is at issue, for whom Being is in question. For the most part, in Heidegger, this being is us, the human beings; although *Dasein* is not equivalent to human beings; Heidegger insist that *Dasein* is not an anthropological, psychological, or biological concept. We can think of *Dasein* as a condition into which human beings enter, either individually or collectively, at a historical juncture when Being becomes an issue for them; in this sense, Heidegger often speaks, in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, of 'historical *Dasein*', 'our *Dasein*', 'human *Dasein*', or 'the *Dasein* of a people'. In everyday German, the word *Dasein* is used just as we use the word 'existence'; we may always substitute 'existence' for "Dasein in order to get a sense of how Heidegger's statements would have sounded to his original audience. But Heidegger consistently sees the Latin term *existentia* as misleading and superficial, so it is preferable to interpret *Dasein* in terms of its root meaning. This root meaning is usually rendered in English as 'Being-there', but when Heidegger hyphenates *Da-Sein*, we employ the equally valid translation 'Being-here'. *Dasein* is the being who inhabits a Here, a sphere of meaning within which beings can reveal themselves as meaningful and significant (Freid and Polt 2000).

An investigation into Being really ought to be able to inquire about the Being of any being, any being at all. Yet only one being consistently makes itself available each

time such a question is raised, namely, 'the men who pose the question'. Analysis of the being that raises question concerning its Being would prepare the way for an inquiry into the meaning of Being in general (Krell 1977). A larger part of *Being and Time* is devoted to this analytic of *Dasein*. Why does *Dasein* qualify as the means to Being? In Heidegger's words:

"*Dasein* is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather, it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it. But in that case, there is a constitutive state of *Dasein's* Being, and this implies that *Dasein*, in its Being, has a relationship toward that Being—a relationship which itself is one of Being. And this means further that there is some way in which *Dasein* understands itself in its Being... It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. *Understanding of Being is itself a definitive characteristic of Dasein's Being*. *Dasein* is ontically distinguished in that it is ontological" (Heidegger 1988).

Thus, the individual's preoccupation with things show him in a certain *existentiell* environment or world which he did not create, but into which he was either born, entered unconsciously by adaptation to a milieu, or by freely adapting a life-strategy. *Dasein* as man always comports himself in a certain relation to other things in the world. In other words, to exist, for Heidegger, is to be-in-the-world and to be-in-the-world is to be thrown and be immersed among things such that one is in a constant struggle to be himself through the process of finite transcendence. This 'ontic' or *existentiell* understanding of man as a being who is constantly engaged with things in the world sees man and things as rooted fundamentally in the world. It is this awareness that man is fundamentally a being-in-the-world (of things) that renders knowledge of all forms possible. For if man were not a being in the world, we could not talk of knowledge of any kind (Unah 1997).

However, unlike the ontic understanding of man just described, the ontological (existential) understanding of man is an insight into the structural elements which are constitutive of *Dasein's* existence. Unlike ontic understanding of man, ontological understanding of man does not stress the environmentality of man, it emphasizes, rather, the existentiality or the structural components of Human Being. The ontic employs a factual approach to man while the ontological employs a factual approach to man which has to do with the structural elements of man, hence, a fundamental ontology. For since ontology deals with the question of the structure of existents, an analysis of the basic constitutive structures of human life would be an ontology and a fundamental one at that. This rules out the idea that Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* is an anthropology or a philosophical anthropology for that matter. The distinction he makes between *existentiell* and *existential* understanding of *Dasein* with emphasis on the existential is also a healthy indication that his philosophy is ontocentric rather than anthropocentric, that is, that it is anchored on the question of Being rather than on the question of empirical man. However, Heidegger argues that since the question of existence or life is one of *Dasein's* ontical affairs and since the very essence of *Dasein* lies in its existence, the existential (ontological) analysis of *Dasein* itself depends in a way on *Dasein's* ontical (*existentiell*) constitution (Unah 1997, Heidegger 1988).

Heidegger therefore proceeds in *Being and Time* with an existential analysis of Dasein –analysis of the conditions of human existence—and devotes most of the work to this. We find such thorough-going analysis of Dasein as being–in–the–world, being–with–others, Dasein as care, as finitude and temporality within time, temporality and everydayness, and so on. From all of these analysis, one thing is clear: “Man is the shepherd of Being (Heidegger 1977a) in that it is in his existence that other entities become present and knowable. *Dasein* as existence is the ground of presence as the mode of Being of the world and of entities understood as forming part of the world. Dasein is therefore the only entity that exist, other entities are simply present for him; thus existence is the ground of presence (Olafson 1996). His being is care (*Sorge*) in the comprehensive sense of the term. Man does not create Being, but he is responsible for it since, without his thinking and remembering, Being has no illumination, no voice, no word (Gray 1952).

It is for this reason that Heidegger sees Kant's Copernican Revolution as a foundational step towards his fundamental ontology. Kant showed that his categories have their origin in man; that is, they have their source in man himself. It means that the fact of our being a subject in relation to an object bears its inner possibility in an *a priori* openness for objectivity. It means that in order to experience being man anticipates the structure of Being. The subject transcends itself toward the object *qua* object, and because of the internal transcendence toward the object *qua* object, this or that object is able to affect us. Heidegger radicalizes Kant's attempt to anchor the ontological concepts in man's transcendence. Man has been taken in the traditional way, namely, as a complex composition of faculties inherent in a substance whose characteristic it is that it can say 'I think'. The statement with which the *Critique of Pure Reason* begins are well known; that there are two faculties, sensibility and intelligence, passivity and spontaneity, statements which seem to be psychological and empirical and, as such, are hardly capable of carrying the structure of the work. But what is worse, as they stand there in Kant, they are not even empirical. They are ideas he wholly swallowed from an unquestioned view of man since antiquity thereby jeopardizing the very essence of his endeavours. He had taken man in the traditional form of a being whose beingness remained in the dark and on the same level with other kinds of beings, a being rather miraculously fitted with two faculties, reason and sensibility. On the basis of this obsolete anthropology, he has created his ontological system by adding to the two faculties a transcendental dimension, the transcendental faculty of sensibility being the pure intuition of time and space, the transcendental faculties, united under the title reason, being enumerated and developed in the transcendental deduction. Heidegger denounces Kant's anthropological foundation and, on the basis of his existential analysis of Dasein, builds a new concept of man as the fundament of ontology on which a truly transcendental, fundamental ontology can be founded (Cerf 1940).

Man as *Dasein* understands Being. The world around us is full of beings. Our inevitable encounter with entities is made possible by Being itself. Our ontological revelation of Being is led by Being itself. Being reveals itself in us through us. It is this ontological revelation of Being 'in us through us' that Heidegger captures by designating this entity which we ourselves are as *Dasein*. After all, says Heidegger, one of the essential determinations of *Dasein* is the comprehension of Being. To



comprehend Being and to know that which is, is to be in a certain relation with Being. How do we relate to Being? This is basically the idea of finite transcendence to which we now turn.

### Finite Transcendence into Nothing

It is quite true that Heidegger never completed his project in *Being and Time*—the project of fundamental ontology, of reaching Being through man—since he never went beyond the analysis of *Dasein* which is only an essential preliminary step to be taken. However, this does not mean that he didn't complete his project; in fact, a careful scrutiny of his later works and essays will confirm this. His analysis of the deep connection between *Dasein* and *Das Nichts* (Nothing) attests to his commitment to his project on the question of Being. His analysis of Nothing is contained basically in his inaugural lecture to the Freiburg University Faculties, *What is Metaphysics* (1929) and *Introduction to Metaphysics* that came side by side with the seventh edition of *Being and Time* in 1953. It is thus no surprising to see him referring his readers to *Introduction to Metaphysics* in the preface of the 1953 edition of *Being and Time*. What then is Nothing?

In his analysis of Nothing in *What is Metaphysics*, he starts by elaborating on the question of 'What is Metaphysics?'. And it is his view that if the sciences are preoccupied with beings only and Nothing else, solely beings, and beyond that, Nothing, then a metaphysical inquiry should bother on this Nothing which sciences give up as nullity (Heidegger 1977b). However, he warns us against positing it as an object. For in our asking (about Nothing), we posit the nothing in advance as something that 'is' such and such, we posit it as a being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from" (Heidegger 1977b). What then is Nothing?

"Whatever we may make of it, we do know the Nothing, if only as a word we rattle off everyday. For this common nothing that glides so inconspicuously through our chatter, blanched with the anemic pallor of the obvious, we can without hesitating furnish even a "definition".

The nothing is a complete negation of the totality of beings" (Heidegger 1977b).

This is what Wole Soyinka obviously is describing in his *The Credo of Being and Nothingness* when he says, "I found myself impelled by a curiosity to experience the absolute state of non-being, of total void— no trees, no rocks, no skies, no other beings, not even I" (Soyinka 1991).

This definition, however, places the Nothing as dependent on the negation. But the Nothing which Heidegger seeks to inquire into is more primordial than negation or 'not' (Heidegger 1977b).

According to Heidegger, *Dasein* who is essentially finite find itself stationed in "the midst of beings that are revealed somehow as a whole. In the end an essential distinction prevails between comprehending the ensemble of beings in themselves and finding oneself in the midst of beings as a whole. The former is impossible in principle.

The latter happens all the time in our existence. It does seem as though we cling to this or that particular being, precisely in our everyday preoccupation, as though we were completely abandoned to this or that region of beings (Heidegger 1977b). In this existence of *Dasein*, is he brought face to face with Nothing? He is, Heidegger says, in the mood of anxiety (Heidegger 1977b). According to Heidegger,

“Anxiety reveals the nothing.

We “hover” in anxiety. More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole. This implies that we ourselves ... in the midst of beings slip away from ourselves...

Anxiety robs us of speech. Because beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds round; in the face of anxiety all utterances of the ‘is’ falls silent” (Heidegger 1977b).

The Nothing does not reveal itself as a being. rather it is encountered ‘at one with’ beings by making itself known with beings and in beings expressly as a slipping away of the whole (Heidegger 1977b). It is in this revelation of Nothing that *Dasein* as existence approach and penetrate beings and relate with beings through *transcendence into nothing*. Heidegger says aptly,

“*Da-sein* means: being held out into the nothing.

Holding itself out into the nothing, *Dasein* is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. This being beyond beings we call ‘transcendence’. If in the ground of its essence *Dasein* were not transcending, which now means, if it were not in advance holding itself out into the nothing, then it could never be related to beings not even to itself.

Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom” (Heidegger 1977b).

Being held out into the Nothing makes man a lieutenant of Nothing. We are so finite that our finitude entrenches itself in existence, that our most proper and deep limitations refuses to yield to our freedom. But being held into Nothing, is our surpassing of beings as a whole. It is transcendence (Heidegger 1977b). Nothing, Heidegger says, is therefore same as Being. “Pure Nothing and Pure Being are therefore the same” (Heidegger 1977b). Being and Nothing belong together because Being itself is essentially temporal (finite) and reveals itself only in the transcendence of *Dasein* which is held out into Nothing. Thus the saying in tradition metaphysical thinking that: *ex nihilo nihil fit*— from nothing, nothing comes to be,— Heidegger says, can thus be rewritten as *ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit*— from the Nothing all beings as beings come to be (Heidegger 1977b). Nothing is therefore the pull from where things evolve from and once again vanishes into. And human existence can only relate to beings if it holds itself out into the nothing via transcendence.

Transcendence, therefore, is the projection of *Dasein* into nothingness as a field or region of encounter to establish and re-establish what is. Transcendence describes the activity of *Dasein* in the domain of nothingness. This activity happens as a conscious reaching out or going beyond something to the region of nothing to affirm what is. Transcendence portrays thought as the locomotive of existence and the lawmaker of

experience. Transcendence itself is the act of forming relations; the act of forming notions of unity, notions of universality, and notions of homogeneity. With these notions created by transcendence we are able to relate one thing to another, connect one experience to another to make them meaningful. Transcendence also, refers to the indigent hunger or native dynamism in man which makes him restless and eccentric, and which propels him to move from one state of affairs to another, from now to not now, from what is to what is not (Unah 2006).

Summarily, in Heidegger's words:

“The nothing comes forward neither for itself nor next to beings, to which it would, as it were, adhere, for human existence the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather it originally belongs to the essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings, the nihilation of the nothing occurs... Dasein can relate itself to beings only by holding itself out into the nothing and can exist only thus...” (Heidegger 1977b).

How is this transcendence into Nothing for the openness of Being reached?

### **Thinking as ‘Releasement’**

Many of Heidegger's later essays were devoted basically to the explication of thinking in elucidating Being or, as man's way of reaching Being. One very important one is his *Discourse on Thinking* (1966) which consist of a “Memorial Address” in honour of Conradin Kreutzer, the composer, and a “Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking.” But Heidegger makes it clear that this thinking he is explicating is neither representational nor calculative (logical) as it is ordinarily understood. He calls these forms of thinking— the representational and the logical— superficial in *Introduction to Metaphysics* while discussing them extensively (Heidegger 2000). Let us make the distinction between these interpretations of thinking and his somewhat clearer.

Representative thinking, Heidegger says, is that which “relates to what is in the future as well as to what is past, but also to what is present; (it)... brings something before us, *represents it*. This representing always starts of our own accord, is freely at our disposal. This freedom is not arbitrary but is bound by the fact that in representing, we think upon and think through what is represented by analyzing it, by laying it out and resembling it (Heidegger 2000). Calculative thinking, on the other hand, computes. It computes ever new, even more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities. Calculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself; it does not contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is: Being (Heidegger 1966). These are ‘misinterpretations’ of thinking. These “misinterpretation of thinking... can be overcome only by a genuine and originary thinking... In order to provoke a new foundation of such thinking, we must above all else return to the question of the essential relation of thinking to Being – but this means unfolding the question of Being as such (Heidegger 2000). This genuine and originary thinking is what Heidegger calls *Meditative Thinking*.

Meditative thinking is seen in *Discourse on Thinking* as the way in which man is involved immediately and directly with Being. This is to say that man's relation with Being is developed in his transcendence to Being into Nothing via meditative thinking. The comprehension of meditative thinking as a structure of man relating directly to Being is clearly the central theme of the Address and Conversation. He describes meditative thinking here as thinking which is open to its content, open to what is given. A man engaged in meditative thinking might well characterize what he was doing as being open, that is, he might comprehend it as a fundamental property of human nature, the property of openness. Yet such thinking (unlike representative thinking) does not involve an act of will for one does not will to be open. But this does not make meditative thinking passive. For man does not come to be open through indifference or neglect. To be open is difficult for man. Since openness involves meditative thinking, it is suggestive to speak of this thinking as a higher kind of activity than willing. But perhaps, the real point is that this kind of thinking lies, as Heidegger says "beyond the distinction between activity and passivity. This higher activity of thinking in relation to the openness involved in it is so important that it needs a special name. Heidegger calls it *Releasement*. Releasement is a defining characteristic of man's true nature involving openness and, through it direct and immediate reference beyond man to Being. *Through meditative thinking, we transcend into the openness of Being, into Nothing*. In order to stress the inherent openness and activity of Being. Heidegger uses the word region and its cognates instead (See Anderson 1966); and he describes this thinking as *waiting upon* which is "to release oneself into the openness of that-which-regions" (Heidegger 1966). He says thus: "...I tried to release myself of all representing because waiting moves into openness without re-presenting anything. And, released from re-presenting, I tried to release myself purely, to that which regions because that which regions is the opening of openness" (Heidegger 1966).

He adds, "Now authentic releasement consists in this: that man in his very nature belongs to that which regions, i.e., he is released to it" (Heidegger 1966).

There are three ways in which meditative thinking is related to that-which-regions, to Being, according to Heidegger, one of which is essential for our discourse (Anderson 1966). This is what Heidegger calls *in-dwelling*. As *in-dwelling*, meditative thinking expresses the requirement of becoming true for that-which-regions. Through *in-dwelling* man is able to express a resolve for truth. It is important not to understand this requirement as a subjective one; for while the resolve for truth is made by man. What is required by him is independent. Truth which is to Heidegger *aletheia* (Greek word for unconcealment or unhiddenness) is not subjective. Essentially, the resolve for truth is the requirement that the regioning of that-which-regions be an unveiling. In such disclosure, man's nature as thinking serves not to create or to impose structures but for a receiving of the regioning of that which regions; for man is essential for the disclosure of that which regions (See Anderson 1966).

The whole of the claim implicit in the account Heidegger gives of Being in *Discourse on Thinking* can be summarized by saying that the analysis of man's nature, as found in meditative thinking provides the key to a direct approach to Being. According to Heidegger, meditative thinking is the new ground of meaning which requires us not to cling one-sidedly to a single idea, not to run down a one-track course

of ideas, that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all (Heidegger 1966); after all, we are directly open to the whole, the Being–process.

Heidegger's idea of thinking as releasement to that–which–regions, to the openness of Being; into Nothing can be summed up thus: “The act of thinking is like an outgrowth of Being. it is a point of contact between man and Being, and serves as a conduit of Being ... an ascent of existence towards essence” (Carvallo Jnr. 1985).

We turn now to one last but essential point in Heidegger's approach to Being through man: the role of language and discourse.

### Language as the ‘House of Being’

“Language is the house of Being and it is by dwelling (in the house) that man ek-sist” (Olafson 1996).

In *Dasein's* going beyond itself or transcendence into Nothing, in his releasement into the openness of Being, language (*sprache*) and discourse (*sagen*) play an essential role in our elucidation of Being, in giving meaning to the Being–process. According to Heidegger, “essence and Being speak in language” and “what really is at issue is an essential classification of the essence of Being as regards its essential involvement with the essence of language” (Heidegger 2000). He however laments the misrelation and mutilation of language due to a destroyed relation to Being. He says thus,

“One would like to treat the particular fact that Being for us is not just an empty word and an evanescent vapor as a case of the more general fact that many words –indeed, the essential words–are in the same situation, that language in general is used up and abused, that language is an indispensable but masterless, arbitrarily applicable means of communication, as indifferent as a means of public transportation, ... which everyone gets on and off. Thus, everyone talks and writes unhindered and above all *unendangered* in language. That is certainly correct. Moreover only a very few are still in a position to think through in its full scope this misrelation and unrelation of today's *Dasein* to language.

But the emptiness of the word ‘Being,’ the complete withering of its naming force is not just a particular case of the general abuse of language—instead, the destroyed relation to Being as such is the real ground for our whole misrelation to language... the fate of language is grounded in the particular relation of people to Being the question about Being will be most intimately intertwined with the question about language for us” (Heidegger 2000).

Heidegger therefore took language up as a central theme in his later thought. We shall attempt to highlight some of the essential points he makes in this regard. Language, after all, has the advantage of not being private in principle as so many mental function have been supposed to be and because it is not controlled by purely individual decisions and preferences, it lends itself to a form of generalizing description of the rules to which individual speakers must be subject if they are to use language at all. In a sense, one could say that in language, a kind of reconciliation is effected between the plurality of speakers and the singularity of the medium in which, as

speakers, they move. It also appears that this takes place in a way that accords to the latter a marked precedence over the former (Olafson 1996).

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, describes language as a modality of the uncovering of entities as entities; language is, at every point, embedded in and presupposes existence as mode of Being of *Dasein* that is itself conversant with Being as the uncoveredness or presence of entities as entities. This idea of language was consistently developed in later thought. Language is that out of which individual speakers speak and upon which they depend; this dependence is described by him as a "showing" (*Zeige*) that reaches into all regions of presence and lets what is in each case present appear and mis-appear (*verschwinden*) out of them. Heidegger's point is that it is 'the word' that first brings a thing into its 'is' and lets a thing be as a thing (Olafson 1996).

Being is discovered and illuminated through language. This is where he sees the works of thinkers and poets very essential. Being can be discovered through the investigation of, the listening to, and the meditation upon the language of genuine thinkers and poets. Language is no mere tool or instrument, nor does its essence consist entirely in being a means of transmitting information. Language is the supreme event of human existence because it enables man in the words of the poet Hölderlin, "to affirm what he is" (Gray 1952). Through the word, through conversation, men can bring the existent into the open and preserve it in potential form for later generation. "Language is the House of Being," Heidegger frequently asserts. Or again, "Being comes self-illuminatingly into language". His point is that language is at its birth a genuine revelation of reality, that words arise from an original experience of the cosmos. They are not chance creations nor utilitarian counters, but on the contrary, arise from a single and primary encounter with things as they are. Used by people who have not shared adequately in such experience, however, their true meaning becomes blunted, veiled and forgotten. Language tends constantly towards decadence and degeneration. The most significant event of human experience, it is also the most dangerous of possessions insofar as it can be called a possession at all. Hence, the thinker who would illuminate Being must dig down through the accumulations of meanings and vague connotations of a word to reach the original truth which it embodies. This is one task Heidegger is good at carrying out: penetrating into the utmost recesses of his native. German and classical Greek in order to discover what Being is (Gray 1952).

Hence the poet and the thinker are, in this regard, near kindred, however separate they may be in temperament and approach. Their goal is the same in Holderlin's line, which Heidegger likes to quote, "they dwell near to one another on mountains farthest apart." If the thinker's mission is to elucidate Being, it is the poet's "to name what is holy." The poet is a giver of name; he is able more than other men to say what things are. Through the gift of language, of which the genuine poet has an intense awareness, he is peculiarly able to stand in the open, to participate in Being, and to make it manifest to other men. Great poets like Holderlin, Rilke, and the Greek dramatists are not concerned with a private world of their own imagining nor content merely to capture beauty in language. They are seekers of objective truth. They bring to mankind a new conception of the "divine." They give names to that which other men could not experience without the naming. These names are not only symbols, shorthand of their

experiences; they are their experiences. And men learn from poets to live in new dimensions of the real. As Holderlin puts it, "man dwells poetically on this earth." The poets' function, Heidegger thinks, is to make us truly aware of this poetical dwelling. The gods, for example, that the poets name are a people's conception of that which is highest and most real about their lives (Gray 1952).

What becomes present to *Dasein* (in existence) are captured in words. Language illuminates Being as it unfolds. Language is therefore, temporal; and finite like Being and *Dasein*. It thus needs to be updated and reestablished as Being unfolds and man's experiences change.

### **Concluding Remarks: Import of a Fundamental Ontology**

So far, we have concisely discussed and analysed Martin Heidegger approach to Being in the course of his philosophical thought guided by one question: What is the meaning of Being? This has produced a fundamental ontology; fundamental because it makes man, as *Dasein* or *Existenz* the fundament (basis) of ontology, the being who transcends into the openness of Being, of Nothing to establish and reestablish what is, i.e., the one with the power of reaching beyond, the power of transcending this being, this state of affairs, to that being, that state of affairs. It is an ontology of man (Unah 2006, see also Unah 1997). Man becomes the search-light of beings, the participator in, and the illuminator of Being, not some mysterious categories or ontological principles. Heidegger's point:

"Builders of bridges and high rise apartments, cyber-neticists, research scientists, painters and poets, farmers and philosophers, each in his own way has to do with beings and thinks about them: From the many inclinations of his solitary way. Heidegger wishes to all these: To build, calculates, investigate, create; to see, hear, say, and cultivate; to think; all are ways men and women involve themselves with beings as a whole. For humans are among the beings (that) for the *time being* are. The question of Being is not bloodless after all, but vital" (Krell 1977).

But why is it vital?

- For reinstating the utmost priority of man in the scheme of things.
- For recovery of the chance to ask what is happening with man on this earth the world over, not in terms of headlines but of less frantic and more frightful disclosures (Krell 1977); for recovery of the chance to question the dehumanization of man by our technological society, the imminent threat of nihilism, the loss of all faith and all sense of direction, which plagues our time (See Gray 1952).
- For relating man again to the sources of their being, to give them something to revere (Gray 1952).
- For turning the vicious circle instituted by traditional ontologies between ontology and experience into a meaningful circle, a circle rooted in man's

essence; his existentialism his relation to Being precedes and makes possible any relations to beings, man himself included (Cerf 1940).

- For pondering the fact that as we surrender the diverse senses of Being to a sterile uniformity (in disguise of categories, beingness, or ontological principles), to one that can no longer entertain variations and multiplicity, we become immeasurably poorer, and that such poverty makes a difference (Krell 1977).
- For bringing to our awareness that vast realm of possibilities open to us in our transcendence into Nothing, the pull from which beings evolve and, once again, disappear into: "... everyone is entitled to patronize nothingness in thought and action and thereby domicile this region, this vast expanse of uncharted territory of possibilities, this enveloping background of everything called Nothing" (Unah 2002).

Concluding therefore, Heidegger brings us to the startling realization that the route to Being is man's existence where man is able to relate to himself, beings and Being through transcendence into the openness of Being; understanding Being is man's mode of existence (Hoy 1996).

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