

Authentic Grasp of Being

Adrian Pritchett

Martin Heidegger provides an interesting lesson about what must be done to authentically grasp the nature of being in *Being and Time*. The focus of being in his book is the unique individual human consciousness referred to as *Dasein*, and authenticity is regarded as that which accords with *Dasein*'s own self, including its history, present concerns, and future possibilities. The thesis of this paper is an interpretative one: the path to authentically grasping one's own being requires first disregarding philosophical history regarding being and then understanding one's own presuppositions. More fully, the phenomena that give rise to examining ontology must be analyzed, which means that one must not simply start with philosophers' assertions; then one must understand his or her own manner of dealing with being to understand his or her own presuppositions about being, and it will be seen how the presence of all presuppositions cannot be removed. The first part of this paper will discuss section six, "The Task of Destroying the History of Ontology," and the second part will discuss section 32, "Understanding and Interpretation." It will conclude with a brief return to the concept of authenticity.

The Task of Destroying the History of Ontology

Heidegger comes upon the need to destroy the history of ontology as he begins his inquiry into the nature of being. What he first intends to do is understand how the question of being has been answered throughout the history of philosophy and then appraise this body of answers to see how our philosophical starting point may help or hinder us. Heidegger reviews an extensive amount of work, but he believes that it all falls short of understanding being. Worse than that, it seems to be hindering further inquiry, so it is necessary to work around this inherited tradition.

The major problem presented by this philosophical tradition is that it is presented dogmatically and so we are eager to accept its offerings without questioning their starting points. On page 43 in our translation Heidegger writes, "Dasein has had its historicity so thoroughly uprooted by tradition that it confines its interests to the multiformity of possible

types, directions, and standpoints of philosophical activity in the most exotic and alien of cultures; and by this very interest it seeks to veil the fact that it has no ground of its own to stand on.” The main point of this statement is that we are distracted by the seemingly rich inquiries into being that have already been carried out, and we assume that all the different possibilities for grounding these inquiries have been carefully considered and exhausted.

This rich quotation also tells us that we each have an existential history that we can personally examine to begin understanding the nature of being, and it further implies that our inquiry is going to be grounded in the phenomenon of personal experience. The philosophical tradition about being dazzles us with assertions and arguments to the extent that we no longer consider personal experience as a starting point.

Earlier in his introduction section one, Heidegger tells us of three major themes developed by the philosophical tradition discussed in section six. In the first major theme, the concept of being has been oversimplified as an easy universal concept. It is simply something that unifies all categories of things that exist, and it began to be formulated in ancient philosophy. Unfortunately, this discourse has made no clear connections among different categories of being, so it seems to tell us nothing useful at all. The second theme concerns assertions that uphold the universality of being but say that it is actually indefinable. Being concerns more than any single entity and it is supremely universal, so we have no access from any level to understand it. But since we exist in being and always encounter being, a third theme concerns the assertion that being is self evident and thus requires no explanation or inquiry since it is transparent. However, this third approach is like the first two since it fails to provide any concrete understanding of being. So Heidegger sees that philosophical discourse has tried to run the gamut of possible ways to understand being but that it leaves us with no helpful content.

In section two, Heidegger explains why his inquiry into being will focus on *Dasein*. He says that in an inquiry there is “that which is asked about,” “that which is interrogated,” and “that which is to be found out by the asking.” Since the inquiry concerns being, though, simply asking about being is actually a possibility within being. Asking about being is a possibility of a special kind of entity, the questioner, so it is natural to begin analyzing the questioner, or the human *Dasein*. Throughout Heidegger’s work the reader is inspired to

think about possibilities in being from a personal, individual perspective, and it is the experience here that sets the stage for understanding being.

Heidegger repeatedly emphasizes the fact that when we begin to ask about being we seem to already have some sort of vague notion about it. After all, we have to start with something that we are curious enough about to even begin examining it, and we have a notion of what we are looking at when we interrogate it. Returning to section six, we now have a better sense of why the history of ontology must be destroyed: We must experience on our own the inquiry into the primordial notion of being and not simply follow someone else's discourse, especially when that discourse fails to guide us in any meaningful way. After all, there would be no benefit from allowing our minds to be empty vessels and filling them with unevaluated ideas. If we feel satisfied with those tautologies from the history of ontology, then we will not personally experience the inquiry and gain understanding.

Understanding and Interpretation

It is now natural to inquire into the operation of our understanding, so Heidegger faces this task head on in section 32. Here he explains that, in general, the understanding is *Dasein's* grappling with possibilities of being, and the term *interpretation* refers to a development of the understanding of a specific possibility or entity in the world. He focuses on the "inauthentic" as an object of the understanding to explain the development of an interpretation, though we will see how this explanation can relate to the authentic.

Interpretation develops in relation to some sort of ongoing involvement, and throughout his book Heidegger treats involvements or concerns as a theme through which being is experienced and generally understood. Much of this background is established in division three of part one. In short, the totality of one's involvements includes everything from specific activities up to general life goals, with a hierarchy of activities and goals in between. The importance of this is such that even specific objects that we use in everyday life have a place within this kind of hierarchy, so, for example, we might speak of a hammer that is used for construction, the hammer's function of fastening wood, the fastening wood to build a house, the building a house to provide shelter, the providing shelter to aid comfort and survival, etc. It is interesting to consider that subordinate activities can support each

other through their overarching activities, so, for instance, the fastening of wood can relate to reading books since the shelter the wood is related to can provide a comfortable setting for reading. So a range of concerns are always present for someone, and it is impossible to become “objective” and remove all consideration of one’s concerns and still analyze anything at all in a meaningful way. It is even absurd to think of such disregard for concerns since one would have a certain motivation or curiosity to even attempt that.

We now understand why Heidegger says that a “fore structure” of conceptions is in place when interpretation is made. Meaning is the result of interpretation, and meaning is grounded in this fore structure. He writes on page 193 that *Dasein*’s “own Being and the entities disclosed with its Being can be appropriated in understanding, or can remain relegated to non understanding.” Since meaning ultimately arises from understanding, what he asserts here is that whether or not any meaning or lack thereof can be considered at all depends on one’s own being plus his or her world with its involvements. There is no concept of understanding or meaning to be found outside of one’s experience and simply floating in some sort of objective sphere.

Heidegger acknowledges that a kind of circularity comes about since our understanding is really always presupposing something. However, a kind of circularity belongs to the essential structure of meaning, and contrary to popular belief, our understanding would be limited without this structure. This structure must be based on the objects of understanding themselves, however, and it must not be based on fancies or merely popular conceptions — such as popular conceptions of being, for example, which shows why we must be careful with historical assertions about ontology. A linear process belongs to mathematical or scientific inquiry, and math or science alone has no way to help us understand our experience of being.

An Authentic Grasp of Being

A close look at these sections in the book point to what it must be like to authentically grasp our being. First section six , nothing is gained by being spoon fed empty statements about general concepts of being, so we must strip away ontological assumptions provided by the history of philosophy. Second section 32 , it is clear that we

are not stripping away all assumptions, but we are looking to ourselves to find the groundwork. If we are finding what is within ourselves, then we are grasping the authentic; if we are using knowledge of ourselves to inquire into being, then we are making an authentic attempt at understanding being. Apparently, the historical attempts to remove all presuppositions are what led to the failure of the long human tradition that has tried to understand being.

Bibliography

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.