

CRITIQUE OF HEIDEGGER'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANING OF BEING

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Heidegger's opening passage in *Being and Time* (1927), where he quotes Plato's *Sophists*, suggests that the meaning of Being requires further inquiry. What we know of Being is vague, and does not satisfy our quest for philosophical investigation. For this reason, the fundamental question that strikes Heidegger is: what is the meaning of Being? The answer to this question is the focal point of, and dominant issue in his philosophy.

Heidegger was not the first thinker to raise this issue. For Aristotle, this question dealt with a primordial problem, and was the scope of a particular type of science which was substantially distinct from other sciences: "There is a science which takes up the theory of being as being and of what "to be" means, taken by itself. It is like none of the sciences whose subjects are defined as special as parts of being."¹ This science, which is defined as metaphysics by Aristotle, studies Being rather than beings. Being is not a category like "quality" or "quantity", which can describe something other than itself, but a unity transcending all categories, and at the same time it is applicable to all of them. This, however, does not mean that Aristotle is thinking about the meaning of Being without dealing with the categories, because if there is a category, then it should be an attribute of Being. Being without the categories is as impossible as the categories without being.² By keeping Being as a transcendent unity and prior to all categories, Aristotle arrives at the conclusion that Being, which is presupposed by all categories, can be thought of as the First Principle ruling the entire body of all sciences. As a consequence of this, the science of this prior subject matter should be presupposed by all sciences and by all regional ontologies.³ The priority of the

science of Being to regional ontologies and all other sciences is explicit in Aristotle, but Heidegger's disagreement with Aristotle arises when this presupposed ontological foundation is thought to be a genus that first brought things into being.⁴

Heidegger also attacks the post-Aristotelian philosophers for having neglected this fundamental question in their philosophical inquiries in favour of investigating the meaning of beings (*Seinden*).⁵ Those philosophers accepted the dogma of negligence, and withdrew themselves from the genuine philosophical question about the meaning of Being for three reasons. First, they thought that Being was the most universal concept, and that its universality 'transcends' any universality of genus. Second, since Being is most universal concept, and is not an entity, it is, then, indefinable and escapes all attempts of define it in accordance with the rules of 'definition' provided in traditional logic. Third, Being is self-evident.⁶ Heidegger rejects the three presuppositions, which support the dogma of negligence. Against them he argues that the universality of the concepts of Being does not guarantee the clarity of its meaning and that the meaning of this concept is still the darkest of all. He agrees with the Aristotelian thinkers that Being is not an entity and is thus indefinable, and that Aristotle's concept of definition "*definitio fit per genus proximum et differentiam specificam*" is not applicable to Being. But the indefinability of Being does not invalidate the question of its meaning, and it should not hinder us from investigating this meaning. In his argument against the third presupposition, Heidegger insists that, although the concept of Being is self-evident, it is still veiled and needs further inquiries.⁷ This paper will attempt to make clear to what extent Heidegger has been successful in his attempt to encompass Aristotelian Metaphysics in understanding the meaning of Being, and how far he has been able to give a clear meaning of it. The paper will seek to explicate the ambiguity and relative inaccessibility of the meaning of Being in Heidegger's major philosophical work *Being and Time* and in his essays, and question as to whether Heidegger has been able to provide a unified meaning of Being.

An inquiry into the meaning of Being is not in the scope of regional ontology, because Being is distinct from beings. Similar to Aristotle's First Principle, it is a

prior condition not only for the existence of beings but also for all scientific inquiry, yet it cannot be studied scientifically. "Fundamental Ontology", which takes Being into account, is substantially distinctive, and its subject matter is neither this nor that kind of being, but Being *per se*: "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 own most aim, if it has not adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task".⁸

For the purpose of examining Heidegger's understanding of the meaning of Being and ascertaining its ambiguity, the first point discussed will be the disparity among Heidegger's commentators in their interpretations of the meaning of Being, which supports the theme of this paper and adds more perplexity to the meaning of Being in Heidegger's philosophy. Kockelmans interprets Heidegger's Being as a process, an activity in which its self-manifestation becomes a truth "As the clearing process which sheds light on itself and on beings by the very fact that it illuminates everything, Being may thus be correctly called truth. Yet the term truth here obviously does not mean 'agreement'; rather, it means clearing, illumination, original self-manifestation, the emergence of Being and of all beings".⁹ Kockelmans is convinced that Being, like the *Geist* in Hegel's philosophy, is a dynamic ontological reality, and it has the character of a happening that comes to manifest itself as a truth. This interpretation can be supported by Heidegger's own understanding of the meaning of Being in *On the Essence of Truth* (1930), where he states that, "The primordial disclosure of being as a whole, the question concerning beings as such, and the beginning of Western history are the same; they occur together in a 'time' which, itself unmeasurable, first opens up the open region for every measure".¹⁰ This interpretation by Kockelmans becomes adequate and reasonable when Heidegger's understanding of "Time" and "Temporality" is taken into account: "In contrast to all this, our treatment of the question of meaning of Being must enable us to show that the central problematic of all ontology is rooted in the phenomenology of time, if rightly seen and rightly explained, and we must show how this is the case".¹¹ If Being is conceived in terms of time, then it should be dynamic and eventful; it becomes concealed only in this temporal character and its concealment is an active process through the ecstatic projection of *Dasein*. Dreyfuss rejects Kockelman's interpretation. He

does not believe that Heidegger regards Being as a process or a happening: "Heidegger must have been aware of this danger, since at the point where he says being is not an entity, he writes in the margin of his copy of *Being and Time*, 'No! One cannot make sense of being with the help of these sorts of concepts.' To think of being in terms of concepts like entity, or process, or event is equally misleading."¹² Richardson has the view that in the early works of Heidegger "Being" and the "world" were considered to be equivalent.¹³ At the same time he suggests that, in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), Being is understood as the pure horizon of meaning, within which the process of the clearing described by Kockelmans will take place.¹⁴ The notion of "Pure" which is mentioned here and is used again by Heidegger in "Letter on Humanism", can be understood in the Kantian sense. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant presents a list of pure categories of understanding within which all material collected by sensibility becomes thought and acquires meaning.¹⁵ For example, the sensuous notions of colour, taste and odour can be kept under the pure category of "Quality". Quality is called pure, because it is independent of all empirical experiences. It is neither redness nor sweetness, but a category transcending all empirical notions. When we say that Being is pure, we simply mean that Being transcends all empirical entities, and that possibility of understanding the meaning of an empirical entity is conditioned by understanding of the meaning of Being. Zimmerman has another interpretation, stating that Being for Heidegger is history shaping ways in which beings can reveal themselves and become real.¹⁶ Okrent has tried to connect this "shaping ways of Being in history" with pragmatic significations of each kind of being that shows itself to us.¹⁷ On the question of Being (*Seinfrage*), Heidegger claims that the question of the meaning of Being constitutes a philosophical inquiry about the meaning of what is asked about. It presupposes guidelines or knowledge, which are already available to us in some way or another.¹⁸ But raising this question is an indication of our intellectual dissatisfaction with available guidelines, and available knowledge. Being, at this stage, is known and yet not known or it is obscure and concealed.

Heidegger explicitly states that the subject matter of this inquiry is the Being of entities, which is not itself an entity.¹⁹ One cannot think of Being as an entity like a tree, a table, a horse or a mountain, and hence it cannot be grasped in

terms of empirical concepts; meanwhile, it is also not the *summum genus* of Aristotle's First Philosophy. For this reason, Being is transcendent and a presupposition, for nothing can be presented to us without having been articulated in its Being.²⁰ As a consequence of this, in order to understand an entity, we need to look into its Being. Our philosophical knowledge is incomplete without apprehending the meaning of its Being. By saying that being is not an entity, we draw an ontological distinction between Being and beings, but at the same time Being cannot be distinct, because no entity can exist without it. In "Letter on Humanism", Heidegger raises another meaning of Being, defining it as power: "As the element, Being is the 'quiet power' of favouring-enabling, that is, of the possible";²¹ or he tries to use Holderlin's elegy "Homecoming" for interpreting the meaning of Being.

Another confusion begins with Heidegger's phenomenological understanding of phenomenon and his metaphor of "*Krankheitserscheinungen*". Heidegger makes a distinction between phenomenon and appearing. Phenomenon is something that shows itself or is manifest.²² This showing itself is the way in which a phenomenon appears and is apprehended. With this interpretation we are confronted with another ontological distinction between phenomenon and its appearance. The relationship between these two ontological spheres is illustrated in the metaphor of "*Krankheitserscheinungen*". The symptoms of influenza, for example, such as high temperature and bodily pain, indicate a phenomenon but an announcing of a phenomenon, and a phenomenon that does not show itself, namely influenza. The phenomenon of this illness announces itself through its symptoms or signs. Appearing is, therefore, not a phenomenon but an announcing of a phenomenon, and a phenomenon is that which announces itself through its appearance.²³ This distinction between phenomenon and appearance, between something that announces itself and its announcing, should not be mistaken for Kant's metaphysical distinction between phenomenon and noumenon. Whatever hidden and appeared are the phenomena and their appearances. Although phenomenon is never appearance, and influenza is not fever or bodily pain, phenomenon and appearance belong together, and the latter depends on the former to exist. This can be true also for the relationship between phenomenon and noumenon; but Heidegger rejects the notion of the hidden realm of Kant's

concept of unknowable reality. The relationship between a phenomenon and its appearance is equivalent to the relationship between Being and being. A phenomenon, like Being, is hidden or not revealed and only beings are revealed or uncovered.

In sections 36 and 37 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger identifies Being with phenomenon, and ontology with phenomenology. His ontological project turns into a phenomenological study of the phenomena, stating that, "Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible."²⁴ Phenomenology is also defined as the science of the Being of entities. This interpretation creates another perplexity in our understanding of the meaning of Being. Before Being of entities was transcendent and pure, but now it is the phenomena that make up Being and Being is always the being of a phenomenon. It seems that understanding of the meaning of entities will suffice for understanding the meaning of Being, because Being is nothing more than the entities or the phenomena. For this purpose, Heidegger has selected an entity (*Dasein*), which is ontologically distinctive as starting point in his journey towards understanding the meaning of Being. He begins with a being rather than Being *per se*, or with a regional ontology (*Dasein*'s ontology) rather than fundamental ontology. The regional ontology of *Dasein*, reveals the meaning of "to be" for *Dasein* as *Dasein*. It is dealing with prior ontological conditions for the existence of a human being. Although it reveals the meaning of entities in their relation to *Dasein*, it does not tell anything about the meaning of Being. Accordingly, the meaning of Being is yet to be understood, and this understanding of the meaning of Being of the entities, including *Dasein* itself, is a prior condition for the possibility of a regional ontology. If I am unmindful of the original philosophical enterprise of Heidegger in *Being and Time*, in thinking about his analysis of *Dasein*'s ontology what impresses me is the existential analysis of *Dasein* rather than the project of fundamental ontology. His existential analysis of human existence is a revolutionary step to deconstruct all traditional theories of human existence, in particular the Cartesian theory of self-substance, and then construct his own analysis of the meaning of "to be" as a human being. But this is not what we expect from Heidegger at the beginning of his philosophical enterprise in *Being and Time*. He promises to investigate into the meaning of Being and to deconstruct the dogma of negligence, which has led to the oblivion

of Being by post-Aristotelian thinkers.

How can the concepts be understood of Being of an entity, such as *Dasein*, without understanding the meaning of Being as a prior condition for its existence? How far will an understanding of *Descin* lead to the answer of the question of Being? The meaning of *Dasein* will not be understood unless the meaning of its ontological foundation is first grasped. If the meaning of Being is not obscure, it will affect our understanding of the meaning of existence as *Dasein*, because Being is an ontological constitution of the being of *Dasein*. An important question is the value of troubling to investigate the meaning of Being in order to understand the meaning of human existence. It seems that the relation between the question of Being and the existential analysis of *Deasein* is unproblematic, because Heidegger analyses the being of *Dasein* existentially before giving us an adequate meaning of Being. And as mentioned before, since Being is transcendental in the Kantian sense, then understanding of the meaning of *Dasein*'s existence is conditioned by and presupposes understanding of the meaning of Being.

Elsewhere, Heidegger has the view that our attempts to understand the meaning of Being are futile. Being is inaccessible and its meaning cannot be apprehended completely. The reason for this lies in the way Being reveals itself to *Dasein*: "Manifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all: it is something that lies hidden, in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as it constitutes its meaning and its ground."²⁵ In this paragraph, Heidegger clearly states that the meaning of Being is inaccessible completely, because, "for the most part it does not show itself at all", and this hidden-ness of Being is not something insignificant or temporary that may not influence our philosophical understanding of reality, but rather essential and constitutes its meaning. The hidden-ness of Being cannot be neglected and at the same time we find ourselves helpless in our search for its meaning as the most part of it "does not show itself at all". In addition to this hidden-ness, Being can be obscured. Further, a phenomenon that is uncovered at some point of being obscured again. This deterioration or recovering up of Being leads to disguise: "...and the most dangerous, for here the possibilities of deceiving

and misleading are especially stubborn".²⁶

In the end, the project of fundamental ontology is not void of perplexity. Although Heidegger tries to rescue occidental thought from the alienation caused by the dogma of negligence of Being, he is not able to provide a clear answer to question. This, however, does not mean that Heidegger's fundamental ontology suffers contradictions, but rather ambiguity and confusion.

NOTES

- 1 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. IV, I. Trans. Richard Hope. The University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- 2 *ibid*, IV, 1003b.
- 3 *ibid*, XI, 1060b.
- 4 Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Blackwell, 1992, p.23.
- 5 *ibid*, p.2.
- 6 *ibid*, pp.22-23.
- 7 *ibid*.
- 8 *ibid*, p.31.
9. Kockelmans, Joseph J. (1984). *On the Truth of Being: Reflections on Heidegger's Later Philosophy*. Indiana University Press, p. 54.
10. Heidegger, Martin. "On the Essence of Truth". In *Basic Writings*. David Farrell Krell. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 127.
11. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, p.40.
12. Dreyfus, Hubert L.(1991). *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. The MIT Press, p. 11.
13. Richardson, William J. (1963). *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, pp. 147-152.

14. *ibid.*
15. Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans F. Max Muller. New York: The Anchor Books, 1960, A79:B104.
16. Zimmerman, Michael. (1990). *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity. Technology, Politics, Art*. Indiana University Press, p. 116.
17. Okrent, Mark. (1988). *Heidegger's Pragmatism. Understanding, Being, and the Critique of Metaphysics*. Cornell University Press, p. 7.
18. Heidegger. *op. cit.* p.25.
19. *ibid*, p.26.
20. *ibid*, p.27.
21. Heidegger, Martin. "Letter on Humanism". *Basic Writings*. p.220.
22. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. p. 51.
23. *ibid*, p.53.
24. *ibid*, p.60.
25. *ibid*, p.59.
26. *ibid*, p.59.

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