

HEIDEGGER AND THE TRANSITION TO POSTMODERNITY

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The notion of postmodernity has recently become a subject of academic as well as popular debate. It is associated with the emergence of a new understanding of reality, which aims at transforming not only Enlightenment knowledge, values and culture, but also universalism, the idea that human history follows a rational progression, and the claim of reason to apprehend the absolute truth. According to the adherents of postmodernism, modernity has not led to the realisation of freedom but to the creation of bureaucratic rationality and a new form of oppression. The modern spirit has eroded much of the remaining confidence in itself. It is doomed to turn against human freedom in the name of liberation by transforming itself into a system of universal oppression and advocating of the logic of domination. Postmodernity, as a reaction against the bureaucracy of reason, brings with itself a new philosophical outlook to combat the challenges of contemporary civilisation.

The term 'postmodern' was first employed by Rudolf Pannwitz in 1917 in describing the "nihilism" of Nietzsche, but it did not attract the attention of Western intellectuals until 1960, when a group of French philosophers, including Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida, began to critically analyse the meta-narratives of modern thought¹ Since then the set of debates on the meaning of postmodernity has been conducted in a variety of forms and contexts. It has been associated with post-Marxism, post-colonialism, post-industrialism, feminism, pluralism, anarchism, gayism, lesbianism and so on.

Lyotard, one of the leading thinkers of postmodernity, has relied,

like Pannwitz, on the concept of Nietzsche's nihilism in articulating the meaning of postmodernity, which he defines as the "incredulity towards meta-narratives" and the rejection first of the modernist discourse, which view human history and culture as a single unified progress towards perfection, and second of the belief that this progress has an unchangeable foundation and can be interpreted in the light of a meta narrative². Lyotard disproves the validity of the foundations and the monopoly of meta-narratives, calling for re-evaluating all values and deconstructing the modern understanding of reality: purpose should be replaced by game, teleology by chance, system by anarchy and homogeneity by heterogeneity. Disillusionment with the practices of the communist party in France led Lyotard to the conclusion that the Marxist meta-narrative was no longer capable of transcending the libidinal impulses of individuals, because these impulses were unpredictable. Instead, Marxism tried to suppress them and, in so doing, produced an authoritarian system.³ Lyotard also stresses the point that conflict in history is no longer determined by commodity or wealth but by knowledge or, more specifically, by information technology. The political power of a nation will be determined by its control of knowledge.⁴ Foucault, another postmodern thinker, tells us to prefer what is positive and multiple, to favour difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems, and to believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.⁵

According to postmodern thinking, the cultural changes in our times have taken us to a stage where the meta-narratives, traditional fixities and universal theories are no longer adequate. As Lyotard puts it, "Let us wage a war on totality, let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable, let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name."⁶ The meta-narratives, for example dialectic methods, resist revision and reinterpretation in the light of changing cultural events. Their advocates, whether Hegelians or Marxists, strongly believe that the meta-narratives transcend temporality and the contingency of the events, and that their universal validity is unquestionable. But the problem that arises here in rejecting meta-narratives, is one of making value judgments. How do we continue to analyse the meaning of historical changes in society, when the Marxist narrative, for example, is dispensed with? How do we construct value judgments in the

absence of a meta-narrative? Lyotard insists that, without a meta-narrative to rely on, we need to deal with situations pragmatically on a 'case by case' basis, and he agrees with Foucault that in this process the little narratives emerge as inventive and significant in the postmodern world. As we can see, heterogeneity, fragmentation and the distrust of large-scale theoretical interpretations with universal application are the hallmarks of postmodernity. The rejection of any universal validity for meta-narratives, accompanied by the emphasis on difference and on the discontinuity of history, and by the shift in ideas about place and the significance of the 'other', form the core of this new development in philosophy.⁷

The antifoundationalism of postmodernity led Derrida to demonstrate the instability of language and the unavailability of the necessary relationship between the signifier and the signified, according to him, some slippage of meaning is possible. The best example of this slippage of meaning is a concept called 'différance', a French word derived from difference, meaning both difference and deferral.⁸ These two words are pronounced the same, the difference between them is revealed only in writing. For this reason, one may accept the view that linguistic meaning is a changeable phenomenon and that the 'différance' should be taken into account in interpreting cultural discourse. For this postmodern thinker, Western traditional philosophy is logocentric, based on the Aristotelian principle of identity and the Platonic metaphysics of an eternal and immutable reality. The principle of 'difference' deconstructs the foundation of such philosophising.

According to Robert Young, postmodernity is the outcome of the Algerian war of independence, because a number of French thinkers, who developed postmodern thought, were either from French Algeria or were marked by the Algerian revolution against French colonialism.⁹ Young also defines postmodernity as a process of decolonising Western culture.¹⁰ Akber S. Ahmed, in *Postmodernism and Islam*, relates postmodernity to the omnipresence of the media, and tries to situate the emergence of Islamism in the contemporary Muslim world within the context of postmodernity.¹¹ Ahmed's understanding of postmodernity in its relation to the rise of Islamism is similar to the view of Bernard Iddings Bell, a British theologian who wrote in 1939 that the term postmodern could be interpreted

in relation to the failure of secularism and a return to religion.¹² As I understand it, postmodernity has its own features and characteristics and it does not include everything stands against modernity. For example, Islamism strongly advocates the universal validity of its meta-narrative. There is nothing in common between the anti-foundationalism of postmodernity and Islamism except that both of them fight a common enemy.

If these depictions are correct, then in my view, Heidegger's contribution to postmodern philosophy is undeniable. Postmodernist thinkers such as Rorty, Derrida and Vattmis, to name a few, admit their debt to Heidegger. In developing their own philosophy, these thinkers have employed his deconstruction of Western philosophy and the metaphysical tradition. But at this point, the legitimacy of this view must be established. Since it is agreed that the meaning of postmodern philosophy is revealed only in its relation to the meaning of modernity, I shall attempt, first, to explain Heidegger's understanding and criticism of modernity, and, second, I will discuss the philosophical transition to postmodernity initiated by Heidegger.

Every stage in human history presents a way of disclosing things, of interpreting itself. Modernity, in this regard, is characterised by the disclosure of all things as raw material to be modified and utilised by consciousness. Modern philosophy, the metaphysical roots of which go back to Plato, has provided logical conditions to legitimise this disclosure. Plato's metaphysical outlook brings with itself a vital consequence: it defines being as the idea and all discourse of being as aiming at assimilation to that model, to the accommodation to the idea; "to be" thus means to be raw material and to be produced. The mountains reveal themselves as coal mines, the forest as timber and the dams as electric power. Plato's metaphysics, as Michael Zimmerman describes it, is productionist-metaphysics, and according to Heidegger, it is the foundation for the modernist-technological view of the world.¹³ The history of Western thought is, therefore, a process in which productionist-metaphysics has degenerated, because technology has dehumanised society and compelled mankind to treat itself and all other kinds of beings as "standing-reserve" (*Bestand*) for total mobilization:

The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual

threat has already afflicted man in his essence. The rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth. Thus where enframing reigns, there is danger in the highest sense.¹⁴

The problem is not in technology itself but in its philosophical foundation, which is inherent in the metaphysical outlook of modernity, in its hostile attitude towards both human existence and nature. Heidegger believes that modernity has squeezed the world between the Soviet system and American capitalism. From the metaphysical point of view, these systems are two sides of the same coin: "The same dreary technological frenzy, the same unrestricted organization of the average man."¹⁵ To Heidegger, both systems have symptoms of the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the transformation of human beings into mass, the hatred and suspicion of everything free and creative.¹⁶ Productionist metaphysics sees nature as an alien force to be controlled and utilised, at the same time reducing human existence to an object for investment and productivity. It extends the market to every aspect of human life and replaces creative thinking with the logic of calculation, leading to an "inauthentic" way of working and producing. For Heidegger there are several features of the darkening of the world and the rise of this demonic culture: one of them is the misinterpretation of human existence and capacity as intelligence or cleverness in examining, calculating and modifying given entities. This intelligence has also been subject to organization, and as a consequence, intelligence has fallen to the level of a tool in the service of the others.¹⁷

'Inauthenticity' is one of the key concepts for understanding Heidegger's criticism of modernity and his contribution to postmodern thought. Heidegger employed this term in *Being and Time*, Sections 126-28, to describe phenomenologically the 'everydayness' of human beings in modern society. His description revolves around the "inauthentic mode of existence" imposed by modern industrial-technological society on human beings.¹⁸

Inauthenticity '*uneigentlichkeit*', prevails as one of the symptoms of the darkening of the world, as the result of the standardisation of human

beings through the rejection of the elements of difference and heterogeneity and replacing these elements with homogeneity and uniformity. The inauthentic mode of existence signifies that I conform to what others think, believe and do. In falling into the abyss of inauthenticity, my distinct way of being, which makes me different from others, is not only unrecognised but also forcibly eliminated. The best example for understanding the inauthentic mode of existence of modernity is the cultural condition imposed by Fascism and Stalinism in the first half of the last century. These systems practically employed measures to standardise human beings and eliminate the difference.

The inauthentic mode of existence affects every aspect of human life. It modifies even speech and the primordial task of language in revealing the truth, because inauthenticity changes the state of language to idle talk (*gerede*), and human quest for truth to curiosity: "Idle talk is something which anyone can rake up, it not only releases one from the task of genuinely understanding, but develops an undifferentiated kind of intelligibility, for which nothing is closed off any longer."¹⁹ The intelligibility in idle talk is "ambiguity", a characteristic of thinking in the modern age, because everyone also knows already how to talk about what has to happen first about what is not yet up for discussion but 'really' must be done. Already everyone has surmised and scented out.²⁰

One of the problems we face in dealing with Heidegger's impact on the postmodern thought is his fundamental ontology or an inquiry into the meaning of Being as a ground. But in my opinion his analysis of the meaning of being is beset with perplexity. There is also a disparity among the commentators on this issue. Kockelmans interprets Heidegger's being as a process or an activity that reveals the truth.²¹ Dreyfus rejects Kockelmans interpretation, stating that Being cannot be understood as a process or an event.²² Zimmermann thinks that Being is history shaping ways in which entities can reveal themselves and become real.²³ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines Being as the Being of the entities, and aslo, in sections 36 and 37 of the same book, he identifies Being with phenomenon, and ontology with phenomenology. In his "Letter on Humanism", Being has become a "quiet power".²⁴ and finally in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger states:

All things we have named are, and yet, when we wish to apprehend beings, it is always as though we were reaching into the void. The being after which we inquire is almost like nothing, and yet we have rejected the contention that the *essent* in its entirety is not. But Being remains unfindable, almost like nothing, or ultimately quite so. Then, in the end, word “being” is no more than an empty word. It means nothing real, tangible, material. Its meaning is unreal vapour. Thus in the last analysis Nietzsche was perfectly right in calling such “highest concepts” as “the last cloudy streak evaporating reality.”²⁵

However, I do not intend to focus on the ambiguity and relative inaccessibility of the meaning of Being in Heidegger’s philosophy. What is relevant to the theme of this paper is that Being can be understood as both temporality and nothing, and that what remains as a foundation is contingency, flux and heterogeneity. Being, unlike Plato’s idea, is dynamic: an emerging power that “issues from concealment” into unconcealment or the truth.²⁶ Unlike the First Principle of Aristotle’s metaphysics, Being is irrational and blind. It is also neither this nor that entity, but unfindable and simply nothing. As a consequence, the eternal changes to the temporal, the necessary into the contingent, and foundationalism into nihilism. In one way, Heidegger’s ontological discourse is nihilism, because it treats being as a nothing, and the term “being” as meaning nothing.²⁷ Heidegger believes also that modern thought has neglected this genuine philosophical issue and, as a result, is alienated from the truth. When human thought falls into negligence and alienation, it becomes lost in cultivating calculative thinking and in dominating what already is present, but creates nothing new. It engages itself in preserving the past and the art forms and beliefs that fill the jug of everyday life with meaning.

Heidegger’s critique of modernity is extended to include modern philosophers such as Descartes and Hegel. Descartes created a new philosophical tradition by turning to the thinking subject as the foundation of knowledge. This new philosophical tradition continued in both trends rationalism and empiricism and Kant’s critical philosophy emerged to re-affirm the importance of the Cartesian turn. The turn to the subject was a departure from the classical metaphysical tradition and one of the essential

features of modern philosophy, but it has not been able to grasp the meaning of the subject in a cultural context. At the same time, it retained Aristotelian coategories to describe the being of the thinking subject. In transcending the shortcomings of modern philosophy, Heidegger, unlike Descartes, does not begin with the metaphysical subject or the being of the subject as a self-substance. In order to break through to a new understanding of the subject, he employs the term '*Dasein*', which simply means "being there". *Dasein* is not a self-substance but an entity that exists only in the world, projecting its own existence without having a prior essence:

The Essence of *Dasein* lies in its existence. Accordingly those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not 'properties' present-at-hand of some entity which 'looks' so and so and is itself present-at-hand, they are in each case possible ways for it to be and no more than that.²⁸

Dasein escapes a modern apprehension of its meaning for two reasons. First, this entity is not the Cartesian self substance the essence of which precedes its existence. Second, since *Dasein* has no prior essence to its existence and its existence is the projection of possibilities, then possibility is prior to actuality. *Dasein* is not only an actual entity but a possibility of various ways of existence. This feature of *Dasein* indicates that, unless *Dasein* articulates all its possibilities or fulfils itself, it cannot be defined and it will remain without having a prior nature or essence. This understanding of human existence is the rejection of the Cartesian theory of self-substance and the Kantian transcendental illusion. It is the death of the self as a metaphysical subject. This analysis of Heidegger should be taken with seriousness, because it is a genuine contribution to the postmodern philosophical debate. This bold departure from the Cartesian tradition, in its deconstruction of the concept of the metaphysical subject, inspired thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, to rethink about the meaning of the subject.²⁹

Being in the world is an ontological constitution that entails *Dasein*'s involvement in the world. This involvement is not interpreted from the viewpoint of a detached observer of events, but from the viewpoint of a dweller and an actor within the world. Dwelling and acting shift the focus

of the cognitive relationship between human beings and the world to a new and pragmatic understanding of this relationship. As Heidegger puts it, human beings are not in the world the way that a chair is in a room. Human existence is being in the world and it should be understood as essentially a worldly phenomenon. The world is not an external space but a place where Dasein dwells. The world is an ontological condition, the environment and home without which Dasein cannot exist.

The things Dasein encounters in the world are not just present at hand, or the objects of theoretical investigations, but handy, or ready to hand for definite purposes. Dasein's involvement with ready to hand entities is primordial to a theoretical investigation. Dasein makes use of things, encountering them not as mere objects of contemplation but as equipment:

...the less we just stare at the hammer thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly it is encountered as that which it is as equipment.³⁰

Against the modern view of human relationships with the world, Heidegger argues that theoretical relationships are not the only possible way of having contact with things. The craftsman for example, does not view the hammer as an entity with certain physical properties, but as something for hammering. As a consequence, the world does not become a collection of extended things in space, but a web of significance. Dasein's approach to this web is a practical one of circumspect concern. It is noteworthy that the primordially of the practical approach does not reduce the significance of theoretical cognition. Heidegger does not say that ready to hand is metaphysically prior to present at hand, nor that this use of ready to hand entities is at the same time blind. It has its own sight, which guides the manipulation of the entities. The craftsman knows what a hammer is for, but does not need to know the physical properties of a hammer in order to use it.

The world of Dasein is not only populated by ready to hand and present at hand entities. There is another class of being, which turns Dasein ontologically into social being. This class is the being of the other or *Mitsein*. The being of the other is an ontological condition like being in the

world is for Dasein. This implies that the existence of the other does not require proof, as the being of Dasein presupposes the being of the other:

The entity which is 'other' has itself the same kind of Being as Dasein. In Being with and towards others, there is thus a relationship of Being from Dasein to Dasein. The relationship of Being which one has towards the other ... then becomes a projection of one's own Being towards oneself; into something else', the other would be a duplicate of the Self.³¹

The existence of the other is neither problematic nor a threat to my existence. My relationship with the other is a projection towards myself because the other is a duplicate and Dasein like me. But this does not signify that the other is identical with the self, and hence the differences between them are eliminated. Dasein is in each case mine, and my being is unique and different in the sense that I have my own way and my own possibilities, which constitute my essence. The other, like the self, also has its own way and its own possibilities.

Being authentic, *eigentlich*, in contrast to being inauthentic, is being different from the other. The self and the other in the authentic mode of existence mutually recognise their differences. The being of Dasein is essentially being in the world with others, and the self and the other mutually recognise their differences. In addition, Heidegger believes that this relationship is not only epistemological, it is also built on the existential of "care" or *Fursorge*. The recognition of the difference between the self and the other is an indication of the way these two entities care for one another. It is not shared ideology, not race or faith, which shapes the cultural life of human beings. Contrary to modern understanding of standardisation, it is "Care" and the submerging of difference which provide a new ground for understanding culture. Heidegger's interpretation of the existence of the other is the rejection of solipsism, Cartesianism and Hegel's social anthropology.

Another important point is Heidegger's understanding of language and the priority of speech, which has influenced Derrida's analysis of the distinction between phonocentric and logocentric, and the remoteness of the latter from originating thought. Language for Heidegger is primarily

phonocentric, and speech (*Rede*) is the ontological foundation of language. His analysis begins with “Understanding”, not as a faculty in the human mind but as an ontological condition prior to theoretical cognition. Understanding is also a prior condition for interpretation (*Auslegung*), because Dasein cannot interpret the meaning of an entity unless it understands it in the context of its fore structure.³² Language is proper to Dasein, because Dasein has privileged access to being or truth. But the language of the inauthentic mode of existence of modernity is characterised by ambiguity, and Dasein’s relationship to the truth remains in oblivion. In Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism”, language is considered to be the house of Being, Dasein dwells in this house and is its custodian.

As mentioned before, inauthenticity reduces language to idle talk and thinking to calculation. The question that arises here is: how can Dasein as the custodian of the dwelling commit itself to the revealing of the truth? How can it regain its creative power? The answer to this question cannot be found in the productive metaphysics of industrial technological society. The saving power, as suggested by Heidegger, to end the darkening of the world is creative work or art. In this resolution, the work of art can play a central role to delineate Dasein as a custodian of the truth. Art, unlike technology, does not depend on calculative thinking and does not ravage the world, instead it reveals and guards the truth. In the work of art, Dasein is engaged in creation and producing authentically. Writhing against the despotism of modernity, Heidegger turns towards art as the only hope to rescue us and the world from the destructive forces of industrial technology. At the end of his essay on “The Question Concerning Technology”, he concludes with a quotation from Holderlin:

But where danger is, grows

The saving power also...³³

As we know, Plato degraded the work of art. He considered it a copy, not creation, and excluded the poets from his Republic. Against Plato’s understanding of art and his metaphysical speculation, which become one of the foundations of modernity, Heidegger restores the work of art to its true essence and accords the healing power to the poetic.

In conclusion, his phenomenological analysis of Dasein in the world,

and his emphasis on difference and authenticity, and on the destruction of the metaphysical subject, mark Heidegger's bold departure from modernity. This thinker has opened up the possibility of a new understanding of human existence, society and culture. Finally, I would like to say that, if my analysis of Heidegger's philosophy has some value, it is in starting a debate on his contribution to postmodernity, not finishing it.

NOTES

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