

HEIDEGGER'S INTERROGATION OF MODERNITY

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Postmodern thinking is considered as a rejection of modernity. Heidegger's name has never been dragged directly into the group of thinkers who are considered as post modernists. Because his phenomenological recasting of the question of being does not fully fall into a rejection of being as in the case of the post modern tradition. The world historical project proposed by Heidegger includes many more issues, which are not the direct concern of the postmodern tradition. Still the postmodern thinkers can draw many useful reflections from Heidegger's thinking which can be very helpful in confronting the project of modernity. This paper tries to view Heidegger's recasting of the question of being in his later writings as an encounter with the problem of modernity.

Heidegger's thinking locates modernity's origin in the failure of metaphysical tradition to think the question of Being in its concrete historicity. Although Heidegger does not take up the issue of modernity as a problem in philosophy, he was deeply dissatisfied with the contemporary culture, which is characterized as modernity. Dissociating from the earlier humanistic attitude of 'Being and Time' his reflections on language in his later essays provide us tools to encounter modernity as a serious philosophical problem. Heidegger considered modernity as nihilistic as it is devoid of all true experiences of life. For him authenticity of man lies in his personal choice and commitment towards other beings. However the modern outlook of life promotes a kind of impersonal detachment. It looks at everything in terms of human utility. Meaninglessness of life is considered as the greatest issue faced by man in the contemporary situation. This has

been a major concern for most of the thinkers of the last two centuries. Nietzsche explained it as the experience of nihilism of modern man and Marx recognized it in terms of the estrangement of human being from his labor.

Analysis of the cause of estrangement and nihilism has become the immediate concern of the major traditions of the twentieth century thinking. Among them Heideggerian reflection on the cause of estrangement provides us some unique insights into the genesis of contemporary technology based society which is said to be in the postindustrial face. It is his practice of thinking *Being* in its concrete particularity that helps him to distinguish the uniqueness of man's practices in archaic past from the estranging endeavors of modern man. All thinkers before him considered the question of *Being* in an impersonal and detached manner. In their reflections other beings appear only in relation to man, because it is from the human point of view that things of the world, and animals and plants are defined. In this sense, the history of thought in our recent past can be characterized as humanistic. Humanism was the answer suggested from all quarters to solve every problem emerged in socio-economic and cultural spheres. Humanism is hailed as the most refined and mature expression of human consciousness in its historical development. However, most of the thinkers failed to understand that humanism is not simply a kind of sympathizing with the human lot or a project for social building. 'Humanism' of the West goes beyond that and becomes a way of understanding the world. It even turns into a sort of anthropocentrism when we posit our values as the criterion for dealing with other beings and measure everything in terms of human utility.

Heidegger finds a correlation between such an arrogant humanism and the estrangement of modern man. The origin of humanism can be traced back to Cartesian thinking. Descartes posited cogito, which is the thinking subject, at the center of the universe. Thinking is the fundamental property of the subject and knowledge is the outcome of its contemplative encounters with the world. Rest of the beings are dissociated from this transcendental subject and placed as substance with extension as the attribute. The autonomous thinking subject is freed from the objects and has given an autonomous existence. From then on the world, with all its

beings, is considered as an independent entity, open to the manipulation of the thinking subject. The meaning of the world is attained by the activity of representation of the objects by the subject. This deep cleft inflicted by modern philosophy between the self-conscious thinking subject and non-conscious beings was the corner stone of all humanistic thinking. Humanistic thinking does not recognize the unity of human consciousness with the rest of the world. The gradual ascendancy of man to the lordship of the universe was possible only at the cost of his alienation from other beings and finally from the world itself.

Heidegger insists that in order to overcome meaninglessness and nihilism we must stand above humanism. First of all Heidegger wants us to realize that :

“Man is not the Lord of the universe. Man is the shepherd of Being”¹

This is possible only by achieving a radical break in the very nature of human thinking. As a first move towards this task he initiates a genealogical critique of the history of metaphysical thought. He tries to show that the fundamental nature of metaphysical thinking is abstraction. Metaphysics thinks the truth of Being of beings, but in an abstract way. Instead of bringing the concrete particularity of the truth of Being, metaphysics thinks only the essence of being which in turn sends the actual truth of Being into *oblivion*. Such a *forgetting of Being* was fatal to the history of man and gave rise to the technological devastation of earth, which now threatens the whole *life world*.

Heidegger, therefore, argues that the need of the hour is to change the essentialist mode of thinking. That is possible only by revealing the truth of Being in a different way. Such a revealing, which the history of thought has forgotten to undertake, is different from the metaphysical manner of thinking. To inaugurate such a revealing, firstly our language has to free itself from the humanistic bias. Instead of fulfilling the function of representation of beings, language can attempt to reveal the Being of beings as a *clearing*. Representation is merely the requirement of man as rational animal, who wants to rule over nature and manipulate its resources. However in the activity of *clearing* not only other beings are let to move freely but also brought into the daylight of human consciousness. Here

utilitarian interest will give way for protective instinct. Then, perhaps, other beings, including animals and plants and stones, will come into radiant presence in our linguistic practices. This is the highest task Heidegger demands from contemporary man. Such a thought, because of its anti-humanistic attitude, cannot be characterized as inhuman as some wishes to do. Beyond all humanistic prejudices it aims to grow as a thought of the entire life world in which man is only a part.

Heidegger offers to analyse the beginning of abstraction in the history of thinking. He argues that the turn towards abstraction in the realm of thinking is not an accidental event happened in the recent past. In his opinion its beginning can be traced back to early Greek metaphysics. He writes :

“..the technical interpretation of thinking..reach back to Plato and Aristotle”²

In his perception metaphysical thinking and abstraction are synonymous terms. It is the activity of abstraction that makes metaphysics possible. The fatal shift from the primordial understanding of Being to that of a technical understanding was inaugurated with the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Even before the dawn of philosophical thinking human thought was able to reflect the truth of Being, but in an entirely different language. The ancient Greeks had a primordial understanding of the truth of Being. At that point their language was not one of technical mastery and abstraction. In their naming of things and creatures, Being was spoken directly to their hearts and they remained in a delightful fusion with the rest of nature. But a radical shift in man's approach towards 'things' takes place when thinking becomes essentialist. Thinking the essence of a thing makes metaphysical thinking different from other possible approaches we can have towards a thing. Metaphysical thought places the essence of a thing in the world of abstract universals as the manner of Platonic idealism. Those who consider the essence to be in particulars, as the case with Aristotle, also fall on the same track because of their acceptance of what is common to all particular things of that class as its essential truth. It reduces being to a concept. Its first form, manifested through Plato and Aristotle, is a theoretical activity whose aim is to achieve rational measurement of things in technical

precision.

The Greeks' attempt to understand a thing in such a way heralded the advent of empirical sciences much in advance. Theoretical thinking is the seed from which modern science comes into being. Metaphysics can be termed science in its infancy and so it is not accidental that technical way of thinking brought about the technological age of modernity. For instance, Aristotle explains about four causes at work in bringing about a thing into being-material cause, formal cause, efficient cause, final cause-and for centuries we have accepted that they are at work in coming into presence of any thing of the world. This fourfold causality is employed to produce results and it became a means for man to instrumentally manipulate the world to reveal what is yet hidden in the folds of Being. Thus, in our age, revealing of the truth of being takes place in the form of modern technology, which is nothing but the gradual culmination of philosophical thought pursued in terms of abstract categories. The end of philosophy writes Heidegger:

“proves to be the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technological world and of the social order proper to this world. The end of philosophy means the beginning of the world civilization based upon Western European thinking.”³

What is revealing in a different form? How can we approach a thing/Being in a different mode? Heidegger's entire career as a philosopher was devoted to seek the possibility of an alternative way of revealing the truth of things. Heidegger shows that in a form of thinking, that is neither calculative nor practically oriented alone man can come nearer to the proper meaning of Being. Ordinarily, man has the tendency to consider the validity of a thing and validity of thinking in terms of the result it is capable to produce. Whatever is not productive of satisfaction to our appetites are considered useless, and even a thing that caters to our needs is thrown away into the dustbin after our purpose is served. Our relation to a thing is like that of our approach to a Styrofoam cup that we use to drink coffee and abandon after use. Even animals and plants are no more than mere objects that will bring us some profit. In general, we deal with things as resources to be used. The same ethos is manifested in technological manipulation of the world “which puts to nature the unreasonable demand

that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such”⁴

Heidegger argues that the calculative sort of thinking can be overcome only by retrieving the essential relationship of man to other beings. This is not at all something new which humanity has to acquire, but is already there as the primordial truth of *Dasein*. Here we can clearly notice Heidegger’s phenomenological perspective in the understanding of the world. He underlines that *Dasein*’s consciousness is not a pure consciousness, independent of its intentional objects but always the consciousness of something. Vice versa the meaning of things to us presupposes its existence to our immediate *life world*. Therefore, *Dasein*’s existence and possibilities are closely knit with the other beings it encountered around. However, the conceptual mode of thinking man undertaken for centuries, separates the *life world* from our daily experience of existence. It does not allow us to see the truth of Being although Being is very closer to us. In Heideggerian terms :

“Being is farther than all beings and yet is nearer to man than every being, be it a rock, a beast, a work of art, a machine, be it an angel or God - Being is the nearest. Yet the nearer remains farthest from man.”⁵

Standing nearer to Being is not the way of the conceptual grasp of a specialist. For instance, geology studies the attributes, material composition and history of rocks. But to think the Being of the rock is to experience that which gives it existence and to immerse oneself in the full ‘thereness’ of that thing irrespective of its utility to us. In the same manner, a mountain range, the flight of a bird, or a building on the bank of a river communicate their presence through their radiant appearance, which is prior to any particular or general act of cognition. Heidegger shows that man’s existence is entangled with the existence of other beings and that only in ‘lighting their Being’ does human existence gets its proper dignity. Because “plants and animals are lodged in their respective environments but are never placed freely in the lighting of Being which alone is “world”, they lack language”⁶. It is man’s responsibility to bring them into the open as only man has the capability to use language. It is only in language the Being of other beings can be revealed so that man becomes the guardian of them,

whose dignity consists in the preservation of Being's truth.

Heidegger gives high priority to the practice of language in surpassing the nihilistic thought brought about by Western metaphysics, which ultimately culminates in modernity. Since modernity is rooted in *logocentric* employment of language, its overcoming necessitates freeing of meaning from essentialist prison house of language. For without language there would be no experience of Being, either in essentialist manner of primordial manner. *Dasein* is to be understood as a being in language. But in the perspective of Heidegger language is not a mere device invented by man for his communication. It is not that man speaks language, rather it is Being that speaks language through man. Therefore, language, firstly and foremostly is that event of bringing the Being into the open. In this sense language essentially is poetry because language is in its aboriginal form the utterance of man to whom for the first time Being is manifested into the open.

In its essence language is not the utterance of an organism, nor is it the expression of a living thing ...Language is the lighting-concealing advent of Being itself.⁷

In the modern age, says Heidegger, it is still possible for man to retrieve the truth of Being that has gone into oblivion under the over-arching shadow of the thinking practiced by the metaphysical tradition. But this fortune is given only to those who are ready to take up the guardianship of Being. To take the guardianship means to 'light the truth of Being'. In "Letter on Humanism" Heidegger repeatedly asserts that 'language is the house of Being'⁸ in order to remind us that the guardianship of the home of being is given only to those who think and create words. If homelessness of man is a condition brought about by the alienation from the rest of the beings, man's homecoming will be possible by coming into the shelter erected in language to preserve the truth of Being by man himself. The message Heidegger delivers to us is that we can still save our life, along with the lives of myriad of species at the abyss of this age of destruction and dwell on earth with all its dignity and greatness.

Heidegger attempts to make it clear that the project of modernity is merely a consummation of the search for the truth of things conducted in

abstraction. The aim of metaphysics from its beginning itself was to answer the question: what is a thing? To this date man couldn't fully answer this question. Logic articulated truth of things by means of their genera and species and paved the way for modern science. In the modern age it is the sciences that take up the search for the answer to this question. Now science and technology replace metaphysic. Technology with the aid of sophisticated tools can more effectively conduct the examination of things and offer more clear answer to this age-old question. When Heidegger argues that metaphysics ends, he does not mean that metaphysics dies away. Instead, metaphysics only transforms into specialized branches of science and technology.

Today technology is hailed as the final answer to all the problems faced by man. Technology, the boon of contemporary man, is also a form of revealing the truth of Being. But the truth *unconcealed* in technology is determined by humanistic interests and, therefore, highly alarming. Instrumentality is the essence of technology. In the mode of technology man's ordering attitude in its extremity holds its grip on nature's resources to produce results. As a way of manifesting the truth of Being technology is an inevitability of human history. Therefore, Heidegger does not make a call to do away with technology. In the opinion of Heidegger the threat in technology does not come from potentially lethal machines and apparatuses, but from its fundamental attitude that it is the single way of lighting the truth. The actual danger has already been inflicted on man in his essence, which is the forgetting of the truth of Being in a more primordial sense. This danger has been launched ever since the Greek metaphysicians began thinking in terms of abstraction. But Heidegger feels that the extreme danger lies in the *enframing* activity of technology. The overarching grasp of technology darkens other possible means for revealing and presents itself as the only way of revealing Being's truth. that could deny man the possibility of entering into a more original revealing of the truth of Being.

Modern technology being the inevitability produced by the essentialist metaphysical thinking, we cannot escape technology by reverting the course of history. Nevertheless, Heidegger insists that we should be able to harness the saving power within technology. The idea of technology originally comes

from Greeks' *techne* by which they mean the activity of bringing forth something. It covered a wide range of activities and skills of craftsmen such as handicraft manufacture, artistic and poetical bringing forth. *Techne* was essentially bringing into presence something concealed within the folds of Being. Greeks called even the arts of the mind and the fine arts *techne*. *Techne* was the activity of *poesis* and is something poetic. They could even call *physis* the activity of *poesis* because the revealing of the truth of a 'thing' in *physis* was devoid of any interest of its utility for man. Understanding a 'thing' neither was a theoretical activity nor it was guided by the motive of manipulating. The activity of *poesis* aimed merely to reveal a thing as pure shining.

But the activity of *Techne* deviated from this course and assume the dimension of modern technology. This turn took place when man conceived of thinking in the model of scientific knowledge and measure our deeds by the successful achievements of praxis. Therefore, the saving grace can befall on man only if he gives up the manipulative humanistic mode of thinking and once again comes closer to the 'lighting of truth' as *poesis*.

Western metaphysical thought from Plato onwards failed to think Being in the proper sense. The theoretical kind of thinking practiced by them deviated from a more primely granted revealing of the ancients, which was a pure shining forth of the truth of beings. That is why Heidegger calls the history of philosophy, the history of the 'forgetting of Being'. This destiny does not rest upon a mere failure of human thinking, but a failure of Western representational rationality, which separated Being and existence that completely dominates the destiny of western history. At the threshold of the postindustrial age Heidegger asks whether a kind of thinking different from the theoretical kind, a reflection that is not metaphysical, is still possible? The answer perhaps depends on considering whether we employ language to let Being speak instead of we speak for ourselves. Then perhaps, as Heidegger wished, human thought will be able to overcome its arrogant humanism and once again let other beings come into radiant presence.

Such a thought will bring man closer to the poetic mode of existence. In Heideggerian perspective 'poetic' is neither strictly nor a specific sector

of cultural activity as in the case of art and aesthetics. Instead, language itself can be understood as poetry in the essential sense because language is that event in which for the first time being as *Being* is disclosed to man. In naming a being man first makes it appear. Hence the archaic man understood language as the primordial expression of truth as the magnificent revealing of Being. Poetry only completes this task, which is set up in language. *Poesis* is the end at which language aims. In the technologically dominated modern age, in order to save life and earth, Heidegger calls for a retrieval of that primordial approach towards the question of Being. Its retrieval may transfigure our present practice of thinking as theoretical activity into a mode of linguistic expression, which comes very close to art and poetry.

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p.221
2. *Ibid*, p. 194.
3. Heidegger, *End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, in *Basic Writings*, p. 337.
4. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, in *Basic Writings*, p. 296.
5. Heidegger, *Letter on Humainism*, p. 210.
6. *Ibid*, p. 206.
7. *Ibid*
8. Heidegger, *Letter on Humainism*, p. 193.