

Martin Heidegger

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Introduction

In the last century, few philosophers have been more influential, or for that matter controversial, than Martin Heidegger. Although Heidegger for the most part confined his philosophical inquiry to the oft neglected and frequently disdained field of Ontology (the study of being), the implications of his work have reached far beyond these confines and have exerted significant influence in the field of Hermeneutics; so much so as to virtually revolutionize the field. Unfortunately, the hermeneutic conclusions reached by Heidegger and extrapolated by those who came after him are intrinsically antithetic to a Christian Worldview, resulting in what many believe to be the philosophical destruction of truth, objectivity, history, morality, and meaning. These conclusions have, overtime time, been absorbed, albeit unconsciously, but the culture at large and at time the church. Ultimately though, Heidegger's conclusions and those based on his work only follow if Heidegger's methodology and fundamental assumptions are sound. A careful examination of Heidegger's thought reveals, that his conclusions are not sustainable as they are based primarily on two untenable assumptions: the truth of historicism, and nihilist metaphysics.

It will be the purpose of this investigation to examine: 1) Heidegger's thought and methodology pertaining to ontology; 2) the resulting hermeneutic influences exerted by this thought and methodology; and 3) the foundational philosophic assumptions upon which they are based. It is not within the scope of this query to present a comprehensive analysis the whole of

Heidegger's thought. Therefore, we will seek to identify what is most essential to Heidegger's system and methodology; an approach that should suffice both to bring to light a sufficient understanding of Heidegger's system, and reveal the crucial areas wherein his system destroys itself.

An Overview of Heidegger's Theory of Ontology

Grappling with the ontological theory of Martin Heidegger is a daunting task to say the least. Heidegger's thought is incredibly complex, and the question he seeks to answer, the nature of Being, is, in and of itself, ponderous. What is more, Heidegger's thought and style are extremely enigmatic for reasons which will become apparent as this study unfolds. Stephen Erickson explains the difficulty inherent in the attempt to understand Heidegger saying, "The 'Heidegger problem' is this. Any attempt to discuss the philosophical work of Heidegger must face up to three hard facts, and in the end admit a fourth. First, many if not most, Anglo-American philosophers do not take Heidegger seriously enough to bother to comprehend his thought, and, secondly, even those who take time to study Heidegger's philosophical writings find his views so enigmatic as to be nearly impenetrable. The third fact is that Heidegger is in large measure responsible for this state of affairs. The fourth is that in spite of this Heidegger repays careful study."¹ Although Erickson's fourth claim is debatable, the importance of Heidegger's thought and the influence it has had, make it an imperative subject of study if not a rewarding one. Prior to this examination, however, it would be quite beneficial to garner at least a basic understanding of Heidegger's major philosophical influences. This will allow for the

¹Stephen A. Erickson, *Language and Being: An Analytic Phenomenology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 4.

identification of many of Heidegger's fundamental presuppositions, which will in turn shed light on the reasoning behind his thought and methodology.

In many ways, Heidegger's thought represents the culmination of the philosophical thought of the Nineteenth Century. As Norman Geisler demonstrates, his influences were incredibly diverse. "He [Heidegger] was influenced by the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the nihilistic concerns of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the historical approach of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), the personal subjectivity of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), and the mystical metaphysics of Plotinus (205-270 A.D.)."² These influences on Heidegger's thought are incredibly important to understanding the direction and ultimately, the short-comings of his thinking. From each these thinkers, Heidegger adopted foundational presuppositions that shaped his thought: from Hegel, came the acceptance of historicism, the belief that all knowledge is inextricably linked to the historical situation of the knower and thus relative;³ from Nietzsche, he adopted a nihilist worldview, holding that man was alone in the universe and without meaning or purpose; from Husserl, Heidegger was to find his methodological approach in phenomenology, which seeks to garner truth by understanding the way in which man consciously interacts with daily phenomena, rather than with objective reality; from Kierkegaard, the notion that truth and reality were ultimately subject to the thought

²Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Introduction, Bible*. vol.1. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002), 162.

³Heidegger ultimately rejected the conclusions of historicism in the sense that he recognized that historicism was both self-defeating and antithetical to the universal truth he sought; however, Heidegger's also took it as fact that Hegel's conclusions about historicism were indeed true as shown by the fact that his theories tried not to refute historicism, but to overcome it.

and experience of the individual; and from Plotinus, an understanding of reality that was not knowable by rational means. Beginning with these assumptions it is easy to understand why Heidegger's thought is so complex; with these beliefs serving as his foundation, arriving at a real and meaningful understanding of being would, for Heidegger, require a monumental leap over enormous philosophical obstacles; one which many believe that, to some measure, Heidegger successfully completed.

Heidegger's philosophical inquiry was guided by a singular purpose, all of his efforts were working towards the end of discovering what it meant "to be." Erickson elaborates, "The major issue which concerns Heidegger is the formulation of, and answer to, a deceptively simple question: What is the meaning of being?"⁴ Although many others before has addressed this same question, Heidegger's perspective on the task conspired to create a unique and complex approach to the question. In his book *Hermeneutics*, Richard E. Palmer demonstrates the unusual aims that Heidegger set which would separate his treatment of ontology from all others that came before: "From the beginning Heidegger sought a method of going behind and to the root of Western conceptions of Being, a 'hermeneutics' that would enable him to render visible the presuppositions on which they have been based. Like Nietzsche, he wished to call the whole Western metaphysical tradition into question."⁵ With this as his aim, Heidegger embarked on a project that would radicalize not only the field of ontology, but hermeneutics as well. It should be remembered, however, that Heidegger's hermeneutic system was ancillary to his ontology.

⁴Erickson, 5.

⁵Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 124.

Heidegger saw hermeneutics as little more than a necessary methodology to achieve his overall goal of understanding the meaning of Being. This fact was recognized by the very man who adapted and applied Heidegger's methodology to the field of philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer. He explains Heidegger's purpose for hermeneutics and at the same time sheds light on the tremendous complexity of Heidegger's system: "Heidegger entered into the problems of historical hermeneutics and critique only in order to explicate the fore-structure of understanding for the purposes of ontology."⁶ As evidenced by this passage, Heidegger's perspective on the problem of ontology was quite different from any before it. In light of this it would be helpful to systematize, as much as possible, Heidegger's reasoning as he worked towards understanding the meaning of Being.

Perhaps the fundamental question that must be answered in approaching Heidegger's philosophy is: How did he conceive of Being? It is hardly meaningful to attempt to discern what being means if one does not first have at least some idea of what being *is*. It is in Heidegger's conception of Being that the necessary complexity of his project is first revealed; as Heidegger himself demonstrates:

But is Being a thing? Is Being like an actual being in time? *Is* Being at all? If it were, then we would incontestable have to recognize it as something which is an consequently discover it among other beings. This lecture hall *is*. The lecture hall *is* illuminated. We recognize the illuminated lecture hall at once and with no reservations as something that is. But where in the whole lecture hall do we find the 'is'? Nowhere among things do we find Being. Every thing has its time. But Being is not a thing, is not in time. Yet Being as presencing remains determined

⁶Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2002), 265.

as presence by time, by what is temporal.⁷

The tremendous difficulty Heidegger had as the result of his presuppositions becomes evident here. Heidegger's *a priori* acceptance of Nietzsche's nihilist philosophy limited his worldview to the purely material and temporal. As a result, Heidegger was forced to find his answer to the question of being within the constraints of a space-time continuum. Thus, Heidegger must virtually contradict himself in his understanding of Being. For although Being, as concept is nowhere present in the physical world, it must be known through "beings" which are in the physical world. Heidegger must therefore attempt to understand something that is both temporal and not-temporal at the same time; an impossible task, but one he nevertheless undertook. Furthermore, as Erickson shows, although Heidegger conceives of Being as something that is not a thing, and thus is not an entity, he must, in the outworking of his project, treat it as such. "The substantive '*Sein*' (Being) implies that what has thus been named, itself 'is.' Now Being itself becomes some thing that 'is.'"⁸ From this emerges a concept of Being that both is and is not; a contradiction that led Heidegger to conclude that ultimately Being is unknowable or at best, "unintelligible in itself."⁹

Having concluded that a direct understanding of Being was not possible, Heidegger sought an indirect route. He proposed that being might be known through the examination of *beings* which on some level must possess Being. Erickson explains, "On Heidegger's analysis,

⁷Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 3.

⁸Erickson, 11. Erickson quotes Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 52-53 in this passage.

⁹Geisler, 164.

though Being is not itself an entity, it is always the Being *of* an entity.”¹⁰ Heidegger saw in this distinction a way around the contradiction of the nature of Being. As such, he sought to discover a way in which he might reach the meaning of Being through an analysis of beings and how they “be.”

It is in this aim that Heidegger’s debt to Husserl becomes apparent. What Heidegger needed, and found in Husserl’s system of phenomenology, was a methodology which would enable him to examine Being on an existential or experiential level. Palmer concurs saying, “In the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Heidegger found conceptual tools unavailable to Dilthey or Nietzsche, and a method which might lay open the processes of being in human existence in such a way that being, and not simply one’s own ideology, might come into view. For phenomenology had opened up the realm of the preconceptual apprehending of phenomena.”¹¹ Heidegger, having concluded that the only way to reach an understanding of Being qua Being was via the indirect route of transcending the existence of individual beings, needed a *way* to transcend the individual and arrive at the unifying principle of Being. Essentially, he sought to unveil the reality of Being behind the individual existences of beings; or as he explains, “Being *is* not. There is, It-gives-Being as the unconcealing of presencing [being].”¹² Heidegger was not concerned with what beings were, rather, he sought to get behind these individual beings by exploring the way in which Being manifest itself in beings. Heidegger explains this process in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*: “All our efforts in the existential

¹⁰Erickson, 18.

¹¹Palmer, 124.

¹²Heidegger, 6.

analytic are geared to the one goal of finding a possibility of answering the question of the *meaning of being* in general. The development of this *question* requires that we delineate the phenomenon in which something like being itself becomes accessible – the phenomenon of the *understanding of being*.”¹³ This was the exact intention of phenomenology. As Heidegger explains, “it [phenomenology] does not characterize the ‘what’ of objects of philosophical research in terms of their content but the ‘how’ of such research.”¹⁴ In phenomenology, Heidegger had found the perfect methodology for his project.

Once Heidegger had determined how he would conduct his research in terms of methodology, he had to apply this methodology in such a way that would coincide with his understanding of Being. It is here where Heidegger’s conception of the necessary relationship between Being and time becomes important. Heidegger believed, that Being was manifest in beings which are inextricably bound to time. He therefore concluded that the phenomenon he was seeking to understand was how Being manifests itself in *Dasein* (the being-there) which exists only in time.¹⁵ As Gadamer explains, for Heidegger, “What being is was to be determined from within the horizon of time;”¹⁶ that is, the key to understanding Being lay within the phenomenon of *Dasein*. In this sense, the understanding of Being is necessarily existential, it is understood in the analysis of the existence or experience of *Dasein*. In this sense, the understanding of Being must also be historical in that the only things available to *Dasein* are the

¹³Ibid, 341.

¹⁴Ibid, 24.

¹⁵Gadamer, 150.

¹⁶Ibid, 257.

experiences of “being-there” that it has already had. Heidegger’s line of reasoning can be summarized as follows: Being is inextricably connected to time and thus to history; if this is so, then the understanding of being lies in the discernment of the processes by which one’s history is presented to one’s Dasein; therefore, in analyzing the process of how the phenomena of being is presented or understood by Dasein, we can perhaps grasp what Being is.

Heidegger’s next step, having arrived at both the method and the target of his application, was to identify precisely how being was manifest to Dasein. To do this he first needed to understand the activity of Dasein. Assuming the fundamental element to the understanding of Dasein is time, Heidegger claims that “Da-sein finds its meaning in temporality,”¹⁷ which is, a condition for Dasein’s understanding of the possibilities of its being. This Heidegger called an “authentic understanding,” that is, knowledge of what Dasein is; or as Jean Grondin more poetically states it, “The goal is to give Dasein knowledge of itself.”¹⁸ The “authentic” understanding of Dasein’s identity is, arrived at through Dasein’s recognition of its own possibilities of being. Charles Guignon explains this process saying that, “In becoming authentic, Dasein recognizes the most binding possibilities for its life and takes them over as its own. But it also comes to see its own life as dovetailing into the wider project of a ‘destiny’ it shares with its community.”¹⁹ The question then becomes, from where does Dasein get its

¹⁷Heidegger, 17.

¹⁸Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 98-99

¹⁹Charles Guignon, *The Twofold Task: Heidegger’s Foundational Historicism in “Being and Time,”* *Tulane Studies in Philosophy: The Thought of Martin Heidegger*, vol. 32, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1984), 56.

possibilities?

As we have already seen, Heidegger held that Dasein, as inextricably linked to time, was fundamentally historical. Thus Dasein finds its possibilities, and projects them forward as a function of its historicity. Heidegger elucidates this relationship explaining that, “The question of the meaning of being is led to understand itself as historical in accordance with its own way of proceeding, that is, as the provisional explication of Da-sein in its temporality and historicity.”²⁰ Unfortunately, while this fundamental historicity and temporality of Dasein is the key to understanding the meaning of Being, it is also, according to Heidegger, an obstacle to the self-awareness of Dasein. In the “inauthentic” Dasein, Heidegger asserts that, “This elemental historicity of Da-sein can remain concealed from it.”²¹ Dasein cannot gain an authentic knowledge of itself apart from an understanding of its intrinsic temporality and historicity. This is blocked, however, by a function of Dasein’s historicity which Heidegger calls “tradition.”

Guignon explains the obstacle presented by tradition to an authentic realization of the being of Dasein:

The understanding of Being circulating in the Anyone is itself a product of what Heidegger calls the ‘tradition.’ In its ways of being, ‘Dasein has grown up both into and in a traditional way of interpreting itself.’ As representatives of the Anyone, we are crossing points of historically shaped systems of shared possibilities which give us a concrete content for our lives;” and consequently, “Each of us embodies the past by virtue of our enculturation into a field of historically generated possibilities of understanding and interpretation. But we have ‘forgotten’ what Heidegger calls the deep ‘wellsprings,’ ‘origins,’ ‘roots,’ or ‘native soil’ from which those possibilities have originated.”²²

²⁰Heidegger, 18.

²¹Ibid, 18.

²²Guignon, 55-56.

In other words, Dasein has forgotten the very historicity which serves as a precondition for the projection of its possibilities. To become authentic then, Dasein must reveal to itself its own history of being and in so doing discern the possibilities for the meaning of Being.

Before examining how Dasein can reach an authentic understanding of the history of its being, it would be beneficial first to clarify our understanding of the exact nature of Dasein's projection of its possibilities; for therein lies the final component of Heidegger's system - the interpretive or hermeneutic nature of Dasein's understanding of itself. According to Heidegger, the very process of Dasein's projection of its possibilities is interpretive. That is, Dasein's future is grounded in the projection of its possibilities from within the structure of its own historical nature. Heidegger explains this relationship informing us that, "Da-sein 'is' its past, in the manner of its being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion 'occurs' out of its future. In its manner of existing at any given time, and accordingly also with the understanding of being that belongs to it, Da-sein grows into a customary interpretation of itself and grows up in that interpretation."²³ In this sense, Dasein, by virtue of its historical tradition, is locked into an interpretive structure of understanding; it is bound by its own temporal and historical nature to interpret its past in order to project the possibilities of its future. As a result, all of human experience needs must be hermeneutic and, as a result, our understanding is by necessity determined by, and limited to, our historicity. Incidentally it is here where the influence of Hegel's historicism is most obviously manifest. Palmer elaborates on this foundational assumption explaining, "The hope of interpreting "without prejudice and presuppositions" ultimately flies in the face of the way understanding operates. What appears from the "object" is

²³Heidegger, 17.

what one allows to appear and what the thematization of the world at work in his understanding will bring to light.”²⁴ The conclusion that must be drawn from this is that man does not experience reality, but only our interpretation of reality within the possibilities presented by our past.

Synthesizing all of these ideas, Heidegger proposed that discovering the meaning of Being would require a hermeneutic investigation of the phenomena of ontology. In other words, he would have to interpret the way Being has manifest itself to Dasein in the history of ontology. In understanding the relation of Being to time, Charles Guignon explains that Heidegger believed he could get beyond the history of ontology, the way that being has manifest itself to or in Dasein, and “retrieve and appropriate its underlying message.”²⁵ He explains further that, “The basic point . . . seems to be that once we realize that all research is part of the ‘happening’ of Dasein, we will also see that the question of Being is inextricably tied into the history of ontology and cannot be answered without coming to terms with that history.”²⁶ Through interpretation, Heidegger believed he could transcend the limiting boundaries of historicism and uncover the meaning of Being that lies behind the history of ontology. However, in order to get behind the history of ontology one must first remove it. Rightfully so then, Heidegger asserts that the understanding of the nature and meaning of Being, requires the destruction of the history of ontology.²⁷ In this process Heidegger was seeking to arrive at a pure conception of Being that

²⁴Palmer, 136.

²⁵Guignon, 57.

²⁶Ibid, 55.

²⁷Heidegger, 20.

was contained in or behind the language of ontology, to separate, if you will, the truth of Being from the historical interpretation of Being. Grondin, quoting Heidegger, explains the line of reasoning behind this process saying, “‘Hermeneutics fulfills its task only on the way to destruction [*Anzeige*].’ Destruction here means the dismantling of tradition to the extent, and only to the extent, that it conceals existence from itself and spares it from the necessity of self-appropriation. Viewed in a positive light, destruction tries to reawaken the primordial experiences of Dasein, experiences that lurk behind the categories of the ontological tradition and that have since become inimical to reappropriation.”²⁸ In essence then Heidegger sees the key to unlocking the meaning of Being in an “authentic” interpretation of Dasein’s historical interpretation of Being.

In order to accomplish this task, Heidegger sought to systematically uncover the meaning of Being through an interpretive analysis of the history of philosophy. Working in reverse from the most recent theories to the most ancient, Heidegger sought to track the phenomenology of being back to its roots. This destruction of the history of ontology was one that Heidegger never accomplished for reasons that will become apparent later. For now it will suffice to understand what Heidegger intended to do, as this will reveal more of his hermeneutic methodology. Although Heidegger did not attempt this second task, he did leave behind his intended method as Guignon explains, “We now know from the table of contents for Part Two of *Being and Time* that this destruction was to work backward, beginning with Kant and then proceeding through Descartes to Aristotle, in order to peel off the hardened layers of tradition and retrieve ‘those primordial experiences in which we first achieved our first ways of determining the nature of

²⁸Grondin, 99.

Being – the ways which have guided us ever since.’”²⁹ In light of this, it becomes clear that for Heidegger, philosophy itself was interpretation. Palmer summarizes the position of Philosophy within Heidegger’s system quite nicely, “in Heidegger, philosophy becomes historical, a creative recovery of the past, a form of interpretation.”³⁰ Within this system, philosophy itself is shown to be hermeneutic.

The question remains, however, how Heidegger intended to “peel” back these layers. For that matter what was it that he was going to peel back to reveal or rather, interpret the meaning of Being? The answer: language. Heidegger sought the meaning of Being behind the vehicle through which Dasein manifest and concealed Being, namely language. He thus concluded that language was an essential component to the understanding of Being. This was not a new concept for Heidegger. Indeed, he held that the manifestation of Being was itself ever present in language, in the copula or the “is” of a sentence.³¹ As such, Heidegger believed that ultimately the Greek language held the key to understanding Being, for it was the Greeks who first raised the question of Being and thus, it was to the Greeks that the first interpretation of Being was manifest and concealed. Erickson elaborates saying, “In particular, to discuss the philosophical significance of the concept of Being is to discover the origin and status of the term ‘Being’ as it arose within the language of the Greeks.”³² Heidegger held that since Western Philosophy had its origins in Ancient Greece, then the key to understanding the true meaning of Being lies in an

²⁹Guignon, 57. Heidegger never published Part II of *Being and Time*.

³⁰Palmer, 126.

³¹Erickson, 14.

³²Ibid, 8.

understanding of the language from which the concept arose. If all manifestations of Being to Dasein since this first manifestation have been, because of the historicity of Dasein, interpretations of interpretations, it therefore seems logical that the way to reach the original manifestation of Being to Dasein is in the original language through which “the long forgotten Greek argument of ‘being’”³³ was transmitted.

This approach still leaves one question unanswered. Once Heidegger got “behind” the original Greek, what did he hope to find? It could not be an objective knowledge of Being, he had already concluded that this was not possible. According to Alan Schrift, Heidegger was attempting to “think the unthought,” in the history of ontology.³⁴ To put this in Heidegger’s own terms, he sought to disclose the possibilities for the meaning of Being within the horizon of its original manifestation; to bring Dasein’s understanding of itself into unity with the first manifestation of Being to Dasein.

The audacity of this approach is beyond bold, it is patently arrogant; yet Heidegger, believing his authentic understanding of the nature of Dasein imparted him with insight unavailable to his predecessors, felt justified in his analysis. Alan Schrift sheds light on the implications of Heidegger’s approach to the History of Ontology, examining Heidegger’s reading, or rather reading-into, of Nietzsche: “. . . the tendency of Heidegger’s reading to expropriate or dispossess Nietzsche’s thought. In apprehending Nietzsche’s text from the perspective of the recovery of Being from its metaphysical oblivion , Heidegger’s method of

³³Gadamer, 8.

³⁴Alan D. Schrift, *Violence or Volition? Heidegger’s Thinking ‘About’ Nietzsche*, *Tulane Studies in Philosophy: The Thought of Martin Heidegger*, vol. 32, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1984), 80.

reading results in *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis* . . . This is to say, Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche appears to be grounded upon the assumption that he knows Nietzsche better than Nietzsche knew himself."³⁵ Although Schrift's claim would appear, at first glance to be too far-fetched, his analysis is an accurate portrayal of what Heidegger's theory told him was the case. His knowledge of an authentic *Dasein* should allow him to uncover what the original author's were really trying to say, but were unaware they were expressing. The question remains however, how could Heidegger possibly know that he had pinpointed what the original author did not know he meant? In the end we see in its many layers, the inescapable and self defeating hermeneutic nature of Heidegger's system. Heidegger in essence, was seeking to interpret the history of ontology, through the interpretation of language, in order to arrive at an interpretation of Being as understood through an "authentic" interpretation of the nature of *Dasein* grounded in historicity. It is small wonder that Heidegger never embarked on such a journey.

Heidegger's Influence on the Philosophy of Hermeneutics

Before moving on to a critique of Heidegger's system, it would be beneficial to briefly discuss the influence that Heidegger has had on the Philosophy of Hermeneutics. Although Heidegger's hermeneutic was secondary, and in some ways accidental, to his ontology, his influence is both profound and obvious. Much of the thought in the field of hermeneutics today is founded upon Heidegger's ontology. The implications for hermeneutics as a discipline seem to flow naturally from Heidegger's system. If the very nature of Being is, as Heidegger claims, an interpretation of the phenomenology of Being by *Dasein*, then it follows that the whole of

³⁵Ibid, 84-85.

existence must also be a hermeneutic. Furthermore, if the meaning of Being is expressed in language or rather, behind language, does it not also follow that all meaning lay not in the language but behind it in the projection of Dasein's possibilities as expressed through language? This is exactly the conclusion of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer realized the implications inherent in Heidegger's methodology. Being, as grounded in historicity was by necessity meaningless. That is to say, Heidegger's goal of pinpointing the meaning of Being was not attainable because Dasein, bound in the structure of historical and existential interpretation could never achieve the objective of transcending its own history. Thus all "meaning" whether of Being or of a text, is merely a relative interpretation. Nevertheless, Gadamer adopted Heidegger's methodology, but sought to free it "from the ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity . . ." ³⁶ It is interesting that Gadamer, having recognized the futility of Heidegger's project, chose to adopt his methodology and apply it the Philosophy of Hermeneutics. If the historicity of Dasein condemns it to a never-ending historical and interpretive cycle incapable of transcending language to identify the meaning of being, would not this methodology produce the same problem for understanding the meaning of a text? Would not the reader, because of the intrinsic historicity of Dasein, be incapable of transcending language in order to understand the meaning behind the words? Would not such an interpretation of the meaning behind the language, be just that, an interpretation and not the true transcendent meaning? It is within the "hermeneutical circle" that the cracks in Heidegger's methodology begin to make themselves evident.

³⁶Gadamer, 265.

A Critique of Heidegger's Ontological Project

In the end, Heidegger's system breaks down on the level of its presuppositions. Although each of his fundamental assumptions is fatally flawed, this study will confine itself to the two that, in the authors opinion, most expose the hopelessness inherent in both Heidegger's system and its foundational worldview – namely, Heidegger's *a priori* acceptance of 1) historicism; and 2) nihilism. In the first of these is revealed the cyclical and self-destructive nature of the methodology itself; in the second, the metaphysical inadequacy of the system which undermines the entire project on a foundational level.

The seventh edition of Heidegger's *Being and Time* had added to it the following observation by Heidegger in the Forward: "The designation 'First Half,' which previous editions bore, has been deleted. After a quarter century, the second half could no longer be added without the first being presented anew. Nonetheless, its path still remains a necessary one even today, if the question of being is to move our Da-sein."³⁷ That Heidegger never attempted the second part of his project has already been shown. The question is, why was he unable to complete his undertaking? A major factor in this failure was the inherent historicism of the system. In many ways this stands as a tremendous irony. Guignon explains, that, "although Heidegger is repelled by the relativism and anarchy of world-views associated with historicism, he cannot ignore the historicity of his own inquiry."³⁸ Heidegger's project, in seeking to ascertain the true meaning of Being, stands as an attempt to subvert the relativism that Historicism, by its nature, brings to the

³⁷Martin Heidegger, forward to *Being and Time*, 2d ed., trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), xvii.

³⁸Guignon, 54.

table, while at the same time accepting historicism as true. It is clear from his methodology and assertions about the nature of Dasein that Heidegger, although “repelled” by the implications of historicism, nonetheless accepted them as true. Apparently, Heidegger felt that he could somehow transcend historicism rather than rejecting it. Instead, what was created was an inescapable self-defeating cycle. The following passage by Guignon, although lengthy, demonstrates with profound alacrity the degree to which Heidegger’s methodology, by its very nature, doomed his project to failure before it began.

The foundational historicism of *Being and Time* was supposed to provide an alternative to both a historical transcendental philosophy and unbridled historicism. Yet it seems that such an approach to working out a fundamental ontology must fail. This may be seen by considering the implications of each of the stages. On the one hand, the analytic of Dasein reveals that we are always entangled in the distortions and concealment mediated by the tradition. ‘To be closed off and covered up belongs to Dasein’s *facticity*,’ Heidegger says. There can be no ultimate ‘transparency’ about ourselves, untainted by the interpretations circulating in our current world. But this implies that our understanding of history will also be limited by the mutable framework of presuppositions of our current world. There is no standpoint from which the historian can work out a final, authoritative account of the deepest meanings underlying Western history. And consequently, the prospects of retrieving the primordial understanding of Being in history are undermined.

On the other hand, the recognition of the historicity of all inquiry tends to subvert the project of discovering ‘essential structures’ of Dasein in the sense attempted in *Being and Time*. If our understanding of ourselves is always pre-shaped by our current historical situation, it seems the any ‘clues’ arrived at by analyzing our present self-interpretations will also be relative to that situation. Otto Pöggeler suggests that Heidegger’s recognition of the full implications of historicity led him to abandon the attempt to answer the question of Being by means of an analysis of Dasein³⁹

The death knell was dealt to Heidegger’s project in its very conception; a fact Heidegger acknowledged reluctantly acknowledged in his Forward. The objective understanding of Being

³⁹Ibid., 58.

which he hoped to reach was, because of his presuppositions, beyond his grasp. Essentially and unsurprisingly, historicism was simply unable to overcome itself.

In light of this, seems surprising that hermeneuticians such as Gadamer would continue to utilize a methodology that was fundamentally flawed. Yet the fact that they continue to do so is, to say the least, revealing, lending insight into the most foundational metaphysical assumptions that guide their inquiry. Jean Grondin, a noted proponent of Gadamer's hermeneutic system, demonstrates, that modern hermeneuticians are aware of the destructive influence that historicism has on their system, as well as the greater underlying metaphysical problems intrinsic to their worldview. "As philosophical hermeneutics can show, to appeal to the logical contradictoriness of universal historicity is to remain in the rut of historicism. Historicism, one could affirm with good reason, is the central and most crippling problem facing philosophy since Hegel, namely, the question concerning the possibility of binding truth and thus conclusive philosophy within the horizon of historical knowledge. Are all truths and rules of conduct dependent on their historical context? If so, the specter of relativism and nihilism lurks nearby."⁴⁰ If all of human knowledge is the product of historic interpretation, as Heidegger and Grondin concede to be the case, then all truth is at best historically relative, and meaning is, consequently, impossible to apprehend much less comprehend. Grondin, however, demonstrates that Gadamer and other philosophers of the same ilk, remain committed to this system, and still see in it a means of transcending historicism and arriving at meaning. The explanation is both confusing and fascinating, revealing that at the core of the entire project lies a prior commitment to nihilism. Grondin's analysis of how Heidegger and Gadmer "triumph" over historicism and its

⁴⁰Grondin., 11

relativity, demonstrates the circularity of their reasoning. “What all these attempted solutions share with historicism is their common metaphysical cornerstone, namely, the idea that in the absence of absolute truth everything is irredeemably relative. Ultimately, however, these solutions were themselves overtaken by historicism: they too, showed themselves to be historically conditioned, since they were continually being outmoded and the particularities of their perspectives superceded.”⁴¹ This is quite simply nonsense. Their line of reasoning affirms the inadequacy of the historicist world-view and then sneaks it in the back door to deny absolutes. Grondin first points out that Historicism is indeed fatally flawed because it is self-defeating in its claim that all truth is historically relative; and then in the same breath uses the claims of historicism to deny an absolute metaphysic, because, according to historicism, all metaphysical claims are also historically relative and therefore, not true in the absolute sense. However, Grondin cannot have it both ways; one cannot condemn historicism as self-defeating and at the same time use it to dismiss absolute truth. Historicism cannot both be the case and not be the case. Yet it is just this kind of absolute perspective that Grondin ultimately seeks to destroy.

The argument against an absolute metaphysic seems to be the one sacred cow that Heidegger and his followers will not question. Even when challenged by the self-defeating claims of historicism, they ultimately default to a nihilist world-view. The passion with which this defense is mounted and the lengths to which they will go to affirm it are, if nothing else, impressive. Consider Grondin’s continued attempt to affirm Heidegger and Gadamer’s successful transcendence of historicism. “Heidegger and Gadamer folded historicism back upon

⁴¹Grondin, 11.

itself, so to speak, and thereby they manifested its own historicity – that is, its secret dependence on metaphysics: the dogmatic thesis of historicism that everything is relative can be made meaningful only against the horizon of a non-relative, absolute, supratemporal, metaphysical truth. Only by supposing absolute truth possible and using it as a criterion could an opinion be judged merely relative.”⁴² This statement borders on mind boggling. Grondin’s solution to the “problem” of metaphysical absolutes is to absolutely deny the need for the metaphysical absolute. Is it a “non-relative, absolute, supratemporal, metaphysical truth,” that “the dogmatic thesis of historicism” is only meaningful if truth is possible? This seems to be a statement about the absolute nature of reality, i.e., a metaphysical statement. Metaphysics cannot be denied, for any attempt to dismiss metaphysics ultimately winds up either assuming some metaphysical absolute, or making a direct statement about the nature of reality.

It might be helpful to give a more concrete example of the “phenomenon” of metaphysics to make the point clear. Consider the arguments used in Grondin’s continued assailing of an absolute metaphysic in which he attempts to demonstrate how his ideas play out in the out-workings of everyday life. “The fallacy lies, rather, in thinking, along metaphysical and historicist lines, that credible criticism can derive only from supratemporal authorities or norms. The fact is just the opposite. Human beings are fundamentally critical *because* they are temporal, and they oppose evil by appeal to their own interests and aspirations, which can only be understood temporally. We need no supranatural laws in order to denounce Hitler’s dictatorship or other lesser evils. Such madness is criticized primarily in the name of the pain and suffering it causes. This critique can dispense with the support of non-temporal

⁴²Grondin, 11.

principles.”⁴³ Unfortunately for Grondin this critique only solidifies the need for “non-temporal principles” First and foremost, Grondin’s own standard for the diagnosis and opposition of evil defeats itself. Were not Hitler and the Nazi’s working from an appeal “to their own interests and aspirations?” Do they not have the right, working from this perspective, to “oppose the evil” that their “interests and aspirations” identified in the Jews, the Slavs, and Democracy? Furthermore, what basis do we have for labeling their actions as either evil or mad? How do self-interest and aspirations serve as an adequate basis to arrive at the concept of evil? Does not the very concept of evil imply that something in and of itself is “not good?” Implicit within Grondin’s arguments are assumptions about absolute standards. The most that Grondin’s world view could consistently hope to assert is that men “oppose things which are not their preference by appeal to their own interests and aspirations.” Even this is a stretch however, because Grondin could never be sure that he had correctly interpreted the “preferences,” “interests,” or “aspirations” of men.

In the final analysis, within the Heideggerian construct, nihilism wins the day, subverting any possibility of real meaning. Yet, ironically, this is exactly what Heidegger’s project intended to overcome. Alan Schrift explains that Heidegger sought “to retrieve meaning from its oblivion;”⁴⁴ the oblivion created by his nihilist and historicist presuppositions. To “rescue meaning” Heidegger would have to transcend his own metaphysical system. However, as demonstrated, metaphysics cannot be transcended. Whatever metaphysical system is chosen will ultimately force a thinker to either be consistent with his metaphysical assumptions, or become mired in self-refuting and contradictory endeavors. Heidegger accepted the metaphysical system

⁴³Ibid, 12.

⁴⁴Schrift, 79.

of nihilism as the accurate portrayal of the nature of reality. Nihilism holds as its central tenant that there is no absolute meaning, primarily because there is no absolute meaner. This is a metaphysical statement to be sure, but it is also, by virtue of being a metaphysical statement, a statement about reality. With nihilism as his starting point, Heidegger had no hope of finding meaning because his metaphysical system held that it was the nature of reality to be devoid of meaning. Therefore if Being was real, i.e., part of reality, it could not be meaningful; if it was not part of reality, then the search if for the meaning of nothing, which is nonsense. One simply cannot transcend what one holds to be the nature of reality.

At the most basic level Heidegger's system is founded on a theological pre-commitment. Heidegger and those who accept his worldview must reject ultimate meaning, because they have *a priori* rejected an ultimate meaner. As such, they are as Heidegger rightly held, trapped within time. If this is the case, then there is nothing eternal other than time and consequently nothing eternal which can sustain any true meaning.

Ironically, Heidegger's theological commitments stand at the heart of his failure. Heidegger's quest was for an understanding of Being in the ultimate sense, yet his world-view prohibited any such sense of the ultimate. Accordingly, ultimate Being can never amount to anything other than pure concept; that is, it can not have an existence independent from human thought. Thus, for Heidegger, ultimate Being can at best exist only as a property within temporal beings. In his understanding of Being as a concept, he treats it as some thing, i.e. an entity; yet this is contrary to Heidegger's assertion that Being is an act; what he identifies with the verb "presencing." His definition implies one who is present to do the "presencing." Thus it is safe to conclude that for Heidegger, Being was an action. Heidegger, however, was unable to maintain

this distinction because he had already eliminated the possibility of an ultimate “presencer” prior to even asking the question about the meaning of ultimate “presencing.” For there to be an Ultimate Act, there must be an Ultimate Actor. Heidegger’s philosophy cannot account for this because his philosophical foundations rule this possibility out *a priori*. On the most simple level, Heidegger is trying to understand the meaning of Being that is not. Yet this reduces ontology to nonsense. Being simply cannot be discussed apart from something that is.

The failure of the Heideggerian System should lead to a natural conclusion – the rejection of the foundational, self-defeating, philosophical presuppositions which necessitate its failure. Once these are demonstrated the only conclusion that can be arrived at is that Ultimate Being “is.” Every attempt to deny metaphysical principle destroys itself and proves the point it seeks to deny. It is here that the superiority of the Christian worldview is clearly demonstrated. Christian metaphysics is able to answer the question of ontology in the “I AM” of Exodus 3:14. The weight of ontological import of this verse phrase is enormous. In one simple phrase is established the ontological answer Heidegger sought – pure existence, prior to all things, the reason for whose existence is Himself. From this most central point all other answers follow. Apart from this point, all questions are ultimately, as Heidegger has demonstrated, devoid of meaning and reduced to nonsense.