

# The World's Great Philosophers

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*Edited by*  
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## Contents

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List of Contributors	viii
Preface	xi
1 Aquinas <i>Timothy Renick</i>	1
2 Aristotle <i>Russell Dancy</i>	9
3 Augustine <i>Vernon J. Bourke</i>	23
4 Berkeley <i>Lisa J. Downing</i>	30
5 The Buddha <i>Peter Harvey</i>	37
6 Confucius <i>David L. Hall</i>	46
7 Derrida <i>John C. Coker</i>	53
8 Descartes <i>Georges Dicker</i>	59
9 Dewey <i>James Gouinlock</i>	69
10 Foucault <i>Ladelle McWhorter</i>	77
11 Frege <i>Hans-Johann Glock</i>	82
12 Hegel <i>Tom Rockmore</i>	92
13 Heidegger <i>Thomas Sheehan</i>	105

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## 13

## Heidegger

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*Thomas Sheehan*

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976 CE) is best known as the author of *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), published in 1927. The book aims at establishing how being shows up within human understanding. Heidegger offered the provisional answer that our experience of being is conditioned by our finitude and temporality. In a phrase: temporality – i.e. finitude – is what makes possible the understanding of being; or, the meaning of being is time.

Heidegger published only half the book in 1927, the part dealing with human being and temporality. He never produced the rest of the work, but over the next fifty years he did complete the project in other forms. During the 1930s he reshaped some elements of his philosophy without changing its two essential topics: (1) the finite occurrence of being, which he called “disclosure”; and (2) the finite structure of human nature, which he called “Dasein.” Understanding how Dasein and the disclosure of being fit together is the key to grasping Heidegger’s philosophy.

Heidegger spent his life as a university professor in Germany, first in Freiburg (1915–23), where he abandoned Catholic philosophy, became a protégé of Edmund HUSSERL, and began propounding a radical form of phenomenology. He then taught at Marburg University (1923–8), where his reformulation of the method and tasks of phenomenology found expression in *Being and Time* and led to a break with Husserl. In 1928 Heidegger succeeded Husserl in the chair of philosophy at Freiburg University, where he taught until 1945.

A conservative nationalist, Heidegger joined the Nazi party on May 3, 1933, three months after Hitler came to power. From April 1933 to April 1934 he served as rector of Freiburg University, during which time he enthusiastically supported Hitler and aligned the university with some aspects of the Nazi revolution. His public and private statements indicate that he supported many of the Nazi policies and ideals and that

he backed Hitler's war aims well into the Second World War. In 1945 he was suspended from teaching because of his earlier political activities, and he formally retired with emeritus status in 1950. The question of his political sympathies continues to shadow Heidegger's otherwise solid reputation as one of the most original philosophers of the twentieth century.

Apart from philosophy, Heidegger's thought has had a strong influence on such disparate fields as theology (Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Rahner), existentialism (Jean-Paul SARTRE), hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer), and literary theory and deconstruction (Jacques DERRIDA). The collected edition of his works (his *Gesamtausgabe*, 1975-), will eventually include some eighty volumes, over half of which have already appeared. Most of his works are available in English translation, and the secondary literature on his philosophy is immense and continues to grow. The best study of his work in any language is Richardson (1963), and the most complete bibliography in English is Sass (1982).

### *The problematic*

Contrary to popular accounts of his philosophy, Heidegger's central topic was not "being" but the *occurrence* of being, and more specifically *what causes* the occurrence of being within human experience. Instead of "occurrence" Heidegger speaks equivalently of the disclosure, emergence, unconcealment, truth, or meaning of being. He argues that being does not occur "out there" independent of human beings but shows up only within human experience – analogous to the way that meaning does not occur "on its own" but only within the human sphere. Thus Heidegger's focal topic – *die Sache selbst* as he calls it – was not "being" so much as *what makes being occur within human experience*.

His simple answer to that question was: human finitude, the radical lack-in-being that defines the human essence. That finitude or lack is why human beings are in a state of becoming (temporality); and such temporality is the "meaning" – i.e. makes possible the understanding – of all forms of being. Because this lack-in-being is tautologically "absent" or "hidden," Heidegger's thesis that we understand being only because we are finite can be restated as: *being occurs in our experience only because we are a certain kind of absence*.

That thesis summarizes all of Heidegger's work, and it remained fundamentally unchanged throughout his career. To understand it we must first grasp the distinction between things and their being.

### *The ontological difference*

Heidegger distinguishes between whatever-is (*das Seiende*) and the is-ness (*das Sein*) of whatever-is. He calls this distinction between entities and their being the "ontological difference." An entity, on the one hand, is anything that is or can be, whether it be physical or spiritual, abstract or concrete. For example, God, human beings, socialism, and the number nine are all entities. The *being* of an entity, on the other hand, has to do with the "is" of whatever-is. Clearly the challenge is to find out what "is" (i.e. "being") means for Heidegger.

In one sense Heidegger's ontological difference between entities and their being merely repeats a commonplace of traditional philosophy. The medieval scholastics, for example, had already clearly distinguished between *ens* and *esse*, just as the ancient Greeks before them had distinguished between *to on* and *ousia*. However, Heidegger gives this metaphysical tradition a phenomenological twist. In his usage, the word "being" refers neither to things in the world (= entities) nor to the mere fact *that* such things are (their existence) and are *what* they are (their essence). Nor is "being" a property (e.g. "substance") that things have in and of themselves apart from human beings. Rather, "being" names the *relatedness of things to human interests*, the multiple and changing ways that things can be understood and engaged by correlative human activities. In Heidegger's work, "being" never refers to a single and unchanging "something" standing off by itself, but always indicates an entity's current phenomenal status in correlation with a given human comportment, whether cognitive, practical, aesthetic, or whatever.

The viewpoint here is phenomenological and hermeneutical: the being of a thing is what that thing currently *appears-as* (*phainetai*) within the human sphere, which in turn is based on what it is currently *taken-as* (*hermeneuetai*) by human beings. "Being" names not the metaphysical "is-ness" of things but their phenomenological "presence unto" possible human engagement. In a word, "being" refers to the *significance* or *meaningful presence* that things have for human beings.

Three things follow from this phenomenological understanding of being and distinguish it from the tradition of metaphysics. First, according to Heidegger, entities may certainly have existence regardless of whether human beings are alive or not. However, entities do not have "being" in Heidegger's sense of the term – that is, they do not have significance – apart from some actual or possible relation to human concerns. In fact, without human beings there is no "being" at all. Second,

an entity and its being are not two separate realities. Being/significance cannot subsist on its own, separated from entities; rather, it is always the being/significance of an entity. Third, although an entity and its being/significance do not occur in isolation, they can be distinguished; and the ability to make this ontological distinction – that is, to know the being/significance of any entity – belongs only to human beings. The ontological difference occurs only in the human essence.

Therefore, Heidegger's focal question – "What explains the occurrence of significance within human experience?" – can also be formulated as: "What makes the ontological difference possible?"

### *Dasein*

For Heidegger, the essence of human being consists in "openness," i.e. being the "open place" (the *Da*) where the being/significance of things occurs. This comes out as "Dasein" (human openness as the locus of significance), a technical term that has been carried over into English.

Insofar as human being is necessarily open, Heidegger characterizes it as "thrown-open" ("thrownness"). We are *a priori* thrust into our existence as a field of possibilities, and we understand whatever we happen to meet by relating it to those same possibilities. In Heidegger's parlance, we understand a thing by "projecting" it in terms of one or another possibility: we take it *as this or that* and thereby understand its significance. Human openness is thus a "thrown projection"; that is, (1) *thrown-open-ness*, as making possible (2) *the projective understanding of the significance of things*. This bivalent structure is called "care" (*Sorge*). Only within the human structure of care does the "being" or "is" of an entity (its significance-as-this-or-that) show up.

Dasein is equally called "being-in-a-world." By "world" Heidegger does not mean a spatio-temporal aggregate of physical entities, such as the universe, or planet Earth. Rather, he means a *unified field of concerns and interests* – such as the "world" of the mother or the "world" of the letter-carrier – which gives meaning to whatever is encountered within that world. In Heidegger's usage, the "world" is the same as the *Da* or open field that defines human being. "Being *in*" the world refers to one's engagement with the meaning-giving concerns and interests that define any such field.

For example, Mrs Smith as a mother lives in a different world from the same Mrs Smith as a letter-carrier. The difference has to do with her distinct concerns and goals (nurturing children versus delivering the mail) and the possibilities and requirements they generate. Each of her

worlds is structured as a dynamic set of relations – all of them ordered to her own possibilities and concerns – that lends significance to the entities that Mrs Smith encounters: children in the one case, letters in the other.

What constitutes the essence of all such worlds – what Heidegger calls their "worldhood" – is the significance that accrues to entities by their relationship to Mrs Smith's concerns and interests. But this significance occurs only in correlation with her engagement with those concerns and interests. In short, one's being-in-a-world discloses the being/significance of entities.

As being-in-a-world and living into its possibilities, Dasein understands not just its *own* being but also the meaningful presence of *other* entities, by referring them to those same possibilities. Our primary way of understanding the significance of entities (which is always a changeable significance and not some eternal essence) is by interpreting them in terms of our pragmatic purposes or possibilities. For example, when I use this stone to hammer in a tent peg, I understand the current being of the stone as *being-useful-for-hammering*. This primary, pragmatic awareness of the being/significance of the tent peg is pre-predicative: it requires no thematic articulation (either mental or verbal) of the form "S = P." Rather, it evidences itself in the mere doing of something: I understand the current significance of the stone by *using* it.

Such first-order practical/pre-predicative awareness is what Heidegger designates "hermeneutical understanding." It is made possible by one's being-in-a-world and specifically by one's structure as thrown projection. In turn, as a second-order or reflective activity (a "method"), "hermeneutics" in Heidegger has less to do with the usual meaning of that term – interpreting texts – than it does with revealing, within all forms of human behavior, the often overlooked structure of being-in-a-world that underlies the first-order hermeneutical understanding of entities.

### *Temporality*

In *Being and Time* Heidegger argues that the defining structure of human openness is "temporality" or "time," a uniquely human condition that is not to be confused with linear, chronological notions of time as past-present-future. For Heidegger, temporality connotes becoming, and human temporality entails becoming oneself. Human becoming is a matter of living into one's future, "standing out" (*ek-stasis*, *ek-sistence*) into one's possibilities.

The ultimate possibility into which one lives is one's own death: the possibility that ends all possibilities. Human becoming is mortal becoming, not just because we will die at some future date but above all because mortality defines our becoming at each present moment. As Heidegger puts it, human being is always being-at-the-point-of-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). Thus one's being is radically finite, and it consists in both (a) being already mortal and (b) "becoming" one's mortality, i.e. anticipating one's death. Such mortal becoming is what Heidegger means by human temporality: the finite *presence* that one has by always and of necessity *becoming* one's own death.

Human temporality means being present by becoming absent; and this mortal becoming is the ineluctably finite essence of human being. When I wake up to that fact and accept it (this is what Heidegger calls "resolve"), I become my own "authentic" self rather than living as the inauthentic "anybody" (i.e. nobody) of everyday existence.

*Being and Time* contends that Dasein's temporality, as the anticipation of death, is what makes possible being-in-the-world and the resultant understanding of being. The argument may be put as follows. Temporality means having one's presence by being already thrown into one's absence (being-at-the-point-of-death). This means Dasein is *a priori* thrown into possibilities, right up to the possibility that ends all possibilities. But being thrown into possibilities entails the ability to have practical knowledge and to engage in purposeful action. And this ability is being-in-a-world. Thus Dasein's anticipation of its own death makes possible being-in-a-world and the disclosure of significance. The "meaning" of being – i.e. that which lets being/significance occur within human experience – is time/finitude.

### Disclosure

Disclosure as the occurrence of being within human understanding takes place on three distinct levels that run from the original to the derivative: world-disclosure, pre-predicative disclosure, and predicative disclosure.

(1) The most original instance of disclosure is *world-disclosure*, the very opening up of the field of significance – the *Da* or world – in conjunction with Dasein's being-present-by-becoming-absent. (2) In turn, world-disclosure is what allows *entities* to be meaningfully present and to be known and used – first of all, practically and pre-predicatively – within the various worlds of human concern. (3) Finally, world-disclosure and the resultant pre-predicative disclosedness of entities, taken together,

make possible the *predicative* disclosure of entities in synthetic judgments and declarative sentences of the type "S = P." Properly speaking, the term "truth," taken as the correspondence between judgments and states of affairs, pertains only to this third level of disclosure, where reason, logic, and science operate. Heidegger argues that the "*essence* of truth" – i.e. that which makes predicative truth possible – is world-disclosure, which in turn issues in the pre-predicative disclosure of those entities against which predicative judgments must measure themselves if they are to be true.

The basic sense of disclosure (i.e. world-disclosure) is what Heidegger calls "language," by which he does not primarily mean spoken or written discourse and the rules governing it. For Heidegger "language" means *logos* such as he thinks Heraclitus understood the term: the original "gathering" of entities into meaningful presence so as to disclose them as what and how they are. This disclosive gathering happens only insofar as Dasein is itself "gathered" into its own mortality. "Language" in this original sense is what makes possible language/*logos* in the usual sense – human discourse as the activity of synthesizing and differentiating entities and their possible meanings.

Heidegger argues that disclosure in the primary sense of world-disclosure is born of something intrinsically absent and hidden – human finitude – and he calls this state of affairs the "mystery" of being. The point can be quite mystifying until one realizes that Heidegger takes disclosure to be a unique kind of *movement*.

As Heidegger interpreted them, classical philosophy in general and ARISTOTLE in particular understood movement not just as a change within entities but rather as the very *being* of entities that are undergoing change. Taken in this broad sense, movement refers to an entity's anticipation of something absent, such that what-is-absent-but-anticipated determines the entity's present being. For example, if you are studying for a university degree, that still-absent degree, as your anticipated goal, determines your current status as being-a-student. Your current being consists in moving towards the absent-but-anticipated degree.

Heidegger describes the still-absent goal of any such movement as being "hidden" (i.e. not present). But to the extent that it is anticipated, the "hidden" goal, while remaining absent, also becomes quasi-present by endowing the anticipating entity with its current being as "moving towards . . ." Movement is a matter of presence-and-absence: the absent, *qua* anticipated, both (a) remains absent by being still unattained and (b) becomes finitely present by giving the anticipating entity its *raison d'être*, "dispensing" to the entity its being. In short, insofar as an entity

is in movement, anticipation of an absence is what "gives" that entity its current presence: *Es gibt Sein*.

This structure of movement is also the structure of disclosure. (1) In the first place, the movement of absence-dispensing-presence is the very structure of Dasein's temporality. Dasein exists by anticipating its final absence; and Dasein's absent/hidden death, insofar as it is structurally anticipated in thrownness and personally anticipated in resolve, determines Dasein's present being as mortal becoming. Thus, the absent goal of temporality gives Dasein its being while itself remaining absent/hidden. (2) Moreover, since Dasein is the sole locus of the disclosure of *all* meaningful presence, Dasein's anticipation of its *own* absence is what discloses the meaningful presence of *any* entity it meets. The disclosure of the being/significance of whatever-is happens only in conjunction with Dasein's mortal becoming. In other words, disclosure and Dasein are but a single movement that issues in being/significance.

Heidegger gives this single movement of disclosure the name "*Ereignis*." In German *Ereignis* literally means "event." However, by playing on etymologies Heidegger interprets *Ereignis* as the process of our being ineluctably "pulled" or "thrown" or "appropriated" into openness. This movement of being-opened-up-by-one's-finitude, in such a way that a world of being/significance is engendered and sustained, is what Heidegger means by *Ereignis*, "appropriation." It is one more name for Heidegger's focal topic, namely, that which makes being/significance occur within human experience.

Although the term *Ereignis* emerges in Heidegger's work only in the 1930s, it is related to what he had earlier called thrownness. "Thrown-open-ness" and "being appropriated into openness" are different names for the same ontological fact, i.e. that human being is always already thrust into openness and claimed by its ultimate possibility in such a way that a world of significance is opened up. The structural priority of one's appropriation-by-absence *over* one's projection-of-significance – i.e. the fact that the former makes possible the latter – is what Heidegger calls "the Turn" (*die Kehre*). During the 1930s Heidegger's growing understanding of this structural Turn at the heart of *Ereignis* led him to recast the form and style of his philosophy (without changing its central problematic) in order to emphasize the priority of appropriation-by-absence over projection-of-meaningful-presence. However, this shift in form and style that occurred after 1936 is not to be equated with the Turn. The shift in style took place within Heidegger's writing and teaching, whereas the Turn constitutes the abiding structure of *Ereignis*.

### Overcoming metaphysics

Because finitude – the source of the disclosure of being/significance – is intrinsically absent and hidden, it is easily overlooked and forgotten. When that happens, one remains focused on entities and their being/significance, while ignoring the disclosive movement – one's appropriation into openness – which dispenses that being/significance. This focus on the meaningful presence of entities to the exclusion of the absence that dispenses it is what Heidegger calls "metaphysics." It occurs both in one's personal life and in thematic philosophy. In both cases, metaphysics is characterized not by the "forgetting of *being*" (which is virtually impossible, in any case) but by the forgetting of the *disclosure* of being, which occurs because of human finitude.

The goal of Heidegger's philosophy was to overcome the forgottenness of disclosure-due-to-finitude by recovering the sense of finitude both in one's personal life and in thematic philosophy. (1) Overcoming the *personal* forgetting of one's finitude is called "resolve" or "resoluteness," and it issues in "authenticity." (2) The recuperation of the finitude-as-the-source-of-disclosure in *thematic philosophy* is called the "overcoming of metaphysics" (or in an earlier formulation, the "destruction" of metaphysics), and it leads to what Heidegger called a "new beginning."

(1) *In the personal realm*. The act of personally recuperating one's essence as finite is called "resolve," and it issues in "authenticity," being one's true self. Although we are always in the process of mortal becoming, we are usually so caught up in the meaningful presence of the entities which we encounter that we forget the finitude and mortality that makes such encounters possible. Heidegger calls this condition "fallenness." Nevertheless, in special "basic moods" (such as dread and wonder) we can rediscover our relation to the finitude/lack that dispenses being, the absence that allows for meaningful presence.

In these basic moods we directly experience not just things, or the significance of things, or even the world that underlies such significance. Rather, we experience the very *finitude* that opens up human being, forms a world, and thereby issues in the disclosure of the being/significance of things within human understanding. In contrast to things, the being of things, and even the world that contextualizes such significance, Heidegger calls this finitude/absence the "nothing." To experience this nothing, he says, is to "hear the call of conscience"; that is, to become aware of one's radically mortal finitude. To flee that call is

to live as an inauthentic or fallen self. Alternately, to heed that call by choosing to embrace one's mortal becoming means to overcome one's oblivion of the source of all disclosure of significance and thus to "overcome metaphysics" in one's everyday life.

(2) *In thematic philosophy.* The forgetting of finitude as the source of the disclosure of all significance also characterizes thematic philosophy. Heidegger reads the history of Western metaphysics as a series of epochs in which philosophers elaborated different interpretations of the being of entities – for example, being as *idea* in PLATO, as *energeia* in Aristotle, right down to being as eternal recurrence of the same in NIETZSCHE. Each epoch of metaphysics is characterized by its understanding of the presence of entities and its oblivion of the absence/finitude that makes possible (or "dispenses") that presence. For Heidegger, the last and climactic phase in this "history of being" is our own epoch of technology and nihilism.

Today, Heidegger claims, finitude as the source of disclosure is all but obliterated by the widespread conviction that the significance of entities consists in their universal availability for exploitation. Entities are understood to be, in principle, endlessly knowable by an ideally omniscient reason and totally dominable by a would-be omnipotent will. Here the meaningful presence of entities takes on its most extreme form: it means the unreserved presence and total submission of entities to human manipulation. Heidegger calls this state of affairs "nihilism" because the absence that dispenses meaningful presence – including today's presence-for-exploitation – now counts for nothing (*nihil*).

Nevertheless, finitude as the source of disclosure is never completely obliterated, even when it is overlooked and forgotten. Under metaphysics, Heidegger argues, the hidden giving of being still goes on giving, although in a doubly concealed way: the finite source of disclosure is both intrinsically hidden *and* forgotten. Heidegger thought that a penumbral awareness of this hidden giving could still be found in the classical texts of the great thinkers from the pre-Socratics to Nietzsche. In interpreting those texts, Heidegger attempted to retrieve and rearticulate the barely expressed "unsaid" – that absence is the hidden source of meaningful presence – which lurks within the "said," the philosopher's text.

This is especially true of pre-Socratic philosophers such as Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus. Heidegger considers them to have been *pre*-metaphysical thinkers insofar as their fragments evidence an inchoate awareness of the hidden source of the occurrence of disclosure, under such titles as *aletheia*, *physis*, and *logos*. He characterizes these archaic Greek thinkers as a "first beginning" of non-metaphysical thought, and he hoped that his own work would prepare for a "second

beginning" of non-metaphysical thought. This new beginning would consist in one's turning back to and "entering" *Ereignis* by recollecting the hidden source of disclosure within one's own Dasein. However, while recollection entails overcoming the *forgetting* of disclosure, it does not undo the intrinsic *hiddenness* of finitude. The point, rather, is to allow the hidden source of disclosure both to remain hidden and, as hidden, to empower the world of significance. The way to do that is to accede to one's appropriation by absence.

Heidegger was convinced that the overcoming of metaphysics was less a matter of writing out a new theory of being (a "fundamental ontology" as he once called it) than of personally recuperating one's radical finitude. For a while he apparently thought that not just individuals but also masses of people might achieve authenticity, virtually at a national level. At one point he even expressed the sentiment that the Germans alone, in their essential relation to disclosure, had a mandate to save Western civilization from nihilism.

Finally, however, Heidegger distanced himself from such empty hopes. He came to see the end of metaphysics not as a future achievement of large groups of people, let alone of one race or nation. Rather, metaphysics comes to an end only for individuals – one at a time and without apparent relation to each other – as each one, in splendid isolation, resolutely achieves the "entrance into *Ereignis*." For all the broad historical sweep of his philosophy, for all the boldness of its call for the "destruction of metaphysics," Heidegger's thought ends where it began, with a call to the lone individual to achieve his or her radical and solitary authenticity: "*Werde wesentlich!*" (GA 56/57, p. 5) – "Become your essence."

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#### Further reading

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