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# Heidegger for the Perplexed: Some Possible Ways Forward after *Being and Time*

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**M**artin Heidegger is one of the more enigmatic figures in recent intellectual history, greatly influencing existentialism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, psychology, technology, religion, and more. Yet many, if not most, Christians have likely never heard of Heidegger, let alone read him, while those that have often seem to have no clue what he was trying to say. Indeed, while Heidegger’s seminal *Being and Time* (1927) is commonly ranked among the top five most influential works of the twentieth century—and provides much of the temporal ontology that is foundational to postmodernity—most seminarians have not read or even broadly engaged with its ideas. Heidegger remains one of those cryptic geniuses that somehow impacts everything while being understood by almost no one. In this article, I will attempt to sift through the unfamiliar language contained within *Being and Time* in order to provide an introductory guide for the bewildered, as well as some suggestions for a religious way forward post-Heidegger. As Heidegger is one of the most potent and lingering voices in on-going philosophical and theological discussions, it behooves any thoughtful Christian to be aware of this seminal work, as well as possible theological responses to it.

*Being and Time* fittingly begins where it all began, with a quote from Plato: “You have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression ‘being.’ We, however, who used to think we understood

it, have now become perplexed” (xxix).<sup>1</sup> Heidegger shares this perplexity, and spends the next four hundred pages laboriously combing every element of the human experience for clues that might relieve it. His quest is for no less than *being* itself. What is being? Does not the very question presuppose its own answer, for to ask “what is” something assumes that one already has a definition of “is-ness”? What “is” means—what it means “to be”—is the very question at hand, and so the very asking presupposes one already has the answer contained within oneself, or else one could not ask the question in the first place. This inward turn is further solidified by the fact that we seem to be the only beings in the world that reflect upon the nature of being (i.e., do rocks or toads ask: “What’s it all about?”). By the very fact that we are asking the question, we must have some sort of special inroad to being (an “ontic priority”) that gives us an edge over other types of beings. Perhaps the key to all of being might just exist within us. Humans are what Heidegger famously calls *Dasein*: beings that reflect upon our own being. Thus, in asking the question “what is being?” we must first begin not with science or metaphysics, but with *Dasein* itself. We must begin with ourselves.

Heidegger identifies his destination (being) and is on the right road (*Dasein*), but what epistemic vehicle will he drive to get there? He rejects the Hegelian Idealism that marked the nineteenth century, yet he is also hesitant to fully embrace the scientific turn, for science asks about particular *beings* (e.g., bugs, atoms, planets)

but not about *being*. He believes the problem is rooted in the Western tradition itself. Plato saw this world as a broken reflection of a deeper reality, and science carries on his legacy by seeing our subjective experiences as less real than the atoms bouncing around “beneath” that experience (e.g., your experience of free will is less real than the determinism of Newtonian laws). But Heidegger wants to avoid such reductionism, and turn instead to our immediate experience through adopting twentieth-century philosopher Edward Husserl’s phenomenological method. The phenomenon of our subjective experience is no less real than the reductionist theories of science or metaphysics. When it comes to the mystery of being, the same inexplicabilities appear in science and metaphysics that appear in our immediate experience. One can always ask: “What is the being of atoms?” or “What is the being of platonic ideas?” Yet even the greatest minds usually end up with the same vague answer that is given for our immediate experience: it just *is*. Thus, the “is” we presuppose to ask the question is just as mysterious in science and metaphysics as it is in phenomenology. The playing field is levelled, and our allegedly subjective experiences become just as valid as any other epistemic avenue to being. In fact, due to the immediacy of experience, phenomenology may even have the upper hand. While metaphysics is too abstracted from reality, and science deals with beings rather than being itself, phenomenology takes the best of both worlds, by combining the questions of being that metaphysics once asked with the “this-world” concreteness of science. Hence, Heidegger’s destination is being, his road there is through Dasein, and his epistemic vehicle of choice is phenomenology.

We can now turn the keys and begin our journey by asking, “What kind of phenomenological being is Dasein?” In the West we have traditionally viewed ourselves as *subjects* who happen to awaken in a world of *objects*. Descartes’s “thinking thing” abstracted itself from the world,

looking down on its body and nature from the outside. Descartes reasoned that we can doubt everything that is outside of our minds (e.g., God, the world, nature, others, our own body). However, we cannot doubt that we are doubting, and so he argued that the “thinking subject” is the foundation from which the world and all knowledge of it begins. The only certainty is that “I think therefore I am”—*Cogito ergo sum*. The self is sure, but the world outside of it is not; nor is it clear how the former is to reach and know the latter. *Cogito ergo sum* presupposed a chasm between the thinking subject and the “other,” and so the subsequent history of philosophy has attempted to bridge the gap. How do we know that anything really exists beyond ourselves? How can we access the outside world? Through reason, through the senses, through faith, through emotion? Heidegger wants to deconstruct these questions and their Cartesian foundation, starting philosophy over again from the beginning.

Phenomenologically speaking, there is no moment in our lives when we have an immediate experience of existing abstracted from the world. We never exist on our own, separate from the world. We are never context-less. We never exist as disembodied brains that are then placed into a body. Rather, Dasein always experiences itself as *being-in-the-world*. Dasein always finds itself already *thrown* into a place and time, among people, earth, animals, and tools. We do not pontificate about the nature and existence of ice cream and how it can be epistemically or ontologically grasped. Rather, we simply devour it with a smile. It is only when we become lost in Cartesian speculation—which is utterly divorced from real world experience—that we can speak of ourselves as subjects abstracted and distanced from the world. When philosophy begins on this fractured foundation, no amount of dialectical sophistry can tie it back together again. The Western tradition lost its way while fixing a problem that is irrevocably built into the very Cartesian ground on

which it stands. But by phenomenologically disposing with the subject/object divide, Heidegger sidesteps many of the problems of philosophy, beginning not with a fractured world longing to be reunited, but with an existence that is already whole. Dasein is not a subject caught up in the “cabinet of consciousness” (62) attempting to access the outside world of objects. Rather, Dasein is being-in-the-world.

The question of being is what led Heidegger inward to Dasein, and Dasein brought us back out again into the world. But what is this world that Dasein is being-

in? In the Cartesian world, objects are described as “objectively present” (e.g., a hammer is an object ontologically constructed of wood and stone). But our phenomenological experience of reality is that one encounters the practical usage of a thing prior to the thing itself. One does not encounter a hammer by theorizing about its objective weight and makeup; rather, our initial experience is of its practical use in “hammering,” or what Heidegger calls the “ready-to-hand.” Our world is not first encountered as objective things, but as a series of practical acts, as movements, as everyday functions *ready* to be used.

These many ready-to-hand experiences comprise the web of meaning and significance that is our world. It is only later when something breaks (i.e., when the hammer can no longer hammer) that we then stop to reflect upon its objective nature and makeup (i.e., what is it, and how can it be fixed?). Science and metaphysics tend to ignore this primary ready-to-hand experience, neglecting the phenomenological meaning and significance of the everyday world, or reducing it into dualities, problems, and confusions that are not really there. But the web of everyday

meanings should not be encountered merely as external objects but as practical processes that we are always already caught up in.

In addition to the ready-to-hand, we also encounter the world as full of other persons. Dasein is inevitably *being-with* others. These others are not separated from us by an epistemic, ontological, or ethical chasm, but are close, immediate, and entangled with us. Heidegger’s thought serves as a strong communal antidote to the individualism of Cartesian thought. However, Heidegger now has the opposite problem. If there is no fracture between us and the outside world of objects and others, then how can one truly be an *authentic* individual? If one is united with the external world, does the individual ego cease to exist? Society tends to create a homogenous blob that sands everyone down into the average, public, everyday “dictatorship of the *they*” (123). We play, work, and live as the *they* does, and ironically even “withdraw” (122) from society in the ways deemed culturally acceptable to do so. “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself” (124). Thus, Heidegger’s journey subverts the ontological fracture of self and other in the Cartesian world, but leaves a whole new problem in its place. How can Dasein, as *being-in-the-world-with-others*, still be authentically true to itself? The rest of *Being and Time* is an attempt to answer this question, and it begins with a reappraisal of the epistemic significance of “moods.”

Dasein always finds itself in a mood (e.g., happy, angry, fearful, overwhelmed, calm). However, our Platonic and Cartesian heritage has defined mood as subjective, fleeting, and secondary to reason. We dismiss moods because they seem to obscure reality and blind us from rational thought. *Logos* trumps *pathos*. By contrast, Heidegger wants to reveal that mood is an ever-present phenomenological reality. Where reason abstracts us from the world up into the land of theory, mood draws us back down into the concrete immediacy of our world. For instance, a generic anatomical description of spiders does not do justice to the reality

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of encountering one. Only the phenomenological mood of horror truly expresses the world that is experienced when we encounter a spider. As such, we must be *attuned* to our moods, and open to their disclosure of being. Moods are not subjective lenses laid over a more objective world. Rather, moods un-conceal the world, disclosing the presence of things within our world in a way that is more phenomenologically accurate than mere theory. Heidegger seeks to free emotion from its subjective cage, enabling humanity to embrace our whole experience of reality as valid.

While numerous moods are disclosive of truths (and untruths), Heidegger believes the mood of anxiety provides a unique disclosure of our world and of how to be authentic within it. Whereas fear is directed toward and discloses a specific being within the world (e.g., an approaching wolf, or an angry step-mother), Heidegger contends that anxiety is broader and more vague; anxiety is a general sense of dissatisfaction with the world as a whole. Anxiety often allows us to see through the everyday trivialities and little victories that bring meaning to the *they*. It distances us from the world of significance: “From being a player in the game of life that I loved, I become an observer of a game that I no longer see the point in playing.”<sup>2</sup> By relocating us outside of the meaningful world of the *they*, anxiety frees us from the world and the petty concerns that so easily concern its inhabitants. Thus, an anxious sense of alienation from “them” is, in fact, a hopeful first glimpse of the possibility of being authentically ourselves.

Since anxiety is not directed toward a particular object within the world, but toward the world of significance altogether, anxiety discloses the totality of being, as well as the possibility of not-being. By temporarily alienating us from the world, anxiety reveals what it would be like to not be in the world at all, that is, to die. Heidegger writes, as “soon as man comes to life he is at once old enough to die” (289). The possibility of death is ever-present in life. While the *they* acknowledges this inevitability, death is

made to be vague, generalized, and distant; death happens to us all but is far off and in the future. The *they* suppresses our anxiety over death, “tranquilizing” and drowning it in a wave of “untroubled indifference” (299). But Heidegger believes it is only in death, or rather, in the anticipation of death, that one can be truly free and authentic. For, first of all, the *they* euphemizes and postpones death, so the sheer acknowledgment of death as immanent distinguishes one from the *they*. Second, death is always one’s own. All other experiences can be shared, but not death. It is the one experience you truly “go alone”—death is one’s “own-most and non-relational possibility” (297). Once we die, we cannot go back and share our experiences with others. Third, death is the horizon of possibility, for once one is dead there are no more choices to make. Death is the “possibility of impossibility” (245). Death contrasts with life, making the teeming freedoms of this world all the more important, inspiring us to live as authentically as possible while we still can. Fourth, since Dasein is finite, death is part of the wholeness of our being, so we can only live authentically when we stop denying this aspect of our existence. Finally—as Sartre developed more extensively—death reveals the nothingness at the centre of existence. There is no Hegelian ideal or moral *telos* to which we must aspire. There are just temporal, fleeting movements of inaugurated being, and so we are free to whisper our own meanings into the void. For these reasons, living in the awareness of death frees us to be authentically ourselves, rather than living in bondage to an external framework grounded in the *they*, in metaphysics, or in God. This truly free and anticipatory mode of existence is what Heidegger calls *being-unto-death*.

If we cease living as being-unto-death, our conscience calls us back. In contrast to the loud and idle chatter of the *they*, conscience speaks through silence, like in a movie where the quiet, reflective moments are more powerful than the loud bangs and explosions. Conscience makes us aware that

we are primordially “guilty.” Guilt in the Heideggerian sense stems not from something wrong we have done, but is a constant underlying experience that has been the phenomenological root behind all moral and spiritual systems. It is a sense that we owe a debt for the sheer fact that we exist and were thrown into existence without earning it. For Heidegger, however, this guilt does not awaken us to some moral duty, but calls us to be true to our own Dasein. Guilt calls us to choose whether to live in the world in a way that is either authentic or inauthentic. Heidegger does not consider the latter morally superior to the former; they are just different modes of existence. One can settle comfortably into the *they* or make the leap into authentic being. The choice is ours. No God or metaphysical system holds us accountable. Conscience is not a voice from God above—it has no ethical content—but rather is a voice from within Dasein itself, beckoning each of us unto death and therefore authentic life.

Ironically, in this call to death, Heidegger’s project finally comes to life. If the question of being seems to get lost in objects, spiders, and anxiety, it comes full circle in mortality. Death reveals that the being of Dasein is temporal. We do not encounter being theoretically as objective presence, but instead phenomenologically as a temporal process of past, present, and future. Our finitude begins at birth, when we are thrown into a factual world without our consent. In our present, we get caught up and entangled in the *they*. In looking forward in anticipation to death, we come to terms with our freedom, and project our possibilities onto the future. We are not an object but an organic being—not a “what” but a “who”—shaped by the process of time and by the possibilities of our future. All elements of Dasein’s existence are experienced phenomenologically in finitude and temporality. There is no moment where we exist outside of time. Birth is our temporal horizon on one end, death is the temporal horizon on the other, and time stands at both thresholds constantly chiming, “You

shall not pass.” Dasein is temporal. Dasein is unto death. Since Dasein is the key to being, then being must also be temporal. Being is not an object, but a movement, a fleeting moment that is born and dies, a mere stepping stone that appears before us as we walk and disappears once we move on. Objects are actually occurrences. Ontology becomes chronology. The secret of *Being and Time* is that being *is* time.

To summarize, Heidegger’s phenomenological method causes him to sit in the basic experiences of Dasein. In so doing, he refuses to reason away or reduce our experience of moods and emotions, but allows them to speak truth to us. While most emotions, such as fear, are directed at an object in the world, anxiety is a general sense of anxiousness about the world as a totality, and so does not disclose a being in the world but being itself. At the heart of this disclosed being is death. In contrast to the Greek and Christian tradition, anxiety reveals that there is no eternal, static foundation for all things, but that being is inherently temporal. One can, of course, see here the ontological foundations of existentialism and postmodernity, where there is no absolute, objective, or eternal metanarrative, but all things rise and fall with time.

What is the Christian to make of Heidegger? The first and perhaps most common criticism of Heidegger’s thought is his lack of ethical content. He contends that conscience does not reveal objective moral standards from above but simply is a call from within to be authentic. Perhaps this authenticity could have provided a form of ethics, but Heidegger insists it is not morally superior to inauthenticity; it is simply a different way of existing in the world. Thus, even if Heidegger’s thought did not inherently lead to his Nazism, neither did it provide a sufficient moral critique of it. According to Heidegger, moral systems are inventions in time, with none superior to any other.

In addition to ethical concerns, Heidegger’s work raises a number of intellectual issues. Whereas the Cartesian system

fractured the self from the other—and so negated community for the sake of the individual—Heidegger bound the self to the mass of this world, losing the *I* in the vast ocean of the *they*. He attempted to reconcile this through authenticity. Yet in the same way that the Cartesian chasm could not be crossed, for it was built into the very foundations of the system, similarly no amount of phenomenological sophistry can rescue Dasein from drowning in the world. The problem is built into the very foundation of being-in-the-world. Heidegger has united Dasein with the world, making it difficult to see how this does not result in solipsism (i.e., the belief that only I exist) or a neo-idealism (i.e., the belief that only minds are real, not matter or the external world). If there is no gap between self and other, where do I begin and the world end? Heideggerian scholars might respond that this is taking being-in-the-world too literally, but if it is not literal, then how does Heidegger sidestep Descartes? Either there is a fracture or a unity at the heart of existence; Heidegger cannot have his strudel and eat it too. Of course, the Christian has the Trinity to help make sense of this tension between self and other, for the triune God can provide a relational ontology that neither absolutizes nor dissolves the individual. In many ways, Heidegger and Descartes stand at opposite ends, pulling at a tension that is held together only in God. This is a tension patristic theologians struggled with for almost two thousand years before Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers got to it.

In addition to these critiques, there are also a number of hopeful and religious ways forward from Heidegger. Karl Rahner was a significant Catholic philosopher who studied at Freiburg while Heidegger was there. In fact, he was so influenced by Heidegger that his dissertation on Aquinas was rejected by his supervisor precisely because it was too Heideggerian.<sup>3</sup> Rahner argues that because Heidegger has broken down the Cartesian chasm between self and other, no epistemic bridge is needed (i.e., apologetics, dialectics)

to get to God, for there is no subject/object chasm to be crossed in the first place. We do not have to come to know God, but exist already bound up with a transcendent notion of divine being from the beginning. There is no fracture to be crossed but a pre-existent unity between God and humanity. Thus, Rahner builds a phenomenological staircase back to metaphysics and theology.

American philosopher Alvin Plantinga inadvertently does something similar (under a vastly different and more analytic guise) by contending that God is a properly basic belief. Plantinga argues that if there is indeed an epistemic fracture between us and God that this would also undermine our access to other minds.<sup>4</sup> We cannot prove that other minds exist (for any proof we amass may simply be an extension of our own minds), but must simply accept this as a properly basic belief that does not require evidence to support it (though it may require fending off counter-evidence). Belief in God is therefore as rational and properly basic as belief in other minds. Thus, similar to how Heidegger and Rahner made Being-in-the-world more fundamental than the subject/object split, Plantinga has also made properly basic beliefs more fundamental than the subject/object gap, thereby avoiding the need for evidence to bridge that gap. While Rahner is certainly not one of Plantinga's major influences, there is nonetheless an interesting similarity here between their drastically different projects.

Theologian Rudolph Bultmann's baptizing of Heidegger also provides a unique opening for theology. Bultmann contended that God is not an object, and so cannot be viewed objectively from the outside, but only subjectively, through the existential immediacy of relation.<sup>5</sup> To appropriate

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Heideggerian terms, God is not *a* being but being itself, and so cannot be held as an object in the world. Thus, Heidegger argues, philosophy needs to know the limits of its critiques, for one cannot grab or fully view God from the outside as an object. However, Bultmann took this further and contended that the “objective” cosmology and historicity of the Bible is irrelevant, for it is only the existential engagement with God that matters. As such, while Bultmann provides a unique way of discussing the mystery and subjectivity of God in a post-Enlightenment context, his evacuation of God from the concrete world is a potential pitfall.

A much more fruitful attempt is being made by the Thomists, who also claim that God is not a being but being itself. Yet they avoid the pitfalls of evacuating God from the world, for they believe such a dichotomy is nonsensical in light of the world’s participation in God. The Heideggerian might respond that any attempt to speak of God automatically reduces God to an objective being in the world who can be described using objective language, and so leads to the problem of onto-theology (speaking of God as “a being,” much like any other). But this is precisely the problem the Thomists are trying to solve, arguing that God is not a being in the world but being itself, from which all things hang ontologically suspended. The Thomist God is not *a being* who simply has a higher quantity of power and knowledge than other beings, but who is qualitatively and ontologically distinct. God is not a highest being among other beings (e.g., Zeus) but the ontological source of all being. Thus, an ongoing and fruitful discussion is occurring among some of the most astute theologians in the world, debating whether the Thomist God of being is the answer to, or the exact problem of, Heidegger. While some claim theology cannot survive the Heideggerian accusation of onto-theology, others believe it is *only* theology that can survive it, with the secular world impotent to provide any capital-B Being behind the world of material beings.<sup>6</sup>

It is also helpful for Christians to wrestle with Heidegger’s call to temporality. While Christians cannot completely abandon the eternal, they can appreciate the need for their theology to do justice to the reality of their lived experience of time. While eternity perhaps occasionally interrupts temporality—for example, breaking in via miracles or a sense of the infinite in worship—our daily lives are nonetheless defined by temporality, and Heidegger is right to remind us of this. We are beings that exist in time, looking back in memory to our past, living in our present, and projecting our hopes onto the future, a future where death is immanent and inevitable and reminds us of our mortality and inherent finitude. Further, is not the scandal of Christianity precisely that in the incarnation, the divine somehow entered temporality, giving it dignity and value? Did not God create a temporal world and call it good? Is heaven merely a static, timeless eternity, or is it resurrection to a new body and a new earth? While a theology that places all of our significance in temporality would be lopsided, it is also true that any theology that leans so far to eternity that it loses the earthliness of time would also be one sided and incomplete, failing to do justice to both the God who enters into history and to our basic phenomenological experience of temporal reality. In this sense, Heidegger’s call, while incomplete, can be helpful in swinging the theological pendulum a little closer to the middle.

Additionally, Heidegger’s phenomenological method has much to commend itself to the theologian, for it seems to legitimate a return to discussing religion in the way it is actually lived and experienced. This is one of the reasons phenomenology of religion has become so primary in religious studies, for instead of reducing the experience of faith to the language of some other discipline (e.g., science, psychology, philosophy, or sociology), phenomenology allows us to sit in the phenomenon of religious experience itself, allowing theology its own authentic voice. One can see here a potential parallel to the Barthian program, in which the legitimacy

of theology as theology can be upheld, instead of reducing theology to some other allegedly more fundamental discipline (e.g., using history or sociology to explain away why the ancient Jews became monotheists, rather than allowing that God could have simply revealed this truth). In turn—while phenomenology has not yet been sufficiently mined in this respect—it can provide a grammar to articulate one’s sense of the divine presence as a legitimate and disclosive experience in itself, rather than reducing it, say, to some psychological delusion of the brain. That said, phenomenology often seems to be done by those who are hostile to religion, and so the conclusions they derive from their experiences are often opposite to the conclusions of Christianity (Heidegger being a perfect example of this). But that same methodology can be appropriated and used for good, in a sort of epistemic pillaging of the Egyptians.

In sum, despite the difficulty of his thought, Heidegger’s *Being and Time* should not be ignored by Christians. His temporalizing of being both critiques, and cries out for critique from, Christian theology. We do well to learn from Heidegger while also learning from his mistakes, finding some way to carve out an incarnational middle path between time and eternity. We have much to learn from Heidegger’s return to the basic phenomenon of experience, for we Christians also buck against the reductionisms of modernity, and our God can

be encountered not *only* in theory, but in the phenomena of everyday life and experience. Heidegger also provides a way forward from Descartes, helping us get beyond the epistemic and ontological chasm of self and other that defined much of the secularizing of Protestant thought. Indeed, for better or worse, the engaged Christian cannot afford to ignore Heidegger and his seminal work, *Being and Time*. **X**

#### Notes

1 All quotations taken from Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. and with a forward by Dennis J. Schmidt, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

2 Simon Critchley, “Why Heidegger Matters,” *The Guardian*, July 6, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/06/heidegger-philosophy-being>.

3 For the later publication of his dissertation as well as a taster of his Heideggerian influence, see Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

4 See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*, Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

5 See Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989).

6 For further reading, see Nick Zangwill, “The Myth of Religious Experience,” *Religious Studies* 40, no. 1 (March 2004): 1–22; Joeri Schrijvers, “OntoTheological Turnings? Marion, Lacoste and Levinas on the Decentering of Modern Subjectivity,” *Modern Theology* 22, no. 2 (2006): 221–53; John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).