

Introduction: The Renewal of the Question

For manifestly 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.¹

Heidegger opens his most famous work, *Being and Time*, by appealing to the above quote from Plato’s *Sophist*. The point that Heidegger draws from this quote is that despite using the word ‘Being’ in a way that indicates we understand what we are saying, we are nonetheless unable to articulate this understanding when questioned.²

Given that our grasp of this expression is exercised more than that of any other expression, owing to the vast array of permutations of the verb ‘to be’ that we need to deploy in talking about anything, our familiarity with the expression ‘Being’ and its variants has a certain intimacy that is not matched by any other expression. Yet, Heidegger notes, despite this peculiar intimacy, we are not at all perplexed by our inability to articulate our understanding of the expression. Heidegger thus claims that if we are to ask the question of what ‘Being’ means, we must first of all come to terms with our inability to address this question straightforwardly. The peculiar fact that our lack of perplexity at this inability reveals is that we do not really understand the question in the first place. Thus, before we can even think of answering it, we must try to understand what the question itself means. Heidegger’s gift to philosophy is this concern with properly raising this question of the meaning of ‘Being’, or simply, the question of Being.

Perhaps what is most strange about what Heidegger goes on to do in *Being and Time*, and in his work after it, is that it is arguable that he ever makes clear the meaning of this question, let alone answers it.³ This is not to denigrate Heidegger. It is not for a lack of serious and rigorous thought about the question and its answer that Heidegger was unable to provide a simple formulation of the

1 Plato, *Sophist*, 22. It is important to note that the word used here is ‘being’ and not ‘Being’. However, Heidegger himself moves directly from the former to the latter. This is understandable given the close relationship between the words which will be explained in fn 2, and in chapter 1, section 1.

2 Following the standard translation of Heidegger by Macquarrie and Robinson, I will use the capitalised term ‘Being’ for Heidegger’s ‘*Sein*’, and the uncapitalised terms ‘being’ and ‘beings’ to refer to ‘*Seiend*’ and ‘*Seienden*’, respectively. I will re-emphasize this difference in the text where I feel it is important. One undesirable consequence of this convention is that it tends to render the use of the capitalised expression ‘Being’ somewhat alien to our ordinary usage of the term (insofar as there is ordinary usage). This is alarming given that both Heidegger and myself will stress that any technical or theoretical usage of this expression must be rooted in such ordinary understanding. However, in this case, adequate rendering of the German distinction is more desirable. I will also treat the word ‘entity’ as effectively synonymous with ‘being’.

3 It is by now a fairly well accepted point that Heidegger does not answer the question in *Being and Time*, and although there are interpretations which miss this point, they will be addressed in the main work. This is not to say that he does not indicate what he takes the answer to be, namely, *time*, but simply that these indications never turn into a properly articulated answer. There are of course still questions as to whether Heidegger thinks one can provide an answer to the question, and to what extent he provides anything like an answer in his work after *Being and Time*. Again, these questions must be addressed elsewhere. It is the claim that Heidegger does not even provide a sufficient formulation of the question which is most controversial, and demonstrating this point will be a major task of the thesis.

project the question demands, or a comprehensive strategy to fulfil it. Nor is this to say that Heidegger provides us no resources to do so ourselves. One of the primary premises of this work is that it is only through an engagement with Heidegger's own thought that we will ever be able to provide such a simple formulation of the project or a strategy for fulfilling it. Nonetheless, one would be forgiven for thinking that Heidegger had given such a formulation. This is not only because of the fact that much has been written on what Heidegger's interpretation of the question is, but perhaps more importantly because even more has been written about what Heidegger's supposed answer, or the beginnings of his answer, were. This is indicative of the fact that many interpreters of Heidegger, along with others who place some discussion of 'Being' at the centre of their philosophy, have simply assumed that they understand the meaning of the question, and proceeded to discuss 'Being' on this basis, rather than genuinely questioning what it is to engage in such discussion. 'Being' thus becomes an almost empty term in much philosophical discussion, used in a haphazard way that hinders real attempts at understanding and obfuscates its philosophical import.⁴

Heidegger is famous for diagnosing a historical trend of the forgetting of Being. This consists in large part in the fact that the question of Being "provided a stimulus for the researches of Plato and Aristotle, only to subside from then on *as a theme for actual investigation*".⁵ Ignoring for the present the other salient points of Heidegger's complex reading of the overarching trends in the history of philosophy, a certain irony becomes apparent. This is present in the fact that many of those who take up Heidegger's renewal of the question of Being are themselves unable to adequately explain what the question means. This in effect amounts to a *second* forgetting of Being. However, this is perhaps a worse forgetting than the first, because we have moved from mistakenly thinking that we know what 'Being' means in a pre-theoretical way to mistakenly thinking we know what it means in a properly theoretical way. The former is a matter of familiarity while the latter is a matter of hubris.

This is not to say that all of those who take up and develop Heidegger's work are completely misunderstanding him, or that they have no grasp of the question at all.⁶ There have been many positive contributions to thinking about Being after Heidegger, despite the pervasive confusion over what exactly it is a contribution to. Moreover, we cannot simply say that an inability to provide a simple formulation of the question demonstrates a complete inability to understand the question

4 A similar point about the inability of much Heidegger scholarship to agree upon what precisely the central themes of Heidegger's work are has been made quite well by Thomas Sheehan ('A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research'). I entirely endorse this point, despite disagreeing with much of Sheehan's actual interpretation of what these themes are. This disagreement will become apparent in the course of the main work.

5 *B&T*, p. 2.

6 Three thinkers who here come to mind are Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, who all engage in some thinking of Being, albeit in very different ways, and with different levels of engagement with Heidegger. I think that Deleuze's thought especially presents us with an incredibly profound attempt to answer the question, even if it is as lamentably unclear as Heidegger's own work at times.

without thereby tarring Heidegger with the same brush. Rather, what is being claimed is that the absence of a clear explanation of what it is we are asking after in raising the question of Being has muddied the waters of post-Heideggerian philosophical discourse.

The goal of the present work is thus twofold: first, to bring some clarity to this discourse by providing a basic formulation of the question of Being, and second, to work out some of the demands that this formulation places on any attempt to answer it. This involves examining Heidegger's own attempt to formulate the question, and assessing his own ideas about how we must approach it. What will emerge from this is an approach to the question very different, and perhaps even alien to Heidegger's own. However, it is nonetheless rooted in the founding gesture of Heidegger's project in *Being and Time*, namely, that this question is of fundamental importance, and if we are to tackle it with any degree of propriety, then we must understand what it is and what it demands of us.

However, there is a second motivation underlying the project outlined above. If I am committed to bringing an additional level of clarity to the philosophical discourse which has arisen out of Heidegger's own work, which is often loosely referred to as the 'continental' tradition⁷, I am also committed to demonstrating the importance of the question to that philosophical discourse, which is equally loosely referred to as the 'Anglo-American' or 'analytic' tradition, which has to greater or lesser degrees eschewed Heidegger's enigmatic renewal of the question.

The idea underlying this commitment is that there is much work in the analytic tradition which would benefit from a more systematic consideration of the way different fundamental questions it raises are related. To take a somewhat hackneyed example, the debate over whether or not *qualia* and various other purported kinds of psychological entities exist still rages in the philosophy of mind. This debate tends to cross over with debates about what legitimately constitutes a property, the nature of identity, the metaphysics of modality, what constitutes a fact, whether or not there are anything like 'essences' and if there are what they are, and most importantly what it is to say that anything exists. These issues are all related to one another in complex ways, and it seems that debates about one of them tend to involve either implicit or explicit appeal to 'intuitions' about the others. This is not to say that there are not attempts to tackle some or all of these in systematic ways.⁸ Nor is it to claim that partially systematic or unsystematic

⁷ I am well aware that allying the various major figures and themes that usually get grouped as 'continental philosophy' with Heidegger is an obvious oversimplification, especially given the antipathy of many of those figures to Heidegger's own work. Nonetheless, despite the noble efforts over the last thirty years to integrate the salient points of Heidegger's philosophy into the 'analytic' tradition (for which Hubert Dreyfus obviously deserves the most credit), it is fair to say that willingness to engage with Heidegger is a fault line between the two traditions, most especially with regard to the question of Being. This is not to say that there aren't those who attempt to straddle this fault line, a category within which I endeavour to be counted.

⁸ I must single out Robert Brandom's eminently systematic work in the philosophy of language (stemming from *Making It Explicit*), which really should be treated as a foray into systematic philosophy as such, insofar as his concerns with other areas are motivated out of it. I can also recommend Colin McGinn's small but rewarding book *Logical Properties*, which explicitly tries to deal with the systematic interrelation of several of these issues in a very

approaches can have no insight here. Rather, the salient point is that even if there are some systematic approaches to these questions, there is no explicit questioning of the very systematic interrelation of these notions itself. No one has attempted to work out what a systematic engagement with these different questions as a whole would demand, independently of simply attempting to so engage with them. If in the continental tradition there is a pervasive assumption that we already have a good methodological grasp of the task, in the analytic tradition there is a pervasive ignorance of the need for such a unified methodology.

If we are to make use of the hard won insights of both traditions, to make them communicate in the proper manner, then we must situate them within the context of an overarching task – a task which itself makes demands of us, and which makes demands about how these insights are to be situated in relation to one another. With this in mind, I suggest that we might apply Heidegger’s own words about Aristotle to himself, namely, that he “formulates [a] wholly fundamental and new position that he worked out in philosophy in relation to all of his predecessors... not in the sense of a system but in the sense of a task.”⁹ Even if Heidegger’s own philosophy is lacking, it is only through staying true to his attempted renewal of the question of Being that we can move forward in philosophy, and do so as it should be done.

The structure of the work is as follows:-

Chapter 1 provides the essential preliminaries for engaging with Heidegger’s thought about Being, and examines the way Heidegger poses the problem of formulating the question of Being in *Being and Time*. It then raises some questions as to how this is to be understood, and presents some further resources for answering these.

Chapter 2 lays out the basic existential structure of Being-in-the-World, and situates Heidegger’s account of meaning and understanding in relation to it. It then uses this to finish reconstructing the formulation of the question as the question of the *meaning* of Being.

Chapter 3 presents Heidegger’s account of truth and the way this account develops after *Being and Time*. It then uses this to reconstruct Heidegger’s later formulation of the question as the question of the *truth* of Being.

Chapter 4 summarises the salient points of the formulations presented in the preceding chapters, and then uses these to assess their adequacy. It presents a series of problems for both formulations, and then draws a number of conclusions regarding the correct formulation of

praiseworthy fashion, even if I entirely disagree with much of it. I must also mention Dale Jacquette’s book *Ontology*, which not only attempts to tackle some of these questions in a systematic way, but does so through attempting to engage with Heidegger. I think it has serious problems on both accounts, but it is to be lauded nonetheless.

⁹ *Aristotle’s Metaphysics* Θ 1-3, p. 10

the question from these.

Chapter 5 concludes the investigation by presenting a basic formulation of the question of Being. It builds on the insights of the previous chapter, drawing additional insights from Heidegger's analysis of metaphysics and Robert Brandom's philosophy of language.