

Chapter Two

Content and Method

Before proceeding to a detailed examination of our ethical theme, and before any conclusions can be reached about ontological interpretation, a range of questions surrounding the content and method of Heidegger's ontology must be clarified. In summary, the content of Heidegger's ontology is the question of the meaning of Being and his method is the phenomenological hermeneutic of existence.

2.1 Content

Fundamental ontology is the general enquiry into the nature and meaning of Being. Since the time of Plato¹, when the ontological themes of truth, being and reality came to be considered the essential ground of systematic universal thought, ontology has occupied a central foundational position in the thought of the West. The inquiry into these themes has provided the content of ontology. However the very broadness of words such as those just mentioned indicates a problem, which also applies to words like 'meaning' and 'existence'. Being has been regarded as a first principle obvious in itself and in need of no further proof, but the problem for coherent ontological analysis is that Being as such is formless and abstract, and is never simply present to the understanding in an obvious and immediate way.

The fundamental question of ontology at the most basic level is the question of what can be said to exist, the question of what is. However the varied answers to this question show its difficulty. Among other possibilities, matter, God, humanity, energy, ideas, the world, space, time, have been advanced as the fundamental reality. The word 'being' can be identified with 'life', 'emergence' and 'endurance'.² One extreme position is the idealism of Parmenides, who Heidegger suggests claimed access to eternal divine truth by laying down that Being is an indivisible whole, with his claim that

"'is' can be said only of Being in an appropriate way, so that no individual being ever properly 'is'.³

The apparent ambiguity engendered by these numerous opinions about what exists is shown by Heidegger's statement, made with reference to Descartes, that

¹ cf. Plato, Sophist

² Introduction to Metaphysics:72

³ Introduction to Metaphysics p.214

"in the assertions 'God is' and 'the world is', we assert Being. This word 'is', however, cannot be meant to apply to these entities in the same sense, when between them there is an infinite difference of Being".⁴

In the midst of these conflicting answers to the question of what exists, and in the midst of the 'infinite difference' traditional philosophy has placed between infinite eternal truth and finite temporal events, a second question, equally fundamental, and with equally problematic status, presents itself. This question is what the word 'Being' can mean; in Heidegger's terms, the question of the meaning of Being. For if the word 'Being' covers such a multitude of realms, it is so vague as to be a mere homonym and a single definite meaning may be unattainable. Being was defined in just this way by Aristotle, who said it is a transcendental universal held together only by analogy.⁵ Heidegger was intrigued by this problem. His reading of Brentano led him to ask:

"what is the pervasive, simple, unified determination of Being that permeates all of its multiple meanings? This question raises others: What, then, does Being mean? To what extent (why and how) does the Being of beings unfold in the four modes which Aristotle constantly affirms, but whose common origin he leaves undetermined? One need but run over the names assigned to them in the language of the philosophical tradition to be struck by the fact that they seem at first irreconcilable: Being as property, Being as possibility and actuality, Being as truth, Being as schema of the categories. What sense of Being comes to expression in these four headings? How can they be brought into comprehensible accord?"⁶

The search for understanding of the single meaning of Being which supports these various uses is thus a metaphysical goal which is basic to Heidegger's thought, despite his criticisms of past metaphysics. As an illustration of the difficulty of knowing the meaning of this word 'is', Heidegger presents Goethe's saying, scrawled on the window ledge of a Swiss mountain hut, "Over all the summits, there is peace". The peace which 'is' over the mountains 'is' not in the sense of "is situated, is present, takes place, abides or prevails".⁷ Being is definitely 'there', but the manner and content of this definitude is elusive. The problem facing such abstract imprecision, as Nietzsche saw with his usual stark insight, is that

"the word 'Being' is no more than an empty word. It means nothing real, tangible, material. Its meaning is an unreal vapour . . . Such highest concepts as being (are) the last cloudy streak of evaporating reality. Who would want to

⁴ Sein und Zeit 93

⁵ Richardson

⁶ p. x Heidegger's Foreword to Richardson Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought, 1963

⁷ Introduction to Metaphysics.90

chase after such a vapour when the very term is merely a name for a great fallacy!"⁸

Even further, Nietzsche seeks to destroy this word completely; in The Twilight of the Idols he says; "Nothing indeed has exercised a more simple power of persuasion hitherto than the error of Being".⁹ Yet Heidegger contends that this elusive question resolves itself into the problem of why there is anything at all, which of all questions is the broadest, deepest and most fundamental.¹⁰

The problem arising from this universality is that when we attempt to study ontology, we find that Being, which initially seems the simplest of notions, is actually the most mysterious. Heidegger indicated the perplexing perennial mystery at the centre of philosophy when he began Being and Time by quoting from Plato's Sophist:

"For manifestly you have been long aware of what you mean when you use the expression 'Being'. We, however, who used to think we understood it, have become perplexed".¹¹

Hegel, who defined Being as the 'indeterminate immediate', found it just as difficult as Aristotle to articulate the meaning of Being precisely. As Heidegger observes, "Being has been regarded as the most universal and the emptiest of concepts".¹² Like time for Saint Augustine, being is simultaneously indefinable and self-evident.¹³ The question of Being is "obscure and without direction"¹⁴; its meaning is "still veiled in darkness".¹⁵ So how can anything definite be said about Being? How can Being become "a theme for actual investigation"?¹⁶ How can "a mere matter for speculation" become "of all questions, the most basic and the most concrete"?¹⁷

Proceeding from an initial consideration of Being in the most general and amorphous terms possible, Heidegger argued that consideration of Being as a theme for actual investigation must precede any thought about entities: "the question of Being aims at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions for the possibility of the sciences".¹⁸ Because, as he here recognises, pure Being performs the Kantian function of providing the rational *a priori* conditions which underpin contingent existence, the effort to understand Being must begin by recognising the universality and the abstraction inherent in this formal notion. The need

⁸ Introduction to Metaphysics:.35

⁹ Introduction to Metaphysics 36

¹⁰ Introduction to Metaphysics: .3

¹¹ Sein und Zeit 1

¹² cf. Introduction to Metaphysics.40

¹³ Sein und Zeit 4

¹⁴ Sein und Zeit 4

¹⁵ Sein und Zeit 4

¹⁶Sein und Zeit 1

¹⁷ Sein und Zeit 9

¹⁸ Sein und Zeit:11

for such an a priori basis is indicated again in the demand that before we can discuss empirical questions which arise in such disciplines as anthropology and psychology, we must seek to "make headway with . . . the task of laying bare that a priori basis which must be visible before the question 'What is man?' can be discussed philosophically".¹⁹

However the pitfall of such an a prioristic approach in the tradition has been the neglect of actual existence. Therefore Heidegger emphasises the necessity of approaching this whole question in terms of the analytic of existence, to "lay the foundations for the sciences"²⁰ through the interpretation of entities. Such an approach does not seek an abstract and placeless universality, because its emphasis is on the need to retain an organic relation to actuality: Being, "that which determines entities as entities",²¹ "is always the Being of an entity".²²

We may consider such disparate fields of human interest as astronomy, poetry, engineering, economics and agriculture, and say that all that is known and all that has happened in these fields is significant for ontology. They all deal with something that exists, but there is no further commonality between a distant star, an antelope, an ode and a bridge than the mere fact that all share existence, and the enormous differences between them must still be considered. Being may be the factor uniting divergent areas of reality for valid philosophy, but this ontological sameness tells us nothing specific about entities. The question is whether the task of formulating a systematic philosophy that will incorporate such contrasting bodies of understanding is possible, given the immensity of what it requires.

One way to begin is by recognising the place of objective meaning. Objectivity can easily be found in any simple statement of fact, for example, "The oak tree has shed its leaves"; "Alpha Centauri is four light years away from us"; "China and India share a common border"; "Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' says beauty is truth"; "energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light" ($e=mc^2$). This list of things are all possible objects for ontological enquiry because all occur within the common ground of existence, but there is a gulf of meaning between material objects, theories, political relations and poetry. For example, we can say the poem exists, but there the similarity to other entities ends. Part of the reason is that the meaning of the poem is not to be found in the empirical data of ink and paper but in its transcendent significance for the human spirit. The role of the perceptive human understanding in conferring meaning and value is thus seen to be significant and indispensable. The point of the existential analytic is that true statements

19 Sein und Zeit: 45

20 Sein und Zeit:10

21 Sein und Zeit:6

22 Sein und Zeit:9

only acquire value as they are situated in the human context, that meaning must be created by people if it is to exist at all.

The phenomenological insistence on establishing meaning at the personal level of human existence is a key to the human dimension, and therefore the ethical dimension, of Heidegger's thought. As Heidegger recognised by making disposition (Befindlichkeit) a major theme of his thought, ontology must consider such phenomena as cultural values, ethical conscience and the freedom of the will if it is to truly account for human realities. The idea that the explanation of such phenomena could require nothing more than reduction to physical components is simply false. The infinite complexity of the existential condition of human being is irreducibly plural and diverse: as Heidegger says, "it is beyond question that the totality of the structural whole is not to be reached by building it up out of elements".²³ This can be seen from the observation that physiology is no more proof that the essence of man consists in an organic body scientifically explained than is the essence of nature discovered in atomic energy.²⁴ The meaning people discover in a Mozart symphony can no more be found through the analysis of the molecular structure of the instruments in the orchestra or the mathematical interpretation of the structure of the sound waves produced than the intentions of Joseph Stalin or Thomas Jefferson can be explained by the methods of neuroscience, yet these human realities are unquestionably significant for the meaning of Being.

Broadly speaking, the interpretation of the nature and meaning of Being falls within the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, the generic term for enquiry which seeks to make different situations and perspectives comprehensible to each other, to understand in the most generic way the signs and messages that mediate between finite human existence and infinite eternal truth. Of course, whether Being ought to be identified with " infinite eternal truth" is disputed just as much as whether Being can be identified with God, but this question of the proper horizon for ontology is one which can only be gradually developed. The processes of textual exegesis point towards how ontology can ultimately be understood as a science, that is, a unified and systematic body of learning, but the generality of the interest of ontological hermeneutics leads to a real difference from the precise empirical sciences.

2.2 The Method of Ontology

Heidegger suggested we can only understand how the essence of humanity "belongs to the essence of Being . . . if before considering the question, What shall we do?, we

23 Sein und Zeit 181

24 Basic Writings:205

ponder this: *How must we think?*"²⁵ This priority accorded to the question of thought is basic to Heidegger's whole method, given that the question of the meaning of being is directed essentially towards encouraging people to think. Heidegger contends²⁶ that simply giving thought to our plight sets us on the way to resolving it. Nevertheless, and despite his contention that the essence of humanity can be disclosed only if thought is given priority over action, genuine thought does have an ethical impact because of the transformation it works on our whole outlook: hence his remark, "granted that we can't do anything with philosophy, might not philosophy, if we concern ourselves with it, do something with us?".²⁷ To think about Being in the modern context can be a disturbing and difficult thing, which if carried through can deepen and improve our whole approach to life. The need to overcome the pervasive poverty of spirit wrought by the common unwillingness to engage in the process of genuine thought, the common tendency to focus on tangible effects, valued according to their utility, while neglecting the deeper and more profound changes signalled within the realm of ideas, is a sign of the importance of following through with a method that gives such a priority to pure thinking for its own sake.

Thinking about Being calls us to seek a deeper historical awareness of the temporal conditions of human existence, and has substantial, if indirect, ethical consequences. Given that the essence of action is accomplishment,²⁸ a conclusion which follows from the observation that action which fails to accomplish anything is worthless, it may be that thought about Being actually achieves more in an ethical sense than some actions done for the best of intentions. The indirect ethical accomplishment of thought about Being is in the long term deepening and improvement it brings to the cultural ethos which informs practical decisions. This deepening is an important, albeit implicit, goal of Heidegger's basic approach, and indicates where the ethical value of his thought may be found.

To indicate more clearly the basis of Heidegger's thought about the question of the meaning of Being, it is essential to understand his use of the method of phenomenology. Heidegger characterised phenomenology as the method of his ontology, defining it as "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself". "The expression 'phenomenology' signifies primarily a methodological conception. This expression does not characterise the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject-matter, but rather the *how* of that research".²⁹ The maxim of phenomenology, "To the things themselves!" offers the key to a fundamental criticism of the Cartesian tendency, which has assisted the estrangement of reason from practical concern by approaching things as mere material substance and thereby hiding their relation to human purposes.

25 Die Kehre, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays : 40

26 Poetry, Language, Thought : 161

27 Introduction to Metaphysics: 12

28 cf. Basic Writings: 193

29 Sein und Zeit 27

Phenomenology PLACES A RENEWED VALUE ON THE THING AS IT IS USED AND ENCOUNTERED IN ACTUAL experience. Heidegger maintained that in our dealings with the world, we employ the “kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use”, rather than “a bare perceptual cognition”, contending that “the achieving of phenomenological access to the entities which we encounter consists in thrusting aside our interpretative tendencies”.³⁰ The deconstruction of these interpretative tendencies is a major part of Heidegger’s philosophy; his phenomenology seeks to relate to and understand things on the basis of their relation to humanity, to concretise the amorphous and speculative study of ontology by constant reference to finite existence. The result is that the things encountered in everyday life and the experiences of ordinary people become real concerns for philosophy. The phenomenological ethic has made a significant contribution to modern thought chiefly because of this insight.

Although critical of rationalism, Heidegger’s phenomenology retained a rational critical spirit. He described his method as

"opposed to all free floating constructions and accidental findings; it is opposed to taking over any conceptions which only seem to have been demonstrated, it is opposed to those pseudo-questions which parade themselves as 'problems' often for generations at a time".³¹

The perception that rationalism had atrophied, that the specialisation of the sciences had rendered them incapable of making humanity their primary concern, provided the ethical rationale for phenomenological ontology as an independent critical discipline. In pursuit of Heidegger’s

"burning problem of obtaining and securing the kind of access which will lead to Dasein", "we have no right to resort to dogmatic constructions and to apply just any idea of Being and actuality to this entity, no matter how 'self-evident' that idea may be; nor may any of the categories which such an idea prescribes be forced upon Dasein without proper ontological consideration"³².

This commitment to critical honesty and the pursuit of truth has been an important factor in the dynamism and ethical spirit of phenomenology, both in its foundations in the thought of Husserl and in its contemporary influence. The phenomenological method of enquiry and school of thought was founded by Edmund Husserl, the teacher to whom Being and Time is dedicated “in friendship and admiration”. As the original exponent of modern phenomenology as a specific way of doing philosophy, the rigour and clarity of his thought cleared the path for the work of Heidegger and many other thinkers, including, most notably, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. The Cartesian Meditations and Ideas expounded a

³⁰ Sein und Zeit 67

³¹ Sein und Zeit 28

³² Sein und Zeit 248

theoretical system arising from profound reflection on the modern problems of subject, object and consciousness. In his later writings,³³ which sought to address the context of the anonymous alienation brought about by technological mass society, Husserl made the relevance of the questions that are decisive for a genuine humanity a central issue within phenomenology. In the Crisis and the Vienna Lecture, Husserl turned from the formal structure of consciousness as noesis/noema to the idea of the spiritual becoming of European humanity.

The fruit of his close theoretical work in his early days emerges with the profound understanding of the social function of philosophy: he said that as soon as civilisation

"becomes consciously recognised in the development as telos, it necessarily also becomes practical as a goal of the will; and thereby a new, higher stage of development is introduced which is under the guidance of norms, normative ideas".³⁴ "With the first conception of ideas, . . . there grows a new sort of humanity, one which, living in finitude, lives toward poles of infinity."³⁵

Whereas

"culture not yet touched by science consists in tasks and accomplishments of man in finitude, . . . many infinite ideas . . . owe their analogous character of infinity to the transformation of mankind through philosophy and its idealities."³⁶

These statements indicate how a concern for ethical renewal was a theme in Husserl's work, but this social concern was arrived at on the basis of a doctrine of philosophy as grounded in transcendental consciousness, with which Heidegger fundamentally disagreed. Much of the influence of Being and Time arose from its effort to humanise knowledge by making Being the central theme of phenomenology, but the priority Heidegger gave to the question of the meaning of Being led to a departure from Husserl's perspective. As will become clearer as we delve further into his philosophy, there is a circularity about Heidegger's method of approach to Being as an issue that was incompatible with Husserl's ambition³⁷ of proving that the intentionality of consciousness is the foundational ground of philosophy.

Heidegger's criticism of Husserl's method is most obvious in the remark that "we cannot ever avoid a 'circular' proof in the existential analytic, because such an analytic does not do any proving at all by the rules of the 'logic of consistency'. What common sense wishes to eliminate in avoiding the 'circle', on the supposition that it is measuring up to the

33 Edmund Husserl: The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, Northwestern, 1970

34 The Vienna Lecture: Crisis Appendix p.275

35 Sein und Zeit 277

36 Sein und Zeit 279

37 expressed in the Ideas and the Cartesian Meditations

loftiest rigour of scientific investigation, is nothing less than the basic structure of care"³⁸ . Such rules of logic would eliminate historical interpretation from the domain of rigorous knowledge, on the ground that "we may not presuppose what it is our task to provide grounds for." For Heidegger, "mathematics is not more rigorous than historiology, but only narrower, because the existential foundations relevant for it lie within a narrower range."³⁹ Instead of logical deduction, Heidegger calls for a "leap into the circle"⁴⁰ so that we may have a "full view" of understanding and of care, which together make up "Dasein's circular Being".

In calling for such a leap, Heidegger echoes Kierkegaard, who held that the philosophy of existence demands a leap into faith, rather than proofs based on rigorous logic. In fact, Heidegger went even further than Kierkegaard, suggesting that "knowing the world is a founded mode of Being in the world",⁴¹ requiring no further justification, whether by faith or logic. Knowing the world must be presupposed, and this presupposition cannot be refuted, but once this non-logical step is taken, there is ample scope for the use of systematic logic to investigate its implications. The alternative procedure, which Heidegger calls "the modern world view",⁴² is "the gnawing of an empty skepticism", and "presupposes not too much but too little". It arises when "we take our departure from a worldless "I" in order to provide this "I" with an Object"⁴³ . The "theoretical subject" which we then "round out on the practical side by tacking on an ethic", "artificially and dogmatically curtails"⁴⁴ the ontology of Dasein. So the transcendental horizon discussed in Being and Time "is not that of the subjective consciousness; rather it defines itself in terms of the temporality of Dasein".⁴⁵ Philosophy as finite understanding must recognise its context: we are more buffeted by fate than creating our world.

Husserl's rejoinder, expressed in the Vienna Lecture⁴⁶, is that rationalism, which avows such a world creating power for the human intellect, is essential to philosophy despite its historical failings. The origin of rationalism is in the distinctive approach to 'theoria' of Plato and Aristotle, in whose work philosophy was born. Their transcendence and critique of the mythical way of thought, contains "the spiritual *telos* of European humanity . . . thereby a new stage of development is introduced which is under the guidance of normative ideas". In science, says Husserl, man reaches toward the infinite,

³⁸Sein und Zeit 315

³⁹Sein und Zeit 152-3

⁴⁰ Sein und Zeit 315

⁴¹ Sein und Zeit 59

⁴² cf. The Age of the World Picture, in The Question Concerning Technology

⁴³Sein und Zeit 316

⁴⁴Sein und Zeit 316

⁴⁵ Introduction to Metaphysics: 18

⁴⁶ Crisis pp 269-301

whereas extra-scientific culture moves within the sphere of the finitely surveyable surrounding world. Infinite ideas - the genuine good, the absolute value - enable the transformation of the human spirit. The praxis of *theoria* aims to elevate humanity through universal scientific reason. Such elevation is only possible when man "turns away from all practical interests and . . . strives for and achieves nothing but pure *theoria*". Only through detached isolation do we gain the resources to renovate and transform our contingent circumstances.

This is a notion of ethics which Husserl correctly derives from Plato and Aristotle and which has informed the most influential schools of philosophy, including Kantian notions of duty and utilitarian ideas about happiness. However Heidegger suggests it has a basic flaw, that its refusal to begin from the situation of 'average everydayness' has produced an estrangement between man and his Being. One of Heidegger's best known theses is the suggestion that Western thought since Plato and Aristotle has 'fallen out of Being'; that the value accorded *theoria* has allowed the forgetting of, and alienation from, the truth of Being. This should not, it must be said, indicate a hostility on Heidegger's part towards the origins of philosophy, because he draws immense inspiration from the Greeks. He is however hostile towards the derivative work which followed Plato and Aristotle, which grounded its understanding in metaphysical concepts instead of establishing an original relation with the things themselves. He says, "philosophy is one of man's few great achievements. But what is great can only begin great. . . So it is with the philosophy of the Greeks. It ended in greatness with Aristotle".⁴⁷ Although the meaning of Being was "found continually disturbing" by Plato and Aristotle, for whom it was "a stimulus for research",⁴⁸ after their time Heidegger suggests this question subsided into neglect, and it was this subsequent neglect, grounded in a failure to base theory on disclosure, that allowed alienation to grow. A principal direction of Heidegger's thought, formulated in his doctrine of care, is the claim that this alienation can only be overcome through active involvement in finite concern. And yet, as we have seen, there is a contradictory current in his thought which criticises our forfeiture to 'average everydayness', valuing conscience and anxiety for pulling us away from involvement towards authenticity. The tension between these two conceptions of the method of philosophy, the one leaping in to involved concern, the other maintaining a detached reserve, will recur in this thesis as an important dimension of the critique of Heidegger's ethics. Heidegger's aim is to articulate an authentic spirituality, but his thesis that authenticity emerges in the openness of the individual to his own being, in being true to one's ownmost potential, rather than in terms of of a social validation, is another factor setting his philosophy apart from much of moral philosophy.

47 Introduction to Metaphysics: 15

48 Sein und Zeit 1

Arising from Heidegger's method of existential phenomenology, a further problem in assessing his method is the issue of systematicity. Systematic investigation usually focuses on a specific subject matter that can be exhaustively analysed to coherently formulate detailed particular information with precision and clarity. In the context of ontology however, systematicity refers primarily to the principle of non-contradiction, that the unity of truth is a fundamental axiom of positive logic. Despite Heidegger's criticisms of the way this theoretical principle has often smothered thought rather than encouraging it, at a more basic level he uses the principle of non-contradiction by making the disclosure of Being the ground of his system of thought.

The problem of method, however, is that Heidegger has been identified with the existentialist revolt against system, especially against Hegel. It appears contradictory to describe Heidegger both as an existentialist who recognised the alienation of human being from thought, and at the same time to assert that his thought is systematic. Existentialist philosophy has often expressed itself as the very negation of systematic reason, for example with Kierkegaard's assertion that systematic logic does not necessarily disclose anything about existence. Existential thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard held that the problem, not only with the Hegelian philosophy based on the construction of an absolute system of ideas but also with scientific materialism, is that the attempt to acquire understanding loses human relevance if it posits itself as universal by ignoring the finite constraints of human limitation. Hegel believed speculative contemplation could deduce the identity of the rational and the real and the bond between the true and the whole through a chain of reason which began from the immediate appearance of phenomena to sense perception. Yet according to the existentialists, Hegel only attained his world-historical universal comprehension by forgetting existence; the idealist demand that truth should be objective is founded on the negation of subjectivity rather than its expression, so by neglecting the necessary task of adequately securing the connection between the absolute truth given to speculative reason and the subjective experience of life, Hegel's thought failed to attain the systematic universality it claimed. Whereas Hegel held that it is possible for the reflective theoretical mind of the philosopher to construct a total system of ideas by proceeding from the immediately given to absolute truth according to the methods of dialectical logic, existentialism begins with the demand that the only possible context of thought is a finite perspective. As Kierkegaard said of Lessing,

"I assume that anyone I may have the honour to talk with is also a human being. If he presumes to be speculative philosophy in the abstract, pure speculative thought, I must renounce the effort to speak with him; for in that case he vanishes from my sight, and from the feeble sight of every mortal".⁴⁹

49 Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Bretall: p.196

Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript brought the problem of how thought can be grounded in truth into sharp focus with a relentless attack on the whole conception of philosophy as system, the heart of the Hegelian approach. Kierkegaard suggested that "the systematic idea is the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being. Existence, on the other hand, is their separation".⁵⁰ The point here is that the infinite speculative unity seen and attained through Platonic/Hegelian logic can only be connected with a finite human perspective by means of the apparent paradox that eternal truth could be manifested in time, so the only subject finally capable of grasping the ultimate system is God. Instead of such puffed up conceit, effectively claiming privileged access to the divine, Kierkegaard calls for a recognition of our mortal condition by asserting that truth is not to be found in the fantastic abstractions of systematic objectivity but in the inwardness of subjectivity. The supposed identity of subject and object postulated as the final fruit of the speculative idealist method must be reconciled with the grubby and broken details of life as an existing individual, and if it cannot be so reconciled it must be abandoned.

The alternative, as far as Kierkegaard is concerned, involves the monstrous belief that it is possible to attain a unified vision, presented in glowing terms as the absolute theory of knowledge, without this vision having any necessary consequences for ethics or practical behaviour. For such a system, "being an individual man is a thing that has been abolished, and every speculative philosopher confuses himself with humanity at large, whereby he becomes something infinitely great - and at the same time nothing at all".⁵¹

While Heidegger was careful to explain the importance of subjective construction of meaning, and recognises that Kierkegaard "explicitly seized upon the problem of existence and thought it through in a penetrating fashion"⁵², he accused Kierkegaard of being under the domination of Hegel on the grounds that the existential problematic remained completely alien to him. It is surprising that Heidegger, who aspired to such systematic universality in his thinking while articulating a thoroughly inward doctrine of conscience, should criticise Kierkegaard for being too close to Hegel, the grand master of the system, because Heidegger's method, which looks for the foundations of systematic ontology in the subjective problematic of human existence, appears to have incorporated precisely the contrasting insights found in the philosophies of these two thinkers.

Heidegger formulated this issue by saying that "for Hegel, the matter of thinking is the idea as the absolute concept. For us, formulated in a preliminary fashion, the matter of thinking is the difference as difference".⁵³ The relevance to our theme is that the project of Being and Time appears to have been to develop an existentialist system, a framework

50 Bretall, p.205

51 Sein und Zeit, p.206

52 Sein und Zeit 235 n.vi.

53 The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics, p.47

of ideas that would recognise historical difference and contradiction while maintaining confidence in the *a priori* connection between thought and truth. The notion of difference is contrasted to that of 'concept', because part of Heidegger's existential purpose was to bring into question the whole framework of philosophy as conceptual systematisation. The underlying aim of this project was to overcome alienation by synthesising historical lines of thought, centred around the poles of truth and existence, that until then seemed irreconcilably antagonistic.

The central question OF the existential *a priori*, THE RELATION BETWEEN truth and existence, was formalised in the ontological tradition dating back to Parmenides in terms of the prior relation between thought and being. The intrinsic difficulty of this question is shown in the fact that Heidegger suggested in Being and Time that Parmenides' doctrine of the unity of thought and being explicitly "passed over the phenomenon of the world"⁵⁴. This statement represents Heidegger's standpoint at the time of writing Being and Time towards the Greek origins of the Western ontological heritage. His standpoint changed somewhat in the Introduction to Metaphysics, where he praised Parmenides for showing that knowledge belongs to those who have seen the path to being and the path to nothingness and taken upon themselves "the arduous path of appearance".⁵⁵ Heidegger described his own earlier interpretation of Parmenides as based on neo-Kantianism:

"this familiar German view (which) works its mischief in all historical accounts of Greek philosophy... The dominance of these views has made it difficult for us to understand ... Parmenides ... (and) to appraise the change which has taken place, not only in the modern era but beginning with late antiquity and the rise of Christianity."⁵⁶

To appraise this change is the basic goal of Heidegger's method, and the ethical dimension of this goal is our subject here. To make Being an object of study assumes that I can detach myself from it as a subject in order to consider it according to the traditional logic of objectivity. Yet the problem about Being is that it defies this objectivity, and so much so that it may be validly doubted whether such logic, based as it is on the views of such thinkers as Plato, Kant and Descartes, can ever hope to speak the truth of being. But steady on. Before casting such aspersions against the greatest figures in the western heritage of philosophy, we should look into what Heidegger actually claims about them, and more to the point, what he proves about their thought. Indeed, as Heidegger warns in the Letter on Humanism, "thinking . . . that attests to its essential unfolding as destiny . . . is far from the arrogant presumption that wishes to begin anew and declare all past

54 Sein und Zeit 100

55 Introduction to Metaphysics 113

56 Introduction to Metaphysics 137

philosophy false".⁵⁷ This is very pertinent to the question of how a contemporary philosophy wishing to understand Being should relate to the greatest thinkers of the west. In coming to terms with such subtle and profound thinkers as Plato, Descartes, Kant and Sartre, the sardonic slighting of their contribution to the human quest for truth is more likely to be ignorant and mistaken than evidence of some dramatic insight at the fundamental level. So Heideggers' startling attacks on their ideas deserve careful scrutiny. Considering how conversant he was with the tradition he rejects, namely the metaphysics of subjectivity expressed as representational dualism, it is advisable to tread cautiously in our investigations, observing before concluding and reading before rejecting.

⁵⁷ Basic Writings: 217