

NOTHING TO TALK ABOUT: THE PROBLEM OF DISCOURSE IN ADVANCED
MODERNITY ACCORDING TO MARTIN HEIDEGGER

A WORKING PAPER

Rachelle Walker, Ph.D.

Colgate University
13 Oak Street
Hamilton, NY 13332
rwalker@colgate.edu

Wading through stacks of freshman essays, I often wonder how the students manage to use so many words to convey so little. Inevitably, a discussion of some such topic as the merits of tyranny versus freedom dissolves into a weak and mysterious assertion that everybody has their “rights.” When pressed to explain *why* an institution such as slavery is wrong most of the class stares in total perplexity—“everyone knows it’s wrong!” The more intellectually honest among them simply say, “because I don’t like it.” Most of them feel no need for a justification for their views, nor do they see their “values” as rooted in any reality beyond their own choice. There is often not even an awareness that a logic exists behind the stance on either side of the issue (e.g., those who supported slavery were clearly just “bad people”). Attempts at true dialogue about such questions are met with frustration: many students’ minds are not prepared to receive or participate in such a conversation.

In tandem with this disconnect from the world of reason, there is also a disturbing emotional rift between students and the rest of human history. The perennial refrain I hear from students is that he or she “does not like history” and, at best, a confession that “those stories you told today were cool.” How do you explain to a nineteen year old that history is worth more than its entertainment value, or worth anything at all? What about modernity has isolated us from the human story in such a dramatic fashion? Much of the pre-modern world lived and breathed their myths and histories; such fables were the real stuff of life. Homer was not the paint but the very canvas of Greek life. Forgetting one’s ancestors and home was a grave evil: today it seems to be the status quo of the young mind. How do you lift the veil that separates the very small everyday world of a college student from the importance of history and politics – or harder yet, philosophy? It seems that many are doomed to remain “one-dimensional” men, as historian Alan Bullock characterized the person who has no connection to anything beyond his own person and

time. This phenomenon is not limited to undergraduate freshman: those nineteen year olds grow into sixty year olds, and they will work and raise families, some will even teach students and publish books. Most will firmly build a life without ever seriously questioning their own assumptions, or wondering at the greatest mysteries of human existence – all the while fancying themselves “open-minded.” This detachment from the world of ideas, both theoretical and practical, makes real discourse (something beyond an exchange of preferences) a painful uphill battle, and while glorifying individual experience, in the end enfeebles a person’s ability to meaningfully understand their own experiences, or those of others. It seems our age has given birth to a world that is becoming ever-smaller and blurred.

Being and Time is Martin Heidegger’s flash of lightning, a jolt intended to pierce this habitual smallness of mind with a blast of primordial reality – at least among those with the patience required to keep up with his ever-more obtuse vocabulary. His work is an attempt to part the metaphysical fog which has enfolded modernity and lulled the world to sleep. This deep sleep – this forgetfulness – he traces back to the earliest enchantments of Western philosophy. In this rejection of the claims to wisdom of the Western tradition, he echoes the earlier laments of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra laughs at the sage who teaches that to sleep well is the whole meaning of life, that our waking hours and our virtues all point to a single goal: a good night’s sleep. But this sage is not an oddity, though “his wisdom is: to wake in order to sleep well.”¹ Zarathustra will assert that all the sages of antiquity, in their quest for wisdom, were truly teaching humanity how to slumber.

In less poetic language than Nietzsche, Heidegger too will teach that Western thought has methodically dimmed the lights on the mystery of existence; the world has become so accustomed to its condition that it no longer sees that the question of Being even exists. For all

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 30.

the supposed advancement of man, this first “question has today been forgotten” (21).² Leo Strauss observed the political ramifications of this forgetfulness: the West is facing destruction, not at the hands of its enemies but from the rejection of its own principles. He famously wrote that “the crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose.” No political community can survive if it cannot justify its own existence to itself, and if it was “accustomed to understand itself in terms of a universal purpose, [it] cannot lose faith in that purpose without becoming completely bewildered.”³

Heidegger was concerned with the metaphysical root of this problem, asking what it means not just for a political community, but for all of humanity if we lose our sense of purpose—and even our longing to understand ourselves and Being itself. Despite the unprecedented ease and technological advancement we enjoy, we have in fact regressed when it comes to the most important things.

What makes this forgetfulness even more dangerous is that since Descartes and the Enlightenment, philosophy has seduced modern men into believing that this state of fuzzy darkness is in fact one of brilliant light. Modern people, if faced with the question of Being, blink in the fashion of the Last Man – as if to say, “what a silly question!” Egoism and a smug utilitarianism reign supreme. An age of hubris and imbecility, dressed up as scientific surety, has dawned. Philosophically, Nietzsche’s dark benediction has come true: “blessed are the sleepy ones: for they shall soon drop off.”⁴ Real discourse has dwindled into competing “narratives”, creating a world in which meaningful action is impossible. What else has the human race to do but sleep? Heidegger was acutely aware of the modern condition: “Are we nowadays even

² All subsequent in-text citations are from Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 1962).

³ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), 3.

⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 30.

perplexed at our inability to understand the expression ‘Being’?” the answer is obvious: “Not at all” (1). Somnolence has won the day.

Heidegger opens his work by asserting that stretching down deep into society, “a dogma has been developed which not only declares the question to be superfluous, but sanctions its complete neglect” (21). Heidegger’s thought is the first in many centuries that seeks to recover those first questions. He wants to reveal the dazzling darkness of the bare night sky to a world long accustomed to the artificial suns of its own making. In this way, his goal is not to light torches (as so many Enlightenment philosophers meant to do), but to put them out, exposing humanity once again to the powerful primal possibility of encountering Being itself.

But how do you show the world a mystery? How do you teach a post-Enlightenment society, full of people who believe that they know all things, that they have forgotten the only thing that truly matters? Heidegger must teach those who are able how to see again.

This essay is a meditation on Heidegger’s understanding of what it means to see—the primary means of which he locates in the possibility of discourse. Reflecting on the Platonic approach to knowing the being of human beings and Heidegger’s phenomenological method, I discuss Heidegger’s work on the importance of anxiety, rooted in homelessness, as the defining characteristic of human beings. Finally, I return to the possibility of true discourse, and the question of whether Heidegger is able to win the ear of the modern world.

The Possibility of Seeing

What does it mean, then, for man “to see”? If our doorway to Being is through our own being, as Heidegger teaches – or that we “ought to begin from the things that are known to us” instead of the “things that are known simply,” as Aristotle put it – the first question becomes,

how do we know our own selves?⁵ Our own being is our access point, the only door to the question of Being to which we possess a key. Heidegger leads us in a twofold quest: What is the means by which we know our own essence and possibilities? And equally important, what can mask ourselves from ourselves? *Being and Time* does not shirk the greatness of its task and opens afresh the question of the nature of knowing.

All philosophy begins with an affirmation of the primacy and possibility of seeing. Anaxagoras, Diogenes tells us, was asked for what end he was born, and he replied that it was “For the contemplation of the sun, and moon, and heaven.”⁶ Man comes into the world in order to see. In the *Republic*, Socrates tells us that the true philosophers are “the lovers of the sight of truth.”⁷ Similarly, in Cicero’s dream of Scipio, the statesman is carried up into the heavens in order to *see*. “When I beheld the whole universe from that point, everything seemed glorious and wonderful”—and the earth and the Roman Empire, by comparison, very small.⁸ Earthly and heavenly things were made plain to him once his eyes could take in the vastness of the cosmos. The common frustration of human beings is that we are particular and earthbound—our sight is impaired, too limited for satiation. We are unable to see the whole. Thomas Aquinas uses similar language to explain the Beatific Vision: “wherefore He who sees God in His essence, even though he know[s] nothing else, would have a perfect intellect.”⁹ Seeing, we find again and again, is the highest form of human knowing.

Seeing of course is more than what the eyes take in. It is an activity that encompasses the full absorption of reality. Lesser forms of knowing depend on the calculations and proofs of

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2002), 1095b.

⁶ Diogenes Laertius, “Life of Anaxagoras,” in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, edited by C.D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1853), 60.

⁷ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 475e.

⁸ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Republic*, translated by Neil Rudd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), VI, 16.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q. 92, Art. 3, Reply to Obj. 5.

theory, but to see is to know simply. Encompassed in the hope of seeing is the assertion that the mind is able, to some degree, to grasp or participate in the real. To deny all possibility of seeing is to deny the possibility of philosophy, of knowing itself. Though Heidegger is a severe critic of most philosophy that came before him, he nevertheless shares with it this basic belief in the primacy of seeing; he writes that “primordial and genuine truth lies in true beholding” (215). It is in seeing that we grasp the essential possibilities that belong to our being. Is it possible, though, to see “falsely”? What distinguishes “true beholding” from false beholding?

In place of true openness to Being is what Heidegger calls “pseudo-openness”. The modern Aristotelian Josef Pieper refers to this as a “lust for seeing.”¹⁰ This is not a sight oriented toward the mystery of Being, but rather an obsession with the act of seeing itself (Augustine’s “concupiscence of the eyes”). It is distraction, an unquenchable thirst for stimulation and activity. Seeing is reduced to an end in itself—an insatiable desire simply “to see.” It is truly a lust rather than a love, a burning curiosity rather than wonder or a passion for truth. Heidegger tells us that “the concern of this kind of sight is not about grasping the truth and knowingly living within it but is about chances for abandoning oneself to the world.”¹¹ Rather than drawing the self out of false and clichéd perceptions of reality, such a lust permanently immerses the self in the now. Like a glutton who eats everything but tastes nothing, who is forever consumed by the act but never achieves fulfillment; this lustful seeing enslaves rather than liberates. One loses touch with his own being, his best hope of achieving openness to the full mystery of Being. Pieper writes that such a person “has lost the capacity to dwell in his own self.”¹² Lost to his own self, he is utterly closed-off to an authentic experience of Being.

¹⁰ Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 39.

¹¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

However, though they may agree on this distinction between true and false seeing, Heidegger and the classical and medieval thinkers who came before him disagree on what it means to truly see. If we turn back to the very roots of philosophy, we find that according to Heidegger Plato and Aristotle were afflicted with faulty eyes. Their approach to reality was flawed, and so was that of all those who followed their in their path. Until the dawn of phenomenology, the possibility of truly seeing was slim to non-existent, and even phenomenology could not promise much until Heidegger's own genius had improved upon Edmund Husserl's method. Previous attempts at metaphysical knowledge came with ready-made frameworks for reality to fit into, overarching schemes that reflected the mind of the philosopher over Being itself. Phenomenology avoids such reckless theorizing, and asks the question that is a preliminary to all metaphysics: what can we know about ourselves from within? Perhaps in the individual experience there is a way to touch upon the essence of our own beings. Phenomenology, Heidegger tells us, will give to philosophy what it has hungered for all along: a chance at reality. There is no other possible approach to truth, Heidegger writes that "only by such seeing does Being get discovered" (215). Phenomenology was to lay a foundation that would make possible the study of Being itself, true philosophy, and thus what we have of *Being and Time* was intended as the opening act to the unwritten second part of Heidegger's work. The absence of the second part of the work may be a confession by silence that phenomenology failed to live up to its promise, perhaps Heidegger found through his own investigation that there is no door by which man can walk from his own being into Being itself. But let us keep that door open, and draw near to the question in the same manner as the work as itself. What does phenomenology teach us about ourselves; what do we see?

Home and Homelessness

Where does phenomenology begin, compared to the ancient philosophers, and what new vision of man does it expose us to?

Classical thought looks to what is best in human beings to gain clues into the nature of human beings. Plato famously looked to the purpose of things in his quest to explain their nature. As a knife is made to cut and cut excellently, so too by the same logic is a human being intended for an excellent, virtuous life, culminating in contemplation. Heidegger would charge Plato with the worst philosophic crime: he began with metaphysics, allowing his own presuppositions to answer the most fundamental questions, and then arranged the world according to that presupposed vision. Christianity greatly inflamed the problem, giving Plato's metaphysical assumptions the added weight of sanctity. Augustine wrote that "God himself is the reward of our virtue," the consummate end and only, so to speak, fulfillment of our "possibilities." Both Plato as a representative of the Greek tradition and Augustine as an example of the Christianization of Greek thought write with a strong sense of what we might call "home." All longings, once purified, are intended for a certain and single fulfillment. It is assumed that the very best in us, all of our virtues and longings, will (or at least ought to) grow into a fullness that will be met in some way: in contemplation, in seeing, in God himself (the Beatific Vision). Heidegger reverses this order: it is the irrational, ever-fluctuating moods, not the enduring virtues springing from right reason, which tell us most about Dasein – the being we humans have in ourselves. He turns to restless anxiety, the awareness of our own unfinished nature, not the stillness of contemplation, to reveal the secrets of primordial disclosedness.

The nature of Dasein, Heidegger tells us, is not marked by a longing destined for fulfillment. Rather, "it is essential to the basic constitution of Dasein that there is *constantly*

something still to be settled" (279). There is a lack of "totality." As long as Dasein is, it is "not yet" (287). Heidegger does not reveal to us any specific possibilities that may work toward sating even by degrees Dasein's unfulfilled state, but he is clear about the end of Dasein: "*death must be conceived as the ending of Dasein.*" This end is not something which happens to us or which we achieve; rather it is with us always, even as we live. He goes on to say that "ending as 'getting finished' does not include fulfilling" (289). Most Dasein, maybe even all Dasein, will end "disintegrated" and "used up" but not fulfilled (288). Heidegger gives us the image of a wayfarer coming upon a road which abruptly cuts off, its construction yet to be finished.

All of this underscores Heidegger's key point: the being of a human person is a *question*, but that question necessitates no answer. Certainly it does not necessitate an answer that we would like or find noble or pleasant. It may be that the nature of our being simply *is* a question. The greatest phenomenological evidence of this is death. Death is not an event that happens to us, as Heidegger sees it, it defines us. We are "being-toward-death." Death plunges us back into the disclosive anxiety which reveals the "uncanny" sense of our existence. This uncanniness, Heidegger tells us, "also means 'not-being-at-home'" (189). We may feel at home, that is, that we belong, that we have a purpose, that we have a resting place, but as we fall out of the world when we are shocked by raw phenomenological experiences such as death, "everyday familiarity collapses." Anxiety draws us out of our "they-self," the falsified sense of home created by the common thinking of the day, and into the "existential mode of the 'not-at-home'" (189). If we forget that death is always with us and defining us, and so lose contact with anxiety, we have closed the door on our own selves.

Dasein is homeless—permanently not-yet. Anxiety is the real key to understanding the existential situation of man. It is anxiety which "can hold open the utter and constant threat" of

death ever before Dasein, allowing one to live with authenticity. It is anxiety and indefiniteness that align us with the “thrownness” of man, the homelessness of the human person. Its presence is not the kind of lack that necessitates a source of alleviation, as would the relationship between hunger and food. “But is there some sort of work for a carpenter or a leather worker, while for a human being there is none?” Aristotle asks in the first chapter of his *Ethics*.¹³ Unlike Aristotle, Heidegger assumes no such connection. Instead, it is just as possible that the answer to Aristotle’s question is yes as it is no—pointing us back to the deep-seated anxiety that we find at the center of the human experience. Homelessness is not a way marker to urge us on down the road to a waiting hearth; it is *the* condition. Seeing, then, is receiving this anxiety and not shying away from it into false dreams of belonging and home. Dasein must instead exist within its own anxiety, recognizing that anxiety is not external to it but intrinsic to its existence. And, it is in anxiety that we can then see the possibilities for authentic being.

To understand Heidegger’s vision of man as rooted in anxiety, we must look more closely into his discussion of how it is that we see ourselves. How do we know who man is, and how do we ascertain whether or not he has a story, a home, a destiny?

Discourse as the Primary Means for Seeing

Heidegger asserts that discourse carries within it the greatest possibility for seeing. Discourse, as the intelligible expression of Being-in-the-world, codifies our interaction with reality. The form that discourse takes in practice is, of course, language: an expressive medium which Heidegger calls “ready-to-hand.” The ordering of the different parts of language creates speech, and speaking can work to create an explicit “co-state of mind [that] gets ‘shared’” by the

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2002), 1097b20.

speakers, and in this sharing a common “understanding of Being-with” is articulated between them (205). Essentially, discourse can be both creative and participatory. If it is possible to know ourselves or to experience Being, we can get at that experience only through discourse. Without discourse, any experience of our own being, or Being itself, would be completely individualized. LSD would be a more fruitful alternative to speech if nothing can be truly said, but only experienced.

But speaking is only one half of discourse: hearing is the other essential component. “Hearing constitutes the primary and authentic way in which Dasein is open for its own most potentiality-for-Being,” Heidegger asserts. Without hearing, discourse is impossible. Just as silence is a prerequisite for music, so must all real discourse occur in the context of hearing. Hearing is more than physical listening, however. Harkening, Heidegger writes, is more important: it is “phenomenally still more primordial” than hearing itself; it is “the hearing which understands” (207). “Understands” is the critical distinction between hearing and harkening; understanding does not come through “talking at length nor through busily hearing something” (207).

Heidegger explains that unending speech “covers up” that which is being spoken about, replacing the thing itself with a “sham clarity.” This sham clarity is the disease of the age, the hubris which has hidden Being from the twentieth century. Genuine discourse first requires an “authentic and rich disclosedness of itself”—that is, of a Dasein’s own being. This openness “articulates the intelligibility of Dasein in so primordial a manner that it gives rise to the potentiality-for-hearing which is genuine, and to a Being-with-one-another which is transparent” (208). If Dasein is open to itself, there is the possibility that an experience of oneself could be translated into speech, and that speech shared with another Dasein who would receive it with true

hearing and understanding. Whether or not such a sharing can take place, whether or not discourse is really possible, is left unresolved by Heidegger.

What is clear is that in the everyday experience of Dasein, discourse lacks the ideal clarity of disclosedness that must be its starting place. The “they” loom large from the beginning—filtering our experiences into preconceived and canned means of identification and meaning. In this way, the publicness of existence is deeply intertwined into each person’s understanding and language, and thus there exists “a hidden way in which the understanding of Dasein has been interpreted” (211). The dominance of this “public way” is profound: “the ‘they’ prescribes one’s state-of-mind, and determines what and how one ‘sees’” (170). The individual “[loses] itself in the publicness and idle talk of the ‘they’; it fails to hear its own Self in listening to the they-self” (315). Accordingly, the individual is lost in the world, closed-off to the possibility of seeing. This victory of the “they” in common talk is “aggravated afresh by the fact that an understanding of what is talked about is supposedly reached in idle talk,” Heidegger writes. “Because of this, idle talk discourages any new inquiry and any disputation, and in a peculiar way suppresses them and holds them back” (170). The talk is substituted for the reality of the thing, creating a false sense of knowing. The spirit of the times, or the mood of the talk, reigns supreme. One or the other replaces the mystery of our own Being with the closeness of an artificial, but close-at-hand, interpretation of things.

Idle chatter, a sort of pseudo-discourse, covers up those entities which are within-the-world by ceasing to be connected to the actual entities—instead we are speaking of “only what is said in the talk as such” (212). The character of idle chatter does not reveal or connect the self to primordial realities; it creates artificial structures, a superficial reality that only exists within the talk itself. Idle chatter closes us off to Being in a particularly insidious and powerful way: it

assumes that the self already knows everything, that there is no mystery, that “nothing is closed off” to it. (212) It is precisely in the great capacity of discourse to hide the self from Being that Heidegger sees the possibility of discourse for revealing the self in a uniquely substantive way. Heidegger claims that “the very possibility of drifting reveals that Dasein’s disclosedness occurs in discourse.” (214) The proof of the pudding, then, is not in the eating but in the perversion. Discourse, when reduced to idle chatter, leads to a disastrous distortion of Dasein, and so inversely when conducted authentically must have the most potential for revealing Being.

Who is Capable of Seeing?

It comes as no surprise that Heidegger deems that most of the world will be lost in the world of chatter most of the time. He claims that the average intellect cannot tell true experiences of Dasein apart from simple gossip and hearsay. The common man will live in a world that is largely artificial, and turned away from Dasein. This is taken for granted. The question remains, though: can even the above-average intellect escape the superficial finality of chatter? Could the lone philosopher or the single brightest individual escape idle chatter enough to truly see being? Heidegger, in no uncertain terms, tells us that such a life is not possible. There is “no possibility of extraction” from living within the false security of a superficial world groomed by idle chatter. To some extent – and how could it be other than to a very great extent? – “the ‘they’ prescribes one’s state of mind and determines what and how one ‘sees’” (296). This is the “Self of everydayness” – a Dasein locked into the public interpretation of the “they.” The “they” covers up those few authentic experiences left open to man.

This is especially apparent in the way we talk about death—a metaphysical slap in the face if there ever was one. Death is treated by the many as a “mishap,” something which

happens to others but will “not happen to me” any time soon (297). If the power of “they” in our everyday thought is so strong that it can hide our own death from us, is its grip too powerful to be broken?

Is any attempt to disclose Dasein a futile one? It seems that Heidegger is proposing that though we all must live mostly closed-off from Dasein, we at least have some chance of an occasional rendezvous with it if we are *aware* that we are closed-off. Heidegger highlights this dilemma in his discussion of idle talk, writing that “the average understanding of the reader will never be able to decide what has been drawn from primordial sources with a struggle and how much is just gossip” (212). Nor, he will go on to say, will the reader want to know where such a line is drawn, because the average understanding believes that “it understands everything” (212). But how could even the very rare consciously humble soul tell the difference between Being and hearsay? Or is all searching simply folly?

The Limits of Ontology

The inescapable interpretedness of life that accompanies the “they”, and the certainty that we can never escape from this interpretedness into a world of Cartesian clarity, does not mean that we are wholly lost in our search for Being. This interpretedness does not only cover up Being, but “its Being is itself of the character of Dasein” (211). Heidegger is telling us that *even the way that we obscure our own being tells us something about our being*. Heidegger does not separate what man is from what man ought to be in his inquiry. Like Rousseau, he embraces every facet of human beings—superstitious longings, moods, idle talk, guilt—which are all critical clues to our Being, not to be tossed away by philosophers such as Kant and other more “scientific” thinkers. Heidegger is nailing down the lid of the coffin on Enlightenment

rationalism and the cult surrounding reason which had dominated thought since the end of the Middle Ages. But, he is also a herald of something new, of a new “authentic” kind of philosophy, birthed by Husserl and Hegel but matured by Heidegger himself. This authentic knowing does not have as its prize unchanging eternal truths which are fixed high in the heavens, up to which man climbs slowly on the rungs of reason. Rather, authentic knowing embraces a universe in which Aristotle’s crystalline heavens are traded for a constant flow of time within which Being fluctuates, disclosing itself and hiding itself by turn. Being is not something we can show on paper, hold in our hand, or believe in as a fixed transcendent truth. Being does not exist above or outside of time, but within it. It exists as everything else exists—Being is inextricably bound within an ever-moving cosmos.

Heidegger is attempting to redirect the stream of Western thought by denying nearly all of its accomplishments. If all men long to see, they also long to control. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the most fundamental desire of the mind: the longing for truth. The most domineering conquerors in human history have fought their battles on the field of philosophy: not content with ruling continents, philosophers want to be kings of the cosmos. Rather than waiting in total openness for truth, philosophers have laid siege to reality, determined to triumph over every hill and dale. Heidegger is unmasking the brutal spirit of the reputedly pure minds of the past.

This means that the hunt for Dasein or Being itself must be played according to a very different set of rules than those that we are accustomed to. The failure to find Dasein ontologically is no real failure at all—the idea of putting all human hope in ontologically derived truths is flawed from the start. Therefore, Heidegger’s difficulty with the constant interpretedness of language and the difficulty of discourse is a significant problem (maybe even

why the second half of his work could not be completed), but it is not instantly an insurmountable one. It can be put on hold because Heidegger is in search of an authentic experience of Dasein, not a formula which traps Dasein—for Dasein, as we've said, is not of that category. We must be open to the mystery of Dasein in order to be on watch for it, but Dasein chooses when it will and will not disclose itself to us.

Even if human beings can know some truths about themselves (and maybe, about reality itself), it seems worth asking given our homeless state and the mighty difficulties surrounding discourse, are there any compelling possibilities that could exist for man? Or would we not much rather have a hope of home than to have “the possibility of Being-free for authentic existentiell possibilities”? Would we wish to replace purpose with possibilities? Have we been poisoned by Plato, as Nietzsche would say, and now human beings will always expect too much for themselves? Heidegger's universe is not a cozy one, nor does it reflect any of the classic fairytale themes so common to humanity: a prince born as a pauper, walking a path fraught with dragons and dangers, but always ending his journey with a castle and crown. No such well-worn path exists for Heidegger. Humanity has no final “happy ending” to strive toward and dream about. Heidegger's possibilities and potentialities for authentic Being are saturated with a sense of unease, of “uncanniness.” While it is possible to point out “inauthentic” Being, it is very hard to put one's finger on what the fulfillment of authentic potentialities for Being might look like. One wonders, could there ever be such a thing as a Heideggerian hero? Maybe a pre-Socratic tragedian? Or something akin to Nietzsche's super man? Neither type appeals much to the common man of modernity, nor perhaps even to the most extraordinary men of this age.

Heidegger certainly succeeds as a critic, snuffing out the torches of earlier thinkers with alacrity and a certain solemn glee. In doing so, he clears away a space for the question of Being,

and arguably causes enough discomfort to lend the question more urgency than it had conjured since the Scientific Revolution. But, does Heidegger save modern discourse? Does he teach us how to see? We can at least credit him with deflating a vast amount of nonsense which masquerades as discourse. As a good doctor of the mind ought, Heidegger diagnoses the problem of modernity with astounding discernment. But is he able to finish the job and prescribe a cure? He has woken us from our slumber—but can he now tell us how to fill our wakeful hours? While Aristotle could persuade you of the value of reading his work, could Heidegger do the same? Aristotle could promise you a path to excellence, while all Heidegger can offer is how not to be a fool. The persuasiveness of a thing is not the necessary correlative of the truth of a thing, but certainly truthful things ought to be persuasive. They ought to be intrinsically compelling, even if unappealing. If Heidegger cannot tell us how to live—either as individuals or communities—if he can only tear down but cannot build up, we have to ask whether or not his whole project was an arduous rabbit trail, scenic at times, but inevitably leading us straight back to the nihilism that he hoped to avoid? Heidegger has exposed our chatter for what it is, but left us without words to speak in their place. If we accept his teachings, we have the comfort of no longer being fools, but must reconcile ourselves to being mutes. Even if he is right, Heidegger's homeless man, suspended in the perpetual anxiety fitting a being-towards-death, is a hard sell alongside Socrates' virtuous man, searching the halls of the wise for the good life.

Bibliography

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Joe Sachs. Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2002.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *The Republic and the Laws*. Translated by Neil Rudd. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 1962.
- Laertius, Diogenes. *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by C.D. Yonge. London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1853.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Walter Kaufman. New York: Modern Library, 1995.
- Pieper, Josef. *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988.
- Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1968.
- Strauss, Leo. *The City and Man*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964.