



Research Paper

Shortcomings of the Western Philosophical Tradition: An Observation from Heideggerian Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The paper is an attempt to understand and bring to light some points of deficiency of philosophical tradition as observed by Martin Heidegger in his lecture which is titled "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics" and "Nietzsche I". Through these writings of Heidegger, I would see what according to Heidegger is the shortcomings of the western philosophical tradition. In other words, Heidegger sees tradition as a degrading mode of doing philosophy where there is no correct and proper formulation of what "Being" (sein) is, which in turn has resulted in pointing out the faulty tradition.

KEYWORDS: Being, Metaphysics, Time, Tradition, Truth

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I. INTRODUCTION

Martin Heidegger's philosophical career was dedicated to the more original and yet untouched topic of his days. He was trained and brought up alongside Edmund Husserl who is the founder of the philosophical movement 'Phenomenology'. Phenomenology in general seeks to study the human experience, the state of human consciousness as it is without having any pre reflective knowledge. And in order to do so the object of experience needs to be bracketed or suspended temporarily alongside the experiencer. What then happens is that pure essence of things or states of affairs could be captured as it is in its original form without any disturbances or dilution of knowledge from the external world. This was the light that Husserl started phenomenology as a movement for the radical change in the philosophical world. One of the slogans that phenomenologists maintain is "back to the things themselves". So, it is quite clear that by any means the phenomenologist's attempt has been to get the true nature of things by employing the phenomenological method, though there are different ways that phenomenologists employ the method.

Following the tradition of the movement, Heidegger also set to restore the essence of things following his teacher Husserl. But he ventures out from a different perspective than his teacher. For Heidegger, the original sense of things is diverted from our attention because of the western philosophical tradition. The western philosophical tradition beginning from Plato has kept the human generation under the shadow of truth. While they also failed to explicate what being is. They consider being to be simple things that are there out there, while the truth is that it has more to do with the essence of reality than it simply looks like.

II. TRADITIONAL METAPHYSICAL CONSIDERATION OF BEING AS BEINGS

To get to the subject more clearly, let's look at the essays Heidegger wrote. In the essay "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics" written in 1949 as a preface to "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger develops arguments as to why traditional metaphysics should be overcome. This argument will turn out to be a critique of metaphysics and the first shortcomings I discovered. In this essay, there is a point that is important to note regarding Heidegger's position on overcoming of metaphysics. It states, "... this 'overcoming of metaphysics' does not abolish metaphysics".¹ In the following line Heidegger develops his point of agreement with Kant that as long as human understands himself as the rational animal, metaphysics belongs to the nature of man.² The possibility that lies ahead of Heidegger is that if humans are successful in going "back into the ground of metaphysics, it might well help to bring about a change in human nature, accompanied by a transformation of metaphysics".³ So, overcoming metaphysics does not mean it's total abort but it will be transformed.

The easiest way to express Heidegger's critique of metaphysics is that it ignores the ground out of which it arises. Alternatively, it is expressed as that which ignores that very possibility that makes metaphysics possible. It seems that "Being" is used synonymously with "ground", though Heidegger never levelled as one in his essay "*The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics*". The ground or Being is something, Heidegger claims, metaphysics forgets despite the fact that it allows for what it is. Then the question is how does metaphysics ignore the ground? Heidegger's answer would be, it ignores by dealing itself only with "beings as beings"(seiendes) and not with "Being"(sein). As discussed in the third chapter, in the same essay Heidegger finds metaphysics as a platform for tallying up many beings and finally considers this totality as equal with 'Being'.

When traditional metaphysics considers the totality of beings as Being, it lands up in two consequences. The first consequence is that it misses out on Being. When 'Being' is observed as a collection of beings, though there is somewhat presence of 'Being', metaphysics misses out on Being, it does not explain Being as such. The second consequence is that it forgets Being. The traditional metaphysics keeps its attempt only to the totality of beings thereby leading to the forgetfulness of Being. So, 'Being' is not only mistaken as a totality of beings but this blunder act enables them to forget Being.

Until now we are using the terms "beings" and "Being" which Heidegger employed and is not fully revealed. One point is distinctly understood, for Heidegger's critique of traditional metaphysics and ontology is that it ignores 'Being'(sein). Also, that it neglects 'Being' by levelling the collection of beings as 'Being'. Thus, the usage 'beings' refers to anything that is there in a particular way. This means while it exists as a being, beings are concrete bodies that are clearly characterized and distinguished. If we survey around the world, we could find ourselves such things as a pen, paper, laptop, woods, dogs, and so on. These beings could be easily examined and classified based on their similar properties with concerned beings. This existence of beings is accessible to humans for inquiry, this inquiry could be an inquiry into humans themselves or beings.

For Heidegger, human beings have a unique way of being, it is not a type of being involved in beings(seiendes). Human beings' existence is described by Heidegger as "being-there"(dasein). In *Being and Time*, the term "being there" is introduced and understood with a chief sentence which Heidegger refers to as "the 'essence' of being there lies in its existence"⁴ or "the essence of Dasein lies in its existence"⁵. For Heidegger, the term 'existence' is misunderstood as synonymous with 'being there'.⁶ Metaphysics is concerned with all the existing things be it the lowest or the highest. An instance of this may be seen with the concept of 'orders of being', in which God is placed at the highest order and the rest is just a declining degree of being.

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, uses the term 'existence' exclusively to designate the being of man.⁷ To exist is the very essence of humans. According to *Being and Time*, the word 'existence' "designates a mode of Being; specifically, the Being of those beings who stand open for the openness of Being in which the stand, by standing it."⁸ Here in the passage "those beings" means humans, and the term "Being" is used in three cases that need to be examined. The first case is "a mode of Being". For this case, it means that Being shows up in a certain way through beings. So, something is showing up about Being with the help of beings, but this something is, according to Heidegger, hidden at the hands of traditional metaphysics. Traditional metaphysics does this by giving its importance to the beingness of beings, it is nothing but trying to elaborate on one aspect of Being. The second case is found in "the Being of those beings". For this case, some features about "those beings" are focussed. But this is no universal character that would group up to one thing. Rather this usage tries to highlight the character of Being by attending to beings in a certain way. The third case "the openness of Being" tries to display the capacity that would not bound himself to the frame of Being which is shown up in beings. One must be clear that beings are only a part of this whole frame of happening. Interestingly humans exist in such a position where they can only better experience Being compared to any other.

Heidegger believes that the term 'existence' needs to be illustrated correctly so that the essence of 'being there' could be seen. So, Heidegger says, "Once 'existence' is understood rightly, the 'essence' of being there can be recalled: in its openness, Being itself manifests and conceals itself, yields itself and withdraws; at the sametime, this truth of Being does not exhaust itself in being there"⁹ When one avoids its narrow focus on beings, like the way traditional metaphysics do, one can approach to the 'essence' of human. The 'essence' of human is in his existence. His existence is characterized in such a way that 'Being' is given to revealed. When 'Being' is revealed, it does not lose totally, but by virtue of its inherent qualities that 'Being' itself possesses, it remains concealed for every revealing. This seems to be very confusing and obscure, but it is this way that Heidegger tries to succumb himself from the clutches of traditional metaphysics.

Heidegger, therefore, employs the terms like "beings", "Being", "mode of Being" to get rid of age-old traditional metaphysical concepts and language. "Being" is not to be understood like the way particular beings are used to be, whenever humans assert something, the role of 'Being' is pre-involved before things are asserted. By this, it is meant that without 'Being' beings are never fully asserted considering the whole phenomena involved in our assertion. It is quite so in this line of thinking that Heidegger is presenting before traditional metaphysics and thus seeking to maintain our attention towards the ground of metaphysics. This exercise will benefit humans by gaining more clarification of 'Being' and will further avoid the act of neglecting it.

The need for the generation to find out and understand ‘Being’ is a necessary one. This is because when traditional metaphysics did not recognize ‘Being’ it is in some sense neglecting the most fundamental. It is evident from the statement of Heidegger that what is preventing humans from getting to the fundamental by going against metaphysics,

“Can Being itself, out of its own unique truth, bring about its involvement in human nature; or shall metaphysics, which turns its back to its ground, prevent further that the involvement of Being in man may generate a radiance out of the very essence of this involvement itself—a radiance which might lead man to belong to Being?”¹⁰

So, to “belong to Being” is the primary aim of Heidegger by overcoming the traditional metaphysics. But one may ask what is it to “belong to Being”? This is perhaps no easy answer to attempt. It will be much simpler to attempt the opposite, to imply what is in consideration when not belonging to Being. As said above, metaphysics put a hindrance from getting to the fundamental, and from the statement of Heidegger, it is evident that now metaphysics is against humans’ way to belong to Being. Thus, it becomes plain and simple due to traditional metaphysics human has lost its sense of Being.

Now if we recall Descartes’s metaphor, there he puts metaphysics as the sole authority for all the knowledge that humans possess. This theme of thinking was prevalent even when humans try to see the natural world. With the beginning of modern science, the western world believed and operated with the thinking that the natural world consists of matter-bearing properties and these could be managed for the purpose of the need of humans. This narrow attitude is nothing but the effect of advancement in modern sciences. Modern science, according to Heidegger, consists of three features factual, experimental, and measuring.¹¹ But what is important is not these three features; there is an iconic fundamental feature which that modern science is lacking. So says Heidegger,

“The fundamental feature must consist in what rules and determines the basic movement of science itself. This characteristic is the manner of working with the things and the metaphysical projection of the thingness of the things.”¹²

The point here is that metaphysical projection owes its presentation to Being, which is fundamental. The results that the modern science is about to bring are founded on traditional metaphysics, which itself is again not in harmony with Heidegger’s theory.

So much of ‘Being’ is tossed around, but what exactly it is? This is no easy talk, but Heidegger tries to bring it to plain with the help of his definition of ‘existence’ and ‘time’. In the case of ‘existence’ which is also interpreted in *Being and Time*, it means a mode of Being in which humans as a being stand open for the openness of Being in which humans stand, by standing it.¹³ The manner in which humans “stands it” is by means of enduring. It endures by “being there” in all the instances. However, this being which is human, is unlike rocks, trees, horses, angels, or God. Because man alone is that being which exists while the rest are but does not exist.¹⁴ There is a feature inherent in human existence that Heidegger calls it “ecstatic essence”.¹⁵ This “ecstatic essence” should not be understood as “standing out” in the sense of interpreting the “out” as “away from” the inherent, because that would simply consider ‘existence’ within the frame of “subjectivity” and “substance”.¹⁶ It is not to be understood as separating from human consciousness. “The ‘out’ ought to be understood in terms of the openness of Being itself”, and “the stasis of the ecstatic consists-strange as it may sound-in standing in the ‘out’ and ‘there’ of unconcealedness in which Being itself is present”.¹⁷ What one must settle is that ‘Being’ has no categories, it simply is different from ‘beings’. And in this connection, humans are there with a capacity to catch hold of not only ‘beings’ but ‘Being’ too.

Traditional thinkers, on the other hand, were incapable of knowing the true facts about Being. Since they are incapable of dealing with Being they prefer to classify it as Nothing. In its history ranging from Anaximander to Nietzsche, metaphysics keeps its focus on beings, and that which is not a being is formulated as Nothing. This line of thinking has enabled to raise the question like-why is there something rather than nothing? Heidegger also raises this question but with a sharper consideration, “why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?”¹⁸ This was the question raised by Heidegger in his 1929 lecture, but he revises this question later in 1949 and puts it as “How did it come about that beings take precedence everywhere and lay claim to every ‘is’ while that which is not a being is understood as Nothing, though it is Being itself, and remains forgotten?”¹⁹ Through these lines, it has been indicated that traditional metaphysics took everything which is not a being as nothing and thereby neglects the Nothing which is like Being. And the result we get today is the narrow focus only on beings.

As mentioned above, Heidegger in discussing about Being bring in the role of time to make his theory plain. His magnum opus “*Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*” is no doubt titled for this reason. Heidegger asserts, “Being is not something other than Time: “Time” is called the first name of the truth of Being, and this truth is the presence of Being and thus Being itself.”²⁰ Above this, if we trace back the source in the history of the Greeks thinking they “experienced the Being of beings as the presence of the present.”²¹ Heidegger found out that the meaning of the word “being” in early Greek thinking was understood and accepted as “to be

present.”²² Further, time is the collective experience of the present and that which continues. And due to this feature of time, Being is also revealed through time.

Traditional metaphysics usually understood Time as consisting of a series of now travelling from one point to another. Heidegger does not disagree with this aspect of time but is of the opinion that something real is revealed in Time. It reveals all those conditions happening with the swift passing moments and beings that remain intact with these moments. There is ‘something’ that participates in every happening and that is precisely what Heidegger is referring to “Being”. This involvement of Being in the happening is what Heidegger is referring to as “the presence of the present”.

III. TRADITIONALWAYOFTREATINGTHE “TRUTH”

In Heidegger’s Nietzsche I, there is a discussion on the guiding question and grounding question of traditional metaphysics and ontology. There it is found that the guiding question is the question operated as its theme in the traditional metaphysics and ontology. With the overcoming of Platonism worked out by Nietzsche, Heidegger sees that the traditional metaphysics ceases to be, while at the same time, we are also faced with the new possibility for the grounding question to be reframed. With the grounding question considered for the formulation, the critique of traditional metaphysics and ontology by Heidegger is to be seen within it. To bring forth this, it will now need to clarify how Nietzsche is understood by Heidegger in the history of traditional metaphysics and ontology.

Heidegger took Nietzsche to be dealing with the answer to the guiding question of traditional metaphysics and ontology. This question is also something which is put forth by the ancient Greeks, and accordingly, this whole span of history from the Greeks to Nietzsche is encircled with the attempt to provide an answer to it. However, when Nietzsche was willing to avoid the nihilism that resulted from Platonism, there he broke the barriers and showed the path to ask and attempt for an answer not for guiding question but for grounding question. Heidegger also believes that “the grounding question remains as foreign to Nietzsche as it does to the history of thought prior to him.”²³ This is because when Nietzsche attempted to discard nihilism, which is the effect of Platonism, it placed him at the end of the traditional metaphysics and was in such a state that he could not visualize the grounding question properly. The overturning of Platonism was worked out by Nietzsche from the principles of traditional metaphysics, that is, by attempting to visualize all beings that exist in particular. Heidegger now sees Nietzsche’s attempt to answer the guiding question following the overturning of Platonism as an important yet proper step to address the grounding question.

Heidegger is of the view that “Nietzsche in will to power attempts to think that original unity of the ancient opposition of Being and Becoming. Being, as permanence, is to let Becoming be Becoming.”²⁴ In order to take a grasp on the quoted line one needs to trace Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche, and in doing so, Heidegger would implicitly highlight his critique on traditional metaphysics and ontology and the path to Being that Nietzsche lays.

According to Heidegger, overturning Platonism embraces avoidance of both the true world, the supersensuous, and the apparent world, the sensuous. But this overturning process is not to be taken in the sense of mere “inversion” of Platonism, for “it is not the simple, almost mechanical exchange of one epistemological standpoint for another, that of positivism.”²⁵ When both the world of Plato is dismissed, then we have the sensuous but not in the sense of Platonism world of apparent which will need another true world. I have shown in the previous chapter that in order to overturn Platonism, both the world needs to be discarded. It was also discussed that Nietzsche was not willing to fall into “vacuous nothing” after Platonism was overturned, and it is his desire to “overcome nihilism in all its forms.”²⁶ Heidegger says, “But the sensuous world is the ‘apparent world’ only according to the interpretation of Platonism. With the abolition of Platonism the way first opens for the affirmation of the sensuous, and along with it, the nonsensuous world of the spirit as well.”²⁷

What Heidegger is trying to say is that with the avoidance of the true world, the supersensuous would lie open for both the sensuous and the nonsensuous world. Here, the nonsensuous world is placed because Heidegger is not considering only sensuous as the sole encounter that humans are facing, while at the same time trying to avoid the two worlds of supersensuous and sensuous.

Nietzsche now has to face the new circumstance after the overturning of Platonism. He now has to find a place as to where the truth must be placed within the world. As I discussed earlier, Nietzsche introduced his Will to Power as a tool to address the truth of all beings. But he was very much within the traditional metaphysics and ontology because his Will to Power still tries to address the necessary question as to why things are the way as they are. One remarkable point of Nietzsche different from the tradition of metaphysics is his perspectivalism. The Will to Power of Nietzsche supervises all things that exist, which means that all things carry their own perspective. Since there is perspective for each one, “truth” also has its place from it. If this is so, then what would happen to the “truth” the ultimate truth that the tradition of metaphysics since Plato is

holding for. Obviously, this is a setback for traditional metaphysics since it is giving a way to many truths generated from different perspectives and not considering the ultimate truth.

Now, again having said that “truth” is perspective, this would entail that we are not in a position to know anything as absolutely true. For both Heidegger and Nietzsche, it certainly is, but in a quite different position. Their position is that in order to determine the “True” one need not leave behind the existing self; one cannot get rid of one’s perspective. However, if any such “True” is known, Heidegger would assert “But such appearance becomes semblance in the sense of mere appearance only when what becomes manifest in one perspective petrifies and is taken to be the sole definitive appearance, to the disregard of the other perspectives that crowd around in turn.”²⁸

This could be seen as a reaction to those who is concerned for the loss of “Truth”, while the fact is that one is caught up with oneself, even when one considers themselves to be moving away from the clutches of the self and addresses “the Truth”, the result is seen as a reduction of all the perspectives into the only appearances. The process ends up in quashing of perspectives of all sorts levelling to an appearance while with the same process it grew “petrified” in the sense that the original perspective is not reflected.

To elucidate further, Heidegger quotes Nietzsche, “ ‘Semblance’ as I understand it is the actual and sole reality of things”²⁹ and Heidegger interprets it as “that should be understood to mean not that reality is something apparent, but that being-real is in itself perspectival, a bringing forward into appearance, a letting radiate; that it is in itself a shining. Reality is radiance.”³⁰ This means anything that is present, which we sense it as real, appears within one’s perspective by its very nature. But we should not get it considered this as something which results from the construction of one’s perspective. Rather, Heidegger believes that ‘perspectival’ itself is the source that allows the things to be presented before us as real. There is a connection between one’s perspective and the things that appear which allows for things to show up as it is in our day-to-day life. It is in this regard Heidegger asserts “But upon deeper meditation it becomes clear that all appearance and all apparentness are possible only if something comes to the fore and shows itself at all. What in advance enables such appearing is the perspectival itself. That is what genuinely radiates, bringing something to show itself.”³¹ So the reality is something that comes out with one’s perspective.

This assertion, however, needs further discussion. For when we assert following Heidegger that reality is within one’s perspective, there arise two doubts that need to be clarified. The initial doubt would be that the existence is first given and then further taken to one’s perspective for consideration. Another doubt that would arise is that one’s perspective is reality. But Heidegger is not granting these two doubts into his consideration for what reality is. For him, “Reality, Being, is *Schein* in the sense of perspectival letting-shine.”³² With the help of the Erasmus comment about the contribution by Albrecht Durer, the painter, Heidegger tries to allocate his position further. Heidegger interpreted Erasmus and says, “by showing a particular thing from any given angle, he, Durer the painter, brings to the fore not only one single isolated view which offers itself to the eye.”³³

Heidegger further extends the statement of Erasmus by saying that “by showing any given individual thing as this particular thing, in its singularity, he makes Being itself visible: in a particular hare, the being of the hare; in a particular animal, the animality.”³⁴ In art, the painter is able to present in the painting something very subtle picture which depicts beyond what is actually presented i.e., Being. Thus, for Heidegger, reality, which consists of Being is revealed with one’s perspective while at the same time it also involves a multiplicity of perspectives. It is, therefore, the ‘perspectives’ itself that grant the reality as it is by shining and radiating.

Now, Heidegger further sees that “truth is necessarily inherent in perspectival shining”³⁵ but there is a difficulty in this truth as it has the capacity to get petrified. Therefore, there is a better platform that we should accept, and here art stands on its own. He asserts, “but the value of the real is measured according to how it satisfies the essence of reality, how it accomplishes the shining and enhances reality. Art, as transfiguration, is more enhancing to life than truth, as fixation of an apparition.”³⁶ In the sentence quoted, “truth” is used to refer to the position of one’s perspective. At the same time, art, on the other hand, enables the varied possibility of reality to get exposed.

IV. CONCLUSION

Heidegger’s claim remains that traditional metaphysics and ontology left the area of Being undiscovered and, in fact, to the extent, failed to do so. Therefore, the first setback of western philosophical tradition is the consideration of Being as beings. The reason is that they consider or see or understand Being only in terms of beings. This is happening throughout the tradition that Heidegger slams. Through the tradition, Heidegger sees that the very ground for all the things, whether animate or inanimate, is taken into consideration by simply engaging in terms of “beings as beings” (*seiendes*) whereas it should actually be dealing with “Being” (*Sein*). This practice adds to the formulation that Being means the totality of beings, which is not the case for Heidegger. And therefore, this scenario lands up in missing out and forgetting being (*sein*). So, it is clear that Heidegger’s critique of traditional metaphysics and ontology is to the point that it ignores ‘Being’ (*Sein*).

What we can draw from the above discussion is also that traditional way of treating the “truth” turns out to be another drawback of western philosophical tradition as formulated by Heidegger. Whereas traditional metaphysics and ontology have remained their inquiry concerning truth but with an attitude of hardening it. The focus is on knowing whatever that exists. For this attempt, they classify methodically and determine beings. But while doing so, they discarded the essence of reality. By conforming to a definite position, they proceed to elucidate beings. And therefore, the actual approach is much different from what it was claimed. They have claimed to account for everything that “is” but failed to accomplish it.

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² Ibid., p. 267.

³ Ibid., p.267.

⁴ Ibid., p. 271.

⁵Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit.,p. 67.

⁶Heidegger, The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics, op. cit., p. 271.

⁷ Ibid., p. 271.

⁸ Ibid., p. 271.

⁹ Ibid., p. 271.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 268.

¹¹Heidegger, M. (2012). Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics. In D. F. Krell (Ed.), *Heidegger Basic Writings* (pp. 183-212). London and New York: Routledge. p. 188.

¹² Ibid., pp. 188-189.

¹³Heidegger, The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics, op. cit., p. 271.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 272.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.271.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 272. Subject-object framework simply is the gift of traditional metaphysics and Heidegger’s theory is trying to overcome it. This attempt of Heidegger also contributes to his critique of traditional metaphysics and ontology.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 272.

¹⁸Heidegger, M. (2012). What is metaphysics? In D. F. Krell (Ed.), *Heidegger Basic Writings* (pp. 41-57). London and New York: Routledge. p. 57.

¹⁹Heidegger, The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics, op. cit., p. 278.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 273.

²¹ Ibid., p. 273.

²² Ibid., p. 273.

²³Heidegger, M. (1979). *Nietzsche I: The Will to Power as Art*. (D. F. Krell, Trans.) New York: Harper Collins. p. 67.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 218.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 209.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 209.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 214.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 215.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 215.

³¹ Ibid., p. 215.

³² Ibid., p. 215.

³³ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 215.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 216-217.