**HEIDEGGER'S "BEING AND TIME" EXPLAINED: A TEACHING PAPER**

This is an imagined dialogue about Heidegger’s “Being and Time”.

I have tried to bring out the main ideas which Heidegger brought to philosophy in this long and difficult book, which is one of the most influential philosophical works of the twentieth century.

**What is the theme Heidegger’s philosophy?**

His big interest was in the phenomenon of being, and his major work is Being and Time, published in 1928. Heidegger had wanted to write a book in four parts about being in general - the being of entities in the world and the concepts we form about the world. He says at the outset that we always assume the being of something as a starting point in all our studies e.g. religion assumes God, physics assumes energy, chemistry assumes mass, biology assumes life. He wants, at least initially, too look at the human existence.

**Where does he start? What can we assume about ourselves?**

Well, of course Descartes famously tackled that problem in his "Discourse on Method". He wanted to know how he knew he existed, and then how he knew everything else existed. He concluded that he knew he existed because he could think consciously. (“I think therefore I am”) but that didn’t help him much with the existence of other human beings (who he couldn’t think for) or even other objects separate from his mind.

**So Descartes reached an impasse. But does Heidegger do any better?**

He decided two things pretty quickly. Firstly, a general study of being would get no help from faith or religion – such studies, as I have already said, depend on the assumption of something else as a starting point. By a similar argument, he would get no help from science – knowing we are all ultimately made of particles or molecules doesn’t really answer the question he and Descartes were trying to address. But Heidegger sets off in a different direction - not with the self as subject, but with human beings in general. (He refers to human beings, a human being, or the human race as Dasein – a German word meaning “the being”, and translators and commentators on Heidegger have chosen not to translate Dasein but to use the word as a catch all for anything in which human type activity is observed.) He wants to show that human beings are aware of themselves not just because they can think but because of a wider physical, conscious, subconscious and social interaction with the world.

**And that differs from Descartes?**

Descartes was right to say he knew he existed because he could think, just as a chemist is right to say that he knows that a substance is an acid because it turns blue litmus paper red. But just as acids chemically do much more than that so human beings interact with and are involved in the world in a much more complex way than is revealed by their conscious thinking. Heidegger used the phrase the “care structure” for this complex interaction of physical, conscious, subconscious and social involvements.

**Care? What has care got to do with it?**

You always have to remember when you’re reading Heidegger in English that you are reading a translation. Care is the translator’s word. What Heidegger meant by it was something wider than the English word. His terminology extends from care (i.e. solicitousness), and includes concern, as in the sense “my interests”, or what I care about. Another way of defining the care structure might be Dasein’s relatedness to other things in the world. Heidegger was very keen to show that being, so far as Dasein is concerned, consists of being-in-the-world. It is not just our consciousness but our interactions that give us a sense of being alive and knowing that we are alive. We need to feel relevant to the world, and the world to us, and when we do that the functions we develop from birth onwards help us to achieve a relationship with the world and other things and people in it. Heidegger seems to see life as a skill – and we have to learn to use the equipment we have to develop the skill.

**So Dasein isn’t just a human being, it’s a fully skilled in life, grown up human being? If it’s me were talking about, I go around feeling that I’m doing things in the world and am interested in what goes on because I see those things as relevant to the world and me to it?**

Yes.

**Does that make me a do-gooder?**

Not necessarily. It doesn’t say anything about your moral stance. Only that having been thrown into the world you take it on board and do things in it. They might be good or bad.

**So he tackled first the being of human beings. How does he go about it?**

Let’s see. And let us note in particular how his approach differs from Descartes and his many followers. First, he sets out a method. He will use a technique called phenomenology. Literally, that means a study of the phenomenon, which doesn’t get us very far. Philosophers had used this technique before Heidegger, notably his teacher Husserl who developed phenomenology as a technique involving detailed description of observed phenomena without analysis of its underlying microstructure or even speculation about its origins or explanation – pure description of the phenomenon as sensed only. In science this is easy to appreciate – an example might be the observation of pressure or temperature and their relationship with one another in a body such as a gas as opposed to investigating what microstructure (molecules and their kinetic interaction, say) which causes them. In philosophy, Husserl saw it as perception of what goes on, without speculation about underlying causes. Heidegger uses the technique differently. For him it is practical involvement with phenomena, not just passive observation. An engineer, or skilled craftsman, is involved with his equipment and materials. His knowledge or know-how is only based on a scientific analysis of his materials to the extent that he needs to do a job. Heidegger is interested in practical involvement with life’s activities.

**And this is different from what has gone before?**

You see the difference from Husserl, who was a Cartesian. He was trying to find a way round Descartes’ problem of conscious observation by a subject of a specific object. This raises philosophical problems about the truth and accuracy of conscious observations because of the separation of subject and object. Heidegger is initially concerned with involvement with what he calls the ready-to-hand. The merely present-at-hand (further away) and our involvement with it – matters of concern to Descartes, Husserl and all scientists as opposed to engineers – he tackles later in the book. His discussions of philosophical truth and the validity of science therefore also come in later.

**I can understand that a human being (Dasein) is a complex system of variously motivated and also physiologically varied activity, and that Heidegger wanted to leap in at the practical involvement end. I know enough engineers and craftsmen to empathise with that attitude. I can also believe in principle that Heidegger uses phenomenology and maybe other philosophical techniques to define and understand Dasein’s practical way of life. But in real life, don’t we do things tacitly, without thinking? Most people are not interested in codifying everything. What’s the point?**

The short answer to your question is that Heidegger tended, on balance, to look at strictly philosophical questions – so naturally he wanted to codify things. He wasn’t writing a life manual for the common man or woman. And many philosophical issues are only of interest to philosophers. But, even for ordinary people, I personally believe it does help to codify what is essentially tacit behaviour in-order-to understand what one is doing in one’s life.

**Can you give me an example?**

When I was at work in a research laboratory, I used to wonder what use I was. You may say: I was paid. I kept getting promoted. My employers seemed pleased with me. What’s there to wonder about? But such an answer only shifts the responsibility onto my employers to make this judgement for me. To be satisfied in myself, I needed to solve the problem for myself. I’d read very little Heidegger at the time. I had only a vague notion that what I was experiencing was an existential problem: “Why do I exist?” “What ought I to do with my life?” The answer occurred to me suddenly, without much analysis. There is no reason that I should exist. I just do. What I ought to do with my life was really known to me tacitly. I just hadn’t codified it. I needed to make my work – indeed my life – relevant to the rest of “the world”.

**The world is a big place, so isn’t that a tall order?**

Yes, and you’re right to point out that what I’ve just said is unbelievably pompous. The world divides into those things and people closest to us (family, friends, colleagues); and things farther off (the public, the rest of the country, other countries). At work, I enjoyed (for example) solving problems for customers. Pure research (read by a few scholars) seemed to me less relevant. All that is subjective, of course: pure research to some people (usually the ones who are good at it, who associate with others who are interested in it, or who work on extremely important things) is of high relevance. We are all different, but we all seek relevance.

**How does this link to Heidegger?**

I didn’t know it did at the time, although I did at least realise that the problem was probably an existential one. Later, when I’d read more about existentialist philosophy, I began to realise that my search for relevance had something in common with Heidegger’s care system, and in particular his insistence on being-in-the-word as the basis of human existence. Also, his concentration on phenomenology – on practical issues and close examination of the world as you find it.

**I’m beginning to see that I should understand you better if I knew more existentialist philosophy. But why Heidegger? Does he answer all your questions?**

No, but he is arguably the most important existentialist – the one from which all others take their lead. But there are others – I read Sartre and Camus first – mainly because they wrote novels which to a large extent illuminate their philosophies. It was only later that I found the time to read Heidegger, who is very difficult.

**Interesting. Are there other novelists who exemplify existentialism?**

For my money, Golding, Hemingway, Kafka, Erica Jong, Thomas Kinneally, D H Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. But all novelists have an existential leaning, by definition. We could go into why.

**That would be a digression, though an interesting one. But this conversation seems to have jumped from deep philosophical waters to deep personal waters to literary waters. Let’s get back to Heidegger. What’s the next step?**

This series of jumps, as you put it, shows how important existentialism is. But to return to the next step: read Heidegger. See how he builds the argument, then see how others have extended it and built on it. Reflect on it. Codifying the tacit can be diagnostic of what human beings – oneself included – do with their lives.

**That sounds like a long job. Can you give some indicators?**

We’ve already covered several of the main points one would want to make in a more formal exposition of Heidegger’s philosophy: his adaptation of phenomenology, his interest in the basis of being human, his interpretation of the care system. We need perhaps to take a closer look at how he reasons this out. He initially looked at the problem in three steps.

**Let’s take it a step at a time. What did he look at first?**

The human being, Dasein, is in a world full of other entities. Heidegger asks first how Dasein relates to those entities, and suggests he does this via practical involvement. This often entails equipment. The equipment might not be complex. For a craftsman, it might be simple tools. For an individual it might be anything he uses – even his eyes and senses. The point about all equipment is that it should be ready-to-hand, and the objects it is used to work on must be ready-to-hand. We go into the world with what Heidegger calls circumspection – looking round for things, expecting to be able to do things.

**But the world consists of more than that. It consists also of things we never use, cannot even see, things which we will never know about.**

That’s true, and Heidegger was very much aware of that. He called those sorts of things present-at-hand entities. The circumspection which we have in the world leads us to discover the world – and if we have a purpose in life it is to do just that. Often this means familiarising ourselves with present-at-hand entities and making them ready-to-hand; creating tools and equipment to do things and discover further things. Heidegger called this process “projection on the world” – for projection on the world read discovery. Heidegger used five particular phrases to demonstrate our main motivations when discovering the world. He suggests we use equipment “in-order-to” (for doing things); “where-in” (in certain practical contexts), “with-which” (as appropriate for the job); “towards-which” (to achieve a specific goal) and “for-the-sake-of-which” (with a larger end in view).

**It’s becoming clear that what Heidegger meant by “the world” is not the whole world i.e. the Earth.**

Heidegger uses the term world in a fairly colloquial sense, just as we might in everyday speech. The world is my world or your world, what we find in the world. If we “go out to see the world”, we don’t expect to see all of it at once. We only expect to see the world of everyday. Heidegger emphasises time and again, that in the first part (Division 1) of Being and Time he is only interested in the average everyday world.

**So we use what we can – equipment in a very broad sense – to discover the world. We make the present-at-hand become ready-to-hand as possible and necessary. Is any type of equipment particularly important?**

Heidegger pays particular attention to signs. We obviously find our way about the physical world with signs – not just signboards, by other familiar things we see around us. Our whole mental world consists of signs directing us not just physically but mentally from one thing to another. We can only do our job or play any part in the world because of the signs and references that make us familiar with where we are and what we are doing. “Cues” might be a good synonym here for at least some of the signs he is referring to.

**What else does Heidegger have to say about discovering the world?**

From signs and cues he moves to directionality, and the concept of the space around us. Kant thought that we have an a priori sense of space. That is, we build up experience of it from an initial sense of it as children which makes it second nature. Heidegger is aware of the measurement of space and of co-ordinates to precisely locate space. But, as an existentialist, he views our grasp of space as what he calls de-severance, or making farness vanish, as equally important in our lives. For example, London may be far away from Birmingham, but if my television shows me pictures of London I shall feel nearer too it. Space disappears if I am involved and kept in touch.

**That seems to cover a lot of ground in the area of Dasein and its involvement with other entities in the world.**

Yes, and it’s time to move to the second of the three steps: being with other people in the world.

**Ah, yes! Other people are significant other entities in the world!**

They certainly are, and Dasein has a special approach to other human beings. In fact, it has a rather contradictory attitude in some ways: Dasein has no proper contact with other humans any more than it does with other entities. Its existence, or being, is its own. Heidegger refers to this characteristic as “mineness”. To make empathetic contact with other Daseins needs solicitude, and particularly consideration and forbearance; what Kant might have referred to as “a good will”. Dasein has to make an effort to do that, if it is to live and survive in the world of everyday. For Dasein this is a big “for-the-sake-of-which” (i.e. a larger end in view) than many of its trivial day to day considerations.

**Why is this attitude contradictory?**

It’s not on its own. But take it alongside another universal characteristic (or *existentiale*) of Dasein, and the problem becomes more apparent. That characteristic is the influence which other people have on Dasein. Heidegger refers to other people as *das man*, and his translators render this rather disparagingly as “The They”.

**Did Heidegger not like other people?**

Unlike Sartre, who famously said “Hell is other people”, and in spite of his translators, Heidegger didn’t take that attitude – although he often worries about the baleful influence of other people. While Dasein has to exhibit solicitude to reach out to others and live with them in the world, other people have an influence on Dasein, and may even reduce or enlarge that very solicitude that Dasein exhibits. Other people, says Heidegger, “present every judgement and decision as their own”. So we are influenced by them even though we know we may be in the right. Because of their influence Dasein is “disburdened of its Being”. This leads Heidegger to the conclusion that there can be an “inauthentic” self which responds largely to the influence of others and an “authentic” self which keeps others’ influences in perspective. Dasein, with its own being (“mineness”) must beware of inauthenticity.

**It begins to sound as if Dasein’s view of the world and his own position in it is more complex than that based on the model of a simple craftsman with his equipment, bringing the present-at-hand close and making use of it. Real people start to interfere.**

They do indeed. And this brings us to the third step in Heidegger’s exposition of being-in-the-world: how Dasein comprehends things in this milieu.

Bear with me; this is complicated. We have the model of the simple person doing things with his ready-to-hand skills. Not only does he have to cope with other people, but he also has to comprehend what is going on and take cognisance of it. This goes back in philosophy to at least Descartes and Kant, who took a subject-object approach to the problem. Heidegger wanted to do things differently. He wanted to rewrite philosophy since the pre-Socratics, and show the world as something perceived by people and not a logical, observed and recorded process as presented by Cartesians. These last three sentences dispose summarily of a great deal of argument and to go into it in detail would take a long time.

**Why not just describe the approach Heidegger takes?**

Heidegger believed that how we perceive the world is part of our mineness, is also influenced by others, but above all is influenced by our moods, or states of mind. Dasein is, according to Heidegger, thrown into the world, and is never free of moods. We can’t lose a mood; only take on a counter mood. It is our mood that is our launch pad for everything we do. Moods depend on being-in-the-world as a whole, and it is moods which determine the appropriateness or otherwise of our actions. Moods are ignored by Cartesians.

**But surely Cartesians are right to do so? Can we not rise above our moods?**

If we are talking about the sort of bad mood we wake up with in the morning, or because we’ve had a quarrel with someone, then the answer is yes, with an effort we can. The difficulty here is in the translation of the German word *stimmung* which Heidegger uses to mean not just a temporary mood frame of mind, or but also a more long lasting or even permanent mindset. The point to take from all this is that our mindset, be it permanent, long term, or very temporary affects how we see things in a complex world where our main awareness is of ourselves and where all kinds of objects cross our path and all kinds of people influence us. In the real world, the nice scientific approach of the Cartesian is not how we operate. Con men, marketing men, TV presenters, politicians and many others take advantage of that.

**Can you give me an example of how moods operate, according to Heidegger?**

Anxiety is a predominant mood for all of us (an *existentiale*, in Heidegger terms). Again we are up against translation difficulties. For what is translated as anxiety, Heidegger uses the German word *angst*, and seems to mean by it not that we are anxious in a detrimental way all the time, but that we are concerned with things; we care about things. Usually angst arises because we do something individual (or authentic) which goes against the received wisdom of others. Sometimes angst can turn to fear, and under such circumstances we are in danger of losing control of the situation that we are in. But angst as care and concern is a normal mood of everyday life. Levels of angst are a matter of our individual experience, or as Heidegger would say, our facticity. By that he means the baggage of experience, emotion, attitude – everything we have learned, be it positive or negative, that we bring to a situation. So facticity plus mood leads us to care and concern for ourselves and for the world.

**That word care again. From what you say, care and concern are prerequisites for discovery or even understanding of the world?**

That’s right; care and concern are the reason why we want to understand things. Heidegger uses the word understanding to mean a kind of competence at life, as a craftsman might have competence at his job. We are such life skills. Dasein is what it can achieve in life through what it can understand. Understanding gives us our potentiality for being. This is the basis of a phenomenological theory of sociology, which says that we understand one another by drawing on a shared set of social concepts. Sometimes we don’t get a whole picture, and we need to interpret. Heidegger saw interpretation as related to understanding because it is grounded in something we have in advance – a point of view which fixes, as it were, the rules for our interpretation. By interpretation we seek meaning. Meaning is a public phenomenon. The meaning we draw from a set of observations might be quite conclusive in certain circumstances but open to wide interpretation in others. This is an important phenomenon which troubled many philosophers who came after Heidegger – Wittgenstein and Derrida are probably the most important of them. The position seems to be that we have norms of meaning, we may have some grounds (which in the main we try to work out in practice) but there are no ultimate grounds for many things that we believe.

**If I can understand, even erroneously, what I am concerned with, what then? To make my way in the world, surely I have to do something?**

You might want to take all kinds of action, depending on the situation. One thing you would certainly want to do is to make an assertion, or a statement of your judgement. If we are sensible, we check our assertion against a wider set of experiences, and the more experience we have the more likely are our assertions to reflect reality. Heidegger is keen on this constant checking and rechecking, he called it “a circle of understanding”. The system of doing this is widespread in philosophy and, indeed, in science: formal checking and rechecking of provisional conclusions against backgrounds containing different relevant factors is called a “hermeneutical circle”. In fact Heidegger’s use of the hermeneutical circle to check and recheck his conclusions is a feature of Being and Time itself, and stands alongside phenomenology as his other main philosophical technique.

**So Heidegger builds up a well balanced person who, while he might start with some baggage from the past and a certain mood, by experience and checking learns to understand, interpret and make assertions about life from which useful, or, at least, serviceable actions can be taken. Indeed, this repeated checking of things against different backgrounds is the basis of what philosophers do. Does Heidegger have any other aspects of everyday life left to analyse?**

Two are left: they are reality and truth. Kant wrote a lot about reality, and how we interpret the world. Heidegger has respect for Kant, but he thinks Kant neglected Dasein’s motivation in interpreting and asserting things. Dasein pushes up against things in the world – it doesn’t passively observe, it gets involved and in the process discloses things. Reality is what practical Dasein discovers and uses. It cannot be defined in terms of the existence of objects outside the mind. Nor should it imply that if we explain something in terms of its components we have any better grasp of the reality of an entity. To explain what a thing is made of and how it works is a perfectly respectable activity called science. But science doesn’t make things more real: an electron or atom is no more or less real than the lump of concrete of which they are a part.

Similarly with truth: Heidegger sees truth not as whether two observations concur and corroborate one another, but as a process of Dasein disclosing the world, which he cares about and is concerned with. Language, discourse and talk are all about the assertion of truth and checking it. He warns again about The They who, as well as providing much needed reality checks through talk and communication generally, can mislead through what he calls “idle talk”. The sequence projection (discovery) – understanding – organisation and interpretation – assertion is not only a product of Heidegger’s work, but a well used basis for the learning process taught in management school courses (though its presentation can take various forms). So it is a very useful and motivating organisation system, not only in the world of work but in life in general.

**But surely the thing about truth is that we can be sure of it?**

As far as human language and assertion after comprehensive observation and checking can make it, yes. But are there ultimate truths? For Heidegger, truth is agreement – a concept or theory made up of assertions of judgement made by Daseins. Dasein is a public, social being, but nature is not. Truth depending on assertions of judgement depends on Dasein, while what an assertion of truth is independent of Dasein. Put another way, if the world were empty of Dasein, there would be things in the world about which assertions could be made but as there would be nobody there to make the assertions there would be no truth (or falsehood). Truth is public and may be modified after further checking. This is important in science.

**One thing seems to be missing in all this: that is, any mention of time. After all, the book is called Being and Time.**

That’s true. The first part of the book – Division 1 – is about Dasein in its ordinary everyday life. The second part – Division 2 – looks at life in the longer term, and this is where time comes in.

**How does Heidegger tackle this?**

He looks in turn at the longer term projects of life, and also at what he has said about the everyday existence of human beings in Division 1, to see what effect consideration of time has. He looks first at Death. His concerns here are not with the process of dieing. He says that death is not part of life, but comes after it. He is certainly not concerned with any afterlife. He sees death more as a dominating factor in how we live our lives. People – the They – don’t want to talk about death. They consider it morbid. Heidegger on the other hand thinks that being aware of your final complete demise – even though you don’t know when it will come – should make you plan your life so that you are ready for it, and so that you don’t feel you have wasted your time. To do anything else Heidegger would consider inauthentic.

**That’s all very well, but people don’t like to think that they will die.**

Nobody can cheat death. Heidegger is more concerned about the life before it – being-towards-death. He is particularly concerned with the voice of conscience and with what he calls resoluteness. Dasein, to be authentic, and therefore get the most out of life, must try hard to understand it and what it wants to get out of life. This actually requires hard work, resoluteness, and listening to ones inner self. This latter call of conscious is not to be confused with guilt, or moralising, but with using all Dasein’s skills to apply itself to its projects. The choice of those projects may be less important than the application Dasein needs to show for them – and self assessment, confidence, not being taken in by the idle talk of The They all lead to an authentic and therefore satisfactory lifestyle. It’s the struggle and the satisfaction from acquiring the skills and solving the problems as they come along that are important.

**You said that Heidegger didn’t offer a life style manual, but I must say it’s beginning to sound like one.**

I see what you mean, of course. But in this conversation I have necessarily truncated the reasoning behind Heidegger’s conclusions. Perhaps I ought to say more about conscience otherwise it does all sound rather pious and preachy. Heidegger sees conscience not in the way Kant saw it in his moral writings i.e. as an internal “court of justice”. Heidegger’s conscience is the call of care and our concerns – a constant “how am I doing?” As far as guilt is concerned, Heidegger suggests that being-towards-others-in-the-world calls upon us to owe other people something, and one of the functions of conscience is to remind us of that requirement. We are after all public people, and we are what we do. Guilt is therefore a nullity, a feeling of something not done which ought to be done. Notice the lack of Kantian type moral ground rules here. The only common ground with Kant is probably Kant’s idea of a necessity for a basic good will in the subject which is similar to Dasein’s solicitude toward others, which is part of the care system. A clear conscience cannot be gained by listening to idle talk, and following The They. While Dasein can take advice, the final decision is its own.

**From what you say it seems clear that Heidegger’s idea of time is not very quantitative. Am I right?**

You are. Heidegger talks of temporality – a sense of time – rather than time as such. He refers to the latter as public time. He is concerned with three phases of temporality. They are: facticity (the past, the baggage we have been born with and have collected); falling (the present); and finitude (the future, or being-towards-death). He sees Dasein standing in anticipation at a temporal junction with a fixed past but a range of possible futures.

**Has falling go anything to do with the idea that we are thrown into the world – without explanation or an instruction manual?**

That’s an interesting idea, and, as I’ve indicated, Heidegger does talk of “throwness”. We have little to guide us: we have parents and significant others, who may be good or bad for us; some people have religion; others turn to philosophy; still others are rudderless. Heidegger saw falling as Dasein constantly changing its self conception over time as it tries to cope with existence and learns more. Once again, the craftsman developing skills and using equipment is a good analogy. So is the scientist using the ready-to-hand to discover the present-at-hand and develop theory which he regards as true until it is disproved. Above all, falling is moving along, losing possibilities in the process but also becoming modified and socialised through contact with others. Much of falling passes quickly; we have no time to consider events and have to accept what we are told. Our experiences become part of our baggage or facticity.

**What else does Heidegger associate with time?**

He has chapters on history (or, as he calls it, historiology) and also on historicity, by which he means the extent to which Dasein exists as the sum of the momentary actualities that have happened to it in its existence. This is similar in concept to facticity, but where facticity summarises the position Dasein is in at any moment, historicity is the process by which it got there. This process will consist of authentic and inauthentic choices, some beneficial, some not. If we were paragons of virtue, no doubt we would make the best and most considered and authentic choices we can, be we are not, and accidents and coincidences can happen anyway. We are also thrown into a factical situation from the moment we are born. While authentic Dasein tries to ride these rapids, and, as Mulhall says “pays no attention to either novelty or nostalgia”, we are in the end left with choices to make and often little guidance as to what to do. But Heidegger believes that to abdicate authenticity, to fail to give our best shot at which choice we are taking, is an abdication of a part of our being, much of which has already been taken away by luck and circumstance. This is not mere “agony Aunt” advice on Heidegger’s part. He has shown, by his analysis, that we have individual histories based on unavoidable choices and circumstances: we can only be resolute on the basis of that which we have learned, so we have no other option but to move forward with some project which we deem appropriate on that basis. The only option is between authentic future choices (i.e. ignoring idle talk and fads) and taking decisions based on experience, particularly repeated experience of the possible.

**What does Heidegger say about historiology?**

In essence, we can learn from history. Historiology is not just a series of facts but is related to Dasein’s historicality. Dasein sees history in its own way, it relates to it, and can learn at least possibilities from it. These possibilities, which involve a degree of selection of what is studied, generally relate to the future, and therein derive their usefulness. He also looks at other philosophers’ views on history to bolster his case. On the whole, at least in my opinion, the history chapter doesn’t add much to the arguments on historicality in the previous one except in the sense that as a society we have experienced a sort of social historicity, which maybe links Heidegger to some extent with Hegel and Marx. But to go into that would be beyond the scope of this discussion.

**All of this sounds very plausible. But a lot of ideas sound plausible but don’t work in practice: Government policies, for example; or management and marketing strategies. How do we know that Heidegger and his followers have got it right?**

We don’t. We don’t know if any philosopher (or politician or planner) has got it right except by practical experience. There are a great many schools of philosophy all looking at similar problems and coming up with different solutions. It’s pretty clear that they can’t all be right. You are right to say that plausibility is a weak qualification for a philosophical thesis or strategy of any kind. The best you can hope for at the outset is that it is thought out in detail, fits the facts and experience known at the time, and is logical. Quite a few theories (astrology, fascism, and for many people, most religion) doesn’t tick enough of those boxes to even be worth considering.

**Science gets it right, doesn’t it?**

Not always. At a high level of science, there is disagreement – indeed, ontological disagreement – on the being of the universe, and the physical events that take place in it. Read up about the Big Bang, the Standard Model of the Universe, and String Theory. The Theory of Relativity explains Newtonian mechanics as well as certain aspects of the larger universe that Newtonian mechanics can’t explain. So you might think that science, if it doesn’t get it quite right first time gets something serviceable which can be improved on later – just as Einstein improved on Newton. But the Theory of Relativity can’t explain the Quantum Theory of subatomic particles, and vice versa. There are two sets of physics running side by side.

**So there’s a whole philosophy of science as well?**

Kuhn and Popper are the big names here. Kuhn says that science moves forward in paradigmatic leaps; Popper says a theory is only scientific if it can undergo a test of falsifiability. Soon or later a theory will be falsified by further observation or better models. Anything else is just speculative philosophy.

**So Marx and Freud – who thought they were scientists – were simply making conjectures?**

Yes: as are all most social scientists and philosophers – according to Popper.

**Did Heidegger see his work as scientific?**

Not really. He had his own views on the being of science, which have a lot in common with those of Kuhn and Popper. We have also covered a lot of what Heidegger says indirectly about science in our discussion of reality and truth.

In Division 2, Heidegger devotes some seventeen pages to what he calls the temporality of transcendence – a complex area. He uses this term in the same sense as Kant, who developed what he called transcendental logic to show that the concepts of (Newtonian) science were true, at least in a world where all our information comes from our senses and the reports of other observers. Typically, Heidegger has his own take on the subject.

He starts from the concept of the ready-to-hand as equipment set out in Division 1. Equipment generally is inconspicuous and works together with other equipment. In using equipment, we work toward a result of a project. When equipment is working properly, we tend to forget about it; it only becomes obtrusive when it ceases to work, or encounters something different. At this point, we start to look at the past, what in our experience might have gone wrong.

Heidegger applies this analysis to the practice of science. Science discloses entities or beings, and it is structured as an interconnection of propositions believed to be valid. Or, put more simply, facts and their causal relationships. Concern with the ready-to-hand thus becomes modified into the discovery of the present-at-hand. This may involve inspection of results of using equipment, or some such other methodical approach. Intuition and circumspection are involved.

Heidegger calls this deliberating. Deliberation has the effect of making an otherwise merely present-at-hand entity effectively ready-to-hand. In other words, the present-at-hand also becomes real, but without making the ready-to-hand more real, only more explicable.

Theory follows from this: If a hammer is too heavy, then we understand a statement to that effect from the environment in which we are using the hammer. But if the hammer is said to have mass only, without reference to it as equipment used in a particular environment, then we have developed a decontextualised piece of theory about the hammer as a present-at-hand object. The argument is basically the same as for the practice of mathematical physics, which was of course the cutting edge discipline in the scientific world when Heidegger was writing Being and Time. The being of the entities under consideration (presumably energy, mass, space, bodies in space) are objectivised and thematised in mathematical terms.

Heidegger also seems to anticipate Kuhn’s later hypothesis that science has a paradigmatic character. Science is possible because its practititioners understand that there are no “bare” facts which can be conceived independently of other facts. The mathematical relationships linking these facts into a theory lie in the fact that the entities it takes as its theme are discovered by “prior projection of their state of being”. In other words, concepts are seen as related as long as they fit into a mathematical model. Discovery of further facts or the beings of entities may change the model.

**So what are we to make of philosophy and science? How useful are they?**

Very few concepts in the world are context free. Not even in science. So far the Laws of Thermodynamics seem to be the only concept that is verifiable throughout the universe. So both philosophers and scientist always look at the applicability of theories under a variety of conditions and contexts, to try to get the widest applicability possible. If you can do an experiment to determine an outcome, well and good. Often you can’t. The experiment becomes general experience, or even something that can’t be determined ever. But Heidegger has a solution of sorts for this.

**What is that?**

It is hermeneutics – which has two parts: understanding and explanation, and leads to the circular or iterative activity we discussed earlier. If you think you’ve understood and can explain a feature, go round it again from a different starting point, and look it from a different point of view or context – and see if it holds up. Don’t be dogmatic. This is the so-called hermeneutical circle. That sounds like common sense, and it is. But it is the basis of science, and it make for a powerful philosophical method to test the plausibility of arguments.

**So why is Heidegger important?**

For all the reasons we have discussed above. But mainly because of his influence on philosophy, especially in Europe and America. Being and Time alone lead to existentialism, has influenced a body of American Pragmatists, and is the basis of much post-modern and post-structural philosophy. Derrida said he never had a philosophical thought which he did not find had already occurred to Heidegger. Finally, he writes about existence and being, the relevance of which is absolutely universal, and which by definition is the most important phenomenon that any of us will ever encounter.

*I have used the translation of Being and Time by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.*

*I am also indebted ito the following commentaries: Stephen Mulhall’s “Heidegger and Being and Time”, Hubert Dreyfus’s “Being-in-the-World”, and also to Michael Inwood’s “A Very Short Introduction to Heidegger”.*