

JILL DROUILLARD: HEIDEGGER ON BEING A SEXED OR  
GENDERED HUMAN BEING

As a feminist Heidegger scholar, I'd like to speak specifically about Heidegger's understanding of a sexed or gendered human being. More importantly, I want to highlight how Heidegger's notion of the human being as historically contingent may be useful for thinking about the fluidity of sex and gender today. While Heidegger's language to examine the human being may have changed over time from the "historical I" to "Dasein" to "mortal dwelling," an important aspect of what it means to be human has remained at the forefront of his thought – that of groundlessness – more specifically, the vying of the human being to create a ground in the wake of such groundlessness. This need to define "what is" in a world of flux is witnessed in contentious discussions regarding fixed understandings of sex and gender and their very relation to each other. The primacy of such discussions and their entanglement with what it means *to be* human leads us to think, as Derrida did, sexual difference as ontological difference.<sup>1</sup> That is, the question of "what is" or what it means to understand "what is" as human beings has historically been influenced by our understanding of sex or gender. Due to space constraints, I will focus largely on a lesser-known text by Heidegger that engages with the sexed/gendered nature of the human being.<sup>2</sup> Then, I will briefly comment on how the takeaways from this text may be useful for rethinking sex and gender today.

Heidegger first mentions sex or gender in his 1923 Freiburg lecture course, later translated as *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, where he explicitly notes his avoidance of the terms "human" Dasein or the "being of man." Both terms, "human" and "man," are founded on predetermined predicates, based on assumptions of endowed reason, hierarchical classifications, and relation to God. Furthermore, Heidegger demonstrates how the "being of man" is sexed or gendered in advance. After citing biblical quotes that define "man" as made in the image of God (and thus not required to cover his head) as the first "son" of many "brethren," he asks, "Problem: what is woman?"

(GA 63: 22/18). This question, “*Problem: Was ist die Frau?*” is never answered but merely interjected. Yet, three thoughts necessarily flow from its inquiry. First, the concept of man, with its Judeo-Christian roots, necessarily excludes woman from having a direct relation to being (if being is God), since only man was made in his likeness. Second, man, in not having to cover his head, is already established within a hierarchy of sexual difference, and such differences are predicated prior to an interpretative investigation of facticity. Third, the problem of woman introduces a problem of the flesh that makes of man (spirit)/woman (flesh) a dialectical relation, and Heidegger accuses dialectics of committing the same error as static juxtapositions. Of dialectic he asserts, “It steps into an already constructed context, though there really is no context here. . . Every category is an existential and *is* this as such, not merely in relation to other categories and on the basis of this relation” (GA 63: 43/35).

Though Heidegger does not explicitly explain why he poses the problem of woman, the reader intuits that the issue of *Frau* as woman is tied to a question of generation, as interpreted by St. Augustine, whom Heidegger declares a few pages earlier as the philosopher who provides “the first hermeneutics in grand style” (GA 63: 11/9). In reckoning with the ontological inequality between the sexes, St. Augustine declares that man was created for the contemplative life (of the spirit) whereas woman finds her origins in corporeality (of the flesh) and procreative purpose.<sup>5</sup> That is, she was created for Adam to have a descendent; she was created for her sex. Woman’s particular relation to sexual fecundity is why she must cover her head and man “ought not.” From her inception, woman is born with a specific form of guilt, accorded because of her bodily intention. Such predetermined guilt runs contrary to Heidegger’s notion of our primordial “being guilty,” that is being born on the basis of a nullity, without ground (GA 2: 329/SZ 284). As *Dasein*, we are “thrown” into the world without a plan, without a blueprint, and so, woman could not be created for her flesh any more than man could be designed for the contemplative (read rational) life. Aware of “man’s” historical baggage as already being predetermined as not only

a rational animal but as a person whose hierarchy is predefined through an ontological sex/gender inequality, Heidegger prefers to use the term Dasein in his existential analytic.

Whereas the terms “human” and “man” already conjure notions of “what is” in advance, Dasein is more concerned with the “how” of such construction. Dasein as “being-there” is always there at a particular time, at a certain moment in history. It is thus in line with Heidegger’s historical ontology to conclude that neither sex nor gender are static concepts that defy the influence of history. Such thinking has important consequences for how we approach debates regarding sex and gender today. For example, in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Heidegger asserts that Dasein is neither of the two sexes but rather harbors within itself an intrinsic possibility to become sexed or gendered (GA 26: 173/137). Dasein, by focusing on the “how” of historical construction rather than the “what is” of static juxtapositions, offers insights for thinking about nonbinary, trans, and genderqueer identities. And while Heidegger was not interested in *Lebensphilosophie* and biological constructions of the human being, his discussion of how we become sexed in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* may contribute to genetic ontologies that explain the potential of our genetic material to become other than what it is. For example, future advances in *in vitro* gametogenesis will allow scientists to create sperm or egg gametes from adult stem cell tissue, forcing us to reassess any notion of sexual difference founded on reproductive difference.

Overall, while Heidegger’s inquiry, “Problem: what is woman?” may not have been raised within the context of a feminist liberatory agenda, the hierarchy of knowledge production that he nevertheless accents in his critique of the terms “human” and “being of man” can prove useful for feminist philosophers who challenge any nonhistorical objective response to this question.

**NOTES**

- 1 Jacques Derrida, “*Geschlecht: différence sexuelle, différence ontologique*,” *Cahier de l’Herne*, ed. Michel Haar (Paris: Herne, 1983), 419–30. Translated by Ruben Berezdivin as “*Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference*,” *Research in Phenomenology* 13, no. 1 (1983): 65–83.
- 2 To my knowledge, Heideggerian scholarship has not previously engaged with Heidegger’s question: “Problem: what is woman?” that appears in his 1923 Freiburg lecture course, later published as *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*. Most feminist interpretations of Heidegger begin with his 1928 Marburg course, later translated as *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. This “problem” concerning woman is perplexing, particularly as he leaves it open-ended.
- 3 Augustin, *La Trinité*, Book XII, 10, trans. Sophie Dupuy-Trudelle, in *Philosophie, Catéchèse, Polémique, Œuvres*, vol. 3, ed. Lucien Jerphagnon (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).