INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is at once historical and programmatic, its roots always planted in tradition even as it moves into new, uncharted terrain. There are undeniably great works all along the spectrum, some immersed in intellectual history at the expense of contemporary problems, some fixated on current problems, forgetful of their histories. But philosophy misunderstands itself at either extreme.

In writing this book, I have tried to steer a middle course between Scylla and Charybdis. The result is a reading of Being and Time that is, I hope, neither antiquarian nor anachronistic. I have focused on some problems at the expense of others, many of them fed by discussions in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, though I have tried to deal with them within what strike me as the conceptual horizons proper to Heidegger’s thinking. The book is therefore neither a commentary on Being and Time nor simply a Heideggerian approach to some independently defined philosophical domain.

It is instead an account of the substantive and methodological role of the concept of interpretation (Auslegung) in Heidegger’s project of “fundamental ontology” in Being and Time. Interpretation runs like a thread through the entire fabric of the text, and I have tried to point up its philosophical importance for the existential analytic of Dasein. Substantively, Heidegger maintains that interpretation – by which he means explicit understanding – is definitive of human existence: Human beings have an understanding of what it means to be, and that understanding is or can be made explicit, at least in part. Homo sapiens may or may not be alone in this capacity. In any case, what is distinctive about us, however widely or narrowly we construe the community of inquirers, culturally or biologically, is our ability to understand explicitly that and what entities are.
Methodologically, moreover, I shall argue, it is precisely the phenomenon of explicit understanding that forms the explanatory target of Heidegger’s argument in *Being and Time*. It is the very possibility of interpretation that Heidegger wants to account for in his phenomenological interpretation of human existence. What *Being and Time* describes, then, is not some random heap of phenomena, just any old thing that happened to strike its author as interesting or important about us. Rather, the book aims to provide an account of the existential conditions constitutive of interpretation, or what I shall call hermeneutic conditions. On my account, then, *Being and Time* is an interpretive description of the conditions of interpretation, that is, the conditions of our ability to understand explicitly *that* and *what* entities, including ourselves, are. Chapter 1 introduces this approach to the text and concludes with some remarks concerning the scope of the term ‘Dasein’ and what I take to be Heidegger’s conception of animal intentionality in the absence of an understanding of being like ours.

The prehistory of this book lies in the dissertation I wrote nearly a decade ago on Husserl and Heidegger. My central concern at the time was whether and how one could decide between their respective conceptions of intentionality, which struck me as obviously incompatible. Had either Husserl or Heidegger simply gotten the phenomena wrong? Perhaps. My thesis, however, was that their accounts of intentionality rest on fundamentally different conceptions of meaning and linguistic practice. I found support and inspiration for this idea in Dagfinn Føllesdal’s semantic interpretation of Husserl’s notion of the *noema*, though I could never accept his subsequent conclusion that Heidegger’s phenomenology remains largely parasitic on Husserl’s, a mere variation on a dominant Husserlian theme. The two seemed to me worlds apart, perhaps ultimately incommensurable.

Only several years after having written the dissertation was I able to put my finger on what had always struck me as peculiarly insular and dogmatic about Husserl’s view. It is not simply that his phenomenology is at times cramped and uninspired or that he advances implausible accounts of meaning and experience. The problem with Husserl’s phenomenology is rather that the method he enlists presupposes substantial commitments about mind and meaning, which he then defends on the grounds that phenomenological inquiry reveals them to be as he says they are. The method seems to vouchsafe the results, yet the results must be taken for granted before the method itself can seem plausible. This, in a nutshell, is the argument of Chapter 2.
incoherence threatening Husserl’s phenomenology, it now seems to me, flows directly from his critical disregard of the problem of hermeneutic conditions, in particular the external social conditions that necessarily inform all phenomenological interpretations of intentional phenomena.

But Husserl is in good company, for most contemporary theories of intentionality are no less neglectful of their own hermeneutic conditions. In Chapter 3, I contrast Heidegger’s explicitly hermeneutical approach to intentionality, which regards it as just one aspect of our being-in-the-world, with two contemporary theories in analytic philosophy: Daniel Dennett’s, which relativizes intentional phenomena to the theoretical attitude or attitudes involved in an explanatory strategy he calls the “intentional stance”; and John Searle’s, which seems to acknowledge the external, extramental conditions of intentionality, conditions he calls the “Background.” Dennett and Searle both say things that sound superficially friendly to Heidegger’s position. Dennett’s “stances” (the physical stance, the design stance, and the intentional stance) for example, appear at first glance to run parallel to the three modes of being in *Being and Time*: objective “occurrentness” (*Vorhandenheit*), instrumental “availability” (*Zuhandenheit*), and human “being-in-the-world” (*In-der-Welt-sein*). Similarly, Searle’s notion of the Background seems to echo Heidegger’s insistence on the embeddedness or situatedness of intentional attitudes in a wider physical and social environment.

But in fact, neither Dennett nor Searle asks the *transcendental* question inspiring and animating Heidegger’s analytic, namely, What are the conditions informing our very idea of intentional phenomena as intentional? What, for example, makes it possible for us even to conceive of anything like the theoretical attitudes involved in the explanatory strategies of science and common sense? And what are the conditions already internal to our understanding of the contents of our own minds, over and beyond the merely physiological conditions of conscious awareness, of which we may be utterly ignorant? Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of Heidegger’s account of the social conditions of meaning and understanding. As I read it, Heidegger’s conception of the normativity of “the one” (*das Man*) in *Being and Time* commits him to a form of social externalism broadly similar in effect, though neither in aim nor in method, to the anti-individualism of Tyler Burge.

As I have just indicated, and as my title suggests, I read Heidegger’s early project as belonging to a broadly Kantian tradition of transcendental philosophy. Unlike other recent commentators, however, I do
not infer from that affiliation that Heidegger was himself any kind of transcendental idealist. On the contrary, in Chapter 4 I try to explain and defend his avowed realism about entities, what I call his ontic realism. Heidegger was a realist, I believe, in part simply because he took our ordinary prereflective attitudes seriously and sought to resist philosophical arguments purporting to subvert or discredit them. Constructing arguments for or against realism or idealism, however, was clearly not Heidegger’s chief concern. Rather, his transcendentalism lay in a different effort, namely, to spell out the conditions that make it possible for us to understand entities explicitly as we do. No conclusion about the hermeneutic conditions of human understanding directly implies any metaphysical thesis concerning the ontological status of the entities we interpret – for example, whether or in what ways they depend on us and our practices or attitudes. Some do, some do not.

It is plausible, for example, to insist that things defined by their usefulness are what they are only within some domain of human practices, whereas mere objects and natural kinds exist independently of us. Reading Being and Time as an account of hermeneutic conditions rather than as straightforward metaphysics, then, takes some of the pressure off the problem of realism and idealism, since Heidegger’s point is not to advance or defend any particular metaphysical thesis, but simply to say what falls within the conditions of interpretation peculiar to human existence and what does not. Brute nature, as Heidegger describes it, falls outside those conditions. Our ordinary, untutored realism about the natural world, then, is both plausible in itself and consistent with the account of hermeneutic conditions in Being and Time. Such hermeneutic conditions, by contrast, comprise the world of human artifacts, practices, and institutions. It therefore makes little sense to be a realist about such things, for what (and even that) they are is bound up essentially with the practices and attitudes in which they are implicated. Being (Sein) depends on Dasein, Heidegger insists, but what is (das Seiende) – more precisely, what is “occurrent” (vorhanden) – does not. Chapter 4 ends with a plea that we not confuse matters by wondering whether being, in addition to entities, might itself be. Being is not an entity, so it cannot be in addition to them. Rather, on Heidegger’s view, being is simply what we understand when we understand what and that things are.

Chapter 5 is an account of what I take to be the hermeneutic condition, the condition of interpretation, par excellence in Being and Time, namely, discourse (Rede). Surprisingly little has been said about this
concept, though it plays a vital role in both divisions of the treatise. But what is discourse? Scholars disagree dramatically about what the term even means. Many assume that discourse, as Heidegger understands it, is simply language taken in a properly broad context to include the full range of semantic and pragmatic phenomena associated with speech, in addition to words and sentences themselves. Others take it to be the underlying pragmatic structure of all meaningful activity, linguistic and otherwise, thus rendering any direct connection between discourse and language virtually accidental.

I think both approaches miss Heidegger’s point, and they do so precisely by missing the phenomenon itself. Discourse is not essentially linguistic, but neither is it simply an aspect of the purposive structure of meaningful activity. It is rather a wider spectrum of irreducibly expressive and communicative comportments that constitute a distinct, nonpurposeful dimension of meaning in addition to the instrumental goal-directedness of practical activity. It is that expressive-communicative dimension of meaning that makes language and semantic phenomena in general possible. Discourse is not language, then, but it is a privileged conditio sine qua non of language precisely because it is the conditio sine qua non of expression generally, and expression is the essence of interpretation. Interpretation is the express or explicit (ausdrücklich) understanding of something as something, and it is the communicative dimension of discourse that allows expressive phenomena to stand out from the background of practical significance and lay claim to an altogether different form of intelligibility. In the absence of some primitive form of communicative comportment, no gesture can distinguish itself as expressive rather than merely useful or appropriate. Understanding and discourse are thus “equiprimordial” (gleichursprünglich), Heidegger insists, inasmuch as they run orthogonally along different dimensions in the fabric of intelligibility, as it were, neither reducible to the other.

What this account of discourse reveals, then, is a level of meaning midway between the instrumentality of practice and the semantic contents of propositions expressed by assertions. This intermediate domain of significance amounts to a kind of hermeneutic salience that makes a particular cultural world intelligible in some expressible way by opening up some linguistic and semantic possibilities and closing down others. Only against a background of hermeneutic salience, for instance, can assertions be intelligible as either true or false. It is this preassertoric domain of expressive significance, I argue, that Heidegger describes in his
account of truth as “unconcealment” in §44 of *Being and Time*. This approach to Heidegger’s account of truth, I hope, steers a middle course between critics who are prone to dismiss it as either obviously false or nonsensical, on the one hand, and those who would transpose it into something innocuous, perhaps even trivial, on the other. Heidegger’s point, as I understand it, is neither to analyze propositional truth in some revisionary way nor simply to insist that entities must be given to us in order for our assertions to be true of them. Rather, in my jargon, the hermeneutic salience in which entities are revealed to us in discourse is itself a condition of the interpretability of assertions as true or false. Discourse is a hermeneutic condition of the truth of assertions.

In Chapter 6, however, I argue that to construe interpretation as expressibility, and so the conditions of interpretation as the conditions of expressibility, is not to say that we should read Heidegger as an “expressivist,” that is, as belonging to a tradition arising in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries according to which expressive achievements of various kinds bridge real gaps between the self and the world and restore it to a form of social and psychological, indeed metaphysical, integrity. Heidegger’s fundamental ontology marks a radical break with that tradition, I believe, since he interprets Dasein as the sort of entity for whom any such ideal of unity or completion amounts to an ontological category mistake. Dasein is in principle never a finished thing, and so neither does it remain tragically unfinished or incomplete in the absence of properly expressive practices and institutions. Expression and expressive practices as such have no telos in anything like the wholeness of selfhood or character, nor is the self the kind of entity that can in principle ever be a finished whole.

The incoherence of that normative ideal is what motivates Heidegger’s account of death in Division II of *Being and Time*. Death, as Heidegger understands it, is neither the mere terminus of a biological process nor the dénouement of a life story, but rather the fact that as we project into some future possibilities, we at once constantly and unavoidably project into the closing down and extinction of others. All projection is in principle attended by the shutting down of possibilities, which is to say “dying” in the existential sense of the word. Authenticity, understood as “forerunning resoluteness” (*vorlaufende Entschlossenheit*), lies in owning up to one’s concrete situation and pushing forward into one’s death, that is, projecting wholeheartedly into the simultaneous flourishing and perishing of possibilities. The possibility of forerunning resoluteness is intelligible only in light of an irreducible first-person
point of view on oneself, as opposed to any objective or impersonal view one might have of oneself as a self. Heidegger’s account of authenticity, that is, recognizes a profound asymmetry between first-person and second- and third-person modes of interpretation.

The question *Being and Time* does not address, let alone answer, however, is how those asymmetrical aspects of selfhood are in fact bound up with one another in a more general concept of self or person. Is a self no more than what it understands itself to be in authentic forerunning resoluteness, or is that first-person understanding always tied in complex ways to an understanding others have of us, both as discursive partners and as unfamiliar third parties? Is it possible to reintegrate a second- or third-person interpretation of ourselves into our own self-understanding without losing sight of the very asymmetry that makes authenticity intelligible? What, in other words, are the hermeneutic conditions of our more general, perspectivally complex concept of the self? As it stands, the account of authentic selfhood in *Being and Time* remains at best radically incomplete. For it remains to be seen whether and how the irreducibility of our first-person self- interpretations can be reconciled with an account of the hermeneutic conditions of a concept of person applicable both to ourselves and to others, but without in effect disowning and defacing our defining commitments by surrendering them to the averageness of public understanding, thus rendering them anonymous and impersonal – in short, inauthentic.
WHAT IS FUNDAMENTAL ONTOLOGY?

The central theme of Heidegger’s philosophy is the question concerning the meaning (Sinn) of being (Sein). The “fundamental ontology” he advances in Being and Time departs dramatically from traditional ontology in that it asks not what there is, nor why there is what there is, nor even why there is anything at all and not nothing. The last of those questions, most famously associated with Leibniz and Schelling, is what Heidegger calls “the fundamental question of metaphysics.” It is a deep and important question, but it is not the question of fundamental ontology, for what it asks about is the totality of entities, not the meaning of being.

Heidegger’s question, then, is not, Why is there anything? but rather, What does it mean for something to be? – or simply (redundantly), What is it to be? “What does ‘being’ mean?” Heidegger asks in his lectures of 1928. “This is quite simply the fundamental question of philosophy” (MAL 171). So, whereas traditional ontology was merely “ontic,” in that it occupied itself exclusively with entities, or what is (das Seiende), Heidegger’s own project is “ontological” in a radically new sense in

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1 I translate Sein as ‘being’ and Seiende as ‘entity’ or ‘entities,’ thus avoiding the common but confusing and unnecessary distinction between uppercase ‘Being’ and lowercase ‘being.’
2 Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, chapter 1.
3 Ernst Tudenghat objects that Heidegger conflates the question of the meaning of being with the question of the meaning of (the word) ‘being’ (see SZ t. 11). Heidegger does admittedly use the two formulations interchangeably, but the distinction strikes me as irrelevant to his treatment of the question, since his argument has nothing to do with linguistic usage as such. For Heidegger’s purposes, asking about the meaning of (the word) ‘being’ is simply another rhetorical way of asking what it means to be.
asking not just about what there is, but about being as such. Fundamental ontology is fundamental relative to traditional ontology, then, in the sense that it has to do with what any understanding of entities necessarily presupposes, namely, our understanding of that in virtue of which entities are entities. Heidegger’s originality consists in part in having raised the question at all, perhaps more explicitly and systematically than ever before. Philosophy begins in wonder, Plato and Aristotle say,4 and in the course of his inquiry into the meaning of being, Heidegger can fairly be credited with reminding modern philosophy of what may be the most wondrous fact of all—that there is anything, and moreover that we understand something definite, however obscure, in understanding that there is.

Over and beyond having posed the question of being, though, Heidegger continues to command our attention because of the originality with which he approaches it, the philosophical strategy and the style of thought he thinks it demands, and finally the conclusions he draws in pursuing, if not exactly answering, the question. For the question of being, as Heidegger conceives it, is inseparable from questions concerning the understanding and the existence of those entities for which, or rather for whom, the question of being can be a question at all, namely, ourselves, human beings. The argument of Being and Time therefore begins by referring ontology back to what Heidegger calls an “existential analytic of Dasein,” that is, an account of the basic structures of human existence: “fundamental ontology, from which all others can first arise, must . . . be sought in the existential analytic of Dasein” (SZ 13), which offers a means of “uncovering the horizon for an interpretation of the meaning of being in general” (SZ 15). For Heidegger, “An analytic of Dasein must therefore remain the principal matter of concern in the question of being” (SZ 16).5

But how are we to understand such a project? What does the meaning of being have to do specifically with the existence of human beings? What unique link between being and human being requires that fundamental ontology proceed by means of an analytic of Dasein? Heidegger

5 But compare Heidegger’s remark earlier in the text that “even the possibility of carrying out the analytic of Dasein depends on the prior working out of the question concerning the meaning of being in general” (SZ 13). Although an adequate answer to the question of being calls for an analytic of Dasein, that is, the analytic of Dasein in turn presupposes some initial articulation of the question of being itself. Heidegger’s project is therefore inherently, but not viciously, circular.
tries to answer this question in the opening pages of *Being and Time*, but it is worth reminding ourselves of the strangeness of the very idea of fundamental ontology if we are to gain philosophical insight into Heidegger’s enterprise. For while the question of being, with its echoes of ancient and medieval ontology, lies at the very heart of his thinking, early and late, Heidegger was no less preoccupied with philosophical questions concerning the conditions of intentionality and the ontological status of agency and subjectivity, uniquely modern problems that lend his work a degree of contemporary relevance unmatched by all but a few philosophical texts of the same period. What, then, is the connection between these two central motivating concerns in Heidegger’s thought? Why should the renewal and explication of the question of being demand a critique of the concepts of subjectivity and intentionality? How does Heidegger propose to ground ontology as a whole in an account of the phenomenal structure of everyday experience, and why does he insist that “Ontology is possible only as phenomenology” (SZ 55)? Why, in short, does Heidegger pursue the question of being in the context of an “analytic of Dasein” at all?

The best short answer to these questions, I believe, lies in an unmistakable analogy between Heidegger’s fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* and the “Copernican revolution” in philosophy Kant claimed to have brought about in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*KRV* Bxvi). Heidegger offered lectures on Kant’s philosophy throughout the 1920s and 1930s. He even published a book, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, in 1929, just two years after the publication of *Being and Time* itself, which I shall discuss further later in this chapter. In a word, Heidegger’s existential “analytic” of Dasein is a self-conscious allusion to the Transcendental Analytic that makes up the central constructive core of the first *Critique*. The reference is crucially important, for an “analytic” in Kant’s sense is not an analysis of the contents of our thoughts, but a kind of “dissection” (*Zergliederung*) – a “critique” in the original sense of the word – of the faculty of understanding (*KRV* A 64–5/B 89–90).  

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6 Herman Philipse is therefore wrong to assimilate Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretations in *Being and Time* to the sort of conceptual analysis practiced by J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, and P. F. Strawson. See Heidegger’s *Philosophy of Being*, 321, 341, 386. Heidegger’s substantive positions do at times coincide with theirs, but his methods are crucially different. What Heidegger sets out to interpret is neither ordinary language nor the logic of our concepts, but the prelinguistic, preconceptual forms of understanding and interpretation that linguistic practices and conceptual categories presuppose. For a more detailed critique of Philipse, see my “On Making Sense (and Nonsense) of Heidegger.”