

Introduction: What Is Called Thinking by Heidegger?

Much rests on knowing what this means: thinking.

Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures Insight into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*

We come to know what it means to think when we ourselves try to think. If the attempt is to be successful, we must be ready to learn thinking.

Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*

Despite the fact that Descartes said it,¹ it still is true that we are essentially thinkers – we just have to define what that means. Heidegger would agree with the statement and argue that thinking it at a deep level requires us to rethink every word in it: we, are, essentially, thinkers.

We think: thinking is not something I do on my own, sitting alone in a cabin with the world placed at a distance. We think with and within a historically situated community, one that makes us who we are as we reciprocally let it be what it is. I can never think except from a we and with a we; no *one* can.

We are. It's not that we are because we think but that we think because we are as thinkers. One reason the question of being necessarily comes is that all things do what they do because they are what they are, although this very point starts breaking down these distinctions. For Heidegger, all inquiries must look to the kind of being of the entity being inquired into.

We are essentially. Essences for Heidegger are more like active engagements than properties or states; he sometimes uses an older form of the word for essence as a verb: *wesen*, 'to essence.' To be is to behave in certain ways through time rather than sitting stolidly self-identically.

We essence as thinkers. One of the main ways that we are is by thinking, getting struck by ideas, wondering and dwelling on them, seeking explanations and gathering reasons to make sense of our lives. Thoughts are not preliminaries to action but are our highest activity, our *ergon* to use Aristotle's term. Thus, to know ourselves, we must think about thinking. Most philosophers do, but few give it the deep, sustained pondering that Heidegger did. Heidegger dwelt on thinking; he made it his philosophical dwelling.

The project of *Being and Time*, his early magnum opus, is to understand being. However, to understand the deepest, broadest, most perplexing, and, at the same time, closest and simplest topic there is, we have to understand how we understand anything at all. We must first understand understanding in order to understand what it is to understand being. You could say, then, that the entire book is ultimately about thinking.

¹ "I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks" (Descartes/ed. Cottingham et al., 2013, 18).

The part of the book that got published² is a sustained attempt to understand us insofar as we can be aware of anything – what he calls “Dasein.” This “existential analytic” is intended to serve as the foundation of the study of being, which may strike some as something of a non sequitur (Heidegger, 1962, 34/13). It’s justified when we think about the interdependence between the meaning of being and a being that can understand it. Think about seeing. We discover the visibility of being by studying human sight, which we get at by examining the anatomy of the eyeball, the visual part of the brain, and so on. Understanding how we see tells us what we can see, and so what of reality can be seen. Similarly, we analyze Dasein’s way of being in order to fully comprehend our understanding, which will show us what it means for anything to be understandable – the meaning of being (Heidegger, 1962, 424/372). This is the basic strategy of *Being and Time*.

Division I of the book favors something of a pragmatic view of thinking, according to which it is organized by and around our projects. This innovative conception emphasizes tacit skills over articulate conscious thinking, know-how more than knowing-that. Division II then turns to a more existential stepping back from all projects in a mood of existential dread that liberates us to become authentic.

Wonder, the beginning of philosophy for Plato and Aristotle, comes to the forefront in his later thoughts. As perhaps the only thinkers in existence, we have a kind of responsibility to respond thoughtfully to being’s provocations and solicitations to think. This should not be carried out as a grave duty but rather celebrated as a festival.

Heidegger’s later work portrays thinking as reciprocal instead of the traditional view of spontaneous, autonomous control, the source of transcendental philosophy, technology, and nihilism. Thinking becomes something we do with and for being instead of to beings on our own for ourselves. It is a cooperation rather than a cooptation, a releasement of thoughts rather than a grasping of concepts, an attending and tending to beings that allows them to come forth and fully be what they are, like nurturing a plant to its flourishing. This account of reason may help overcome the nihilism that he thinks traditional notions of thinking have led us into. After the death of God we may no longer be able to be worshipful servants of a divinity, but we can still be the thinkers of being, standing in awe before the fact that anything is at all.

Every painting tells us to cherish and delight in the way the world fits our vision, beauty raising the two into their reciprocal essencing height. Every piece

² See Braver, 2015b for a number of Heidegger experts’ views on what the missing portion might have been like.

of music is a revelling in hearing. So philosophizing is a celebration of the fact that being can be thought, that the world around us yields to concepts that join together into arguments which can lead us to entirely new ways of thinking which in turn open up further ways of celebrating the world and living out our lives. Along with everything else that it is, an argument is a work of art in the medium of ideas, and all works of art carry the same message: “at bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary” (Heidegger, 1993a, 179). The simplest, most ubiquitous fact there is – the fact *of* the there is – is what there now is for us, and it is astonishing in its unsurpassable mundanity. “Everything in what is most usual (beings) becomes in wonder the most unusual in this one respect: that it is what it is” (Heidegger, 1994a, 144). There are, of course, many themes in the decades of his later thought, but they all gather around our thinking of being in some way or other. Heidegger’s great talent was to never stop being amazed, to never lose his philosophical wonder or stop thinking about thinking, everything he writes being an invitation to join him at the “feast of thought” (Heidegger, 1993a, 144).

There are two parts to this Element, dividing along the main turn in Heidegger’s own path of thinking. Part I examines Heidegger’s early thinking and view of thinking as it surfaces in Divisions I and II of *Being and Time*. Part II turns to the way of thinking Heidegger took in later years. The aim throughout is to unpack both how he thinks and what he takes thinking to be, i.e., what he shows us and what he says about thinking. I will be organizing the Parts around short statements about what thinking is for Heidegger – e.g., “thinking is interested,” “thinking is temporal,” “thinking is wondrous,” and so on – each of which will serve as something like a thesis statement for its section.

Part I Early Heidegger

We can learn thinking only if we radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally.
 Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 8

I Division I of *Being and Time*: Thoughtful Knowing-How to Get Around in the World

Thinking Thinks the History of Thinking

From the beginning to the end of his long career, Heidegger believed that thinking is historical. Thinking takes place as a conversation *with* the tradition because it takes place *within* the tradition, as our predecessors give place to us. “Our own way derives from such [traditional] thinking. It therefore remains necessarily bound to a dialogue with traditional thinking. And since our way is concerned with thinking for the specific purpose of learning it, the dialogue must discuss the

nature of traditional thinking” (Heidegger, 1968, 55). Thinking about thinking is, of course, itself an act of thinking, being both the topic thought about and the thinking about it. This makes all these thoughts we’ll be looking at reflexive because any conclusions they reach about their subject automatically apply to themselves. If thinking is historical, then, thinking of the historicity of thought must be as well: thinking about historical thinking can only be done historically. Most thinkers do so naively, unaware of the context informing their inquiry or even in denial of it. Understanding the nature of thinking, however, requires us to fully appreciate how that context informs all inquiry, including that one.

Thinking of thinking must, dizzyingly, become a historical thinking of the history of thinking about historical thinking, as Heidegger realizes in the Introduction to *Being and Time*:

The ownmost meaning of Being which belongs to the inquiry into Being as an historical inquiry, gives us the assignment of inquiring into the history of that inquiry itself By positively making the past our own, we may bring ourselves into full possession of the ownmost possibilities of such inquiry. The question of the meaning of Being . . . thus brings itself to the point where it understands itself as historiological. (Heidegger, 1962, 42/20–21)

To move forward, inquiry must go back. To think about thinking in a new way requires a thoughtful immersion in the old ways, and much of Heidegger’s work is taken up with examinations of previous philosophers’ thoughts about the nature of thought.

Traditional Thinking Thinks of Thinking as Articulate and Thematic

When Socrates questioned people in his dialogues, he demanded that they come up with explicit, articulate definitions that captured the essence of their subject in logically consistent accounts. The interlocutors’ inability to do so exposed their lack of knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, their lack of thinking. The fact that they did not realize how shabby their beliefs were showed how little examination they had given them. Since beliefs determine actions for Socrates, living the unexamined life meant believing unexamined beliefs, whereas the life worth living is dedicated to thinking through one’s thoughts, poring over them and improving them until they can withstand Socrates’ examination. Only explicit, thematic analysis can determine the worth of thoughts and yield truth; its absence can give, at best, lucky guesses. This has been one of the models, if not the primary model of thinking and knowledge in philosophy ever since. Let us call it the Platonic Model.³

³ Of course, there are multiple interpretations of Plato, many of which would diverge from this reading.

We can see the Platonic Model in, for example, Augustine's famous frustration about time: when no one asks him what time is, he can deal with it perfectly well; but if anyone asks him to define it, he suddenly has no idea what to say, paralyzed like Socrates' interlocutors. His theoretical inability to tell us what time is undermines for him his practical ability to tell what time it is.⁴ To generalize extravagantly, most philosophers have followed Plato's lead, leaving another epistemological path relatively unexplored: what would happen if we take seriously that mundane capability to deal with time, the know-how of timing and showing up on time that Augustine scoffs at? Perhaps wandering down such paths heretofore relatively untraveled is one way, "by positively making the past our own, we may bring ourselves into full possession of the ownmost possibilities of such inquiry" (Heidegger, 1962, 42/21).

Heidegger wrote on Aristotle a great deal and he took a few steps down this path. Plato says that knowledge is virtue – you must know what virtue is in order to be virtuous and just knowing it makes you virtuous. But for Aristotle, virtue is knowledge – if you behave virtuously and demonstrate virtue in your actions, then you ipso facto possess the relevant knowledge. "Some people who lack knowledge but have experience are better in action than others who have knowledge" (Aristotle, 2019, VI.7.1141b16-19). The skill is not a rudimentary approximation or preparatory step to its true form of a logical, articulated account. No, this kind of thinking and knowledge is embodied in its enactment.

Thinking Is Pragmatic. Most philosophers base their views of human nature on some specialized, atypical quality or activity – usually theoretical contemplation, though others such as worship or citizenship crop up here and there. Instead of understanding us beginning from what we do one percent of the time, Heidegger wants to start from what we do ninety-nine percent of the time – our average everydayness where our thinking is wrapped up in what we are doing rather than a matter of abstract rumination. "I cannot adequately define the concept of understanding if, in trying to make the definition, I look solely to specific types of cognitive comportment" (Heidegger, 1988, 275).

So what do we do most of the time? Well, we *do* stuff – we drive cars, eat sandwiches, go swimming, as well as several other things. We act, interacting with things and people to accomplish goals, and we do this far more and much earlier than abstract thinking.⁵ Many argue that all of that behavior can only take

⁴ Note: while I have been using a theory–practice dichotomy to get the basic ideas across quickly and easily, Heidegger's more complete account rejects any such clean division. Contemplation, after all, is one of the duties of a professional philosopher, as I inform my wife when she tells me that I'm not paid to think.

⁵ Some scholars, such as Richard Rorty (1979, 1982, 1991) and Mark Okrent (1988), have found common ground between Heidegger's views and American pragmatism, as did Dewey. "Sidney Hook reports, for instance, that John Dewey, after hearing a summary of *Being and Time*,

place on the basis of intellectual convictions. I picked up the hammer because I held the belief that hammering in nails is the best way to build this bookshelf, that building this bookshelf is a good thing to do, and that this is a hammer. Thinking must always be present before and beneath our actions, rather than just generally going along thoughtlessly.

Heidegger argues that most of the time when we hammer, we're just hammering. There need not be any explicit thoughts about the hammer or the goal or really anything at all. We retroactively place beliefs underneath our actions when we stop acting to theoretically reconstruct what had been happening, bullied into a belief in beliefs by the tradition's cognitivism. "I picked up the hammer, so I must have had the thought that that's what it was." This is not a good phenomenological description of what actually occurred but rather an artifact of the tradition's influence (as well as another reason we will soon discuss). If we describe what actually happened more carefully, we come up with a very different account:

In such dealings an entity of this kind is not grasped thematically as an occurring Thing, nor is the equipment-structure known as such even in the using. The hammering does not simply have knowledge about the hammer's character as equipment, but it has appropriated this equipment in a way which could not possibly be more suitable When we deal with them by using them and manipulating them, this activity is not a blind one; it has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided. (Heidegger, 1962, 98/69)

The notion that there *had* to be some cognitive element like knowledge or belief motivating or justifying our action is not supported by the evidence but by a twenty-five-century-long presupposition.

The point isn't that we use things *instead* of understanding them. That takes the Platonic Model as the only genuine form of knowledge so that if we lack that, we simply have nothing. Of course I understood the tool – I picked up the lump of metal with a stick of wood attached and slammed a piece of metal into some boards with it; I didn't use it to pick up a cat or eat soup. Picking out the right item and using it appropriately gives clear evidence of understanding, but one that doesn't fit the Platonic Model of understanding well. Heidegger argues that a distinct form of understanding is operative in our activities that, if captured in cognitive terms, can only appear as a poor form of contemplation, as it did to Augustine who scorned his ability to meet his friends for lunch at noon. This is understanding not in the sense of having thematic knowledge but "with the signification of 'being able to manage something'" (Heidegger, 1962, 183/143);

remarked 'that it sounded as if a German peasant were trying to render parts of [Dewey's book] *Experience and Nature* into his daily idiom'" (Guignon, 1983, 1).