

Method of Citation

With few exceptions, references to Heidegger's writings are to *Sein und Zeit*, 11th ed., or to volumes of the *Complete Edition (Gesamtausgabe)* of his writings. *Sein und Zeit* is cited as "SZ" followed by a page number (e.g., "SZ: 15"); references to volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe* are cited as "GA" followed by the volume number, the date of composition of the passage cited (if known), and page number (e.g., "GA55, 1943: 19"). All translations are mine. All italics in quotations are original, except when I translate *das Seiende* as "what is." Most other English translations include the pagination of the German original, making it possible to dispense with citing the translations' pagination. In the case of exceptions, the German pagination is given followed by a slash and the pagination of the English translation (e.g., "GA9, 1929: 106/84"). When the cited contents of a GA volume are translated in more than one English volume, an acronym of the relevant English title is given. A full list of primary texts and their translations can be found at the beginning of the References section.

1 How Does It Stand with Presence?

“*Being is presence*,” writes Heidegger. This “decisive experience of my path of thinking cannot be remembered often enough” (GA98, ca. 1950: 278).

He recalls “the simple, but also barely developed recollection of being as presencing, as which time itself clears itself . . . It is impossible to say why and how, unmerited and unwanted in any respect, this recollective thought was gifted to the thinking that I sought.” This “fundamental experience” was “the sole thunderbolt that struck my thinking existence [*Dasein*] . . . The riches of what can be experienced here and what is still reserved for recollection exceed everything that the paths of a thinking could ever discover and bring to light” (GA82, 1943: 354–55).

Thinking being as presence means recovering a legacy and exploring possibilities, engaging in our future and our past. Presence itself – Heidegger’s thunderbolt announces – is a present, a gift of time. This thought promises still more to us than it offered to Heidegger himself, despite his decades of meditation.

But in order to pick up the trail where he left it, we must better understand this lightning that struck him in the early 1920s and provoked him until the end. On its own, the assertion that “being is presence” leaves many matters in the dark.

First, what does “being” mean? A century after *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s most dedicated interpreters still disagree.

What does “presence” mean? How narrowly should it be taken?

What is the meaning of the “is” in “being is presence”? Is it phenomenological, describing experience? Historical, characterizing the tradition? Or does this distinction break down in Heidegger’s thought?

Is being *necessarily* presence? Or is this contingent? Or both: a contingent necessity for the Westernized world, our destiny? If so, how does presence shape Western metaphysics?

Are there alternatives to presence? If so, is Heidegger seeking them? Does he want to expand the sense of being beyond presence – or even leave presence behind? Some readers are convinced that he is critiquing presence, while others think he cherishes presence in its richest form.

Although his insight into being as presence was a “decisive experience,” is it the heart of his thought? Or a provocation that led him to more fundamental issues?

Beyond the daunting challenge of understanding Heidegger, there is the question of whether he is right. Is being *truly* presence? Just how illuminating is this thought – phenomenologically and historically?

Finally, above these questions hovers the question of what difference they make. Are they academic issues, of interest only to specialists? Or – Heidegger is sure of this – do they spell the fate of our planet? He claims that not just philosophy but our dominant ways of handling and judging all that *is* rely on an unrecognized experience of being as presence – so we are blind to the source and limits of our ways of illuminating things. Is this so?

We cannot answer any of these questions in isolation; they rebound on each other. If we are already plunged into the history of being as presence, it would be too crude to define presence phenomenologically, and then turn to the history of philosophy. Phenomenology without history is naive, while history of philosophy without phenomenology is mere doxography.

The questions concerning presence hang together. To recall this entire problematic, we can use a vague Heideggerian locution: “How does it stand with presence?” (GA78, 1942: 169).

The problematic is compounded by Heidegger’s shifting thoughts and usages. These shifts are not mere confusion, but a journey along a “path.” Some seeming inconsistencies can also be explained by different contexts. In particular, when we are in the midst of his sympathetic interpretations of the tradition, especially early Greek thought, his own critical standpoint can become invisible.

Still, some discrepancies pose obstacles to our investigation. Above all, Heidegger describes “presence” narrowly and broadly. The narrower it becomes, the more provocative the claim “being is presence” – but also the less plausible.

The narrowest sense of presence would be bounded, uniform, necessary being, disclosed without remainder in an eternal “now.” Parmenides’ Fragment 8, lines 5–6, offer a classic formula for this vision: οὐδὲ ποτ’ ἦν οὐδ’ ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἔστιν ὁμοῦ πάν, / ἔν, συνεχές. “Neither was it nor will it be, for it is now, all together, one, continuous.” Here Parmenides – as usually read – binds what *is* to its presence in the present: immutable immediacy, standing noonday. “Everything purely full, no emptiness, no ‘away,’ no absence in being as such, but only presence . . . simple collectedness in the present” (GA35, 1932: 167–68). We can call this the *Eleatic* sense of presence.

If this is what “presence” means, the *phenomenological* claim “being is presence” seems obviously false. The Eleatic vision expressly *rejects* the phenomena. What appears to sensation contradicts logic and must be denied, as Zeno tries to show with his paradoxes. Heidegger, we will see, complicates this issue with an unconventional reading of Parmenides as describing a *horizon* of presence within which surface phenomena appear (GA35: 176). But inevitably, the more narrowly one means that “being is presence,” the more one excludes from being.

As a *historical* claim, “being is presence” in the Eleatic sense would be provocative, aggressive – and again – seemingly false. One can even doubt whether Parmenides himself embraced the view he ascribed to a goddess (Adluri, 2011). And surely, very few later thinkers unreservedly join the Eleatic rejection of all so-called nonbeing. The atomists claim nonbeing *is* as void. Plato’s *Sophist* defends nonbeing as difference. Aristotle defends nonbeing as potency and change. Descartes and Leibniz discover the mathematical logic of motion. Nietzsche shudders at “the inert stable dead being of Parmenides” (1962: 92), “un-Greek as no other” (1962: 69), and celebrates “the innocence of becoming” (1997: 36–37).

The broadest sense of presence would include all these non-Eleatic phenomena: emptiness, otherness, multiplicity, potential, change. All are “present”: they show up, they make a difference to us. Otherwise we couldn’t even refer to them. Absence itself can be vividly present (just consider the question, “Where’s my phone?”).

Now “being is presence” is far more flexible and plausible – so plausible that it is trivial. How could this triviality be a “decisive experience”? What would be the impact of such a feeble “thunderbolt”?

If neither extreme is right, perhaps we need a concept of presence that packs a punch *and* lands a blow: a provocative, questionable, but defensible claim that has both historical and phenomenological resonance.

Or maybe the punch of Heidegger’s thought does not lie in presence, but in what makes presence possible: in his earlier work, time; later, appropriation (*Ereignis*). Of course, these words are no less in need of interpretation than “being” and “presence.” And there are more puzzles: Are time and appropriation *phenomena*? If so, aren’t they present in some sense, so that presence rather than they would be most fundamental? If not, how can we think of them at all?

Those of us trying to think through these issues in English face further obstacles. Some thirty expressions in Heidegger can be translated with variations on “presence,” “présent,” or “presént.” Which word is he using, and does it make a difference?

Heidegger’s vocabulary obviously did not follow a set of rigid definitions for half a century. However, translations should let Anglophone readers recognize which German word he uses. Since we are considering developmental questions, it also helps to know when a passage was composed. To that end, I indicate years of composition, whenever they can be ascertained; all translations are mine; and I translate Heidegger’s words for presence as follows. Inevitably, some of these choices are arbitrary. I will occasionally insert the German as a reminder or clarification.

<i>An-wesen</i>	presence-to
<i>An-wesung</i>	pre-sencing
<i>Anwesen</i>	presence
<i>anwesen</i>	to presence
<i>anwesend</i>	present (adj.)
<i>Anwesende, das</i>	what is present
<i>Anwesenden, die</i>	those that presence
<i>Anwesendes</i>	what presences
<i>Anwesendmachen</i>	present-making
<i>Anwesendsein</i>	being-present
<i>Anwesenheit</i>	presentness
<i>Anwesung</i>	presencing
<i>entgegen-warten</i>	presently await-toward
<i>entgegenwarten</i>	presently await
<i>Gegen-wart</i>	awaiting-toward
<i>Gegenwart</i>	the present
<i>gegenwärtig</i> (adj.)	in the present
<i>gegenwärtig</i> (adv.)	presently
<i>Gegenwärtige, das</i>	what is in the present
<i>gegenwärtigen</i>	make present
<i>Gegenwärtigkeit</i>	in-the-present-ness
<i>Gegenwärtigsein</i>	being-in-the-present
<i>Gegenwärtigung</i>	making-present
<i>Mitanwesenheit</i>	copresentness
<i>präsent</i>	Present
<i>Präsentation</i>	presentation
<i>präsentieren</i>	to present
<i>präsentisch</i>	present-oriented
<i>Präsenz, Praesenz</i>	Presence
<i>ungegenwärtigen</i>	to unpresent
<i>vergegenwärtigen</i>	presentify
<i>Vergegenwärtigung</i>	presentification

To further confuse matters, certain expressions in Heideggerian English appear to refer directly to presence but do not. “Presence-at-hand” and “objective presence” are not misguided translations of *Vorhandenheit*, but the German word does not explicitly name presence. As for *vorstellen*, I follow the tradition of translating it as “represent,” but it literally means “to set before.”

More problematically, the verb *wesen* has been translated as “to presence.” *Das Seyn west* becomes “beyng presences.” “Beyng” is a convenient counterpart to the antique *Seyn* – but is *wesen* equivalent to *anwesen*? “*Anwesung*

constitutes the first flaring up of *one Wesung* of beyng” (GA65, 1936–38: 31). “Now the essence of beyng no longer means only *Anwesenheit*, but the full *Wesung* of . . . truth” (GA65: 32). “*Wesung*, not grasped as such, is *Anwesenung*” (GA65: 189). We must avoid translating *Wesung* as “presencing”; otherwise, these statements make no sense.

Here is how I translate a few words that are related to presence, but do not directly include it.

<i>Ab-wesen</i>	being absent
<i>Abwesen</i>	absence
<i>abwesen</i>	be absent
<i>abwesend</i>	absent
<i>Abwesenheit</i>	absentness
<i>Ab-wesung</i>	ab-sencing
<i>Abwesung</i>	absencing
<i>gewärtigen</i>	await
<i>vorhanden</i>	at hand
<i>Vorhandenheit</i>	at-handness
<i>Vorhandensein</i>	being-at-hand
<i>vorstellen</i>	represent
<i>Vorstellung</i>	representation
<i>Wesen</i>	essence
<i>wesen</i>	to essence
<i>Wesung</i>	essencing

The varieties of presence have long been a theme for phenomenologists. For example, Husserl analyzes presentification in his 1905 lectures on time-consciousness (1964: 57–71, 116–17, 124–26), edited and cited by Heidegger in 1928 (GA26: 263–64). Other readers have also tackled the sense and status of presence in Heidegger (e.g., Marx, 1971; Carman, 1995; Olafson, 1996; Dastur, 2014; Backman, 2015; Backman et al., 2019). It is beyond my scope to do justice to this intricate literature, although I cite some highlights.

Instead, I focus on Heidegger’s own texts – now available in the hundred-some volumes of his *Gesamtausgabe*. I have chosen some striking passages and followed a few important lines of thought. I cannot explain every context, and I encourage readers to explore alternatives. This short study is a set of indications for further research – not a doctrine from either Heidegger or me.

What follows is primarily a study in the history of philosophy. But since history and phenomenology are intertwined, I include a few scenarios that describe experiences and begin experimental reflections, illustrating a few complexities of presence.

Now we must ask: What is being (Section 2)? What is presence, and how broad is its scope (Section 3)? How does Heidegger's critique of presence evolve (Section 4)? How does it apply to the "history of being" (Section 5)? What difference do his thoughts on presence make (Section 6)?

2 The Meaning of "Being"

I pry into my memory and discover myself as a prying boy, lifting a slate flagstone in my garden. I almost drop it as the writhing and teeming hits me. Life thrives underneath: a salamander, worms, pillbugs, ants. They must be as shocked by the light as I am by their existence. I savor the shiver that runs through me as I recognize that they're there, that they were already there, and that countless other creatures are squirming under other flagstones on which I've run day after day, never thinking to look beneath.

It's as if I never knew my garden until now.

It's as if I never knew myself until now.

What does "being" mean? This basic question is still not discussed enough in Heidegger scholarship. "Basic" does not mean easy, and by avoiding it we end up speaking at cross purposes, or not even knowing what we mean. Is Heidegger inquiring into the usage of the word *Sein*? Processes in the universe? Human culture and practice? Or all these and more, without alerting us to the ambiguities?

Being has many aspects. The problem of their unity first stimulated Heidegger's thinking (GA14, 1963: 93/74). Importantly, being embraces essence and existence – "what-being" and "that-being." What it means *that an entity is* is tied to *what kind of entity it is*. "Actuality itself essentially varies . . . The full essence of an entity concerns both the *what* of an entity and the *how* of its possible or actual actuality" (GA33, 1931: 223). Existence for a rock is not existence for a salamander. Heidegger's question of being always has this "existential" element, which we obscure if we take him to be asking only about typologies. Although he is not raising "ontic" questions about what in particular is or is not actual, he *is* investigating what it *means* for things to be actual.

This question of meaning is crucial. Being means something to us – we understand it – even though we have trouble articulating it. This understanding conditions every experience, although it usually stays in the background (SZ: 6). As I step on a rock, I understand that its being is rocklike, and that I cannot step on a person as if on a rock. (People do step on each other, but cruelty, inconsideration, and cheerleading are relations to humans, not rocks.)

The being of an entity, then, is what it means *to us* that the entity is, as the kind of entity that it is. Heidegger goes farther: Being is not given at all except to