

# 1.

## ABANDONMENT OF BEING (SEINSVERLASSENHEIT)

**A**BANDONMENT OF BEING means at the same time both our abandoning being by covering up being as a condition that lets being be, and (reading the genitive the other way) it also means the abandonment of us *by* being as being withdraws from us. Since everything we do is really a response to being, these two add up to pretty much the same thing for Heidegger. Being has abandoned us by abandoning entities, a strange idea since we and entities always have to have being as long as we are. The best way to approach this idea is to see it as an adaptation of a central notion in Kant's and Husserl's thought. Perhaps the main insight in Kant's first *Critique* and Husserl's work in general is that despite how it appears, we don't just open our eyes and find reality laid out before us, imposing itself on our consciousness by bumping into us; this kind of empiricist realism amounts to naiveté or dogmatism. Their discovery was that a great deal goes into the having of an experience, much of it on the part of consciousness. For us to perceive an object for Kant, the transcendental faculties must organize sensory data, giving it qualities such as time, space, causality, and objectivity. For Husserl, transcendental subjectivity stitches together an array of adumbrations or sides into a unified entity, thus conferring upon it the status of a single, persistent, independently existing object. We see many-sided objects instead of a series of discrete sides – indeed, we see them as *sides* at all – because we fuse them together, like squeezing used slivers of soap into a single transcendental bar. Sides are, so to speak, intentional: sides are always sides *of* something, and it is our transcendental constitution of the object that attaches them to it as sides of it. For both, what seems to lie before us as a gift is largely a product of our own unconscious labor.

*Being and Time* largely follows this strategy, albeit with important changes. DASEIN opens the CLEARING – the condition for the possibility of experiencing anything – by being-in-a-world; this in turn takes place on the basis of her caring for herself, which is ultimately made possible by her TEMPORALITY. Although, like Kant's processing, this largely takes place without our conscious control, rather like our autonomic nervous system or our fabrication of our own dreams, it is still our doing. On the other hand, like Husserl's active syntheses, we can exert some control over the process: when we still our unthinking use of a tool to stare at it, we change its mode of being from AVAILABLE to OCCURRENT. These modes of being correlate with, and are the result of, our stance toward entities and are ultimately due to features of our nature. (See Blattner 1999 for a detailed presentation of this reading.) This is one reason why the foundation of ONTOLOGY lies in the existential analytic, i.e., the analysis of Dasein's way of being.

Although Heidegger's critiques of his early work are often more exculpatory than critical, a fairly consistent thread objects to how subjectivistic and transcendental they are. He often limits the critique to his choice of terminology for suggesting such an interpretation to careless readers while denying that it is correct, but these excuses generally rely on what strike me as

implausible, “violent” reworkings of what he actually wrote, forcing it into alignment with his contemporary views.

In any case, Heidegger in his later works sees this entire line of thinking – from Descartes through Kant to Nietzsche, with roots reaching back to Plato – as “FORGETFULNESS OF BEING.”

Human beings continually have to do with being, and yet it is alien to them. They have to do with being inasmuch as they constantly relate to entities, but it is alien to them inasmuch as they turn away from being, because they do not grasp it at all; instead, they believe that entities are only entities and nothing further (GA40:139/138).

We cover up being with a realism that ignores the conditions that make awareness possible: “light never first creates the clearing. Rather, light presupposes it” (GA14:81/BW 442). Or, in the modern era, we ourselves take credit for the existence and nature of the entities around us, or at least our awareness of them: “the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct” (GA7:28/BW 332). This idealist/technological stance ignores the fact that we can only become aware of things if being “sends” us a clearing, i.e., gives us this capacity. We do not open up the clearing; we are given or thrown into it. All attempts to explain entities or to discover their BEINGNESS (i.e., the universal characteristics that define reality) – that is, METAPHYSICS – abandons being by taking either entities (in realism) or ourselves (in idealism) as the self-sufficient grounds of reality and awareness, ignoring what makes them possible in turn.

However, Heidegger stresses that this erring is not our fault; it is due to being itself. Our abandonment of being is conditioned by its abandoning of us, leading us to the opposed-with-shared-origin errors of thinking that either “entities are only entities and nothing further” or “everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct.” We find these ideas plausible because being withdraws by its very nature. In unconcealing entities, this very event of UNCONCEALMENT is itself concealed. Being, the event of manifestation, deflects our attention onto the things that are manifest. We don’t think about the fact that a pen is or that we can experience it, for example; we just pick it up and write. “The abandonment of entities by being means that BEYNG *conceals itself* in the manifestness of entities. And beyng itself is essentially determined as this self-withdrawing concealment” (GA65:111). This is no accident; it is the nature of being to love to hide, as Heraclitus says. Being doesn’t conceal itself *behind* entities, but *in* their appearance to us, *as* this very appearing.

In this way, Heidegger’s later analysis of the abandonment of being can still be seen as combating something like transcendental dogmatism or phenomenological naiveté, but no longer by appealing to consciousness or Dasein. “The abandonment of entities by being gives them the appearance that they themselves, without needing anything else, are now there to be grasped and used. . . . Entities then appear *in that way*, namely as objects and as things objectively present, as if beyng were not occurring essentially” (GA65:115). It is naive to think that entities are just there and impinge upon our awareness when they knock into us, but it is equally naive to think that it is we who have prepared the way for them to become manifest to us, the way Kant, Husserl, and, I believe, early Heidegger did. Metaphysics exacerbates abandonment by giving answers to the question of being: “where . . . entities as entities have become obvious (and consequently the

*Abandonment of Being (Seinsverlassenheit) / 5*

question of being is merely a pursuit of ‘ontology’ as a fixed discipline), then no one thinks to ask how entities as entities come into the open and what this opening might be, and how it takes place. . . . The abandonment by being is consoled by the absence of the question of truth” (GA45:198/170).

However, as Heidegger likes to quote Hölderlin, the danger also contains the saving power (GA7:29/BW 333, GA11:119/QCT 42). In the word “*Seinsverlassenheit*” we find the word “*lassen*,” to let. This is a very important word in Heidegger’s later work; he even says that, “the deepest meaning of being is *letting*. Letting the being be, this is the non-causal meaning of ‘letting’” (GA15:363/FS 59). Being lets entities be by opening up a clearing that lets entities through to our thinking. This helps us reconceive the nature of thinking as something fundamentally receptive, instead of the transcendental tradition’s emphasis on activity – constituting, organizing, synthesizing, bestowing. “With the relation of letting-presence to ALÊTHEIA, the whole question about the being of entities is removed from the Kantian framework of the constitution of objects” (GA14:56/OTB 46). We receive an understanding that being lets us have, that lets through entities and lets us understand them, one that lets us make sense of and encounter entities. All activity takes place on the basis of this prior receptivity.

The proper attitude for us to take to this fundamental enabling is what he calls in *Being and Time* (in a different context) a “reciprocal rejoinder” (SZ 386). Whereas being lets entities come to presence, we can let being itself come to presence by thinking about this event, so that “the essence, the coming to presence, of being enters into its own emitting of light” (GA11:121/QCT 45; see also GA14:84–5/BW 445). At its best, our thinking reflects, re-enacts being in that we reveal the revelation: “originary thinking is the echo of being’s favor, of a favor in which a singular event is cleared and lets come to pass: that entities are” (GA9:310/236). That is why our “letting entities be, is the fulfillment and consummation of the essence of truth in the sense of the disclosure of entities” (GA9:190/BW 127): we disclose the disclosure. Letting be or RELEASUREMENT (*Gelassenheit*) is the great Aristotelian virtue of Heidegger’s later thought: it is when we are most ourselves and when we are our best selves. Cultivating this attending to and tending of the event which lets being let entities be – what he calls being the shepherd or tender of being – is our proper (“*eigentlich*”) response and responsibility.

If this turning comes to pass, our contemporary NIHILISM and “desolation” (another sense of *Verlassenheit*) may turn away by turning itself inside out, turning abandonment (*Verlassenheit*) into releasement (*Gelassenheit*), the danger into the saving power. This is not something we can do on our own, nor is it a simple switch. We cannot solve the problem by just turning our attention to being; it must show itself to us and it always does so in a partially concealing way. Our task in this desolate time is to become aware of and train our attention on the fact that being has withdrawn and abandoned us, which may prepare for its favoring us once more. If we can realize that our present desolation is itself sent by being, this would point us toward being as the giver of all SENSE, thus curing our transcendental narcissism and resulting cosmic loneliness (another possible translation of *Verlassenheit*). This changes the early existential thrownness from an abandonment in life to the granting of a clearing. We have been granted this miraculous opportunity to receive the manifestation of reality, and standing within even a desolate clearing should fill us with awe-filled gratitude. We need to stop taking for granted that which has been granted to us. Being grateful for our nihilistic epoch is the beginning of the turning of that

nihilism into a meaning-ful understanding of being, which is what I think Heidegger means by the return of the gods. Although being withdraws, if we embraced its withdrawal, it would no longer be an abandonment.

*Lee Braver*

REFERENCES IN HEIDEGGER

SZ 2–4; GA8; GA65:10–2; GA40:139/138; GA66:90; GA45:184–90

**ABIDE, ABIDING (WEILEN). SEE LINGERING.**

## 2. ABILITY-TO-BE (*SEINKÖNNEN*)

**A**N ABILITY-TO-BE is the capacity to inhabit a particular range of possibilities. It involves possessing the understanding, skills, and affective inclination to pursue these possibilities. Ability-to-be defines DASEIN's own relation to its being. Each Dasein has its own ability to be. It cannot be separated from Heidegger's explanation of Dasein's being as existence, and in particular the latter's characterization as POSSIBILITY.

The concept of an ability-to-be belongs to the period of *Being and Time* and the lectures that come before and just after it. Heidegger very rarely uses this expression in his later work. It is part of his reappropriation of Aristotle's ontology for the analytic of Dasein. It can be interpreted as his translation of the Greek *dunamis*. Of course, this is a creative repetition of Aristotle's original vocabulary. What Heidegger means by "ability-to-be" is not exactly the same as what Aristotle meant by *dunamis*. One very important difference, so as to stress the singular ontological nature of Dasein, whose being is an issue for it, is that Heidegger prioritizes the possible over the actual, whereas in Aristotle the relation is the other way around. "Higher than actuality," Heidegger writes in the introduction to *Being and Time*, "stands possibility" (SZ 38). He can do so, because possibility is not defined here in a logical or formal sense, as merely the opposite to necessity, but ontologically as a specific way of being of Dasein.

Dasein is, but not as some 'thing' either OCCURRENT or AVAILABLE. No doubt, Dasein can be understood as a thing but this is not primarily how Dasein is. The selfhood of Dasein is not a substance, even some kind of mysterious one. It is the drama of existence. This is why it can make sense to say I have lost or gained myself, or I am not truly myself. Each Dasein is uniquely itself, and in each Dasein the world is born again in terms of possibility. Ability-to-be names the individualization of each Dasein, how each one of us has to answer the question of existence, and why the being of Dasein is always "mine" (SZ 232). This is why, when Heidegger speaks of an ability-to-be, he usually adds "own" or "ownmost" (*eigen, eigenste*). Yet, in a certain sense, these expressions are redundant, for an ability-to-be is always "owned" in some way or another, even if it is "disowned."

Dasein relates to its being. It does so because its being is a question for it, even if this question remains unanswered. Its being is its possibilities, and it relates to them through the UNDERSTANDING. "Understanding" in English has far too much a cognitive flavor for what Heidegger means by *das Verstehen*. For a start I do not relate to my possibilities by thinking about them. They are revealed to me through my moods. When you meet someone and ask "how are you?" you are asking them about their mood, and how or what they reply, verbally or not, reveals to you their possibilities. Most of the time, of course, I do not answer this question sincerely, so nothing of my world is revealed to me, or to the other who asked me this question.

This is why, when Heidegger speaks of an ability-to-be, the question of AUTHENTICITY and inauthenticity is never far behind, since in being my ownmost potentiality for being, I am authentic, and in not, inauthentic. Heidegger stresses that this distinction is not a moral one, even though the translation tends to push in that direction. It belongs to the very being of

Dasein that it understands its possibilities in terms of how everyone else does. This is not a failure or a lack on my part. To understand myself in terms of my own possibilities, to seize the possibilities that have fallen to me, and to have the courage to be who I already was (all ways of making sense of an ability-to-be), can only be a modification of inauthentic existence.

One's ownmost ability-to-be cannot be separated from ANXIETY and DEATH. In anxiety, I am not fearful of this or that possibility, but the possible as such. This does not mean I am anxious of all my possibilities, but my existence as a whole out of which all my possibilities emerge. My existence is not this or that thing, but quite literally "nothing at all," which Heidegger describes as my "null-being" (SZ 305). To face the meaning of one's existence out of this experience of "meaninglessness," is to become aware of one's own "being-toward-death." Death, in this sense, is not a fact or actuality, but my death as a possibility, which is ever-present but I cannot foresee. This death is the impossibility of every possibility, and in confronting it I have the option of choosing my own ability-to-be, whatever that might be for me, rather than just living the life of everyone else, which I have not decided.

With his emphasis on one's ownmost ability-to-be, one might accuse Heidegger of reducing existence to a solipsism. To this accusation he answers, in the lectures *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, that this would be again to confuse an ontological distinction with a moral one, as though it were a fault of Dasein that it had to choose its own way of being, as opposed to not choosing itself and putting others before itself. Of course, one way in which Dasein could individuate itself would be to put others before itself, but this moral choice is only possible because of the ontology of Dasein and not the other way around. As when, for example, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes two ways of being with others, one in which we free them for their own possibilities, and the other, where we attempt to overpower and control them (SZ 122).

*William Large*

#### REFERENCES IN HEIDEGGER

SZ 86, 122, 143–45, 188, 191–94, 221, 231–33, 250–52, 287–88, 336–37; GA9:157/121, 168–69/129–30; GA18:224; GA20:422, 433; GA21:219, 236, 412–14; GA22:140–41; GA24:242, 390, 409, 418; GA26:239, 266, 276; GA89:208–9

#### FURTHER READING

Blattner 1996, Carter 2014, McNeill 2009, Volpi 1996

**ABODE (AUFENTHALT). SEE SOJOURN.**

### 3. ABYSS (ABGRUND)

**A**N ABYSS IN general is something that cannot be fathomed – that is, a phenomenon that defeats any effort to explain, determine, define, rationalize it, or make it intelligible using conceptual resources. Heidegger also uses “abyss” as a term of art to refer to a specific and important type of abyss in the more general sense. “Abyss” in Heidegger’s specific sense is something that grounds the BEING of a thing precisely by refusing to determine it. Heidegger often indicates that he is using “abyss” in this specific sense by hyphenating the term (“a-byss,” *Ab-grund*)<sup>1</sup>, or by referring to it as an “abyssal ground” (*abgründige Grund*). A true decision or a free act, the genuine beginning of a new historical age – such things are constituted as what they are by the lack of any fully determining antecedent. Thus, the ground or reason for their being what they are is that they lack a determinate ground or reason. As Heidegger puts it in perhaps his clearest definition of an abyss in the special sense, an “a-byss” (*Ab-grund*) is

that which releases into its essence what is groundable, but in such a way that that which is doing the releasing refuses itself and thereby denies to the grounding anything occurrent, or a reference to or insistence on anything occurrent. Instead, it gives to it the necessity of decision (GA69:98).

When we experience an abyss in this specific, ontological sense (that is, an abyss as defining the being of something), it is not merely something negative. It doesn’t simply present us with a failure of our ability to understand or define or make sense of the world. Instead, it has an “existential positivity” (GA20:402). It is a positive determining feature of some things that the reason they are what they are is that they are lacking in reasons or foundations: “the ground grounds as a-byss” (*Der Grund gründet als Ab-grund*, GA65:29).

Heidegger makes frequent use of “abyss” in the generic sense, that is, to describe things that resist being explained or made intelligible in conceptual terms. The SENSE of being is an abyss (SZ 152). Philosophy at its most fundamental level “necessarily moves in an abyss” (GA28:310), because it lacks secure foundations for its arguments or theories. TIME (GA29/30:220) is an abyss that can never be conceptually grasped (later, Heidegger explores at some length the idea that time-space is an abyss in the more specific sense; see GA43:287; GA65:371–88). Animals are separated from humans by an abyss (GA29/30:384) because we lack the experience and categories necessary to fully understand the animal’s impoverished relationship to its world. Non-being and the NOTHING are abysses – they resist our best efforts to make sense of them (GA40:118/116). Given that LANGUAGE offers us the conceptual resources we ordinarily draw

<sup>1</sup> By hyphenating it, Heidegger can indicate that the abyss is, as an abyss, also offering a ground in some sense. The root word – “byss” comes from the Greek *bussos* or *bathos* – means literally the bottom of the sea, but figuratively a substance that grounds perceptible attributes but is never itself directly perceived.



on to make everything else intelligible, it is perhaps surprising that Heidegger argues that language, too, is an abyss in the generic sense. While allowing us to explain other things, it itself resists being made intelligible to us (see GA12:11/PLT 189; GA11:48/HR 293). This is in part because “between the unintelligible word and the mere sound grasped in acoustic abstraction lies an abyss of essential difference” (GA8:88/130).

Heidegger invokes the idea of an abyss as an abyssal ground in the specific sense at various key points in his work. We’ve already noted that FREEDOM (GA9:174/134; GA65:438; GA66:237), decision (GA65:470), and historical beginnings (GA70:10ff.) are all constituted by the fact that their ground is an abyss. Creativity also is constituted by an abyss, as the creator gives birth to something new, and thus is constituted by the relationship to a lack of antecedents (GA65:40). Heidegger argues that DEATH is for DASEIN an abyss (GA20:402–03), because it is our capacity for death that defines us, but it defines us by refusing to allow us to be determined in terms of any occurrent properties or features or relationships we might happen to possess (see also GA65:285). We Dasein, as transcendent beings, are an abyss – that is, as always transcending our factual characteristics, we can never make ourselves fully intelligible even to ourselves:

in TRANSCENDENCE Dasein surpasses itself as a being; more exactly, this surpassing makes it possible that Dasein can be something like itself. In first surpassing itself, the abyss is opened which Dasein, in each case, is for itself (GA26:233–34).

The “distinguishing mark of the Dasein” is the fact that we can descend into the abyss “unprotected and unsupported” (GA65:487) – in other words, that we can determine ourselves on the basis of a free, creative relationship to the nothing (GA9:312/237–38).

The CLEARING is the abyss of grounds – it allows entities and events to show up as having reasons, by withdrawing itself from notice, let alone understanding (see GA65:352).

The wrestling and mutually determining interaction of the FOURFOLD of EARTH, sky, mortals, and divinities is an abyss – there is no determinate and necessary reason for the configuration that they settle into in any given instance (GA65:486).

Heidegger distinguishes an abyss from an unground. An abyss provides a kind of grounds precisely by withdrawing or holding back any determining reason for the way things are. An unground presents the appearance of a determining reason, but in fact it is an illusion (see GA40:5/3).

*Mark A. Wrathall*

#### REFERENCES IN HEIDEGGER

- GA3:167–8, 215; GA5:269–71/200–02, 275/205, 372/281; GA9:165/127, 174–75/134–35, 312/237–38; GA15:298–99/FS 18; GA16:192; GA20:402; GA21:378; GA26:234; GA27:50; GA28:310–11; GA29/30:6, 115, 220, 384, 409, 411; GA38:19/177; GA39:24, 52–53, 105–07, 222, 243; GA40:5/3, 118/116, 121/120; GA42:235; GA43:287; GA45:193; GA51:61–63, 68, 74; GA60:23; GA65:13, 26, 29, 31, 40, 76–77, 139, 236, 280, 285, 307–08, 317, 325, 331, 346, 350, 352, 369–70, 379–88, 438–39, 460, 470–72, 482, 485–90; GA66:11, 22–24, 37, 46, 52, 54, 63, 83–102, 112–13, 116, 125, 131–32, 219–20, 236, 241–42, 295, 307–12, 395; GA67:20–21, 62, 65, 80; GA68:3, 45–48, 98; GA69:98, 213; GA70:10–11, 13, 15, 53, 59, 71, 100, 172, 178; GA75:31–32, 75–76, 122–23, 153; GA79:112–14, 128, 153–54, 159, 175; SZ 152



**ACCOMPLISHMENT (*VOLLZUG*). SEE ACTUALIZATION.**

**ACCUSTOM (*WOHNEN*). SEE DWELLING.**

**ACT OF INTUITION (*ANSCHAUUNG*). SEE INTUITION.**

**ACT OF UNDERSTANDING (*VERSTEHEN*). SEE UNDERSTANDING.**

**ACTUALLY (*FAKTISCH*). SEE FACTICITY.**

## 4.

ACTUALITY (*WIRKLICHKEIT*)

ACTUALITY IS A state or condition of being real, effectual, or actuated (i.e., “at work”). Unlike DASEIN and the OCCURRENT (*Vorhandene*) in Heidegger’s early period, or the FOURFOLD (*Geviert*) and THING (*Ding*) in the later works, actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) does not typically behave like a technical term in Heidegger’s oeuvre; nor does it name one of Heidegger’s own abiding topics, except in contexts where Heidegger is creatively appropriating the thought of his predecessors. The term occurs frequently in the corpus (to judge by the *Heidegger Concordance*, more often than most others), but many uses are *casual* and not strictly philosophical. The most abundant occurrences are to be found in courses of lectures and seminars dealing with Aristotle, on the one hand (where *Wirklichkeit* often translates the Greek *energeia*), and German Idealism, on the other, with Hegel’s well-known claim about the rationality of the actual, and Schelling’s anxieties about the actuality of evil, more or less clearly in view, and with the metaphysics of the will, as the last stage in the metaphysics of subjectivity, as Heidegger’s principal concern, and the problem of NIHILISM as the driving force.<sup>1</sup>

Other occurrences, early and late, are tied to a discussion of the modal categories, although Heidegger tends to dismiss the philosophical value of this logical, or formal, way of dealing with the nature and concept of the actual and its actuality, for reasons tied to a long-standing conviction that our *logoi* ought to embody our best efforts to say what entities themselves are, in opposition to the technical orientation of modern and contemporary thought, and the related temptation to construct methods or techniques of thinking divorced from concrete engagement with subject-matter.<sup>2</sup> In *SZ*, actuality is said, famously, to be inferior to POSSIBILITY, at least as far as extant PHENOMENOLOGY is concerned (*SZ* 38).

In the earliest lecture courses, and occasionally beyond, Heidegger employs the term, loosely, as a synonym for “reality” (*Realität*), in which case it means to capture the being of something occurrent (or extant), stripped of its significance (the being of an object), or to convey, broadly but more significantly, the effectiveness of an event or an approach to an important historical happening (more on this below). The more interesting uses of “actuality” come during the period of Heidegger’s efforts to think through the meaning of work and production (*Arbeit*, *Werk*, *poiêsis*), with Aristotle, and the Greeks more generally, chiefly in view, and in a way tethered eventually to Heidegger’s deep and long-standing engagement with art, and poetry in particular, as an original way of disclosing, against what he takes to be the reductive tendencies in the modern era. (Think of “kinetic energy” in modern physics.) And it is this use of the term that deserves close and careful attention.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the seminar on Schelling and Hegel published as GA86 and the volume *Zu Ernst Jünger* (GA90).

<sup>2</sup> For one of the most scathing attacks on formal logic, see GA21:12–19. Heidegger’s references to actuality as a modal category are too numerous to reference here. For a representative discussion, see *SZ* 143–44.