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HEIDEGGER,  
BEING,  
AND TRUTH

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by LASZLO VERSÉNYI

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approaching and inevitable end of life would quicken one's sense of life; it would lend existence an extraordinary sense of urgency, a consciousness of now or never. But would it do more than that, would it actually help us make any concrete resolutions, and would such resolutions once made be necessarily authentic? This is to be doubted.

To begin with, the urgency the thought of death lends life is quite general and indefinite; it makes life as such urgent but fails to disclose what in particular is truly urgent in my life. Heidegger himself insists that the call of conscience that calls man into facing death as his own tells him nothing, gives him no information; "nothing" is called to the self that is called" (BT 273/318), the "call speaks in the eerie mode of silence" (BT 277/322), it simply calls the self "to its own self" (BT 273/318). Therefore, facing death may make me aware of the fact that my life has to be lived and lived by me, but not of what exactly the particular life that is to be lived by me is. It may bring home the fact of my finitude in general (that I will not live forever and therefore have to live now), but not what I as a particular finite being am. It may make me aware of my ultimate limit (death) but not of my particular ones, of my temporal end but not of my particular ends, of my purposiveness in general but not of my particular purposes. As such, being-unto-death is an ultimate definition of (a setting limits to) my existence that, in effect, fails to define it, as to content, in any way whatsoever.

Heidegger rightly sees that facing death in all its threatening imminence will make our immediate cares and concerns irrelevant, break down our unthinking routine, lift us out of our often unessential relations to the beings (human or other) in our world, and thus it may well be the first step toward resolutions that will make our existence more authentic. But what Heidegger fails to see is that this is all that facing death can be and do. It can momentarily

free us from (possibly unessential) involvements and thus free us for (possibly more essential) new involvements, but it cannot free us, i.e. deliver us, into our essential involvements (the ones we should be actually involved in because we are already—by nature—thrown into, involved in, them), because it fails to disclose them, and thus fails to disclose ourselves to ourselves.

Heidegger's "authenticity" of existence is, after all, but a new name for the age-old concept of *arete*: the excellence in being what one is, the fulfillment of one's own particular functions; true self-realization in the sense of self-disclosure and self-fulfillment. Authenticity is a demand for man because human Dasein is characterized by both facticity and existentiality: it has necessary possibilities (functions to fulfill), but these possibilities that it is "thrown into" are not already realized (by nature) but have to be realized—disclosed and fulfilled—by Dasein itself, and Dasein is aware of this fact.

But being-unto-death will not help us become authentic because it will not give us any insight into our essential functions. Urging us to decision but not to any particular decision, making it clear that we must choose but not what—let alone how—we must choose, being merely "a choice of this choice, the decision for being able to be oneself on one's own" (BT 268/313) but not a revelation of what this self is, facing death will bring us to the brink of resolution but it will leave us there hovering, completely irresolute. It will detach us from the (possibly unauthentic) life we lead, detach us from other human beings, detach us from the things of this world, but precisely because it will do so it will not rightly detach us from our detachment and lead us back into a more authentic life.

In effect, being-unto-death volatilizes our existence rather than makes it concrete, and the uniqueness (*Jemeinigkeit*) it supposedly provides is no more than an empty concept,

the emotional version of a Kantian transcendental idea. To be a unique self, I need to realize not only that no one can die my death and thus no one can live my life for me, but also what exactly I as a supposedly unique individual self am. To be a finite self I have to realize not only that I have to die and thus must live while I can, but also what exactly my finite limits and potentialities of life are. Authenticity does not come from a merely negative realization (of the necessity and imminence of death) and a merely negative movement (away from my present projects, concerns, involvements). It requires a positive realization (of what I truly am) and a positive movement (back into a more essential life). And Heidegger's "authentic resolve" in the face of death does not provide these. Therefore in practice it will not only fail to make me unique: it will fail to make me even a particular human being because it abstracts (me) from all my particular concerns<sup>4</sup> and thus in fact it abstracts "me" (a supposedly unique and inalienable but in fact completely empty self) from myself. I am a self not so much in my relation to my own death as in the totality of my temporal cares and concerns, in the whole of my worldly relations to other beings in my world. It is only in and through these that I can be related to myself—to a self that is more than an empty idea—and being-unto-death, isolating "me" from all my worldly relations, hides rather than reveals these—and thus myself—to me.

To be sure, the confrontation with death will not leave us permanently suspended in a state of indecision and inaction. Its very urgency will soon plunge us back into life. But, since facing death does not of itself give our resolution any content, this urgency is blind and directionless, and thus our reentry into worldly existence will be more of a headlong flight into the first best possibility of

4. For Heidegger, it is only in unauthentic existence that "one is' what one does" (BT 239/283).

Being, into any possibility at all, than a choice of one's true self; it will be more an escape from irresoluteness than an authentic resolution. Heidegger's authentic resolve in the face of death is, therefore, not just empty—making us free for, open to, decision, but leaving the decision itself completely open—it is also dangerous. It leads to a blind leap and—if resoluteness implies steadfastness in what is resolved—a blind adherence. It is more of a hindrance than a help to authentic existence.

What Heidegger's insistence on resolute decisions, on the choosing of choice, leaves completely out of account is that authenticity is not necessarily achieved by *my* choosing a way of life for myself—rather than following the "one"—and abiding by my choice; it is achieved, rather, by my adoption of the way of life that is—already, potentially—my own and therefore necessary for me to adopt. Were not some particular finite possibilities of Being more essential for me than others (since I am already factually projected in them although I have not yet realized them existentially) the choice would be meaningless, since no choice, even the "choice not to choose," could possibly be wrong, and authentic existence would be neither a problem nor an existential demand for man. But if choices are meaningful and authenticity is a problem for man, then being-unto-death is no solution to the problem even though it results in resolutions. For what makes resolutions authentic is not that *I* happened to make them but that they were the right ones for me to make. And it is not the urgency of the decision—in the face of death—that makes my decision right—essential for me—but the much more difficult process of cool deliberation: reflection on life as a rich and varied complex of possibilities rather than just on death as their ultimate end and negation. Such reflection requires not so much the facing of an indefinite future as it requires the facing of a definite past: an examination of the many par-

illumine human existence ecstatically, by stepping out of it altogether and throwing a more than human light upon it from without. There is nothing wrong with the logic of this movement of reversal; what is wrong is simply one of its premises. But this makes Heidegger's whole conversion a kind of error and erring: a movement that moves from a false premise, through twisted paths, to a paradoxical conclusion.

The basic premise of Heidegger's conversion or reversal is that (since *Being and Time* failed and *Being and Time* was humanistic) with the failure of *Being and Time* humanism as such failed. But this is an unacceptable premise. *Being and Time* failed to provide solutions to the problem of human existence not because it was humanistic but because it was not humanistic enough, i.e. because, in spite of its humanistic beginning, in one respect—in its proposal of a way to authentic existence—it already anticipated the nonhumanistic standpoint of the latest writings.

*Being and Time* correctly defined man as the being concerned about its own Being, the being whose essence is self-directed questioning, a progressive self-disclosure of and self-projection into its self-disclosed possibilities of Being. But when it came to finding a way in which to make man essential, Heidegger almost completely ignored his own definition of the essence of man—as involved in a self-directed questioning—and proposed a way that was in effect the opposite of all existential, self-reflective, self-disclosing dialogue: being-unto-death, the facing of the negation of all of Dasein's possibilities, which lifted man out of his questioning of and preoccupation with his worldly possibilities, disclosed nothing about the self, and put an end to, rather than promoted, rational self-reflection. In *Being and Time* Heidegger had characterized man as an ontological being—one whose essence is to understand its Being—but in spite of this he proposed a solution to man's

problems—measureless dread in the face of an equally measureless threat—that precluded all understanding. He described man as a teleological, aim-directed, purposive being, but he forgot that one important component of being teleological is *logos*, a rational comprehension of one's aim and purpose and a rational search for and calculation of ways and means to attain it. This omission of, and indeed outright opposition to, rationality on Heidegger's part in effect anticipated his attitude toward reason and understanding in the latest writings, and it was this anticipation of the conclusions of his last hermeneutic period in the first that accounted for the ethical failure of *Being and Time*. But this anticipation—that the essence of man was not existentiality, ontology, and teleology, but the life without why, and that therefore the way to become essential was an unquestioning leap and a blind trust in something beyond man—was not humanistic; it was directly contradictory to the humanistic definition of man. Thus Heidegger's conclusion, that a conversion from humanism to nonhumanism was necessary, was the necessary result of the presupposition of the (nonhumanistic) conclusion in the argument for it.

The circularity of Heidegger's conversion—of his own failure to elaborate a truly humanistic philosophy into the failure of humanism as such—is highly deplorable for two reasons: it led to an impossible demand (for nonhumanistic definitions of man and Being, and for a nonhuman existence), and it led away from a real demand (for self-fulfillment here and now) and a usable definition of man on whose basis an ethics designed for human use could have been developed.

In his last writings Heidegger is intent on getting away from an immanent definition of man, and on defining man's essence on the basis of an independent definition of Being. But this attempt to overcome humanism proves to be as

futile as the one at overcoming metaphysics. In the first place, as I have tried to show in the preceding section, we have no direct access to the Absolute and cannot therefore attain to a nonmetaphysical, nonhumanistic definition of Being. This absence of an independent (of man) definition of Being makes a nonhumanistic definition of man (based on an independent, nonhumanistic definition of Being) equally unattainable, and turns our efforts at obtaining one into the paradoxical effort to define something unknown but knowable (man or Being as disclosed by the human understanding) on the basis of something not only unknown but also utterly unknowable and undefinable (absolutely transcendent Being as such).

In the second place, even if we had a supposedly independent definition of Being—by way of a direct revelation such as all religions lay a claim to and, in the end, Heidegger arrogates—this would not get us any closer to a nonhumanistic definition of man, or even of Being. For any definition of Being would have to be comprehensible to man—in order to *define* Being for man—and would thus have to be given in human rather than nonhuman terms. Being may well be Wholly Other in itself; but if we are to hearken to it and respond to its Voice it must not speak *to us* in a wholly other tongue.<sup>6</sup> And even if it did, its Message would still have to be translated into human language and interpreted by a human interpreter before it could be a message to us. Consequently any definition of the essence of man, based on such a definition of Being, would already be an immanent, man-bound, humanistic definition—based on *man's* understanding of Being—rather than a transcendent, nonhumanistic one—over and above and beyond man's understanding.

6. Cf. K. Loewith, *Geschichtliche Abhandlungen* (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1960), p. 212. My indebtedness to Loewith in this chapter is greater than can be indicated by individual footnotes.

Heidegger's search for a nonhumanistic definition of man and Being merely manifests and reinforces what it attempts to deny and refute. The search for a new (be it ever so nonhumanistic) definition of Being is, after all, but a manifestation of the existentiality and ontological nature of man (his search for his own Being) that the search is supposed to overcome. Thus it is a self-refuting search, for, seeking for such a definition, Heidegger is engaged in an enterprise which, in accordance with the definition sought, is totally unessential for man, whose essence is now defined as the life without questioning and defining. Whatever content the new definition has is derived from its negative reference to what it tries to transcend (human existence humanistically comprehended) rather than from any insight into what it tries to attain (nonhumanistic Being as such). The whole enterprise escapes total meaninglessness only by virtue of its indirect description as well as manifestation of our humanistic, ontological, metaphysical nature, against which it is directed. Thus, while *Being and Time* failed because and to the extent that it anticipated the nonhumanistic turn of the latest writings, these writings do not fail altogether (to have some meaning) because and to the extent that they manifest and indirectly reinforce (against Heidegger's explicit intention) the humanistic spirit of the earlier ones, from which they still draw inspiration and meaning.

This extent is, of course, not considerable. It is just enough to make Heidegger's latest writings paradoxical rather than completely meaningless. His proposal for a more essential (nonhumanistic) human existence is not meaningless, for its meaning is supplied by its negation of human existence as we know it here and now. But it is therefore paradoxical, because it counsels the overcoming of our very humanity as the way to true humanity.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger saw clearly that it is our

ontological, teleological, existential nature (concern for and questioning of our Being) that makes existence problematic, i.e. makes man a problem for himself. In his later writings he showed that no ultimate solution to this problem can be provided by the thing that creates the problem in the first place, i.e. that our ontological nature (questioning of our own Being) precludes rather than provides a final solution that would put an end to this questioning. On the one hand, the reasons reason gives (*redditi*) to reason (the demand for reasons) are always adequate to reason, for they are given in its own terms and thus cannot help answering its particular demands. On the other hand, they can never be totally adequate to reason and answer its ultimate demand (for ultimate reasons), because they are grounded in reason and thus cannot serve as a "grounding ground" for it. Therefore rational human existence (our ontological nature) cannot of itself overcome its ultimate groundlessness and find, on its own and by its own effort, an unshakeable foundation on which to rest.

Faced with this ultimate groundlessness and restlessness of reason, in his latest writings Heidegger provides the only logical solution to the problem (a solution that was, however, implicit in *Being and Time's* resolve in the face of death): if reason makes existence a problem which it cannot ultimately solve, the only solution to the problem is to abandon reason. If our existentiality or ontological nature leads to existential and ontological predicaments which it cannot help man to overcome completely, the solution is to overcome and relinquish our existential-ontological nature. If our being-in-the-truth (disclosure of Being-in-the-world) is always and inevitably a being-in-the-untruth (limited revelation within finite horizons of disclosure), the way out of this "untrue" state of Being is to abandon this type of truth or disclosure—questioning of Being—and abandon ourselves to the life without why. Oedipus' sight,

his self-disclosing passion, apparently brought him to grief. So let us put out our eyes and go to Colonus, where the grace of Being is waiting.

This solution is, of course, perfect and unexceptionable as a solution to the problem. The only trouble is that it does not happen to be a *human* solution, a solution to *man's* problem. It is a solution that solves man's problem by doing away with man.

For in *Being and Time* Heidegger rightly distinguished between ontic and ontological beings, between Angelus Silesius' roses and men, between the life without why and the life of care and concern. But precisely because he was right there, his present relinquishing of what alone distinguishes man from all other beings is a relinquishing of the humanity of man. In *Being and Time* Heidegger counseled facing death as a way of salvation for man. But in his last writings he goes a great deal further and advocates death pure and simple. Since merely facing death but not actually projecting ourselves into this "ultimate possibility" failed to reflect us back into authentic existence, he now advocates that we actually project ourselves into this possibility and commit (moral and intellectual, i.e. human) suicide.

This is, of course, not a new solution. Mysticism, ecstatic religion, and transcendent (rather than transcendental) philosophy have traditionally offered the same advice. But this does not make the advice right and the solution a solution for man.

A true solution can never come from despair, be this a despair in the face of death and nothingness—as in the first stage of Heidegger's hermeneutic—or in the face of the ultimate groundlessness of Being—as in the last stage. It can only come from courageous endurance: an endurance of and in the face of the ultimate groundlessness of Being. Heidegger saw this in *Being and Time*, but, failing to follow



up his analysis of man's ontological nature, he failed to show the way to such endurance. Nevertheless, we must find a way if we are to remain human.

It may be true that man is ultimately homeless in the world, that he is by nature "exposed into nothing," and driven to a never ending search for his own Being. But this is no reason for despair; on the contrary, this alone gives us hope and shows us the way to authentic existence. If man's nature is to be ontological, authentic existence does not come from finding a final answer that would put an end to all our questioning; it comes from engaging in the questioning in which our nature is fulfilled. If man is by nature teleological, excellence in living does not come from having reached a final *telos* which would put an end to our teleology (life); it comes from the seeking and striving itself, the fulfilling of our teleological nature. Man may be homeless, ultimately. But he is not ultimately homeless *in the world*, for, as Heidegger shows in *Being and Time*, the world is his home, it is his to make a home of, it is a world only through his home-building, and it is only through his own home-making effort that man can be man and that he can be at home anywhere. In other words man is not just homeless—by nature—he is also a home-maker and thus he can live and abide authentically not by entering into a wholly other abode, prepared and held open for him by a wholly other Being, but by fashioning and making a home for himself out of "ultimately" chaotic materials on an "ultimately" ungrounded ground. This activity alone gives man dignity, for this activity is the source and essence of his life and therefore the home in which he has to dwell.

Heidegger would do well to remember, in his latest writings, the title of his first major work: *Being and Time*. Such a remembering might remind him of the fact that man is a temporal, historical being who lives in time, not in eternity, and therefore needs temporal solutions rather than

eternal ones. He needs solutions for the moment in which he lives, solutions from moment to moment as long as he lives, solutions for the innumerable moments that compose his life and history. But these, even the most lasting and satisfactory ones, are finite solutions. And as such they are satisfactory for finite beings whose Being is finite transcendence, a transcendence of the particular limits that define our existence at any moment of its course, rather than a transcendence of finitude as such, a transcendence into infinity and eternity. What man needs in this "time of need" is not the third stage of Heidegger's hermeneutic: the bringing of message and tiding from a wholly other, absolute, and transcendent Being. It is hermeneutic as an interpretation and clarification of finite human existence, the hermeneutic of *Being and Time*, that alone can solve our problems; it is more humanism rather than less that can save, i.e. make essential, human existence.

In his overcoming of metaphysics, Heidegger overextended reason's demand for continued form-giving, defining, de-limiting, and disclosing into a demand for the ultimate and absolute completeness of all definition and disclosure, and thus he ended up with a negative, limiting concept, an empty transcendental idea (of absolutely transcendent Being). In his overcoming of humanistic ethics he overextends the existential, onto-teleological demand of human nature (for continued self-transcendence) into a demand for absolute transcendence, and thus ends up with an empty, totally negative notion of a transcendent existence. He succeeds in overcoming humanistic ethics and attaining to a thinking that is truly beyond good and evil. But, since in this overcoming of humanism not only humanism but the very idea of being human is left behind, the success of Heidegger's nonhumanistic thinking is a dubious, self-defeating victory. Instead of being the triumphant new response to and correspondence with a wholly other Being