

Heidegger: Between Idealism and Realism

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IN THE CONTINUING DEBATE BETWEEN REALISM AND IDEALISM, the thinking of Martin Heidegger occupies a unique position. The cornerstone of this position is what Heidegger calls the *ontological difference* — the differentiation between entities and the being of entities. Having established this difference, Heidegger claims that, although natural objects *are* independently of human beings, the *being* of these objects is only in human understanding. There is an obvious and essential tension in this assertion, which is lost when we obscure the ontological difference. When this occurs, one of the two poles of the assertion — that entities are apart from human beings or that being is only in human understanding — predominates, and Heidegger begins to sound like either a realist or an idealist, respectively.

Difficulty arises for us, however, because our general understanding and vocabulary are too limited to unproblematically grasp this ontological difference. To do so, Heidegger states, we must first break through many of the preconceptions of our traditional orientation. Accordingly, to locate Heidegger within the debate between realism and idealism, I will develop his position and consider several problems of interpretation against the backdrop of his critique of traditional Western ontology.

To begin, Heidegger does state clearly that “Entities *are*, quite independently of the experience by which they are disclosed, the acquaintance in which they are discovered, and the grasping in which their nature is ascertained.”¹ Through our practical involvement with the entities within our world, these entities are first uncovered and made intelligible to us. Yet the entities themselves *are* both prior to and apart from our encounter with them. If human beings no longer existed, trees, mountains, stars — the universe as a whole — would not thereby cease to be.

On the face of it, this assertion that natural objects *are* independently of human beings, agrees with realism. But the agreement is only limited. Heidegger parts company from the realist when he goes on to say that “Being ‘is’ only in the understanding of those entities to whose Being something like an understanding of Being belongs.” The entity in question is Dasein.² And Dasein, Heidegger further informs us, “is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it.”³ Human beings are unique among entities in that they are concerned about their existence, and the possibilities they are presented with in this existence.⁴ Other entities such as trees, rivers and presumably even animals, lack

such concern for their being—what it means to be themselves or not be themselves. Consequently, Heidegger claims that entities other than human beings do not, in the proper sense of the term, *exist*; for it is just this concern for being that characterizes existence. Human beings, however, are concerned about the possibility of being themselves or not being themselves. Human beings, therefore, exist. Based on this concern for its being, Heidegger further concludes, Dasein is in the unique position “that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. *Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being.*”⁵

In saying that human beings are concerned about their being, however, we must not understand Heidegger as suggesting that we are preoccupied merely with our own selves. Rather, this concern is founded on the ontological structure of human beings as “being-in-the-world.” A human being is not a Cartesian subject that is in principle distinct from the world, but is an entity whose being is characterized by its very involvement in the world. Accordingly, when we—through our concern—disclose our being to ourselves, “entities within-the-world...[are also] in each case already...disclosed.”⁶ Human beings and the world are revealed together, as a unitary phenomenon. As being-in-the-world, therefore, understanding of our own being includes the understanding of the being of entities within the world.

Heidegger calls the entities we reveal through our involvement with them *zuhanden*, or “ready-to-hand.” Ready-to-hand entities are thus characterized by the specific use that we make of them. A chair, for example, as an entity that can be employed in the way we use chairs in our culture, is ready-to-hand. The mode of being of the ready-to-hand is *zuhandenheit*, “readiness-to-hand.” Moreover, since our primary experience with entities is as things of use—as ready-to-hand—the fundamental mode of being in which we disclose entities is readiness-to-hand. Readiness-to-hand, therefore, is a foundational ontological state.

Traditional ontology has reversed this picture, however, and understands the relationship between human beings and the entities they encounter, as that between discrete subjects and discrete objects. Heidegger calls entities with this autonomous mode of being *vorhanden*, “present-at-hand,” and the mode of being itself *vorhandenheit*, “presence-at-hand.” Furthermore, in basing its understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world on the present-at-hand, this ontology has established presence-at-hand as the fundamental ontological state. Our involved interaction with entities then becomes a founded, and not a primary, mode of being. Consequently, Heidegger argues, this ontology has shattered the phenomenon of the human being, breaking up the unitary whole of being-in-the-world into the discrete elements of the human subject and external objects, which it then attempts to join together into a world.⁷

It is just this ontology of the present-at-hand that Heidegger sees as underlying realism: “in realism there is a lack of ontological understanding. Indeed realism tries to explain Reality ontically by Real [present-at-hand] connections of interaction between things that are Real [present-at-hand].”⁸

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“We must be cautious about thinking of Heidegger as an idealist. In failing to clarify its ontological basis, idealism has, along with realism, obscured the ontological difference between being and entities.”

In failing to differentiate between being and entities, realism has conflated the independence of natural objects from human beings with the being of these objects, and has thus portrayed these objects as *being* independently. Consequently, realism has established this independence as the primary orientation of its ontology. Realism, therefore, is essentially rooted in an ontology of the present-at-hand.

As we demonstrated above, however, an ontology of the present-at-hand is disruptive of the unitary phenomenon of human beings as being-in-the-world. In light of this disruption, Heidegger states, “What is decisive for ontology is to prevent the splitting of the phenomenon [of Dasein].”⁹ Our primary encounter is with the ready-to-hand. What then is the relationship between the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand? When there is a disruption of our involvement with the ready-to-hand, we are then confronted with entities as extrinsic to our practices and concern—as simply there as the entities they are in themselves. Thus, we discover the present-at-hand only through a process of decontextualizing the ready-to-hand: “To lay bare what is just present-at-hand and no more, cognition must first penetrate beyond what is ready-to-hand in our concern.”¹⁰ Our discovery of the present-at-hand is therefore founded upon our prior encounter with the ready-to-hand. And as we have seen, this involvement with ready-to-hand entities is constitutive of our ontological structure as being-in-the-world. Only based on this structure, therefore, can we go on to reveal objects as distinct from our practices and concern; that is, only on account of readiness-to-hand is there presence-at-hand.

Realism, as based on an ontology of the present-at-hand, is thus fundamentally incompatible with Heidegger’s ontological understanding. Should we therefore classify Heidegger as an idealist? This is a tempting option, especially given his statement in *Being and Time* that “As compared with realism, *idealism*, no matter how contrary and untenable it may be in its results, has an advantage in principle.”¹¹ The advantage is that idealism is much more amenable to the ontological thesis that being is dependent on human understanding: “If idealism emphasizes that Being and Reality are only ‘in the consciousness’, this expresses an understanding of the fact that Being cannot be explained through entities.”¹² Yet even though idealism possesses this greater compatibility, it has also historically functioned within an inadequate ontological understanding:

as long as idealism fails to clarify what this very understanding of Being means ontologically, or how this understanding is possible, or that it belongs to Dasein’s state of Being, the Interpretation of Reality which idealism constructs is an empty one.¹³

We must be cautious, therefore, about thinking of Heidegger as an idealist. In failing to clarify its ontological basis, idealism has, along with realism, obscured the ontological difference between *being* and entities. Yet where realism was guilty of conflating the independence of natural objects with their *being*, idealism conversely confused the dependency of *being* with entities, so that the entities themselves were seen as dependent on human understanding. It is this second move that causes Heidegger to speak critically of idealism: “if ‘idealism’ signifies tracing back every entity to a

subject or consciousness..., then this idealism is no less naive in its method than the most grossly militant realism.”¹⁴

Yet though both realism and idealism present problems, at least as expressed within *Being and Time*, Heidegger expressed a much greater openness to the latter. Both operate within an inadequate ontology; yet there remains for idealism alone the possibility of rectifying this deficiency. Realism has been disqualified, not primarily because it obscures the ontological difference, but rather on account of the ontology of the present-at-hand which Heidegger sees as intrinsic to it. If, therefore, realism attempted to reconstruct its ontological foundation by establishing readiness-to-hand as fundamental, it would no longer—by definition—be realism. Idealism, conversely, never beginning with a notion of entities as independent of human beings, did not lock itself into an ontology of the present-at-hand. Accordingly, if idealism was to clarify its understanding of being, it alone would provide us with an adequate point of departure for our further ontological investigations:

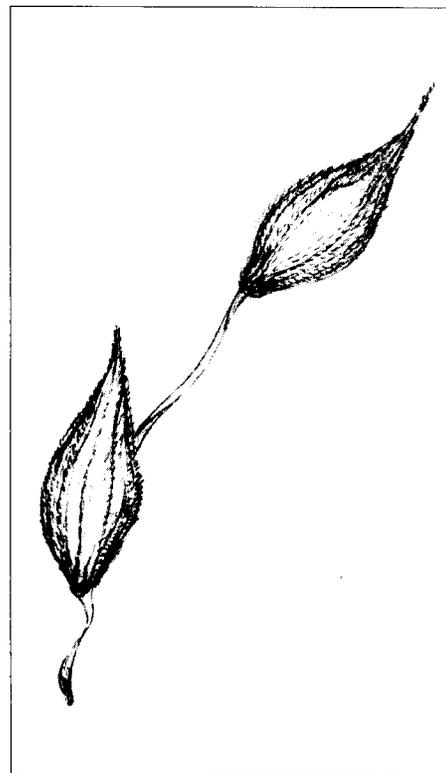
If what the term “idealism” says, amounts to the understanding that Being can never be explained by entities but is already that which is ‘transcendental’ for every entity, then idealism affords the only correct possibility for a philosophical problematic.¹⁵

Our intention in stressing the greater compatibility of idealism, however, is not to press the issue as to which camp—realist or idealist—Heidegger belongs to, but only to caution against the tendency to interpret his position as a species of realism. In our day, as in the period of *Being and Time*, “idealism is feared almost like the foul fiend incarnate.”¹⁶ This fear, Heidegger believes, has at least in part been responsible for our failure to work out a sufficient ontological understanding from which we may even correctly approach the debate between realism and idealism:

Viewed with minute exactitude, the anxiety that prevails today in the face of idealism is an anxiety in the face of philosophy — and this does not mean that we wish to equate philosophy straightway with idealism. Anxiety in the face of philosophy is at the same time a failure to recognize the problem that must be posed and decided first of all so as to judge whether idealism or realism is tenable.¹⁷

Although idealism may prove to be untenable, Heidegger then states, realism is neither tenable nor untenable, “because it has not yet even pressed forward at all into the dimension of philosophical problems, the level where tenability and untenability are decidable.”¹⁸ Yet the fact that idealism may provide a better starting point does not mean that we will end by endorsing it as a philosophical position. Heidegger is more accepting of idealism, but only so that he may press through idealism and go beyond the debate between realists and idealists altogether. Ultimately, therefore, the dichotomy between realism and idealism is not a helpful one for understanding Heidegger, and we must similarly force ourselves to think beyond both it and its underlying philosophical presuppositions.

We must now go on to consider three problems of interpretation that arise from a consideration of Heidegger’s position. Heidegger’s central thesis is that, although natural objects *are* independently of human beings, the *being* of these objects is only in human understanding. Yet we now face a paradox: if



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being is not apart from us, how is it that we can say (most properly) that entities *are* independently of us? The verb “to be” is itself the grammatical expression of our understanding of being. Thus the assertion that entities *are* independently of human beings does not achieve in itself the differentiation between being and entities. Would it be more correct to say, therefore, that natural objects are not apart from human beings? If we did, we would be back in traditional idealism, where the entities themselves are reduced to the human subject. But if natural objects indeed *are* independently of us, how can Heidegger correctly say that *being* is only in human understanding?

THE PROBLEM, IT APPEARS, IS WITH THE LIMITS of human language and understanding. Language, Heidegger states, is ontologically founded upon “discourse” or “telling,” which Heidegger defines as “the articulation of intelligibility.”¹⁹ And intelligibility, on its part, is always the intelligibility of being: the act of making an entity intelligible is the revealing of that entity in its being. If, therefore, language is founded upon this articulation of intelligibility, then language will never be able to get around the understanding of *being* implicit in its structure. We cannot speak of something without saying that it *is* — even when that something is the present-at-hand. Thus the first assertion of Heidegger’s thesis is in itself incapable of differentiating between entities and their being. Hence the need for the second assertion, which qualifies the first by telling us that, although entities *are* independently of human beings, the *being* of these entities — including the *to be* of the first assertion — is not apart from human understanding.

Heidegger expresses this same paradox, though cryptically, when he says, “When Dasein does not exist, ...it cannot be said that entities are, nor can it be said that they are not.”²⁰ The point here is not the trivial matter that if human beings did not exist, it could not be said that entities *are*, because there would be no one to do the saying. Rather, it could not — most accurately — be said that entities *are*, because this “are” is a modality of the being of the entities, and consequently is not apart from human beings. Yet, again, neither could it be said that entities *are not*; for even the negation of the *to be* is an expression of an understanding of being. We are left with the paradox, a paradox which is rooted in the nature of language and understanding. However, as long as we bear in mind these limitations, we do know that one of the ways something can be made intelligible by us is as present-at-hand—i.e., as that which “is” independently of us. Based on this understanding of presence-at-hand, we can say that even if we did not exist, natural objects would still continue to be.²¹ We simply need to remember that the being of these objects—and thus the *to be*—has its origin in human understanding.

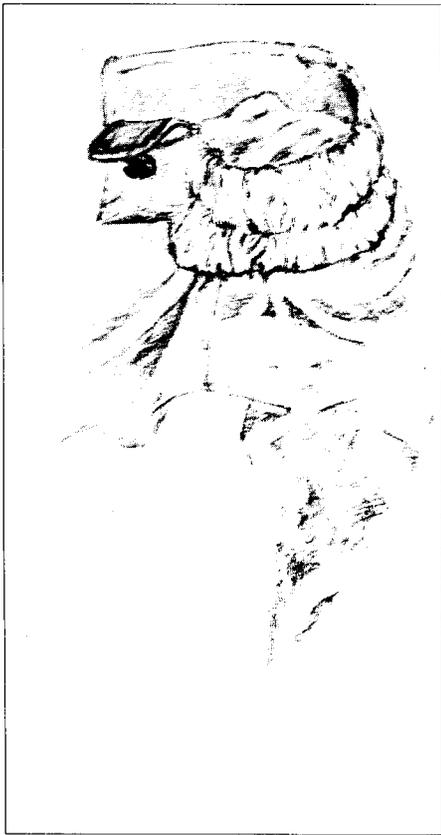
The above paradox may seem rather minor for Heidegger or us to address. Yet perhaps what is motivating Heidegger is the possibility that this feature of language may contribute to the tendency we noted in realism to understand *being* as localized in objects, and thus as equally independent of human understanding. When we seek to investigate the nature of natural

objects as they are in themselves, apart from their possible involvement in a context of human practices, we necessarily place ourselves in a detached and objectifying posture in relation to these entities. By means of this detached posture, we disclose entities as present-at-hand—as distinct from us—and we begin to list off the features of these entities as they are in themselves. We discover, for example, that water is composed of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. In such descriptions, Heidegger informs us, the *to be* functions in a dual manner.²² As the copula, the *to be* informs us that this entity, water, is a certain way—i.e., that it is composed of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. Yet the *to be* functions not only to tell us what this entity is but also to assert *that* it is. The *to be*, as a function of being, articulates an understanding of the entity in its being. Yet, as we have seen, such assertions do not differentiate between the entity and its being. The danger lurks, therefore, that we may uncritically catalogue the being of the entity along with the other qualities we discover about it. It is just such a move that realism has made: in failing to make the ontological distinction, realism has read the being of entities—through the *to be*—into its characterization of the entities themselves.

Heidegger extends this paradox to apply not only to the *to be* but also to such concepts as “independence” and the “in-itself.” Heidegger designates these concepts as “characteristics of Being,”²³ and states that, along with being, “When Dasein does not exist, ‘independence’ ‘is’ not either, nor ‘is’ the ‘in-itself.’”²⁴ When we uncover present-at-hand entities, we observe that they *are* independently of us. Yet if we are attentive to the ontological difference, we also observe that the *being* of entities is still implicated in this statement through the *to be*. There is, moreover, a second way in which this assertion proves unable to move beyond the understanding of *being* implicit in language: through the concept of *independence*. As with the *to be*, the independence of an entity from us is bound up with our understanding of the *being* of that entity; it is not a quality of the entity itself. How could something be independent when that which it is supposed to be independent from *itself* does not exist? Apart from human beings, therefore, entities are neither independent nor dependent, as they neither are nor are not. We once again find ourselves caught in the constraints of language and understanding. However, staying within these boundaries, we know that one of the ways in which we may disclose entities is as present-at-hand — i.e., as independent of us — and we may speak of them accordingly. Entities *are* independently of us, though this quality of independence does not inhere in the entities themselves; rather, it is an ontological characteristic, and is itself dependent on human understanding.

This same argument is made for the concept of the *in-itself*. Kant had employed this term to refer to the noumenal world as it is apart from the conditioning effects of the human faculty of intuition. There is indeed a similarity between Kant’s understanding of the noumenal world’s independence from this faculty of intuition and Heidegger’s discussion of the independence of the present-at-hand from human understanding. Yet, for Heidegger, there is no inseparable gap between human understanding and

“How could something be independent when that which it is supposed to be independent from itself does not exist?”



the present-at-hand. When we reveal entities as present-at-hand, we reveal them precisely as that which they are in themselves. However, we still need to clarify the in-itself ontologically; for though the present-at-hand is what it is in itself, the circumscribing of the present-at-hand in itself, is a process that occurs within human understanding. The in-itself is thus a characteristic of our understanding of entities, and not of the entities themselves. It is true that Heidegger uses the term in-itself in ways that might lead one to think he understands it as a quality of entities, as when he says "the fact that Reality is ontologically grounded in the Being of Dasein, does not signify that only when Dasein exists and as long as Dasein exists can the Real be as that which it is in itself."²⁵ Such uses, however, are explained by the same limitations of understanding and language discussed above. As with the "is" and "independence," the "in-itself" is an ontological characterization and is therefore dependent upon human beings and their understanding of being. Once again, if we are not attentive to the ontological difference as it relates to the in-itself, we will obscure the fact that the very determination we use to capture an entity in its pure, autonomous nature—*in-itself*—is a characteristic of our understanding of the entity and not of the entity itself. There is no autonomous in-itself, but only an in-itself-in-relation-to-human-understanding.

THE SECOND TOPIC WE NEED TO ADDRESS CONCERNS the ontological priority of readiness-to-hand. We have seen that our primary encounter is with the ready-to-hand, and that the present-at-hand is uncovered by going through what is ready-to-hand. But we have also observed that present-at-hand entities are as they are in themselves before our disclosure of them, and even if we do not disclose them; *a fortiori*, the present-at-hand is prior to the ready-to-hand. How then can Heidegger claim that presence-at-hand is founded upon readiness-to-hand? Does this not entail a contradiction? Heidegger addresses this problem when he says, "only by reason of something present-at-hand, 'is there' anything ready-to-hand. Does it follow, however,...that readiness-to-hand is ontologically founded upon presence-at-hand?"²⁶ What is most serious, however, is the fact that if it should turn out that presence-at-hand is fundamental, then the ontological understanding of human beings as being-in-the-world will be refuted, and we will find ourselves back in an ontology of the present-at-hand. Frederick Olafson expresses this same concern when he remarks:

once the concept of an independent *vorhanden* has been admitted, there is no way in which one can avoid treating the *vorhanden* as a necessary condition for the *zubanden* and the latter as thus a derivative, rather than a primary ontological concept, as Heidegger evidently intended it to be.²⁷

This apparent contradiction dissolves, however, when we bear in mind the careful distinction Heidegger makes between the terms ready-to-hand/present-at-hand and readiness-to-hand/presence-at-hand. This distinction is rooted in the ontological difference. Human beings uncover both *present-at-hand* and *ready-to-hand* entities; the modes of being in which they are disclosed are *presence-at-hand* and *readiness-to-hand*. As regards the entities themselves, the present-at-hand is in fact both prior to and a

necessary condition for the ready-to-hand. If it were not for the fact that natural objects like wood, glass and iron *were* before human beings encountered them, we could not have ready-to-hand entities such as houses, desks and chairs. Moreover, though present-at-hand entities are apart from human beings, ready-to-hand entities are not; for the latter are first brought into being through their involvement with a matrix of human practices. However, presence-at-hand — as the ontological characterization of the present-at-hand — necessarily comes after human beings; for, again, it is human beings alone who first reveal entities in their being, and this includes presence-at-hand as well as readiness-to-hand. But since our primary experience is of the ready-to-hand, readiness-to-hand is therefore ontologically prior to presence-at-hand. Thus, though Olafson is right in stating that the present-at-hand is a necessary condition for the ready-to-hand, he is quite wrong in concluding that the latter is therefore a derivative ontological concept. The ready-to-hand is not an ontological concept at all, neither primary nor secondary. Rather, the ready-to-hand is characterized ontologically by readiness-to-hand. And though the present-at-hand is a necessary condition for the ready-to-hand, presence-at-hand is ontologically founded upon readiness-to-hand.

“Heidegger argues that ‘Nature is itself an entity...which can be discovered in various ways and at various stages.’ Thus, reality admits of more than one true description.”

THE THIRD ISSUE OF INTERPRETATION concerns the identity of natural objects as disclosed through objective inquiry with the natural world as it is prior to this encounter with it.²⁸ We have seen that we reveal the present-at-hand when we isolate entities from their involvement within a context of human practices. This detached posture is perhaps most common in modern physical science, where the specific goal is to investigate nature as it is in itself. The question that is most frequently asked of science is whether its understanding of the natural world in fact represents this world as it is in itself. Again, Heidegger’s answer to this question is yes; in the scientific process, he states, “the struggle is solely directed to the entity itself and solely in order to free it from its hiddenness and precisely thereby to help it into what is proper to it, i.e. to let it be the entity which it is in itself.”²⁹ Scientific inquiry, as a rigorous investigation of the present-at-hand, accurately represents the natural world as it is in itself.

Many in our day, however, have rejected this understanding of the scientific enterprise, fearing that it further licenses the scientific imperialism we have witnessed throughout the modern era. Such a reaction, as Hubert Dreyfus notes, stems from the view that the natural world can be represented correctly in only one way.³⁰ If the scientist’s description of nature is true, then the word of the scientist becomes final. Any other description of reality would have to displace that of modern science, by demonstrating that the scientific description is wrong and its own correct. The real problem, therefore, is not with the understanding that modern science correctly represents nature, but with this restricted conception of nature as correctly representable in only one fashion. Conversely, Heidegger argues that “Nature is itself an entity...which can be discovered in various ways and at various stages.”³¹ Reality admits of more than one true description. Thus though science represents entities as they are in themselves, the correspondence is not

strictly one to one: "Beings have stages of discoverability, diverse possibilities in which they manifest themselves in themselves."³² Science captures natural objects under a particular aspect; but it is only one of many aspects in which these objects may appear. Modern science's understanding of the natural world, therefore, is neither exclusive of nor preeminent to other ways in which we may apprehend this world. "One cannot say that, for example, physics has the genuine knowledge of the solar sphere, in contrast to our natural grasp of the sun."³³

We do not, therefore, have to discount the claims of the natural sciences in order to make room for other descriptions of nature. Rather, we need to broaden our understanding of the possibilities of representing this reality. Different cultural practices disclose different aspects of reality. One such practice is modern science; another may be mystical contemplation. The understanding conveyed by each is sure to be different; but it does not follow from this difference that one is right and the other wrong. Both can be right in that both can display for us different facets of reality's ability to show up.

In saying that different depictions of reality may each be right, however, we are not suggesting that these various descriptions somehow add up to one comprehensive picture of the whole. Such an interpretation would force us back to the naive view that reality admits of only one correct representation. Nature is capable of presenting in a multitude of ways, but these various ways are independent from—and may even be incommensurable with—one another. Thus, just as "Scientific representation is never able to encompass the coming to presence of nature," so too the sum total of all human theories could never comprehend this reality—"theory never passes that which presences by, but rather remains directed toward it."³⁴

With his paradoxical assertion that, although entities *are* independently of human beings, the *being* of entities is not apart from human understanding, Heidegger has thus established a new voice in regard to the debate between realism and idealism. There is an essential tension in this position, which springs from the ontological differentiation between being and entities. Through this differentiation, Heidegger has collapsed the ground between realism and idealism and has achieved, therefore, not so much a balance between the two as the negation of both. Conversely, if we lose this tension, we will necessarily be drawn back into the debate. Yet with the tension maintained, we can set a course tangential to this debate and thereby clear the ground for a new epoch in our understanding of being and the world. φ

ENDNOTES

¹Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 251.

²Dasein is Heidegger's term to designate human beings, taken both individually and collectively, as well as the manner of being that is unique to them. I will instead speak of human beings, the human being, we, us, our, etc.

³Heidegger, *Being and Time* 33.

⁴*Ibid.* 42.

⁵*Ibid.* 32; emphasis original.

⁶*Ibid.* 251.

⁷*Ibid.* 170.

⁸*Ibid.* 251.

⁹*Ibid.* 170.

¹⁰*Ibid.* 101.

¹¹*Ibid.* 251.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.* 251-52.

¹⁵*Ibid.* 251.

¹⁶Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 167.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Heidegger, *Being and Time* 204.

²⁰*Ibid.* 255.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Heidegger, *Basic Problems* 218.

²³Heidegger, *Being and Time* 251.

²⁴*Ibid.* 255.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.* 101.

²⁷Frederick A. Olafson, *Heidegger and the Philosophy of Mind* (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 1987) 49-50.

²⁸I am indebted for much of this section to Hubert L. Dreyfus' unpublished paper, "Heidegger's Hermeneutic Realism," and to my conversations with Professor Dreyfus.

²⁹Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 25 (Vittorio Klostermann:Frankfurt, 1977) 2.

³⁰Dreyfus, "Heidegger's Hermeneutic Realism," 9.

³¹Heidegger, *Being and Time* 92.

³²Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 167.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Martin Heidegger, "Science and Reflection," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 174.