

# Heidegger's Phenomenology and Human Excellence

By Bill Meacham

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## Introduction

Martin Heidegger was one of the most influential philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work, firmly in what has come to be called the "Continental" tradition, is intriguing both because of its intellectual content and the manner in which it is presented. This essay is by no means a thorough treatment of Heidegger's work. I intend merely to give an introduction to phenomenology and Heidegger's variant of it and to make some suggestions about what his project might inspire us to do with our lives.



## Husserl's Phenomenology

Martin Heidegger was a student of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology as a philosophical (as opposed to a merely psychological) discipline. The goal of Husserl's phenomenology was to describe as exactly as possible the phenomena and structures of conscious experience without appeal to philosophical or scientific preconceptions about their nature, origin, or cause.<sup>1</sup> Phenomenology is the act of examining one's own experience reflectively and without bias. The investigator inspects his or her own experience directly instead of, for instance, using intermediary channels such as an electroencephalograph to measure brain waves. It is called "reflective" because it is analogous to how one sees oneself in a mirror. The object being examined is, in some sense, oneself, just as the image in a mirror is.

The bias that phenomenologists try to avoid is the naive belief that the objects of our experience actually exist independently of our experiencing them. The

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, "Martin Heidegger."

phenomenologist does not deny their existence. He or she merely attempts to avoid letting that naive belief influence the investigation. By bracketing, or putting aside, our instinctive belief in a real world, we can perceive things that have been in our experience all along but to which we paid no attention. The phenomenology of visual perception, for instance, investigates the mental structures that are present in an act of seeing something: things like the implicit belief that what we are seeing has another side, hidden from us; that it has persisted through the past and is expected to persist into the future; that others like us will see it in much the same way; that it has certain uses; and so forth. We do not normally pay attention to all this cognition. Instead we just pay attention to whatever we are looking at. But the cognition is there nonetheless, and can be noticed with sufficient attention to the process of perceiving. Buddhist meditators and phenomenological investigators share some similarity in this regard: both just pay attention to what is present in experience, without interpreting it as anything else. It is a radically first-person point of view.

If you are still puzzled, consider two experiences: (1) seeing a small black dog, and (2) hallucinating that you see a small black dog. Until you know that the second case is a hallucination, the experiences are exactly the same. In both cases you see a small black dog. The dog is present in your experience. And in both cases there is a great deal of cognition, mental processing, that is present in the dog-as-perceived. The dog-as-perceived has elements that are just given – its shape, color and sound – and elements that are contributed by the perceiver – the recognition that it is a dog, the tacit knowledge of what dogs do and hence certain expectations of the dog, and so forth. Together what is given and what we add constitute the dog-as-perceived. The elements contributed by the perceiver are present in every act of perception, although they are most often overlooked. Using the phenomenological method, Husserl investigated the experience of a great number of things, including physical objects, mental constructs such as mathematics, the internal experience of the passage of time, and much more.

## Heidegger's Phenomenology

But this is not about Husserl's phenomenology of perception, interesting as that may be. It is about Heidegger's extension of it. Heidegger took that same stance – a radical first-person point of view – and applied it not to experience of specific types of objects but to life as a whole, the life-world (in German, *die Lebenswelt*, a term that Husserl introduced a few years after Heidegger published *Being and Time*). Husserl's insight was that every experience is an experience *of* something. We never have experience without there being something present in the experience. Heidegger's insight was that same principle applies to our life. We always find ourselves in a world, engaged in it. The fundamental structure of human life is Being-in-the-world (in German, *In-der-Welt-sein*). We are never isolated subjects, cogitating about things from which we are essentially separate. We cannot properly be taken into account except as existing in the midst of a world among other people and things. "Being-in-the-world" is hyphenated into one word to indicate that categorical distinctions such as subject and object, consciousness and world, are interpretations that are secondary, not foundational. The original experience, which we can understand only by stepping back from it and reflecting on it without bias, is a unitary phenomenon.

Immersed in the first-person point of view, Heidegger employs unusual, idiosyncratic terms. “Being-in-the-world” is one such term, as is the famous *Dasein* (being-there), which means human being. To be human is “to be there” and “there” is the world.

## A Phenomenological Observation

To understand the phenomenological attitude, consider two other unusual phrases of Heidegger’s, “ready-to-hand” and “present-at-hand.” In *Being and Time*, Heidegger contrasts two ways of dealing with or relating to objects in the world. As a phenomenologist he describes them, not in objective, scientific terms, nor in terms of how we feel or behave toward the objects, but in terms of how the objects appear to us. He calls these two modes of appearance Readiness-to-hand (in German, *Zuhandenheit*) and Presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). That which is ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) is usable and useful, like a hammer that is close by when we want to nail something. That which is merely present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) is just there with no immediate relevance, like some other tool, a set of wrenches say, that is in the vicinity when we have no need of it because what we want to do is nail something, not turn a bolt. The wrenches have no bearing on what we are concerned with at the moment, unlike the hammer, which does. The wrenches and the hammer appear to us quite differently.

I say “merely present-at-hand” because for Heidegger being present-at-hand is a deficient mode of being. Readiness-to-hand is more primordial. In our original experience, before we do a lot of thinking about it, our world is mostly composed of things that are ready-to-hand. They stand out against a background of what is just there. We do not perceive everything as being of equal importance. Heidegger says

“The kind of dealing which is closest to us is ... not a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use.”<sup>2</sup>

As evidenced by the title of his book, Heidegger is making an assertion about what really is, what actually exists. According to him, some things are ready-to-hand and others aren’t; they are just there.

This is not what a scientific analysis would tell us. If you took photographs of a workbench, measured and weighed all the objects on it, and carefully plotted their spatial locations and distances from each other, you would find no readiness-to-hand and no presence-at-hand. In a sense, I suppose, the objects would all be present-at-hand, just there; but with nothing ready-to-hand to contrast them with, they would not even have that quality.

The question of the ontological status of qualities has a long philosophical history. Is the redness that we see when looking at an apple or a rose something “out there” in the object? Or is it “in here,” solely in our experience of the object? Or does it arise only when someone sees the object? A scientific approach would say that light of a certain wavelength is there whether or not anybody is looking. But the redness itself, where is that?

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<sup>2</sup> *Being and Time*, p.95.

Similarly, where is readiness-to-hand? Not in the object alone, nor in the person alone, but in the relationship. Heidegger's strength and unique contribution is to insist that wherever it is, readiness-to-hand is real; it has its own being; it actually exists.

## What "They" Tell Us

We know about readiness-to-hand only if we pay attention to our experience, but most of us are not in the habit of doing that. Too often we just unthinkingly go along with the accepted beliefs of our society without examining them closely. We think stuff is just there, because that's what science (the kind of science found in popular belief) tells us, despite our own experience that some things are much more interesting than others and are present in our experience much more vividly.

In talking about unexamined experience, Heidegger speaks of the "they." That phrase is an English translation of the German *das Man*, which literally translated means "the one," meaning everyone in general but nobody in particular. For instance, the German proverb "*An den Früchten erkennt man den Baum*" means literally "By the fruits one knows the tree." That means we know someone's character by how they act, which is not controversial, but other unexamined suppositions are more problematic.

Heidegger speaks of being "lost in the publicness of the 'they'."<sup>3</sup> Many of us have ideas about how to live our lives that are not our own, but just given to us by those around us. We think we ought to go to school, get a job, get married, raise a family and so forth, just because that's what everyone does. We think we ought to listen to and obey the authorities just because – well, because they are authorities and surely they know better than we do. We think we ought to wear the clothes and listen to the music our friends and peer group do because everybody else does and we don't want to be different. Or we rebel against conformity and wear different clothes and listen to different music because – hmmm – because our rebellious peer group does the same. If we are not careful, we live in a world not our own, a world punctuated only by the amusements and diversions that "they" (the authorities, the mass of everybody else, the peer group) provide for us.

## Authenticity

Heidegger calls the mode of existence dictated by the "they," derisively, inauthentic. At root, "authentic" means "my own" (in German, *eigentlich*.) So the authentic self is the self that is our own, that leads a life that is owned by us ourselves, that is to say by each one of us individually, whereas the inauthentic self is the self lost to the "they."<sup>4</sup>

What does it mean to be authentic, to own your life? Heidegger thinks it has something to do with facing up to your own death, living in the knowledge that you will die, facing the anxiety that accompanies that realization, and in that knowledge resolutely taking responsibility for your own existence.<sup>5</sup> I'm not going to follow that train of

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<sup>3</sup> *Being and Time*, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, "Martin Heidegger."

thought, however, because it is not clear whether Heidegger's assessment of death is something essential and common to all humans or merely something idiosyncratic to himself.<sup>6</sup> (To find out, we would each have to examine our own life experience and see what we find.)

The problem with being inauthentic is that it mostly doesn't lead to happiness and fulfillment. Going along with the "they" works to a degree, particularly if we live in a stable society in which roles and expectations are well-known and constant over generations. But it doesn't work if our world is changing rapidly and the old tried-and-true approaches to life don't produce useful results. It doesn't work for those of us with talents and interests outside the norms. It doesn't work if just doing the same old thing that we have always done will result in ecological destruction and loss of shelter, food and water. It doesn't work if just blindly obeying the political authorities, or even getting excited and working passionately for one political party or another, will do nothing to change the fundamental economic circumstances of our lives. It doesn't work if, thinking we are merely meaningless collections of atoms, destined to live for a time and then disperse, we miss out on the deep satisfaction of knowing that we are part of something much vaster and more beautiful, and deliberately directing our efforts to be in harmony with that greater pattern.

(Before continuing I want to note that there is a sense in which the "they" is not so bad as I am making out here. We all live with others, and in fact we could not live without them. Humans have been called (by others, not by Heidegger) "ultrasocial"<sup>7</sup> and "obligatorily gregarious."<sup>8</sup> Without others of our kind we could not survive. Heidegger, from his phenomenological perspective, calls this feature of human life "Being-with" (*Mitsein*), and says it is essential to being human.<sup>9</sup> We are inauthentic when we fail to recognize how much and in what ways how we think of ourselves and how we habitually behave is influenced by our social surroundings. We are authentic when we pay attention to that influence and decide for ourselves whether to go along with it or not. Living entirely without such influence, however, is not an option.)

## Excellence

So what shall we do instead of going along with the "they"? My answer goes back to Aristotle, who was a major influence on Heidegger's thinking. Aristotle claimed that happiness and fulfillment have a lot to do with how well we function.<sup>10</sup> Functioning well means doing what we are good at and doing it in a good way, a way that promotes and enhances our ability to do it. When we function well we experience what the

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<sup>6</sup> A danger of the first-person point of view is that in looking at our own experience we might find things that we mistakenly think are common to everyone or even essential to being human, but in fact are true only of our own life. The danger is even greater if we, like many Continental philosophers, use impressive sounding neologisms or use words in strikingly different ways from their ordinary usage to talk about what we find. The reader might be inclined to believe what we say uncritically, just because it sounds extraordinary or dramatic. If so, the reader would be succumbing to the "they."

<sup>7</sup> Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, pp. 47 ff.

<sup>8</sup> de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.7 1097b 22-29

Greeks called *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness or flourishing.<sup>11</sup> And how do we find out what functioning well means for us? By carefully examining our own life experience; in other words, by doing a sort of phenomenology.

There are things that some of us are good at and others are not. Some have special talents for sports, for instance, or mathematics or music, but not everyone does. On an individual level, each of us needs to find out what he or she is good at personally, or idiosyncratically, and pursue and develop those talents. That's where phenomenological examination of our own life world comes in. Each of us can ask: What am I really good at? What really gives me deep nourishment and satisfaction? Others, your culture and your family and peer group, will tell you, but only you can determine whether what they say is true for you.

Looking at ourselves individually is not enough, though. We need to know something about humans in general, not just our own experience. There are also things that everybody is good at, by virtue of being a human being.

I'm summarizing quite a bit here, but my research tells me that the uniquely human function is our capacity for second-order thinking. By "second order," I mean the ability to take ourselves as objects of thought. The first order is to think about things and people in the world external to us. Other animals do that; they can think about the world and communicate with each other about it. But only we can think about ourselves. Our ability to pay attention and think about ourselves as well as the world we live in, is what distinguishes us from other animals. Heidegger alludes to this characteristic of being human when he says

Dasein [the human being] is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather ... in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it.<sup>12</sup>

I prefer to speak of human excellence instead of authenticity. Only if we exercise the uniquely human function of self-reflection do we operate at our full capacity and have the best chance to find our place in the world and live there harmoniously. Doing so means finding out things like how cognition and emotion work, how morality and religion function to bind individuals together in groups and cause conflict between groups, and many more such facts about humans generally. And it means discovering how each of us in particular thinks and acts; what gets in the way of our clear thinking and how to overcome such obstacles.

The oracle at Delphi said "Know thyself." The phenomenologist says "Know your experience. Pay attention to your own being." To do so might be uncomfortable. It might cause us to question what "they" tell us and require courage and determination to stay true to the quest for real confidence in what we have learned for ourselves and seen with our own eyes. But the rewards will be great. The potential is there for us to experience the happiness and fulfillment of the truly excellent human being. What that means is something each of us needs to find out for him- or herself.

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<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia, "Eudaimonia" and "Eudaimonism."

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32.

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Bill Meacham, Ph.D, is an independent scholar in philosophy and the author of the book *How To Be an Excellent Human* and the blog *Philosophy for Real Life*, both of which are available on his website, <http://bmeacham.com>. He spent many years in computers and data processing. He brings the precision required for good software

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## Revision History

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