

The Ontological and Phenomenological Dimensions of the Concept of Environment in Questioning Thought in Martin Heidegger

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Abstract---Martin Heidegger expressed a dual concern with the concept of the environment in his inquiry into the meaning of thought. He approached this through a phenomenological analysis and an ontological interpretation that together reveal the environment's role in the ontological constitution of being—a being that is always defined within a specific world. In its effort to affirm existence, being emerges from the lived world, which sets the parameters for the awareness of being. Each subject, in turn, defines its environment as a mode of thinking. Thus, the environment of thought becomes the secure path through which the subject moves toward being. In this sense, thinking becomes a kind of geography from which the subject derives its existence and realises its actual fulfilment.

Keywords---Being, environment, hermeneutics, ontology, phenomenology, world.

Introduction

Redirecting the course of ontology was not easy for Martin Heidegger, as it demanded from him a sudden and intensified awakening to the question "What does thinking mean?" This culminated in the philosophical foundation of the concept of *Dasein* for the first time in the history of ontology, as he led the question towards constructing the image by which the self is liberated from the lived world towards its personal realm that defines the edifice of being. In this context, Heidegger found a secure path to reach the ontological and phenomenological dimension of the environment, where it manifests and becomes clearly visible. This questioning constituted a space worthy of reconsideration of the

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foundational image of the concept of the environment in the history of philosophy. Herein lies the genius of the Heideggerian proposal, which encompasses the conditions and contingencies that enable one to interact with the world as a conscious self with affective states. This question merits deeper reflection than what appears evident to us. Therefore, it may be necessary to reveal Heidegger's understanding of the concept of the environment in this context. These considerations lead us to inquire into the accurate ontological and phenomenological dimensions that Heidegger encountered when he resolved to question thinking.

1/ Questioning in light of the Phenomenology of the Environment (the Representation of the Environment)

The bold step of questioning thought was linked to the monumental project presented by Heidegger in his work *Being and Time*, as a philosophical endeavour derived from his questioning of thought in his book *What Is Called Thinking?* These two works constituted an extensive philosophical circle with studied objectives, comprising multiple dimensions. However, this discussion focuses on the phenomenological and ontological dimensions with which Heidegger endowed the concept of the environment following his interrogation of thought. Heidegger reopened and resumed this question in a dual philosophical manner after it had fallen into oblivion. In the course of this resumption, he reformulated an image of human existence in the form known as *Dasein*, that is, the existence in which being is determined and self-aware. This effort did not stop there; instead, Heidegger delved into whether existence depends solely on consciousness or whether this consciousness is preontologically linked to existence. Through this paradox, Heidegger entered the realm of phenomenology via one of ontology's broadest gateways, creating an unforeseen encounter between ontology and phenomenology under this questioning, thereby transcending Western metaphysics and proclaiming its end.¹

The initial presence of phenomenology appeared in the notion of *Dasein*, which radiates Husserlian phenomenology, focused not on the things themselves. However, on what appears to us of them, that is, their meaning for us. Heidegger thus followed the same path in presenting the idea of *Dasein*, which reflects the meaning of existence rather than existence itself. Accordingly, under the project of *Dasein*, the outlook on the concept of the world or environment changes such that *Dasein* desires to know the world rather than merely living in it. The former perspective enables it to realise itself, whereas the latter reduces it to being a part of nature like other entities. At first glance, this distinction might seem trivial or self-evident since human beings are thinking of subjects with intentional consciousness. However, deeper reflection reveals profound contingencies that resolve many philosophical problems, most notably the issue of subject and object, and the historical ontological debate concerning the priority of essence over existence.

The concept of the environment that Heidegger envisages is not our historical understanding of nature, as in physics or the natural sciences do, but rather a philosophical understanding that merges phenomenology with ontology. This perspective constitutes the consciousness that determines human beings. Hence, the concept of the environment essentially exists within a temporal unfolding through which the self comprehends its world as the ontology of human existence, making the understanding of being integral to its own existence. This interaction with the environment, which may be called its personal world, is distinct from the objective or material world since it manifests therein through consciousness, perception, and the affective quality of varied experiences. Thus, being coexists with this environment in a mode of authentic existence rather than inauthentic existence, each individual uniquely inhabits this world and poses cosmic and existential questions. These inquiries enable *Dasein* to live as a being rooted in its world. The concept of the environment remains within the scope and limits of *Dasein* and its understanding of being; it is a solid wall behind which being shelters from the notion

¹ Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Nadia Bounafqa, Diwan of University Publications, (n.p., n.d.), 34, 51.

of nonbeing. Human understanding of the meaning of its existence is at the core of the world, which itself is a mode of existence.²

In this way, before the world is regarded as limited and finite in comprehension, it represents the normative nucleus of *Dasein*, the being conscious of itself, which establishes the field of significance comprehensively as the foundational ground upon which the human being erects itself and derives the intelligibility of its existence.

This interpretation departs from the conceptions bequeathed to us by the entirety of the Western tradition. The manner in which the universality and totality of the human being are defined does not rest upon fixed characteristics assigned according to its diverse needs; rather, it is influenced by a constellation of interpretable significations that enable phenomenology to analyse the meaning of existence by returning to the essence of things themselves, not merely to how they appear to us. Here, the knowing self attains a primary and comprehensive apprehension of its world within the temporality of existence.

What may be termed the world, according to Heidegger's conception of the environment of the human being—*le monde*—constitutes a field of ontological, phenomenological, and hermeneutical significations for being functional through understanding its world by interpreting the truth of its existence, in which it lives. In this sense, the human being possesses a unique and universal character fundamentally distinct from all other beings and entities, because it alone, in its essence, among other beings, can create a different world. Being attains this through *transcendence* by means of the phenomenological method, which confers upon existence its world by transcending all objects towards the horizon of its world, representing the actual image of existence peculiar to *Dasein* in its transcendence and distinction from other beings.³

Being can only reach the limits of this world through the movement it makes in separating from itself and opening towards the totality of other beings. This movement is simultaneously transcendent, which allows it to depart from the primary givens and essential characteristics of other beings and to acknowledge the particularity of its world in relation to other worlds. Transcendence, according to phenomenology, grants the necessary belonging of the human being within its world, which confers meaning upon its existence and constitutes being through its transcendence.

2/2/Phenomenological Interpretation and the Foundation of the Concept of the Environment

Within a foundational phenomenological interpretation of the concept of the environment or the ontological world of being, Heidegger distinguishes in his fundamental work *Being and Time* between the world as the totality of beings and the ontological concept of the world, which refers to the existential. While the existential determination of the world points to that through which *Dasein* exists, the world in the ontological sense is not the object opposing the knowing self but rather the locus in which one lives. Accordingly, Heidegger distinguishes the life-world from other worlds and differentiates between the ambient world (*Umwelt*), which connects us to the things surrounding us; the shared world (*Mitwelt*), involving interpersonal relations; and the proper or personal world (*Selbstwelt*), which links one to oneself. However, existence with others in a shared world may lead to neglecting existence in the world of things objectively and organically, as objects exist, and to overlooking existence with the self within the personal world.⁴

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Fathi Al-Maskini, ed. Ismail Musaddaq, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Jadid Al-Muttahida, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2012, 64.

³ Jamal Muhammad Ahmad Suleiman, *Being and Beingness in Martin Heidegger*, Dar Al-Tanweer for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, (n.p., 2009), 97–98.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 150, 242.

Thus, this distinction and the demarcations Heidegger established between the concept of the world lead to a fundamental clarification of the term environment as synonymous with the ontological understanding of the world and provoke the problem of the world within the framework of phenomenological analysis and its ontological interpretation. Heidegger regarded phenomenology as the secure path that may follow in its journey towards its world, as phenomenology establishes the relation connecting being with the world it constitutes itself. Accordingly, phenomenological intentionality seeks the meaning of life: why? Moreover, how or what may be called the experience of being in the world is an existential experience of *Dasein*. The phenomenological analysis of the concept of the environment takes two primary directions: the first concerns elucidating the structure of being within the temporality of existence; the second interrogates the possibility of existence, that is, the world that allows for the possibility of transcendence within an ontological foundation.

The phenomenological and ontological dimensions of the concept of the world, which, in Heideggerian terms, correspond in meaning to the concept of the environment, represent a transcendence of the classical conception of the world in the history of philosophy, where the world was understood as everything detached from the self. This view opposes various definitions of the world offered by philosophers of different orientations, notably Descartes' definition of the world as a "spatial horizon in which man and other beings are placed." Heidegger strongly rejects this conception because he believes that the world only acquires meaning when connected to the question of being here, that is, *Dasein*. This conviction is a Greek legacy revived by Heidegger within ontology, drawing particularly on Parmenides, who asserted that "the being of beings belongs to being and is determined by it." In other words, every being has a world distinct from other beings; this world differs from the environment that contains beings or the objective space in the usual sense. Instead, it constitutes a subjective horizon where the proper understanding of the world emerges from the human being, for it is the human being who possesses the capacity to determine the scope of their existence.⁵

Through this distinctive and original conception, Heidegger carves out a new meaning for the concept of the world that diverges from all previous conceptions, whether religious, natural scientific, historical, or philosophical. He established the question of being the principle from which all his conceptions begin and to which they ultimately return. His return to natural philosophy assisted in undermining and dismantling the materialist conception of the world, which confines it to a narrow and restricted meaning, leading Heidegger to a perspective where consciousness aligns with existence in the world.

Understanding the world is a call to truth lived by being, breaking the silence of its concealment. It is an experience rooted in the core of the self, and this truth is absolute and remains after the world and humanity have passed away. This truth is the disclosure of human existence. This ontological discourse renders the meaning of existence as originating not from the philosophy of essences but from reason and understanding alongside it. These two factors allow the manifestation of *Dasein* as a unique presence, since the human essence lies in the genuine contemplation of the being of things. This renders truth immanent to human *logos* and consonant with the understanding of existence. This understanding is founded upon an ontological and phenomenological basis, embodied in the intentionality of consciousness and a hermeneutical dimension realised in understanding.⁶

In this context, thought contemplates both the question of being and being itself. This thinking simultaneously projects the existence of *Dasein* with all its ontological determinations, for *Dasein* possesses a qualitative priority in the possibility of understanding its existence. In light of the definition of human existence as *Dasein*, the authentic ontological structure of the world is formed.

The meaning of existence does not transcend the temporal framework, as time constantly reveals the specific mode of being for being. Heidegger did not overlook analysing the strong relationship between

⁵ Jamal Muhammad Suleiman, *Technology, Truth, Being*, 165, 171.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Call of Truth*, trans. Abdel Ghaffar Makawi, Hindawi Foundation, United Kingdom, (n.p., 2017), 43–44.

time and being, finding that the function of being is to disclose time as it is. Through time, we distinguish between being and nonbeing, nothingness, and, in every act of knowledge, time is experienced as time for us. This ontological distinction, which springs from time, is the thinking of being. Heidegger delves further into this idea, concluding that what *Dasein* ultimately seeks is to understand the horizon of the truth of its world as time itself, not outside or distant from it, since otherwise existence becomes devoid of meaning, something illogical to being.⁷

If one reflects on the concept of time derived from this existential analysis, it emerges as the fundamental determinant of the projection and presence of the idea of *Dasein*. Time is not transcendent over existence; rather, it is the enactment of the possibility of existence in the world. This process of opening completes the relationship between being and time so that existence and time appear to be mutually inclusive. The ontological experience Heidegger describes does not render time transcendent over being; in contrast, it establishes their analogy and participation according to the ontological manifestation, which may be called the temporality of being itself, or existence as the source of all time. The concept of the environment implicit in Heidegger's description, accompanied by reflection on the mode of being within an ontological context, faces a threat from the domination of technology, the greatest danger to *Dasein* that alienates it from the truth of its existence. The truth of human existence precedes the human being fashioned by the technological world. At this precise point, Heidegger links the critique of technology with being, affirming that technology should be subordinate to being, not the reverse. The disruption of this order and relation has produced crises, all indicating the nihilism of existence. Heidegger elucidated these in particular terms, describing them as estrangement and reification. He asserts that the dominance of technological understanding manifests as estrangement from the meaning of being, raising the following question: where can one conceive of being without a home, so to speak? To bring forth being world anew, it is necessary to reinforce a mode of being Heidegger terms the "liberation towards being," that is, placing being as a priority and precedence, meaning to regard it with care, whereby existence is understood as comprehension, not as an object. This will be primarily.⁸

Heidegger's diagnosis of the crisis of technology has the potential to redraw the boundaries of *Dasein*'s authentic world. It is a calm reflection that must be practiced, an additional question to the pivotal question of existence in Heidegger's ontology. Through these phenomenological and hermeneutical contemplations of the question of existence, which simultaneously constitute a call of being, the desire to respond becomes necessary for every human possessing the capacity to answer this call.

The idea of responding to the call of being is exercised by *Dasein* daily, without a doubt. This notion leads us to consider Heidegger's analyses of the problematics of the everyday, inseparable from the question of existence and the concept of the world environment. The discussion of the everyday within Heidegger's ontology does not signify what is prevalent or recurrent in daily life; instead, it points to profound philosophical dimensions concerning the concept of *momentariness* (German *Augenblick*). Heidegger introduced this term for a philosophical necessity to contrast with prior approaches to the everyday and to remove it from general understanding, placing it instead within an ontological context. The issue of momentariness revolves around the dependence of existence on the consciousness of being and its nonindependence from the momentary. By this step, Heidegger brackets everyday conceptions, proposing a phenomenological treatment within an ontological framework. This is evident in the concept of existence immersed in the everyday in a momentary, continuous, and inseparable manner. Thinking about being is simultaneously thinking about one's personal world, a world in which *Dasein* is immersed momentarily and continuously. This essential existence attained by *Dasein* leads it not only to contemplate being itself but also to reflect on other existential questions regarding its being, such as death, emerging from the affective state of anxiety. Heidegger distinguished between anxiety

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 689.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Technology, Truth, Being*, trans. Muhammad Spila and Abdulhadi Miftah, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Beirut, 1st ed., 1995, 43–44.

and fear, choosing the term “anxiety” because it better captures this description. Whereas one fears something known, one is anxious about something unknown, which is the crux of this idea. All these existential questions remain inseparable from *Dasein*’s everydayness.⁹

These existential questions constitute an essential condition that enables being open to the world as it is, indicating that the human being holds a central presence within this world. Heidegger intended the notion of anxiety to demonstrate that anxiety itself is a mode of affirming being, as it expresses the fear of nothingness. Existential anxiety thus serves as an additional revealing and affirming tool for the essence of existence. Momentariness provides the ontological foundation for this entity, which is crafted by the consciousness of being.

Language is inseparable from the question of existence and the understanding of the world in Heidegger's thought, as he regarded language as the fundamental medium and driving force for understanding existence. Heidegger's linking of the duality of language and existence is not arbitrary but rather a carefully considered step with clear objectives and outcomes. When a philosopher such as Heidegger places language at the center of existence, it means that language expresses significations surpassing mere linguistic meaning, extending to ontological significance. This grants human beings a linguistic relationship with their existence. Heidegger found that language, when treated philosophically, provides meaning to existence and signs of presence. Thus, language is the most splendid manifestation of being, as it balances between the entity and being, serving as the mediating element in this equation.

However, what kind of language does Heidegger mean within this ontological framework? The language that Heidegger formulates here is the language of speech and meaning from an ontological standpoint, that is, language with a true essence that reveals existence, distinguishing it from language in its grammatical and morphological sense. It transcends this to ontological understanding and performs the task of disclosure of being the primary task of *Dasein*. Within this ontological context, Heidegger describes language as “the dwelling place of being... language is not essentially a means by which the entity expresses itself, nor is it the expression of a living being; language is the manner in which being reveals itself.” The dwelling here assumes the sense of essence according to Heidegger’s conception of language.¹⁰

This ontological analysis of language reveals a distinctive feature of Heideggerian philosophy: its capacity to penetrate concepts from their ordinary meanings to unthought meanings. This is fully disclosed by ontology as a whole, particularly by Heidegger’s analysis of the relationship between language and being. By moving the concept of language beyond mere expression and linguistic speech to the disclosure of the truth of being, Heidegger establishes that actual language is the one that questions the truth of existence and employs understanding as a bridge linking it to being. Language's function is thus the interpretation of being, which confers upon humans a linguistic mode of being distinct from ordinary language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of the environment, according to Heidegger's questioning of thought, merges phenomenology and hermeneutics in the ontological foundation of the concept. This understanding opens various philosophical horizons and dimensions for contemplating the question of being. Being itself provides the ontological significance of the concept of the environment or world presented in a novel form, inseparable from ontology, or what Heidegger termed ontological existence, which is intimately connected to the concept of existential time as the momentary and everyday thinking of being. On the other hand, Heidegger endowed language with ontological significance in his

⁹ Adel Mustafa, *Understanding Understanding: An Introduction to Hermeneutics*, Hindawi Foundation, United Kingdom, 1st ed., 2018, 129.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 187–188.

conception of the environment, rendering it the primary discloser of the truth of existence. All these profound dimensions reached by Heidegger restore the standing of phenomenology and hermeneutics, firmly asserting their place in the history of ontology. This unique approach challenges classical ontology, which has remained confined to the question of the priority of essence over existence and has not moved beyond it for centuries.

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