

A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PROBLEM OF METAPHYSICS IN MARTIN HEIDEGGER

TAMUNOSIKI MARKSON

Department of Philosophy

University of Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

&

PRINCE NWINEE TAMBARI

Department of Philosophy

University of Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that studies nature and the totality of being, in which case, it explores into the nature, structure and the basic and fundamental issues or principles of the universe. It is indeed the philosophical study whose object is to determine the real nature of things. Put differently, to determine the meaning, structure and principles of whatever is insofar as it is. This paper, therefore, attempts an exposition of the nature and character of metaphysics as espoused by Martin Heidegger. It x-rays the problem of metaphysics as contended by Heidegger vis-à-vis his idea of fundamental ontology which has Being as its object of inquiry. It adopts qualitative research method which is basically descriptive and employs textual analysis. It limits its scope to the analysis and understanding of the problem of metaphysics in Heidegger's phenomenological existentialism. It posits, in conclusion, that Heidegger's reconstruction of metaphysics has plausibility as it pays particular attention to the question of Being which has been neglected by previous metaphysicians. It recommends a reconstructive adaptation of Heideggerian metaphysics for contemporary philosophy and, of course, 21st century metaphysics.

Keywords: Reconstructive, Problem, Metaphysics, Martin, Heidegger.

Introduction

The major focus of this paper is to attempt a reconstruction of the age-old problem of metaphysics which is the intellectual burden of Heideggerian philosophy. Metaphysics, as a core branch of philosophy, is the search for ultimate reality. It inquires into the nature and structure of reality as a whole. In other words, it is a critical, rational or systematic reflection on the totality of being. It critically examines the composition and structure of realities that underlie or underpin nature-physical and non-physical. What is more, it is the philosophical study whose object is to determine the real nature of things-to determine the meaning, structure and principles of whatever *is* insofar as it *is*. It interrogates into the constitutive or basic elements that permeate the universe.

Heidegger on the Problem of Metaphysics

It is, however, important to note that Heidegger has disdain for traditional metaphysics. His displeasure or dissatisfaction with previous metaphysicians stems largely from the fact that they derailed from the primal goal of metaphysics which is the analysis of being. That is what Heidegger in his *An Introduction to Metaphysics* refers to as fundamental ontology. His determination to chart a new course or reconstruct the entire edifice of metaphysics was informed by the following baffling questions: Why are there existents rather than nothing? Why is there anything at all rather than nothing? Heidegger's preoccupation consists in the search for the *Being* of beings. Prior to the emergence of Heidegger on the scene of metaphysical inquiry, traditional metaphysicians had obsession for issues such as the problems of appearance and reality; essence and existence; change and permanence; mind and body; substance, universals; etc. Even if the issue of Being was raised by philosophers, Heidegger contends that it was not adequately addressed. He notes that particular attention was not being paid to the nature of ontology as a mode of metaphysical inquiry.

His major contention is that traditional metaphysics forgets *Sein* – that Being which is the ontological foundation of all beings. Down the stream or trajectory of the historical excursus of the wrong journey of metaphysics, Heidegger shows the genesis, development and varied nuances of various metaphysical concepts, as has been pointed out earlier, all derailed from the concern of ontology. For Heidegger, “The question of Being has today been forgotten” (*Metaphysics* 2). The challenge, therefore, is to reconstruct the question of Being. He further writes that, “The question of the meaning of Being must be reformulated. If it is a fundamental question, it must be made *durchsichtig* (transparent) and in an appropriate way” (Heidegger *Metaphysics* 8). The foregoing assertion underscores Heidegger's metaphysical project. He understands the central and fundamental problem of metaphysics not to be the abstract investigation of the totality or the plurality of Being.

It is not the Platonic *form* or the Aristotelian *Ousia*. It is not the Thomistic ontological approach of equating Being with the Judeo-Christian God. It is not the scholastic Being qua Being; not the Cartesian Solipstic *cogito*; not the Kantian transcendental apperception. Heidegger subscribes neither to Leibnizian subjectivity nor to Spinozian monadology nor still to the *Urbmensch* (Superman) of Nietzsche (Iroegbu 213). All these, according to Heidegger, are false routes to the real Being. For him, the fundamental object of metaphysics from which all these scholars and more have derailed is the unraveling of the deep-seated meaning of *Sein*. It is the foundation of all beings, and is the primary concern of metaphysics.

Heidegger on Being

There is no doubt that the object of metaphysical inquiry revolves around the nature and character of being. In other words, the concept of being as an entity having ontological status and significance is the crux or main thrust of metaphysical investigation. Thus, the strand of metaphysics that is concerned with the meaning, composition and characteristic features of being is technically known as ontology. It is, therefore, germane to provide a working definition of the concept of being in a concise, less ambiguous or vague expression. It is indeed an aspect or dimension of special metaphysics which deals with being that has both essence and existence.

Recall that metaphysics is a form of speculative philosophy that inquires and raises questions such as: What happens to man after mortal death? Is the world and its phenomena what they appear to be? (Ajodo21-22). These and many other perplexing or striking questions border on the nature of being or reality which is the fulcrum or hallmark of metaphysical inquiry. It is a truism that what constitutes the intellectual burden or major preoccupation of metaphysics is an analysis and understanding of being as a metaphysical phenomenon. The word Ontology is derived from two Greek words: *onto* meaning *being* or *to be* and *logos* meaning *science* or *discourse*. Ontology is, therefore, the branch of metaphysics that studies the nature of existence. In other words, ontology is the metaphysical science or study of being.

Historically, the first systematic attempt to address the problem of being in the history of philosophy dates back to Parmenides of Elea (C.515-450 B.C.). For Parmenides, "Whatever exists, exists, and there is nothing apart from that which exists" (qtd in Lawhead 20). Being or reality is that which is i.e. that which exists. The problem of Being is the crux or main thrust of Heidegger's metaphysics. It lies at the heart of his rational inquiry or thought pattern. His focus shifted from cosmology and cosmogony to ontology which has been neglected by previous metaphysicians. His metaphysics revolves around the fundamental ontology of Being of beings. There is no gainsaying that his search for the real meaning of Being, which for him is the primal goal of metaphysics, marked a watershed in the annals of the history of metaphysics. It is indeed a paradigm shift in metaphysics.

In the Heideggerian perspective, metaphysics must return from the derailment it had undergone over the years. For him:

Disclosure of being means the unlocking of what forgetfulness of being closes and hides. And it is through the questioning that a light first falls on the essence of metaphysics that had hitherto also been hidden (Heidegger *Being and Time* 15).

He makes a clarion call for a return to the major preoccupation or business of metaphysics which consists of uncovering or unraveling the true nature of Being i.e. the Being of all beings. The problem which Heidegger sets out to investigate is not the problem of man but the problem of being. He stresses the necessity to restate and properly situate this age-old problem of metaphysics which has been neglected by previous philosophers.

In his *Being and Time*, he provides the rationale for his philosophical inquiry thus:

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being'? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of being... Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of being and to do so correctly (1).

By 'being' Heidegger does not mean any particular kind of being, he means 'that being of beings'. But what is this 'being of beings?'. It is that from which all beings derive their being and it is present in all beings. Heidegger maintains that this being is not God. What is more, it is not even an existing entity, but all existing entities derive their being from it and it is everywhere. It is being itself but not a particular being.

The reality of this being that is said to be all-embracing and the totality of all existing beings or existents raises quite some puzzles. They are, amongst others; How do we approach the study of being? Where do we start from? These and many other striking questions immediately come to mind in attempting to conceptualize Heidegger's understanding of being as an ontological entity. Heidegger opines that any rational or systematic inquiry into the nature and character of being should take man as its point of departure. His conviction is that man is the only being that ask or ponder on the question of being. The appropriate or suitable way to approach the question of being, therefore, is to interrogate the beingness of man. For him:

The very asking of this is an entity is mode of being; and as such it gets to the essential character from what is inquired about, namely, being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its being, we shall denote by the term *Dasein* (Heidegger *Being and Time* 27).

The import of the above submission is that *Dasein* is the only being that has consciousness and rationality. Man is the only existent (being) that has self-awareness of his own existence.

In Heideggerian philosophy, *Dasein* is the fulcrum of his thought pattern. He based his study of man on his everyday experiences or existential conditions.

Furthermore, Heidegger calls man's essential and existential structures *existentialia*, and the method he proposes to adopt in this inquiry is *phenomenology*. It is, however, important to note that Heidegger's existential phenomenology differs fundamentally from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. He did not call for the elimination of metaphysics like Hume and Kant before him. Heidegger asserts that in its history trajectory something has gone wrong with metaphysics. It has missed its way in terms of the primary object of its inquiry or preoccupation: Being. Metaphysics forgot the most fundamental subject of its inquiry: the *Sein, Ens, Being, or 'to be'*, of the different levels of being. The forgotten Being here is the difference between Being and Beings, otherwise called ontological difference. It is "the differentiation between Being and beings" or what Heidegger defines as:

We call the distinction between Being and beings, when it is carried out explicitly, the ontological difference (*die ontologische Differenz*) (*Being and Time* 15).

Heidegger maintains that the ontological difference was forgotten. There was a *Seinsvergessenheit*; i.e. oblivion or forgetfulness of Being. He defines the latter thus:

Oblivion of Being means: the self-concealing of the origin of Being divided into whatness and thatness in favour of Being, which opens out being as beings, and remains unquestioned as Being (*Being and Time* 35).

Being was forgotten, not out of the poverty of human memory, not out of some psycho-somatic defects in metaphysicians, not out of intellectual negligence or investigational carelessness. It is because, Being, in its destiny (*Geschick*), is hidden and essentially veiled. This

makes its being forgotten a part of its reality. Thus, the forgetfulness of the ontological difference stems from the ambivalence at the centre of the science of being itself.

Critical Evaluation

Heidegger's seminal contribution to the province of metaphysics is indeed a landmark feat. He draws our attention to the glaring fact that Western philosophy has alienated us from appreciating the real meaning of Being. His profound influence on twentieth century thinkers cannot be overemphasized. It is important to note that Heidegger's attempt to deal with the problem of metaphysics is not error-free. For instance, his idea of fundamental ontology was defeated on the score of this. The concept of Being remains a mystery. Heidegger's approach to solving the problem of Being is as attractive as it is elusive. He can be judged to be guilty of the same fault or weakness he charged against his predecessors. He seems to be more of an anthropologist than a metaphysician.

Hence, his forgetfulness of metaphysics. In this lacuna, the disappointment is as enormous as the hope that Heidegger had raised in metaphysics. His ontology, in the opinion of critics, is a sort of paganism. His philosophy is characterized by a totality that neglects infinity and a situation where truth (*aletheia*) is given priority over justice (*dike*). All these are inherent weaknesses in Heidegger's ontology.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that Heidegger's attempt to reconstruct the object of metaphysics is quite educating, illuminating, and instructive. His commitment to addressing the problem of Being which, according to him, is the principal goal of metaphysical inquiry provides a conceptual framework for properly understanding ultimate realities and the nature of human existence. In conclusion, a case is made that Heidegger raised a fundamental issue in metaphysics which is thought-provoking.

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