

# Essay on the present-at-hand and the ready-at-hand in heideggers philosophy

[Philosophy](#)



In this paper, I will discuss the present-at-hand and the ready-at-hand in Heidegger's philosophy. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is a German philosopher who is often thought of in terms of the Existentialist movement in Continental philosophical tradition, but who did not prefer to be classified as an existentialist (McBride 131). Heidegger concerns himself with the deep metaphysical question of being in his book *Being and Time* — a job he never completed in his lifetime (Blattner 9). Heidegger has an ambitious project in his book — that is fundamentally to investigate being, a project he feels has been forgotten by philosophers (Heidegger 1). Theologians ought to study Heidegger because he gives sense to the phenomenon as to why human beings search for something beyond themselves. Although his philosophy rejects a sound theology, it does give a phenomenological account of man's search for meaning, a topic of interest to the God seeker.

In a course on philosophy of theology, it would be prudent to wonder why we are reading Heidegger. He was an atheist. But he gives us trenchant reflection on what is the ultimate concern of mankind who does not have the ultimate answers to his own existence. On reading about Heidegger, in thinking about this paper, it was interesting to encounter Avital Ronell's remarks about the thinker in the documentary *Unexamined Life* (2010). In the *Apology* of Plato, Socrates says the "The unexamined life is not worthy living for a human being" (38a). And in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, he says that by nature all people desire to know (980a). And in the *Theaetetus* Socrates opines that the philosophy begins in wonder (155d). Aristotle has this same idea when he talks about philosophy is wonder, and the philosopher has to have wonder in order to be a good philosopher (982b).

Heidegger has all these attributes in his philosophy for his trying to think about what is obvious to most people. In fact the very first quote of the book, *Being and Time*, begins right away wondering about the puzzle of being, where he quotes Plato talking about how it seems so obvious what we say when talk about being, “ however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed” (244d; Heidegger 1).

In other words, what the entire history of philosophy has been is an investigation into something we think we know so well. Heidegger’s point is that we are wrong in knowing even that which is the closest to us. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* he underscores this point when he writes that human beings are caught up in boredom and distraction and we miss out on the true nature of being (1). We think we know reality, what is present to us, but what we know is that which is so obviously ready to us that we only become aware of it when it is broken. Heidegger is the philosopher’s philosopher, and he is trying to think about a question that is a comment on what philosophers do. They try to think about what Ronell says that those who try to reduce everything to the absolute meaning. It is better to look at being in the world as play, and this is what Heidegger means by the ready-at-hand, when we have a pure playful comportment with the world, and not trying to reduce everything to some kind of classifiable meaning. Ronel in the documentary *Examined Life*, which is a very helpful video for understanding philosophy, quotes Heidegger who is trying to map out a road that leads to nowhere, for he is making new pathways, which in Greek is *methodos*. It is where we get the word methodology. The methodology that Heidegger carves out for us is the path of the philosopher who is trying to

roadmap a way to being, but where the end of the road is not something that is just absolutely there. Many people think that the meaning of life is in one easy answer. Some people say God. Others say it is all in one's mind. The scientist says it is an objective scientific study. But Ronel, who is thinking like Martin Heidegger, says that those that think they have the right answer are often the most wrong. Those who are sure of their convictions are often the ones who are most wrong.

Heidegger is a fantastic questioner into what it means to be a human being in the world, for he does not feel there is one right answer. Ask anyone what they think the meaning of their life is and perhaps the answer will be in the multitudes. A teacher says that they teach, and a parent says that they are there to raise their kids. Heidegger outlines main of his main points in his lectures he gave to students, which has been published as a book entitled *Introduction to Metaphysics*. In this book he does ask a very important cosmological question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” (7). Heidegger does not give an answer to this question, but only to say that Dasein is a questioning being. The answer, then, is in the nature of Dasein itself. Dasein is that being which asks the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” But as Dreyfus says in his commentary on Heidegger's *Being and Time*, that there is no one answer to this question of why the teacher is a teacher, and the parent is a parent — and we do all this for a final for-the-sake-of-which — which Heidegger argues is the ultimate mystery of Dasein (95). It is what Paul Tillich calls the ultimate concern of humankind (1951). Ronell, in the documentary, goes with this point and says that those who have a “purpose” often are the most uncertain, and they are the ones

who are most often questioning not because they have a definitive answer. It is like how Socrates is characterized in the readings from Plato's *Apology* and the summary Lawhead gives in his book, that Socrates himself did not claim to have the answers to the meaning of life. Socrates claimed he only asked questions to find an answer, and in some parts of the conversations Socrates has with his friends he does not have an answer. Socrates says in the *Apology* that " I am very conscious that I am not wise at all" (21b).

In this way, to bring Socrates into the discussion, is to bring the entire history of philosophy into question. Those who think they know everything is caught up with the present-at-hand. But those of us, most of us, who are so involved in life we never think to ask the most fundamental questions because they are so obvious to us — the ready-at-hand. Heidegger thinks that being is such a gargantuan concept, encompassing our understanding of everything that one apprehends in entities (22). Being is both indefinable as a concept, but at the same time, being is so obvious that to be forgotten (23). Being, Heidegger states, " must already be available to us in some way" (25).

However, we get clouded in our apprehension of being, in what Heidegger calls " obsuration" (25). Heidegger argues that what we seek in understanding Being is so familiar to us that at first it may be something we cannot grasp, but upon further investigation what was obvious has a richer layer hidden beneath the veil. It is like what the fiction writer David Foster Wallace says is like being a fish in a water tank — what is so obvious is that the fish is in the water. Being is like a fish swimming in an aquarium who has no idea that it is in a water (21). In this way, the study of being is the study of entity, but the catch is that we, human beings, are an entity that can think

about what it means to be an entity. Heidegger has a special word for what kind of entity is the human being: “Dasein” (27).

As Blattner has observed, Heidegger is trying to understand the phenomenon of everyday life (13). And as Heidegger writes, “Being is always the Being of an entity” (29). The question of Being is capitalized when Heidegger is talking about ontology in this way, and he uses the lower case “being” to talk about it in a less mysterious way — but Blattner explains that this lower and upper case distinction is unimportant (Blattner 14). Lawhead makes this distinction in his textbook when he talks about Heidegger working on an ontology, meaning that he is interested in how we engage with all levels of reality (546). Heidegger wants to demystify our understanding of being, and avoid the lofty speculation that we have seen in how other philosophers have dealt with the question. Plato certainly makes being a question of transcendence and he places being on such a lofty plane that it is nearly impossible for the prisoner in the cave to reach it for he is trapped in his own body (514a). Descartes needlessly divides being into body and soul, and this dualism is a problem for Heidegger (46). The philosopher Heidegger most agrees with is Aristotle, even though he says that Aristotle too failed to clear away the confusion (48).

Part of this problem is that we are not transparent to ourselves: “Dasein is not only close to us — even that which is closest: we are it, each of us, we ourselves” (36). But even in this closeness — think of David Foster Wallace’s analogy of “this is water” — we are simultaneously close to and far away from ourselves. For example, we think we know ourselves, but there are times when we are not so sure. We at times have a clear understanding of

our being, but this understanding becomes clouded in our everydayness. For example, there is so much we do not pay attention to in the world. And the world is an important distinction for Heidegger. For him, there is no distinction between “inner world” and an “external reality.” We are always already in the world. No matter of introspection will accomplish any further clarity, nor will an investigation into the external world in a purely scientific way will work either.

For example, a hammer, which is Heidegger’s favorite example, is nothing without carpentry, and a home run is nothing without a game of baseball (Blattner 15). Heidegger writes in another text that the question of being alerted to him the problem that the Ancient Greeks called *Aletheia*, which means the concealedness of what is present (qtd. in Kaufman 239).

Heidegger wonders if reality is found in uncovering what is hidden through “consciousness and objectivity” or is it the “Being of beings in its unconnectedness and concealment” (Ibid.). Heidegger is not a realist, for he does not think that the reality exists objectively independent of our experience. In other words, what he means is that there is no real “tree” that is completely divorced from my experience of the tree. But Heidegger also rejects idealism, in that the experience of the tree, my conscious awareness of the tree is not the entire reality either. This is why Heidegger relies on present-at-hand and ready-at-hand to attempt to answer this question.

Lawhead refers to this idea of Heidegger in his *Historical Introduction to Philosophy* when he delineates further what Heidegger is doing in his work. When I go through the door and feel at home in the world, it is not just a

mental state that I feel, nor is the feeling just nothing. It is, in fact, the relationship I have with existence. But existence is not something I can simply study in a petri dish. Nor is existence something that Descartes in his *Meditations* calls the “I am; I think” (qtd in Baird 345). In other words, things, entities, exist in the world, for I am that kind of being that takes a stand on my very being, and being in the world is something that I take issue with, or otherwise I would not be a human being. The very notion that I will die is very much a part of how I defined myself, and how my finiteness defines me. I know that I will die, and it is this knowledge that transform my very being. As Heidegger says, “Dasein is not only the primary entity to be interrogated; it is also that entity that already comports itself in its Being” (35). Descartes’s notion of “I think therefore I am” does not work in the ontology of Heidegger because it is not a complete picture of the way being in the world operates according to an ontology of being in the world. What is made clear is that as Dasein, we find ourselves thrown into a situation (Lawhead 552). In other words, I am the person with a history, with facts that make up who I am — but this is a situation that I am thrown into beyond my ability to choose. In being with the world I am engaged in the world, and this is what is meant by the ready-at-hand. To give another example, imagine a commuter on a crowded bus during rush hour. The commuter is completely absorbed in their dealings. At the grocery store, a customer buys food but is so engaged in what they are doing that they do not even think. For this is the point, Heidegger is trying to make. Descartes thought that being alive solely consists of thinking. But Heidegger is laying bare the idea that we are not so much thinking all the time, as merely being



in the world, wrapped up in our concerns.

But there is often times when our relationship with the world is not so seamless, when we are disrupted and we are forced to come out of our everydayness and encounter the hammer that is broken, or the door that won't open. For earlier, the example of the door was given. I am unaware of the door until one day I lose my keys, and I cannot get into my house. The door is then very much real for me, and I notice it more than I ever did before all my other dealings with the door. For it is when the ready-at-hand becomes disrupted that I experience the world in a different way. If I am working at my desk and the lights go out, I immediately become anxious. Or if I am walking after class, and I feel that someone is following me, the environment that I am in changes. Heidegger is saying that these experiences are part of being in the world and are very much related to our very existence in the world.

In this way, when the world is broken, when the ready-at-hand is disrupted, it is an interesting phenomenon. Heidegger calls it the modes of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy (104). The door, as I have already mentioned is conspicuousness only when it does not open. It is not just that I am observing the door in the way that it is. A door is not just a mere "thing" (104). In dealing with the door that will not open, I am very much not at home in the world. At the same time, the way in which I am not at home makes the door become even realer than it ever was. If the car breaks down, a person becomes very much conspicuous of the existence of the car. Or if I am writing in my notebook, and I run out of pages, the notebook becomes "obtrusive" to me. Or if a person is working in the office

and the lights go on and off, they cannot think and concentrate, so the world becomes obstinate. Heidegger writes “ The structure of the Being of what is ready-at-hand as equipment is determined by references or assignments” (105). By becoming unusable equipment becomes peculiar, as in the broken pen that I use to write, or filled up, or in any way the world becomes glaring in its presence is really just the veil of everydayness lifted. Heidegger calls it being “ disturbed” (105). “ The world announces itself,” Heidegger writes (105).

If Heidegger is to be understood, he is saying that context is everything. In a way, he is right, for when one is sitting in a room, and there is a constant noise from outside, it is hard to pay attention. Or if, in class, there is a commotion outside, the attention of the class is turned away from the teacher to the classroom. What we normally do not take notice of, when it becomes “ missing” — makes a break “ in those referential contexts which circumspection discovers. Our circumspection comes up against emptiness, and now sees for the first time what the missing article was ready-at-hand with, and what it was ready-at-hand for. The environment announces itself afresh” (105). It is interesting that Heidegger writes that the world announces itself — for it is becoming a point of his ontology that existence, to exist, is not solely that the individual thinks. The world comes into being with Dasein and Dasein is always and already in the world. What Heidegger is also saying is that the reality of things is not just in the circumspection of objects. For example, think about a sunset. It occurs every day, but every day a person observes a sunset it is not the same. It is not just in the mere circumspection of reality that the world is lit up — but as Heidegger writes, “

it is in the “there” before anyone has observed or ascertained it. It is itself inaccessible to circumspection, so far as circumspection is always directed towards entities” (105).

Lawhead mentions anxiety as a good example. Waiting for a friend to arrive to visit a person feels anxious for they are expecting the arrival of their friend. At the moment of expectation, different things in the environment are lit up based on the context of how a person is in the world. Things that are missing. Perhaps the cups need to be arranged for tea. Or there is dust in the corner of the room. There is no tea bags, so the person has to run down to the store to replenish the supply. But when the friend arrives, the anxiety of expectation vanishes, and the former things are forgotten for awhile, or at least until something else goes missing, or is lost. In this way, this is how Heidegger is making an investigation into everyday life. For every example he gives; it is possible to attend to the phenomenon. In this way, it is how nothing can be reduced solely what is present at hand, nor are we always so lost in the world that everything is also ready to hand. Being in the world is a series of going back and forth between these two modes.

In conclusion, Heidegger changes how we view the self in his analysis of the present-at-hand and the ready-at-hand. I cannot just think of myself as an organism, nor can I think of myself as a mind trapped in a vat. As Velasquez rightly notices, understanding reality is understanding the ontology of the human being (176). As the readings from Lawhead show, Heidegger is trying to open a very large discussion that has concerned the history of philosophy from the beginning. Questions like why we exist, why we are here on earth, and what are we doing with our life become important. While Heidegger is

sometimes very confusing in his use of language, the hunch of this author is that he understands that language itself is a tool, and language can both conceal and reveal. Language is everydayness when Dasein is completely absorbed in the objects of their concern, and there is no special attention given to language. But a language itself is often broken and in this brokenness we can lose our tin ear. The point Heidegger is trying to make, in the main, and it is the point that Lawhead delivers in his readings of him, is that Heidegger is trying to wake the world up by showing how the world announces itself.

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