

Heidegger's Phenomenology
and Contemporary Environmentalism

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Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself, ed. Ted Toadvine (SUNY Pres Series in Environmental Ethics and Philosophy, 2002), 73-101,

The phenomenology developed by Husserl and transformed by Heidegger provided the basic conceptual distinctions for much of twentieth century continental philosophy. In addition to challenging customary conceptions of selfhood, language, and metaphysics, continental philosophy has also contributed significantly to postmodern ethics and multicultural theory by criticizing humanism and theo-logo-phallo-centrism. In the domain of environmental philosophy, however, continental philosophy initially played a less influential role than did Anglo-American philosophy. Soon, however, a number of continentally-oriented philosophers questioned the metaphysical presuppositions of modern moral philosophy, especially as "extended" to non-human beings, and began exploring whether thinkers such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Merleau-Ponty could help clarify issues pertinent to humanity's attitude toward nature.¹

In what follows, I continue that exploration by examining the extent to which Heidegger's phenomenology can contribute to environmental philosophy. His theoretical approach to preserving nature differs from the Anglo-American one in two major and intertwined ways. First, his approach cannot be adequately conceived in terms of the debate between anthropocentrists, who say that inherent value belongs only to humans and that nature has only instrumental value, and biocentrists, who say that nature itself has inherent value with which human values are continuous. Although Heidegger's thought is sometimes described as anthropocentric, he himself sharply criticized anthropocentrism. Yet he was no biocentrist, because he believed that humankind is discontinuous with nature as understood by physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology. Second, Heidegger's approach to preserving nature is not axiological, but ontological. That is, he does not propose to discover some property in natural beings that is "inherently valuable." Indeed, he maintains that the very concept of "value" arose along with the power-hungry modern subject. Hence, extending value to non-human beings encompasses them within the same subjectivity that is central to

technological modernity.² Heidegger's approach to limiting humanity's destructive treatment of nature was ontological. In his view, for something "to be" means for it to manifest itself, in the sense of being interpreted, understood, or appropriated by human Dasein. Dasein's encounter with beings occurs in the temporal-historical clearing opened up through Dasein. Because Dasein neither produces nor owns this clearing, but rather exists only insofar as it has been appropriated as this clearing, Dasein is summoned to "let beings be," by allowing them to manifest themselves in their various kinds of intelligibility.

In his early work, which sought access to Being as such by analyzing the Being of human Dasein, Heidegger indicated that nature primarily manifests itself as a resource for human ends, and secondarily as an object for the natural sciences. He hinted at other modes of nature's Being, but did not adequately develop them. By the 1930s, concerned about the perceived subjectivism and anthropocentrism of his early work, he approached Being without engaging in extensive analysis of Dasein's Being, although he always emphasized the close relation between Being and human Dasein. His later phenomenology, ever more hermeneutical in orientation, amounted to a radical uncovering of insights gained by the phenomenological ontology of previous great thinkers, above all Aristotle.³ Heidegger interpreted crucial Aristotelian concepts, such as physis, energeia, dynamis, kinesis, and metabole, in ways that offer fruitful alternatives to traditional readings of Aristotle. Recently, in an essay attempting to demonstrate Heidegger's pertinence for environmental philosophy, Nancy J. Holland maintains that Heidegger's version of Aristotle's view of nature differs dramatically from the modern scientific view, which objectifies nature. Holland does not point out, however, that much of contemporary environmentalism endorses the scientific view of nature, including the idea that humans are simply one species among others. Hence, there is no easy way to reconcile Heidegger's view of nature and humankind with the environmentalists' view. Even more troubling for those attempting such a reconciliation is Thomas J. Sheehan's contention that Heidegger himself concludes that there is no alternative to the nihilism of the scientific/technological understanding of Being. According to Sheehan, Heidegger's talk of a "new beginning," a post-metaphysical and non-domineering encounter with beings, is internally inconsistent with his own thought.

Early Heidegger's Phenomenological Analysis of Nature as Human Resource

Despite his debt to Husserl, whose account of "categorical intuition" in Logical Investigations foreshadowed his own understanding of Being, Heidegger redefined phenomenology in his own way.⁴ Agreeing with Husserl that phenomenology's methodological aim was to get back to "the matters [die Sachen] themselves," Heidegger maintained that the matters most in need of disclosure and simultaneously most difficult to disclose were ontological. In Being and Time, he defined phenomenology by first analyzing the term into its roots, phenomenon and logos.

Phenomenon, he writes, "means that which shows itself in itself, the manifest." (BT,51; SZ,28)⁵ Ordinarily, what show themselves are beings of various kind, accessible to what Kant called "empirical intuition." But beings are not what Heidegger has in mind by the phenomenological concept of "phenomenon," which concerns "that which already shows itself in the appearance prior to the 'phenomenon' as ordinarily understood and as accompanying it in every case...." (BT, 54-55; SZ,31) Kant maintained that space and time--the pure forms of intuition—are phenomena that appear prior to the appearance of objects of experience. Typically, space and time are not noticed as such; instead, attention is given to things appearing within the horizons opened up by space and time. A true phenomenon, then, does not show itself directly, but instead makes it possible for beings as such to appear.

Heidegger defines logos, the other element of phenomenology, as "discourse" (Rede), which Aristotle explained as apophainesthai. "The logos lets something be seen (phainesthai), namely, what the discourse is about... Discourse 'lets [something] be seen' apo...that itself of which the discourse is [about]." (BT, 56; SZ, 32) This letting be seen makes possible truth, aletheia, which Heidegger defines not as "correctness" in judgment, but instead as taking something out of its hiddenness or dis-covering it. Synthesizing his analysis of phenomenon and logos, Heidegger defines phenomenology as "To let be seen from itself that which shows itself, just as its shows itself from itself." (BT, 58; SZ, 34) But what needs to be show itself through phenomenology is not what primarily shows itself, i.e., various kinds of beings, but instead that which lies hidden: Being. Although concealed from ordinary view, Being "belongs essentially to what thus first and for the most part shows itself [beings], so much so

as to constitute its meaning and ground." (BT, 59; SZ, 35) According to Heidegger, "This Being can be covered up so extensively that it becomes forgotten and no question arises about it or about its meaning." (BT, 59; SZ, 35) Seeking to uncover what has been hidden in the Western tradition—Being—, phenomenology amounts to ontology, correctly understood. Indeed, philosophy itself is "universal phenomenological ontology..." (BT, 62; SZ, 38)

Early Heidegger maintained that human Dasein's temporality constitutes the "world" in which beings can manifest or present themselves insofar as they are interpreted "as" something. To speak of the "Being of beings," then, means to speak of how beings reveal themselves in the clearing within which human Dasein's interpretative activity occurs. Synonyms for "clearing" (Lichtung) include: the "world", "absencing" (Abwesen), and "nothingness." Seen from later Heidegger's perspective, this clearing—and not the Being of beings--constitutes the central topic of his thinking. Indeed, he maintained that metaphysics has long asked: "What is the Being of beings?", but phenomenological ontology asks: "What is Being as such?" By "as such," Heidegger meant the conditions needed for beings "to be", in the sense of manifesting themselves in their intelligibility or in their availability to Dasein.

Beings manifest themselves in limited ways to animals, Heidegger maintained, but only the interpretative comportment of human Dasein is capable of disclosing the complex intelligibility and meaningfulness of beings.⁶ Early Heidegger, influenced by Kant, emphasized the intrinsic relation between manifesting or Being (Anwesen) and the transcendental temporality or absencing (Abwesen) necessary for such manifesting. Being tends to conceal itself; indeed, beings can appear as beings only insofar as attention is turned away from Being and toward the beings that appear. The work of metaphysicians, which involves uncovering and describing the Being of beings, has been so difficult precisely because of this self-concealing aspect of the Being of entities . Even more hidden, however, is the condition for such manifesting, namely, the clearing, understood first as Dasein's transcendence, and later as Ereignis, a term that Sheehan translates as "opening up the open [the clearing]." Ereignis constitutes the "third term" that makes possible the reciprocal relation between manifesting and the interpretative behavior that allows manifesting to occur.⁷

So hidden is the clearing/Ereignis that thinkers of the stature of Plato and Aristotle overlooked it. Heidegger used phenomenology to point out the primal "phenomena"—Being, understanding, and the clearing—by virtue of which our encounter with secondary "phenomena"—beings—can take place. A particularly powerful phenomenological method is needed to disclose Being and the clearing, because of their own tendency to conceal themselves. Early Heidegger used "formal indication" to describe the demanding phenomenological practice which Dasein employs as an inquirer to address its own self-concealing Being as transcendental temporality.⁸

If early Heidegger said that beings could not "be" apart from the temporal-historical clearing constituted by human Dasein, later Heidegger added that beings cannot "be" apart from language (logos), which he equated with Ereignis, the opening within which beings become accessible to human Dasein's interpretative activity. It is from this concept of language that Jacques Derrida derives his claim that there is nothing "outside the text." Such notions disturb those environmentalists who insist that nature is robustly real, independently of being known, perceived, encountered, or spoken of by humans.⁹ Heidegger himself expended a great deal of effort attempting to clarify the relation between the seeming "independence" of beings, on the one hand, and the fact that they can "be" only within the temporal-historical world, on the other. As I have explained elsewhere, Heidegger developed a "realism" regarding beings, and an "idealism" regarding Being.¹⁰ That is, Dasein does not invent or create nature, as in some kind of subjective idealism, but instead is dependent on nature. Nevertheless, insofar as a being may be said "to be," it must be revealed as something, that is, as intelligible, as meaningful, as useful. In 1929, Heidegger wrote: "Although being [seiend] in the midst of beings and surrounded by them, Dasein—as existing—has always already surpassed nature."¹¹ The apparent "alreadiness" of natural beings and their resistance to human intervention are basic features of beings that Dasein discloses in encountering them.

Criticizing the naïve realism of natural science, early Heidegger argued that the interpretation of beings as "present-at-hand" objects independent of human experience derives from the more primordial everyday experience of beings as ready-to-hand tools or instruments for human purposes. In disclosing not just artifacts, but natural beings as ready-

to-hand, e.g., the forest as timber and the wind as power for windmills, everyday human Dasein discloses beings as they are "in themselves." (BT,100-101; SZ, 70-71) The priority assigned by Heidegger to productivity and to the instrumental understanding of Being led Hubert Dreyfus to depict Being and Time as one of the final stages in productionist metaphysics, of which later Heidegger was to become so critical.¹²

At first glance, the claim that "in themselves" (an sich) beings are instruments for human use seems to be a throwback to primitive anthropocentrism. In contrast, scientists say that a tool is "in itself" an object formed of materials shaped according to certain specifications. The use to which a tool is put is secondary to its primary ontological status as a material artifact. Conceding the point made here, Heidegger writes: "That the world does not 'consist' [besteht] of the ready-to-hand shows itself in the fact (among others) that whenever the world is lit up... [e.g., when tools break down, get in the way, or get lost] the ready-to-hand becomes deprived of its worldhood so that Being-just-present-at-hand comes to the fore." (BT, 106; SZ, 75) For tools to function as tools, neither their Being nor the world in which they are involved may become explicitly manifest. The "inconspicuousness" and "unobtrusiveness" of tools are positive ontological traits that characterize the "Being-in-itself" of beings ready-to-hand. In saying that "the world lights up," Heidegger means in part that we become more aware of the Being of tools as things intertwined in complex sets of reference relationships ("the worldhood of the world"). As such awareness arises, the tool shows itself more as (and thus "becomes") an object present-at-hand; our capacity for working with it as a tool diminishes; we understood what it "is" differently. In other words, for tools to show up as tools, their Being as ready-to-hand must conceal itself or "hold itself in." This self-concealing or "holding-in" is what Heidegger means by saying that readiness-to-hand constitutes how things are "in themselves."

For Dasein to encounter beings as beings, Dasein must have an a priori understanding of the Being of the beings in question. Drawing on Aristotle, Heidegger maintained that Dasein's temporal mode of Being, existence, involves a two-fold movement (kinesis) of excess and regress.¹³ Always already, prior to any empirical encounter with beings, Dasein exceeds, steps beyond, or transcends itself and moves toward Being. This movement constitutes the

clearing in terms of which Being can be understood. Simultaneously, however, Being withdraws, conceals, or effaces itself, such that Dasein regresses or moves back toward the beings whose Being has been thus understood. Ordinarily, Dasein is unaware that such ontological motion and understanding make possible our everyday dealings with beings. Wrongly assuming that all understanding is at the level of beings, Dasein typically conceals not only the ontological difference between Being and beings, but also the clearing in which Dasein can encounter beings as such. Dasein's everyday "pre-ontological" understanding leads us to encounter beings—including natural beings—primarily either as tools or as raw material. Bruce V. Foltz maintains, however, that strategic and methodological factors help to explain why Heidegger emphasizes this instrumental understanding of Being. In his insightful book on Heidegger and environmental ethics, Foltz writes:

the primacy of the practical in this case (and elsewhere) is intended strategically to emphasize our involvement with nature and how involvement alone discloses it as meaningful—thereby dislodging the detached stance of *theoria* and "beholding" from their long dominance in the Western understanding of nature."¹⁴

As Foltz and others have noted, *Being and Time* does not reduce nature to the either/or of instruments or scientific objects, but instead alludes to (but does not explore) alternative modes of nature's Being, including the romantic. In 1929, Heidegger referred to nature in "a primordial sense" that cannot be understood either as readiness-to-hand or in terms of virtually any human relationship.¹⁵ Later Heidegger's idea of the self-concealing "earth," and his analysis of central concepts in Aristotle's thought seem to have been efforts to reveal this primordial nature. In a moment, we will see the extent to which Heidegger's Aristotle-analysis can be read as consistent with environmental philosophy's concern to justify protecting nature from needless exploitation.

First, however, let us discuss briefly another aspect of Heidegger's early thought that is important for environmental philosophy, namely, his claim that Dasein's Being is care. In part, this claim emphasizes that Dasein is not a disembodied intellect, but instead radically finite, embodied, Being-in-the-world for whom beings matter. Dasein cares for itself when it

frees itself from inauthenticity (self-deceptive and self-disowning flight into beings), and when it frees itself for authenticity (affirmation that one is the mortal, temporal, historical openness in which beings can manifest themselves). Dasein cares for other beings when it lets them be, in the sense of allowing them to manifest themselves in terms of their own inherent possibilities. Dasein exists not for itself alone, but instead in the service of the Being of beings. By defining human Dasein in this way, Heidegger sought to go beyond the "humanism" that defines humanity as existing solely for itself.

In 1941, he quoted an old Greek saying, meleta to pan, "Take into care beings in the whole."¹⁶ Taking beings into care means not only intervening ontically to preserve them, but more importantly holding open the clearing in which they can show up as beings. The former kind of caring may be misguided unless the latter kind takes place appropriately. In 1946, describing Dasein as the "shepherd of Being," Heidegger urged people not to disclose beings exclusively as raw material for modern technology.¹⁷ Allegedly, there are aspects of earth (nature) that cannot be brought to light within the world of modern science and technology. Recognition of this fact, so it has been argued, may provide the basis for a respect for natural beings, a respect lacking in the modern technological disclosure of nature.

Aristotle's Pre-Technological Disclosure of Beings

By the 1930s, Heidegger developed in more detail his contention that the Western understanding of Being had declined since its great beginning in ancient Greek thought. Asserting that modernity was the nihilistic culmination of the ever-increasing self-concealment of Being, Heidegger claimed that the powerful, but constricted technological understanding of Being was turning the earth into a gigantic factory and humanity into the most important raw material. To prepare the way for a "new beginning" that would disclose beings in alternative ways, he contrasted the early Greek understanding of Being with the nihilistic modern understanding. Ostensibly, Western history began when ancient Greek Dasein was appropriated or opened up (vereignet) as the site through which beings can "be" in the sense of being disclosed. This appropriation involved violence. "Humankind," Heidegger wrote in 1935,

is forced into such Dasein, hurled into the affliction of such Being, because the overpowering order as such, in order to appear in its power, requires a place, a scene of disclosure. The essence of Dasein opens up to us only when understood through this need compelled by Being itself. [...] [A]t the site of its appearing, omnipotent Being (literally) violates [vergewaltigt, from vergewaltigen, to do violence to, to rape] Dasein....¹⁸

According to Heidegger, early Greek thinkers experienced the violence and strangeness involved in humankind's effort to know and to shape physis, usually translated as "nature." At times, however, Heidegger virtually equated physis with ousia: Being, presencing, manifesting. Central to physis is kinesis, the movement by which a living being brings itself into presence by continually going back into itself in order to unfold itself. Despite his genius, Aristotle did not fully understand the relation between presencing and human Dasein; nor did he recognize the necessity for the temporal clearing (Ereignis, Lichtung) in which that reciprocal relation could hold. Heidegger attempted to read Aristotle in a manner that would reveal aspects of the clearing. Hence, he drew on Aristotle's concept of kinesis to explain how the "movement" of human temporality opens the clearing in which beings can be encountered as beings. Heidegger believed that the decline of the West began when Plato interpreted Being as constant presence (Anwesenheit), eidōs, the eternally unchanging form. Entirely concealed in this ontology is the clearing, the no-thingness or the nihil within which such eidōs can first make itself available or intelligible to human Dasein. According to Heidegger, millennia of obliviousness to the nihil makes possible the most fundamental kind of nihilism.

Not surprisingly, in view of Plato and Aristotle's own use of metaphors drawing on handcraft-production, the Romans interpreted Greek philosophy as productionist metaphysics: "to be" means "to be produced," for example, to cause something merely potential to be actualized. Metaphysics became the quest for Being, now defined as the ultimate cause, ground, or foundation for beings. Never fully revealed to the ancient Greeks, and now more hidden than ever, is the clearing that makes possible Dasein's interpretative encounter with beings. With the wedding of Christian philosophy to baleful Latin translations

of crucial Greek philosophical terms, the ultimate ground became the self-producing God. Later, Descartes turned human reason itself into that ground, by asserting that for something "to be" means for it to be representable as a clear and distinct idea of the human subject. Because only quantifiable phenomena are thus representable, Being became identified with the objects of the mathematical sciences. Nature was thus deprived of any status apart from that of an object for scientific analysis or raw material for modern technology. Certainly, nature is left with no "inherent worth" or "intrinsic value," in the parlance of contemporary environmental ethics.

Heidegger, Aristotle, and Environmental Philosophy

Recently, Nancy J. Holland has argued that in his lecture-course, Aristotle's Metaphysics ¶ 1-3, Heidegger not only sketches the origins of the technological understanding of Being, but also provides "an alternative account of the relation between Dasein and the natural world, based on a different understanding of [B]eing, an alternative with arguably important implications for contemporary ecological questions."¹⁹ This alternative reconciles the relative independence and integrity of beings with the fact that beings "are" only insofar as they manifest themselves within the clearing constituted through Dasein. Holland would presumably agree that because Dasein does not itself create the clearing, but instead is appropriated as it, Dasein is obligated to "care" for beings in part by letting them present themselves in ways that accord with their own inherent possibilities.

In his course on Aristotle, Heidegger focused not on physis, but rather on the meaning of two terms profoundly related to it, namely, energeia and dynamis, usually translated as actuality and potentiality. He emphasized that dynamis means force and capability, as well as possibility. Aristotle himself defined dynamis as "the origin of change, an origin which as such is in being other than the one which is itself changing, or, if the originary being and the changing are the same, then they are so each in a different respect."²⁰ Heidegger, however, refused to concede that producing (Herstellen) is the key for understanding dynamis as the origin of change.²¹ Moreover, he emphasized another,

little- noticed aspect of dynamis, namely, Ertragsamkeit, or “bearance,” meaning both bearing-fruit and bearing-with or enduring and resisting. “Bearance refers to dynamis as the foundation for what withstands any attempt to change for the worse or to destroy.”²² This sense of bearance, as Holland points out, may be discerned in Heidegger’s later concept of “earth,” which “shatters every attempt to penetrate into it.” Even the scientific-technological will to mastery is impotent in the face of the self-concealing, enduring earth.²³

The other aspect of bearance involves the dynamis in its “for doing, for producing: in the orientation toward what is to be produced, there is the reference to what can be produced.”²⁴ That which is produced is the ergon, or product. Aristotle’s opponents, the Megarians, maintain that the actuality (energeia) of the work is nothing other than what has been produced, what “is” really there. For the Megarians, power resides only in the act of power, that is, they equate Being with what is “present” in the sense of a being (ergon) whose production is complete. Although there is some truth in saying that the actuality of artifacts lies in their being the final product of productivity, this is not an adequate way to characterize all modes of Being, including the natural and the divine. Moreover, the Megarians' exclusive focus on what is present or actual concealed not only the complex movement (kinesis) of living beings that go back into themselves in order to bring forth other aspects of themselves, but also the human kinesis by virtue of which Dasein holds open the temporal-linguistic clearing in which physis--presencing, self-manifesting self-unfolding--can itself be revealed as such. As Holland comments, the Megarians' error of equating Being with the ergon is later compounded by the evolution of our understanding of nature itself, first, as the object or result of an act of (divine) creation, and then as the merely “present-at-hand,” the object of scientific investigation or technological manipulation.²⁵

Heidegger noted that bearance as endurance plays not only a negative role, but a constructive one as well. For Greek thinking, the limits imposed by material are crucial in the formation of a being. The grain of the wood figures into the production of a cabinet. For the technological understanding of Being, in contrast, natural beings--the earth--are treated as if they involved no inherent limits whatsoever.

The birch tree never oversteps its possibility. The colony of bees dwells in its possibility. It is first the will which arranges itself everywhere in technology that devours the earth in the exhaustion and consumption and change of the artificial. Technology drives the earth beyond the developed sphere of its possibility into such things which are no longer a possibility and are thus the impossible.²⁶

Elsewhere, Heidegger wrote: "The earth can show itself only as an object of assault.... Nature appears everywhere... as the object of technology."²⁷ Today, all things are "challenged forth" to be interchangeable raw material. The technological understanding of Being involves a disastrous combination of subjective idealism and naïve realism. On the one hand, modern man reduces everything to the status of an object for the cognizing subject. In modernity, the subject has swallowed everything up; all things are interpreted, valued, and assessed according to the subject's drive for power and security. Eventually, as industrialism comes to fulfillment in the technological age, even the subject-object distinction is itself overcome insofar as everything is transformed into interchangeable raw material.²⁸

On the other hand, having forgotten its capacity for understanding the Being of beings, modern humankind adheres to a naïve realism, according to which humans are one species among others. Heidegger regretted that modern humankind interpret itself as a clever animal striving to control all other beings in order to enhance human power, security, and comfort. Time and again, he insisted that humans cannot be conceived merely as one being among others, and certainly not as animals.²⁹ His anti-natural conception of humankind had the virtue of allowing him to distinguish his thought from the racism of National Socialism, even though he supported this movement in hopes that it would save the West from nihilism. For some environmentalists, however, Heidegger's refusal to conceive of humankind as simply another species imbedded in the organic "web of life" puts him in the camp of anthropocentric humanism, which conceives of nature primarily instrumentally.³⁰

Still, Holland maintains, Heidegger's defense of the integrity of natural beings provides the basis for defending them from exploitation by modern technology. She maintains that "we must respect the natural world in its own terms, acknowledging the limits as

well as potential of its 'bearance.'"³¹ A little later, she writes: "The actuality [of a being] is independent of perception, but the perceptibility is not. This is what underlies Heidegger's doctrine of what one might call 'metaphysical respect.'"³² Such respect arises from acknowledging the relative independence and integrity of beings, which may be what Heidegger had in mind when he once spoke of their "dignity" (Würde) in distinction from their "value."³³ Although such respect might form the basis for an environmental ethic, critics would expect Heidegger to define both the meaning of and the basis for such "dignity." Philosophers have not yet agreed whether one can successfully identify and defend any property—ontical or ontological—which would require us to accord "inherent worth" even to humans, much less to animals and plants, not to mention the ecosystems, mountains, and rivers regarded as so worthy by many environmentalists. Heidegger's brief accounts of the "dignity" of living beings usually focus on their Being as physis. But for him, physis somehow means both the manifesting (Being) of beings within the clearing, and the process whereby an organism unfolds its own structure in the life-process. In my view, Heidegger never adequately reconciles these two aspects of physis.³⁴ Critics charge that by virtually equating them, Heidegger ends up in a kind of "ontological aestheticism," which celebrates the beauty of the self-manifesting of beings at the expense of their merely "ontical" characteristics.³⁵ Whether or not such a critique is justified, greater clarity is needed regarding Heidegger's conception of physis.

Obstacles to an Eco-Friendly Interpretation of Heidegger's Phenomenology

Heidegger often said that humankind may undergo a transformation that will initiate a non-domineering way of disclosing beings. Some commentators, however, contend that such a transformation would be inconsistent with the basic thrust of Heidegger's thought. As noted earlier, Thomas J. Sheehan asserts that Heidegger himself saw no escape from the nihilism of technological modernity.³⁶ For Heidegger, nihilism has two senses: nihilism I and nihilism II. Nihilism I refers to the collapse of a culture's guiding values, beliefs, and ideals. Nihilism II refers to a culture's obliviousness about the nihil, the clearing, Ereignis, in which can take place Dasein's interpretative/practical encounter with beings. Ereignis cannot be grasped by the human intellect, which is capable only of comprehending beings as beings.

Allegedly, nihilism II makes possible nihilism I, i.e., the obscuration of Ereignis makes Dasein blind to its ontologically unique endowment. Consequently, Dasein interprets itself merely as the clever animal seeking control of everything through modern science and technology. Sheehan argues, however, that in Heidegger's own view, Aristotle's thought ultimately leads to nihilism I. Moreover, even if a few philosophers point toward Ereignis, thereby minimally easing nihilism II, this fact cannot in and of itself influence nihilism I. Dasein's capacity for (perhaps) completely disclosing beings is not incompatible with the fact that Dasein is not only blind to Ereignis, but incapable of comprehending it even when a sideways glance is caught of it. The ethical, political, and social challenges posed by the looming possibility of the total disclosure of beings must be met with means other than those used by Heideggerians meditating upon Ereignis.

At one time, Heidegger did seem to think that disclosing nihilism II could transform nihilism I. In fact, he defended his involvement with National Socialism as part of his own philosophical effort to overcome (überwinden) nihilism. Later on, however, having abandoned this disastrous political engagement, he spoke not of Überwindung, but rather of Verwindung. As Sheehan comments, Verwindung involves not the overcoming of nihilism I, but instead of "a 'freeing' of oneself from social and cultural nihilism by seeing its rootedness in a deeper and unsurpassable 'nihilism' that is in fact the human condition."³⁷ If Sheehan is right, Heidegger's well-known utterance that "only a god can save us now" is best read ironically, given his views about the inevitability of Dasein interpreting beings ever more completely. Moreover, his talk of a dispensation (Geschick) that may enable Dasein to interpret beings in a non-domineering way is best read as an instance of mythologizing that has been described as Heidegger's "private religion."³⁸

Sheehan observes that understanding everything as raw material is possible only insofar as Dasein still exists within the clearing that makes beings available to Dasein. Heidegger remarked: "Even if the contemporary and closest humankind, technologized and equipped to the outmost, is in a planetary condition for which the general distinction between 'war and peace' belongs to things gone by, even than humanity still lives 'poetically' on this earth..." He immediately adds, however, the following: "...but he lives in essential opposition

(Gegenwesen) to poetry and hence without need and therefore inaccessible for its essence."³⁹

Here, Heidegger gives with one hand what he takes away with another. True, modernity does disclose the Being of beings, but not the poetizing mode of Being heralded by Hölderlin, nor the self-blossoming mode of Being—physis—revealed by Aristotle. To experience an alternative way of disclosing beings, Heidegger maintained, humankind must become attuned to its own profound lack, its ontological need. Self-assertive humankind discloses all beings as flexible raw material without any internal limits. Such disclosure is a nihilism that correlates with humanism, "the ideology which asserts that human [B]eing is fulfilled in abetting the limitless availability and intelligibility of everything that is."⁴⁰

At times, Heidegger suggested that humankind reject modernity and become open for a new mode of ontological understanding that enables Dasein to become rooted again in the earth. Elsewhere, however, he asserted—for example, in his essay, "Über die Linie," dedicated to Ernst Jünger—that there is no alternative to the technological disclosure of Being, which involves the correlation between nature as raw material and Dasein as the Gestalt of the worker-soldier using such raw material in the quest for ever greater power, security, and comfort.⁴¹ Many commentators on Heidegger conclude that the technological disclosure of beings decreases Dasein's overall capacity for ontological disclosure. Sheehan maintains, however, that far from offering a constricted disclosure of beings, modern science may reveal them more thoroughly than ever before. Hence, he asks: "Why are they correlative in an apparently zero-sum way, such that the increase in the power and domination of the Gestalt of the worker would necessarily entail the decrease in the power of appropriation [Ereignis]?"⁴² The scientific-technological disclosure of beings has made possible extraordinary improvements in human well-being, but that disclosure also poses enormous social, ethical, political, and political problems, which some people claim is leading to nihilism, in the sense of nihilism I. Nevertheless, the technological disclosure of beings does not reflect a constriction in the clearing/Ereignis. In other words, the history of Being from the pre-Socratics to the present day cannot be understood in terms of growing obliviousness to the clearing; instead, the clearing makes possible the rise of modern science and technology.

Heidegger assigns to human Dasein an extraordinary position, outside the great chain of being and cosmos, even outside of Being itself, but inside the "truth" (Ereignis, clearing) of Being. Heidegger rendered Parmenides' famous saying, "Being and thinking are the same" (to gar auto noein estin te kai einai), as "There is a reciprocal bond between apprehension [Dasein's ontological understanding] and Being."⁴³ This "guiding principle of Western philosophy" names Ereignis, that is, the groundless opening that makes possible Dasein's interpretative encounter with beings. Heidegger stated: "We always say too little about 'Being itself' when, in saying 'Being,' we leave out presence to the human essence and thereby fail to recognize that this [human] essence itself goes to make up 'Being'."⁴⁴ If Dasein is essentially openness for the self-manifesting of beings, beings themselves are inherently inclined to make themselves completely accessible to human Dasein. As Sheehan says, "entities are ontologically 'ad hominem'."⁴⁵ Hence, nihilism I (technological modernity) arises not because Ereignis conceals itself, but instead because Ereignis occurs at all:

Insofar as the essence of entities entails their presence to human cognition and will, it also entails that they are disposed to be picked up and used, to be reshaped as poioumena—and endlessly so. The endless accessibility of the real is at the core of the Greek-Western vision of [B]eing, which from the pre-Socratics up to Heidegger, has affirmed the infinity of the intelligibility (and thus the transformatibility) of to on, an infinity that is correlative to the infinite reach of nous.⁴⁶

If Sheehan is right, there is no basis in Heidegger's own ontology for his critical portrayal of modern technology as a highly attenuated disclosure of beings. Contrary to Heidegger's yearning for the post- or non-technological era of the fourfold (earth and sky, gods and mortals), and contrary to some environmentalist's longing for an era before modern technology, Sheehan argues that

we would be doing [B]eing-itself no favors if we just let entities 'be' in the sense of leaving them pristine and untouched, perhaps even unknown. To let entities be means to let them be present, that is, to take them as endlessly engagable. And we do that by endlessly engaging them..., and yes, by

letting them be submitted to the domination of the worker in the inevitable humanization of nature and the naturalization of man.⁴⁷

In effect, Sheehan is saying that from their own side beings "want" to be disclosed and utilized by humankind. Ereignis itself entails this. Moreover, according to Aristotle, insofar as humans pursue their desire to know, they are seeking to become godlike. Humans can become godlike, because they share to some extent in God's own nature. Writes Sheehan:

But this means that, whether or not the project is ever actually fulfilled, Aristotle has opened up to human beings the possibility of the total knowledge (and along with that knowledge, the control) of everything that is insofar as it is. Aristotle's theology is the first technology, and modern technology is only the last theology. The "death of God" begins with the first sentence of the *Metaphysics*, and after it nihilism will be only a mopping up exercise.... [H]enceforth in Western thought theos, the highest instance of physis, will be a symbol for the goal and scope of technology: the humanization of nature and the naturalization of man.⁴⁸

In this exegetical tour de force, Sheehan concludes that the ontological kernel of Heidegger's thought is consistent with Marxism and liberalism, the progressive ideologies according to which humankind is both capable of and entitled to transform nature in infinite ways. Clearly, this conclusion would be palatable neither to most Heideggerians, nor to most environmentalists, for whom progress amounts to an ideological justification for the exploitation of nature. In Sheehan's view, however, Heidegger's dislike for modernity reflected personal and political considerations that cannot be reconciled with the gist of his thought. Sheehan seeks to rescue Heidegger from neo-Christian eschatology, according to which Being will one day reveal itself again, thereby saving humankind from technological nihilism.⁴⁹ According to Sheehan, the real eschaton concerns "the ultimate, unsurpassable factum," that humankind lives "into and out of appropriation [Ereignis]...."⁵⁰ Humankind must come to terms with both the insecurity and power imposed by this destiny, i.e., nihilism II, obliviousness to the clearing/Ereignis. Philosophers may learn something profound from Heidegger's discussion of the clearing, but, writes Sheehan, "the future of the humanization of

nature and naturalization of man, is decided not in classrooms or philosophy conference, nor in libraries or texts. It is being decided in the hills and in the streets, in the boardrooms and the maquilas."⁵¹

Conclusion

Sheehan is the leading exegete of Heidegger's Aristotle-interpretation. For this reason, readers must take seriously his striking conclusions that nihilism II cannot be overcome, that Heidegger's thought is ultimately irreconcilable with a nostalgic and anti-anthropocentric environmentalism, and that Western history involves not decline, but instead the gradual (progressive!) unfolding of the extraordinary ontical power with which humankind has been inexplicably endowed. Many Heideggerians, particularly those who affirm Heidegger's pertinence for environmental philosophy, however, would complain that Sheehan either ignores or minimizes aspects of Heidegger's thought that suggest the possibility of a non-domineering disclosure of nature.⁵² Moreover, even if such Heideggerians concede that later Heidegger mythologizes Being (which supposedly reveals itself, hides itself, initiates new beginnings, etc.), they could argue that his analysis of early Greek thinking reveals an alternative conception of Being than the technological one. The fact that the technological understanding of Being happens to prevail currently does not mean either that it is inevitable or enduring.

Presumably, the excesses of the technological disclosure of beings could be tempered by acknowledging two things: first, following Aristotle, that living beings tend both to preserve and to unfold themselves according to their own internal possibilities; and second, that humans have a responsibility to respect the integrity and relative independence of natural beings, even though often using those beings in order to serve human ends. If the Kantian doctrine of respect for persons is based on insight into human existence, as Heidegger's himself suggested, then respect for animals, plants, and even ecosystems may be based on insight into their own modes of Being. The fact that plants, animals, and ecosystems "show up" as beings only through Dasein's interpretative activity does not give Dasein a license to treat such beings in any way whatsoever, any more than the fact that other persons show up through such activity gives Dasein license to treat persons without due respect. Endowed with

great disclosive capacities, Dasein is also burdened with unparalleled responsibilities to "care" for beings.

Although he agreed that modern technology culminates Aristotle's metaphysics, Heidegger also maintained at times that the technological disclosure of beings is as narrow as it is powerful. In regard to how living beings are disclosed by natural science and machine technology, Heidegger stated that

an original reference to things is missing We feel that what zoology and botany investigate concerning animals and plants and how they investigate it may be correct. But are they still animals and plants? Are they not machines duly prepared beforehand of which one afterwards even admits that they are "cleverer than we are"?⁵³

In other words, Heidegger would contest the conclusion that the technological disclosure of beings exhausts their possibilities, even if such disclosure enables "infinite" shaping and altering of such beings. In a world other than the technological world, beings can "be" other than as scientific objects or raw material. Beings still need Dasein as the site for their self-manifesting, but can any particular world make possible a totalizing disclosure of beings?

Even if Heidegger did insist that the technological disclosure of Being is merely partial, however, Sheehan is right about this: the fact that Dasein was thrown into the clearing at the beginning of Western history offers no reason to expect that Dasein will be thrown into a different—post-technological, non-domineering—clearing in the future. Instead, there are far better grounds for thinking that "this is it." If so, the progressive reading of Western history, according to which humankind will eventually achieve a godlike power over beings, would make more sense than Heidegger's reading of history as a decline into the nihilism II that makes nihilism I possible. Additionally, as I noted earlier, Heidegger's insistence not only on the pre-eminence of human Dasein among all beings, but also on the fact that Dasein cannot be conceived as an animal, poses grave problems for many of those who want to enlist his thought for environmentalism. Finally, the fact that he so readily used his thought to support National Socialism should alert Greens to the dangers posed by ecofascism.⁵⁴

In closing, let me suggest that Sheehan's effort to reconcile a progressive reading of history, from Aristotle to modern technology, with Heidegger's phenomenological ontology might be transformed by re-introducing a certain conception of Spirit, panentheism, which Sheehan—like most moderns—prefers to exclude. According to panentheism, Spirit manifests itself in evolutionary processes in terms of an enormously complex hierarchy, which includes material nature and consciousness, but Spirit is not exhausted by any such manifestation. Spirit is the clearing, understood as absolute non-duality. Appropriating Dasein as the agent that will interpret beings, Spirit fulfills itself in the historical process by which humans (and comparable beings elsewhere) discover and actualize their own incipient divine powers. Such a conception, which I cannot develop here, emphasizes that the transcendent dimension of Spirit accompanies its immanent dimension. According to the perennial wisdom, compassion—including compassion for all sentient beings—spontaneously arises with increasing wisdom. A wiser humankind would treat all sentient being less brutally than we do today. The capacity for technological control over beings does not constitute wisdom, but neither does wisdom involve denying that such power may or even ought to be the destiny of our species. Sharing with Nietzsche and other moderns an antipathy for the otherworldliness of the onto-theological tradition, Heidegger reduced Spirit's transcendence to the radical finitude of Western Dasein. In doing so, however, he—like other moderns—limited the possibility of a serious dialogue among contemporary cosmologists, environmental philosophers, and teachers from diverse spiritual traditions.⁵⁵

¹ See for example, George S. Cave, "Animals, Heidegger, and the Right to Life," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 4, No. (1982), 249-254; Michael E. Zimmerman, "Toward a Heideggerean Ethos for Radical Environmentalism," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer, 1983), 99-131; Bruce V. Foltz, "On Heidegger and the Interpretation of Environmental Crisis," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Winter, 1984), 326-342; Bruce V. Foltz, "On Heidegger and the Interpretation of Environmental Crisis," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Winter, 1984), 323-338; Laura Westra, "Let It Be: Heidegger and Future Generations," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter, 1985), 341-350; Michael E. Zimmerman, "Implications of Heidegger's Thought for Deep Ecology," The Modern Schoolman, LXIV (November, 1986), 19-43; David Abram, "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer, 1988), 101-20; and Max Hallman, "Nietzsche's Environmental Ethics," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), 99-125.

For re-evaluations of my position on Heidegger and radical environmentalism, see Zimmerman, "Rethinking the Heidegger--Deep Ecology Relationship," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Fall, 1993), 195-224, and Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

² See Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," trans. David Farrell Krell, in Basic Writings (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 28; "Brief über den 'Humanismus' ," Wegmarken (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967), 179.

³ See Jacques Taminiaux, "Poiesis and Praxis in Fundamental Ontology," Research in Phenomenology, 17 (1987), 137-169.

⁴ See John Van Buren, "The Young Heidegger and Phenomenology," Man and World, 23 (1990), 239-272.

⁵ BT refers to Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); SZ refers to Sein und Zeit (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967). I have sometimes altered the Maquarrie/Robinson translation.

⁶ Frank Schalow, "Who Speaks for the Animals? Heidegger and the Question of Animal Welfare," Environmental Ethics, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall, 2000), 259-272.

⁷ My analysis of Ereignis is indebted in part to Thomas J. Sheehan's excellent essay, "On Rightly Dividing the Word: A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," Proceedings, 34th North American Heidegger Conference, Marshall University, May 19-21, 2000.

⁸ On "formal indication," see Theodore Kisiel, The Genesis of Being and Time (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Daniel Dahlstrom, "Heidegger's Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications," Review of Metaphysics, Vol. 47, No. 4 (June, 1994), 775-795; John Van Buren, "The Ethics of Formale Anzeige in Heidegger," American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. LXIX, no. 2 (Spring, 1995), 157-170; and Ryan Streeter, "Heidegger's Formal Indication: A Question of Method in Being and Time," Man and World, 30 (1997), 413-430;

⁹ See Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease, Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Michael E. Zimmerman, "On Vallicella's Critique of Heidegger," International Philosophical Quarterly, XXX, No. 1 (March, 1990), 75-100.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, On the Essence of Reasons, trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 38-39. German original ("Vom Wesen des Grundes") is on facing pages of translation.

¹² Hubert Dreyfus, "Heidegger's History of the Being of Equipment," in Heidegger: A Critical Reader, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Harrison Hall (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 173-185.

¹³ My interpretation here is indebted to a number of Thomas J. Sheehan's essays, including "Heidegger's Philosophy of Mind," in Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey, ed. Guttorm Floistad (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 287-318.

¹⁴ Bruce V. Foltz, Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics, and the Metaphysics of Nature (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International Press, 1995), 34, note 3.

¹⁵ Heidegger, On the Essence of Reasons, 81-83.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, Grundbegriffe, ed. Petra Jaeger, Gesamtausgabe 51 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1981), 42.

¹⁷ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 193; "Brief über den 'Humanism'," 145.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Ralph Mannheim, 136-137, 149; Einführung in der Metaphysik, ed. Petra Jaeger, Gesamtausgabe 40 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 171-172, 186-187.

¹⁹ Nancy J. Holland, "Rethinking Ecology in the Western Philosophical Tradition: Heidegger and/on Aristotle," Continental Philosophy Review, Vol. 32 (1999), 409-420; citation is from 413.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, Aristotle's Metaphysics □ 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 57; Aristoteles, Metaphysik □ 1-3: Von Wesen und Wirklichkeit der Kraft, ed. Heinrich Hüni, Gesamtausgabe Vol. 33 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1981), 68.

²¹ Heidegger, Aristotle's Metaphysics, 75; Aristoteles Metaphysik, 89-90.

²² Holland, "Rethinking Ecology," 411.

²³ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," trans. Albert Hofstadter in Poetry, Language, Thought (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 46-47; Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," Holzwege (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1972), 36.

²⁴ Heidegger, Aristotle's Metaphysics, 89; Aristoteles Metaphysik, 105.

²⁵ Holland, "Rethinking Ecology," 412.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," in The End of Philosophy, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 109; Heidegger, "Überwindung der Metaphysik," Vorträge und Aufsätze (Pfullingen: Neske, 1967), 90.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsche's Word, 'God is dead'," in The Question Concerning Technology, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 100; "Nietzsches Wort 'Gott ist tot'," Holzwege (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1972), 236.

²⁸ These themes are developed in Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology.

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, Grundbegriffe, ed. Petra Jaeger, Vol. 51, Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1981), 84. See also Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," passim.

³⁰ See Michael E. Zimmerman, "Martin Heidegger: Anti-Naturalistic Critic of Technological Modernity," in Ecological Thinkers, ed. David Macauley (New York: Guilford, 1995).

³¹ Holland, "Rethinking Ecology," 415.

³² Ibid., 417.

³³ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism, 228; "Brief über den 'Humanismus' ," 179.

³⁴ See my essay, "On Vallicella's Critique of Heidegger," International Philosophical Quarterly, XXX, No. 1 (March, 1990), 75-100. See also Michel Haar, The Song of the Earth, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

³⁵ See Michael E. Zimmerman, "The Limitations of Heidegger's Ontological Aestheticism," in Heidegger and Praxis, special issue of The Southern Journal of Philosophy, XXVIII (1990), 183-189. See also John D. Caputo, Demythologizing Heidegger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

³⁶ Thomas J. Sheehan, "Nihilism: Heidegger/Jünger/Aristotle," in Phenomenology: Japanese and American Perspectives, Bert C. Hopkins, ed. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 273-316.

³⁷ Ibid., 281.

³⁸ Richard J. Kroner, "Heidegger's Private Religion," Union Seminary Quarterly Review, 11 (1956), 23-37.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, Hölderlins Hymne "Andenken", ed. Curd Ochwadt, vol. 52, Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982), 40.

⁴⁰ Sheehan, "Nihilism," 275.

⁴¹ Heidegger's essay, "Über 'die Linie' ," originally published in 1955, appears on the pages facing its translation in The Question of Being, trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (New Haven: College & University Press, 1958). On the Heidegger-Jünger relation,

see Michael E. Zimmerman, Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁴² Sheehan, "Nihilism", 284.

⁴³ Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 122; Einführung in der Metaphysik, 154.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, Zur Seinsfrage, 27/407, cited by Sheehan, 293.

⁴⁵ Sheehan, "Nihilism," 294.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 296.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 297

⁴⁸ Ibid., 308-309.

⁴⁹ For recent look at the religious dimension of Heidegger's thought, see Daniel Dalhstrom, "Heidegger's Religious Turn: From Christianity and Metaphysics to God," Proceedings, 34th North American Heidegger Conference, Marshall University, May 19-21, 2000.

⁵⁰ Sheehan, "Nihilism," 314.

⁵¹ Ibid., 315.

⁵² See chapter six of Foltz, Inhabiting the Earth, for example.

⁵³ Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning the Thing, trans. W.B. Barton Jr. and Vera Deutsch (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1967), 41; Die Frage nach dem Ding (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1962), 31.

⁵⁴ See Michael E. Zimmerman, "Ecofascism: A Threat to American Environmentalism?" in The Ecological Community, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1997), 229-254.

⁵⁵ For a useful attempt at such a dialogue, see Ken Wilber, Sex, Ecology, Spirituality (Boston: Shambhala, 1995).

My thanks to Frank Schalow and Thomas J. Sheehan for their critical suggestions, which improved this essay. Remaining shortcomings are exclusively my responsibility.