

## **Martin Heidegger**

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Because German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was one of the past century's most important thinkers, and because he offered such an influential critique of the technological domination of nature, some philosophers have attempted to read his thought as a forerunner of contemporary environmentalism. Adherents to environmental movements that regard nature as somehow sacred often believe that Heidegger's shares this view. There are, in fact, similarities between Heidegger's thought and many versions of contemporary environmentalism. For example, both sharply criticize anthropocentric humanism for having wreaked such destruction on the natural world. There is an important difference as well, however. Above all, Heidegger disagreed with the claim, accepted by most environmentalists, that human beings are animals. In asserting that humans are ontologically different from all other entities, Heidegger follows in his own unique way the traditional idea that humans stand outside of nature, even while being part of it. In addition to conceptual problems that impede easy assimilation of Heidegger's thought to contemporary environmentalism, there are also political problems relating to his notorious affiliation with National Socialism.

Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time* (1927), maintains that human existence opens up the temporal-historical "clearing" or "world" in which entities can manifest or show themselves, and in this sense "be." By asserting an integral relation between being and time, Heidegger emphasized the historical dimension of being and thus challenged the traditional assumption of the link between being and eternity. Moreover, he contended that 'being' names not an eternal ground, foundation, or source—such as

Platonic forms or the Biblical God-- but instead the capacity for entities to present themselves in their intelligibility. For such presenting to take place, there is required a clearing or opening, which is provided by the temporality enacted in human existence. Heidegger's major goal was to describe this clearing in which entities can be encountered, known, and dealt with as entities.

In the 1920s, Heidegger distinguished between inauthentic and authentic human existence. Despite his denials to the contrary, this now-famous distinction owed something to the Christian distinction between the conditions of sinfulness and grace. Heidegger's spiritual concerns, which at one time had led him to study for the Roman Catholic priesthood, are at work in many of his writings, which became very important for 20<sup>th</sup> century theology. As inauthentic, Heidegger claimed, one denies or flees from one's mortal openness; as authentic, in contrast, one affirms and owns up to that openness. Authentic existence involves a radical transformation of temporality, such that entities can manifest them differently than they show up in everyday life. Authenticity can characterize not only individuals, Heidegger maintained, but entire peoples as well. In the 1930s, he indicated that an authentic people, resolved to exist courageously within the limits imposed by historical finitude, could disclose nature in a way other than as raw material for industry or objects for scientific investigation.

The concern for nature that appeared in Heidegger's work in the 1930s is not much evidenced in earlier writings. In Being and Time, we are told that entities reveal themselves primarily as tools or instruments for human purposes, and secondarily as objects for scientific cognition. This neo-pragmatic depiction of humankind's everyday understanding of entities led some critics to conclude that early Heidegger's thought is

consistent with what he himself would later describe critically as the technological understanding of being.

During the 1930s, in connection with his analyses of Nietzsche's philosophy and Hölderlin's poetry, Heidegger developed his critique of the humanism (capitalist or socialist) that characterizes modern Western societies. In a controversial interpretation, he read Nietzsche's vision of the Overman as an aspect of the nihilism characterizing modernity, which is ostensibly the final stage in the history of Western metaphysics. By nihilism, Heidegger meant—in contrast to Nietzsche--not the collapse of cultural norms, but instead humanity's blindness to its own essential nothingness (nihil). Humankind is not one entity among others, but instead exists as the no-thingness, openness, or clearing in which entities can show themselves. The ancient Greeks had some insight into the crucial relation between human existence and the being of entities. Gradually, however, Western humanity's self-understanding became so constricted or inauthentic, that entities are now able to reveal themselves only one-dimensionally, as flexible raw material useful for enhancing human power and security. Heidegger maintained that Nietzsche's conception of humans as "clever animals" was in many ways consistent with the metaphysical Darwinism that allegedly animates modern political ideologies. For such animals, blind not only to their extraordinary ontological endowment but also to the responsibilities that it imposes, the drama of human existence is reduced to the struggle for survival and power. Nature becomes a gigantic filling station that fuels the frenzied and insatiable drive for ever greater consumption. As an alternative to the will to power at work in the technological disclosure of entities, Heidegger urged people to cultivate the attitude of "releasement" (Gelassenheit) in which they may "let things be," that is,

manifest themselves according to their own inherent properties, rather than in accordance with the demands placed upon them by the technological subject.

In Hölderlin's notion of nature as "holy wildness," Heidegger discerned hints of an encounter with nature, physis, the ontological primal that eludes human mastery. The relation between such "wildness" and what many environmentalists have in mind by "wilderness" is not clear. Heidegger defined nature in terms of his ambiguous interpretation of physis. At times, he viewed physis as almost identical with being, that is, the self-manifesting of entities that occurs within the temporal-historical clearing. This sense of physis means nature insofar as it manifests itself and to that extent is said "to be." Nature defined in this manner is what Heidegger meant by "wild" nature, that is, the overpowering manifesting with which humankind must struggle mightily in order to make entities intelligible, appreciable, or useful to humankind. By emphasizing the interpretative activity involved in disclosing the being of entities, Heidegger indicated that the historical world—the clearing needed to encounter physis or being—is constituted not only by temporality, but by the gathering and articulating power of logos as well. Because logos gives rise to human language, the latter is not possessed by us; instead, according to Heidegger, we are possessed by logos.

Elsewhere, Heidegger interpreted physis not as the self-manifesting of entities, but rather as their self-emergence, as when an animal gives birth to its young or unfolds into maturity. Nature in this sense does not refer to the intelligibility whose disclosure depends on the temporal-linguistic clearing. Instead, we typically experience and understand natural phenomena as occurring independently from us, and as having taken place long before human existence began. In places, Heidegger indicates that humankind

itself is an aspect of physis, understood now as the complex natural processes that take place independently of human existence, even though they can “be” only insofar as they show themselves within the clearing opened up through human existence. These incompatible conceptions of nature or physis reveal Heidegger’s own struggle to reconcile or at least to address two central aspects of humankind, namely, our entity-disclosing aspect and our entity aspect. Heidegger never deviated from his conviction that humans transcend nature even while somehow being part of it.

During the 1950s, apparently de-centering humankind’s role in constituting the clearing, Heidegger suggested that the disclosive world results from the dynamic and intertwined play of the “fourfold” of earth and world, gods and mortals. Moreover, in his 1966 interview with Der Spiegel, he stated that “only a god can save us” from the dire consequences of modern technology’s mobilization of humankind and nature. Nevertheless, despite such hints that the clearing for entities may be co-constituted by phenomena in addition to human existence, Heidegger consistently affirmed the primacy of humankind in holding open the clearing. Only humankind, he stated on many occasions, is endowed with the clearing-constituting logos, which is what makes human language possible. Even in connection with the fourfold, he indicated that the gathering of earth and sky, gods and mortals is made possible by a human artifact, the jug. Some years earlier, he wrote that the historical clearing of the ancient Greeks was gathered and held open by a far grander artifact, the marble temple. For Heidegger, then, humankind retains a central role in opening up the clearing, because the logos animates human language alone.

Heidegger's convictions that only humankind understands the difference between being and entities, and that human existence is crucial for holding open the clearing in which entities can show themselves, give pause to many environmentalists—including deep ecologists—who otherwise are attracted to his critique of technological modernity and his call to let things be. Far from being a biocentric egalitarian, he agreed with the traditional idea that humankind is constituted ontologically in a dramatically different way than all other entities. As an indication of the importance he assigned to humankind, he wrote that the loss of the clearing would be even worse than the destruction of the natural world by nuclear war. Heidegger would have agreed with today's environmentalists who criticize anthropocentric humanism for justifying the destruction of nature, but he would also have criticized those environmentalists who conceive of humans as nothing more than intelligent animals.

Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism lasted from 1933-1945, although he was most intensively committed to the movement during 1933-1936. Like many philosophers, artists, and intellectuals in Germany at the time, he was seduced by Nazi promises to save Germany from communism, and to restore depth, purpose, and meaning to a society ruined by lost war, inflation, and economic depression. Far from being a mere fellow-traveler, however, Heidegger enthusiastically supported the regime and used his own philosophy to provide legitimacy for the regime at a critical moment. Although later concluding that actual National Socialism was metaphysically the same as world-destroying capitalism and communism, he long remained loyal to his own version of National Socialism. According to this version, the decline of the West into technological nihilism resulted from the gradual eclipse of humanity's understanding of

itself as the clearing for the self-showing of entities. Environmentalists who engage in a totalizing critique of modernity need to understand how important that critique was not only to Heidegger's thought, but also to much of National Socialist ideology. Today's environmentalists, in other words, need to understand that there was a perverse "green" dimension to National Socialism, which celebrated the relation between pure and healthy "land" and pure blood (Blut und Boden). The Nazis came to power partly by their fierce condemnations of Enlightenment modernity and its political institutions, even though they were quick to seize upon and put to dark uses the fruits of modern science and technology.

To his credit, Heidegger spurned the Nazis' biological racism, preferring instead what some have called a kind of linguistic racism. Heidegger depicted Germans as superior because only their language was as great as that of ancient Greece. He rejected biological racism, however, primarily because he disagreed with Darwinism and denied that humans are descended from animals.

One scholar, Thomas J. Sheehan, argues that the same reactionary political orientation that led Heidegger to support National Socialism has also misled many Heidegger scholars and environmentalists about the extent to which his thought is "green." Heidegger's hatred of large cities and his preference for the Swabian countryside were consistent with his critique of modern science and technology, which objectified nature and transformed it into fungible raw material. The real thrust of Heidegger's thought, however, is that human existence is destined to accomplish modernity's goal of making all entities completely present for study and exploitation. Humankind is appropriated as the site in which this disclosure can and must take place. All Heidegger's talk about

“letting things be”, and his yearning for a “new beginning” that leads away from the technological disclosure of entities, may be best understood as expressions of his anti-modernism, rather than as expressions of what his thinking really implies. If Sheehan is right, Heidegger’s thought is consistent with the titanic project of world domination that Nietzsche allegedly foretold and celebrated.

Heidegger, then, left a mixed legacy both for environmentalists and for those seeking to discern the sacred in nature. His thought may be far more compatible with technological modernity than he himself was at times willing to admit. Still, his criticism of the excesses of anthropocentric humanism, including mistreatment of animals and heedless destruction of the natural world, retains its force, even if one affirms modernity’s achievements of renouncing political repression, freeing science from religious dogmatism, and providing a far better material living standard for countless millions of people. Moreover, even if modernity cannot adequately be understood in terms of the clever animal seeking power, by taking this approach Heidegger points to the dangers involved reading humankind in reductionistic terms that ignore its remarkable capacity for understanding itself and other phenomena. In their zeal to renounce traditional views that distinguish humankind from nature, many environmentalists uncritically accept materialistic and Darwinist accounts of human existence. In doing so, they may fail to appreciate that humankind does in some sense transcend the natural order of things. Indeed, the capacity for religious experience, including discerning the presence of the divine in natural phenomena, indicates that humanity has perceptual and spiritual capacities that transcend the sense organs and the rational mind.

In the past decade, considerable interest has been sparked by theologians and scientists attempting to bridge the divide, erected during the Enlightenment, that separates theology from science. Today, a number of cosmologists argue that the initial conditions of the cosmos were so fine-tuned that they defy the laws of chance. The possibility that the universe may exhibit some degree of purpose is reinforced by the anthropic principle, according to some versions of which the emergence of carbon-based forms of life not only did happen on Earth, but would inevitably have happened somewhere in a cosmos. The universe, then, seems to organize itself in ways conducive to the generation of life-forms that can first apprehend that very cosmos, and subsequently inquire into its structure and origin. Is humankind taking part in the process by which the cosmos brings itself to self-awareness? Does humankind have a higher cosmic role to play than to insure its own survival and to maximize its pleasure?

Two factors conspired to prevent Heidegger from giving positive answers to these questions. First, the science of his era was so positivistic and reductionistic, that he asserted that “science does not think.” Second, he had no interest in the foundationalist metaphysics associated with Biblical religions and Greek metaphysics, which engaged in story-telling about where things came from and what caused them. In Heidegger’s view, science offers more complex and possibly more veridical versions of such stories. Heidegger was really interested in how and why entities appear in their intelligibility, that is, why and how entities become disclosed as entities. Comprehending how such manifesting can occur is a matter for thought, not for science. Because of these attitudes, however understandable they may have been, Heidegger would not have been able to take seriously the emerging effort to develop a scientifically-respectable cosmology that

takes into account not only the creative aspect of the divine, but humanity's capacity for experiencing the cosmos itself and aspects of its divine source.

Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysical foundationalism and his notion of the "ontological difference" between being and entities had an enormous impact on postmodern thought, including deconstruction. Postmodern thinking has joined those neo-Marxists who challenge the very idea of a pristine "nature" that exists independently of human language, culture, and social practices. Many environmentalists prefer the good old days, when the stability and identity of "reality" and "nature" were taken for granted, but the genie is out of the bottle. Radical constructivism, according to which nature is reduced to a virtual product of human imagination and practices, may go too far,. Nevertheless, in order to understand our obligations to nature, we must understand as well our role in conceiving, defining, and constituting it.

### **Further Reading**

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