The ‘Letter on Humanism’ is a work that was written in response to a series of questions by Heidegger’s French Colleague Jean Beaufret (10 November 1946) with regard to Sartre’s address, given at the Club Maintenant in Paris, France, on October 29, 1945, which was published in 1946 as Existentialism is a Humanism. Heidegger’s letter, originally finished in December 1946, was formally published in the following year, having been expanded into an essay. In the following pages, I will analyse Heidegger’s Letter, not only as a free-standing essay, but more specifically as a direct response to Sartre’s attempt to characterise existentialism as a form of humanism. In this difficult piece, it is important to read each sentence slowly and carefully in relation to the ongoing train of thought, but also in relation to the essay as a whole (of course, this is a heuristic, poetic illusion… as we are already thrown, etc…).

The position of this essay in Heidegger’s creative output as a whole is significant as it is his first major work following the end of the second World War, one which was an attempt to re-establish his reputation during the intense scrutiny to which he was subject in the de-Nazification hearings after the War. The exchange between Heidegger and Sartre is also significant as it is perhaps the first fruitful philosophical exchange between French and German philosophy after the defeat of the Nazi regime in August 1945.

It should be remembered that Heidegger, despite the persistent subversive character of his lectures and writings during this period (and his surveillance by Nazi officials and the attacks by other intellectuals, such as Baumler) was to many at this point a persona non grata for the fact that he continued to teach at the University of Freiburg throughout the war (and thus, his apparent complicity with the Nazi regime). Frank Edler in his ‘Alfred Baeumler on Hölderlin and the Greeks: Reflections on the Heidegger-Baeumler Relationship’ (Janus Head), and in the series of articles which followed, makes convincing arguments that Heidegger acted in a subversive manner as Recktor.

Heidegger himself wrote of this complicity in his recently published Black Notebooks, ‘Forced into taking over the rectorate, I act for the first time against my innermost voice.’ (GA94 110) [1] Though later, he provides a hint of his disposition towards the new regime, ‘The upheaval to being-there as the taking effect of the truth of being—my sole intention.’ (GA94 259) [2] The various judgements of the tribunal amounted to a prohibition from teaching until 1951. It would be fitting to consider this essay as a first reflection by Heidegger (as with Oedipus in Colonus) on the question of the relationship between philosophy and action, of that between the thinker and the political.

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1 https://luchte.wordpress.com/heideggers-letter-on-humanism-a-reading/
Heidegger begins his Letter with an attempt to lay out a provisional context for his contemplations which will follow in this essay. With an obvious reference to Sartre, he writes that ‘We are far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough.’ (LH, p. 217, 145) The key to this sentence is the phrase ‘decisively enough’, since Heidegger is not suggesting that we do not have any theory of action or method for the practical assessment of action, but that we are far away from thinking ‘decisively’ about action. Indeed, ‘we’ (moderns) see (theorein) action as ‘causing an effect’ and ‘we’ value an action on the basis of its ‘utility’. These first sentences moreover already resonate strangely with Sartre’s Existentialism.

For, in the first instance, Heidegger has indicated an essence for action. Such an indication was not suggested by Sartre as he merely assumes we know what he means by the term. If we will recall, the latter stated that ‘existence precedes essence’, and that what we are is established by what we do, by our action, by our deeds. Yet, Heidegger has already taken a step back from such a routine and facile characterisation of action by asking after the ‘essence’ of action. In other words, if, for Sartre, our essence is determined by our actions or deeds, but if, for Heidegger, the essence of action has not been ‘pondered decisively enough’, then our essence cannot be determined by actions or deeds, if that is, we have not yet thought clearly about action and its essence. Or, on the contrary, we will be forced to state that our essence, which follows our existence is determined by an act or event, the essence (Wesen) of which precedes our essence (essentia) and our existence (existentia).

Heidegger writes that the essence of action (which itself is not determined by any particular action or deed) is ‘accomplishment,’ (Vollbringen) (LH, p. 217, 145) which is, as accomplishment, an unfolding of something into the fullness of its essence. In other words, that which is accomplished in this unfolding must in some sense already be. In this light, the essence of action, as accomplishment, is an unfolding of that which already is – and therefore, if action is that which determines our essence, for Sartre, it is an accomplishment of a being that already is. In this light, for Heidegger, in a very significant sense, existence does not precede essence, but vice versa, essence precedes existence, this latter being produced, in the sense of the Latin producere (to be lead forth, unfolded as accomplishment).

We will recall that it is precisely this word that Sartre contested in his characterisation of the theological and technological paradigm of essence as an idea, plan or method which preceded the existence of the thing. But, though it might seem that Heidegger is merely seeking to reverse the reversal of that Sartre which had already asserted, his next sentence is vital in his attempt to distinguish his own criticism of Sartre from that of Christianity and Communism, or in other words, from the view of humanism as either an imago dei (image of God, as in Genesis) or as homo faber (man the maker, as in Marxism, Hannah Arendt, et al.). Heidegger writes: ‘But, what “is” above all is Being.’ (LH, p. 217, 145) In this way, that which ‘is’ and ‘is’ prior to action, prior to existence and its pragmatic essence, is Being. Moreover, it is through thinking, Heidegger writes, that the relation of Being to the ‘essence of man’ is accomplished, unfolded, not as action in the modern sense – as making or effecting – but as that which is brought to Being ‘as something that is handed over to it from Being.’ (LH, p. 217, 145) In this receiving from Being and giving back to Being, Being itself comes to language. Heidegger writes,
Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of Being insofar as they bring the manifestation to language and maintain it in language through their speech. Thinking does not become action only because some effect issues from it or because it is applied. Thinking acts insofar as it thinks. Such action is presumably the simplest and at the same time the highest, because it concerns the relation of Being to man. But all working or effecting lies in Being and is directed towards beings. Thinking, in contrast, lets itself be claimed by Being so that it can say the truth of Being. Thinking accomplishes this letting. Thinking is the ‘engagement par l’Etre pour l’Etre’ [engagement by Being for Being]. (LH, p. 217-218, 145)

That which is significant for an understanding of this difficult passage is the attempt, already mentioned, to provide a provisional context for a questioning of Sartre’s facile and superficial appeal to action as that which ‘makes’ our essence. Heidegger would agree with Sartre that the essence of man is not in an a priori idea of God, nor in a ready-made notion of ‘human nature’ such as that of a zoon politikon (Aristotle), or, a social animal (Marx). At the same time, it is neither a question of these latter alternatives and the position that Sartre has asserted with respect to the abandonment of man. For Heidegger, that which Sartre has forgotten is precisely Being – or, in other words, Sartre has answered the question of Being with the statement that Being is Subjectivity (the nothingness of existence prior to the establishment of essence through action). For Heidegger, both producere and essence have a deeper meaning, prior to the scholastic differentiation between existentia and essentia (more on this later).

In this light, Heidegger is responding to the claim made by Sartre that ‘we’ are abandoned to a world in which there are ‘only human beings’ – with a transfigured sense of context, as a house of Being, given by Being to man, accomplished by thought and articulated and preserved through language. In this way, it is no longer, as with Sartre, human subjectivity (even that which is deeply conceived as ‘human reality’) which is the main player amid existence, but it is the play of Being itself (which, I must emphasise, is not to be regarded as either a being or object (Seiende) in the ‘world’ or as a ‘God’ or a subject, either inside or outside the ‘world’). Heidegger will regard any attempt to impose the interpretive frame of subject and object upon our experience as a metaphysical falsification of Being.

Immediately following and flowing from this rather difficult passage that we have just considered is a rather prosaic consideration of the historical meaning of the metaphysical framework of subject and object. Heidegger writes:

In this regard “subject” and “object” are inappropriate terms of metaphysics, which very early on in the form of Occidental “logic” and “grammar” seized control of the interpretation of language. We today can only descry what is concealed in that occurrence. The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation. Thinking is not merely l’engagement dans l’action [engagement in the action] for and by beings, in the sense of the actuality of the present situation. Thinking is l’engagement by and for the truth of Being. The history of Being is never past but stands ever before; it sustains and defines every condition et situation humaine. (LH, p. 218)
The liberation of thought from grammar is a freeing of ourselves from the ‘technical interpretation of thinking’ laid out originally by Plato and Aristotle. For the latter, thinking is ‘technē, a process of reflection in service to doing and making,’ (LH, p. 218, 146) or, of praxis and poiesis. For Heidegger, thinking is not a ‘practical’ endeavor, as it is not in service to action. Neither is thinking merely theoretical.

Indeed, and this point resonates in our own era, Heidegger contends that the merely theoretical is a reactive posture which seeks to preserve the ‘autonomy’ of thought in the face of action. And, while this posture attempts to maintain the ‘prestige’ of thinking through the emulation of ‘science’, Heidegger contends that thinking loses its essence when it becomes a science or a merely theoretical activity. That which is lost, abandoned in the technical interpretation is the question of Being, an abandonment which is sanctioned by ‘Logic’, the nexus of rules which formulates the behaviour of the technical interpretation as the ‘technical-theoretical exactness of concepts.’ (LH, p. 219, 147).

Before Heidegger explicitly addresses the first question of Jean Beaufret, he notes that it would perhaps have been better to respond to the questions in the form of speech, which, he contends, remains in the ‘element of Being’ and maintains the ‘multidimensionality of the realm peculiar to thinking,’ (LH, p. 219, 147) It is writing, which forces us to consider ‘deliberate linguistic formulation’, and thus, which facilitates the establishment of the grammar of technical thinking. It is important, at this point, to note that the difficulty of some of the sentences in the Letter can be understood against the background of the question of the ontological difference, of the difference between Being and beings, and of the necessity of a difference in ‘conceptuality’, or language, in respect of this difference. In this way, Heidegger articulates a distinction between a technical interpretation of thinking, once compatible with beings and with ‘science’, and a poetical interpretation of thinking, which is that which can allow Being to come to language. We should, again, also keep in mind the intimacy of speech with Being, and hence poetry, over again written language and beings and ‘science’.

The First Question: How can we restore meaning to the word ‘humanism’?

Heidegger begins his answer to the question – which is not going to be given any clear answer until page 247 – by raising his own question as to the necessity of maintaining the word ‘humanism’ – a word first made relevant by Niethammer. He suggests that –isms have already caused enough ‘damage’ in an obvious reference to the various ideologies associated with the War – fascism, Nazism, Americanism, Communism, etc. He moreover makes the suggestion that these labels are demanded by the market of public opinion, a point that Sartre also made in his Existentialism. Yet, this suggestion makes the implication that such –isms are unoriginal, as are the divisions in thought itself between ‘logic’, ‘ethics’ and ‘physics’ – even the term ‘philosophy’ itself only arose when ‘original thinking comes to an end.’ (LH, p. 219, 147) All of these terms, again associated with Plato and Aristotle, would be emblematic of the technical interpretation of thinking.

But, immediately after these suggestions, Heidegger enters, shifts, into another ‘saying’, a different way of speaking, the difficulty of which must be understood as a stepping back into a more original saying
that is seeking to articulate a poetic thinking of Being prior to ideologies and divisions into sub-disciplines, such as logic, ethics, and physics – or, into the discipline of ‘philosophy’ itself.

This other way of thinking is attempting to retrieve the element in which thinking can properly be – for without this element, it can no longer be a thinking at all – but a technical interpretation of thought, or, in other words, an ideology or a worldview. The element, in this way, enables thinking, or in other words, it brings thinking into its essence – it allows thinking to be accomplished, or, as we have heard, it brings the essence of man into relation with Being through thinking. Thinking is thus a thinking of Being in the sense of, first, that thinking, as with all things, acts, etc. belongs to Being as an aspect of Being itself, and secondly, thinking of Being is a thinking of Being itself, a listening to Being. Thinking arises out of the element of Being as that which belongs to and listens to Being. But, as that which arises from Being itself, as that which unfolds from Being, thinking is the unfolding of the essence of Being, an essence which Being ‘fatefully embraces’. (LH, p. 220, 148)

Heidegger poetises that the embrace by Being of its own essence is a favoring or love of its own essence, a loving which means ‘to bestow essence as a gift.’ (LH, p. 220, 148) This favoring, giving, is the essence of enabling, as with the enabling of thinking in the element, in Being; it lets thinking be, its lets being be by enabling, favoring, by giving the gift of Being, of itself. Enabling, as the element which allows something to be, is that which is most possible, it is the ‘condition of possibility.’ Heidegger closes this shift in his language, saying, ‘As the element, Being is the “quiet power” of the favoring-enabling, that is, of the possible.’ (LH, p. 220, 148)

Heidegger shifts back into critical prose with a consideration of the meaning of possibility once thinking has slipped out of its element in the epoch of ‘logic’ and ‘metaphysics’. Within these horizons, possibility only has meaning in contrast to actuality. Or, in other words possibility (potential) and actuality (actus) are thought in the same way, and are related to, the distinction (as we indicated earlier) between essentia and existentia. As we have noted, these are not the terms which are of concern to Heidegger. On the contrary, for him, possibility refers to Being itself, prior to the scholastic distinction between essence and existence – a distinction, which we should note, which is operative in Sartre’s Existentialism. Being, for Heidegger, watches over thinking and through the relation the latter engenders, over the essence of man, and seeks to keep thinking in its element.

Heidegger contends, however, that thinking does not – and has not – remained in its element, but has become a techné, a technique of explanation from ‘highest causes’. There is no longer thinking, but the technical discipline of philosophy, which is fragmented into the –isms of the competitive, modern marketplace of ideas. The hegemony of ideologies, Heidegger states, is based upon ‘the peculiar dictatorship of the public realm.’ (LH, p. 221, 149) Moreover, a merely private existence, withdrawn from the public realm merely shows its own weakness in the face of the dictatorship. The dictatorship, for Heidegger, arises from the dominance of subjectivity, and is the ‘metaphysically conditioned establishment and authorization of the openness of individual beings in their unconditional objectification.’ (LH, 221, 149) In this way, language becomes dominated by the necessities of the public realm, and thereby, becomes technical, grammatical communication.
In this light, the technical matrix of the public realm becomes the historically established regime which decides that which is proper and improper with respect to language, and thus, of existence. But, since language was originally, when it was in its element, the house of Being, its technical, grammatical transformation under the metaphysics of subjectivity prohibits us from cultivating a relationship with Being, and hence, our own Being. Heidegger contends, ‘Instead language surrenders itself to our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings. Beings themselves appear as actualities in the interaction of cause and effect.’ (LH, p. 223, 150)

Yet, Heidegger suggests, if we are to find the thread that will lead us out from the labyrinth of grammatical, technical language – so that we can once again come near to Being – we must ‘learn to exist in the nameless.’ (LH, p. 223, 150) We must take a step back from our seduction to the public realm and the plethora of beings and be open – in silence – to the manifestation of Being itself, and allow ourselves to be claimed by Being. However, Heidegger asks if such a desire – of making man ready for the claim of Being, of bringing man back into his essence – is not a concern about man, and hence – and this is where he finally begins to explicitly address the question – of humanism. Heidegger writes, ‘For this is humanism: meditating and caring, that man be human and not inhumane, “inhuman,” that is, outside his essence. But in what does the humanity of man consist? It lies in his essence.’ (LH, p. 224, 151)

On Humanism

Heidegger begins a historical recollection of the meaning of humanitas, of humanism, so as to decide ‘whence and how the essence of man is determined.’ (LH, p. 224, 151) Heidegger travels through various determinations, from Marx (man is a social animal), to Christianity (man as distinct from God, who will return to God from his temporary stay in the ‘world’), and to the homo humanus (as distinct from homo barbarus) of the Roman Republic, achieved through the cultivation of virtue through Greek paideia (education). Heidegger contends that humanism is first established in Rome and ‘remains in essence a specifically Roman phenomenon.’ (LH, 224, 152) And, it is this phenomenon which re-surfaces in the Renaissance in which Greek (as seen by the Romans) and Roman learning re-emerged from under Gothic barbarism, but as an intrinsically Roman phenomenon. This neo-humanism is again connected to Germany in the late 18th century under the names of Wincklemann, Goethe and Schiller.

Heidegger, rather enigmatically, but significantly, states that Holderlin ‘does not belong to “humanism,” precisely because he thought the destiny of man’s essence in a more original way than “humanism” could.’ (LH, p. 225, 152) This last reference is important as it will guide the meaning of Heidegger’s perhaps ‘higher’ interpretation of the significance of ‘human existence’ and the connection of this higher destiny to that of the Greeks (which, he has made all too clear, is not to be found either in Rome or in its ‘humanism’).

‘Humanism’ is furthermore, for Heidegger, an ambiguous term as it relies on auxiliary terms such as ‘freedom’ and ‘nature’ which differ according to the interpretative context. For instance, Heidegger remarks that neither Marx nor Sartre would need to return to antiquity to use the term humanism in their own senses. Christianity, moreover, has its own sense of humanism which is concerned with
‘man’s salvation’, where all of history is seen as the drama of the redemption of man. Nevertheless, irrespective of their disagreements, each of these interpretations of humanism relay on ‘an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole.’ (LH, p. 225, 153) In this way, Heidegger contends, every humanism is already a metaphysics, and thus already presupposes an interpretation of beings – and in this way, every humanism has already suppressed the question of Being. Nevertheless, Heidegger remarks, the task of re-asking the question of Being will take place in the labyrinth of metaphysics and will appear initially as a metaphysical question.

What is important in the preceding is the obviousness with which the various interpretations of man presuppose a very elaborate metaphysics without ever admitting this fact to be the case. As we can see, for instance, Sartre’s contention that the existence of man precedes his essence and that his essence is determined by his actions – is already a metaphysical position and one that presupposes a historically established notion of the essence of man. Sartre opposes the theocratic and technological conceptions of man, but has not recognised that these are just varying species of humanism to which his own philosophy has a marked family resemblance. Indeed, Sartre not only bases his philosophy upon Descartes, but also speaks of the necessity of the dignity of man in connection to his choice of the Cartesian philosophy. However, this is not to begin in the nothing, before essence, but only one particular notion of essence. In fact, even the valorisation of action is to tacitly assume a particular historically established essence of man. That of which Sartre is not asking is the Being of man – and he does not do this as this question has already been suppressed by his modus operandi.

Heidegger contends that all of these various humanisms or humanistic ideologies are dependent on a universally recognised essence of man as an animal rationale, or a rational animal. But, it is so obvious, and so universal – and unquestioned (for instance, animal, ratio, these words are interpretations of existence, of life which are not at all obvious or true), that it is the type of assumption that is never noticed. And, as it is not noticed, it is established as an answer to the question of the Being of beings. But, in this way, the question of Being itself is suppressed as is the ontological difference which has been fixed by a specific metaphysical interpretation.

In this context, the question of Being has been forgotten as it is no longer possible as a question within the context of metaphysics. ‘Man’ becomes just another being amongst beings; that which is essential to man is forgotten. Heidegger writes, ‘Metaphysics closes itself to the simple essential fact that man essentially occurs in his essence, where he is claimed by Being. Only from that claim “has” he found that wherein his essence dwells. Only from this dwelling “has” he “language” as the home that preserves the ecstatic for his essence. Such standing in the clearing of Being I call the ek-sistence of man. This way of Being is proper only to man.’ (LH, p. 227-228, 155)

Ek-sistence, as a clearly distinct expression that Sartre’s existence, is meant to point out the peculiarity of man as one who asks after the essence or meaning of his own being (in Being and Time, man is the being for whom Being [and his own Being] is an issue). Again, ek-sistence is not that which is traditionally entitled existentia. He quotes from Being and Time: ‘The “essence” of Dasein lies in its existence,’ but states that he is concerned in this passage (which resembles Sartre’s ‘existence precedes
essence’) with pointing out that the essence or meaning of man occurs to the extent that he is the Dasein, the be-ing there, or that he is the ‘clearing of Being’.

In other words, man is an ecstatic openness in the midst of the truth or self-showing of Being. Being, as we have seen, is the element which gives itself, which shows itself, its truth; it is thinking which brings the essence of man into relation with Being and it is poetic language which maintains this relation with Being, as man lives ecstatically (standing out in the open, as neither subject nor object) amidst the truth of Being. By standing outside her Being in the truth of Being, the human preserves the essence of her Being. She is ‘placed freely’ in the clearing of Being, in the ‘world’ of language, which is the ‘clearing-concealing event of Being itself.’ (LH, p. 230, 158) Moreover, Heidegger writes, ‘As ek-sisting, man sustains Da-sein in that he takes the Da, the clearing of Being, into “care.” But, Da-sein itself occurs as essentially as “thrown.” It unfolds essentially in the throw of Being as the fateful sending.’ (LH, 231, 158) In this way, with the main action being that of Being – as Being throws us into the world, into its manifested truth, the main player of this thought is no longer subjectivity – or, Being is not subjectivity.

Heidegger’s Criticism of Sartre

Heidegger begins his treatment of Sartre with a consideration of the latter’s maxim: existence precedes essence. Immediately, Heidegger situates this maxim in the traditional distinction between existentia and essentia, and comments that, from the time of Plato, it has been held that essentia preceded existentia. He asserts that Sartre merely reverses the order of priority, and writes, ‘But, the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement. With it he stays with metaphysics in oblivion of the truth of Being.’ (LH, p. 232, 159) Heidegger wishes to take a step back and to ask out of what destiny was this distinction between existentia and essentia made in the first place. However, he adds, from within the antithetical matrix of the distinction itself, the question can never be thought or asked. In this way, Heidegger states that ‘existentialism’, as conceived by Sartre, has nothing at all to do with the statement from Being and Time that the ‘essence’ of man lies in his existence.

At the same time, for us to being about to take the step back from the dichotomy of existentia and essentia, we must ask ‘how Being concerns man and how it claims him’. (LH, p. 233, 160) The answer to these questions comes with the notion that, as we have seen, the ‘essence’ or Being of man is his ek-sistence, or that man comes near to Being in the ‘ecstatic inherence in the truth of Being.’ (LH, 233, 160) And, if this is the Being of man, his essence, Heidegger contests, than ‘humanism’ as traditionally conceived is inadequate to the higher essence of man (as the one who is the guardian of the house of Being, as the one who lives in language, as the one who speaks), and in this way, he continues, Being and Time is opposed to ‘humanism’. Yet, this higher essence of ‘man’ is not meant in the sense of metaphysical subjectivism (or as anthropocentrism) in which man is the tyrant of Being to which each and all is subject. Instead, he writes:

Man is rather “thrown” from Being itself into the truth of Being so that ek-sisting in this fashion he might guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are. Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or
history and nature come forward into the clearing of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being. But for man it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in his essence that corresponds to such destiny; for in accord with this destiny man as ek-sisting has to guard the truth of Being. Man is the shepherd of Being. (LH, p. 234, 161-162)

But, what then, Heidegger asks, is ‘Being’? He replies, ‘It is It itself.’ (LH, p. 234, 162) It is not ‘God’ or ‘cosmic ground’ – ‘Being is farther than all being and is yet nearer to man than every being...’ ‘Being is the nearest. Yet the near remains farthest from man. Man at first clings always and only to beings.’ (LH, p. 234, 162) But, in our clinging to beings, we collapse the ontological difference and forget Being. Our thinking is only ever about beings or the Being of beings, and is never about Being as such. Our thinking, moreover, as long as it does not acknowledge the prerequisite condition of Being, will remain a species of metaphysical representation with its centre in a hegemonic being, a phantasm, such as subjectivity, nature (conceived as a collection of objects) or God.

But, in our step back, amid the question of Being, the nearest, Being shows itself in its clearing, in its manifestation, as truth (Alethea, truth as the unconcealment amid concealment, who signifies the struggle to disclose the truth, to bring it to light, out from under the weight of beings and of metaphysical, subjectivist representation.) Heidegger writes, concerning the relation that subsists between the essence of man and Being:

Being itself is the relation to the extent that It, as the location of the truth of Being amid beings, gathers to itself and embraces ek-sistence in its existential, that is, ecstatic essence. Because man as the one who ek-sists comes to stand in this relation that Being destinies for itself, in that he ecstatically sustains it, that is, in care takes it upon himself, he at first fails to recognize the nearest and attaches himself to the next nearest. He even thinks that this is the nearest. But nearer than the nearest and at the same time for ordinary thinking farther than the farthest is nearness itself: the truth of Being. (LH, p. 235, 163)

We become ensnared, we fall into beings, and believe that these things are the nearest, are our essence, are what is closest to us. This allusion to the contention that the cogito, the subject, is that which is nearest and most known – absolutely clear and distinct to us – underscores Heidegger’s attempt to distance himself from Sartre and his metaphysical subjectivism, which contrary to his own self-understanding, forces a tacit answer upon him of the essence of man, even before his actions – and, even his actions are still orchestrated in the confines of metaphysics and in service to the theoretical construct of the subject, of the cogito. Sartre is ensnared in beings, alludes Heidegger, and has thus foreclosed upon his own ecstatic relation to the truth of Being, a relation which is of and by Being in its gift of the truth of Being, and into which man is thrown.

The nearness of Being, Heidegger suggest, is mysterious in its ‘governance’ of the situation of ek-sistence. This unnoticed governance, moreover, takes place through or as language, conceived as the house of Being, and not as the metaphysical-animal expression of the subjective and rational animal. In this way, language, as a gift of Being, is the ‘home of man’s essence.’ (LH, p. 237, 164) Man ek-sists dwells in the truth of Being and guards it, and thus, that which is central in the determination of the
essence of man, for Heidegger, is Being and not man, not subjectivity. Being is the ‘dimension of the ecstasy of ek-sistence.’ (LH, p. 237, 164)

In this way, Heidegger contends that his indication of the essence of man as ek-sistence is not a humanism if that term is meant metaphysically. He writes, furthermore, disclosing his criticism of Sartre quite clearly:

Certainly not if humanism is existentialism and is represented by what Sartre expresses: précisément nous sommes sur un plan où il y a seulement des hommes [We are precisely in a situation where there are only human beings].’ Thought from Being and Time, this should say instead: précisément nous sommes sur un plan où il y a principalement l’Etre [We are precisely in a situation where principally there is Being].(LH, p. 237, 165)

The situation, which is a crucial term for Sartre, is not of the subject, but of Being itself, a situation as a clearing, the place of truth, given by Being. Heidegger writes, ‘The self-giving into the open, along with the open region itself, is Being itself’. (LH, 238, 165) Being, to repeat our indication of the ontological difference, is not a being among beings. It is meant, Heidegger reminds us, in the sense in which Parmenides said, ‘esti gar einai’ – ‘For there is Being’. Such a sense is repeated by Aristotle several centuries later when he asked, ‘Why is there something, rather then nothing.’ This is a sense of Being which is neither concerned with what things or beings are (essentia), nor with how things or beings are (existentia), but instead, it is a sense of Being which is concerned with that anything is at all. Such a sense of Being, Heidegger states, is unthought today, but the possibility of such a thought is indicated by Heidegger in his es gibt: There is/it gives Being. Indications, moreover, of this sense of Being can be traced in the history of Being in ‘the words of essential thinkers.’ (LH, 238, 165)

In this way, a thinking which thinks Being, is historical, as it recollects the truth of Being from out of the dispensation of Being itself. The history of Being, as that which houses the truth of Being, Heidegger alludes, is a history which happens as the ‘destiny of the truth of Being...’ Being gives itself, a giving which as alethea, is also a concealing (Being withdraws with the dispensation of beings), and from this giving the history of Being shows itself. Heidegger states that this giving of the destiny of Being is to some extent disclosed through the philosophy of Hegelian philosophy of Absolute metaphysics, and in the Marxian and Nietzschean inversions of this philosophy (and each of which was in its own way concerned to overcome mere subjectivism). However, this disclosure has taken place as metaphysics, and indeed, Heidegger contends, the history of Being has had only one epoch to date, and that is the metaphysical. Beyond the epoch of metaphysics, Heidegger ‘assumes’ that man will be able to think Being from the ecstatic openness of ek-sistence, as standing out in the truth of Being, and not from the perspective of the ensnarement of beings.

In this sense, and as a further strand in his criticism of Sartre, Heidegger states that Being is not a positing or creation of the consciousness of man. He reminds us of his statement from the opening pages of Being and Time: ‘Being is the transcendenspure and simple’. In many other texts, from his earliest to his latest writings, Heidegger criticised the modern contention that Being is a positing of the ego cogito, from Descartes through Kant and in the present situation to Sartre. Again, that which
Heidegger is calling into question is the arrogant pretensions of the subject of metaphysical representation. He writes that Being is ‘essentially broader than all beings, because it is the clearing itself.’ (LH, p. 240, 167) At the same time, since we are embedded in the historical epoch of metaphysics, it is at once necessary, on the one hand, to retrospectively consider the essence of Being from the perspective of the clearing of Being, and on the other hand, to prospectively seek to find Ariadne’s thread out of the labyrinth so that we can begin to think the truth of Being.

It is in this way that Heidegger’s approach to the history of Being, or to metaphysics, differs essentially from the anti-metaphysicians of the Vienna Circle and of the Analytic tradition generally. Heidegger is not seeking to simple cut out metaphysics root and branch, but through his method of phenomenological destructuring, to retrieve the question and the truth of Being as it has been disclosed through its prevailing dispensation as metaphysics. This is the meaning of the destruction of the history of ontology, not a crass elimination, but a dismantling of the artefacts of thought so as to approach the event of nearness that lies at the heart of an essential thinking.

Being, which is not a creation of subjectivity or God, is illumined in the midst of an ecstatic projection which, as ek-sistence, is itself thrown from Being into the truth, the clearing, of Being. Heidegger states that ‘man dwells as the ek-sisting one without yet being able to properly to experience and take over this dwelling.’ (LH, p. 241, 168) This experience of not being able to take over this dwelling, this inability to come near to Being and find our own essence is explored by Heidegger in the context of his lecture course (1943) on Holderlin’s poem, ‘The Homecoming’.[3]

It is in this context that Heidegger speaks of the homelessness of contemporary man which is signified by the metaphysics of subjectivity over against a sense of belonging to the destiny or the history of Being. He contends that Holderlin’s concern that his countrymen find their essence is not to be meant in any egoistic, patriotic, or nationalist manner, but instead as a sense of a ‘belongingness to the destiny of the West’. (LH, p. 241, 168) What he may mean by this ‘West’ and its destiny, of course, mat seem all very complicated and mysterious – to some, or it could be all so very simple – and dark, joyous – a differing destiny – though one which embraces the wanderer, the romance of Martin and Hannah...

Heidegger answers the question regarding ‘humanism’ via the formal indication of Holderlin’s poem. The poem is an indication of the contours, rhythms, dance of existence – the tension of going home – the ease of being there, in its time – the powerlessness, disconnection we feel most of the time. But Holderlin still invokes

Begin the music, and the worries
Almost vanish which would have affected our joy

Homelessness, Homecoming and the Holy

Heidegger contends that Nietzsche was the ‘last to experience this homelessness’, and that his only recourse – and one of futility – amid the situation of metaphysics was a reversal of metaphysics. The reversal is futile as Nietzsche remains, according to Heidegger, within metaphysics. Holderlin, on the other hand, as previously suggested by Heidegger, (LH, p. 225) has already transcended ‘humanism’ with
his non-metaphysical poetry. In the context of his poem, ‘Homecoming’, the ‘homeland’ has the significance of the ‘nearness to Being,’ in the sense of language (in this case, the German language) being a ‘house of Being’, or the historical dwelling of the German people. And, placing a question over Sartre’s all-too-hasty assertion of ‘atheism’, Heidegger states that it is only within language in its nearness to Being that the question of the holy, of God and gods, can be decided.

Heidegger writes:

But the holy, which alone is the essential sphere of divinity, which in turn alone affords a dimension for the gods and for God, comes to radiate only when Being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation has been illuminated and is experienced in its truth. (LH, p. 242, 169)

Homelessness is an abandonment of Being by beings, and it is in this oblivion of Being that confusion reigns in our thinking. Immersed in beings, we tacitly answer the question of Being through the assertion of the primacy of a being, of an object of metaphysical speculation – of an infinite being, a finite being, or as that which ‘encompasses beings’. At the same time, the oblivion of Being occurs ‘naturally’ as Being is that which throws us into the world, as that which dispenses its truth, and, in this way, remains concealed in its self-showing, in its truth (Alethea). In our obsession with the gifts that we have been given, we forget the giver. Heidegger contends that it is poetry which speaks of the destiny of Being, and in a way that transcends metaphysics as the only extant epoch of the history of Being. It is also in this sense that poetry – and specifically the poetry of Holderlin – transcends humanism as metaphysics.

Metaphysics, as it is the ensnarement in beings, unfolds the destiny of the world as one of homelessness. Heidegger contends that we must ‘think that destiny in terms of the history of Being,’ (LH, p. 243, 170) and he contends that there is an affinity between such thinking and that of Marx, who thought of the history of human existence as one of estrangement, which Heidegger regards as akin to the homelessness which is engulfing the world. As a further criticism of Sartre (and Husserl, whose Cartesian Meditations can be seen as the background for Sartre’s Existentialism), Heidegger contends that neither scientific phenomenology nor existentialism are capable of a ‘productive dialogue’ with Marx, as neither has grasped the historicity of Being.

Nevertheless, despite the early Marx’s thematisation of estrangement and historicity, Marxism remains, for Heidegger, ensnared in the metaphysics of subjectivity, in that, following Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, it regards material labour as the ‘self-establishing process of unconditioned production, which is the objectification of the actual through man experienced as subjectivity.’ (LH, 243, 171) Heidegger contends that the subjectivistic essence of materialism remains veiled by the seemingly impersonal operations of technology, which itself is a ‘destiny within the history of Being’ as a mode of truth, of aletheuein, for the disclosure of beings. With regard to this destiny of technology as the unconditioned objectification, and its impact on the world on a geopolitical alignments between Communism, Americanism and Europeanism, Heidegger writes:
No metaphysics, whether idealistic, materialistic, or Christian, can in accord with its essence, and surely not in its own attempts to explicate itself, “get a hold on” this destiny yet, and that means thoughtfully to reach and gather together which in the fullest sense of Being now is. (LH, p. 244, 171-72)

Neither nationalism nor internationalism (nationalism raised to a global system) can confront the threat to the essence of human existence that is posed by the destiny of metaphysics as technology in that each of these ‘solutions’ is itself metaphysical – and still regards man as an ‘animal rationale’. Yet, Heidegger, in preparation to an more explicit answer to Beaufret’s question, contends that man is both more and less than a ‘rational animal’. On the one hand, he is ‘more’ in that such a description does not disclose human existence in terms of its essence – in the sense of his nearness to Being. On the other hand, man is ‘less’ as he is not truly bound up with the arrogant pretensions of metaphysical subjectivity. Reminding us of our essential thrownness, Heidegger declares:

Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being. Man loses nothing in this ‘less’; rather, he gains in that he attains the truth of Being. He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being’s truth. The call comes as the throw from which the thrownness of Da-sein derives. In his essential unfolding within the history of Being, man is the being whose Being as ek-sistence consists in his dwelling in the nearness of Being. Man is the neighbour of Being. (LH, p. 245, 172-73)

Once again, Heidegger reminds us of our utter finitude – and of the Dionysian character of existence amidst the temporality of a makeshift ‘world’. We are called, in our thrownness – with the dignity of a shepherd...

Nevertheless, Heidegger reflects upon his own language of ‘Man’ and concedes that his thinking is a humanism in an ‘extreme sense’ – though not to be metaphysically construed. He writes, ‘It is humanism that thinks the humanity of man from the nearness of Being. But at the same time it is a humanism in which not man but man’s historical essence is at stake in its provenance from the truth of Being.’ (LH, p. 245, 173) But, again, Heidegger reminds us that he is not speaking of human existence in the sense of the ego cogito (or in light of the distinction between essentia and existentia, but as ek-sistence which is the ‘ecstatic dwelling in the nearness of Being’. (LH, p. 246, 173) Such a comportment with Being is that of ‘care’ and not that of the objectification of representational thinking.

Heidegger, in the spirit of his own radical phenomenology, asks us to step back and to experience Being for ourselves (as in Holderlin’s poem) – and to disengage from a ‘philosophy’ which throws up barriers and obstructions to the movement to the ‘matters themselves.’ He indicates his meaning by stating that ‘to “philosophize” about being shattered is separated by a chasm from a thinking that is shattered.’ (LH, p. 246, 174) In other words, it is not sufficient to merely parrot the words of a philosophy – as he seems to be suggesting was the case with Sartre’s reading of Being and Time, but to actually ‘experience’ these things for oneself – i.e., hence, the title ‘phenomenology’.

In our present case, the truth of Being must come to language; thinking must, as we suggested earlier, accomplish the relation of Being to the essence of man – or, thinking must descend to the depths of Being, and Heidegger suggests that such thinking would be much better characterised as one of ‘silence’
(Wittgenstein’s ‘showing’), far away from the idle chatter of propositional philosophy (cf. Collingwood’s Autobiography). Whether or not his indication of the pathway is a ‘blind alley or a free space in which freedom conserves itself’ (LH, p. 247, 174), Heidegger will leave to the reader as a decision must be made by one’s self in his wandering amid homelessness toward a possible homecoming in neighbourhood of Being.

Returning to the Question of Humanism

After a nearly 29 page preparatory detour, Heidegger returns to the question set forth by Beaufret, ‘How can some sense be restored to the word “humanism”?’ Assuming we wish to retain the word, Heidegger suggests that the problem of the word is that is has become metaphysical – in other words, that it is severed from the question and truth of Being. Nevertheless, the severing is a breach that has forced us to consider the meaning of ‘humanism’ in a deeper way, and has given us the chance to fathom an ‘older’ (‘Greek’ in the sense of Holderlin’s mythos) meaning than the current form which emerged with the Romans. In other words, some meaning of the term will be restored, but it will be a different meaning and one that is gathered not through definitions and propositions, but through a primordial experience or phenomenology of human existence. As we have suggested, the essence of man is his ek-sistence as the clearing of Being – as the shepherd of Being, as the one who cares for the truth of Being – and indeed, as one that is essential to Being.

After giving a provisional answer to the question, Heidegger asks whether it is indeed necessary or even desirable to retain the word ‘humanism’ as it is bound up with misunderstandings and openly metaphysical obstructions to the truth of Being, and hence, to our very essence. Heidegger writes,

Or should thinking, by means of open resistance to “humanism,” risk a shock that could for the first time cause perplexity concerning the humanitas of homo humanus and its basis? In this way, it could awaken a reflection – if the world-historical moment did not itself already compel such a reflection – that thinks not only about man but also about the “nature” of man, not only about his nature but even more primordially about the dimension in which the essence of man, determined by Being itself, is at home. (LH, p. 248, 176)

Heidegger lays out an answer to his questions in the form of an extended poetic engagement with the reader, much in the manner of Nietzsche in some of his rhetorical engagements in Thus Spoke Zarathustra and in other writings. Let us turn to this extended passage (pp. 249- 250)

From this passage, it can be fathomed that Heidegger is attempting to break out of the one-sidedness of what he regards as sterile antitheses which surround any statements involving advocacy or enmity, or the for and against. Indeed, he is again calling into question the entire plane of propositional logic as the seat of truth and as the method by which such truth is disclosed. For, as he suggests, logic is concerned with the representation of beings in the Being (and this in terms of a very particular notion of Being, such as substance, subjectivity, or some other being). But, what of Being itself, in the sense that has been developed in his Letter? How do we speak of the pre-logical? Heidegger writes,
To think against “logic” does not mean to break a lance for the illogical but simply to trace in thought the logos and its essence, which appeared in the dawn of thinking, that is, to exert ourselves for the first time in preparing for such reflection. Of what value are ever far-reaching systems of logic to us if, without really knowing what they are doing, they recoil before the task of simply inquiring into the essence of logos?

Heidegger contends that his pre-logical reflection upon logos (language) is not that which is irrational, but instead, it is logic which is irrational for denying access to the question of logos. That which Heidegger is calling into question, through his attacks on ‘value’, etc. is not the humane considerations of ‘culture,’ ‘art’, ‘human dignity’, etc., but instead the notion of value itself, which in the neo-Kantian legacy from which he himself was liberated, roots all value in the positing of the subject. He contends, ‘Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid – solely as the objects of its doing.’ (LH, p. 251, 179)

That which Heidegger is suggesting is similar to what Nietzsche had already stated concerning the essence of nihilism and the death of god. Nihilism occurs when the highest values de-value themselves – God dies the moment he is established as the highest being, i.e., such a procedure makes God just another being, and one indeed posited by the subject (as with Kant’s regulative ideas).

At the same time, as Heidegger made clear in his lectures on Nietzsche a few years before his Letter, the task is not that of a revaluation of all values – as this would still be a subjectivising, and hence, metaphysical. Instead, one must turn away from values and its validating subject and turn instead toward the truth of Being. This again, is not the destruction of values, but a re-interpretation of our own existence and of the true basis for our affirmations amid ek-sistence.

Heidegger, of course, is very cautious with respect to the meanings of his language and how it may be misinterpreted by readers. This is a motif in the present Letter due, to a large extent, to what Heidegger regards as Sartre’s subjectivist mis-understanding of Being and Time. The term about which Heidegger is most concerned is ‘world’ in the phrase being-in-the-world (In-der-welt-sein) which is, for him, the ‘basic trait’ of humanitas, contending that world is not meant as an earthly opposite to the Christian spirit or supersensible world. Instead, for Heidegger, world is the clearing, or the openness of Being in which the human being stands in his ek-sistence.

In this way, the human being is neither the earthly being over against the transcendent, nor is he the subject over against the world (even an inter-subjective subject), but is instead already already being-in-the-world as one who is amid the world, prior to the analytical abstraction of the subject-object distinction, which, for Heidegger is an artificial construction. And, in this context, his call for a step back into the truth of Being, into the openness of ek-sistence in the clearing, is the authentic meaning of deconstruction – from the restricted economy of logic and beings to the general economy of logos and Being (Bataille). As a further criticism of Sartre, Heidegger contends, moreover, that such a disclosure of the worldly essence of human existence is meant to make no decision about the existence or non-existence of God or gods. He writes,
Thus it is not only rash but also an error in procedure to maintain that the interpretation of the essence of man from the relation of his essence to the truth of Being is atheism. And what is more, this arbitrary classification betrays a lack of careful reading. (LH, p. 253, 181)

In other words, that which is disclosed in Being and Time is an ‘adequate concept of Dasein’, or a phenomenological analysis of the being of the questioner – of the one who asks after Being. This is the preliminary analytic of Dasein that is necessary before we can turn to a consideration of Being pure and simple. In other words, and as has been already suggested, there is much preliminary work to be done before we can even begin to ask about the question of God, or of the ‘subject and object’. Heidegger writes,

Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word “God” is to signify. (LH, p. 253, 181-82)

It is in this way that Heidegger contends that Sartre has embraced atheism much too hastily. Indeed, for the former, there is much more work to be done in order to retrieve the basis from which we can adequately question our own Being, and Being as such. In other words, Sartre has radically misunderstood Being and Time and the task associated with the turn toward Being itself. Sartre has remained within the metaphysics of subjectivity and is therefore condemned to the repetition of the trauma that is associated with this metaphysical dispensation. On the other hand, those who may acquire a grim satisfaction in Sartre’s error, and use Heidegger as a means to re-establish a belief in the existence of God, have also acted too hastily and have committed an error in method. Indeed, such a concern for the existence of an infinite being betrays a lack of respect for the boundaries of thinking and that which is given for thought as the truth of Being. Heidegger writes:

Thinking does not overcome metaphysics by climbing still higher, surmounting it, transcending it somehow or other; thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing down into the nearness of the nearest. The descent, particularly where man has strayed into subjectivity, is more arduous and more dangerous than the descent. (LH, p. 254, 182)

Heidegger contends that it is not theism as faith in the revelation of a deity which allows us to supplant metaphysics, but the openness toward Being. But, he suggests, in our descent, instead of reaching the nearest – Being – we may stray into subjectivity, thinking that is the nearest, when perhaps it is the next nearest. Heidegger contends that this move – that of Sartre’s – though on the right track in its descending trajectory, is dangerous as it leads to the ultimate nihilism of metaphysical subjectivism – as the valuelessness of the validating and valuing subject, which has been established as the highest value.

The Question of Ethics

The second question from Beaufret is whether or not ‘ontology’ in the manner considered in the Letter must be supplemented by an ethics which would instruct us on how we should live in light of our essence as ek-sistence. Indeed, we have been told a lot on how we ought not think and be – we should not be subjectivist, as we are not the centre of all Being. Instead, we ought to be open to the
truth of Being – we are this openness, but have forgotten this truth, as we have become ensnared in the objectifications of things, entities, beings. Heidegger does in fact express sympathy with such a desire, especially, as he remarks, our predicament upon the planet is ever more dangerous and perplexing (technology, nuclear warfare, the destruction of language, etc.)

Heidegger also expresses caution in that the call to think Being has only been heard and it would be equally dangerous to establish a set of rules – rules which are only relevant for the moment (makeshift) – once and for all, and without any more thought about Being and about the dynamic essence of human existence. Heidegger suggests that before we attempt to fashion such an ‘ethics’ and consider its relation with ‘ontology’ that we more clearly and carefully consider what in fact ‘ontology’ and ‘ethics’ are – and whether such considerations are attuned with the nature of thinking and its task to think and care for the truth of Being.

In the wake of this caution, Heidegger makes the suggestion that ‘ethics’, ‘ontology’ and with these, ‘logic’, ‘physics’, etc. are disciplines which were established quite late in the history of philosophy in the school of Plato – who was, for Heidegger, the founder of metaphysics. Heidegger raises the possibility that the task of thinking associated with the truth of Being may no longer be tenable in terms of the narrow disciplines and sub-disciplines which are the myriad threads which articulate the history of Being as metaphysics.

Indeed, Heidegger is seeking to deconstruct these historically disseminated disciplines in the history of metaphysics through an uncovering of an ‘older’ conception of ‘ethics’ in the ethos of Sophocles and Heraclitus. Just as with logos, ethos is that indication of a pre-ethical state of Being – not, again as the un-ethical, but as an abode or dwelling place (also, attunement in Greek musical theory). Heidegger expounds on the meaning of ethos,

The word names the open region in which man dwells. The open region of his abode allows what pertains to man’s essence, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear. The abode of man contains and preserves the advent of what belongs to man and his essence. (LH, p. 256, 185)

Heidegger illustrates this indication of ethos through a story told by Aristotle about the thinker Heraclitus. It is said that once some visitors had come to Heraclitus’ abode expecting to find the thinker at work – thinking. Instead, when they entered his house, they found him hovering next to a stove, warming himself. Heraclitus said to them, sensing their disappointment, ‘Here too the gods come to presence.’ Heraclitus had said, ‘ēthos anthrōpōi daimōn.’ This has been translated, Heidegger remarks, in a Modern way as ‘A man’s character is his daimon’. Heidegger uses Aristotle’s story to give a differing translation, one that seeks to be attuned with the ancient ‘Greek’ sense of the words and what they name.

Heidegger, living up to expectations, offers, ‘The abode for man is the open region for the presencing of god.’ (LH, p. 258, 187) In light of this different translation, it is suggested that ‘ethics’, far from the modernist (of even Platonic) notion of a set of rules for our behaviour, should instead be thought of as a thinking about, or pondering, the abode of human existence, which Heidegger would regard, in keeping with deconstructive strategy, as an original ethics. At the same time, however, Heidegger reminds us
that this is not ethics in the usual sense as it is a thinking about our Being – and it is thus akin to his project of fundamental ontology (not the ontology of metaphysics) as articulated in Being and Time as the analytic of Dasein. Heidegger writes:

…. such thinking is neither theoretical nor practical. It comes to pass before this distinction. Such thinking is, insofar as it is, recollection of Being and nothing else. Belong to Being. Because thrown by Being into the preservation of its truth and claimed for such a preservation, it thinks Being. Such thinking has no result. It has no effect. It satisfies its essence in that it is. But it is by saying its matter. Historically, only one saying belongs to the matter of thinking, the one that is in each case appropriate to its matter. Its material relevance is essentially higher than the validity of the science, because it is freer. For it lets Being – be. (LH, p. 259, 188)

Such a thinking, Heidegger continues, builds upon the house of Being, or language, which is the abode or dwelling place of human existence. Thinking does not create the house but brings human existence, Heidegger writes, into the realm of healing [das Heilens], which, if we recall an earlier reference, is akin to the holy (heilig). It is important, for what is to follow, to keep this in mind, and to attempt to think, in the manner of logos and ethos, of healing as an attempt of thinking to bring human existence, as with Heraclitus, into the presence of the ‘god’ or the holy.

Heidegger begins a rather difficult excursion into language over the next two pages which may strike the reader as bizarre, not to say, extremely difficult. He writes that in the realm of healing, evil (Böse) also comes into the open ‘all the more in the clearing of Being.’ (LH, p. 260, 189) It would seem that, with this excursion, Heidegger is entering into the classic question of evil, or of the problem of evil. Yet, as we will see, this question is connected to the question of human action more generally, and thus, will be connected to his ongoing criticism of Sartre.

On the one hand, Heidegger states that evil does not consist in human action, but instead in the malice of rage. On the other hand, he writes that both healing and rage occur in Being ‘insofar as Being itself is what is contested.’ (LH, p. 260, 359) Furthermore, he links this contestation at the heart of Being, of healing and rage, to what he calls nihilation (Nichtens). This is a neo-logism of Heidegger, which makes its appearance in Being and Time, and itself became the subject of a controversy with the analytic philosopher Rudolf Carnap, who objected to Heidegger’s use of ‘nothing’ as a noun – in the sense, ‘The nothing naughts’.

Wittgenstein also made remarks to Waismann about this usage, but suggested a differing conclusion than Carnap (cf. ‘Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Carnap: Radical Phenomenology, Logical Positivism and the Roots of the Continental/Analytic Divide,’ ‘Under the Aspect of Time: Heidegger, Wittgenstein and the Place of the Nothing’ and, Of Freedom: Heidegger on Spinoza). That which is important about this word is its prominent use in Sartre’s Being and Nothingness – and it is the use that Sartre makes of this word that is being contested by Heidegger.

It is interesting that Sartre first came into contact with this word through the lectures by Alexandre Kojève on Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit in which he famously stated that human existence is a nothingness that nihilates through time. Nihilation in this sense is meant to refer to human action and
our capacity to create and destroy simultaneously – for example, in order to make a cake, I must destroy seeds of wheat, eggs, sugar cane, etc. I destroy/create through time with my actions. Bataille, who was also present at Kojève’s lectures (and was a friend of Sartre’s) also made much of our destructive aspect claiming that death is essential for all that we do, and all that we do is a detour toward death. That which is significant in this context, with respect to Heidegger, is his denial of nihilation to the human ‘subject’. Instead, he roots nihilation in the heart of Being itself.

If we wish to understand this usage, we can return to his previous claim that healing and rage are rooted in Being and not in human existence. This claim can be illustrated if we consider the highly significant early Greek thinker Empedocles, who set out an analogous opposition at the heart of Being in Love and Strife. Indeed, we could claim that healing and love both bring together, gather together, as in the gathering in the house of Being. We could, moreover, claim that raging and Strife destroy and remove from presence.

In this light, the contestation at the heart of Being is an account of change, or the flux at the heart of existence, in which the nothing is analogous to the silence between the notes of a melody. In this way, at the heart of Being, there is the contestation that brings about the unfolding and accomplishment of destiny – to which human are fated and play a part. However, it is not human action which causes this destiny to unfold; it is our task to think this unfolding destiny as it is Being which is the actor, and its unfolding, the fruition of the unity of opposites, of Love and Strife, of Healing and Rage.

In this way, Heidegger sets forth a final attack on Sartre’s philosophy of subjectivity, denying to him his claim that the essence of man is in his action. In this way, the question of ethos and logos – and of nomos as law – resolves itself into the question of Being and the thinking of Being, as that to which we must attune ourselves as we build the house of Being with our language and poetically dwell within the truth of Being to which we have been thrown. Heidegger writes,

Thinking attends to the clearing of Being in that it puts its saying of Being into language as the home of ek-sistence. Thus thinking is a deed. But a deed that also surpasses all praxis. Thinking towers above action and production, not through the grandeur of its achievement and not as a consequence of its effect, but through the humbleness of its inconsequential accomplishment. (LH, p. 262, 191-92)

As we poetically dwell in the house of Being, our poetic thinking brings Being to language. In this way, as we ek-sist in the openness of the flux of Being, the latter is always on the way to language and it is our task to remember Being in its mysterious and pervasive eruption.

The Third Question

Heidegger anticipates an objection that can be made to his forgoing account of thinking by asking ‘Whence does thinking take its measure? What law governs its deed?’ (LH, p. 263, 192-93) This is necessary due to the misunderstandings that will arise from those, like Kant, who regard the Copernican subject as the primary lawgiver of Nature. If we are merely to respond to Being and its destinal action, then how are we to be assured that our thinking will ‘not fall prey to arbitrariness. The question from Beaufret is more elegant: ‘How can we preserve the element of adventure that all research contains
Heidegger immediately mentions poetry, which he claims, is subject to the same objection as thinking. However, just as immediately, he cites Aristotle’s Poetics, where the latter contended that ‘poetic composition is truer than exploration of beings.’ (LH, p. 264, 193)

That which is essential in this claim is that poetic composition, for Heidegger, acts under the law of Being, which is prior even to the laws of logic. Poetic thought is claimed by Being, guided by Being and its task is to bring Being into language. In this way, and we should keep in mind the thought of the eternal recurrence of the same in pre-Socratic philosophy, that which is being said by thought is always the Same, as the unfolding of the recurrence of Being. Arbitrariness is a charge that has not freed itself from metaphysical subjectivism and the voluntarism that is its dangerous possibility. Being is not arbitrary. On the contrary, the demand is to cultivate an ethos of thinking that remains attuned to Being and its law. As Heidegger counsels:

To attend to the fittingness of thoughtful saying does not only imply, however, that we contemplate at every turn what is to be said of Being and how it is to be said. It is equally essential to ponder whether what is to be thought is to be said – to what extent, at what moment of the history of Being, in what sort of dialogue with this history, and one the basis of what claim, it ought to be said. The threefold thing mentioned in an earlier letter is determined in its cohesion by the law of the fittingness of thought on the history of Being: rigor of meditation, carefulness in saying, frugality with words. (LH, p. 265, 194)

The poiesis of thought in its event is the openness to all that is, that it is, and in the stillest hour creates the words that come on dove’s footsteps.