

2021

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### Recommended Citation

Pierce, Marshall (2021) "On the Deconstruction of Metaphysics: Heidegger's Critical Ontology in Being and Time," *Acta Cogitata: An Undergraduate Journal in Philosophy*. Vol. 9 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://commons.emich.edu/ac/vol9/iss1/6>

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# On the Deconstruction of Metaphysics: Heidegger's Critical Ontology in *Being and Time*

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**Abstract:** Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* offers a sustained critique of the Western philosophical tradition. Specifically, Heidegger describes his project as a "deconstruction" of prior ontological systems, whose goal is a positive recuperation and reformulation of the "question of being." This question, Heidegger suggests, has been obscured and distorted by prior metaphysics. In Division One of *Being and Time*, Heidegger explicates his own ontology in a critical mode, positioning himself against various canonical figures while forging his own, novel conception of the "being of beings." This paper offers a focused exposition of *Being and Time*'s first Division, tracing the contours of Heidegger's critical project while shedding light on his reading of the history of Western metaphysics. Centering on Heidegger's critical intervention in ontology, the paper shows how Heidegger's unique vision emerged through a complex engagement with Aristotelian and Cartesian thought.

## Introduction

In a letter to Karl Löwith dated February 20, 1923, Martin Heidegger described the conclusion of the seminar he had offered the previous year on the seminal work of his esteemed mentor, Edmund Husserl: "In the final hour [...], I publicly burned and destroyed the *Ideas* to such an extent that I dare say the essential foundations for the whole [of my work] are now cleanly laid out" (quoted in Kiesel and Sheehan, 2007, p. 372). Later remarking to the same Löwith that this experience secured him "completely on [his] own feet," Heidegger indicated the extent to which his own philosophical journey was intimately entangled with a critical project and posture: the "essential foundations" of the pupil's work were "laid out" in precisely the same moment that he "burned and destroyed" his master's system (Ibid.). It should come as little

surprise, then, that with the publication of his magnum opus only four years later, Heidegger would deliver a sustained and probing critique of Western metaphysics; he framed his whole project in *Being and Time* as a “deconstruction,” or “destruction” (*Destruktion*) of prior ontology, with an eye toward a positive reformulation of the “question of being” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 22). Heidegger’s metaphysics is delineated point by point in a critical or contrapuntal mode,<sup>1</sup> positioned against the work various canonical figures; it is by means of critique that Heidegger forged his own, novel conception of the “being of beings” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 8).

The purpose of the present study is to draw out the critical dimension of Heidegger’s approach in *Being and Time*’s first Division. Rather than offering a reconstruction of the entire work, the study limits itself to an exposition of precisely those points at which Heidegger is engaged—explicitly or otherwise—with the two figures who emerge as his privileged objects of critique, namely Descartes and Aristotle. This study’s first objective—and the substance of its first section—is to familiarize the reader with Aristotle’s and Descartes’s views insofar as they form the background upon which Heidegger critically constructs *Being and Time*’s first Division. The study’s second objective—and the matter of its second section—is to demonstrate the substance of Heidegger’s critique and the positive aspects of his critical ontology. Heidegger treats Aristotelian and Cartesian ontology as paradigms which more or less circumscribe all subsequent ontological reflection; yet according to Heidegger, both Aristotle and Descartes derived their metaphysics from a limited or shallow notion of being, mistakenly elevating one

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<sup>1</sup> In musicology, counterpoint describes a relationship between two or more musical lines which are independent in rhythm and melodic contour, yet which remain harmonically interdependent. The ambivalent independence of a contrapuntal line or voice captures nicely the relation between Heidegger’s system and those he critiques: precisely insofar as his positive vision emerges through a gesture of negation and an emphasis on difference, Heidegger’s work cannot be said to be fully independent of prior metaphysics. As we shall see, there is a strong sense in which Heideggerian deconstruction *builds*, while incorporating and preserving that which is negated.

particular sort of being to the level of a paradigm or archetype to which all beings should correspond.

### **Prior Meanings of Being**

Due to his sustained engagement with the history of Western metaphysics, an outline of the prior meanings of being is requisite to an understanding of Heidegger's critical project and a sophisticated appreciation of his ontology. Indeed, the novelty and stakes of his metaphysics will be lost on a reader unfamiliar with the tradition it calls to task. Heidegger works from the supposition that Aristotelian and Cartesian thought circumscribe modern ontological reflection and discourse—that is, it is nearly impossible to pose ontological questions without incorporating Aristotelian or Cartesian assumptions. In order to pose the “question of being” anew, Heidegger insists that we must think *beyond*—which is not to say wholly *reject*—Aristotle and Descartes (Heidegger, 2010, p. 22). To do so, however, we must first familiarize ourselves with their thought and their discourse. This section hence reconstructs Aristotelian and Cartesian metaphysics, which appear as privileged objects of Heidegger's critique in *Being and Time*'s first Division.

At the most general level, one can discern two accounts of being in the Aristotelian corpus—a substantialist account and a hylomorphic account. The former is developed in Aristotle's *Categories*; the latter is in the *Physics*. In the *Categories*—traditionally considered the first work of the *Organon*<sup>2</sup>—Aristotle endeavored to discern the basic “categories” required to think or talk about anything. He proposed ten such categories, which correspond more or less

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<sup>2</sup> That is, Aristotle's collected works on logic, comprising six volumes. According to convention, the order of the works, with the corresponding Bekker numbering, is as follows: *Categories* (1a), *On Interpretation* (16a), *Prior Analytics* (24a), *Posterior Analytics* (71a), *Topics* (100a), *On Sophistical Refutations* (164a).

precisely to various parts of speech. The first category is *substance* (οὐσία), which Aristotle distinguishes in its “primary” and “secondary” modes (Aristotle, 1991a, p. 4 [2a13-2a18]). Primary substances are what we tend to think of as *entities*, or things—Aristotle gives the example of an individual man or an individual horse—whereas secondary substances are *types* of entities—Aristotle called them “species”—as distinct from entities themselves. “The species in which the things *primarily* called substances are,” Aristotle writes, “are called secondary substances, as also are the genera of these species. [...] [T]he individual man belongs in a species, man, and animal is a genus of the species; so these—both man and animal—are called secondary substances” (Aristotle, 1991a, p. 4 [2a13-2a18], italics added). Both primary and secondary substances possess being, according to Aristotle—both are real—and in either case meaningful propositions can be formulated in which substance—whether primary or secondary—occupies the subject position (Aristotle, 1991a, p. 6 [3b10-3b23]).

Aristotle suggested that *quality* or *attribute* (ποιότης) was another fundamental category (Aristotle, 1991a, p. 15 [8b25-8b26]). Substances necessarily have attributes, and a thing without attributes is hardly conceivable. For Aristotle, attributes possess being, as do substances—they too are real—but the being of attributes is, in a certain sense, derivative of the being of substance. Hardness is a real attribute of a desk, for instance, yet hardness in itself, bereft of a substance in which it inheres, cannot be said to exist or take a share in being. A desk bereft of hardness would surely be a lousy desk—perhaps it wouldn't be a desk at all—yet as *substance*, it would continue to *be*, and attributes other than hardness would necessarily inhere in it. Lending ontological priority to substance, Aristotle implied a pluralistic ontology which would be thematized in Heidegger; yet, as we shall see, the ontological priority accorded to substance

came to exert a profound influence on the history of Western metaphysics—and this influence, Heidegger believed, eclipsed and distorted our understanding of being.

Substantialism, the metaphysics of the *Categories*, was not Aristotle's only contribution to the history of Western ontology. The account of being most often associated with his name in fact diverges from the one offered in this early volume. Aristotle expounded his later, "hylomorphic" account of being in order to overcome an apparently intractable problem arising within the simple, predicative relationship between substances and attributes which characterizes substantialist metaphysics. Aristotle observed that existing things change, which is explicable in terms of their attributes in a substantialist framework: change occurs when a substance exchanges one attribute or set of attributes for another (Aristotle, 1991a, pp. 15, 16 [8b27-9a9, 9a29-9b9]). But things are also generated and destroyed, and as Aristotle saw clearly in his *Physics*, genesis and destruction pose an aporia for substantialist ontology, in so far as being and non-being can only be conceived as attributes within its terms (Aristotle, 1991b, pp. 80-81, 120 [225a1-225a19; 225a35-225a36; 245b9-246a9]). To say that *non-being inheres as an attribute in a thing* is a paradox, and this unavoidable paradox led Aristotle to revise his account of being.

Hylomorphic ontology does not abandon the notion of substance, it qualifies it. Here, substance is distinguished as *matter* (ὕλη) composed or arranged under a certain *form* (μορφή) (Aristotle, 1991b, p. 23 [194b9]). Hylomorphic ontology transcends the aporia faced by substantialist ontology by proposing that the material substrate which undergoes changes such as genesis and destruction is not *substance* but *matter*, and the thing lost or gained is not *attribute* but *form* (Aristotle, 1991b, p. 13 [190a9-190a31]). When substance—a complex, articulated thing composed of form and matter—is destroyed, it undergoes a process of decomposition whereby the matter remains but the form is effaced. Because matter is not itself substance, this

account reconciles substantialist ontology with our lived experience, an experience in which entities indeed go out of and come into existence.

Up to this point, one could have said that the *preeminent meaning of being in Aristotle is substance*. Yet with the advent of the hylomorphic account, substances come into being by virtue of the formal composition of matter, and the concept of *form* thus achieves a sort of priority in Aristotle's later metaphysics. What it is for a thing to *be* a substance is to be a substance endowed with a form, and when a substance loses its form it loses its existence *qua* substance. If my desk is destroyed in a fire, its being is lost due to the absolute elimination of its formal properties—it is reduced to ashes. Yet precisely these ashes demonstrate that matter persists, under a different form, even when substance is destroyed. In Book II of the *Physics*, Aristotle links the form of a thing to its function; many things, he observes, assume the forms they do to perform a given task. (Aristotle, 1991b, p. 23 [194b27-194b29]). Consider a desk, or a bodily organ: each of these has a physical composition tightly linked to what it *does*. Both form and function are in this way linked by Aristotle to a thing's *purpose* (τέλος), i.e., what a thing is *for* or that *for the sake of which* it has the form that it does. If a desk was for digging, rather than sitting behind, it would surely have a different form; and if a heart was for gastrointestinal digestion rather than pulmonary circulation, it too would have a different physical composition.

While Aristotle's reasoning may seem exact—and it surely holds in certain cases—the limitations of hylomorphism as a metaphysical position are significant. Due to the imbrication of the concepts outlined above—form, function, and purpose (τέλος)—one must conclude that hylomorphism is, at bottom, a metaphysics of the functional object. Put differently, Aristotle failed to consider that things worthy of metaphysical description may exist that for all that lack functions or purposes. Because on his view all material beings are substances in which form

(μορφή) and purpose (τέλος) are tightly linked with being itself, Aristotle was forced to consider human beings, like all things, as entities endowed with a final purpose—which he defined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as εὐδαιμονία, or human flourishing according to the good (Aristotle, 2000, p. 5 [1095a]). Taking a certain sort of thing—functional things—as a paradigm of being itself, Aristotle was incapable of properly analyzing the ontological structure of things without τέλη, or purposes.

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Alongside Aristotle, René Descartes stands as a key object of Heidegger's critique in Division One of *Being and Time*. In the ontology developed across his *Discourse on Method*, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes drew heavily on the views of the early Aristotle, or a substantialism in which entities primarily figure as bearers of attributes. Significantly, Descartes would adapt Aristotle's typology of attributes—developed in the *Categories*—to make a novel distinction between “principle” and “dependent” attributes of things; the first was a constitutive feature of a thing, where the second was merely accidental. The notion of a “principle attribute” led Descartes to posit a categorical distinction between two classes things—*res cogitans* and *res extensa*, or mental and extended substances. The principle attribute of the first is thought; of the second, corporality (Descartes 2003, p. 98). In this way, the schema of Aristotelian substantialism, in which the world is composed of many classes of being, would be dramatically reduced by Descartes to two: the ideal and the material, which are, with regard to one another, wholly discrete. “Examining what we are,” Descartes wrote, “we clearly perceive that neither extension, nor figure, nor existence in any place [...] nor anything similar that can be attributed to body, pertains to our nature, and nothing save thought alone” (Descartes, 2003, p. 59, see also p. 98). Cartesian dualism thus hypostatized a rigid divide between subjects

and objects: the objective world of *res extensa* became ontologically distinct from the 'I' of mental substance, while all thought, sensation, and experience was conceived in terms of attributes inhering in the cogitating 'I.'

Following the division between principal and dependent attributes, Descartes would introduce a further distinction, marking off those attributes which could be described by euclidian geometry—conceived in terms of abstract extension—from those which are grounded in sense perception. “Extension in length, breadth, and depth, constitutes the nature of corporeal substance,” Descartes wrote, here affirming that the world of bodily objects is, *ipso facto*, an abstract domain of calculable space. As a rationalist, Descartes held up geometrical knowledge as an epistemological ideal:

[Having examined] all the clear and distinct notions of material things that are to be found in our understanding, and [...], finding no others except those of figures, magnitudes, and motions, and of the rules according to which these three things can be diversified by each other, *which rules are the principles of geometry and mechanics*, I judged that all the knowledge man can have of nature must of necessity be drawn from this source; because *all the other notions we have of sensible things, as confused and obscure, can be of no avail in affording us the knowledge of anything out[side] of ourselves*, but must serve rather to impede it (Descartes, 2003, p. 177, italics added).

Descartes categorically transposed attributes grounded in sense perception—such as taste and smell, as well as value and meaning—into the domain of the subject. According to this view, such qualities do not describe the world as *res extensa*, but are mere attributes inhering in mental substance, or abstract subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

The substantialist metaphysics of Descartes roots itself in a rejection of Aristotelian hylomorphism—one following from the preeminent position held by the concept of function in

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<sup>3</sup> Significantly, precedent for such a distinction can be found in Aristotle himself, who, in the *Categories*, distinguished among qualities to isolate those “affective” qualities—such as color—which follow not from an “affectation” in or of the substance in question, but instead affect our sensory perception of that substance. See Aristotle, 1991a, p. 16 [9b10-9b19].

Aristotle's mature thought. Emerging at the threshold of modernity from a medieval Scholastic tradition where function was tightly linked to the idea of ascription, Descartes tended to view things in themselves as functionless. Where function was naturalized in Aristotle, it was typical of the New Science championed by Descartes to view function as conceivable only in terms of subjective or divine attribution: without an ascribing subject, all things were without purpose and, therefore, intrinsically functionless (Smith, 2018). To the extent that the function of a thing could be said to take a share in being, this was purely a mental phenomenon—like taste, smell, or meaning—imprisoned in the formless void of the cogitating 'I.'

Descartes' claim that geometrical description amounts to the most indubitable—and hence fundamental—way of apprehending or describing the world was profoundly disconcerting to Heidegger. Does this not represent a cold, mathematizing interpretation of being? Here, no thing can be said to bear objective significance, since meaning is categorically excluded from the mathematical or natural scientific level of description (Heidegger, 2010, pp. 88-89). On the other hand, Aristotle's mature ontology was grasped by Heidegger as a metaphysics in which the functional object was falsely privileged as a paradigm for all things—and ultimately for being itself. In Heidegger's estimation, then, the horizon of Western metaphysics presents itself in a janus-faced aspect: within this tradition, the meaning of being has been systematically distorted and violently reduced—to the teleological being of the functional object or the abstract and vacuous being of substance.

### **Toward a Fundamental Ontology**

It is against the backdrop of these two tendencies—Aristotelian hylomorphism on the one hand and Cartesian substantialism on the other—that Heidegger develops his “fundamental

ontology” in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 2010, p. 13). According to Heidegger, Aristotle had mistakenly linked function, and hence purpose, to being as such; yet in Heidegger's view neither function nor τέλος can be necessary conditions of being, since human beings—the very beings for whom being is a consideration—lack functions or purposes.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the thrust of Cartesian ontology divests corporeal existence of significance, making meaning utterly subjective and the world a kind of cold, calculable waste. This perspective, Heidegger suggests, fails to accord with the constitutive and intersubjective character of meaning as encountered in the world, and diverges in the most radical ways from the horizon of actual experience. Both Aristotelian and Cartesian ontology eclipse our view of being.

Division One of *Being and Time* elaborates a “fundamental ontology” which charts a decidedly different trajectory than that traced by prior metaphysics. Employing a novel method of phenomenological description, Heidegger arrives at an entirely new breed of metaphysics—one he believes to be critically positioned *vis-à-vis* the ontological systems handed down by the Western philosophical tradition. As a phenomenologist, Heidegger distances himself from prior metaphysics in his insistence on the necessity of describing everyday experience, or “average *everydayness*” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 16). As Thomas Kalary observes, Heidegger's phenomenological approach grounds “philosophy as a pre-theoretical primordial science” which can be “enacted only through an explication” of the basic structures of “factic life” (*faktische*

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<sup>4</sup> Heidegger's polemical claim that human beings are essentially purposeless should not be conflated with a nihilistic one, whereby individual human life cannot be lived with intention and meaning. On the contrary, Division Two of *Being and Time* explicates Heidegger's normative guidelines for “authentic” existence within the strictures of factual human life. Heidegger's point here, in Division One, is that the human being—or, more specifically, *Dasein*—lacks any generic purpose simply on the basis of its inclusion in the category of being to which it belongs. Where a potter's wheel has a specified purpose simply by virtue of its *being* a potter's wheel—and arguably, the same could be said to hold for an uninvented thing, like a tree's leaves or a red blood cell—a human being, *qua* human being, is neither functional nor purposive.

*Leben*) (Kalary, 2012, p. 181). Whereas Descartes's meditative method rested upon his ability to divorce himself from the world of the everyday, Heidegger emphasizes the centrality of that world to any account of being as such. This is not to say that everything to be known about being is immediately grasped in a pre-reflexive manner, for as Heidegger notes, fundamental ontology as revealed by phenomenological inquiry is "far removed from what is accessible to the pre-ontological understanding of being" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 177). Still, it is Heidegger's view that an accurate *description* of the constitutive *structures* of everyday experience will furnish an *ontology* of the being whose everyday experience is so described. The overarching thrust of *Being and Time* is to arrive at this descriptive account.

The everyday experience Heidegger undertakes to define in *Being and Time* unfolds from the perspective of a being Heidegger calls *Dasein*. A common German noun often translated as "existence," the term composes the noun *Sein*, "being," and the prefix *da-*, signifying "there." The type of being uncovered by Heideggerian fundamental ontology is thus not abstract but concrete, always situated in a particular *locus*, or "world."<sup>5</sup> Due to the technical specificity with which Heidegger invests the term *Dasein*, recent translators of his work tend to leave it untranslated; and, because the whole of Division One of *Being and Time* can be seen as offering a sustained, probing, and idiosyncratic definition of the term, one can hardly adduce a comprehensive, sloganistic definition. Provisionally, though, one can say with confidence that *Dasein* refers to *the sort or the way of being that human beings fundamentally partake in or have*, though it is by no means explicit that *Dasein* is restricted to human beings.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It is significant that, terminologically, this *locus* is undivided from the very being (*Sein*) fundamental ontology describes. As we shall see, it is absolutely central to Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* that this genre of being is wholly inseparable from the world in which it is given. This is in sharp contrast to the Cartesian view, cited above, that mental substances are essentially non-spatial.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger offers somewhat equivocal remarks regarding the extent to which creatures other than humans could be ontologically embraced by *Dasein*. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," an essay

Undertaking a fundamental ontology from the standpoint of *Dasein*, Heidegger commits himself to an ontological pluralism, distinguishing *Dasein* from “other beings” which have features other than those constitutive of *Dasein* (Heidegger, 2010, p. 11). This heterogeneity of being raises two immediate concerns. First, if Heidegger wants to pose the “question of being” *sans phrase*, as he claims, why does he take a particular sort of being, *Dasein*, as his starting point? To justify this choice, Heidegger makes two distinct claims. First, he observes that *Dasein* is that which is “ontically ‘nearest’” to us (Heidegger, 2010, p. 16). As the sort of being that we ourselves are or have, *Dasein* is the genre of being with which we are most intimately familiar, and hence the one we have the best shot at describing accurately. Ultimately, this claim rests on Heidegger’s conviction that fundamental ontology will be revealed through phenomenological description, a procedure of self-disclosure which cannot be performed for a being other than the one we ourselves are. Secondly, Heidegger claims that *Dasein* is a being “essentially concerned about its being,” for whom a “pre-ontological understanding of being” is an “essential tendency” (Heidegger, 2010, pp. 11 and 13). As beings fundamentally predisposed to ontological reflection, and always already endowed with a working definition of being, *Dasein* is, as it were, given to us as a foundation for ontological inquiry.<sup>7</sup>

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published in 1950 but drafted between 1937 and 1939, a decade after the initial publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes both plants and animals as existing with “no world.” (“World,” as we shall see, is perhaps the most fundamental structure of *Dasein* according to the analysis of *Being and Time*.) By contrast, in a series of lectures delivered in 1929, Heidegger describes non-human animals as “poor in world” or existing within a fundamental “poverty of world” (*Weltarmut*). See Heidegger, 1971, p. 43; Heidegger, 1995, p. 263. See also Agamben, 2004, pp. 49-73.

<sup>7</sup> While Heidegger is right that these constitute excellent reasons to undertake a philosophical investigation of *Dasein*, a profound unclarity persists concerning the way a fundamental ontology of this particular sort of being is to furnish an answer to the “question of being” as such. In works subsequent to *Being and Time*, such as the lecture series *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger will argue that it is only to *Dasein* that being is revealed or “disclosed” as such. Whereas non-human animals encounter the objects in their environments as pure particulars, Heidegger argues that only human beings discover in such particulars the instantiation of being (*Sein*) itself, or encounter these particulars as *beings*. (This claim dovetails with Heidegger’s assertion, in the same lectures, that non-human animals are fundamentally “poor in world”; see footnote 7, above). Yet, even if *Dasein* is the being to whom

If other ways or sorts of being are fundamentally heterogenous with respect to *Dasein*, as Heidegger claims, one could raise a second objection: Does Heidegger not lapse into the same genre of dualism for which he rebukes Descartes? Does he simply posit a new sort of subject indelibly cleaved off from its object? Answering this question takes us to the heart of the Heideggerian analysis of *Dasein*, and demonstrates the depth of Heidegger's critical divergence from Descartes. Heideggerian pluralism parts ways with the Cartesian division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, for where Descartes finds mental substances radically distinct from *res extensa*—and hence, inevitably skeptical as regards the latter—Heidegger presents *Dasein* as always already “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 53). The world in which *Dasein* finds itself is not ontologically distinct from, but is rather a constitutive ontological structure of *Dasein*. Always already known to *Dasein*, or familiar, the world forms an essential element in the ontological explication of *Dasein* as a unique sort or way of being. *Dasein*, for this reason, is never given apart from the world, and cannot be known except in and through its imbrication with all things worldly (Heidegger, 2010, pp. 59-62). If *Dasein* is, in the most fundamental sense, constituted in and through the world in which it is given, this represents a view of being at antipodes with the model of Cartesian dualism.

Embedded in its world, *Dasein* is a being essentially “concerned” with things—objects and practical engagements (Heidegger, 2010, p. 96). Far from being an immaterial spectator of its material environment, *Dasein* is fundamentally involved in and engaged with the things around it. The world is made up of objects *Dasein* touches, employs, and knows, and these objects are certainly not best described geometrically, as mere “objectively-present” entities

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being itself is fundamentally revealed, as Heidegger suggests, this hardly furnishes us with a bridge between the fundamental ontology of *Dasein* and a fundamental ontology without qualification. See Heidegger, 1995, p. 263.

bereft of meaning (*Vorhandene*) (Heidegger, 2010, p. 96). On the contrary, the world encountered by *Dasein* is a world invested with significance, a world comprised of vast networks of meaningful things “ready-to-hand” (*Zuhandene*) (Heidegger, 2010, p. 67). Emphasizing the everyday and the tactile, Heidegger notes that “the closest kind of dealing is not mere perceptual cognition,” as Descartes would have it, but is rather “a handling, using, and taking care” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 67). In other words, *Dasein*'s most basic or fundamental reality is surely not skeptical, or even speculative, but is rather rooted in pre-philosophical, pragmatic encounters with things in the world. Cartesian skepticism concerning the “demonstrability of the external world” is unintelligible from the standpoint of an investigation which presupposes being-in-the-world and average everydayness as its foundation (Heidegger, 2010, pp. 77-83, cf. 195).

By emphasizing the practical, the everyday, and the worldly, Heidegger shows that the Cartesian interpretation of the world as *res extensa* is not *false*, but is wholly *derivative* of a more fundamental or “primordial” experience of the world—which is always pragmatically encountered and invested with meaning. *Dasein* as being-in-the-world is, at the most fundamental level, being in a meaningful environment made up of useful objects. Only on the basis of such a world—which is always already “disclosed” or accessible in itself to *Dasein* in the latter's pragmatic and meaningful dealings—can a scientific view of things as mere objective presence (*Vorhandenheit*) arise (Heidegger, 2010, p. 195). In this way, Heidegger does not so much reject Cartesian ontology as bracket and reverse it. Where Descartes takes the mathematically describable character of *res extensa* to be the an objective bedrock against which subjective experience and meaning-generation emerge, Heidegger sees this scientific view as a narrow, parochial description of things which can only be produced on the basis of a more primordial experience of being-in-the-world. “Da-sein,” Heidegger writes, “is primordially

familiar with that within which it understands itself [...]. This familiarity with the world does not necessarily require a theoretical transparency of the relations constituting the world as world. But it is probable that the possibility of an explicit ontological [...] interpretation of these relations is grounded in the familiarity of the world constitutive for *Da-sein*" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 81). The primordial condition of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world is the real foundation upon which theoretical or philosophical insights may be built.

Following Aristotle, Heidegger's analysis of "world" (*Welt*) and the "handiness" (*Zuhandenheit*) of things underscores the importance of functional and purposive objects to ontological inquiry. Yet *Dasein* is not itself reducible to description in terms of function or *τέλος*, since Heidegger, like Descartes, sees the functions of things as *dependent* upon *Dasein*. However, for Heidegger, contra Descartes, ascriptions of function and meaning are not individual subjective acts. Rather, they are collectively generated and sustained in socio-cultural, historical, and pragmatic practices to which *Dasein*, as a "factual" being, is always already given over: the world in which *Dasein* finds itself is one where meanings and purposes for things have always already been established (Heidegger, 2010, p. 61). The desk at which I am writing isn't for sitting at rather than for digging a trench simply because I decide this. Rather, I encounter the desk as a place for sitting; this is, after all, what the desk *is*. As indubitable features of socio-cultural reality, meanings and purposes for things are *objective* features of the world, on Heidegger's view. That the *avant garde* artist may display a urinal as a work of art, excerpting it from its functional mode of being and assigning it a new purpose and meaning from whole cloth is no exception. On the contrary, the jarring and confounding presence of this object in a gallery, and the scandal its presence provokes, serve to underscore Heidegger's point: the meanings of objects are so deeply socially codified—are indeed objective features of the social world—that

any attempt to change these meanings may appear as a sort of violence directed at the social order.<sup>8</sup>

While Heidegger's stance *vis-à-vis* Cartesian thought is often polemical, his critical engagement with—and appropriation of—Aristotle is significantly more nuanced. Of Heidegger's indebtedness to Aristotle, Martin Wheeler writes, "Aristotle's demand in the *Metaphysics* to know what it is that unites all possible modes of Being [...] is, in many ways, the question that ignites and drives Heidegger's philosophy," while Thomas Sheehan observes that "Aristotle appears directly or indirectly on virtually every page" of *Being and Time* (Wheeler, 2011; Sheehan, 1975, p. 87). Heidegger engaged extensively with Aristotle, lecturing on *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* in 1921-22, on the *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* in 1924, and on *Aristotle's Metaphysics, Book Θ1-3* in 1931; across these lectures, Heidegger clarified his own philosophical vision via an extended dialogue with Aristotelian thought.

Notwithstanding the complexity of this intellectual engagement, many of the criticisms Heidegger explicitly addresses to Cartesian substantialism apply, tacitly, to Aristotle's hylomorphic metaphysics. As we have seen, Heidegger, like Aristotle, brings purposive and functional objects to the foreground of his analysis, yet he distances himself from Aristotle by rejecting the view that the being of the functional object can act as an archetype for being as such. At a more profound level, Aristotle's entire approach to metaphysics diverges sharply from Heidegger's, precisely due to the latter's commitment to fundamental ontology as phenomenological explication of *Dasein*'s everyday being-in-the-world. By contrast, Aristotelian hylomorphic ontology is, precisely, a metaphysical theory: it deduces objects which are never

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<sup>8</sup> This example gestures towards the culturally conservative politics tacitly lurking beneath Heidegger's account of being and world. See Rosner, 2009.

perceived or experienced in isolation—matter and form—from our real experiences of things, specifically things which are generated and destroyed. Heideggerian fundamental ontology, on the other hand, offers a clarification or elucidation of the basic *pre-theoretical* structures of being as *Dasein*. In the same manner than Cartesian skepticism and a calculating comportment towards existence can only arise on the basis of a more fundamental experience of “being-in-the-world,” Aristotelianhylomorphism presupposes a more basic experience as its condition of possibility, but this experience remains unthought within its parameters.

This experience and its basic structures emerged as Heidegger's central objects of inquiry in *Being and Time*. Situated at a deeper level than that charted by either Aristotle or Descartes—a level prior metaphysics overlooked due to its quotidian character—Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein* is, strictly speaking, a *fundamental* ontology.

## Conclusion

On Heidegger's view, both Aristotle and Descartes used the wrong sort of model as the basis for their ontology. For Descartes, mental substances exist completely divorced from a world made up of objectively present things (*Vorhandene*), despite all phenomenological evidence to the contrary. And for Aristotle, human beings are not essentially different from other entities, and can thus be defined in terms of τέλος, or purpose. For both figures, metaphysics should properly go beyond quotidian experience—furnishing an ontological theory of the latter—yet in this gesture, metaphysics fails to interrogate its own conditions of possibility. Describing *Dasein* by means of a phenomenology of the everyday, Heidegger hoped to avoid this error handed down by the history of Western metaphysics: such was the project of fundamental ontology, which

Heidegger also regarded as a “destruction” (*Destruktion*) of the Western metaphysical tradition (Heidegger, 2010, p. 37).

*Being and Time*'s first Division unearths a pluralistic ontology in which *Dasein* shows up as one entity among many. No single ontological description can encompass all things, in Heidegger's view, and the history of Western ontology has done violence to this simple fact. Yet Heidegger does not simply reject prior ontological systems. His complex engagement with the Western philosophical canon discloses how and why prior ontologists failed, and suggests that a comprehensive ontology would make ample use of their insights. Aristotle's hylomorphic account of functional objects informs Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*'s practical dealings with objects; and Heidegger accepts—perhaps begrudgingly—that a scientific outlook indebted to Descartes cannot be written off as simply wrong. Both of these interpretations of being find a place in Heidegger's structural analysis of *Dasein*; but they are both, at bottom, derivative of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world.

By formulating a fundamental ontology centering a particular being—*Dasein*—it is ultimately unclear if Heidegger succeeds in transcending the deadlocks of prior metaphysics: shadows of androcentrism and post-Kantian idealism linger at the margins of Heidegger's thought and his discourse. Even if *Dasein* is the being to whom being as such is revealed, as Heidegger claims, he fails to specify how one can move from the ontological analysis of *Dasein* to an investigation of being as such. If such a movement is somehow foreclosed to *Dasein*, one could rightly ask, why? And if *Dasein* is the being who encounters being in beings, as Heidegger insists, what form and content would an analytic of being as such assume? If these questions remain unanswered in his discourse, then perhaps Heidegger is finally right to suggest that fundamental ontology illuminates the *question*—but not the *answer*—of the meaning of being

(Heidegger, 2010, p. 37). Heidegger's critical comportment toward canonical thought and the project of prior ontology urges us to pose, again, that question.

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