



Precognition Transcript
Episode 80: Heidegger's *Letter on
Humanism*

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Notes on Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" - Seth Paskin, Austin Texas

Letter on Humanism was written in response to a letter sent by a French student to Heidegger asking 'how can we recover a sense of the word "humanism"?' Heidegger uses this question as a pretext for discussing how his philosophy of Being relates to humanism, Christianity, Marxism and Existentialism. He wrote it shortly after being banned from teaching by the post-war tribunal for his involvement with National Socialism during the war.

The text is less an argument than an example of the 'poetic' way of thinking characteristic of Heidegger's later works. (The works after the "turn" or Kehre) Heidegger in the text is going to trace origins of concepts and words and make associations to suggest what he sees as more original, richer or deeper understanding of the essence of human being and Being than he thinks are available under the predominant Western metaphysical paradigm.

That paradigm has three primary characteristics with which Heidegger will take issue:

- It interprets Being through beings rather than interrogating Being itself
- As a consequence, human being is interpreted against and among beings instead of recognizing its unique relationship to Being
- It is committed to a substance ontology that blinds us to other ways of seeing Being than Subject – Object

All of these things stand in the way of achieving a different way of seeing Being. It's not that they are wrong and there is a right way but they do need to be overcome to get at something more 'originary'. "Overcome" here is meant in a technical sense and Heidegger first alludes to it in Being and Time when he talks about the Destruktion of metaphysics. In keeping with Being and Time, Heidegger will assert that the way to get to Being is through human being.

In this lecture Heidegger will talk about thinking and claim it provides a unique and privileged relationship between human being and Being. He is using "thinking" in a technical sense here – it's what he's trying to do in this text as opposed to reasoning, analysis or understanding in the traditional (metaphysically overdetermined) sense.

So first Heidegger puts forth that thinking establishes a relationship between human being and Being. It is in thinking that human being can achieve the fullness of its essence. Thinking and language have a relationship as well. Heidegger says "...in thinking being comes to language. Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. 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 this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saving."

This is pretty typical of the language in this essay and much of later Heidegger. It can be a bit abstruse and occasionally annoying but once you know his code you can get a grasp of what he's trying to say even if you don't "get" it. He thinks there is a different way for human beings to 'be' outside of the metaphysical paradigm and his metaphors are dwelling, nearness, home, clearing – spatial vs. seeing, grasping, penetrating, getting – the ownership language of subject/object metaphysics.

Heidegger refers to the ancient Greek distinction between praxis and poesis. He claims already in Plato and Aristotle that thinking is seen as techne in service of doing and making. It has logic. Thinking taken in itself is not 'practical' and this determining of thinking as techne is the root of the cover up that he is trying to expose.

Thinking in the sense that Heidegger wants to use it is the purview of Philosophy. Thinking in the technical sense is the purview of Science. Philosophy is guilty of perpetuating the error by trying to treat thinking practically but somehow elevate itself above science. In doing so it forgets Being in favor of beings (metaphysics).

Trying to recover thinking (and language) from logic/techne does not mean we are trying to be irrational. Thinking ceases to be thinking when it becomes techne. Language in this capacity serves to objectify everything. Objectification is domination. The misuse of language is violence against others.

Heidegger reiterates the question and implies that the request to recover humanism is a request to recover this technical use of language – logic and reason – after a period of insanity (WWII). He instead posits that we might not want to recover it and instead should use this as an opportunity to try and recast "humanism" as caring that human beings be human and not inhumane.

Heidegger then traces what he considers to be different ways in which human being has been conceived and how humanism is tied to one specific modality:

- Marx: human is social, natural needs are secured
- Christian: human in contrast to God, redemption in next life
- Roman: humanitas first introduced. Contrast to barbarous.

All of these (and you can throw in Aristotle's political animal) are grounded in a metaphysics or ground one. If you determine the essence of human being as X, you are presupposing an

interpretation of beings (because you are defining human being against other beings). Heidegger wants to get outside of this and think/say human being in relation to Being.

Thinking Being isn't a transcendental exercise – you can't escape metaphysics. You have to question it from within a metaphysical framework. In this case, "humanism" sees human being as *animale rationale*. Man is the rational animal. We, as one type of living creature, differ from other living creatures in that we employ reason. We are essentially *homo animalis*, distinguished only by an attribute or characteristic.

Heidegger goes through some machinations around this and he wants to claim that human being is *sui generis* by virtue of thought and language. There is a ton of word play and poetic language that you should read and I won't regurgitate here. Let me just give you a sense of what he does.

I mentioned before that for Heidegger metaphysics is committed to substance ontology. "Substance" means the presence of what is present = the physical/temporal immediacy of what is actual (vs. potential) in the world. Think of the 'substantiality' of x. "Substance" means what is present = the actual thing itself. This is the essential thing, not its accidental qualities. In the tradition, 'substance' denotes that which distinguishes a thing from other things expressed in terms of qualities or attributes, or rather that in which qualities or attributes inhere (occur, instantiate, etc.) This requires presence. So substance is both the presence of a thing understood as what is actual and persists, as well as the thing itself understood as that which distinguishes an entity from other entities. This is the metaphysical view. Remember also that this view presupposes subjectivity of some sort. Presence and persistence of things is present and persistence to a Subject. That could be God as a subject as well.

Heidegger here is saying something like: the way a human being becomes present (in his proper essence - assume this qualifier from now on) is to be present to being. Ask yourself this: to what does the subject become present as an object or thing? Metaphysically, other subjects. Essentially, human beings become present to Being. (non-metaphysically) So what is this 'presence' of human beings? It's not objectivity, where the human being is a persistent and individuated substance. Rather, the essential presence of human being is what he calls ecstatic inherence in the truth of being. Human being persists, has presence, by 'inhering' in (the truth) being. He calls this *Ek-sistence* (vs. existential).

Stretching the analogy from above, being is more like substance, human being is like qualities or attributes. What persists is being - any existence human being has depends on the truth of being. Yet by ecstatic inherence in the truth of being human being fulfills his essential nature.

I'm sure this is confusing and there is much in the text I passed over but this is how he answers the question of what is the essence of human being and how he doesn't answer the question of how to recover "humanism". There is quite a bit more in the Letter elaborating this point and going off on some tangents but this is the meat of the matter on my reading.

Hope this will be of some use to you and set the stage for our discussion. Please make sure to visit our blog at partiallyexaminedlife.com and follow us on Twitter (PartiallyExLife) and Facebook. If you'd like to be a part of conversation, join our Citizen's membership group for \$5 a month and be connected to a like-minded set of smart and interesting folks. Thanks!