

Martin Heidegger.  
Perspectives on the Interpretation of his Thinking



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For my parents

## Preface

This book collects the author's academic essays on Heidegger in the past few years. Most of these essays were published in the *Chinese Social Science Journal* and constitute an interpretation of Heidegger's philosophical thought and related texts from different perspectives. The earliest of these essays was published in 2016, while the latest was published in 2020. It can be said that these texts also record my journey in studying and following Heidegger.

This book is positioned to professional scholars specializing in Heidegger, but it is not limited to that. It has at least two other readerships. One is the general philosophical researcher, who can find in it Heidegger's insights on topics of interest to them, such as philosophy of life, practical philosophy, nihilism, etc. In addition, the book is also intended for a general audience, which can also gain some insights into the wisdom of life from the book. For a deeper understanding of the academic background, the reader can turn to my last book *Ontologie der Praxis bei Martin Heidegger*.

My reconstructions and readings of Heidegger have been based on the scholarly conviction that it is important to bring Heidegger to life and to reveal what Heidegger

means for the history of thought and even for our modern life. The danger of doing so is that it may deviate from Heidegger's original philosophical creation, especially his obscure and self-created terms. But I see this danger as an opportunity for us interpreters. To understand Heidegger, we must reveal the questions to which Heidegger's philosophical creations respond, questions that are universal, unchanging and penetrating.

I am grateful to my current workplace, Yuelu Academy, Hunan University, which has provided me with a free and favorable research environment, as well as ample research funding, allowing me to launch my creative work. I am also grateful to Professor Mo Bin, the former editor of the *China Social Science Journal*, who accepted my first article and initiated my years-long plowing in that newspaper. Thanks to my friends who studied and discussed Heidegger with me, without whom the completion of this book would not have been possible. Finally, I am grateful to the city of Freiburg, where most of the essays in this book were written and where I have fond academic and life memories. I dedicate this book to my parents, who, as Chinese parents, have always been quietly giving their time.

February 6, 2021



Changsha

## **Does Heidegger Have a Practical Philosophy?**

In the late 1960s, there was a revival of virtue ethics in Anglo-Saxon academy, a revival of Aristotle. At the same time, there was also a movement to “reconstruct practical philosophy” by deconstructing Aristotle in the German academy, represented by H.-G. Gadamer, H. Arendt, and J. Ritter, all of whom were students of Heidegger and were partly involved in Heidegger’s early courses in Freiburg and Marburg. In this way, we cannot fail to mention the relationship between Heidegger and practical philosophy.

Heidegger, however, is perceived by the public as an anti-practical philosopher. In his “Humanist Letter” of 1949, Heidegger mentions an allusion. After the publication of *Being and Time*, a young man wrote a letter to Heidegger and asked him: When will you write an ethics? Heidegger commented on this: The ethics you want is nothing more than to provide some norms that will give you binding guidance for your life. And you need these norms and guidance only because you are blind and you fail to grasp the changing world. The human demand for ethics is a testament to this dilemma. And the root of this dilemma lies in the forgetfulness of Being. In this way, Heidegger leads the question of ethics

to the question of Being, which is equivalent to his rejection of the an ethics.

Ostensibly, Heidegger refuses to give an ethics, but it is important to know that what he refuses to give is actually an ethics as ethical norm and standard of value, but he does not deny the other possibilities of ethics. Or we can look at it this way, Heidegger only rejects ethics in the Kantian sense as well as utilitarian ethics, both of which have in common the aim of providing ethical norms. Practical philosophy, however, has an Aristotelian model as well. Especially when we learn that Heidegger has always had a strong interest in Aristotle - he wanted to carve out, through phenomenological research, an Aristotle different from the traditional understanding (shaped by Scholastic philosophy) - then we can guess: if Heidegger had a practical philosophy, he was closer to the Aristotelian model than to the Kantian one.

However, can we assume that by digging into the element of practical wisdom (phronesis) in his phenomenological interpretation of Aristotle, especially in the creative reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Heidegger has come up with an ethics? The question is not so simple. As many scholars, including Gadamer, have pointed out, Heidegger's creative transformation of Aristotle is in fact a kind of "ontologization", which is particularly evident in Heidegger's elimination of the

Aristotelian concept of ethos. In other words, rather than valuing Aristotle's ethics, Heidegger values his ontology.

Our question then becomes: what is the relationship between ontology and ethics (practical philosophy) in Heidegger's view? Must ethics be based on ontology, or is ethics ontology? More importantly, what kind of ontology is Heidegger talking about? It is clearly not an ontology in the general sense, an ontology with the most universal as its object. Rather, it is a "fundamental ontology". A fundamental ontology, in Heidegger's case, is an ontology that lays the foundation for all other ontologies. In *Being and Time*, the fundamental ontology is equated with the analysis of the being-there (Dasein). This being is the factual life, the active, present individual. It can be said that being-there is a formal portrayal of the human being. If the object of practical philosophy is human activity, then, we can also say that the analysis of being-there forms the basis of practical philosophy.

To understand Heidegger's practical philosophy, we must understand the relationship between theory and practice. Here, instead of getting entangled between the terms "ethics" and "ontology", we should go back to the beginning of Heidegger's thought. When Heidegger was first lecturer in Freiburg, he proposed a philosophical conception that philosophy would not work as a theory, a universally valid, objectifying, and life-abandoning theory.

At the same time, he proposed a “pre-theoretical” philosophical prescription. In other words, philosophy as a theory is not the only possibility of philosophy, but rather a misinterpretation of the original philosophy. What, then, is the original philosophy? Is it practical? By no means so, if we understand practice in the sense opposite to theory. When we oppose theory and practice, we have, in fact, stepped into a trap. Philosophy, neither theory nor practice, is the original philosophy that is pre-theoretical, prior to the distinction between theory and practice.

Heidegger opposes theory because he opposes a static understanding of life. The characteristic of theory is universalized and solidified, it is bound to establish some supreme value, or supreme being, represented by Plato’s idea. Heidegger’s intention is to break the primacy of theory, that is, to restore a dynamic, living being-there. This being is situated, active, temporal. The “there” is a kind of situational generation, a gathering, a culmination. This is the basic idea of Heidegger’s early thought, which uses “being-there” to reach “Being” by revealing the temporal structure of this being.

To show this, however, it is not enough to understand *Being and Time*. It is important to know that there is another important constituent part of Heidegger’s philosophy, and that is his deconstructive interpretation of the history of philosophy. Here we take Heidegger’s

reading of the first chapter of Book I of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as an example to show: how is Heidegger anti-theoretical? What kind of practical philosophy, in a pre-theoretical sense, is Heidegger's practical philosophy?

This text by Aristotle is about the origin of philosophy, or the origin of theoretical wisdom. There are five stages: sensation (seeing), experience, art, knowledge, and wisdom. Each of the later stages is a "more" than the previous one, and is "more in wisdom". For a layman, he may not be able to define wisdom directly, but he knows who is "wiser": this everyday comparative perspective is tapped by Heidegger. The path to wisdom is an ascending process, the extreme of which is pure wisdom. Heidegger translates wisdom as "true understanding", which means "the most" in terms of wisdom. So, how does this ascent process work? Heidegger points out two features of it. First, the form, the universal element, the "what-being", gradually comes to the fore. Experience is more universal than sensation, and to have mastered the art is to know the cause, and thus to be more universal. Second, the everyday dealings with the world around us are gradually excluded. At the extreme, that is, wisdom, it is completely detached from everyday activities and becomes purely observational.

However, the object of pure observation and examination, that is, pure form, is divorced from its own

foundation and root, that is, life itself. Theory, in this sense, is portrayed as abandonment of the life (Entlebung). And, Aristotle's establishment of pure theory determined all subsequent ontologies in Western history. Since then, Being has become presence (Anwesensein) and presence-at-hand (Vorhandensein).

Let's think about the whole process: philosophy is meant to lead us gradually closer to wisdom and truth, but when it goes to the extreme, it is dominated by theory, so much so that life itself is forgotten. If we follow Plato's allegory of the cave, we can call "theory" the "second cave". The dominance of theory is the fundamental fault of Western philosophy. Heidegger's revelation of this is the first and most crucial step in his deconstruction of Western philosophy. He wanted to overturn the traditional view of philosophy, to reveal an original philosophical possibility. And for this philosophy, he does not give a positive name, but we can point out, based on various hints of Heidegger, that it is a practical philosophy, and an "original" practical philosophy. Here, practical philosophy is not a philosophical discipline as opposed to theoretical philosophy; rather, philosophy itself is practical philosophy, and philosophy is possible only as practical philosophy. At the same time, the traditional opposition between theory and practice, between ontology and ethics, no longer exists, and this is precisely the future trend of

philosophy in Heidegger's eyes.

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## Heidegger on the Field of Ethics

Because of Heidegger's excessive preference for the question of Being, many researchers argue that an ethics cannot be found in him and that he has a fundamentally anti-ethical tendency. However, some other researchers argue that the fundamental ontology proposed by Heidegger in his *Being and Time* can provide the basis for an ethics, and thus the idea of a "fundamental ethics" can be derived. So, are fundamental ontology and ethics compatible? We can find some clues to this question in Heidegger's last lecture at Marburg. In this course, Heidegger proposes the idea of "metontology" and gives an important hint in his lecture notes: "Herein lies the possibility of an ethics". It is thus clear that the field in which Heidegger explores ethics is metontology.

So, what exactly is metontology? How does it relate to fundamental ontology? Metontology is also called "metaphysical ontics". As the name implies, it is at the level of the "ontic", and is derived from the fundamental ontology at the level of "ontological". Metontology includes a wide range of fields, such as nature, space, history, etc., and the core of it is the "metontology of the being-there". The ethics mentioned here belongs to this.

As we know, the fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* is ultimately implemented in the analysis of being-there. Here, it is important to distinguish between the “analysis of being-there in the sense of fundamental ontology” and the “analysis of being-there in the sense of metontology”. The former is incomplete in that it only outlines the basic provisions and structures of being-there; only through the metontology does the analysis of being-there really become complete. Thus, the relationship between the two is: fundamental ontology leads metontology, and metontology complements fundamental ontology.

It is noteworthy that the expression “metontology” appears only once in Heidegger. In other words, Heidegger does provide a field for ethical inquiry through the formulation of “metontology”, but he does not go further into it himself. Why, then, is this? The renowned Heideggerian researcher F.-W. von Herrmann’s explanation is that Heidegger’s discovery of the historical nature of Being led him to move from his earlier phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to the question of Being to his later “being-historical thought” (seinsgeschichtliches Denken). This shift was so fundamental and urgent for Heidegger that he did not have the time and energy to deal with the ethics which seemed to him to be derivative. With regard to ethics, Heidegger’s cue to the public was to prevent its tendency

to theorize, technicalize, and metaphysicize, yet he himself did not proceed positively to construct an ethics. The result of this is that he gives the wrong impression of an anti-ethical tendency. Conversely, however, it must be admitted that in Heidegger ethics is always second nature, and not comparable to the ontology which is first nature. This holds true, at least for Heidegger at the time of *Being and Time*.

It can be seen that Heidegger had not yet left the traditional metaphysical framework of ontology as the first philosophy. This is overcome by the conception of an “original ethics” in the “Humanist Letter”. In the view of the French philosopher Luc Nancy, the original ethics embodies Heidegger’s conception of ethics as the first philosophy. Heidegger emphasizes, however, that the original ethics is neither ethics nor ontology, but rather transcendence of both. By interpreting the word *ethos* as the “habitat” of human beings, Heidegger removes the meaning of “norm” and “morality” from the ethics. In this new framework, the metontology and its related ethics seem unnecessary.

Based on this, the question that remains to be asked is whether Heidegger’s “turn” of thought has completely transcended and overcome metaphysics and thus won a new realm of thought, or it has instead retreated into a refuge of thought far from factual life and human

relations? If we agree that Heidegger's post-metaphysical thinking opens up a new realm of thought and action, then we must find in it a new position to explore the ethical-political thing, that is, a post-metaphysical ethical-political thought. If we think that "post-metaphysics" and "ethical-political thought" are fundamentally contradictory, then we must find a way to "turn" out away from Heidegger.

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## The Heideggerian Philosophy of Life

Could Heidegger's philosophy be seen as a philosophy of life? If so, what is distinctive about his philosophy of life? Heidegger gives the impression that he refuses to consider his philosophy as a philosophy of life, because philosophy of life is ontic, while his philosophy is a certain kind of ontology, precisely, the fundamental ontology. In *Being and Time*, he draws the line with anthropology and philosophy of life. But, conversely, other philosophers tend to treat Heidegger as a philosopher of life, or a philosophical anthropologist, such as E. Husserl and M. Scheler. It is true that Husserl and Scheler portrayed Heidegger as a philosopher of life in a critical sense, but as Heidegger studies continue to grow, many Heidegger experts also portray Heidegger as a philosopher of life, and use the term in a positive sense. Heidegger is portrayed as a philosopher who opposes theory and emphasizes and values life itself. In this way, it is interesting to explore the Heideggerian philosophy of life, which is a research perspective explicitly rejected by Heidegger himself, but widely adopted by researchers.

However, researchers are also well aware of the following contradiction in Heidegger: on the one hand, he

emphasizes the factual, living experience of life; on the other hand, he focuses on Being itself and tries to explore the Being-character of life. How to reconcile these two elements, then, constitutes the central problem in understanding Heidegger. Life is extremely concrete; Being, on the other hand, is empty and extremely universal. Some scholars point out that Heidegger's thought underwent a major transformation during his lecture period, when he crossed over from the period of philosophy of life to the period of ontology with the "Aristotle Course" in the summer semester of 1921. This is seen from a genetic perspective. Why these two extreme opposite tendencies in Heidegger? We try to look at this question from the perspective of the philosophy of life. What is important for us is not to clarify whether Heidegger's philosophy is a philosophy of life or not; rather, we have to ask in what sense a Heideggerian philosophy of life differs from a philosophy of life in general.

In the early Heidegger there are two key words: life and theory. Theory is portrayed as the opposite of life, or, to use Heidegger's term, the abandonment of life. On the one hand, this term indicates that theory resists life and dismantles it; on the other hand, it also indicates that theory is derived from life, and that theory is the detachment and abandonment of life on the soil of life. It