

# HEIDEGGER

## A Guide for the Perplexed

David R. Cerbone

**HEIDEGGER:  
A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The following texts are cited parenthetically in the text by means of abbreviations. Translations have been modified slightly in some cases.

BP     *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. A. Hofstadter, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (revised edn), 1982.

BT     *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

In addition to the Stambaugh translation, there is a long-standing and widely used translation by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). To facilitate reference to the Macquarrie and Robinson translation, as well as the original German text, I will cite passages from *Being and Time* using both the page number of the Stambaugh translation and the page number of the German text, which appears in the margins of both English translations. The first page number will be for the Stambaugh edition; the second will be the marginal German page number.

DT     *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J. M. Anderson and E. H. Freund, New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

HCT    *The History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. T. Kisiel, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

OBT    *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. J. Young and K. Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

OWL    *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. D. Hertz, New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

PLT    *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- QCT *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt, New York: Harper and Row, 1977.  
WCT *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. G. Gray, New York: Harper and Row, 1968.

Further information about Heidegger's writings and their availability in English can be found at the end of the book.

The passages from Arthur Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World* are taken from the excerpt, 'Two Tables' in *Reality*, ed. C. Levenson and J. Westphal, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994, pp. 144–9.

## INTRODUCTION

Anyone contemplating reading this book has, I will assume, at least contemplated, and perhaps even tried, reading some of Heidegger's philosophy, and has, I will further assume, found doing so, or even the prospect of doing so, anything ranging from daunting to intimidating to off-putting to downright bewildering. Heidegger's writing is no doubt challenging, indeed the term used in the title to this book, 'perplexed', would appear to be particularly apt for describing the state of most newcomers to his work. However, I want to suggest that the term is particularly apt for a rather different reason, since *perplexity* is in many ways precisely the state that Heidegger wants to cultivate in his readers, which implies that his readers, especially newcomers to his work, do not initially or automatically partake of such a state. That is, Heidegger's worry, his worry specifically about our readiness for philosophy, is that we are not sufficiently perplexed, that we instead find ourselves, variously, complacent, inattentive, forgetful or unreflective. Consider, for example, Heidegger's rather astonishing claim in one place that in order to 'learn thinking', we must first admit 'that we are not yet capable of thinking' (WCT, p. 3). Such a remark is intended to be, literally, thought-provoking, and its underlying message is that we are not provoked to think often enough, indeed that we are not yet even in a position to recognize anything that we do as actually thinking. The 'task of thinking', as Heidegger sometimes refers to his philosophy later in his life, requires first a disruption of our complacency, a willingness to acknowledge that we may not yet know what thinking is, and so a willingness to encourage and sustain in ourselves a feeling of perplexity. To dismiss or disown such feelings, to remove them hastily or artificially by means of some form of distraction

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(superficial entertainment, amusement, intoxication and so on), is to refuse to begin the hard work of thinking philosophically, indeed of really thinking at all. For Heidegger, then, a feeling of perplexity is anything but a reason to put his writings aside; instead, it is precisely what the reader should have if she is to find anything worthwhile in his philosophy.

Heidegger's remarks about thinking come from work written well on in his philosophical career, from a phase commonly referred to as 'the later Heidegger' (the nature and significance of these demarcations will occupy us shortly). The idea, though, that philosophy begins with perplexity can be found throughout his writings. His landmark work written much earlier in his career, *Being and Time*, which we will spend the majority of this book examining, begins with an epigraph taken from Plato's dialogue, *Sophist*:

For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression '*being*'. We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed.

Heidegger no doubt intends this admission of perplexity to describe his own condition, but his hope is that the 'we' who speak here will come to include his readership as well. His fear is that it may not. Heidegger follows this citation with the question of whether we currently have an answer to the question of the meaning of the word 'being', and his answer is emphatically negative. He then raises a further question concerning our attitude toward our lack of an answer to the question of being: he asks after the perplexity we may or may not feel about our current predicament with respect to the notion of being: 'But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression "being"', to which Heidegger replies, 'Not at all' (BT, p. xix/1). Heidegger thus sees as his principal challenge in *Being and Time* to be one of bringing his readers to the point of feeling perplexed, of finding the 'question of being' an occasion for puzzlement. Without that perplexity, without being struck both by the question of being and our inability to answer it immediately, Heidegger's investigation cannot even begin to make sense, much less appear compelling, even vital. So again, I want to suggest that perplexity in the face of Heidegger's philosophy is a good thing, something to be cultivated and investigated, and so a reader who finds herself perplexed should be praised as long as she

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is willing to see in that perplexity a reason to continue rather than simply put Heidegger's writings aside.

As a 'guide for the perplexed', the task of this book is perhaps to alleviate some of that perplexity, though it would be inadvisable to try to remove it altogether. Instead, my aim is to effect a kind of reorientation with respect to that perplexity, so that it may be engaged with productively. Meeting this aim will require distinguishing carefully between perplexity, a healthy and potentially fruitful state, from mere *confusion*, a more scattered, dissonant condition that serves only to stifle investigation. Heidegger's writings are indeed perplexing – as I've already tried to suggest, they aim to be perplexing – but they can be confusing as well, and I see my job as one of diminishing that confusion so that we may feel perplexed in the right way. I thus do *not* see my job as one of simply making Heidegger 'easy' or 'simple', since attempting to do so could only distort what Heidegger is up to in his philosophy (I actually think this is the case for trying to understand any serious philosopher – Kant, Plato, Hegel or Aristotle can no more be made easy without falsification than Heidegger). Making Heidegger easy would short-circuit the perplexity that Heidegger himself regards as necessary for his philosophy to be properly understood and appreciated; simplification would provide the appearance of comprehension, along with the even more harmful conclusion that any further thought could be foregone. I want instead, by removing confusion, to provide a kind of foothold for engaging with Heidegger's writings, so that the reader may learn from them, question them, quarrel with them and perhaps even extend the kind of thinking they initiate. All of these things can only be properly done insofar as one is not just confused about what Heidegger is saying. I have found over the years of teaching Heidegger that my more confused students are especially apt to be quarrelsome, though this typically amounts to little more than lashing out, rather than anything approaching illuminating debate. Any series of angry observations that can be condensed into the lament, 'Heidegger sucks!' is far indeed from the kind of *thinking* Heidegger's philosophy wishes to enact and encourage in its audience. In my view, Heidegger's philosophy does not 'suck', indeed quite the contrary. There is much to be learned from engaging seriously and patiently with his writings, and my hope is that this book will help readers in doing so.

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Heidegger's writings are expansive and by no means monolithic in their philosophical outlook. Heidegger lived and worked for a very long time and his views changed considerably over the years. The most significant 'break' in his thinking is between the period in which he wrote *Being and Time* – what is often referred to as Heidegger's 'early philosophy' – and pretty much everything thereafter. (Scholars do on occasion distinguish between a 'middle' and a later Heidegger, and lately there has been a call by some to recognize an 'earliest' Heidegger as well. While there is considerable merit in these finer-grained distinctions, the coarser division will suffice for our purposes.) Despite the fact that the later philosophy occupies by far the majority of Heidegger's philosophical career (more than four decades versus roughly one), the majority of this book will be devoted to *Being and Time*. Though Heidegger's philosophy changes considerably, sometimes in ways that explicitly repudiate claims and methods central to *Being and Time*, he never entirely abandons that early work and it continues to serve as a kind of touchstone for all of his thinking. Thus, in order to understand any of Heidegger's work, it is necessary to have a good grip on what he is up to in *Being and Time*. Of course, getting a good grip on *Being and Time* is important not just as a means to understanding the later philosophy. There is a great deal of tremendous philosophical importance in *Being and Time*, well worth considering for its own sake and for its impact on philosophy well beyond his own later writings. As I'll try to demonstrate at various places below, Heidegger's insights and ideas in *Being and Time* have an impact on some of the very basic ways in which we think about our relation to the world, as many of those ways have been informed by philosophical ideas that he exposes as deeply problematic. *Being and Time* is not only an exercise in philosophical criticism, however, as it offers a rich and compelling conception of human existence that proved deeply influential for the development of the existentialist tradition culminating in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of the 1940s (Heidegger, for his part, was not entirely pleased that his earlier work had this effect). Throughout Part I, we will work through *Being and Time* with an eye toward both its critical and productive aspects.

Part II will be devoted to Heidegger's later philosophy. Owing to the extent of his later work, my coverage here will be even more selective than with *Being and Time*. I will try, though, to present several of what I take to be key ideas in the later work and situate them in

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relation to his earlier work. Though I have left a great deal out, my hope is that by reading this book, the perplexed, rather than confused, reader will be well equipped to work through what's been omitted on his or her own.

**PART I**

**HEIDEGGER'S EARLY  
PHILOSOPHY**



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## CHAPTER 1

# THE QUESTION OF BEING AND *BEING AND TIME*

In my introductory remarks, I appealed to the epigraph of *Being and Time*, taken from Plato's *Sophist*, as illustrative of the kind of perplexity Heidegger wishes to awaken and cultivate in his readership. More specifically, the perplexity Heidegger invites concerns what he calls simply 'the question of being' (or *Seinsfrage*), which is meant to serve as the subject matter of the entirety of *Being and Time* (and beyond, as I'll explain below). Heidegger's opening remarks are meant to suggest that Western philosophy has slowly but surely whittled away at the perplexity felt by the ancient Greeks, with whom the question of being, Heidegger claims, first arose. The kind of wonder or astonishment felt by the Greeks in the presence of reality, and so their wonder and astonishment at the question of what it means to be, has slowly and lamentably faded as Western philosophy has developed: the question of being 'sustained the avid research of Plato and Aristotle but then on ceased to be heard *as a thematic question of actual investigation*' (BT, p. 1/2). Too often, the question of being has simply been ignored, or, worse, taken to admit all too easily of an answer. A facile answer, Heidegger thinks, is tantamount to ignoring the question, i.e. the question is answered in a way that really amounts to little more than a quick dismissal. Heidegger canvasses three of these ready answers to the question of being in the opening paragraphs of his first Introduction – being is the 'most universal' concept; being is 'indefinable'; and being is 'self-evident' – none of which Heidegger finds satisfactory, and all of which point only to the need for further investigation. (That being is universal does not mean that its meaning is clear; that being is indefinable does not eliminate the question of its meaning; and that the meaning is self-evident and yet we find ourselves at a loss to say what it means

only shows that we are more in the dark than we care to admit.) Thus, part of the burden of Heidegger's first Introduction is to impress upon us that the question of being is *the* most fundamental philosophical question, though the obscurity of the question, due in part to centuries of philosophical distortion and neglect, means that formulating the question properly and setting out to answer the question will require considerable care.

## 1A DA-SEIN AND THE QUESTION OF BEING

After his opening remarks concerning the need to revisit the question of being and reconsider its formulation, Heidegger devotes the majority of the first Introduction to devising and justifying a strategy for clarifying and answering the question of being. The strategy focuses on the nature of human existence, which Heidegger refers to using the term 'Da-sein'. The term is left untranslated in English editions of *Being and Time*, largely to signal the peculiarity of Heidegger's terminology even in German. The term '*Dasein*' is not one coined by Heidegger: my nearest German dictionary lists '*dasein*' as a verb meaning 'to exist' or 'to be there', and also '*Dasein*' as a noun meaning 'presence', 'existence' and 'life'. To disrupt any assimilation of Heidegger's usage to these standard meanings, the Stambaugh translation inserts a hyphen between the two component terms ('*da*', meaning 'here' or 'there', and '*sein*', meaning 'being'); in her own introduction, she explains the addition of the hyphen as conforming to Heidegger's own directives (see *BT*, p. xiv). Heidegger's appropriation of the term for one kind of being or entity is thus idiosyncratic, and deliberately so: Heidegger wants to reserve a special term for the kind of beings we are that does not carry with it any unwanted connotations or prejudices, as is often the case if we use locutions such as 'human being', '*homo sapiens*', 'man' and so on. These terms are beset by various, potentially misleading, anthropological, biological and even theological ideas that will only serve to distract. For example, Heidegger does not want his conclusions regarding what is fundamental and distinctive about our way of being to be circumscribed by the facts of biology: it is perfectly conceivable on Heidegger's account that biologically different beings, even wildly different ones (suppose, for example, that we some day encounter extraterrestrials), exhibit these same characteristics or features. Thus, '*homo sapiens*' as principally a biological

categorization is incorrect for Heidegger's purposes. What is distinctive about Da-sein, as the entity each of us is, is not a matter of biology or theology, but rather characteristics that are to be exhibited and worked out *phenomenologically* (just what that means will be spelled out later on).

Consider again the perplexity that we feel (or, from Heidegger's perspective, we *ought* to feel) upon first hearing the question of being. Insofar as we understand the question at all, i.e. insofar as we respond with something more than 'Huh?' or 'Say what?' it is still likely to be the case that we will very quickly run out of things to say. Certain other terms may spring to mind or to our lips – reality, actuality, existence and so on – but spelling out what *these* terms really mean appears to be no less daunting than our trying to say what 'being' means. Heidegger fully expects this kind of difficulty; all he asks initially is that we not forego the difficulty and that we not interpret our difficulty as a basis for condemning the question. By way of reassurance, perhaps, he is quick to point out that we are not as lacking in resources as we might feel. In fact, we turn out to be the principal 'resource' for answering the question of being, though that piece of information may no doubt come as a surprise.

To see what Heidegger has in mind here, let us consider two perplexing claims he enters in the first Introduction:

1. Da-sein is a being whose being is an issue for it.
2. Da-sein is a being who has an understanding of being.

Claim (2) for Heidegger holds the key to making progress in clarifying and answering the question of being: that Da-sein is a being who has an understanding of being means that Da-sein is a good place to look to get started. In other words, since Da-sein already understands what Heidegger wants to know the meaning of (namely, being), then Da-sein is the best clue available for working out what it means for anything to be. While this is roughly Heidegger's reasoning, it is still rather schematic: we need to know more about just what (1) and (2) mean, how they are interconnected and how Heidegger plans to exploit them to further his philosophical project.

On the face of it, (1) and (2) just sound like two different ideas, both of which may happen to be true about us (or about Da-sein). For Heidegger, however, (1) and (2) are importantly interconnected. A general lesson about reading *Being and Time* is in the offing here: rarely for Heidegger is a series of claims he enters on a particular topic