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The Greek Inception, *Phusis*, and Ultimate Temporality:

Humanity as Time Itself

Michael Poussard

What is a human being? For centuries, and even today, many have considered man to be a breathing organism endowed with a higher intellect—a rational animal. This classification seems to serve the twofold purpose of presenting man as quite similar to other beings while highlighting his one key distinction. For Aristotle (arguably the most influential of the Greek philosophical giants), the faculty of reason suffices to distinguish mankind from the rest of nature. Implicit in this understanding is that the existence of a being with such a faculty is purely contingent. Therefore, it is not at all far-fetched to imagine a world devoid of humans. Nature would simply continue to operate and even to be perceivable in just the same way as it is now. Since we are merely beings that happen to be present along with the multiplicity of other beings, all aspects of nature, even the elusive concept of time, reside outside of ourselves; they may be perceived by us, but they do not arise from or depend upon us.

Standing forth as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century is Martin Heidegger. A prolific yet enigmatic German, Heidegger regards the above metaphysical/Aristotelian definition of mankind as entirely inadequate. By asserting the historicity and ultimate temporality of *Dasein* (the being for whom Being is an

issue), Heidegger seeks to return to the originary question of Being, the *Greek Inception* that long ago became obscured and concealed by metaphysics' reduction of all entities to mere presence-at-hand, finally establishing that humanity—*Dasein*—is *time itself*.

I. The Demise of the Inception

Throughout Heidegger's works runs what seems to be a continuous strain of nostalgia for the Ancient Greeks. However, his longing for a return to the ancients is far more than mere romanticism. Having come from a background imbued with Christianity (spending time himself in Jesuit formation), he reacted in an intensely negative way towards Catholic dogma. One who adheres to a faith has already had the question of Being answered for him; thus, he cannot approach it authentically—he no longer lives with the question¹ Rather, the question of philosophy, the broadest, deepest, and most originary question—Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?—never comports itself to its times, but imposes itself upon the times. It “either projects far beyond its own time, or else binds its time back to this time's earlier and *inceptive* past.”² In response to modernity's “rootless organization of the average man,”³ Martin Heidegger seeks some sort of restoration of the *Greek Inception*: when untimely philosophy first stood forth among humanity. What did this inception consist in? Why and how did it devolve?

At the dawn of philosophy, a particular “fundamental orientation to Being”⁴ had been set forth by the thinkers and poets such that beings were thought of as a whole as *phusis*—what emerges from itself, an unfolding and persistence, the emerging-abiding sway “by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable.” *Phusis* encompasses both Being and becoming, embodying all of heaven and earth, past and present, high and low.⁵ It shaped and informed the Greek society as a whole—its underlying relation to Being. While effects of this great inception still reverberate today, all philosophy

since then has been a mere devolvement of understanding of the true nature of Being as such.

“[The philosophy of the Greeks] came to an end in greatness with Aristotle.”⁶ As is Heidegger’s custom, he reverses common perceptions of time and relationality. The philosophy of the Greeks came to an end with Plato and Aristotle. But, really, the philosophy of the Greeks *began* to come to an end with these thinkers. Its “end” was actually the end of its beginning, its inception. The end of the inception was not an end of the Greek relationship to Being, but rather the beginning of its downward trajectory away from *phusis* and towards beings. The Greek relation to Being does continue (vestigially) to remain even today, gradually concealing itself. Plato and Aristotle lay only on the cusp of this downward trajectory. Yet this was somehow the end, the greatest and most lamentable moment: the reduction of Being—*phusis*—to “beingness”—*ousia*.⁷

Perhaps the greatest and the closest philosopher to the rightful conception of Being, Aristotle receives the bulk of Heidegger’s criticism. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle almost follows the understanding of Being as *phusis*, seeking the “first causes of being as being.”⁸ However, from the start, the reduction of philosophy to prose and logic gives away the fall from the initial inception. “Only poetry is of the same order as philosophical thinking,” both of which bring beings out of their monotony and everydayness.⁹ In contrast to Aristotle, the pre-Socratics admired by Heidegger and most closely associated with the Greek Inception—Parmenides and Heraclitus—wrote in verse.

Aristotle seemed to direct his thoughts inward upon beings at the expense of Being in his focus on *ousia*, the underlying substance behind things. Thus begins the Greek “ontology of *Vorhandenheit*,” or the present-at-hand.¹⁰ In their search for the essence of Being, the Greeks narrowed their focus upon the observable world (*Vorhandenheit*), intending to then abstract the meaning of Being as such. However, this approach has shown itself to be fruitless. This error pervades and persists to this day: the end of the inception

occurred when philosophy had begun to mistake nature for the world.¹¹

II. Aristotle, Mankind, and Time

For the moment, let us leave Heidegger behind and explore Aristotle on his own terms, particularly his *Metaphysics*. “All human beings by nature stretch themselves out toward knowing.”¹² Knowing comes from the senses. Therefore, we take pleasure in using the senses. The greatest sense (and this underlies Platonism as well—images) is sight, for it is the most comprehensive, most discriminating, and most freeing sense. For Aristotle and Plato, to know something is to *see* it as it is. From this concept comes the Platonic term *eidos*, which is translated “idea,” but literally means the “look” of a thing. To seek wisdom in philosophy is the highest form of seeing, the fulfillment of wonder, and the highest activity in which man can engage.

Wonder leads to both *poetry* and *philosophy*. These answer the great questions of mankind. Ought they both to be pursued? The poets’ assertion of divine jealousy provides the reason for Aristotle’s assertion that poets lie and should not be followed—“many lyrics are lies.”¹³ Therefore, philosophy is the one avenue to the satisfying of wonder. This wonder is unique to man—the animals do not wonder because they do not have such a faculty; the gods do not wonder because they already know all things. Philosophy is the highest activity of man because it aims higher—and it can only do this because man is not the highest being, but occupies a particular space in the realm of being.¹⁴

It would seem that man is that being who wonders, who thinks. However, Aristotle, in defining the essence of man, decides not to do so starting with what makes man unique, but from what makes him the same. While the *Metaphysics* emphasizes mankind’s reaching towards knowing, i.e., wonder, Aristotle elsewhere (*De Anima* III.11) compiles human nature into a concoction of the essence of a plant,

with the addition of the essence of an animal and the addition of wonder/intellect. A substance is defined by its essence—the combination of all these things. Therefore, Aristotle defines man’s essence from things which are present in the world.¹⁵

Here, we see the above-mentioned shift from *phusis* to *ousia* at work. Man, as the being that wonders, is yet grouped with all other objects of the senses, analyzed, and categorized in the same way that trees, rocks, and gods are categorized. All sense of the unfolding of Being is gathered into the small sense of discovery—the wisest person knows all things.¹⁶ Therefore, for the wisest person, there would be nothing left to be disclosed. To live is merely to be present.¹⁷

One of the few things studied by Aristotle that absolutely resists being placed into the world as present-at-hand is the concept of time. In his *Physics*, the question of “Does time exist?” is posed before an inquiry is made as to its nature.¹⁸ Time is difficult to deny as part of our existence; yet it cannot be pinpointed as existing in the way in which other objects of study exist. Perhaps time is the chain of “nows,” but the now ceases to be immediately as it comes into existence. Can it, then, be said to be at all?

We can indeed say that time *is* by virtue of there being change. However, our experience of time, despite the uniformity of days, weeks, and years, is not at all consistent. Hours seem to fly by in an instant while asleep. Time moves quickly when we are occupied and slowly when we are bored. Yet based on the motions of the heavens, it seems that it is our experience only of time, and not time itself, that varies. This poses interesting new questions as to the nature of time.

It seems, *prima facie*, that time is identical with change or movement; when things are changing rapidly, time seems to go quickly; when things do not seem to be changing at a sufficient rate, time moves slowly. When we are asleep and do not perceive change at all until we rise, it seems that the “now” of rising happened immediately after the “now” of falling asleep, although we know that hours have passed. However, while change gives us some sense of

time, it cannot be identical with time itself. Change is movement in space, yet time has no position in space. Furthermore, our only direct way of experiencing time is through the *now*. The memory tells us that there have been other “nows” that are no longer accessible, and we know that this now will immediately pass into oblivion and be replaced by a new now. In its very becoming, the now is destroyed. Therefore, it is not a unit of time, but an infinitely divisible connection that can never be fully present *as such*.¹⁹ Because of this, time, in a sense, can be said not to be; it is never fully present. Yet, without time, there can be no presence; all things appear in a now.

Time as it actually is, according to Aristotle—future and past connected by the always-present now (“it is the now that measures time”)—is not identical with change or movement. Rather, it is the *measure* of change in respect to the before and after.²⁰ The now links the before to the after, the past to the future. It marks the end of the past and the beginning of the future in the same way that a circle is both concave and convex. The essence of time is the now, which is always the same as every other now, yet completely unique because things in the world have changed. Although *time is not present to us in the way that things in the world are present*, it is undoubtedly there and necessary. The now cannot “stop,” for in its becoming, it immediately gives way to another now. “Time will not fail, for it is always at a beginning.”²¹

III. Heidegger, Destruction, and Restoration

The task at hand in *Being and Time*—to set metaphysics free from the accretions which have gathered since the Greek Inception—must be accomplished through destruction of the ontology of *Vorhandenheit*.²² In section II of this essay, Aristotle’s *Physics* was the primary source used. According to Heidegger, it is actually the *Physics* of Aristotle which grounds his *Metaphysics* by establishing the ontology of *Vorhandenheit*: the fall of man—*Dasein*—to mere presence-at-hand.²³

The Greek approach to beings—seeking out the *look*, the *eidos*, of a thing—was taken for granted as the sole way to approach Being. However, the look of things is only perceived through the interpretive lens of the being of *Dasein*. Failing to acknowledge or account for this, the post-inception Greeks turned their inquiry inwards upon themselves, attempting to circularly arrive at the substance of mankind through the very lens of mankind—an absurdity akin to seeking the inner workings of a telescope by *using* the telescope to search. The assumption was made that man must be merely one being among others. This insufficient classification does not become an ontological problem for these philosophers, as Heidegger claims it should have.

In defining man as rational animal, something living which has reason, man is understood as being present-at-hand: *Vorhandenheit*.²⁴ However, “over and above the attempt to determine the essence of ‘man’ as an entity, the question of his Being has remained forgotten . . . [it] is rather conceived as something obvious or ‘self-evident’ in the sense of the *Being-present-at-hand* of other created Things.”²⁵ It is this conception of the being of man that Heidegger attempts to completely subvert. This is what he intends by the destruction of metaphysics: not to eradicate it, but to shake off all that has followed from the reduction of man to present-at-hand and then to rebuild from the original, foundational, inceptive *Phusis*.

What, then, is Heidegger’s answer for the Being of man, of *Dasein*? While the scope of this essay is not to explicate exhaustively the Being of *Dasein* as described in *Being and Time*, the following, cursory considerations should be sufficient to adequately draw several conclusions in comparison with Aristotle.

We know that “the person is not a Thing, not a substance, not an object.”²⁶ We know that the answer cannot be derived from empirical science or from the *look* of a thing, for this already presumes an ontical understanding of Being; but the ontological foundations are always already ‘there.’²⁷ These foundations, overlooked by Aristotle

and concealed for centuries by the very nature of Being itself, are what Heidegger explores and seeks out in *Being and Time*.

What is our relationship to *Vorhandenheit*? For *Dasein*, things are meaningful, not quantitative. “All ‘wheres’ are discovered and circumspectively interpreted as we go our ways in everyday dealings; they are not ascertained and catalogued by the observational measurement of space.”²⁸ Our understanding of things in space is not that they are plotted out in a system of coordinates; our spatiality is entirely relational. Something is “above,” “below,” “on the floor,” or “in the sky.” We carry with us ideas of left and right.²⁹ “*Dasein* is ‘spatial’ with regard to its Being-in-the-world.”³⁰

Relationality and concern in regard to the present-at-hand, however, hardly exhaust the Being of *Dasein*. The most profound expression of this Being is *Dasein*’s relation to itself. Everyday *Dasein*, in its normal failure to take notice of Being as such, falls into the *they-self*, into averageness and inauthenticity. This is so common a state that Heidegger asserts that, proximally and for the most part, *Dasein* is “they.”³¹ Rather than live in the “they,” *Dasein* should seek to arrive at “*Authentic Being-one’s-Self*.”³²

To be authentic, *Dasein* must understand itself as “thrown, fallen projection.” As thrown, *Dasein* is placed into its world not of its own accord. It did not decide where or when to be born, nor even to exist in the first place. As fallen, *Dasein* finds itself in the midst of and alongside other beings. As projection, *Dasein* futurally anticipates itself as possibilities; this is not formulating a plan, but letting those possibilities be as such.³³ *Dasein* is what it *has been*, what it *is*, and what it *becomes*—allowing it to say with understanding to itself: “Become what you are.”³⁴

In these ways, *Dasein* can be said to *be* in both the *what has been* and the *what will be*. *Dasein* is *temporal*. It is not merely “in time;” its very being is rooted in this temporality, this unity of past, present, and future in thrown, fallen projection.

IV. What is Time?

Reversing chronology, Heidegger intends to be *the ancient of the ancients*, “to proceed up towards the hidden roots of Greek thought in a more radical way than Aristotle himself ever did.”³⁵ Aristotle was the greatest and the closest to the proper understanding of Being, reaching a “more original ground” than even Plato.³⁶

Let us now recall Aristotle’s *Physics*. It is clear that time indeed *is*, but it *is not* in the way that other things are. His most concise formulation of time is: “those aspects of motion which we count with regard to before and after.”³⁷ With all this in mind, it certainly cannot be denied that *Dasein is*. Yet, we see that *Dasein* (like time) *is not* in the same way that other things *are*. The mistake of ignoring the latter statement destroyed metaphysics, ended the Greek Inception, and sent philosophy spiraling downwards, further and further from the true essence of Being—*phusis*.

We now see clearly that Aristotle’s description of time, the one thing that he encountered as existing in an entirely different way than all other things (present-at-hand), ought to be applied to mankind itself. The connection of past, present, and future in Aristotle is at stake here. To Aristotle, being means that which *is* in the present. The past no longer is, and the future is not-yet.³⁸ These are all, however, connected in his concept of time—no *now* can come into being of its own accord, but is rather begotten by the demise of the previous now. It takes its existence from all of the nows that preceded it, connecting them to all of the nows yet to come. This concept is precisely the thrown, fallen projection, the ultimate historicity, of *Dasein*.

Furthermore, the problem of individuation runs deeply within Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Heidegger asserts that time itself, *Dasein*’s temporality, is what individuates: it allows for *Dasein*’s “unique thisness and one-time-ness of its there-ness, which it alone can seize, thus becoming entirely non-substitutable by any other being.”³⁹ In Aristotle’s lowering of the essence of a being to its genus, he allows for ultimate and unbounded substitutability that is contrary to our

experience of the self and of others. In contrast to the modern “rootless organization of the average man,” the platitude “you are unique” still rings true, despite its triteness.

“To appreciate and study time, one must genuinely ask: ‘Am I time?’”⁴⁰ The question is not formulated, “is humanity time?” Rather, arriving at an authentic understanding of oneself is intensely personal. While no *Dasein* can exist on its own (even a hermit has come from society/historicity), to live as thrown, fallen projection towards death, authentically embracing mortality is a feat that only the individual him or herself, in resoluteness, can achieve. The ultimate question of Being—of *phusis*—is lived with and explored, approached and re-asked, by each generation and each individual. To have an answer, however, is to eliminate the question. Rather, we must seek to live *with* the question. *Being and Time* ends, quite poignantly: “Does *time* itself manifest itself as the horizon of *Being*?”⁴¹

Notes

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale UP, 2014), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴ Charles Guignon, “Being as Appearing: Retrieving the Greek Experience of *Phusis*,” in *A Companion to Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics*, ed. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), 35.

⁵ Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ Guignon, *A Companion to Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics*, 36.

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joseph Sachs (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 2002), 1003a 31.

⁹ Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 29.

¹⁰ Remi Brague, “Radical Modernity and the Roots of Ancient Thought,” *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1983): 64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980a 21.

- ¹³ Ibid., 983a 2.
- ¹⁴ Brague, *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, 69.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982a 9.
- ¹⁷ Brague, *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, 70.
- ¹⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye (Boston: The Internet Classics Archive, 2000), <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle>
- ¹⁹ Ibid., IV 11.
- ²⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV 12.
- ²¹ Ibid., IV 13.
- ²² Brague, *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, 70.
- ²³ Ibid., 71.
- ²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1962), 74.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 75.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 73.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 75.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 136.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 143.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 138.
- ³¹ Ibid., 167.
- ³² Ibid., 168.
- ³³ Ibid., 185.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 186.
- ³⁵ Brague, *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, 72.
- ³⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. Ingo Farin and Alex Skinner (Norfolk: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 66.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 67.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 87.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 70.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 71.
- ⁴¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 488.

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