Article

Haecceitas and the Question of Being: Heidegger and Duns Scotus

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Over the thirty years since his death Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) has emerged as one of the key philosophers of the 20th Century. Yet he claimed to be moved throughout the entirety of his work by a single question: *the question of the meaning of being*. According to Heidegger the ancient Greek thinkers experienced being with a sense of wonder that has been lost in modernity. There has never been a satisfactory answer to this question and philosophers are no longer even perplexed by their inability to answer it. It was the question of being (*Seinsfrage*) that Heidegger set out to confront in his unfinished master work *Being and Time* (1927). The young Heidegger years before the publication of that work had been afforded an insight to an aspect of what would become his central concern from what at first might seem an unlikely source: the medieval philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus. Scotus inspired Heidegger in so far as his thought was in proximity to "real life," and while he would later move decisively away from the position he took in his 'scotus Book," in a move that has been referred to as the first "turn" in his thought from the 'system of Catholicism" to liberal Protestantism, Scotus provided the young scholar with an insight into human individuality that would prove decisive in his mature work. Despite this move away from any kind of "onto-logic," there is an element of Heidegger's thought that is influenced by Scotus (1265/6-1308), one of the brightest stars of medieval philosophy. So, while my investigation is conducted with the fact of this turn in mind, my aim is to explore this element.

Early in his career Heidegger wrote his post-doctoral teaching qualification or *Habilitation*, *Duns Scotus" Theory of the Categories and of Meaning*, on Scotus under the supervision of the Neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert. However, the situation is complicated by the fact that in his *Habilitation* Heidegger based some of his considerations on a text called the *Grammatica speculativa* that was attributed to Scotus. This text was later shown to be a work of Thomas of Erfurt. Next to nothing is known about Erfurt except that he was active early on in the 14th century. Now, Heidegger's philosophical method in the *Habilitation* was such as to be concerned with current "problems" in philosophy and his strictly philosophical aim was to engage in a dialogue with a past thinker in the service of these current problems. The author of the *Grammatica speculativa* had worked along lines

drawn by Scotus to such an extent that when questions of authorship were finally settled it did not discredit the work Heidegger had put forward.

This approach of looking to texts in the history of philosophy and seeking to bring them to bear on contemporary debates points forward to Heidegger's later *destructive* readings of the history of philosophy in his mature works. In *Being and Time* Heidegger tells us of the need to "destroy" the tradition of philosophy precisely because of its solidification into a body of tradition. In this destruction, which from the perspective of *Being and Time* and *The Basic Problems of Philosophy*, a lecture course from the late 1920s that deals with some of the problems originally intended for discussion in *Being and Time*, is actually a positive approach, he sets himself the task of loosening up the concepts and positions put forward by past thinkers in order to get to the "fundamental experiences" from which these concepts actually arose.

In *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger talks about the "birth certificate" of concepts. He is concerned to see where our concepts came from, what inspired them and ultimately, whether they are appropriate to the subject matter to which they are applied. This kind of approach, he tells us in his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, will sometimes involve placing oneself in what a text does not in fact say (the "unsaid") in order to force it into speech. The project of destruction comes into its own in *Being and Time* and belongs essentially to the project of that text.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger sought to approach the question of being through a *fundamental ontology* of Dasein. Dasein, for want of a better way of expressing it, is Heidegger's term for the human being. It means *being-there* and connotes being *there*, *here* and *now*. Dasein is that peculiar "place" where being is revealed and as such is fundamentally "in" a world. The thought here is that being is something like *meaning* and Dasein is that being who is sensitive to meaning. As Richard Polt has put it: "*Being is the difference it makes that there is something rather than nothing.*"[1] It is Dasein who is sensitive to this *difference*. Fundamental ontology sought to lay out the structures of Dasein so as to prepare the way for tackling the problem of being. Of all things that *are*, it is only Dasein whose "being is an issue for it": Dasein *has* its being "to be" (their life to live) in a way that no other thing has. Before the question of being is even explicitly stated, Dasein has an implicit awareness of what it means to be. In Heidegger's terms, Dasein has a pre-theoretical understanding of being that is always in play in Dasein's everyday dealings with it's environment. The question of being is nothing less than the radicalisation of this pre-understanding.

The question of being is made even more problematic by the fact that being is in no way a particular being. Being is not a *thing*, nor is it a *class* of things. That is, there is an *ontological difference* between *being* and beings. Heidegger sought to tackle being and only in light of this task was he concerned with particular beings. This is precisely why Dasein was so

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[1] Richard Polt, *Heidegger, An Introduction* (London: University College London Press, 1993), 3.

important, for it is Dasein who, in addition to understanding particular things, also has an understanding of being.

The problem of being was first raised for Heidegger in an Aristotelian-scholastic context and this context had a decisive influence over the way he formulated the problem in *Being and Time*. There, in an important respect, Heidegger agrees with the scholastics. He says: "*Being is the transcendens pure and simple.*"[2] Being for the scholastics was called a "transcendental" in the sense that it *transcended* the ten categories outlined by Aristotle in his text of the same name. Heidegger agrees with this, *being* is neither a being nor a class of beings. In *Being and Time* Heidegger also wants to invoke the Kantian sense of transcendental where transcendental means "necessary condition" or "condition of possibility" of objectively valid experience. A *transcendental condition* in Kant's sense is a necessary condition which logically precedes and provides for the possibility of something else. For example, a necessary condition of any experience at all for a human being is that that experience will be in space and time. According to Kant, human beings cannot experience the world in any other way.

Heidegger wants to say a little of both with his notion of being. Being does exceed the categories (the scholastic dimension) but it also forms a transcendental structure that provides for the appearance or presence of beings (the Kantian dimension). Hence the *ontological difference* between being and beings. Heidegger's genius lay, in large part, in his creative use of notions from the tradition of philosophy. Heidegger differs from both Kant and the scholastics. He differs from Kant (and much of the tradition) in the sense that there is no recourse to an "unintended" reality. Kant famously distinguishes between the *phenomenal* world and the *noumenal* world. The phenomenal world is the world of human experience. The noumenal world is that of things as they are "in themselves" independent of human experience. Of this noumenal world, we can know only that it exists. There is nothing corresponding to the noumenal in Heidegger. As he says: ""Behind" the phenomena of phenomenology there is essentially nothing else . . .."[3] He differs from the scholastics in the sense that he has no intention of providing a theology. Heidegger's interest in the scholastics was primarily philosophical and philosophy, so Heidegger thought at this point, must be atheistic. Nonetheless, Heidegger clearly saw what was important in both Kant and the scholastics, and what he could use.

Heidegger, in *Being and Time* at least, saw many of the problems that permeate the tradition as arising out of the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle understood the question of being to really be about substance (*ousia*). In his *Categories* Aristotle distinguishes between *primary substances*, such as this particular man and *secondary substances*, such as the *species* "man" and the *genus* "animal." He says:

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[2] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1962), 62.
[3] *Ibid.*, 60.

> A *substance* – that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all – is that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g. the individual man or the individual horse. The species in which the things primarily called substances are, are called *secondary substances*, as also are the genera of these species. For example, the 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.[4]

That which exists in a primary way is any particular thing. However, in order to talk about this particular thing you have to invoke its species and genus. "What is this particular thing? It is a "man"." "What is a "man"? It is an animal." Aristotle also enumerated the ten categories. They can be understood as examples of ways we might characterize a particular thing we meet in our experience of the world. For example, we might speak about its 'substance," its "quantity," its "qualities," its "relations," its "place," its "time," its "position," its 'state," its "activity" or its "passivity." Once the particular thing's substance has been identified—for example, it is a "man"—the other nine categories can be invoked to give further information about it.

Now, there are at least two problems with this schema that are of particular importance for us. Firstly, when we want to talk about a particular man, say Socrates, we find ourselves saying that Socrates is a "man." This may be true, but it doesn""t tell us anything about 'socrates" beyond the fact that he shares certain properties with every man. Socrates is a *thing* of a particular type. We might here want to invoke, in Aristotle's defence, some of the other categories. If we want to know more about Socrates why not simply talk about his "quantity" or "activity" and so on. The difficulty with this is precisely the fact that these categories, while they may be useful for talking about objects such as stones, do not get to the heart of the kind of being appropriate to Socrates. Socrates is not just one more "thing" amongst others. Recall, Heidegger's characterisation of human being as Dasein. Precisely as Dasein, Socrates is not a just a thing of a particular type, a type of "what." As Heidegger would say, Dasein is always a "who," never a "what." If Heidegger is right, Socrates is not a "thing" at all because he "has" his being "to be" and can relate to it in a way that nothing else can. In short, Aristotle's ten categories are not appropriate to Dasein and talking in those terms misses the point of what it is to be a Dasein. Heidegger needed to forge a new vocabulary that would be more appropriate to human being.

Secondly, when Aristotle takes the question of being to be about substance he fails to note the crucial difference between being and beings, the ontological difference that is so important for Heidegger. Being is in no way a

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[4] Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, trans. by J.L. Ackrill (New York: Clarendon Press, 1963), 5-6.

being or thing. For Aristotle, by contrast, substances are beings or things: they are primary substances (the individual man) or secondary substances (species or genus). Aristotle stands at the very beginning of the tradition Heidegger sought to destroy in *Being and Time*. He is the father of what Heidegger calls at that time the "forgetfulness of being."

Our two objections are bound up with one another. In Heidegger's view, Aristotle failed to recognize the ontological difference and—partly as a consequence of this—he failed to recognize the unique nature of Dasein, the being who has an understanding of being. The result of the Aristotelian ontology was an ontology of things that are simply there, or *present-to-hand*. Aristotelian substance ontology ushered in the "metaphysics of presence" that Heidegger sought to move beyond. Heidegger realized that the Aristotelian categories do not apply to all there is. Not everything is simply "present." In particular, they don"t apply to Dasein: Dasein is not simply a present "thing." Quite the contrary, Dasein is in fact distinguished by its very *lack* in being. Dasein is not *complete* in the way rocks are complete. Dasein has no fixed *essence*, no particular "what" that it essentially is. Dasein is a *project*, it *has* its being "to be" and is always a "who."

This realization was decisive. An entire new vocabulary and method was needed for characterizing Dasein. Particularly, Heidegger recognized that Dasein is always "in" a world that it is *concerned* with and that for the most part Dasein is "fallen" into this world and tends to understand itself in terms of that world. In this state Dasein is *inauthentic* and is best described as *generic*. Inauthentic Dasein simply "goes about its business as one does" and does not face up to the problem of deciding how to live its life. However, in fundamental *moods* such as anxiety Dasein is forced to face up to it's situation and can become *authentic*. In this state Dasein is explicitly *concerned about* and *attends to* its situation. Such a Dasein has faced up to the question of how it is to live its life. The problem is that anxiety is rare and disturbing and being authentic is difficult. It is far easier to just get on with things as one does.

Dasein is always situated in a particular context and has the task of living its life. Of all beings, Dasein is the one in a "factical situation." "Facticity" is a structural dimension of Dasein and is bound up with Dasein's individuality. The fundamental ontology of *Being and Time* sought to render Dasein transparent in its being. Integral to this task was an account of Dasein in its "facticity," its concrete life. What was required was a "hermeneutics (interpretation) of facticity" and since our concepts arise out of the "factical life" of Dasein this project was deeply connected with the task of the destruction of the tradition.

In order for this project to gain its point of departure however, an insight into the individuality of the individual was required. A major advance in this direction from the point of view of his philosophical development came with Heidegger's early engagement with Duns Scotus. It was precisely here that Heidegger came across an explicit challenge to the Aristotelian schema, a challenge that included a specific concern for the uniqueness of the individual.

It was this concern for the individual in Scotus's metaphysics that made him so attractive to the young Heidegger. He says:

> His striking individuality as a thinker characterizes him in general as having unmistakably modern traits. He has a more extensive and accurate nearness (Haecceitas) to real life, to its manifoldness and possible tensions than the scholastics before him . . . he knows how to turn . . . from the fullness of life to the abstract world of mathematics.[5]

Scotus saw clearly the need to augment the Aristotelian categories and something of their failure when it came to capturing all that there is to capture about the individual.

We have said that almost nothing is known about the life of Thomas of Erfurt. We are in only a slightly better situation when it comes to Duns Scotus, Doctor subtilis himself. We know that he was born between December 1265 and March 1266 in the town of Duns in the Scottish Borders. That he was ordained on the 17th of March 1291 at St Andrew's Priory in Northampton. That he was a Franciscan. That he taught at Cambridge, Oxford and Paris. That he was expelled from France in June 1303 because of his allegiance to Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) in the dispute with King Philip IV The Fair (1285-1314) of France. We also know that he died at Cologne on the 8th of November 1308.

In philosophy, Scotus's genius shows itself in the subtlety and force of his metaphysics. Here, we can clearly see why he was known subsequently by the Honorific title 'subtle doctor." For Scotus, the subject matter of metaphysics is being, and God is its goal. Scotus held that there were a certain number of "facts" that could be known about God independent of revelation. The science whose charge it is to prove such facts is metaphysics. Since particular sciences, such as metaphysics, do not prove the existence of their own subject matter and the metaphysician proves certain facts about God— most notably, His existence—God cannot be the subject matter of metaphysics. The proper subject matter of metaphysics is being and being, as we have said, is a transcendental. For Scotus, being comprises "all that is intelligible" and he takes it that the human mind, when considered as an intellectual power, is capable of knowing all that is intelligible. As such, being is the "first object of the intellect," its most natural concern. It is precisely here that we can note our first explicit connection with Heidegger: for Heidegger, no less than for Scotus, being was—to use the language of the scholastics—the first object of the intellect. And while Heidegger came to see the limits of Aristotelian-scholastic thought, especially with regards to the problematic of a phenomenology of religion and an investigation of the religious *lifeworld* of "Primal Christianity," this scholastic insight is taken over by Heidegger with

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[5] Martin Heidegger, *Duns Scotus" Theory of the Categories and of Meaning*, trans. by H. Robbins (Chicago: De Paul University, Chicago, June 1978), 15.

the claim that the "understanding of being" is Dasein's most fundamental characteristic.

Metaphysics is, for Scotus, the science of the transcendentals and the way towards this science had been pointed to by Aristotle himself when, in his *Metaphysics*, he notes that attributes such as "being" and "unity" fall outside the scope of his categories. The transcendentals are precisely those attributes of a thing that *transcend* Aristotle's ten categories and being is the most fundamental of these. Scotus also held that when considered without determination, being is our most abstract concept. For Scotus, there is a basic sense in which things such as substances and accidents, God and creatures, all exist. Considered in this basic way, being is simply opposed to nothingness. The other transcendentals, unity, truth and goodness/desirability, are *coextensive* with being and are in some sense properties of it. Of any particular being, say Socrates, in addition to saying that it exists (being), we can say that it is one (unity), that it truly is what it is (truth) and that its being what it is, is desirable (good). If the transcendentals are correctly elucidated, so held Scotus, then the existence of God can be inferred. As such, God is the *goal* of metaphysics and not its subject.

Where did Heidegger see Scotus's "nearness to real life"? This dimension arose out of Scotus's metaphysics and was one of his most noted innovations. It is with his notion of *haecceitas* or "thisness" that Scotus brought scholastic thought into proximity with the real life of the individual.[6] This notion is bound up with another central notion in his metaphysics: the *formal distinction*.

In medieval scholasticism it was common to distinguish between two forms of distinction: the *real distinction* (two things are really distinct and can in principle be separated: God could destroy one while preserving the other) and the *distinction of reason* (two things are conceptually distinct but not objectively or really distinct). By contrast Scotus's formal distinction holds that it is possible to distinguish between different *formalities* of one and the same thing. For example, it is possible to distinguish between God's intellect and His will within the one Divine being; intellect and will are *really identical*. This distinction is more than a mere conceptual distinction because it has a basis in the "reality of God" and it is less than a real distinction because these formalities cannot be really separated. Distinct formalities are just as essential to the nature of the thing: they are *really identical* and only *formally distinct*.

Scotus's proximity to real life came when he applied his account of the formal distinction to the problem of *individuation*. Recall that in our above account of Aristotle's *Categories* a problem emerged with regards to the "individuality of the individual." If both Socrates and Plato are members of a particular species, then what distinguishes them? It is precisely with regards to this problem that Scotus's notion of *haecceitas* really comes into its own. The

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[6] The concept of *haecceitas* tends to be discussed in terms of the problem of individuation in Scotus's translated texts. See his *Philosophical Writings, A Selection*, trans. by A. Wolter (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987) and *Duns Scotus, Metaphysician*, trans. by W. Frank and A. Wolter (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1995).

individual members of a particular species have something in common by virtue of which they are members of that species. Both Socrates and Plato share something that makes them both "men." Yet, Socrates and Plato are also different: Socrates is not Plato after all. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, had held that it was "matter" which individuated members in a particular species. Socrates and Plato are different because they are made of different stuff. Both, however, remain essentially men. Scotus, by contrast, held that what in fact individuated different members of a species was precisely their respective *haecceitas*. As such, any created thing, such as Socrates, has two really identical but formally distinct "essential aspects": namely, its kind (man) and its individuating "*haecceity*." Crucially, any particular thing's *haecceity* is unique to it: there can be many men, but only one Socrates and this by virtue of his "thisness."

While it is certainly the case that Scotus was dealing with traditional metaphysical problems, such as that of individuation and the Problem of Universals, that Heidegger in his mature writings was concerned with only in a very specific sense, it was the crucially important notion of *haecceitas* that gave Heidegger the insight he required into the individuality of the individual and it was here that Scotus entered into the proximity to real life, the "place" that Heidegger noted in his *Habilitation* (quoted above) as so desperately important. With Heidegger, *haecceitas* became *facticity*. Scotus's insight allowed Heidegger to "go all out after the factic" and turn the concrete life of Dasein into a problem. As far as Heidegger is concerned, all questioning, including ontology, has its origin in the concrete life of the individual Dasein. Dasein, in its concrete life, has an understanding of being and the question of the meaning of being is nothing less than the radicalisation of this understanding. Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, retains, in his own peculiar way, the insights of Duns Scotus.

Heidegger was deeply influenced by Scotus, and despite the fact that he did move away from his very early 'scholastic" manner of approach, this influence can be felt in *Being and Time*. Although *Being and Time* remained unfinished it has proven to be one of the classics of twentieth century philosophy and it is testimony to the enduring genius and relevance of Duns Scotus that the author of this classic of Western philosophy learned something of what it means to be a philosopher from this seemingly remote scholastic thinker.

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