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Heidegger's Basic Assumptions

If we improve our understanding of ordinary talk of physical things, it will not be by reducing that talk to a more familiar idiom; there is none. It will be by clarifying the connections, causal or otherwise, between ordinary talk of physical things and various further matters, which in turn we grasp with help of ordinary talk of physical things.
W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object*¹

In *Being and Time* Heidegger sets out from three assumptions: first, that we generally have some understanding of what it means to be, some sense of being; second, that this understanding matters to us and, in an essential way, constitutes our manner of being; and third, that we are capable of giving an appropriate analysis or interpretation of this understanding.² These are by no means the only suppositions driving the project begun in *Being and Time* but they certainly figure among its most basic assumptions. The first of these assumptions is Heidegger's „preontological“ and „preexistential“ assumption, the second his „existential“ assumption, and the third his „ontological“ assumption. These basic assumptions, moreover, exhibit an order that is equally basic to Heidegger's project at the time. The existential assumption presupposes the preontological assumption and his fundamental ontology presupposes the existential character of our preontological sense of being.

Despite an increasing appreciation of the relevance of many of Heidegger's investigations to concerns of contemporary analytic philosophers, these basic assumptions continue to be roundly viewed with a mixture of suspicion and bemusement. It would be extremely difficult – and no attempt will be made here – to give an adequate explanation of all the reasons for this recalcitrance. Yet, from Rudolf Carnap's and Gilbert Ryle's early and, in the end, dismissive reviews of *Being and Time* to Richard Rorty's double-take on Heidegger, there has been a broad consensus that Heidegger falls prey to a kind of linguistic mystification, that confusions about the functions of language keep him from exercising proper control over his use of it. Thus, Carnap famously castigated Heidegger for formulating sentences like „The nothing itself nothings“ („Das Nichts selbst nichtet“). So, too, Rorty couples his enthusiasm for „the pragmatist young Heidegger“ with a dismissal of the turn taken by the later Heidegger, in Rorty's words, „a failure of nerve“ that led to a „reification of language.“³

Heidegger, it must be acknowledged, is a philosopher in love with language. Relishing the power and reveling in the play of words, he deliberately indulges in the capacity of an unconventional juxtaposition of them to jolt our sensibilities and take us to the limits of intelligibility, often leaving the impression that, in the process, he has not merely extended but crossed those limits.⁴ He is acutely aware that language „works“ in large measure because it is *about* something⁵ and, indeed, about *entities* and not being. Nor does he think of his own use of language as an exception, even if it means that his rhetoric is deeply ironic, perversely deriving its force from the ontic weight of ordinary language. Thus, in his own idiom, Heidegger is in broad agreement (and no more so than in the *Beiträge*⁶) with the quotation from Quine, cited at the outset. But he would also have endorsed Quine's caveat about philosophers who „overdo this line of thought, treating ordinary language as sacrosanct“ – as though language did not evolve.⁷ Thus, though it is admittedly difficult to gainsay the inference that Heidegger's beguiling lover and his own rhetoric get the better of him at times, he also has his reasons for running the risk of what often appears as self-indulgent, promiscuous, even mystifying prose. This gamble is particularly (though not exclusively) evident in his late 1930s project of preparing for a new beginning, for making a new start in thinking what it means to be. In this context, as he himself remarks, making oneself understood or intelligible is the deathknell of philosophy.⁸

In the following paper I do not intend to defend this last remark or argue that particularly niggardly notions of existence and language motivate the suspicion and bemusement with which Heidegger's thought is frequently viewed. The latter sort of argument might work for the likes of Carnap but less obviously for the likes of Rorty and, in any case, such apologetics by themselves beg the question of Heidegger's basic assumptions and contribute little to evaluation of their trenchancy. Faulting Western thinkers for „forgetting being“ (*Seinsvergessenheit*) is a senseless charge without a clear account of what has been forgotten and, thus, a demonstration of our ability to say what has been left unsaid. In the following paper, with this caveat in mind, I attempt to unpack Heidegger's three basic assumptions, with an eye to clarifying their significance and implications as well as the insights underlying them. The purpose of the exercise is to demonstrate that, far from being the product of linguistic mystification (confusions, misunderstandings, or deliberate obfuscations of language's functions), the assumptions are reminders of some of language's basic functions, exemplifying the linguistic conscientiousness that Heidegger demands of

philosophical thinking and writing.

1. The Preontological Assumption

In order to forestall from the outset certain misunderstandings of Heidegger's first assumption, it is important to note that he is not supposing as a point of departure that what it means to be is the same for every sort of entity or that each of us understands the same thing by it or understands with the same level of perspicuousness. Indeed, Heidegger concurs that, by the lights of the traditional conception of definition, being is indefinable, though he is quick to add that this indefinability, far from deterring us from the question of the sense of being, requires us to take up the inquiry. Particularly with these qualifications, his first assumption seems plausible enough, even trivial, given our more or less successful ability to distinguish between being and not being, both in the sense of life and death and in the sense of truth and falsity, without engaging in ontology. Typical speakers of English may not discriminate among uses of „being“, „existence“, „reality“, and the like, as do German philosophers from Kant and Hegel to Heidegger, but they have little trouble wielding and, thus, to that extent understanding a family of such terms. The welcome insistence by Wittgenstein and others on distinguishing the use of „is“ as an expression of existence from the use of it as a copula or as a sign of identity testifies to the plausibility of Heidegger's first basic assumption.⁹

Still, one might object that talk of „what it means to be“ is fundamentally misguided because only expressions (words, sentences, pictures, representations, and the like) have meanings. In other words, we should be speaking, not of „what it means to be“ or „the sense of being“, but of „what ‚to be‘ means“ or „the sense of ‚being‘“. Undoubtedly, there are useful purposes served by this sort of regimentation of language but it should not be overlooked that it signals a considerable departure from ordinary language. Not only are our ordinary uses of ‚sense‘ and ‚meaning‘ not restricted to expressions, but it is difficult to conceive how we could account for the meaningfulness of an expression if they were.¹⁰ Heidegger avoids this difficulty by exploiting the ordinary, more expansive usage of these terms – while at the same time distinguishing the family of terms associated with „meaning“ from those associated with „sense“. ¹¹ In particular, he grounds the „meanings“ of typical assertions in the „sense“ of the familiar complexes of „references“ that underlie (make up and make possible) our encounters with things. Heidegger insists that, like the typical references to which they are inevitably linked, meanings and senses are not mental representations.

Indeed, at least in the order of presentation in *Being and Time*, Heidegger's accounts of meaning and sense first take their bearings from an elaboration of references, though in this case the referentiality is what makes something handy and, hence, is by no means restricted to representations or morphemes. By its very nature (or „in itself“¹²), a nail „refers“ to a hammer which, together with the nail, „refers“ to a board and a surface. Like Dewey, Heidegger recognizes that, strictly speaking, there never is just one tool. Instead, such devices constitute a whole in which one device (tool, implement) refers to another. Thus, a hammer refers to nails, hammer and nails to an object (e.g., a board) to be affixed or fastened to the surface of another, etc. To know how to use these implements is to be familiar with the complex of references that make them up or, in other words, it is to *understand* these tools, projecting possibilities for them.¹³ For each specific context of handy devices in my environment, there is a specific complex of references that make up that context and do so by virtue of what each device or piece of equipment within that context as well as the context itself are for (the nail is for hammering, the hammering of the nail for fastening the board onto a surface, and so on). „What it's for“ or, more precisely, the way in which the respective device or context „refers to“ and, in that sense, „is for“ another is its meaning.

A similar analysis holds for signs, assertions, and sentences insofar as they are themselves handy parts of such a complex of references. Meanings – the ways in which the handy things around us refer to one another and thus, in our understanding of these references, mean or point to (*be-deuten*) another – make „words and language“ possible.¹⁴ As for assertions as such, their meanings are their uses in pointing out, determining, and communicating – all of which takes place, like the interpretation that gives rise to an assertion, in terms of some understanding, some foregoing familiarity with („by way of“ and „in“ the use of) the referential complex of equipment that typically includes assertions.¹⁵ These remarks, it bears adding, do not entail anything like a necessarily mute (prediscursive) access to meanings. Ever the phenomenologist in this respect, Heidegger emphasizes that we generally talk about and even articulate meanings before we specifically appropriate them by way of explicit interpretations and assertions. In the foregoing account, for example, we used assertions to point out, determine, and communicate long before we asserted these uses (meanings) of assertions in general. Heidegger accordingly distinguishes different kinds of assertions, ranging from those that, along with other implements, are part of the enactment of meaning („fully absorbed in some preoccupation“) to those that are not („a theoretical assertion about something on hand“).¹⁶

In turn, these meanings („what things are for“) can be sensible (*sinnhaft*) or not whereas the understanding that projects them can be senseless (*sinnlos*) or not.¹⁷ Sometimes we say that something „makes sense“ to indicate

that we understand its contextual role or function, not merely relative to other things (as is the case for meanings) but with a view to the concerns of ours that are thereby served or disserved. That respective sense of things is structured by (albeit thereby also distinct from) what we have in advance, a context that we have already appropriated with some understanding (*Vorhabe*) and move within, what we have our sights on in advance within that context, the perspective that guides the appropriation of it (*Vorsicht*), and what we have grasped in advance, our preconception (*Vorgriff*). For example, when we understand a hammer as a hammer through its reference to nails, boards, and so on (that is to say, when it has that meaning for us), we understand it with a view to some concern of ours, something towards which or for which we project it (e.g., making shelves, creating cupboard space, etc.). Heidegger accordingly construes sense as that upon which the understanding makes its various projections, enabling us to understand something precisely as the thing it is: a hammer as a hammer, this sentence as a sentence, and even being-here as being-here (*Da-sein*).¹⁸ Hence, when Heidegger proposes, as the key to inquiry into the sense of being, an investigation into the sense of being-here (fundamental ontology), his first step is to analyze how being-here is disclosed to itself in order to ask what lends this self-understanding its sense or, in other words, to ask what it is towards which being-here is willy nilly projecting itself.¹⁹

2. The Existential Assumption

Heidegger's first basic assumption is, as noted earlier, relatively uncontroversial at a certain level. I have been suggesting that his construal of „sense“ in the phrase „the sense of being“ conforms to some quite mundane uses of „sense“ („*Das hat Sinn*“; „That makes sense“). But we need not embrace Heidegger's particular uses of „sense“ and „meaning“ in order to concur that we are able or at the very least presume to be able to distinguish what is from what is not the case (truth from falsity). This presumption is a presumption, in Heidegger's words, of an understanding of being. Yet, if his first basic assumption, so construed, appears trivial, the same cannot be said for his second assumption. That second, properly existential assumption is the supposition that our understanding of what it means to be matters to us and, as such, is integral to the way we are. Beyond Heidegger's first basic assumption that we have some general sense of what it means to be, his second basic assumption underscores that we have an ability to discriminate among different ways of being, not least, our own. But, more importantly, we have this ability, this understanding, because we care about being or, more precisely, because this understanding is inseparable from the way we care about being. This caring understanding, moreover, is essential to our own distinctive manner of being. Thus, built into Heidegger's second assumption, is the self-disclosive or reflexive character of our understanding of being and the irreducibility of our existence to some thing or status apart from this understanding. Among the many implications of this basic assumption about the existential character of our preontological understanding is the ultimate bankruptcy of any rigid separation of an analysis of our understanding of what it means to be from an analysis of our manner of being. In more traditional terms, Heidegger's existential analysis may be said to take place at a level that does not countenance any sharp division between epistemology and ontology.²⁰

Like Dewey, Heidegger protested an overly intellectualist understanding of human existence and urged philosophers not to pass over the world of everyday life and, in particular, our foregone involvement in useful networks of handy implements making up that world, at work and play. But, in Heidegger's case, this protest against exaggerations of the roles played by epistemic capacities and mental states (traditionally, perception, knowledge, and/or rationality) does not signal a primacy of practice over theory or, for that matter, of human animality over human rationality.²¹ Instead, Heidegger construes understanding in a certain respect as a basic existential, at once constitutive and disclosive of our very existence; we exist as the sort of beings we are precisely because we understand what it means to be and this understanding matters to us.

To be sure, as noted in the previous section, Heidegger makes a good deal of an ordinary use of the term „understanding“, conceived as a facility, skill, or knack at some concrete practice (e.g., „understanding“ French, chess, how to work a crane, how to register to vote, how to fly an airplane, and so on). This sort of understanding as a particular know-how in the workworld is different from understanding what it means to be. Yet, while Heidegger is no pragmatist, the latter, existential understanding not only typically coincides with, but also has structural affinities with that practically operative understanding. Just as we exist in a workworld only by understanding our work, so we exist in a world at all only by understanding our worldly existence. Moreover, just as we work on things with others precisely inasmuch as we project possibilities for the network of handy devices that we wield, so we exist precisely by projecting possibilities for ourselves that disclose what it variously means for us and other things to be. In this sense, our existence is unthinkable without our understanding of what it means to be, however tacit that understanding or projection may be.

There is a further noteworthy structural parallel between these levels of understanding (Heidegger

differentiates them as „existentiell“ and „existential“). Whatever we understand, we understand with a certain disposition towards it, from fleeing it to letting it pass us by indifferently to running towards it (in this sense, we might say in colloquial terms that our understanding and, thus, our existence is always „on the go“). What it means for us to be is (generally and among other things) to be this attuned or disposed understanding. Accompanying any concrete and concretely disposed understanding is an existentially disposed understanding (a projection of what it means for us to be, that matters to us). As Heidegger puts it, aptly summarizing the fact that our being matters to us and that we understand it in just this way: to exist is to care.

If trenchant, this second basic assumption has far-reaching consequences. One consequence is the inadequacy of approaches to human existence that take their bearings solely from considerations of a human being's psychological, anthropological, biological, or neurobiological conditions. Without denying the considerable importance and validity of such considerations, Heidegger notes that such disciplines typically construe human beings as entities on hand within a nature that is itself taken to be simply on hand. If we take this sort of construal of human existence seriously, then we will treat the understanding generally as a phenomenon secondary to the body precisely insofar as it is on hand for scientific scrutiny. If not collapsible into an external, scientific consideration of some bodily phenomena (e.g., the neurological network including the brain and its variously distributed receptors), the understanding and its historicity come to be regarded as epiphenomenal or supervenient features of those phenomena. In contemporary jargon, Heidegger's existential assumption runs directly counter to a naturalistic program of understanding the understanding.

At the same time, Heidegger's existential conception of understanding, by taking leave of any naturalistic approach, does not thereby make common cause with a certain „garden variety“ historicism. By „garden variety“ historicism, I mean attempts to determine human understanding principally by locating it in history as part of or even supervenient upon a sequence of causally linked events. This stripe of historicist may, of course, emphasize the uniqueness of historical reality, recognize the need for creative and sympathetic imagination on the part of the historian, and set limits to the efficacy of appeals to causal connections (whether or not they are conceived as naturally derivative). But even with these qualifications, such an historicist continues to construe the understanding – even an understanding of what it means to be – as something on hand in history, available to the appropriately sympathetic understanding. By contrast, an existential understanding is, properly speaking, never on hand. We exist by virtue of the way in which we understand, that is to say, project what it means to be, coming to ourselves in the process.²²

Heidegger accordingly distinguishes this existential understanding, not only from understanding as a kind of practical know-how, but also from understanding that is singled out as a particular kind of theoretical knowledge. Understanding of the latter sort is primarily directed, like other kinds of theoretical knowing, at one thing or another and consideration of it is principally the work of epistemology or scientific methodology, as exemplified by Dilthey's contrast of understanding in the sciences of the mind (*Geisteswissenschaften*) with explanation in the natural sciences. From very early in his career, Heidegger saw in that contrast certain common ontological presuppositions that spelled doom to efforts to identify the distinctive method of the sciences of the mind.²³

On Heidegger's existential assumption, it bears iterating, the human manner of being (what he calls „existence“ or „being here“) is distinguished precisely by understanding what it means to be and by the fact that this understanding matters to it. Heidegger's early ontological economy may be too restrictive; without reducing the modes of being to being handy, on hand, and here (*Zuhanden-*, *Vorhanden-*, and *Da-sein*), he operates primarily with these three basic ways of being.²⁴ But nothing handy or on hand as such (i.e., nothing insofar as it is handy or on hand) can be said to understand. His existential assumption accordingly entails a repudiation of naturalism and historicism given their common reduction of understanding and, accordingly, human existence, to things on hand, past and/or present.

While Heidegger's use of „understanding“ in an existential sense, i.e., a caring projection, is distinctive in the ways reviewed, it does not represent a break with quite ordinary and traditional uses of the term. Mention has already been made of the ordinary use of „understanding“ as a know-how and of the fact that we do not ordinarily ascribe understanding to a stone that is simply on hand or to a hammer that is handy. Heidegger's emphasis on the caring aspect of our understanding (its „mattering“ and being „at issue“ for us) also trades on a proverbial use of the term.²⁵

3. The Ontological Assumption

Heidegger's third assumption is that we are able to give a plausible, even trenchant interpretation of our understanding of what it means to be. Heidegger presumes not only that a self-disclosive understanding of being is central to the make-up of existence (the manner of being that is peculiar to human beings), but that a certain kind of

thinking – in *Being and Time*, a fundamental ontology – has the wherewithal to retrieve, elaborate, and project that understanding. According to that projection, a certain interpretation of time provides the sense of being.

The assumption that a philosophy can say a good deal about human understanding of what it means to be is no less radical a departure from conventional wisdom than is Heidegger's second basic assumption. This departure is radical both with respect to the very idea of an inquiry into the sense of being (ontology proper) and with respect to what Heidegger takes to be the foundational project of analyzing existence (fundamental ontology). While contemporary philosophers are typically not averse to ontology as an inquiry about the kinds of objects or things to be countenanced, there is less interest in it as an investigation of what it means to say that they are countenanced at all.²⁶ As for fundamental ontology in particular, just as the second assumption's talk of understanding as an existential (and not merely a capacity of a human being otherwise constituted) is foreign to prevailing conceptions of the understanding,²⁷ so fundamental ontology's project of analyzing human existence, at some remove from psychology, anthropology, or biology, seems a fruitless and rudderless exercise in self-indulgence.

The conventional view of philosophy's slim ontological capacities may have deep roots in the Western philosophical tradition, as Heidegger maintains, but at least one line of its lineage can be traced to the long shadow cast by the young Hume. In the *Treatise* Hume notes that any search for the impression generating the idea of existence stumbles over the fact that we attribute existence in some sense to every perception (impression or idea) that we have. Since there is no reason to suppose that any two distinct impressions are „inseparably conjoin'd“ (or, more pointedly, that a putative impression of existence is inseparably conjoined with every other impression), Hume concludes that the idea of existence, instead of being derived from a particular perception, is tantamount to the idea of perception itself. The idea of existence adds nothing, he submits, to the idea of an object since an object is precisely what is perceived, whether by way of an impression or an idea. Thus, the idea of existence is superfluous relative to the idea of perception, including the object or what is taken to be the object of the perception, be it an impression or idea. The two disjunctions in the last sentence point, to be sure, to ambiguities in Hume's discussion of the idea of existence. Nevertheless, overriding the ambiguities is an unambiguous dismissal of the distinctiveness of the idea, given the fact that „every object, that is presented, must necessarily be existent.“²⁸ Hume's epistemology of impressions and ideas has come in for considerable criticism in the twentieth century, but it is not hard to see the stamp of the foregoing considerations in a widespread tendency to conflate being or existence (Hume himself uses the terms interchangeably) with what exists (beings or „objects“) and to identify what exists with whatever the relevant scientific community posits (happily countenancing the ambiguity of whether the latter is what it perceives or takes itself to be perceiving). This tendency obviously leaves ample room for controversy, not only among the respective scientists, but also among phenomenologists and physicalists, platonists and pragmatists on what there is. But what it means to assert the existence of something is, if not ignored, then viewed in the spirit of Hume as self-evident, hardly worthy of entry into the logical space of inquiry.

Classic analytic philosophers from Moore and Russell to Quine and Strawson do not ignore questions of existence but, for them, such questions largely turn on questions of quantification and linguistic referentiality that perpetuate Hume's economy.²⁹ Quine's remarks about existence and the quantifier are particularly interesting on this score. After noting that existence is what the existential quantifier expresses, he observes:

There are things of kind F if and only if $(\exists x) Fx$. This is as unhelpful as it is undebatable, since it is how one explains the symbolic notation of quantification to begin with. The fact is that it is unreasonable to ask for an explication of existence in simpler terms. We found an explication of singular existence „ a exists,“ as „ $(\exists x) (x = a)$ “; but explication in turn of the existential quantifier itself, „there is,“ „there are,“ explication of general existence, is a forlorn cause. Further understanding we may still seek even here, but not in the form of quantification.³⁰

What is interesting about this observation is the way in which Quine appears to leave the door open for further understanding of existence and, indeed, does so by explicitly contrasting understanding with explication in terms of quantifiers. Yet even in this context, Quine's main concern is the logical notation of quantification as a way of symbolically rendering how we say what is; he makes no attempt to understand what is meant by doing so.³¹ Instead he situates ontology within the ongoing project of a global science (or, at least, the supposedly global reach of sciences as a whole) in which the central ontological issue is whether to countenance abstract objects along with physical objects.³² In this spirit, he writes: „Bodies are the prime reality, the objects *par excellence*. Ontology, when it comes, is a generalization of somatology.“³³ Moreover, in thus shaping our ontologies, Quine urges a „relativistic empiricism“, summed up in the maxim: „Don't venture farther from sensory evidence than you have to.“³⁴ Thus, in highly modified fashion, Quine reprises Hume's basic attitude toward questions of existence.

Such views of ontology may explain the strangeness of Heidegger's project to some contemporaries, but they also lend support to his insistence that many Western thinkers have forgotten the very question of the sense of being and thereby underestimated our capacity to take our bearings from this questioning. Such thinkers have forgotten the question because they are, in effect, „closet metaphysicians“ who take the question as answered.

Herein lies the rationale behind Heidegger's attempt to renew the question through analysis of a manner of being that is apparently peculiar to humans. In contrast to the likes of Hume and Quine, he does not presume that there is no fundamental difference in saying that a naturally found substance exists, an artifact exists, or a human being exists. In addition, Heidegger identifies a symptom of thinking that turns a blind eye to these differences. That symptom is a tendency to pass over the phenomenon of the world, equating it with nature, and to attach a higher priority to analysis of perceptual and theoretical cognition as an event in nature than to analysis of practical skills and dexterity in the workworld. Analysis of that working environment would reveal, as noted earlier, that what it typically means for something to be is precisely not to be present to a perceiver or observer, not even a potential perceiver or observer. A hammer, for example, is handy precisely to the extent that it is inconspicuous, disappearing in the use made of it for hammering, and to the extent that what the hammer and the hammering are for is not yet on hand. These sorts of absences are essential to the hammer's ontological make-up, i.e., its handiness (being-handy: *Zuhanden-sein*).³⁵ Moreover, something similar holds not only for the entire complex of devices discussed earlier, but for our own way of being. Our being-here (*Da-sein*) is not equivalent to the way in which an object is on hand (*Vorhanden-sein*), as something presently or potentially present to the appropriate perception or theoretical inspection.

At the same time, as one might gather from this brief exposition, there is an important difference between the absence that renders a hammer handy and the absence that constitutes our being-here. Just as what the hammer, nails, and so on are for can become something that is simply on hand (think of ruins, a no longer inhabitable house, or a boat no longer seaworthy, moored in mud at low tide), so we can and do become something on hand: corpses. But this formulation is misleading if „become“ in this case is taken to indicate a persisting identity. To be sure, there are cases where „become“ presumes an enduring standing (what Heidegger calls *Ständigkeit des Selbsts*), e.g., „becoming“ an adult, a victim, a citizen, etc. But in death, I do not become something; I come to nothing. Moreover, this coming is not something in a distant future; it is something that I project as a possibility (the possibility of my impossibility, as Heidegger puts it), whether I want to or not, as long as I am here.

This projection, this future that is most my own (and, in that sense, the most authentic and original future, the future that is coming to me and that I have been cast into the world to project), is what provides the sense of my being-here. At one level, this conclusion appears to continue the traditional practice of interpreting being in terms of time (i.e., being as an on hand or potentially on hand presence). But Heidegger is rejecting not only the identification of being with what is on hand and, in that sense, present but also a conception of time that takes its bearings from the present (the now or potentially „now“). The future that provides the sense of my being-here is not something on hand, it is not the presence of any object, and yet only with a view to it am I able to make sense of existing. This absence is as essential as our presence to our being-here and it is not the absence of anything simply on hand (since, being-here, we are never simply on hand). This absence is essential, moreover, precisely as a possibility that we project for ourselves and therein lies the basic timeliness our existence – and ultimately the source of its meaning and value.³⁶

Conclusion

My aim in the foregoing paper has been to elaborate as straightforwardly as possible the insights underlying the basic assumptions of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. With regard to the first two assumptions, I have also tried to show how Heidegger's formulations of them conform to quite ordinary uses of language. The same cannot be said, of course, for the third, explicitly philosophical assumption. History teaches us that philosophers generally find it necessary to introduce or adopt, if not a formal language, then at least a distinctive terminology. Yet for all the innovativeness of Heidegger and Heideggerese, even in *Being and Time*, his project of fundamental ontology by no means signals a complete break with philosophical tradition.

Adapting an image originally drawn by Neurath, Quine insists that science and philosophy, including ontology, are in the same boat, a boat that we are forced to rebuild at sea while staying afloat in it.³⁷ In one important sense, this image – precisely as an image of a process at once finite and holistic – applies equally well to Heidegger's existential analysis. For Heidegger, too, „there is no external vantage point, no first philosophy“ that provides a warrant for his inquiry. Instead he repeatedly cautions and takes measures against the preemptive, debilitating step of looking to something else beyond human understanding to explain it.³⁸ But for Heidegger, in contrast to Quine and his confrères, this move requires a reliance on the self-disclosive character of existence and to the allegedly normative and responsible dimensions of that self-disclosure. In this respect, Heidegger's basic assumptions provide a variation on a theme with deep roots in the philosophical tradition shared by Descartes and Kant, i.e., an insistence not only on the distinct (empirical, ontic) content of a certain sort of reflexivity but also on its compelling, normativity-generating (justificatory, ontological) character. For all Heidegger's differences with

his predecessors, his account of existentials as self-disclosive and constitutive of our being has unmistakable affinities with Kant's concept of a transcendental self-consciousness and Hegel's concept of spirit. Heidegger's particular contribution is, among other things, to have brought this aspect of that tradition down to earth – more precisely, to its inextricable worldliness and worldly responsibilities.

1 W. V. O. Quine: *Word and Object*, Cambridge/Massachusetts 1960, S. 3.

2 This paper is dedicated to Claudius Strube, a prodigious scholar, an acute thinker, and a good friend. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to Claudius Strube for invariably enlightening me about the nuances of Heidegger's thought and, more importantly, for exemplifying the generosity of the human spirit.

3 R. Carnap: „Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache,“ in: *Erkenntnis* 2, n. 4 (1932), 219-241; R. Rorty: *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, New York 1991), 52, 63; G. Ryle, „Heidegger's ‚Sein und Zeit‘,“ *Collected Papers*, vol. 1: *Critical Essays*, New York 1971, 197-214.

4 Thus, for example, the rhetorical force of „Die Sprache spricht“ relies upon an apparently self-evident notion (*Selbstverständlichkeit*) about who or what does the talking, relying upon it in order to expose the obscurities of what we take to be self-evident and to wrest from those very obscurities the potential for further thinking.

5 This „aboutness“ is fundamental for the talk or speech that Heidegger in *Being and Time* considers more basic than language as well as for language that, in his maturer view, „houses“ what it means to be. Communication and predication presuppose this „aboutness“. However, it cannot be equated with a semantic function in contrast to syntactic and pragmatic functions (Charles Morris' old semiological division) since the „aboutness“ can be found in commands, wishes, and presumably other forms of discourse; see M. Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen 1972, 161f. (hereafter: „SZ“). Hence, it would be wrong to infer that his insistence on „aboutness“ puts him at odds with the likes of Wittgenstein and Austin who criticize others for overplaying the roles played in language by naming and describing (e.g., the picture of language attributed to Augustine by Wittgenstein).

6 Heidegger's major work of the late 1930s: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Frankfurt am Main 1989.

7 Quine, op. cit. Note, too, that Heidegger would not only have agreed with Quine's last remark but taken it a step further by insisting that it entails the need for adopting a new relationship to entities.

8 *Beiträge*, 435: „Das Sichverständlichmachen ist der Selbstmord der Philosophie.“ Here again the connection between „Verständlichkeit“ and „Selbstverständlichkeit“ must be kept in mind.

9 Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3.32; Carnap, op. Cit., 233f.

10 We readily speak, for example, of the sense or meaning of things, aspects, states of affairs, dispositions, decisions („What sense does that decision make?“), events, actions („What's the sense of doing that?“), lives („the meaning of life“), composites („What does it all mean?“), groups, and even existence. David Wiggins provides an example of an author who uses „meaning“ and „sense“ interchangeably and does not restrict the expression „has a meaning“ to a predicate of expressions (his use of „has a meaning“ coincides principally with uses of „is worth something“ or „has value“); see D. Wiggins: „Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life“ in: *Needs, Values, Truth*, Oxford 1998), 87-91.

11 In contrast to common usage (such as maintained by Husserl against Frege), Heidegger uses „Bedeutung“, „Bedeutsamkeit“, „be-deuten“, „bedeutend“ (typically translated „meaning“ or „significance“) differently from „Sinn“, „sinnhaft“, „sinnvoll“ (typically translated „sense“). See, for example, Heidegger's explicit refusal „to restrict the concept of sense to the meaning of the ‚content of judgment‘“ (SZ 156).

12 In other words, the nail is not constituted as an object that also happens to refer; instead, precisely in being the sort of implement that it is, it refers to another implement and thereby to an entire complex of implements; SZ 71, 75.

13 Someone familiar with the devices and well practiced in the use of them is someone who „sees“ her way „around“ them, i.e., she knows how they work in reference to one another. This clumsy formulation „seeing her way around“ is an attempt to convey what Heidegger deems „Umsicht“, the kind of working discernment (know-how or understanding) that operates in tandem with a person's employment of the implements.

14 SZ 161: „Den Bedeutungen wachsen Worte zu.“ Heidegger dubs the ensemble of these meanings the „meaningfulness“ or „significance“ (*Bedeutsamkeit*) that composes the structure of the world in which we respectively already find ourselves; cf. SZ 87: „Die Bedeutsamkeit selbst aber, mit der das Dasein je schon vertraut ist, birgt in sich die ontologische Bedingung der Möglichkeit dafür, daß das verstehende Dasein als auslegendes so etwas wie ‚Bedeutungen‘ erschließen kann, die ihrerseits wieder das mögliche Sein von Wort und Sprache fundieren.“ While by no means excluding the attribution of meanings and senses to implements, including words, assertions, and language, Heidegger takes pains, as this last remark indicates, to elaborate how these attributions piggy-back on the existential significance of „meaningfulness“ and „sense“, that is to say, a significance that pertains primarily to our manner of being-here (*Da-sein*).

15 Not altogether unlike Wittgenstein's move to locate meanings in use, understanding, and explanation rather than vice versa; cf. G. P. Baker & P. M. S. Hacker: *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, vol. 1, Chicago 1980, 678f.

16 SZ 158. A great deal more needs, of course, to be said about the generation of the theoretical assertion and its *nature and degree* of separation from the assertions that make up pre-theoretical discourse; although Heidegger does not, in my view, say enough, it is important not to lose sight of his sure grasp of the intentional or ecstatic character of assertions that at every level underlies their „aboutness“ (their being *about* something). This ecstatic character underscores a continuity between pretheoretical and theoretical assertions, for all their difference, that also underwrites Heidegger's own theory; see my *Das logische Vorurteil*, Wien 1994, 145-152.

17 Whereas only being-here can be „sensical“ or nonsensical, i.e., senseless (SZ 151: „sinnvoll oder sinnlos“), meanings as

articulations of sense are sensible, in keeping with the sense of „things“ or not (SZ 161: „sinnhaft“).

18 SZ 151: „*Sinn ist das durch Vorhabe, Vorsicht und Vorgriff strukturierte Woraufhin des Entwurfs, aus dem her etwas als etwas verständlich wird.*“ With a view to a respective sense, the understanding is always already projecting possibilities that can be interpreted and articulated and that, once articulated, constitute meanings (*Bedeutungen*). Heidegger’s account of the relationship between „Sinn“ and „Bedeutung“ invites many intriguing questions, e.g., is it „sinnhaft“ or „sinnvoll“? how does the account avoid articulating and thus controverting the articulable-but-not-articulated (*Sinn*)? is not the fundamental ontology articulated in SZ an inquiry more properly into the meaning of being than into the sense of being?

19 SZ 143: „Im Worumwillen ist das existierende In-der-Welt-sein als solches erschlossen, welche Erschlossenheit Verstehen genannt wurde.“

20 Historically, this move outflanks both the Neo-Kantian emphasis on epistemology and the Neo-Aristotelian emphasis on metaphysics (Brentano). At the same time Heidegger sees resources in Aristotle and Kant to lend support to his insight into a manner of being that is irreducibly *disclosive* of its manner of being and others’.

21 There is no primacy of practice in three senses: first and most obviously, in the sense of an activity that is the result of some planning; second, less obviously, in the sense of a particular concrete, empirical endeavor or set of such practices; and third, in the sense that the understanding of being is so tied to concrete projections that philosophy, theory in some sense, or thinking cannot retrieve and alter it.

22 SZ 145: „Und nur weil das Sein des Da durch das Verstehen und dessen Entwurfscharakter seine Konstitution erhält, weil es *ist*, was es wird bzw. nicht wird, kann es verstehend ihm selbst sagen: ‚werde, was du bist!‘“

23 SZ 38, 143. Heidegger championed Frege’s anti-psychologism in his second published article and yet, in his dissertation, for all its criticisms of psychologistic theories of judgment, he observes that there is no non-question-begging way to refute psychologism; see M. Heidegger: *Frühe Schriften*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann Frankfurt am Main 1978, 165.

24 Other distinctive modes of being that seem to be countenanced in *Sein und Zeit* include „Mitsein“, „Leben“, „Bestand“, and certain modes of being that we call „Natur“.

25 Probably drawing on Kluge’s etymological account, Heidegger also refers to the root of the term in the sense of „being able to stand before some matter“ (SZ 143); note that Kluge also suggests „standing before the court, standing for someone“ as possible sources of the word as well; cf. Kluge: *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, revised by Elmar Seebold, Berlin ²³1995), 861.

26 Quine: *Pursuit of Truth*, revised edition, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1992, 33-36.

27 For some typical accounts of understanding, see G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca/New York 1971), 135; R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1981, 10f, 20f.

28 D. Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford ²1978), 66f.

29 Quine, „On What There Is“ in: *From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) ²1980, 13: „To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable. In terms of the categories of traditional grammar, this amounts roughly to saying that to be is to be in the range of reference of a pronoun.“ See, too, Quine: *Word and Object*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1960, 176; A. Church: „Ontological Commitment“, in: *Journal of Philosophy*, LV (1958): 1008-1014.

30 See Quine: *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, New York/London 1969, 97; Quine echoes this point in *Pursuit of Truth*, 26f, 36.

31 Hence, Quine’s insistence that “what there are taken to be are assuredly just what are taken to qualify as the values of ‚x‘ in quantifications“ (i.e., bounded variables); see Quine: *Pursuit of Truth*, 27. For a clear differentiation of matters of reference from those of ontology, see G. Evans: *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. J. McDowell Oxford 1992, 3.

32 Quine: *Word and Object*, 19-25.

33 Quine: *The Roots of Reference*, LaSalle (Illinois) 1973, 88; see also *ibid.*, 54.

34 *Ibid.*, 138. Quine calls this empiricism „relative“ because, while abandoning the attempt to translate corporeal talk into sensory talk, it attempts to minimize the leaps between „globally learned observation sentences and the recognizably articulate talk of bodies“ (*ibid.*).

35 What it means, at an ontic level, to be a hammer is, among other things, to be a tool but ontologically it is to be handy (ready-to-hand, „zuhanden“) For this very reason, moreover, a broken or missing hammer or, for that matter, a hammer not suited to the task at hand reveals, not only a way in which something handy can be obstructively on hand but also the context – typically, the workworld – in which something is handy. This context is a network of practical reference or implicature (of which linguistic reference and implication are, if not derivative, a subset).

36 As noted above, Heidegger objects to the identification of being with presence or, in Hume’s terms, an „object that is presented,“ seeing in such identifications a kind of ontological myopia or negligence.

37 O. Neurath: „Protokollsätze,“ *Erkenntnis* 3 (1932/33): 206: „*Es gibt kein Mittel, um endgültig gesicherte saubere Protokollsätze zum Ausgangspunkt der Wissenschaften zu machen.* Wie Schiffer sind wir, die ihr Schiff auf offener See umbauen müssen, ohne es jemals in einem Dock zerlegen und aus besten Bestandteilen neu errichten zu können. Nur die Metaphysik kann restlos verschwinden.“

38 Quine: *Ontological Relativity*, 16, 127; SZ 6: „Der erste philosophische Schritt im Verständnis des Seinsproblems

besteht darin, nicht *mython tina diegeisthai*, ‚keine Geschichte erzählen,‘ d.h. Seiendes als Seiendes nicht durch Rückgang auf ein anderes Seiendes in seiner Herkunft zu bestimmen, gleich als hätte Sein den Charakter eines möglichen Seienden“; SZ 12: „Die Frage der Existenz ist immer nur durch das Existieren selbst ins Reine zu bringen.“