

MARTIN HEIDEGGER AND PAUL KURTZ ON HUMANISM

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The presuppositions for this presentation of Martin Heidegger and Paul Kurtz on Humanism are:

- 1) Although fundamental ontology and humanism are different they nevertheless share a common ground.
- 2) Every human endeavor involves values and philosophical presuppositions.
- 3) There is no hard and fast principle of division between philosophy and psychology.

Heidegger in the essay “Letter on Humanism” says that every humanism is grounded in a metaphysics or in the making of itself its own ground, becomes a metaphysics. This makes sense for a fundamental ontologist. We first ask about Being to explain the things-that-are. With another twist Heidegger says that to determine the nature of the human being it is proper for every metaphysics to be humanistic. The failure of humanism is to get at the fundamental question of the *Dasein's* truth of Being. Humanism is self-affirming. It is the opposite of true *Dasein*. This is objectivization of *subjectum*. What is to be accomplished in this presentation is to reflect upon whether or not Being may be brought into expression in another way.

Kurtz suggests in *The Humanist Alternative* four characteristics that contemporary humanists emphasize. Humanists have some confidence in human beings. The bases for morality are human experience and human needs. Humanists are opposed to all forms of supernaturalistic religion. Humanists believe in intelligence and critical reason in reconstructing moral values. Humanism is humanitarian. Kurtz further says that Humanists share in common that moral values must be removed from theological dogma. Moral ideals are to be constantly re-examined and revised in light of current needs and social demands. The good life is achieved when we realize the human potential.

The inquiry into beings *as* beings is the motif of metaphysics. For Heidegger, Being itself is never graspable objectively. It makes comprehensible to us how we have access to entities. The relation of Being to the nature of human being is Being itself is the relationship. The “Letter on Humanism” revolves around the existence of human being. It is not an attempt to understand human being as one living being among others.

Heidegger wants to surpass every form of humanism, in so far as humanism puts the human being in center stage.

For Kurtz, Humanism is not necessarily committed to a specific metaphysics. It could incorporate a metaphysical account based upon science. Heidegger takes the stance that philosophy never arises out of science or through it. This would be to let the modern conception of science infiltrate philosophy. Kurtz dispenses with Being. Heidegger dispenses with Humanism. Kurtz tells us that Humanism is committed to metaphysics in the broadest sense. This denies ontology. Being eludes identifiable confirmation. Heidegger stands-with ecstatic nature, stands (static) outside (ec-) within the light of Being. This is Being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world is Being-in also a standing-out (ex-sistence). This is the ground for awareness and responsibility, an openness to the world, a transcendence of the world. Being-in-the-world is an empty formula. It says nothing about human beings only about human being.

For Heidegger, Christianity is a humanism. Everything comes down to the salvation of the human soul. All doctrines of Humanism coincide from the view of an already-established interpretation of nature, history and world. Kurtz dismantles this idea, in saying that for free thinkers, atheists, agnostics and sceptics adopted the name Humanism in opposition of a dogmatic Church. Then with quick witted twist Kurtz says it is a surprise to discover that those whom the Humanists opposed now proclaim the very ideals asserted in opposition to them.

Heidegger puts a disclaimer on any movement of thought, on what has been said in *Being and Time*, about the word “man” the impersonal one to sociology. That “man exists” answers the question of the essence of “man.” Insofar as “man” ex-sists being-there endures taking the There as the clearing of Being within “care.” The question remains whether human being finds what is appropriate to its essence to correspond to destiny. This is ecstatic existence experienced as “care.”

Heidegger says Humanism has lost its meaning through the realization that its essence is metaphysical. Every Humanism is founded in or converted to metaphysics. Every determination of the essence of human being presupposes the interpretation of beings without asking the question of the truth of Being. The first Humanism presupposes the essence of human being as the *animal rationale* which is a metaphysical interpretation. Heidegger attempts to restore Humanism. *Humanum* points to humanitas which is the essence of human being. This essence rests in ex-sistence. This essence derives from Being itself. The essence of “man” is essential for the truth of Being.

Heidegger is for the guardianship of the truth of Being and is very strict in dictating as to what should be thought. Heidegger is a policeman taking Humanism into the custody of Being. The thought in *Being and Time* is not meant in passing to move into sociology. The metaphysical must be based on the question of the truth of Being. Heidegger saves Humanism by absorbing it. This means there is no Humanism. This can only irritate Kurtz. For Kurtz, Humanism has a commitment to the ethic of the free mind. Kurtz stands on this very precise statement: Humanism is the centrality of *the ideal of free thought*. Rather than absorb another's thought open out to the other's thought. This allows the freedom to go beyond each thought. Dialogue and negotiation open alternatives before us.

Through the characterization of something as value, for Heidegger, it loses its dignity. Valuing does not let things be. To think counter to values does not mean to plunge the existent into worthlessness and nullity. Heidegger's concern is with the question of the truth of Being. There is an urgency for an ethics, especially in an age of technology. Ethics dwells in the abode of human being. The thought which thinks of the truth of Being is at the source of ethics. But this thinking is not ethics. Heidegger says in a concise and precise statement: Fundamental ontology attempts to go back to the basic essence, from which the thought of the truth of Being derives.

Kurtz has a concern for humanity, the good life, social justice as moral ideals. Normative principles must prevail in social life. The principle of equality, for Kurtz, is a basic ethic. It does not imply that all humans are equal in talent and capacity. It recognizes biological and cultural inequalities. It respects differences. Human beings are equal in dignity and value. Humanism, Kurtz says, expresses a normative ideal offered to guide and direct conduct. Humanism is not to be identified with a particular ideology. This would be too narrow. Humanism, for Kurtz, is an effort to bring to awareness what one is and is not. There is no ultimate destiny. Kurtz wants to create an authentic life in which enjoyment and happiness is possible. This is creative self-realization enhancing the qualities of human experience. Kurtz is for free inquiry and the use of critical intelligence in which one cannot define in advance of the specific Humanist position preceding investigation. This avoids predetermination. Openness allows for the possibility of extending the meaning offered by Humanism to include other criteria. Kurtz has a commitment to the ethic of the free mind.

For Heidegger, Ontology thinks being in its Being. If the truth of Being is not thought there is no ground. Formulating different questions removes thinking from the ontology of metaphysics. Assigning directions come from Being itself not from the handiwork of human reason. Being is the shelter in view of its own truth shelters "man." Heidegger says specifically: Language is the house of Being and the dwelling of human beings.

Looking at others and their ability to be an influence upon the development and direction of the self begins with the sociality of our existence and its irrefutable primordality. Heidegger's analysis of the "they self" and the "authentic self" can be seen as highly sensitive to shared living. One result of this social nature is that we may find ourselves Being-with-others and yet experience a feeling of alienation. This is only one way of Being-with-others. *Dasein* is essentially Being-with. *Dasein's* Being-alone is Being-with in the world. Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with. The experience of alienation is a deficient mode of Being-with. Others are always already there even though our experience may set us apart from them. This displays the power of imagination in that even though no one is near "they" are with us because we are *in* a world where Being-with is an existential statement as to its essence. *Dasein* as Being-with lets the *Dasein* of Others be encountered in its world. One's own *Dasein* has the essential structure of Being-with. In this way *Dasein-with* is encounterable for Others. In discourse Being-with becomes explicitly *shared*. It is through discourse with others that we come to know and understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

In this way Being is brought into expression in a different way. Caring is a natural unfolding which emerges from within life. Living life centered around caring for appropriate others, one of whom is oneself, is living the meaning of one's life. This would be a self-to-be-with-others. The moral principles Kurtz stands for focus on the general guidelines for how we ought to act toward one another. The ethical thought is attentive to the human good. Compassionate feeling and reason are not in opposition but in harmony. The free mind is the source of ethics.

Both Heidegger and Kurtz are exploring what it means to be a human being. Neither views this in terms of religion or theology. In speaking of the nature of the human being it is both philosophical and psychological. Psychology has its ground in philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of the human being. Yet the proper turn of psychology is to clear the discord among philosophies of the human being. Philosophy is not venturesomeless. The nature of reality, the good life, how one obtains knowledge, these assumptions influence the questions the psychologist asks and the interpretation of research findings. Without assumptions and values there would be no questions to ask or goals to pursue. In turn, there is no value unless one is committed to it.