***Letter on Humanism* by Martin Heidegger**

*Letter on Humanism* is a short essay Heidegger composed in response to a number of questions directed his way in 1946 from the Frenchman, Jean Beaufret. Both Beaufret’s letter and Heidegger’s “Letter” reference Jean-Paul Sartre’s public address, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, in which Sartre argues that human beings have no pre-ordained essence (or nature). Rather, we are what we do, and we are completely free to choose those actions. Existentialism is a form of humanism because according to its principles there is no external legislator guaranteeing our actions. Meaning and value come only from ourselves, as subjective agents (the Cartesian *cogito*), and only through the actions we freely choose. The “Letter” ultimately rejects all traditional forms of humanism by appealing to a deeper *ek*-sistential foundation in which humanity stands out into the “truth of Being.”

Action and Thinking

Action is typically presumed to be that which causes an effect, but Heidegger asserts that the essence of action is accomplishment. For accomplishment to be realised something must *be* in the first place, and nothing *is* more than Being. “Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man” and in that sense, is action. “Thinking acts insofar as it thinks.”

Thinking has been subordinated to doing and making and in this it has been rendered inert before the sciences, becoming nothing more than a tool for them or a technique allowing us to ‘do’ more and ‘make’ better things.

The notion of “care” Heidegger espoused in *Being and Time* precisely serves to bring us back from this to our essence; thinking (that is, meditating on our relation to Being) so that we can be human and not inhuman; that is, not outside our essences. But what is our essence, our *humanitas* [human nature]?

Humanism and *Humanitas*

Every form of humanism is grounded in metaphysics because they can only be erected on an “already established interpretation of… beings as a whole.” Metaphysics is the way Dasein goes ‘beyond beings’ to the way in which those beings are first disclosed for him or her. It is thus essentially and necessarily humanistic.

Metaphysics has always assumed that the essence of the human being is the *animal rationale* and this is true even when the essence of the individual is posited as spirit or mind. Heidegger calls this thinking in terms of *Homo animalis* rather than our *humanitas*. And this is precisely the limit of metaphysics; although it reveals beings as a whole (thereby going ‘beyond’ individual beings), it cannot “ask about the truth of Being itself.” Being unable to ask this question prohibits it from reaching the essence of human beings because the essence of “man” lies in the truth of Being, “where he is claimed by Being.” Metaphysics thinks of human beings as just living creatures among other living creatures and in this it misses *humanitas*.

So what is the “essence” of the human being? Heidegger says our essence, or “way of Being”, is *ek-sistence* and defines this as “standing in the clearing of Being”. The “ek-” in ek-sistence refers to the term “ecstatic” which means to “stand out”. It is because human beings, unique in the known universe, stand out in Being in this way that we take the “clearing of Being, into “care”” thus preserving, or guarding the truth of, it. What all of this means is that as ek-sisting beings, humans let beings “appear in the light of Being as the beings they are.”

In this, metaphysics has it backwards, our existence is not grounded in reason, rather, our *ek*-sistence is the ground of the possibility of reason. In addition, being in the clearing of Being, “which alone is “world,”” also allows us to have language. Language is not merely a communicative tool for Heidegger, nor is it a symbolic thing. Rather, it is “the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself.” Language is central for Heidegger as its essence is the “house of Being”, that is, the “home of man’s essence… in which man ek-sists by dwelling…”

Now, with everything said thus far, it sounds as if Dasein produces Being in some way and in *Being and Time* Heidegger actually says, “Only so long as Dasein is, is there Being”. He stands by this but clarifies the statement by saying that Being is absolutely not the product of humans. Rather, the fact that Dasein is in its essence, the clearing of Being, is “the dispensation of Being itself.” Being itself cannot be grounded in any being because it is “*transcendens*, pure and simple.”

Being reveals itself in human “ecstatic projection”, a way of being that stands out projecting itself towards its future possibilities but always as having been thrown in the past. And what actually performs this throwing of the human in its projection is precisely Being itself. In an interesting passage, Hediegger says, “Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being… [He has been] called by Being itself into the preservation of Being’s truth.”

The fact that we are estranged from our roots in Being Heidegger calls *homelessness*, and he laments that it is becoming the “destiny of the world.”

So Heidegger’s ek-sistence has nothing to do with existence and he takes the chance to distance himself from Sartre’s famous expression, *existentia* precedes *essentia*. With this, Sartre reversed the traditional opinion since Plato but “the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement.” Sartre hasn’t grasped the truth of Being with this and so remains stranded above Being.

Because humanism cannot go beyond the metaphysical to the realm of Being, it can never realise the true essence of the human being (our *humanitas*) and to that extent Heidegger maintains that the “thinking in *Being and Time* is against humanism.” This is obviously not to say that Heidegger advocates the inhuman. On the contrary, he is opposed to humanism because it “does not set the *humanitas* of man high enough.”

Humanism by any Other Name

Heidegger now wonders if we should even keep the name “humanism” considering he is proposing redefining it so drastically. He discusses five ways his *humanitas* breaks with traditional humanism and why this is not a bad thing:

1. To be against humanism doesn’t mean to be for the inhuman and the brutal.
2. To be against logic doesn’t mean to be for the irrational and the illogical. It is merely the recognition that logic is confined to “beings in their Being” and doesn’t penetrate to Being itself by what Heidegger calls *logos*.
3. To be against values doesn’t mean to reject meaning and deem everything valueless. Rather it suggests that valuing a thing actually robs it of its worth by reducing it to a mere object to be appraised by human beings. “Every valuing… is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings be: valid.”
4. To say that the Being of human beings is being-in-the-world is not to downgrade us to worldly things unbound from “transcendence” or reduce philosophy to positivism. For Heidegger “world” is the openness of Being in which the human being ek-sists.
5. To affirm after Nietzsche that God is dead is not to affirm atheism. Nor is it to be stalled in indifference about whether God exists or not, nor is it to fall prey to nihilism. Rather, Heidegger’s approach dismisses all of these metaphysical concerns and takes thinking back to Being, not by failing to take a position on them, but by turning to more essential concerns. Metaphysics is not overcome “by climbing still higher… [but by] climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest [i.e. the clearing of Being]”.

Ethics and Ontology

Heidegger begins his discussion of ethics the way he always does, by returning to the Greeks. We usually think of ethics as being a code of conduct but *ethos* originally meant “abode, dwelling place”. Since we have already seen that human beings dwell in the clearing of Being in their essence, it is this that is the original ethics. But this ethics is actually ontology. Heidegger now turns to ontology and finds that it remains locked in the conceptual and fails to think the truth of Being. The result is that neither ethics nor ontology are capable of penetrating to the truth of Being and so they “no longer ha[ve] any basis in this sphere [of the truth of Being]”.

The Theoretical and the Practical

In a similar way, Heidegger claims that “the thinking that ponders the truth of Being… is neither theoretical nor practical. It comes to pass before this distinction. Such thinking is, insofar as it is, recollection of Being and nothing else… it lets Being – be.” The thinking that thinks Being precedes contemplation because it “cares for the light in which a seeing, as *theoria*, can first live and move.” Since thinking translates Being into language, it is a deed but a “deed that also surpasses all *praxis*”.

Nihilation and the Nothing

Heidegger also spends some time talking about nihilation. What nihilates appears as the negative, the “no”. But it would be a mistake to see this as a denial carried out by a human subject, an *ego cogito*. Nihilation only unfolds in Being itself, not in human existence, and as such belongs to the essence of the human being who ek-sists. This explains why, if one looks for nihilation in the world of beings, one will never find it; because it doesn’t exist in beings themselves, it exists in Being. This nihilating which takes place in Being, Heidegger calls the *nothing*. “Hence, because it thinks Being, thinking thinks the nothing.”