**“On the Essence of Truth” by Martin Heidegger**

“On the Essence of Truth” is a lecture given by Heidegger in 1930. It adds to the description Heidegger gave of truth in *Being and Time* as a fundamental unconcealing (paradoxically rooted in an ‘older’ concealing) in opposition to the traditional understanding of truth as correspondence.

Truth as Correspondence and Comportment

Heidegger first wonders about the usual concept of truth. He tries out the proposition that “the true is the actual”, as in true gold is ‘actual’ (i.e. not ‘false’) gold. But even ‘false’ gold, something which only seems to be gold, is still something actual, so this can’t be the definition we are looking for. “Genuine gold is that actual gold the actuality of which is in accordance with what, always and in advance, we “properly” mean by “gold.”” When the being itself is in accord with our understanding of the thing, then it is true. There is also another way to think about truth. It also applies, not just to beings themselves, but to propositions *about* things. So we say that a “statement is true if what it means and says is in accordance with the matter about which the statement is made.”

Truth, then, is built on accord, or *correspondence*, and this dual nature of accord is captured in the traditional definition of truth: “*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*… truth is the correspondence of the matter to knowledge.” The word for this is *correctness*. Heidegger also notes that untruth is simply the opposite; i.e. the non-accordance, or non-correspondence, of the matter to knowledge. Untruth therefore “falls outside the essence of truth.”

Since Heidegger considers “material truth” (the correspondence of the being itself to our knowledge of it) to be a theological justification for “propositional truth” (the accordance of the being itself with the statement), he will purge the theological aspect and take the traditional definition of truth to be the latter.

Now, he asks a question. How can the statement accord with the thing? The two are after all, completely different, in almost every imaginable aspect. Correspondence here cannot consist in a “thing-like approximation” because the two ‘things’ are totally different. So how are they related?

The statement presents the object (Heidegger’s example is a coin) and in doing so, describes *how* the object is presented (as round, or as made of copper, etc.). To ‘present’ means to “let the thing stand opposed as object.” But in order to stand opposed the statement like this, the thing must “traverse an open field of opposedness” without losing its essence as a thing. The openness of this “open region” is not created by the statement, but it uses it as a way of relating to the thing. This relating, between the statement and the thing, which takes place in the open region, Heidegger calls *comportment*. All comportment (relating in/through the open region) is only possible because the thing is opened up *as such*, i.e. as a being. This opening up in which a being appears as a being was known “early in Western thinking as “what is present” and for a long time has been named “being.””

If correctness; that is, the correspondence of the statement to the thing, is only possible “through this openness of comportment, then what first makes correctness possible must with more original right be taken as the essence of truth… Truth does not originally reside in the proposition.”

The Essence of Truth as Freedom and The Essence of Freedom as Ek-sistent Engagement (Letting-Be)

Next, Heidegger claims that truth as correctness, is in turn grounded in *freedom*. As he puts it: “the essence of truth (correctness of statements) is freedom.” But what does this mean? Since freedom is a property of human beings, is truth ultimately to be grounded in an arbitrary subjectivity? This prompts a discussion of the essence of freedom.

First, the freedom Heidegger is talking about here has nothing to do with human choice. Rather, it refers to a freeing-up of beings so that they may be revealed. “Freedom for what is opened up in an open region lets beings be the beings they are. Freedom now reveals itself as a letting beings be.” This “letting beings be” sounds passive, but it is actually the exact opposite; i.e. to “engage oneself with beings.” In fact, “To let be – that is, to let beings be as the beings which they are – means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself.” Heidegger calls this open region, *ta alethea*, the unconcealed.

He goes on to say that freedom, or letting-be, is intrinsically “ek-sistent”, which means standing outside itself. What does this mean? Freedom isn’t anything that is self-contained, having meaning within itself; rather, for freedom to be freedom, it must go outside itself, actively engage in the openness of the open region with beings in order to disclose them (or let them be) as beings. The essence of freedom manifests then, in Heidegger’s words, as “exposure to the disclosedness of beings.”

Now Heidegger says something interesting. Through this ek-sistent engagement; i.e. freedom, “the openness of the open region, i.e., the “there” [“*Da*”], is what it is. In Da-sein the essential ground, long ungrounded, on the basis of which man is able to ek-sist, is preserved for him.” This is the first time I am aware of Heidegger using the word ‘Da-sein’ not as a synonym for human being, but as the ground on which man is able to ek-sist. What does it all mean? Human ek-sistence grounded in the openness of the open region; i.e. in Da-sein, “is exposure to the disclosedness of beings as such.” This is why Heidegger calls it ‘ek-sistence’ rather than ‘existence’; to draw attention to the fact that humans are a standing outside of themselves. The essence of human being is to go outside itself, in the openness of the open region, as disclosure of beings. And this disclosure of beings in freedom is the essence of truth (as correctness).

Now we can see that human beings don’t ““possess” freedom as a property. At best, the converse holds: freedom, ek-sistent, disclosive Da-sein, possesses man”. Being exposed (ek-sisting) in the openness of the open region this way, man doesn’t exist, rather “man *is* in the manner of ek-sistence.”

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| Comportment  Statement Thing | Da-sein  Being(s) as a whole  Freedom  Beings |

The Essence of Untruth

Next, Heidegger returns to the idea of untruth:

However, because truth is in essence freedom, historical man can, in letting beings be, also *not* let beings be the beings which they are and as they are. Then beings are covered up and distorted. Semblance comes to power. In it the nonessence of truth comes to the fore. However, because ek-sistent freedom as the essence of truth is not a property of man; because on the contrary man eksists and so becomes capable of history only as the property of this freedom; the nonessence of truth cannot first arise subsequently from mere human incapacity and negligence. Rather, untruth must derive from the essence of truth.

So, the essence of truth (as correctness) is freedom, and the essence of freedom is the ek-sistent engagement with beings as a disclosive letting beings be within the openness of the open region (Da-sein). But freedom can also, in letting beings be, let them *not* be what they are, which is untruth. This means that untruth derives from freedom (which is also the essence of truth). It also means that “truth and untruth are, *in essence, not* irrelevant to one another, but rather belong together… [and this is why it is] possible for a true proposition to enter into pointed opposition to the corresponding untrue proposition.”

Since we saw earlier that truth is, in actual fact, not exhausted by the correctness of statements (it’s essence lies in freedom), then neither can untruth (i.e. “the nonessence in the essence of truth”) “be equated with the incorrectness of judgments.” Instead, it must also have a deeper meaning also buried somehow in freedom. This is what we will explore in the next section.

Correctness (truth)

Incorrectness / semblance (untruth)

Freedom ((Nonessence in the) Essence of truth)

Ek-sistent engagement as disclosive letting-be / not letting be (Essence of freedom)

Attunement and Untruth as Concealing

Beings as a whole are disclosed in a comportment (relating in/through the open region) which is always *attuned*. “Being attuned, i.e., ek-sistent exposedness to beings as a whole” is the *way* comportment to beings as a whole is realised. All historical man’s comportment is thus attuned, which basically means that all of our relations to individual beings are necessarily built on, or include, this apprehension of, or orientation towards, beings as a whole (Heidegger talks about attunement as profound boredom, joy, and anxiety in *What is Metaphysics*). Attunement can be confused for emotion, but it isn’t. Rather, we are only able to ‘experience’ and ‘feel’ because we are attuned.

So, the disclosure of individual beings is only possible because we have already been attuned to beings as a whole. But from the point of view of the everyday, this “as a whole” appears “incalculable and incomprehensible.” It certainly can’t be understood from beings themselves. There is a reason for this. “Precisely because letting be always lets beings be in a particular comportment that relates to them and thus discloses them, it conceals beings as a whole. Letting-be is intrinsically at the same time a concealing.”

Untruth as Errancy

If truth is ultimately grounded in the disclosedness of freedom, “concealment is then undisclosedness and accordingly the untruth that is most proper to the essence of truth.” Since we have seen that in disclosing individual beings, being as a whole is necessarily concealed, this means that, “untruth proper, is older than every openedness of this or that being.” This is important, but even more essential to Heidegger’s thought here is the realisation that even this initial concealing of beings (Heidegger also uses the word ‘being’) as a whole is itself concealed and it is this *meta*-concealing which conserves the letting-be which allows individual beings to be disclosed. Heidegger calls this concealing of what is concealed, “the mystery; not a particular mystery regarding this or that, but rather the one mystery – that… holds sway throughout man’s Da-sein.”

“In letting beings as a whole be, which discloses and at the same time conceals, it happens that concealing appears as what is first of all concealed. Insofar as it ek-sists, Da-sein conserves the first and broadest undisclosedness, untruth proper. The proper nonessence of truth is the mystery.” It should be noted that the ‘non’ in ‘nonessence’ here doesn’t mean negative or inferior. Rather, it is in fact, a “pre-essential essence” in the sense that without it, there can be no truth.

In our constant comportment towards beings, our distracted residing in what is readily available and always accessible, we have let a *forgottenness* take precedence. What has been forgotten? The mystery itself; i.e. the fact that the concealment (of beings as a whole) has concealed itself. In the midst of forgottenness, we continually supply ourselves with standards but we do so without considering the ground or the essence of those standards. Even worse, we take ourselves, “as subject, to be the standard for all beings”. We treat individual beings as if they were somehow “open of and in themselves” (e.g. physicalism), a state Heidegger calls *in-sistence*, as distinguished from *ek-sistence*. “As *ek-sistent, Dasein is insistent*. Even in insistent existence the mystery holds sway, but as the forgotten and hence “unessential” essence of truth.”

It is important to note that even in *insistent* existence, the mystery (the concealment of the concealment of beings as a whole) still operates; i.e. it hasn’t been eliminated, it has just been forgotten. As Heidegger puts it; “As insistent, man is turned towards the most readily available beings. But he insists only by being already ek-sistent…”

This flight from the mystery towards readily available beings is *errancy*, which is to be understood primarily as “to wander from the right way”, rather than “to fall into error.” One has always gone astray in *errancy* because in insisting, Dasein is already ek-sisting. Errancy is the “counter-essence to the primordial essence of truth” as it opens up an open region for *error*. However, “as leading astray, errancy at the same time contributes to a possibility that man is capable of drawing up from his ek-sistence – the possibility that, by experiencing errancy itself and by not mistaking the mystery of Da-sein, he *not* let himself be led astray.”

Philosophy

Heidegger also discusses history in this lecture. It is when “the first thinker takes a questioning stand with regard to the unconcealment of beings by asking: what are beings?”, that *history* begins, because it is at this time that beings as a whole, as opposed to individual beings themselves, first come into focus. Prior to this, the mystery reigned, in which not only were beings as a whole concealed but the fact of this concealment was also concealed. As Heidegger says, “In the thinking of Being the liberation of man for ek-sistence, the liberation that grounds history, is put into words.”

This questioning into the “original truth of being as such as a whole” is precisely what philosophy is. “Philosophical thinking is gentle releasement that does not renounce the concealment of being as a whole… In the gentle sternness and stern gentleness with which it lets being as such be as a whole, philosophy becomes a questioning which does not cling solely to beings…”

What makes philosophical thinking difficult, “discordant” as Heidegger puts it, is that in delving into the essence of truth, it discovers that that essence also “contains the nonessence and above all holds sway as concealing”.

The Essence of Truth and the Truth of Essence

So, “Errancy and the concealing of what is concealed belong to the primordial essence of truth. Freedom, conceived on the basis of the in-sistent ek-sistence of Dasein, is the essence of truth (in the sense of the correctness of presenting) only because freedom itself originates from the primordial essence of truth, the rule of the mystery in errancy.” This is something of a confusing passage so let’s break it down:

*Errancy and the concealing of what is concealed belong to the primordial essence of truth.* The primordial essence of truth can ultimately be traced back to the one mystery (the first concealing) and this original act concealing leads to errancy.

*Freedom… is the essence of truth… only because freedom itself originates from the primordial essence of truth, the rule of the mystery in errancy*. Freedom, i.e. letting beings be (both as they are (correctness) and not as they are (incorrectness)), can be the essence of truth only because it is in turn grounded in the one mystery. Why? Because it is only with the double concealment; i.e. the concealing of beings as a whole and the concealing of this concealing (the one mystery, or the primordial essence of truth), that beings are first able to be disclosed as beings; i.e. freedom.

Correctness (truth)

Incorrectness / semblance (untruth)

Freedom (essence of truth)

Disclosive letting-beings-be (truth) || Concealing of beings as a whole (untruth)

The one mystery (“proper non-essence of truth” or “primordial essence of truth”)

Heidegger now claims that the “question of the essence of truth arises from the question of the truth of essence.” In the first, “essence” means the *whatness* and “truth” is a characteristic of knowledge (correctness). In the second, “essence” is “understood verbally” and in it, “Beyng is thought as the difference that holds sway between Being and beings.” Heidegger just throws this new term ‘Beyng’ in here and doesn’t clarify what he means by it at all but it appears to mean something like that by which Being allows itself to be known as beings. Perhaps the ‘essence of Being’? Meanwhile ‘truth’ in the second clause “signifies the sheltering that clears as the basic characteristic of Being.” We’ve already seen that truth is ultimately a disclosing (i.e. not merely correspondence), and this is why Heidegger calls this “sheltering that clears”, truth.

So what is the sheltering that clears? Well, like Beyng, Heidegger doesn’t say much about it but he does add that; “Because sheltering that clears belongs to it, Being appears primordially in the light of concealing withdrawal. The name of this clearing is *aletheia*.” So Being is ultimately an unconcealing (of beings) (*aletheia*, or a “sheltering that clears”), and as an unconcealing it doesn’t and can’t appear as something like a being for us, something we can grasp; rather, it appears as a “concealing withdrawal”. It is precisely only in the way it *doesn’t* appear that we can apprehend it.

This all allows Heidegger to say, in what amounts to the denouement of the lecture, that “*the essence of truth is the truth of essence*”; i.e. “Sheltering that clears is – i.e., lets essentially unfold – accordance between knowledge and beings.” In other words, truth as accordance is founded on a deeper truth, namely, the sheltering that clears.

At the end of the lecture, Heidegger notes that “the meaning… of the truth of Being and not merely of beings, remains intentionally undeveloped.” In addition, he says, we haven’t yet gotten off the path of metaphysics. Nevertheless, the lecture’s decisive steps, “which lead from truth as correctness to ek-sistent freedom, and from the latter to truth as concealing and as errancy” changes the questioning in a way that “belongs to the overcoming of metaphysics.”