

Neither Being nor Non-being: On the Heidegger's Concealed State of Beings

Hongcheng Wang

School of Philosophy and Social Development, Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong, China

Abstract: Heidegger's exploration of "concealed" and "disclosed" being in *Being and Time* and later works offers key insights into ontology. Through a critique of realism, Heidegger introduces the concept of "nature" to reveal a concealed mode of being that transcends Dasein's understanding, while still avoiding the extremes of subjectivism and realism. This concealment neither fully depends on Dasein's disclosure nor exists independently, challenging traditional subject-object dualisms. The research examines how Heidegger distinguishes between concealment and disclosure, offering a novel perspective on the interrelation between Being and Dasein. This study demonstrates how Heidegger's ontology goes beyond subjectivism, contributing to a deeper understanding of the concealed dimensions of Being, and advancing a more comprehensive ontological framework that bridges both fundamental ontology and metontology.

Keywords: Heidegger; Concealment; Nature; World

1. Introduction

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger confines the scope of his discussion about Being entirely within the world. Concerning Being that are apart from the world, he makes the following statement: "When Dasein no longer exists, 'independence' is also no longer 'there', and 'being-in-itself' is no longer 'there'. At that time, such things are neither intelligible nor unintelligible. Beings within the world can then neither be disclosed nor concealed. At that time, it cannot be said that beings exist, nor can it be said that beings do not exist."^[1] The last sentence of this passage is clearly perplexing, as it seems to describe a mysterious "intermediate state" of Being: neither non-existent nor existent. This expression seems to touch upon some boundary of being, suggesting the possibility

that beings could elude the totalizing grasp of Being. But what exactly does it mean? This paper will refer to this "intermediate state" of beings as the concealed of beings, and, by drawing on Heidegger's descriptions of this concealed state in his early and middle-period works, will analyze the significance of expressing such concealment in such an extremely ambiguous manner.

2. Heidegger's Critique of Realism and the Paradox of External Reality

Can beings exist independently of the world? From Heidegger's critique of realism, it seems he would not agree that beings possess such autonomous independence. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger critiques a form of realism that supports the existence of an "external world." Realists of this kind insist that entities, as the essence of beings, can exist prior to the world, or that reality can exist independently of consciousness, and they "believe that the reality of the 'world' needs to be proven and can be proven." However, from Heidegger's perspective, in order to answer the question of whether "external reality can exist independently," we must first examine the ontological constitution of Dasein. These realists, by ignoring the fundamental constitution of Dasein, confuse the existence of entities within the world with the independent status of an ultimate reality devoid of worldliness. They attempt to demonstrate the consistency between these two through logic. But in fact, they overestimate the power of logical argumentation. When they find that logic does not help them access the realm of "external reality," they often abandon logic and begin to posit some incomprehensible entity as the legislator of being. Yet such a hypothesis clearly, "it is to assume something on the order of a divine understanding, a God's-eye point of view from which the question can be asked."^[2] Thus, although these realists originally sought to prove the independence of ultimate reality, they

ultimately rely on faith to guarantee it. Undoubtedly, there is an irreconcilable conflict between the reliance on logical proof and faith in a legislator of being, and this conflict forces these realists into a kind of skepticism that denies the Dasein-like mode of truth. As David R. Cerbone points out: “Skepticism and realism are, in other words, two sides of the same coin, since realism concedes, and indeed is predicated on, the legitimacy of skepticism’s demands.”^[3] Heidegger could not accept the inconsistency in the argumentation of external realists. He believed that the reality (presence-at-hand) of the “world” does not need to be guaranteed by faith, because prior to all faith “the peculiar thing is just that the world is ‘there’ before all belief.”^[4] After all, everyone already has some understanding of their being-in-the-world, and the “independence” of entities is always concealed within this understanding. As Hoffman points out, if we say that entities are “in-themselves,” it is only because we “understand and conceptualize” this “characteristic of beings.” Since all “characteristics of beings” are related to Dasein, the in-itself state of entities is also related to Dasein. This means that the so-called “in-itself reality” independent of Dasein is actually a hypothetical situation imagined by Dasein, and the premise of this hypothesis is that we are aware of positing an “external reality” independent of ourselves.^[5] Clearly, this premise is deliberately concealed by realists. Thus, when a realist claims that their argument does not rely on faith, their method of “proving” the independence of “ultimate reality” can only be to first package something understandable as an incomprehensible “external reality” and then reveal the deliberately overlooked understandable part, in order to demonstrate that the “external reality” is accessible. However, the true “in-itself reality” never actually appears in this “argument”; what is discussed is always something understandable pretending to be incomprehensible. These realists, who first suspend the phenomenon of being-in-the-world and then rely on faith to guarantee the reality of entities, are also called skeptics by Heidegger. From Heidegger’s perspective, these skeptics are always self-contradictory, since no one truly holds an absolute skeptical attitude. At most, skepticism is used as a purely formal intellectual exercise or as a case of mental disorder. Therefore, “The genuine solution to the problem

of the reality of the external world consists in the insight that this is no problem at all, but rather an absurdity.”^[6]

Since the problem of the reality of the external world, as explored by realists, is itself a paradox, can we then assume that Heidegger completely denies that beings possess a certain kind of independence? Not entirely. Heidegger does not wholly reject realism. In his critique of it, he makes the following statement: “As long as an ontological proposition does not deny the present-at-hand existence of entities within the world, it coincides with the realist proposition in conclusion, which might appear as a form of praise. However, realism holds that the reality of the ‘world’ requires proof and can be proven, and this is where the ontological proposition fundamentally differs from all forms of realism.”^[1] Here, Heidegger is implying that if external realists posit an “external world” but claim that this “external world” resists proof and cannot be proven, their view would not conflict with existential ontology.

We can interpret this as Heidegger indeed suggesting a position that entities possess a mysterious mode of being apart from the world. Since for Heidegger, the world is not a simple spatial existence, and it does not have an inside-outside distinction, the independent state of the entities discussed here can be termed their “concealed being.” This “concealed being” contrasts with the disclosed existence corresponding to the world, as it transcends Dasein’s understanding.

Evidence supporting this perspective can be found in the chapter on the “external world” problem: “Entities do not exist by virtue of the experiences, recognitions, and apprehensions through which they are unfolded, disclosed, and determined (in the original German, this ‘exist’ is italicized, editor’s note). However, being only ‘exists’ in the understanding of a certain entity—and understanding of being, as such, originally belongs to the being of that entity.”^[1] Entities possess a concealed state “apart from the world,” which allows them to exist independently of understanding, in a mysterious mode that is “both existing and not existing.” However, being can only unfold itself through understanding, which is why the word “exists” in the second sentence is put in quotation marks, indicating that “existence” here refers to this unfolding, not implying that being would completely “cease to exist” without Dasein

(since Heidegger is very precise with his use of quotation marks, as can be seen in his distinction between world and “world”). In contrast, the word “exist” in the previous sentence is italicized rather than placed in quotation marks, which indicates that entities still exist even when they are not understood; however, this state differs from readiness-to-hand, presence-at-hand, and existence. The use of italics shows that, although Heidegger describes the state of beings when Dasein is no longer existent as “neither existent nor non-existent,” he is merely borrowing common terminology to highlight the distinctiveness of this state. Fundamentally, this state still belongs to being. Joan Stambaugh, the first English translator of *Being and Time*, adds a footnote to this sentence: “But this understanding lies in hearing, though this does not mean that ‘being’ is merely ‘subjective.’ Instead, it means that being (as the being of entities) cannot be regarded as the ‘internal’ of Dasein (as being-thrown).”^[1] Clearly, Stambaugh has also perceived the deeper meaning of the quotation marks used in this context.

3. The Duality of Disclosure and Concealment in Heidegger’s Ontology

If we attempt to elucidate the concealed being solely by analyzing such subtle punctuation, it is evidently insufficiently convincing. We must acknowledge that without engaging with Heidegger’s other texts, it is challenging to directly discern from *Being and Time* that beings possess a concealed mode of being. The reason for this difficulty seems evident: in *Being and Time*, Heidegger focuses on the analysis of Dasein’s construction of being-in-the-world, without yet delving into the dimension “beyond the world.” Thus, he treats concealment as the background for analyzing beings within the world, rather than as a direct thematic focus.

However, this does not mean that Heidegger did not address issues related to concealment during this period. As early as 1925, in his lectures, Heidegger stated: “Beings as ‘in itself,’ is independent of any apprehension on our part; however, this being can only be discovered in encounters, and it can only be explained and understood based on a phenomenological exposition and interpretation of the structures of such encounters.” This seems to suggest that beings other than Dasein possess not only the

modes of exist ready-to-hand and present-at-hand but also a mode of exist “in itself,” independent of apprehension (understanding). However, this conclusion is drawn somewhat hastily, as this statement can also be interpreted to mean that as long as a being exists within the world, it must be brought forth by Dasein. A being that is not grasped by Dasein is simply an unknowable enigma. While these two interpretations differ on whether beings can exist outside understanding, both agree on one point: the state of a being outside understanding can only be described indirectly. The world exists alongside Dasein, and beings that exist independently of Dasein—that is, exist without a world—are fundamentally outside the realm of description. For such beings, whether one claims they exist or do not exist is equally inappropriate, for in Heidegger’s framework at the time of *Being and Time*, Being and world are inseparable. Dreyfus sharply summarized Being as “being-understood,” and if we accept this view, then beings outside the world are practically equivalent to nonexistence. Yet Heidegger’s wording on this issue is not so definitive; he simply maintains that in such a case, “we cannot say that a being exists, nor can we say that it does not exist.” This suspends such an “external reality” in a realm entirely different from existence, placing it in a phenomenological epoché.

In 1927, Heidegger continued to contemplate this “other” that exists apart from the world. He examined the relationship between the “totality of beings” and the world by analyzing “nature” as the “sum total of all beings.” He argued that prior to entering our world, present-at-hand beings are merely a concealed part of “nature.” “In dealing with beings as nature in the broadest sense, we apprehend that beings, as present-at-hand, as something we encounter and hand over to other beings, already existed independently of us.”^[7] This “nature” refers to “the totality of beings” and is borrowed from the common understanding of objective nature, rather than being Heidegger’s own concept. Heidegger uses it here to express that within the totality of beings as nature, there remains a portion that is “undiscovered.” “Being-in-the-world pertains to the discovered nature of beings, while ‘being-in-the-world’ does not belong to the existence of nature itself.”^[8] This part of nature’s existence is not included within “being-in-the-world,” yet it can

exist in a “non-worldly” manner, meaning it is in some sense independent of our existential activities. Its existence does not depend on us discovering it, nor on its appearing within our world.

Thus, Heidegger uses the concept of “nature” to distinguish between two states of exist: one is the “discovered” state of beings as being-in-the-world, and the other is the “undiscovered” state, suspended through the understanding of Dasein but never revealed. This undiscovered, concealed state embodies the most fundamental form of concealment, resisting all direct description. The moment we attempt any description of it, it is uncovered (understood) and becomes a being-in-the-world. This means we can only ever grasp discovered beings, but we cannot grasp the undiscovered “being”, even though this “being” is always present (in concealed existence). Hoffmann interprets “nature” in this context as: “(at least in early Heidegger) nature is precisely that external, untamed entity that contrasts with the man-made world.” We cannot directly encounter “nature” in our everyday existence because the prerequisite for understanding it is to renounce all of our interpretive capacities. Therefore, the present-at-hand is not something created by the labor of Dasein’s engagement, but rather something brought into the world of Dasein through existential activity. With “nature” as this background, when we encounter present-at-hand entities in the world, we understand their independence as part of their mode of being. Dreyfus also contends that it is precisely because we understand the “independence” of present-at-hand entities that we can ask questions such as: “What was here before we began existing? And what will remain in nature if Dasein ceases to exist?”^[9]

However, in this case, Heidegger’s treatment of the undiscovered “beings” (nature) seems quite similar to Kant’s notion of the thing-in-itself, even appearing to resemble the realists whom he critiques in *Being and Time*. Dostal has criticized Heidegger on this point, arguing that the significant gap between Dasein and present-at-hand entities leads to an ontological dilemma that cannot be overcome. According to Dostal, “this dilemma is primarily related to the methodological priority of Dasein. The priority of Dasein makes it difficult for present-at-hand entities to exist independently of Dasein. While such independence is not necessary

epistemologically, it is necessary ontologically.” Yet, because undiscovered beings (nature) are independent of Dasein, Dostal believes that Heidegger’s acknowledgment of these undiscovered beings (nature) implies a regression to the positions of Kant and Husserl, whom he critiques. Vallicella, a Kantian, has also questioned Heidegger’s ontology from this angle. According to him, if we follow Heidegger’s logic, after the extinction of humans on Earth, although Being would no longer be understood, they would still exist. In this case, Being would be externally posited as the truth of beings. However, since Heidegger emphasizes that Being is constitutive of beings, this would imply that beings are both independent and not independent of Dasein. Thus, Vallicella argues that Heidegger ambiguously admits the thing-in-itself as beings without Being, “only overcoming the dualism between phenomena and the thing-in-itself through vague and ambiguous language.”

The criticisms by Dostal and Vallicella are based on a common misunderstanding, which is to interpret early Heidegger as a kind of “subjectivism” or “philosophical anthropology”. They believe that beings in Heidegger’s existentialism can only exist as being-in-the-world, meaning that they can only exist in the mode of disclosedness. Therefore, both critics interpret the concealment of the undiscovered “Being” as an extension of the disclosed exist of discovered Being. After all, for traditional metaphysicians, beings either exist or they do not—there is no “neither existence nor non-existence” concealed state. Yet Heidegger’s analysis of “nature” is precisely intended to prevent others from understanding existence solely from the standpoint of disclosure. He uses the “objectivity” of nature to respond to interpretations of his work as “subjectivism.”

Nevertheless, scholars such as Vallicella not only reject this “defense” but argue that this defense leads to beings being both “internal” and “external” to Dasein. In fact, the very issue these critics highlight is precisely where Heidegger breaks from traditional philosophy—this is the point of transcendence in his existentialism. In distinguishing between the discovered and undiscovered “nature”, Heidegger grants existence two meanings: “disclosure” and “concealment”. Beings can be “external” to Dasein because they exist as

concealment, in their “primordial” form; and beings can be “internal” to Dasein because they exist as being-in-the-world, disclosed through openness. It is precisely because existence can be both “disclosed” and “concealment” that beings are neither strictly “internal” nor “external” to Dasein. Once they are discovered, they exist as being-in-the-world, alongside with Dasein.

Dostal and Vallicella do acknowledge that “existence” has two meanings, but confined by formal logic, they cannot comprehend how a being can occupy a state of “neither internal nor external” to Dasein. For these scholars, the ambiguity of the term “existence” is illogical, and thus they treat this duality as a contradiction or conflict. They insist on limiting the meaning of existence to the level of disclosure. Since they equate “existence” with openness and intelligibility, they continue to regard Heidegger as a form of “subjectivism”. However, because this interpretive framework cannot explain the concealed being of “nature,” they believe that Heidegger’s defense not only fails to solve the problem but turns what could have been a coherent “subjectivism” into a “subjectivism” with internal contradictions^[10].

4. Conclusion

Some may argue that if the ambiguity of existence has led to misunderstandings of Heidegger, wouldn’t it be helpful to differentiate between the two levels of “existence” using two distinct concepts? However, this approach is also problematic. Dreyfus attempted such a distinction by separating the present-at-hand existence of beings from the thing-in-itself nature of undiscovered “beings” (nature), suggesting that “natural beings are independent of us, while the existence of nature depends on us.” This distinction fails because Dreyfus did not incorporate the more primordial aspect of “being” (Seyn) into his interpretation. Instead, he explained “existence” purely in terms of intelligibility and disclosure, which equates the concealed being of “nature” with a kind of “non-existence.” This interpretation implies that without Dasein’s understanding, beings would cease to exist. Consequently, under Dreyfus’s interpretation, not only does the existence of being-in-the-world depend on Dasein, but so does the existence of undiscovered beings, which still risks interpreting Heidegger as a

form of “subjectivism.”

We also cannot fully separate the two meanings of existence. The “concealed being” that transcends understanding is not an “objective externality.” It transcends understanding precisely because we acknowledge or understand it as something that is “beyond understanding.” This acknowledgment of the “beyond understanding” is not a naive presumption, as in external realism, but an honest admission of our necessary ignorance. In other words, although concealed being transcends understanding, it is still understood in a very weak sense—it occupies a liminal space of understanding. Ultimately, both concealed being and disclosed existence refer to the same being. Existence itself unfolds through a dynamic of both concealment and disclosure. Thus, concealed being and disclosed existence cannot be conflated, nor can they be entirely separated. This is why Dostal, by interpreting concealed being as disclosed existence, views Heidegger’s ontology as a form of “subjectivism”; and when Dreyfus equates concealed being with non-existence, he still interprets Heidegger’s ontology as “subjectivism.”

In reality, as long as we continue to use binary, determinate language, any description of concealed being will inevitably lead to misinterpretation. Heidegger clearly recognized this tension, but in *Being and Time*, he was unable to resolve it. After all, *Being and Time* was an academic work written for his tenure application, and thus had to employ determinate language. Yet concealed being transcends the limits of such language, which is why Heidegger used the ambiguous phrase “neither being nor non-being” to bracket this crucial ontological issue.

Furthermore, *Being and Time* analyzes the relationship between humans and Being entirely from the perspective of Dasein, tracing Dasein’s primordial disclosure of Being. In this context, any exploration of beings outside Dasein’s horizon of existence would obstruct the process of primordial unconcealment. However, in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, when Heidegger uses the commonly understood concept of “nature” to articulate the “independence” of beings, he steps beyond the horizon of existentialism. He begins to explore another dimension of beings that is closer to the common human perspective, at a metontologie

level. This dimension supplements, rather than overturns, fundamental ontology. In other words, fundamental ontology and the metontologic exploration of “nature” serve as foundations for each other, together forming a complete ontology. It is precisely this insight that led Zerbone to assert that Heidegger’s exploration of nature as the thing-in-itself provides a guarantee for his phenomenology, ensuring that his Dasein phenomenology does not conflict with common-sense notions of the objective world. Heidegger reminds us that in describing Dasein and the world, we cannot begin purely from the subject or purely from the object.

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