

## Extreme Humanism: Heidegger, Buber, and the Threshold of Language

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### Abstract

Throughout this essay I attempt to bring into focus what I see as the thorniest point of proximity between two giants in twentieth-century ontology; that is, the nature of language in the delineation between human beings and animals within the work of Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber. I consider Heidegger's conception of world in an attempt to understand how he sees the abyss—as well as the bridge—between animals and humankind. Buber's more encompassing view of being seems to be a fruitful catalyst for moving Heidegger closer to something at which he hints but from which he withdraws. By exploring the relationship among human beings, animals, and language, I hope to offer a way of encountering animal life that, although it speaks to Heidegger, is actually a way of being in the world that apparently was closed off to him.

### Essay

What is the nature of language? What is the language of nature? Is it solely language that distinguishes human beings from animals, or is the difference between the two more substantive? Eschewing both Aristotelian empiricism which sought to define human beings as animals with reason and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition in which YHWH as creator-god placed human beings (created in the image of the divine) in a superior and dominant position over dumb beings (who in turn received their names from their recently created lords), Heidegger seeks liberation “from the mechanistic conception of life” (Heidegger 1995, 189) as well as from the foundation offered by the Western philosophical tradition. The key difference between human beings and animals for Heidegger lies in the interrelated concepts of world and language. Heidegger considers three specific beings in his discussion of world and language: stone, animal, and human being. His discussion of these three beings accounts for approximately one-third of the text of his 1929-30 lecture course

published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. The *word*-lessness of the stone reflects its own *world*-lessness. Moreover, the animal that stands with human beings on the side of world is nevertheless deprived of that world. Heidegger further problematizes the relationship between animals and human beings in his 1946 “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” where he contends that non-languaged animals are ambivalently related to human beings: “on the one hand they are in a certain way most closely akin to us, and on the other they are at the same time separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss” (Heidegger 1998 “Letter,” 248)—itself a “bottomless” world, a world with neither ground nor substance. These essential traits make dumb animals “the most difficult to think about” (248). Yet the human being’s own relation to being (by way of language) is not necessarily any easier to grasp. Human beings both have a world and are world-forming, but this ability to form worlds cannot be reduced to the typical metaphysical relationship: that is, a human subject does not merely impose a form upon his or her objective world. Rather, the world for Heidegger is the clearing of being itself. The *worlding* of the human being grounds him or her within being, *informing* the human being’s own being.

Language, for Heidegger, is closed to the experience of dumb beings: “Because plants and animals are lodged in their respective environments but are never placed freely into the clearing of being which alone is ‘world,’ they lack language” (248). Animals are always already at home—*lodged*—within being; they do not stand out in the clearing of being like human beings do. Heidegger defines language as “the clearing-concealing advent of being itself” (249). But if there is no clearing for the animal in which to stand out (ek-sist) in the first place, then the concealment of being by language becomes an unnecessary appendage or futile adjunct to the non-human animal: “living creatures are as they are without standing outside their being as such and within the truth of being, preserving in such standing the essential nature of their being” (248). Being has always already arrived for the animal; there is no need to announce its advent by way

of language. Heidegger further explicates his notion of human existence—the standing out in world, or the clearing of being—in his 1949 “Introduction to ‘What Is Metaphysics?’”:

The being that exists is the human being. The human being alone exists. Rocks are, but they do not exist. Trees are, but they do not exist. Horses are, but they do not exist. Angels are, but they do not exist. God is, but he does not exist.... The proposition ‘the human being exists’ means: the human being is that being whose Being is distinguished by an open standing that stands in the unconcealedness of Being, proceeding from Being, in Being (Heidegger 1998 “Introduction,” 284).

Putting aside the question of domestication and enculturation of animals—which is outside the scope of this essay—an exploration of Heidegger’s conception of world would be useful in attempting an approach toward the difficult thinking necessary to understand just what he sees as the nature of the abyss as well as the nature of the kinship between animals and humankind. One wonders if it is possible to begin to close this gap. To this end, I would like to take up Martin Buber’s own ontological understanding of the relation between human beings and dumb animals in his 1923 *I and Thou* as a way of rethinking the fundamental Heideggerean question about language and non-human animals.

*World* comes to the fore within Heidegger’s exploration of the humanity of human beings. Significantly, the etymological origins of *world* tend more toward time and historicity (as in “the age or life of man”: the medieval world, for example) than the currently standard conceptualization of location and positionality (as in “citizen of the world”). In Heidegger’s use, however, *world* is never merely the earth as opposed to the heavens or the realm of the spirit; it does not indicate a realm of beings at all but rather “the openness of being” (Heidegger 1998 “Letter,” 266). This use is not quite the same as that in his lecture course, where he proposes, “Let us provisionally define world as those beings which are in each case accessible and may be dealt with, accessible in such a way that dealing with such beings is possible or necessary for the kind of being pertaining to a

particular being” (Heidegger 1995, 196). If *world* is defined—no matter how provisionally—according to accessibility of beings to other beings, then the dumb animal is not entirely deprived of it:

If by world we understand beings in their accessibility in each case, if such accessibility of beings is a fundamental character of the concept of world, and if being a living being means having access to other beings, then the animal stands on the side of man. Man and animals alike *have world*... The animal thus reveals itself as a being which *both has and does not have world* (199).

This tension among human beings, animals, world, and language/silence is not unique to Heidegger. But whereas Heidegger limits the animal’s access to language (“they lack language”), Buber opens up the possibility of standing in relation with dumb animals within language—or within the dialogue, to keep within Buber’s terminology. In fact, Buber opens up the dialogue for all of nature—be it stone or tree—as well as the supernatural or divine. Here, however, I limit the scope of my discussion to dumb animal as distinct from the languaged human being.

Buber begins his text with a description of the world: “The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude” (Buber 1970, 53). This twofold attitude mirrors the two basic word pairs that he can speak: I-Thou and I-It. While I-Thou can only be spoken “with one’s whole being” (54), I-It establishes a subject-object dichotomy and hierarchy where the subject is privileged, thereby leading to the alienation of modern human beings. A subject I cannot expand into its fullness within the fullness of its relation to an other (who is also fully expanded within the self-same relation) if everything other is only objectified and treated or encountered as mere object (that is, as an It).

For Buber, there is no difference between “being I and saying I” (54). But is Buber’s inter-subjectivity (that is, the I-Thou relation itself) yet another shoddy humanism that keeps human beings from the destiny of their being? From my understanding of Buber’s text,

he does not resort to the anthropocentric fallacy of privileging human beings over other beings: the Thou for him expands beyond the merely interpersonal to include nature, works of art, as well as the divine. Furthermore, Buber posits an ontology based solely on relation: “All actual life is encounter” (62). In this way, he too dismisses subjectivity by favoring neither a subjective I nor a subjective Thou. Instead he privileges the mutuality of the relation between the two subjects, all the while aware that this ideal mutualism can degenerate into the monologic objectification and instrumentalization of an I-It. I expands because Thou is boundless and wholly other (as opposed to being merely the other of the I). The I does not exist except insofar as it is in relation to either a Thou or an It.

Buber maintains that the first sphere of relation is life with nature: “Here the relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language. The creatures stir across from us, but they are unable to come to us, and the [Thou] we say to them sticks to the threshold of language” (56-7). In the 1957 Afterword to *I and Thou* Buber expands his notion of threshold beyond language to that of mutuality:

Animals are not twofold, like man: the twofoldness of the basic words I-[Thou] and I-It is alien to them although they can both turn toward another being and contemplate objects. We may say that in them twofoldness is latent. In the perspective of our [Thou]-saying to animals, we may call this sphere the threshold of mutuality (173).

Peter Atterton clarifies this expanded notion in his 2004 essay “Face-to-Face with the Other Animal?” Atterton explains that Buber

sought to distinguish the relation to nature from the relation that exists between persons through the introduction of the term threshold (*Schwelle*). The plant and mineral world (“from the stones to the stars” [*IT*, 173]) were said to be at the “pre-threshold” (*Vorschwelle*) of mutuality; the animal at the threshold; and the human at “over-threshold” (*Überschwelle*) (Atterton 2004, 263-4).

Only between human beings is *complete* mutuality possible, but everything in nature nonetheless has some capability for mutuality: “it is clear that the regions of nature—from rocks to plants to animals—are still defined in terms of their capacity for mutuality, and that is presumably the reason why Buber felt he could simply revise the twofold ontology of *I and Thou* [in his Afterword] rather than abandon it altogether” (264). If this is the case, then Buber’s dialogic ontology cannot be limited by the merely anthropocentric notion of dialogue, just as Heidegger’s language is beyond the merely linguistic. But is Buber’s threshold ontologically different from Heidegger’s abyss? Can Buber’s threshold serve as a bridge between the human being and the animal, or between the world of the human being and the tentative, provisional world of the animal? How is it that Heidegger is so eloquent a thinker when it comes to how human beings are able to stand in relation to architecture, poetry (poetizing), works of art, and even to being itself, but he seems unable or unwilling to address the issue of human beings standing in relation to other living beings, which is much of the focus of Buber’s work?

At first glance, the abyss separating human beings from animals within Heidegger’s work seems to allow for the greater possibility that human beings can be seen as privileged subjects and that they remain in a dominant position within a hierarchy of beings, thereby reestablishing the Judeo-Christiano-Islamic creation myth. The reestablishing of such a hierarchy, however, runs counter to Heidegger’s call to deep thinking about being and our experience of dwelling within the truth of being in the world. Within his thoughtful delineation of the human being’s existence, Heidegger emphasizes, “The proposition ‘the human being alone exists’ does not at all mean that the human being alone is a real being while all other beings are unreal and mere appearances or human representations” (Heidegger 1998 “Introduction,” 284). Rather, Heidegger questions the questionability of such a hierarchy throughout his lecture course, insisting that even amoebae are no less perfect or complete than elephants or apes: “Every animal and every species of animal as such is just as perfect and complete as any other” (Heidegger 1995, 194).

Any difference that may exist between the human being and the animal, especially with an attribution of some specific difference to the human being, abandons “the human being to the essential realm of *animalitas* (Heidegger 1998 “Letter,” 246). As far as Heidegger is concerned, we are on the wrong track if this is our method. Instead, he wants to think humanism while not privileging the human, especially over being. The human being is not the animal that has *logos* (as logic) but rather the (animal) being that lets him- or herself be gathered by *logos* (as *legen*). Just as Buber is aware of how easily the mutuality of I-Thou can collapse into the instrumentalized I-It relation of subjugation and dominance, Heidegger too considers how easy it is for the human being to stray away from his or her destiny of being. He warns that if we human beings do not allow being to inform us, we deform into something less than animal: “However ready we are to rank man as a higher being with respect to the animal, such an assessment is deeply questionable, especially when we consider that man can sink lower than any animal. No animal can become depraved in the same way as man” (Heidegger 1995, 194). Human beings can become deformed when we privilege our grasp of information as if objective data and mere facts were an unconcealing of the truth of being. If indeed “knowledge is the remembrance of being” as Heidegger reminds us in “Anaximander’s Saying” (Heidegger 2002, 263), then, the memorization of mere information (as so-called objective fact) is being’s forgetting.

We human beings also tend to forget the fact that our being is always already a being *with*. Heidegger defines the human being as one who is able to transpose him- or herself into the being of another human being. Even asking the question whether a human being can transpose into another is “fundamentally redundant”:

Insofar as human beings exist at all, they already find themselves transposed in their existence into other human beings, even if there are factually no other human beings in the vicinity. Consequently the Da-sein of man, the Da-sein in man means, not exclusively but amongst other things, being transposed into other human beings. The ability to transpose oneself into others and go along with them, with the Dasein in them, always already happens on the basis of man's Dasein, and happens as Dasein. For the being-there of Da-sein means *being with others*, precisely in the manner of Dasein, i.e., existing with others (Heidegger 1995, 205).

It is the misperception of a gap that needs to be bridged between (and among) human beings that leads philosophy astray into metaphysics and a calling for(th) empathy—a seriously flawed concept that posits a lone, solipsistic, singular subject who is isolated from others (206-7). Here Heidegger pulls back from explicitly defining the Da-sein of the human being as a being also with other non-human beings, but he leaves an opening into that possibility by “not exclusively” ruling out a transposition into the mute animal. Is this “amongst others” a gesturing toward the possibility of a co-mingling of the human being's world and the partial world of the animal? Can the misperceived gap between human beings not also point toward a misperceived abyss between human being and animal?

If we were to keep this possibility open—that being is always already a being with *all other beings*—then one can perhaps ask an even more difficult question: is there something human beings can learn from dumb animals? Can we begin to understand better our own (concealed) nest in being by thinking toward the animal's nest? If a transposing into the animal is possible, how do we “translate” ourselves across the abyss in order to relate to our animal relations? Would such a transposition lead to a new elation (a new ecstasy vis-à-vis ek-stasis) due to a closer relation to animals, a relation in which we human beings divest ourselves of our prelate positionality? Buber suggests that we can indeed learn something from animals:

The eyes of an animal have the capacity of a great language. Independent, without any need of the assistance of sounds and gestures, most eloquent when they rest entirely in their glance, they express the mystery in its natural captivity, that is, in the anxiety of becoming. This state of the mystery is known only to the animal, which alone can open it up to us—for this state can only be opened up and not revealed.... This language is the stammering of nature under the initial grasp of spirit, before language yields to spirit's cosmic risk which we call man. But no speech will ever repeat what the stammer is able to communicate (Buber 1970, 144-5).

We human beings may indeed be separate from animals, and animals may indeed be mute and unable to respond to language's call. But despite this, we nevertheless are *responsible* for animals—that is, we have in a Lévinasian sense the *ability to respond* to animals, to realize a *response* to them even within their muteness. We allow animals to enter into relation with us within language—the house of being we share with all other beings. Our responsibility for animals heuristically mirrors our responsibility to being. Human beings are the shepherds of being. “Shepherd” is informed by nature, by the nature of sheep. The shepherd is he or she who gathers together the dispersed herd of sheep, the human being who gathers together that which disperses itself, namely, being (as *physis*). Our proximity to (the presence of) dumb animals offers a heuristic opening to the (absence of the) gods who for Heidegger speak the truth of being.

Throughout his later work, Heidegger carefully divests us human beings from our subjectivism, our techno-productionist views of the world, as well as our various forms of humanisms; that is, he allows no room for the privileging of the human being, particularly that over being. The human being—the only being that being languages—has his or her dwelling in being concealed by language. This essence of the human being alone counters any argument that Heidegger somehow privileges human beings over other beings. How could the homelessness of the human being indeed assert a privileged position? Instead of just such a reassertion of the primacy of human beings, Heidegger seeks the human being outside metaphysical

systems that pay no heed to the ontological difference, that confuse being with beings. He has no need for systems that define human beings simply in contradistinction to plant, beast, and God (Heidegger 1998 “Letter,” 246). One of the problems with humanism is that it comes to us by way of a Latin worldview; a Roman (mis) understanding of late Greek culture mediates our knowledge of Greek civilization (as well as of being). All humanisms—whether Roman, Marxist, existentialist, or Christian—“agree in this, that the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole” (245). But for Heidegger, being, on the contrary, is the openness wherein the essence of the human being unfolds. Our entry into that openness is language, the “clearing-concealing advent of being itself” (249). Being, as the clearing from which all *physis* arises, dwells within language. Language is not a purely objective phenomenon, however; it can be manipulated, surrendering itself “to our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings” (243). As being arrives in language, it does not simply become yet another being among beings. Instead, the ek-sisting human being—the one who stands out in the clearing of being—guards, preserves, sustains, and takes into “care” the clearing of being.

Heidegger, however, is not purely anti-humanism. Instead he offers an *extreme* humanism “that thinks the humanity of the human being from nearness to being” (261). This extreme humanism depends on thinking the truth of being which in turn “depends upon this alone, that the truth of being come to language and that thinking attain to this language” (261). Every language, though, is always already susceptible to metaphysics. Existing in namelessness then, for Heidegger, is a move beyond the metaphysics of language (toward an *arche* before the concealment of being within language): “But if the human being is to find his way once again into the nearness of being he must first learn to exist in the nameless” (243). Heidegger’s own discarding of his key terms “hermeneutics” and “phenomenology,” he confesses to a Japanese interlocutor, was “in

order to abandon [his] own path of thinking to namelessness” (Heidegger 1971, 29). Perhaps here Heidegger is pointing toward a way of being more originary than the myth of Genesis, prior to the naming of the “lower” animals which established human beings as superior, thereby naming us their lords (instead of their shepherds). Perhaps this is the lesson we can learn from dumb animals: if we humans can learn to exist in our own namelessness, then maybe we can somehow make the leap (*Ursprung*) past all shoddy humanisms throughout history and even past metaphysics itself to Heidegger’s own extreme humanism which thinks the human being from within the nearness of being and as always already with and among all other beings.

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