

## Rethinking Education: Heidegger's Philosophy in the Service of Education

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The English-speaking academic world increasingly recognizes Martin Heidegger's potential contribution to education. In this article I explore key notions in Heidegger's philosophy in order to further realize this potential. One purpose of examining the latent contribution of his work to education is to scrutinize and shape the relationship between philosophy and education and so to enhance both realms. As such, the article aims not only to challenge and redefine our perception of public education, but also to assist in understanding what it means to be a human being. I first briefly review central notions in Heidegger's ontology as described in *Being and Time*, point toward some of the difficulties in using it for education, and suggest various avenues to overcome them. Then I suggest and examine several implications for the essence of education following Heidegger's philosophy and propose shifts in the central characteristics of education. Finally, I focus on one implication and reassess the place of content in education. It should be stressed from the outset that my suggestions are not direct interpretations of Heidegger's educational thought or logical inferences from his philosophy; rather, Heidegger's work serves more as an inspiration in rethinking the role and goal of education.

### BETWEEN ONTOLOGY AND EDUCATION

At the heart of Heidegger's ontology lies the "ontological difference": the distinction between beings and Being,<sup>1</sup> or between a being and Being. When we refer to things, when we point to something, we talk about beings. Beings are what is around us, physically and mentally; they are any "object" that traditional metaphysics investigates, including human beings and any being that is considered a "higher being." Beings can be classified, thus, according to categories or hierarchy. Even the source that created, allegedly, all beings ("God"), is a being. But we cannot simply think about Being in this way. Being is not a being. Actually, there is a logical ontological problem in saying "Being is" (or "a Being") precisely because Being is not something (although authors find it difficult to avoid this language). A sketchy attempt to explain Being might be to say that Being enables beings to be. Clarifications of the term "Being" in the interpretive literature are assisted by "the nothing" or "Nothing." For example, Richard Polt says that "*Being is the difference it makes that there is something rather than nothing.*"<sup>2</sup> In the translators' introduction to *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Gregory Fried and Richard Polt explain that "[n] either Being nor Nothing is a *being* for Heidegger" (note the capitalization of Being and Nothing),<sup>3</sup> and Stephen Mulhall argues that there is "deep affinity between Being and 'the nothing'."<sup>4</sup> These uses of "Nothing" in order to explain Being suggest the singularity or the uniqueness of Being against other terms, and point beyond a scale or spectrum of beings toward a foundational aspect of beings.

At this point it is essential to introduce Heidegger's use of the term "Dasein." For several reasons, one being his intent to move away from traditional metaphysics, he does not use the term "human being," but instead chooses the German term "Dasein," which can be translated literally as "being there" or "there-being." Dasein is a central part in examining Being.

Heidegger himself refers directly to Being very rarely in *Being and Time*.<sup>5</sup> At one point he says that "being (not beings) is dependent upon the understanding of being; that is, reality (not the real) is dependent upon care."<sup>6</sup> He later asserts that "'There is' [*Es gibt*] being — not beings — only insofar as truth is. And truth *is* only insofar as, and as long as, Dasein is. Being and truth 'are' equiprimordially."<sup>7</sup> Heidegger does not perceive "truth" in the traditional metaphysical sense of correspondence between a statement and reality, or correctness of a statement. Truth, for Heidegger, is concealed. In order to expose it there is a need for unconcealment.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Being holds the significance of disclosure.

This way of perceiving Being and truth lead to the technique Heidegger uses in order to investigate Being. Heidegger is interested in understanding Being, but in order to do that he turns to the being that asks the question about Being: Dasein. We can see from the aforementioned quotes that Heidegger draws parallels between Being, Dasein, and truth. Polt explains that Dasein is "an entity whose own Being is an issue for it,"<sup>9</sup> and that actually Dasein is the one that poses the question about its own being. Hence, Dasein holds responsibility in exploring Being:

We cannot avoid inheriting a meaning of Being, and it is our responsibility to appreciate it, question it and keep it alive by keeping it open to further unfolding. We cannot detach ourselves from the event of Being, because our participation in it is what makes us human — or rather makes us Dasein "the thrown thrower."<sup>10</sup>

The gap between beings and Being, in which Dasein finds itself, raises the question whether Being can be relevant or useful for understanding beings. Solomon Goldberg asserts that Heidegger's inquiry into Being is not practically relevant for beings, the things — living or not living — that we find around us: "the understanding of Being that Heidegger associates with philosophizing is of absolutely no use for a knowledge of beings."<sup>11</sup> As such, he questions the relevance of the ontological difference for education. I want to challenge this skepticism.

At first glance, there is a serious difficulty in seeing how Heidegger's abstract philosophy might be useful for a practical endeavor such as education and a systematic organizational structure such as schooling. The pursuit of an elusive concept such as "Being," for example, might deter us from considering all of Heidegger's philosophy as a tool — not to say a foundation — for planning and constructing educational policies and actions. However, as the gap between Heidegger's work and the English-speaking world is rapidly closing, his relevance to education is increasingly acknowledged. The educational potential within Heidegger's texts and his own value as an educative figure are now widely recognized.<sup>12</sup> Glenn Gray maintains that "Heidegger is above all else a teacher."<sup>13</sup> Iain Thomson credits Heidegger with an "*ontological revolution* in education,"<sup>14</sup> and argues that "philosophical rethinking of education was of great importance to Heidegger's work as a whole."<sup>15</sup>

Michael Peters asserts that “[m]any of his texts, especially those works that come to us as *lectures* he gave to specific audiences, are specifically and self-consciously *pedagogical*.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, thinking, learning, and teaching are the main objects of inquiry for Heidegger (for example, as articulated in *Being and Time*, *What Is Called Thinking?*, *The Thinker as Poet*, *Principles of Thinking*, and *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*). Nevertheless, the nature of the relationships between Heidegger and education, and the potential impact of Heidegger’s philosophy on education, are not clear. As Peters observes, “Heidegger’s influence on education might be traced indirectly through his impact on phenomenology, hermeneutics and existentialism, as theoretical approaches in education considered as a social science, but also in terms of his influence upon the development of modern psychiatry, psycho-therapy and school counseling.”<sup>17</sup>

In considering Heidegger’s philosophy as a means to think about education and the meaning of education (or schooling), it seems that there are serious difficulties in “translating” the philosophical insights into educational ideas, or to use them in order to conceptualize education. For example, as mentioned above, Goldberg contends that inquiry into Being is not useful for knowledge of beings, and as such it seems also not useful for education as an endeavor that deals with beings.<sup>18</sup> However, several commentators draw parallel lines between Heidegger’s philosophy and education, or point to educational aspects within Heidegger’s work. A prominent example is Michael Ehrmantraut’s analysis of Heidegger’s philosophy as pedagogy.<sup>19</sup> By examining Heidegger’s lectures, Ehrmantraut depicts this philosopher’s work as an educational text or as one with an educational value. Relating to academic institutions, Ehrmantraut asserts that the lectures include an “attempt to replace established forms of education with a ‘new way of teaching’” that “appears to be an effort to translate Heidegger’s philosophic pedagogy into the forms of higher education.”<sup>20</sup> Later on, in discussing Dasein’s relation to Being in terms of “nearness to the *essence* of all things” or “nearness to the world,” Ehrmantraut argues that “[t]he attainment of such nearness (*Nähe*) is identified as the ground of philosophy and, at the same time, is posited as the goal of education itself.”<sup>21</sup> Similar parallels between Heidegger’s philosophy (and philosophy in general) and education were done by others, with regard to the practice of teaching. For example, Dawn Riley sees Heidegger as a teacher: “Like philosophers, teachers do themselves an essential good by their involvement with a single recurring question. Heidegger has suggested a foundational one: What does it mean to teach? And related to this, to let learn?”<sup>22</sup>

Heidegger describes the ontological structure of Dasein, that is, how it relates to Being through its own being. In doing so he argues that Dasein calls itself by the *voice of conscience* (or *call of conscience*) which “summons” Dasein to be aware of its own inevitable death. This call is unconditioned and inherent in one’s life in a way that it is constantly in the background of Dasein’s existence. Listening and responding appropriately to this call, with awareness of Dasein’s existence that Heidegger terms “anticipatory resoluteness,” leads Dasein to be authentic. Lauren Bialystok explains that “[i]n heeding the call of conscience, Dasein makes the critical shift of confronting its death.... Authentic Dasein is characterized by this ‘resolute

anticipation' [*Entschlossenheit*], or 'being-toward-death.'"<sup>23</sup> Using the voice of conscience, Mulhall makes another reference to Heidegger as a teacher. He contends that a useful parallel can be drawn between, on the one hand, the relationship between inauthentic Dasein and an authentic friend that assists it to reach authenticity, and on the other hand, the relationship between Heidegger's readers and Heidegger himself; in these relations, the friend and Heidegger both act as a "voice of conscience" that plays a central role in moving forward.<sup>24</sup>

Following these associations between existential philosophy and education, the rest of the article explores possible implications for the essence of education.

#### RETHINKING EDUCATION

As Heidegger challenges traditional metaphysics and reexamines fundamental concepts such as human being, death, and time, I suggest examining the relevance of Heidegger's philosophy for education through phenomenological ontology of education itself. In other words, my suggestion is not to improve education in a narrow sense of making it better (of a higher standard or quality), but to find out what education would be if considered phenomenologically vis-à-vis being a human being. As Donald Vandenberg explains: "It is not the grounding of educational theory that is called for, but the grounding of education itself."<sup>25</sup> As such, the foundation of education is not intended to serve as a theoretical conception or abstraction of what education means, but is designated to contribute, or actually is, a foundation of being human. Seen in this way, education achieves legitimacy not by political or ideological arguments but by inherently being an existential phenomenon. Thus, educational research and educational practice are other means of recovering from the damages of traditional metaphysics and of considering the ontological difference. Such an ontological education will work side-by-side with philosophy. Its goal, following Heidegger's project especially in *Being and Time*, is explained nicely by Polt: "With the overcoming of metaphysics, we can enter a new era that involves responding to Being rather than dominating beings."<sup>26</sup> As such, both existential and educational aspects need to be integrated in order to avoid an implicit criticism such as Vandenberg's concerning the lack of ontological aspect in Dewey's work: "Heidegger has suggested that philosophy is phenomenological ontology.... Dewey, because he perceived the societal function of philosophy, suggested that philosophy is philosophy of education. If one grants both Heidegger's and Dewey's claims simultaneously, then philosophy is the existential phenomenology of education."<sup>27</sup> He further states: "Dewey's descriptions of experience are phenomenological, but in a pre-Husserlian, *sans* the phenomenological bracketing, sense."<sup>28</sup> This criticism points to the groundbreaking dimension within Heidegger's insights, which require examination in order to offer an education that is better aligned with the phenomenon of being a human being.

A central characteristic of education that needs reexamination following consideration of Heidegger is the scale or destination of education's impact. Indeed, institutionalized education is conducted through schooling, the specific spatial-temporal system that is managed through policies and curriculum and is directed toward

students. However, in line with associating education with being a human being (and thus with existential philosophy), the audience of education is humanity in general, as individuals and as a whole. Ehrmantraut expresses the same idea in referring to Heidegger's lectures: "The task of initiating a living philosophizing in 'our Dasein' is carried out primarily for 'these' students in 'this' lecture hall. Yet without diverting the primary focus of attention from these students, modern humanity itself becomes the indirect recipient of this education."<sup>29</sup> Education is committed not only to the students enrolled in schooling, but also to every currently existing and future human being.

The discussion thus far suggests a parallel between philosophy and education, and specifically between Heidegger's philosophy and education, that relates to being a human being. Thus, we can conclude a similar parallel between the ultimate goal of Heidegger's philosophy (at least as explicitly articulated in *Being and Time*) — Being — and setting an existential goal for education. Following Heidegger's method of examining Dasein for the question of Being, I propose the existential goal of examining the meaning of being a human being. This goal is in line with perceiving humanity as the audience of education.

It is important to emphasize two crucial points regarding this goal. First, this goal is not just an educational one, that is, it does not aim merely at schooling, but is an overall goal that is relevant for one's life in general. Just as the voice of conscience is in a way constantly in the background of Dasein's existence, so this existential goal should accompany any human being and be in the background of one's thoughts and actions; what one learns and experiences should serve as a source for considering the meaning of being human being. Thus, this goal is not suggested here simply as one possible goal among a series of educational goals, nor as a major educational goal, but is posed as *the only* educational goal that the student should carry with her beyond schooling into the rest of her life.

Second, the existential goal is not to discover or understand the meaning of being a human being, as if the answer is already available or even possible; there is no absolute or final answer to this question. Instead, the goal is to *examine*, to ponder, to question. This approach is in line with dismissing education as a delivery apparatus in which content is transmitted to students, as will be discussed below.

Furthermore, from the parallel between the "generality" of Being and posing humanity as the audience of education, we can infer a broad social goal for education. Just as an individual existential goal for education might be to raise awareness of the existential situation of that human being, a communal goal for education might be to raise awareness of the existential situation of all human beings as a whole. I argue, therefore, that, in a sense, education should take the role of the voice of conscience, and call both individually to each human being and collectively to the whole of humanity. Hubert Dreyfus explains that, like Marx's class struggle and Freud's notion of the libido, the voice of conscience is an "enlightened authority" that keeps the concealed truth and represses it. Acknowledging the truth is supposed to bring some sort of liberation. For Heidegger, this voice "is already present in Dasein's sense," and he claims that "the realization that nothing is grounded and that there are no guidelines for living gives Dasein increased openness, tenacity, and even gaiety."<sup>30</sup>

This enabling approach, together with the overarching social goal for education, opens the door for education to be a key player in shaping our lives.

Heidegger makes it clear that Dasein calls itself, but also admits that “Resolute Dasein can become the ‘conscience’ of others.”<sup>31</sup> Mulhall embraces this possibility and, as mentioned above, perceives Heidegger as a voice of conscience that guides his readers.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, education should be considered as the voice of conscience for humanity, as it deals with the future generation of human beings and, as such, points toward the future of humanity. In terms of its social role, considering education as the voice of conscience means to perceive education neither as a preparation (or training) mechanism for the next generation nor as a means to insert the student into the existing social-cultural structure (e.g., seeing the student as a future worker that has to establish a specific identity and pursue a job). In other words, education is not to be perceived as a supply system for other systems, whether is the economy, academia, or the military, but rather as a humanistic service for the students as human beings. Education should be upgraded from an instrumental sector that prepares young human beings to enter society and instead claim as its mission being a strategic headquarters of humanity.

#### EDUCATION TOWARD BEING: REMOVING CONTENT FROM THE CENTER

The call of conscience serves as a compass with which to navigate life in the background of Dasein’s existence. However, the call does not include particular content; it is — in a sense — empty. Heidegger says:

But how are we to define *what is talked about* in this discourse? *What* does conscience call to the one summoned? Strictly speaking nothing. The call does not say anything, does not give any information about events of the world, has nothing to tell.<sup>33</sup>

This view of the call of conscience goes hand in hand with Goldberg’s interpretation of “horizon” in Heidegger’s work. The traditional way to perceive horizon is as the limit of what is seen, and accordingly education “should increase the number or the range of things a person understands, has experienced.”<sup>34</sup> However, Heidegger’s view on education gives another role to horizon as a metaphor, one that has nothing to do with expansion: “Philosophical education is not connected with any sort of increase, neither an increase in the amount of things which a learner appreciates cognitively, morally, or aesthetically.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, “education is essentially a transcendence to a world, i.e., is the human being’s going beyond all beings towards Being.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, education is not about the acquisition of more pieces of knowledge, not about content at all, but about striving beyond the everydayness toward some kind of a dramatic shift in one’s life.<sup>37</sup> Since education should be in line with the existential pursuit after Being beyond beings, I suggest an alternative ground for curricula based on existential considerations for education, and call for an education that is not content-focused, but rather shifts from acquiring knowledge and skills toward an examination of having possibilities.

Granting content a central role in education and considering the goals of education to be the transmission and acquisition of content signify an emphasis on *possession* of content. Possession of content — knowledge or mastery of material — especially when it aims at operating things-at-hand,<sup>38</sup> aligns with the neo-liberal or the capitalist

approach. In that sense, ownership of knowledge is no different from ownership of physical property; they both have the instrumental status of “becoming,”<sup>39</sup> that is, expanding the items one owns, be it physical or cognitive ownership. Similarly, we can base our criticism of the centrality of content on the ontological distinction between “having” and “being,”<sup>40</sup> and on this basis, make the case to adopt the latter over the former as an educational goal.

It is not suggested here that content has no value. However, when content itself — and not students’ humanity — is the center of education, it is objectified and treated as things-at-hand,<sup>41</sup> in which case students are alienated from the world and as a result from themselves.<sup>42</sup> When content is perceived as an object within the subject-object divide, the student is cast in the role of subject who is assumed to own the content as an object. It should be stressed that “content” here signifies not just factual information, but also procedural knowledge in the form of skills. Thus, to continue Vandenberg’s line of thinking, when content is objectified it is meant to be something to be grasped, mastered, and manipulated. Instead, education should promote existential understanding that uncovers how the material is part of being a human being, part of students’ and teachers’ world as their being is being-in-the-world.<sup>43</sup> Regarding the teacher’s role, this kind of existential education asserts that the teacher should acknowledge the state of being-in-the-world in which both she and her students exist, take responsibility for raising awareness of this situation, and encourage examination of its nature and implications. The weight of teaching should be removed from building tasks and monitoring completion to amplifying and translating the “call of being”<sup>44</sup> or encouraging students to pay attention to this call; education should let students respond to the call of conscience.

#### CONCLUSION

Heidegger’s ontology calls us to look at ourselves as we are, as human beings, and as such to look beyond the immediate that surrounds us and ponder the question, “what makes us human beings?” Adopting this approach to education will remove the boundaries that limit the meaning of education and reduce it to an instrumental function used by others. Following Heidegger’s philosophy, educators will be able not only to be critical of current practices, but also to revisit what education should be. They will be able to reexamine what it means to educate and what education’s role and effect might be. To set the examination of the meaning of being a human being both as a general and as an educational goal opens the door for rethinking who education serves and how it should be done.

An important result of setting an existential goal that looks at the meaning of being a human being is to challenge the prominence of content in education. It seems that content-focused education acts according to a tendency, and even a temptation, to provide assets to students. Indeed, the traditional metaphor of filling a vessel has been changed to one of delivery, whether it is of knowledge or skills.<sup>45</sup> However, the basic tendency to pass on objective content through dealing with beings is still prevalent.

Reexamining education along Heideggerian lines, including the status of content within education, will contribute to identifying major characteristics of current public

education and formulating required shifts towards making school a more critical place. One projected shift involves changing our expectations about education: when content no longer has the status of an object to be conquered, school becomes less a place of exercising and training skills and more a place of questioning and pondering about being. As such, existential education shifts our focus *from* “can” to “want”: from an education that is focused almost solely on students’ abilities to one that gives more space to their dreams, wonders, and doubts. Instead of preparation for a specific possibility, education should encourage examination of the meaning of having possibilities as a characteristic of being a human being. This examination, of course, is within the broader examination of the meaning of being a human being. Another anticipated shift involves students’ place: from perceiving education as a system that operates *on* students (by teachers, curriculum, bureaucracy) to a site where collaboration is done *with* students.

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1. Different translators treat differently the question whether to capitalize “Being” (in German all nouns are capitalized). For clarity, I will use “Being” throughout.
  2. Richard F. H. Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 3. All emphases in quotes are in original.
  3. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xii.
  4. Stephen Mulhall, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Heidegger and Being and Time* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 211.
  5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (1962; revised ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).
  6. *Ibid.*, 204. “Care” is the meaning of Dasein as being-in-the-world, that is, the way Dasein employs concern about it being as being-with (other human beings) and taking care (with the objects in the world).
  7. *Ibid.*, 220.
  8. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger argues that this unconcealment of truth can be made by a work of art. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (1936; repr. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
  9. Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 166.
  10. *Ibid.*, 147–148.
  11. Solomon Goldberg, “The Unforgetting of Paideia: Heidegger on the Possibility of Philosophical Education” (PhD diss., The Hebrew University, 2008), 261.
  12. Mulhall, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook*; and Michael A. Peters, “Editorial: Heidegger, Phenomenology, Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 41, no. 1 (2009): 1–6.
  13. Glenn J. Gray, “Introduction,” in Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), xvii.
  14. Iain Thomson, “Heidegger on Ontological Education, or: How We Become What We Are,” *Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2001): 254.
  15. Iain Thomson, “Heidegger’s Perfectionist Philosophy of Education in *Being and Time*,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 37, no. 4 (2004): 439.
  16. Peters, “Editorial,” 2.
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. Goldberg, “The Unforgetting of Paideia.”
  19. Michael Ehrmantraut, *Heidegger’s Philosophic Pedagogy* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010).

20. Ibid., 99. In many aspects, Heidegger's insights regarding higher education can be directed toward k–12 schooling.
21. Ehrmantraut, *Heidegger's Philosophic Pedagogy*, 122.
22. Dawn C. Riley, "Heidegger Teaching: An Analysis and Interpretation of Pedagogy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 8 (2011): 813.
23. Lauren Bialystok, "Amoral Authenticity: Questioning the Ethics of Authentic Being With-Others in *Being and Time*" (Paper presented at the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy Annual Congress, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 2007): 4.
24. Mulhall, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook*.
25. Donald Vandenberg, *Being and Education: An Essay in Existential Phenomenology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 15.
26. Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 163.
27. Vandenberg, *Being and Education*, 41.
28. Ibid., 99.
29. Ehrmantraut, *Heidegger's Philosophic Pedagogy*, 79.
30. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 37–38.
31. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 285.
32. Mulhall, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook*.
33. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 263.
34. Goldberg, "The Unforgetting of Paideia," 256.
35. Ibid., 258.
36. Ibid., 257.
37. The effects of existential education, as an education that deals with the meaning of being a human being, are beyond schooling and beyond graduating.
38. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
39. Goldberg, "The Unforgetting of Paideia."
40. Sam Ashton, "Authenticity in Adult Learning," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 29, no. 1 (2010): 3–19.
41. Heidegger's emphasis on attention to things (e.g. the use of the hammer and the importance of works of art) and his close attention to texts he reads do not weaken my argument since attention to and deriving insights from things is essentially different from acquiring, assimilating, and possessing content for the sake of becoming a possessor. Heidegger himself speaks against commercial use of art and calls for considering what we can learn from "great art" over "the crafts or industrial arts." See *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 16.
42. Vandenberg, *Being and Education*.
43. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
44. Vandenberg, *Being and Education*.
45. The metaphor of growth is essentially not different from these metaphors as it is based on providing resources or environment that encourage developing of content-based results, in a Deweyan, constructivist, or any other epistemological way.