

## **Fundamental Ontology and the Hermeneutics of Time in Heidegger's Early Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the problem of time within Martin Heidegger's philosophical project, taking as its point of departure the transformation he brought about in the status of time within the ontological question. The study begins by elucidating the limitations of traditional conceptions of time, particularly those of Aristotle, Augustine, and Kant, in which time was associated with motion or the soul, or conceived as an a priori form of inner sense. By contrast, Heidegger seeks to move beyond the reduction of time to the present and succession and to disclose its ontological structure through the concept of temporality. The article demonstrates that time does not constitute an external framework within which Dasein exists; rather, it constitutes the primordial structure through which Dasein's being-in-the-world is determined, encompassing care, openness to possibility, finitude, and death. The study therefore concludes that temporality is not a property added to Dasein's Being but the very horizon for the understanding of Being itself. Consequently, the question of time is inseparable from the question of Being, thereby providing the ontological foundation for Heidegger's project of overcoming the metaphysics of presence.

**Keywords:** time, temporality, Heidegger, Dasein, Being, metaphysics of presence

### **Introduction**

Throughout the history of philosophy, time has never been merely a discrete subject of philosophical inquiry; rather, since the beginnings of Greek thought, it has remained bound up with the conception of Being operative at each stage of philosophical reflection. Aristotle understood time in relation to motion, Augustine relocated the question within the domain of the soul and consciousness, and modern philosophy, particularly with Kant, redefined time as an a priori condition for the possibility of experience and knowledge. Despite the fundamental

differences among these conceptions, they share a tendency to approach time through something else: motion, the soul, the subject, or the conditions of knowledge. Consequently, the question of the essence of time remained, to varying degrees, governed by a metaphysical framework that presupposed the possibility of determining time independently of its primordial relation to Being.

Within this context, Martin Heidegger's endeavour assumes particular significance because his project consists in reconstructing the question itself. From a Heideggerian perspective, time is neither an external container within which beings and events occur nor merely a sequence of successive moments; rather, it is connected with the structure by virtue of which human existence is what it is. Hence, the transition from "time" to "temporality" marks a shift from conceiving time as an object of thought to understanding it as an ontological structure through which the meaning of Being is disclosed. This is what grounds the project of *Being and Time* in the interrelation between the question of Being and the question of time, such that neither can be understood in isolation from the other.

The significance of this transformation lies in the fact that Heidegger does not confine himself to criticising the traditional conception of time; rather, he rereads the history of metaphysics by examining how it established presence as the basis for understanding Being. Reducing time to the present leads to treating the past as that which has elapsed and the future as that which has not yet occurred, whereas Heidegger's analysis of temporality proceeds from the unity of past, present, and future as dimensions inherent in the structure of Dasein's Being. Temporality, therefore, is no longer merely a property added to human existence; it becomes the structure through which that existence itself is determined.

Therefore, the problem addressed by this study concerns the **ontological meaning of time**: What does it mean for time to constitute a horizon for the understanding of Being? How does Heidegger move from a critique of the traditional conception of time to the establishment of temporality as the primordial structure of Dasein's Being? Does this transition make it possible to overcome the metaphysics of presence, which associated Being with permanence and presence-at-hand, and to reconstruct the question of Being based on finitude and temporality?

On this basis, the article seeks to trace the transformation Heidegger brought about in the concept of time by examining, first, time as a transcendental horizon for the understanding of Being; second, its relation to understanding and Being; and, finally, temporality as the ontological structure of Dasein. This requires situating Heidegger's project in critical dialogue with earlier conceptions, particularly those of Aristotle, Kant, and Husserl, to clarify the implications of making time a condition of possibility for the question of Being rather than merely one of the objects of that question.

### **Time as a Transcendental Horizon for the Understanding of Being**

The problem of time constitutes the cornerstone of Heidegger's early project, to the extent that *Being and Time* may be understood as a hermeneutic attempt to interpret Being within the horizon of temporality.

For Heidegger, Being is an event that occurs within the horizon of transcendental time (Heidegger, 1972a, p. 45). From this perspective, time represents the primordial field through which beings exist and the principal dimension of coming-into-existence in the world. Bourdieu (1975) captures this view of time as internal to human existence:

a medium in which we move as a floating bundle of straw moves in a river, but rather lies at the very heart of the structure of human life itself, a dimension of existence that constitutes the human being from the outset before becoming something that can be measured. (p. 134)

To clarify the extent of the transformation proposed by Heidegger, it must be set against the traditional metaphysical conception of time. From Aristotle through its later developments in Hegel, this conception continued to approach time from the standpoint of the “now” and the present, such that time became a succession of moments that could be determined and measured. For Heidegger, overcoming this metaphysical interpretation of time is an urgent task. The first step along this path is to establish a correspondence between human existence in the world and time. Heidegger, together with Bergson, maintains that human historical existence is possible only because the human being is temporal, for existence as a whole “can occupy a place in history only because it is an existence of pure time” (Benabdelali, 1985, p. 49). Heidegger’s task in this context is to overcome the metaphysical interpretation of the category of time from Plotinus to Hegel, through Saint Augustine and Leibniz, while also breaking with the Kantian representation of time as an epistemological schema that, together with space, apprehends perceptual intuitions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991, p. 11).

According to Heidegger, Kant remains committed to the Cartesian position in its entirety, without providing an ontological analysis of subjectivity. He continually establishes a correspondence between the thinking “I” and time. His difficulty, in Heidegger’s view, lies in his failure to recognise that time possesses an actually independent and objective existence; instead, he repeatedly refers it back to the human subject as the “form of inner sense” (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 128–134).

Kant’s reliance on the subject in his interpretation of time is, to some extent, similar to Aristotle’s interpretation, which consistently refers time back to motion. Aristotle affirms the priority of motion over time, distinguishes between their respective properties, and maintains that a real relation exists between them. He holds that “when we perceive motion, we perceive it together with time . . . and conversely, when we think that some time has elapsed, it also seems to us that a certain motion has occurred along with it” (Ricoeur, 1988, pp. 16–17). Time is thus wholly connected with motion without itself being motion.

This absence of objective independence persists in Saint Augustine, who connected time with the mind and the soul while focusing on the metaphysical question of whether, or, in another formulation, how, time can be measured. From Heidegger’s perspective, Husserl offered a genuine but incomplete attempt to remove time from the sphere of metaphysical thought by

distinguishing between objective time and the internal consciousness of time (Ricoeur, 1988, pp. 61–62).

Heidegger's originality lies in his attempt to transform the category of time from a marginal problem in philosophy into a fundamental issue within the horizon of the question of Being. He replaces the dependence of time on reason, motion, and the subject with unrestricted autonomy that encompasses the three dimensions of existence: past, present, and future, thereby transforming the entire problem of historicity into the problem of temporality. Heidegger seeks to provide a new interpretation of time and to demonstrate the interconnection between temporality and Being, with time serving as the index of human existence and imagination as the fundamental support of knowledge, before understanding and intuition. In doing so, he effects a rupture with the Kantian representation of time in *Critique of Pure Reason*, a rupture articulated in Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*.

Time and space do not have the same status, according to Heidegger, since "space constitutes the form of outer sense, unlike time, which constitutes the form of inner sense, insofar as it is represented by the human being" (Heidegger, 2024, p. 13). If time is one of Aristotle's ten categories, understood within the general articulation of Being through substance and its nine accidents, then time, like space, also becomes one of the transcendental epistemological forms within which Being as a whole is encompassed and ordered as a cosmos. In the modern period, Kant thus converges with the Aristotelian conception of time insofar as time and space become two general frameworks innately present in the human mind, whose function is to organise knowledge and representations. Tarif al-Khuli (2014) describes them as follows:

two a priori forms of sensibility according to which the data of this sensibility and the content of the human experience of the external world are ordered; time and space are therefore two a priori forms or conditions of knowledge. (p. 15)

For Kant, the distinction between time and space concerns their respective modes of operation: although their epistemological function is comparable, time is structured by succession, whereas space is structured by continuity.

### **The Temporality of Dasein and the Deconstruction of the Metaphysics of Presence**

If the preceding analysis has shown that time cannot be reduced to the present or to the mere succession of nows. That temporality constitutes the horizon within which Being is disclosed. The question that arises at this stage concerns not the essence of time in itself but the implications of this transformation for the structure of ontology. For Heidegger, removing time from conceptions that made it dependent upon motion, consciousness, or the subject does not represent the end of the inquiry but its actual beginning. Liberating time from the metaphysics of presence requires reconsidering how the question of Being was formulated in the history of philosophy. Heidegger's central claim, therefore, is that what appeared in the philosophical tradition as a question concerning time conceals, at a deeper level, a particular conception of Being founded upon making presence the implicit model for everything that it means "to be".

From Plato and Aristotle to the Kantian moment, the belief prevailed that time is the present and that linguistic metaphysics embraced this traditional representation of time as the moment. Heidegger's analyses restored significance to the future, thereby converging with Bergson's analyses, which placed Being and becoming on the same level and spoke of full time. Yet the present cannot create anything; it cannot add Being to Being, since the present is ultimately nothing but an intuition of fullness, while duration is not a given but an act or accomplishment (Bachelard, 1950, p. 8). Heidegger also seeks to establish a connection between the Platonic vision, Aristotle's philosophy, Kant's position, and Husserl's Sixth Investigation, entitled "Being Is Not a Predicate or a Real Constituent of a Judgement", which Heidegger maintained had been lost in the sands.

Through this connection, Heidegger reformulates the question of metaphysics, and within it the question of Being, based on the analyses of Aristotle and Kant. The fundamental thesis he seeks to defend is that time constitutes "the transcendental horizon for any understanding of Being" (de Rubercy & Le Buhan, 1983, p. 16). Heidegger therefore insists on grasping the concept of time radically, as encompassing present, past, and future alike, rather than as continuation or duration in the Bergsonian sense (de Rubercy & Le Buhan, 1983, p. 17). Thus, time, as a central concern of Heideggerian philosophy, becomes, in *Being and Time*, the fundamental question through which Heidegger interrogates the history of metaphysics, from its Greek origins to its transformation in Descartes and Husserl. The urgent task, in Heidegger's view, is to break with the metaphysics of presence, which treated "the past as that which will not recur and the future as that which is not at hand, as something absent" (Heidegger, 1973, p. 76), and thereby to overcome the philosophical legacy extending from Plato and Aristotle to Plotinus, Saint Augustine, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Schelling, all of whom defended the thesis that time is the present.

For Heidegger, what matters is not that the question of time is as old as philosophical thought itself, like the question of Being, but that what is old be understood more radically. The radicality of his position lies in the interrelation he establishes between Being and time and between being-in-the-world and being-in-time. The question of Being and the question of time are not separate subjects. Heidegger therefore interprets Dasein as a temporalised being and time as the transcendental horizon of the question of Being. By interpreting Dasein within the horizon of temporality, Heidegger seeks to awaken an understanding of the meaning of the question of Being in time and to "rehabilitate ontology, which Neo-Kantianism, positivism, the philosophy of life, and transcendental phenomenology had rendered impossible" (Dastur, 2011, p. 40). Conversely, Heidegger maintains that "metaphysics is the destiny of erroneous thought; it is the reflection of thought proceeding in the wrong direction" (Heidegger, 1968, p. 67). Breaking with metaphysical thinking and confronting it within the fundamental structure of philosophical thought therefore becomes an unavoidable task in the face of these intellectual stakes and transformations. *Critique of Pure Reason* was never, as the "Neo-Kantians" maintained, intended

merely to establish a theory of knowledge; rather, according to Heidegger, it represents the point of “completion of the age of metaphysics and the laying of its philosophical foundations” (Richardson, 1974, p. 29).

At the same time, Heidegger remained deeply engaged with Kantian thought, particularly regarding the relationship between thought and temporality. He repeatedly emphasises Kant’s significance, regarding him as the only philosopher who undertook the task of interpreting temporality from an ontological perspective, albeit unintentionally (Luchte, 2008, p. 73). For Heidegger, Kant’s difficulty lies in his separation of perception from sensation, which turns time into a transcendental category. Heidegger attributes Kant’s failure to disclose the relationship between thought and temporality to this separation. This Kantian failure becomes Heidegger’s point of departure as he seeks to develop the Kantian perspective on the implicit relationship between understanding and temporality.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger articulates the fundamental problem through several interrelated tasks: interpreting Dasein in terms of time; explaining time as the transcendental given within the horizon of the question of Being; and identifying the features of fundamental ontology and its history in relation to the problem of temporality. On this basis, Heidegger revisits the history of philosophy from an ontological perspective, a task that, by his own admission, had previously been undertaken only by Hegel (Macann, 2005, p. 58). This return to the history of philosophy enabled him to reconsider the concept of *ousia*, meaning Being, which had traditionally been understood as stable presence. Reconsidering this troubled relationship between temporality and the historical formulation of the question of Being requires a genuine philosophical restoration of the relation between Being and time, thereby affirming that Dasein possesses an objective ecstatic structure in its capacity to come into existence in the world.

The significance of Heidegger’s analysis of time lies in his attempt to understand time based on time itself. This requires overcoming its physical interpretation, as found in Newton, and moving beyond the association of time with the data of consciousness and its interpretation on that basis, as in Bergson, who considered pure duration to be the form assumed by the succession of our states of consciousness when the self is allowed to flow with life (Bergson, 1889, p. 75). Heidegger’s task may therefore be summarised as an attempt to “approach time philosophically rather than theologically” (Dastur, 2011, p. 13) and to establish a genuine interconnection between Dasein and time by posing the ontological question of whether we ourselves are not time. Heidegger maintains that only by speaking temporally about time can a radical understanding of the problem of temporality be achieved (Dastur, 2011, pp. 18–20). At this level of analysis, the phenomenological interpretation of the temporal meaning of Being becomes intelligible through Heidegger’s affirmation that the question of time is determined from the outset by the question of Being.

The phenomenological destruction of classical ontology proceeds from the broad idea that beings are understood from the outset in terms of time, and that the question of Being

acquires its true rigour only through “carrying out the destruction of the ontological tradition” (Dastur, 2011, pp. 30–32). This also entails revealing the limits of the ontological tradition from Plato to Descartes in the light of the problem of temporality. Heidegger’s temporal ontology is thus intended to overcome the error of Hegelianism by dissolving the ontic into ontology and moving beyond the positivist interpretation, one consequence of which is an ontological emptying produced by ontic interpretations. For Heidegger, the primordial ontological foundation of Dasein’s affectivity is temporality: it constitutes the deep structure within which the meaning of Being is disclosed, or “the horizon for the understanding of Being” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 371). The meaning of Being in general can therefore be projected only within the horizon of temporality. Ricoeur (1988) identifies three important achievements in Heidegger’s analysis: integrating the question of time as a whole into the fundamental structure of care, defining the unity of time through the interplay of temporal ecstases, and distinguishing a hierarchy of levels in the temporalisation of Dasein’s temporality. Yet, from a more developed perspective, beings possess a pre-ontological temporal character, because time, as the horizon of every understanding of Being, makes every interpretation of Being dependent upon Dasein’s understanding of it. Heidegger therefore requires Dasein to reconsider “the primordial interpretation of time as the horizon for the understanding of Being on the basis of temporality as the Being of Dasein, which understands Being” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 32).

Against this complex philosophical background, the question of time emerges as the central problem of every possible ontology. According to the Heideggerian conception, time “is not a thing and therefore is not something that exists; nevertheless, in its passing away it endures without itself being something temporal in the manner of that which exists in time” (Heidegger, 1972a, p. 3). The same applies to Being: it is not a thing and is likewise not itself something temporal, although it is nevertheless determined by time as presence. We do not find Being amid a collection of things, nor can we grasp it at a particular moment in time; nevertheless, it remains that which possesses presence through time and is determined by it. In any case, the present is only one mode of apprehending time. Lévinas (1994) clarifies this point:

To be in the present does not mean that we are in the presence of an interval of time severed from a linear sequence of duration, or in the presence of a point on that sequence; we are not dealing here with a present detached from time, constituted at a particular moment, nor with an element of time; what is at issue here is the function of the present. (p. 16)

Thus, for Heidegger, time is not a space within which we move; rather, it is what makes the existence of such a space possible in the first place. It belongs to the very structure of human life itself and is a “dimension of existence that constitutes the human being from the outset before becoming something that can be measured” (Bourdieu, 1975, p. 135). Heideggerian time does not transform presence into the presentation of the subject, as in Descartes or Hegel; rather, it functions here as a mode of Being’s constitution.

This constitutes a radical overcoming of the modern representation founded on the Cartesian cogito, which Kant transformed into a transcendental subject. Within that representation, time is established as one-dimensional and appears as successive nows unfolding in relation to the human subject.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger indicates that temporality is not a framework within which everyday events occur but the deep structure that enables Dasein to be what it is. Temporality is therefore connected with the meaning of primordial care. Heidegger maintains that temporality “is essentially ecstatic, that temporality temporalises itself primordially from the future, and that primordial time is finite” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 377). Finitude should not be understood here as an accidental deficiency in Dasein’s time but as that which reveals the truth of its existence: Dasein can be a project open to its possibilities only because it is a finite existence and, consequently, an existence directed towards an ultimate possibility that cannot be surpassed.

This finitude appears most clearly in death, which does not merely represent an event occurring at the end of Dasein’s life but an ontological event that discloses its primordial structure. Primordial time is revealed as finite only through Dasein’s relation to death as its ultimate possibility (Heidegger, 1962, p. 435). Here it becomes clear why the future assumes greater significance than the mere present: Dasein does not exist as a completed present but as a possibility that projects itself towards what it can be. In this sense, the future is not a temporal point that has not yet arrived but an ontological dimension in the constitution of Dasein itself.

This also entails reconstructing the relationship between time and space. If Dasein’s spatiality cannot be understood based on mere spatial extension, it is grounded in the ontological meaning of care, that is, in its temporality. Heidegger therefore states that “Dasein’s space is not extended; rather, it is the space of care” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 420). Spatiality does not appear here as a neutral geometrical domain occupied by Dasein but as a mode of its openness to the world. Dasein’s spatiality is therefore not separate from its temporality but emerges from it, since the world becomes a meaningful space only because Dasein is open to it within a temporal structure that determines what is near and what is distant, what is present in concern, and what lies outside the sphere of care.

At this level, Heidegger also resumes his critique of the Hegelian representation of time and its relationship to spirit. Hegel attempted to understand the possibility through which spirit falls into time as a form of abstraction, which, in Heidegger’s view, makes his conception of time more radical than its ordinary understanding. Nevertheless, this conception ultimately remains connected to world-time as an objectivity that constitutes the condition of possibility of beings within the world. Hence arises the necessity of distinguishing between world-time and the primordial temporality of Dasein: the former appears as time that can be represented and measured within the world, whereas the latter is the structure that makes the disclosure of the world and Dasein’s openness to it possible in the first place.



The analysis thus leads to a conclusion that goes beyond merely asserting that time is a condition for understanding Being. Temporality reveals that Dasein does not possess a completed existence and then live in time; rather, its Being is determined through an ongoing process of openness to its possibilities, through a primordial relation to past, present, and future, through a finitude disclosed by death, and through care, which renders the world a meaningful space. The deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence therefore does not result in the abolition of the present but in the removal of its ontological privilege. Presence becomes a dimension within a more primordial temporal unity rather than the standard by which Being is measured. Hence, the distinctive contribution of Heidegger's analysis becomes clear: if time is the horizon for the understanding of Being, temporality is the structure that enables Dasein itself to understand Being. The question of time can therefore no longer be separated from the question of the mode of Being of the being that understands Being.

### **Conclusion**

Heidegger brought about a radical transformation in the understanding of time. He no longer regarded it as an external framework or as a category associated with motion, the soul, or the subject, but connected it instead with the ontological structure of Dasein's Being. Whereas Aristotle related time to motion, Augustine to the soul and the possibility of measuring time, and Kant to inner sense and knowledge, Heidegger maintained that these conceptions had not reached the ontological dimension of time.

For Heidegger, temporality is the structure within which past, present, and future are integrated into the Being of Dasein. Dasein does not first exist and then enter into time; rather, its Being is essentially temporal. Temporality is therefore connected with care, anticipation, possibility, finitude, and death. The analysis of time also reveals Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of presence, because Dasein's Being is not confined to the present but remains continually open to its possibilities, its past, and its future.

Thus, for Heidegger, time is not merely one topic among others within ontology; rather, it is the horizon within which ontology and the understanding of Being become possible. The understanding of Being proceeds from the analysis of Dasein's Being as temporal Being, and time is therefore connected with Being, being-in-the-world, care, and finitude. The question thus shifts from "What is time?" to the deeper question of what makes the understanding of Being possible. The answer is that temporality constitutes the fundamental horizon for the understanding of Being.

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