

Who lives in the House of Being?

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In this paper I concentrate on Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism'. In this text Heidegger refers to language as the 'House of Being'. Through a discussion of this metaphor I investigate Heidegger's confrontation with some of the topics he left marginalised in his previous work like space and body.

INTRODUCTION

For Heidegger (1973) the human condition finds its best description in the phrase *being-in-the-world*. With this term he wants to stress that a human being is awoken in a world or thrown into a world from which is inseparable; a human being is in fact the relation it shares with the world it receives. There is no outside determination of this world or even a theoretical or practical preparation for entering this world; we rather know it through our *being-there* (*Dasein*) which is Heidegger's basic term for human existence. Despite the intense spatial nuance of these terms, Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that *Dasein*'s spatiality is based on care (*Sorge*) which is 'the temporal modality that holds together the structure of being-in-the-world' (Vallega, 2003, pp. 62–63). As Heidegger (1973) makes clear this means that '*Dasein*'s specific spatiality must be grounded in temporality' and is not 'a result of his bodily nature' (p. 418/367, p. 82/56).

In this way, early Heidegger succeeds in downgrading both space and body with a theory that prioritizes time but is phrased in spatial terms. This situation pervades *Being and Time*. For example, his two main terms for relating to things, that is, the 'ready-to-hand' and the 'present-at-hand' encourage a momentary diversion towards the body but his thought never actually stray from its temporal focus.

In Heidegger's (1971, 1982) later writings space makes its presence even more commanding and his language is extensively shaped by spatial and architectural metaphors; things gather the world, thinking is building, mortals dwell poetically, language is the 'house of being' and his own language which verbalizes an attempt to overcome the danger of metaphysical thinking appears to be metaphorical through and through. However, in Lecture Six of *The Principle of Reason* Heidegger (1996) argues that the function of metaphor is exactly what founds the artificial and harmful distinction between sensible and non-sensible that grounds western metaphysics.

The idea of transposing and of 'metaphor' is based upon the distinguishing, if not complete

separation, of the sensible and the nonsensible as two realms that subsist on their own. The setting up of this partition of the sensible and nonsensible, between the physical and nonphysical is a basic feature of what is called metaphysics and which normatively determines Western thinking (p. 48).

Derrida (1974) states that this take on metaphor suggests that ‘philosophy would be a self-eliminating process of generating metaphor. It would be of the nature of philosophy that philosophical culture be a rude obliteration’ (p. 9). So rude in fact, that allowed ‘the term *sense* to be applied to that which should be foreign to the senses’ (p. 28). But if this is true, why does Heidegger’s own thought rely on metaphor in order to bring to light a conception of language that is forgotten? Derrida (2007) points out that there seems to be a contradiction, if we take into consideration

... Heidegger’s statements concerning the so-called metaphysical concept of metaphor, on the one hand, and, on the other, his own text insofar as it appears more ‘metaphorical’ or *quasi*-metaphorical than ever, at the very moment when he defends himself against that. How is this possible? (p. 68)

Derrida (2007) adds that Heidegger maintains that his own metaphors are not metaphors at all. What are then these metaphors and what do they suggest for Heidegger’s later thought? In order to explore this question, I first need to point out that Heidegger’s concerns about metaphor are not directed towards the forgetfulness of the sensuous but to the fact that such a notion of a purely sensuous and thus literal sphere does not exist. In Lecture Six of *The Principle of Reason*, that is, in the very text that he utters his concerns about metaphor, he argues that reason does not have an absolute foundation and it is rather found in beings. Beings should not be thought as what we represent but rather what we see and hear. After all, he tells us, Plato named ‘the genuine element of beings *ιδέα*—the face of beings and that which is viewed by us’ and ‘Heraclitus named what constituted the genuine element in beings—*λόγος*—the locution of beings to which we respond in hearing’ (Heidegger, 1996, p. 47). For Heidegger this etymological clarification suggests that the non-sensible is always already implied in the sensible and hence perception is not a process of registration of external stimuli but the construction of the stimuli themselves. He points out that:

Whatever is heard by us never exhaust itself in what our ears, which from a certain point of view can be seen as separated sense organs, can pick up. More precisely, if we hear, something is not simply added to what the ear picks up; rather, what the ear perceives and how it perceives will already be attuned and determined by what we hear. . . Of course our hearing organs are in a certain regard necessary, but they are never the sufficient condition of our hearing, for that hearing which accords and affords us whatever there really is to hear. The same holds for our eyes and our vision. If human vision remained confined to what is piped in as sensations through the eye to the retina, then, for instance, the Greeks would never have been able to see Apollo in a statue of a young man or, to put this in a better way, they would never have been able to see the statue in and through Apollo (pp. 47–48).

For Heidegger perception is not a neutral registration of an external world, because there is no world that is neatly separated between a subject and an object. Our human bodies in their structure are never of the plain sensible nature; they always include the imaginative dimension in their potentiality to construct what they receive. Our receiving is always a building and for this reason building is thinking. Heidegger is suspicious of metaphor because the prevailing interpretation of metaphor presupposes a sensible origin that mirrors the world and a movement towards an abstraction that constitutes the non-sensible. When however, the question is posed for something so complicated as language these simple dualities (sensible and non-sensible) and their respective linguistic ones (signified and signifier) cannot fully describe what is going on. There are after all, signifiers that constantly emerge and make up our world without us knowing what exactly they point to. Experiences structured by technology are, in fact, the very field that exhibits this tendency. For example, what does being-online mean and why do we use this expression to describe what is usually considered a temporal disembodied experience? I believe, Heidegger's choice to use the expression 'the house of Being' in order to describe our use and being in language points to the answers of many of these questions but, what is more, his contemplation on this very expression sets the grounds of his later philosophy that constitutes a turn towards space and body. The fact that a simple metaphor can be so informative is explained by Derrida (2007). He says:

Each time that a rhetoric defines a metaphor, it implies not only a philosophy but a conceptual network within which philosophy as such has been constituted. Moreover, each thread in this network forms a *turn*, one might say a metaphor, if this notion were not too derivative here. The defined is therefore implied in the defining term of the definition (p. 58).

Since the house that is the focus of this metaphor has featured a lot in Heidegger's thought, in the next section I attempt a miniature genealogy of this concept. This genealogy will reveal that even though Heidegger often visits the concept of the *house* in order to formulate his thinking he never stays *in* it and *with* it long enough in order to provide a proper phenomenology. However, with his description of language as the 'house of Being', we can observe his final return to the matter or even his own *homecoming*.

THE HOUSE OF BEING

Heidegger talked about the house in several occasions. In *Being and Time* he discussed it as that which reveals the temporal regions of night and day despite the fact that the house as an environment that harbors so many of our intimate daily activities could have served him as an exemplary phenomenological opportunity. When, however, Heidegger wants to discuss the idea of anxiety (*angst*) and wishes to show its extremities, he argues that this experience refers to an 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) feeling. The word in its literal translation refers to the feeling of not being at home, or even being homeless. In fact, for Heidegger the everyday being-in of human beings is a 'tranquillized self-assurance—'Being-at-home'. This means that for him the experience of the home is equated with familiarity and thus inauthenticity (Heidegger, 1973, p.

233/ 188). Only, when *Dasein* is awakened from this indifference, does it obtain the possibility to become resolute and thus move towards authenticity. In this respect, in Heidegger's early thought the feeling of being-at-home is discussed only in its inauthentic aspects.

In some of his later writings, however, the house or the home participates in his discussions with different connotations. In the *Letter on Humanism* which is actually a response to Jean-Paul Sartre's public address titled *Existentialism Is a Humanism* Heidegger (2008) attempts to unearth subjectivity that is deeply seated in Europe's philosophical tradition and even in Sartre's own take on existentialism, and there he uses his famous expression that bares upon the idea of the house. In the first page Heidegger says that:

Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man. It does not make or cause the relation. Thinking brings this relation to Being solely as something handed over to it from Being. Such offering consists in the fact that in thinking Being comes to language. *Language is the house of Being*. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home (p. 147, *emphasis added*).

But is this discussion and especially Heidegger's understanding of language as '*the house of being*' an instance of metaphor? Do we really have an image of how man dwells in an actual house and if we do can we transport this to man's relation to Being? Heidegger certainly does not provide us with such an image. Despite his insistence of describing being *in* workshops or bridges he has never provided a full description of what it is to live in a house as Gaston Bachelard does for example in *Poetics of Space*. I believe this serves two important purposes: First, both the workshop and the bridge are better suited for describing an experience of space that is mainly temporal since it refers to an orientation towards a project that needs to be completed in a different time and place. Both the workshop and the bridge allow the transition to somewhere else, their purpose is to act as nodes in a larger network of significances that are mainly temporal: the finished product, a wooden table for example, will leave the workshop in order to fulfil its purpose in a house somewhere else, and the bridge will allow the members of a family to reach the house. This temporal take on spatiality is what interests early Heidegger. What, happens, however when the house actually gathers its inhabitants? What kind of spatial experience do people, in fact, most people on earth have when they are gathered inside the house participating in experiences like resting, bathing, daydreaming, eating, sleeping, caring for some other member of their family, or having sex? All these activities and of course the spatial element in them seems different from what is usually discussed in Heidegger.

Second, Heidegger (1971) does not provide such an image of living in a house, apart from a short description of the farmhouse in the Black Forest, because his phenomenology attempts to subvert the description of experience as the producing of images. Such images are not our daily way of experiencing the world. It is for this reason that we do not need a philosophy of images but we need an account of what is to live in a house. For Heidegger, however, the house and all the concomitant words (homelessness, homeland, homesickness etc.) are reserved for a more basic discussion of human existence that is described as early as *Being and Time* in temporal terms. But even, in later writings where the primacy of time is supposedly given up being-in-the-world or dwelling is understood as 'ek-sistence' (Heidegger, 2008, p. 155). This does not in any

case refer to the concept of *existentia* as the realization of a possibility or an idea and it cannot be conceived as actuality or subjectivity. Heidegger says that: ‘As ek-sisting, man sustains Dasein in that he takes the Da, the clearing of Being, into “care”.¹ But Da-sein itself occurs essentially as “thrown”. It unfolds essentially in the throw of Being as the fateful sending’ (p. 157).

This means that Dasein, which is defined by its own situatedness, perceives this situatedness as a relation to Being. Its own self-understanding cannot be differentiated from the perception of Being and this relation is unfolded temporally through care for future projects. In this way, Dasein lives out of a past and is projecting itself to the future while living the present. The house then, or, better yet, the Home, is reserved in Heidegger’s thought for discussing this basic relation between human beings and Being. For example, Heidegger says that: ‘Homelessness... consists in the abandonment of Being by beings. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of Being. Because of it the truth of Being remains unthought’ (p. 165).

The expression, then, ‘*house of Being*’ is not supposed to inform us about our daily experience of being in a house. The fact, that this discussion is kept persistently oriented towards time does not allow us to glimpse the spatial element and its role which is so integral in our actual being-in-a-house. But on the other hand, this metaphor is not a metaphor at all—in the form of a transportation of meaning—, since it belongs to a thinking that is not constructed on the dichotomy of the sensible and the non-sensible and it ‘is neither theoretical nor practical’ (p. 177). In this respect, this metaphor is not a metaphor because it belongs to a different path. Heidegger (2008) says:

Thinking builds upon the house of Being, the house in which the jointure of Being fatefully enjoins the essence of man to dwell in the truth of Being. This dwelling is the essence of ‘being-in-the-world’. The reference in *Being and Time* (p. 54) to ‘being-in’ as ‘dwelling’ is not etymological game. The same reference in the 1936 essay on Holderlin’s verse, ‘Full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells on this earth’, is no adornment of a thinking that rescues itself from science by means of poetry. The talk of the house of Being is no transfer of the image ‘house’ to Being. But one day we will, by thinking the essence of Being in a way appropriate to its matter, more readily be able to think what ‘house’ and to ‘dwell’ are (p. 177).

But what does this mean? Obviously, if there is such a thing as Being it is certainly not a thing; it is at least a process or an event. Equally language is not a thing but something greater. In this respect the ‘house of Being’ does not in any way permit the correspondence between the unfamiliar non-sensible and the familiar sensible that a metaphor implies. Being is above all not a being, and thus we cannot rely on the human being—which similarly is not a mere being among other beings—and its dwelling in a house in order to think metaphorically the nature of language. However, Heidegger’s attempt exists in language; it is a path of thinking and a language about language. In his mind this is thinking in its most originary form. And this thinking which is neither theoretical nor practical *passes through* space and it *dwells on* (in?) the house. And it is not the case that we know what dwelling or the house is because, even before Being comes into the question, they are not just sensible things or activities; nothing is merely sensible. Before we even start talking about dwelling we already dwell and in this respect we do

not need a metaphor in order to move into the non-sensible sphere and thus talk metaphorically about the essence of dwelling because dwelling has already happened. We are above all dwellers. We have already thought or experienced dwelling *as such*. Dwelling has already *taken place*. But why is ‘take place’ necessary? Why is the spatial element necessary and what is its role? What is that which organises dwelling in such manner that is articulated in language spatially? Derrida (2008) believes the answer lies on the spatial dispersion of the human being. He says:

The spatial or spacing dispersion is manifested, for example, in language. Every language is first determined by spatial meanings (*Raumbedeutungen*). The phenomenon of these so-called spatializing metaphors is not at all accidental nor does it fall within the scope of the rhetorical concept of ‘metaphor’. It is not some external fatality. Its essential irreducibility cannot be elucidated outside of this existential analytic of *Dasein*, of its dispersion, its historicity, and its spatiality. The consequences of this must therefore be drawn, in particular for the very language of the existential analytic: all the words that Heidegger uses also necessarily refer back to these *Raumbedeutungen*, beginning with the word *Zerstreuung* (dissemination, dispersion, distraction), which nevertheless names the origin of spacing at the moment when, as language, it submits to its law (pp. 20–21).

This dispersion into spatiality goes of course back to the problem of *Dasein*’s body which once more in the *Letter on Humanism* remains unsolved. Heidegger argues that he knows what the body is not but he does not say what it actually is: ‘The human body is something essentially other than an animal organism’ (Heidegger, 2008, p. 155). Thus, once more we are reminded that dwelling as the most basic and primordial of human conditions is temporal (ek-sistence) but we do not know in what way the unique spatiality of the human body is implicated in dwelling.

However, when Heidegger wants to talk about the connection between his thought—which is mainly ontological—to ‘a possible ethics’ he cites a story from Aristotle. In this story Heraclitus is ‘warming himself at a stove’ when unexpectedly he is confronted with ‘some strangers who wanted to come and visit him’.² The visitors are of course surprised to find the philosopher engaged in such mundane activities but Heraclitus invites them in his house and says: ‘*Einai gar kai entautha theous*’, which means “Here too the gods come to presence” (p. 175). For Heidegger the ‘here’, the place, the abode is what was understood by Heraclitus as *ēthos*. After all, Heraclitus said ‘*ēthos anthrōpōis daimōn*, “The ‘familiar’ abode for man is the open region for the presencing of god (the unfamiliar one)”’ (p. 176). This suggests according to Heidegger that if ethics ‘ponders the abode of man, then that thinking which thinks the truth of Being’ as the primordial element of man, as one who ek-sists, is in itself the original ethics’ (p. 176).

This proves according to Heidegger that his ontology of the dwelling of man is also an ethics. However, this relies on a story where the word *ethos* quite ‘literally’—if we can say that—relates to our daily inhabiting of the house. The ‘familiar’ is this daily dwelling in a house and it is what allows the presencing of the god. It does not matter that the familiar is not conceptualised. It is still there. It happens. The spatiality of the body that dwells in this house is there. Heidegger does not wish to enter this discussion, precisely for this reason, because in that house of daily preoccupations comes the dwelling of the body. In fact, David Krell argues that Heidegger purposefully neglects to mention that the stove in the story is, in fact, located in the kitchen

‘as though anxious to circumvent that room’ (Krell, 1992, p. 4). Krell even suspects that the stove might refer ‘to the stove for heating water for the bath’; or even worse to other plumbing equipment for more embarrassing needs. Heidegger, then meticulously avoids talking about the fact that Heraclitus had a body while dwelling in his home.

CONCLUSION

In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard (1994) discusses *being in intimate places* as our basic entrance to the world and the human condition. Bachelard argues in this book that ‘our house is our corner of the world . . . it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word’ (p. 4). It is our primary ‘cast into the world’ (p. 7). As he explains: ‘Being reigns in a sort of earthly paradise of matter, dissolved in the comforts of an adequate matter. It is as though in this material paradise, the human being were bathed in nourishment, as though he were gratified with all the essential benefits (p. 7).

Bachelard’s discussion of the house lends Heidegger’s own belief concerning our thrownness into the world a more hospitable hue. The house is welcoming the child. The interaction between them is a meeting of potentialities. In fact, he argues that ‘(t)he house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for daydreaming’ (p. 15). For this reason the house ‘is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits’ (p. 14). We actually never learned to open a general, abstract door but the specific door of our specific home. The house is lived through its materiality but this materiality is received through imagination. He says

whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter . . . the imagination builds ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort itself within the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts. In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams (p. 5).

It is no wonder then that these thoughts and dreams, even our most original thoughts and dreams, go though the intimacy of spatiality and bodiliness that is constantly relived. Being-in-a-house is being-there-in-a-body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that the body itself can enact the movement between the literal and the metaphorical.

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body’s natural means; it must then build itself an instrument and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world (p. 146).

In my opinion this interpretation illuminates the nature of the human body which in its potentiality allows our moving beyond our particular situation. Language is the ‘house of Being’ but since it is through a body that we walk and eat, talk and sleep, our bodily space is inscribed in language and language is inscribed in our bodies. Heidegger’s marginalisation of space and body kept this relation veiled. However, the traces of this truth can be found when the cut threads are put back together. On this point Luce Irigaray (1999) argues that:

The physical constitution of beings is forgotten in the metaphysics of Being. Nature is re-created by the *logos*. In oblivion of the fact that what is done over in this way keeps its physical qualities as well. Of the fact that the economy of the physical being is always recalled in every one of man’s fabrications. That the living body as *Gestell* always leaves traces in these fabrications. Forgotten traces, they persist as the unthought and unthinkable aspects of the world that man has fabricated for himself (p. 87).

Heidegger’s famous metaphor says a lot about the philosopher’s perhaps unconscious remembrance and desire for ‘his first “house”: his dwelling within a living body. . .’ (Irigaray, 1999, p. 70). Dwelling within a living body, dwelling in a body and dwelling with other bodies seems to be what the spatial metaphor is revealing and what mortals need to listen. The Saying of language echoes in the ‘house of Being’ but this house is alive, made of flesh and blood and constantly changing. This liveliness is captured through poetical language and metaphor. Their originality might not be a proof of linguistic inventiveness but of alitheic revealing. This is, in fact, poetical language’s ‘second-order reference’ which according to Ricoeur (1978) ‘constitutes the primordial reference to the extent that it suggests, reveals, unconceals—or whatever you say—the deep structures of reality to which we are related as mortals who are born into this world and who dwell in it for a while’ (p. 154). In this sense, Heidegger’s spatial metaphors—which are not metaphors at all—describe or better yet attest to language’s original function that is performed by a being that dwells in a body and daydreams about the house of Being.

NOTES

1. Care is a temporal notion in Heidegger and does not refer to any ethical aspect.
2. Aristotle, *De partibus animalium*, I, 5, 645a 17ff. cited in Heidegger, 2008, p. 175.

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