

## Tool, Thing and Object

Bowen ZHA (Kyushu University)

The well-known discourse on the tool and its handiness (*Zuhandenheit*) appears in the framework Analysis of Environmentality and Worldhood in General (*Umweltlichkeit und Weltlichkeit überhaupt*) in the first part of *Being and Time*. What precedes this analysis, and at the same time necessarily leads to it, is the formulation of the question of Being. Heidegger reads the three, *Dasein*, the world and the tool-being, in a relationship through an existential analysis. However, there is a significant change in the position of the description of nature and beings (*Seiendes*) in *Being and Time* and the later period after the Turning (*Kehre*).

In equipment that is used, 'Nature' is discovered along with it by that use--the 'Nature' we find in natural products. ...The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind 'in the sails.' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 100)<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, in Heidegger's later work after the Turning, which also focuses on the relations between beings and human, his position changes in a completely opposite way. He argues that in modern technology, which means Enframing (*Gestell*), beings and nature, reveals as a resource to be used by human, and such a situation that is the result of a challenging (*Herausforderung*), as well as of metaphysics.

The hydroelectric plant is set into the current of the Rhine. It sets the Rhine to supplying its hydraulic pressure, which then sets the turbines turning. ...[T]he river is dammed up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier, derives from the essence of the power station. (Heidegger, 1993, p. 321)

Therefore, a being, such as a jug, must be considered as a thing, and "from through the thinging of the thing there takes place and is first determined the presencing of what presences after the manner of the jug." (Heidegger, 2012, pp. 15-16)

In Heidegger's philosophy, the relations between humans and beings changed. So, how exactly is being revealed as a tool and grasped by *Dasein*? How should we understand the beings, as a tool or as thing? Moreover, does this indicate that the way of understanding beings in *Being and Time* is somehow inadequate?

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<sup>1</sup> Soon after completing *Being and Time*, Heidegger reinforced this view in his writing. "That which first of all and constantly lies-before in the closest circle of human activity and accordingly is constantly disposable is the whole of all things of use, with which we constantly have to do, the whole of all those existent things which are themselves meant to be used on one another, the implement that is employed and the constantly used products of nature: house and yard, forest and field, sun, light and heat. What is thus tangibly present for dealing with (*vor-handen*) is reckoned by everyday experience as that which is, as a being, in the primary sense." (Heidegger, 1988, p. 108)

In response to this question, Graham Harman, a representative of Speculative Realism, argues that this position of being cannot be fully understood through the phenomenological perspective, i.e., by understanding being in terms of the relations between man and being. Harman believes that the reason for the failure of *Being and Time* lies in the failure of the phenomenological approach as correlationism, and therefore being must be seen as an Object independent of relations, not as a Tool in relations. Conversely, Heidegger continues to adhere to the phenomenological approach and tries to understand being as a thing after the Turning.

This paper attempts to address three questions as follows:

1. What is inadequate with the position of understanding being in *Being and Time*?
2. From the standpoint of Harman's Realism, why should Heidegger's phenomenological approach to philosophy as a whole be criticized?
3. Does Heidegger himself address Harman's critique in Heidegger's later work, and how do Harman's and Heidegger's approaches differ?

## 1. From Tool to Object

In *Being and Time*, the beings are encountered by "Dasein" as Being-In-the-World in three main modes: ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*), present-at-hand (*Vorhanden*), and being-with (*Mitsein*) other Dasein. The answer to the question of what the being means for Dasein is the concept of *Zuhandenheit*. Through this analysis, Heidegger argues that a key clue to understanding beings for Dasein is through a network of relations in the world, i.e., *Zuhandenheit* or readiness-to-hand, or in Harman's words, "tool-being."

However, Harman rejects this relation-based approach to dealing with beings, citing the difficulty of understanding a tool's existence outside of such a relation. This is a poignant question raised by Harman. Imagine that something we have at hand, such as this paper, can only be known as a "combustible object" if it is lit, i.e., having a relation to the phenomenon of fire. Once the tool is withdrawn from the relationship, we cannot grasp it anymore. Thus, Harman argues that,

For if the being of things lies veiled behind all theory and practice, this is not due to some precious merit or defect of human Dasein, but to the fact that all relations translate or distort that to which they relate: even inanimate relations. ... In other words, the withdrawal of objects is not some cognitive trauma that afflicts only humans and a few smart animals, but expresses the permanent inadequacy of any relation at all. (Harman, 2011, p. 44)

In Harman's view, Heidegger's tool-analysis in *Being and Time* is too systematic, making Heidegger into a "correlationist", for whether the tool grasped by Dasein is seen or used, in both cases it is treated

only in relation to something else, not in its own right.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Harman describes his philosophy as “realism without materialism.” Despite Heidegger’s attempt to establish a critical divide between “being” and “human Dasein,” Harman considered that what Heidegger gives us is the fundamental difference between reality and relation.<sup>3</sup> Harman consciously ignores Heidegger’s late distinction between “object” and “thing,”<sup>4</sup> by equating objects and things. Harman argues that tools are only part of the object/thing that is revealed in a relation, while the object/thing that is truly independent of the relation exists prior to that relation.

Turning his back on Heidegger’s anti-metaphysics position, Harman identifies his own philosophy as an attempt to form an ontology of object, independent of their epistemological status, that is, independent of knowing the relation between subject and object. Thus, for Harman, who advocates Speculative Realism, one of the most fundamental positions is a critique of the phenomenological approach of grasping object through relations, which is also a fundamental position of Heidegger. Harman stresses the independent reality of objects.

After attacking the systematic claim of tool-analysis, Harman goes on to attack a second influential claim in *Being and Time*, which is Heidegger’s tracing of beings to *res*, and going back to the ancient Greek concept of *pragmata* to explain the words of beings, beings are limited as tool-being.

The Greeks had an appropriate term for “Things” *πράγματα*—that is to say, that which one has to do with in one’s concerned dealings. But ontologically, the specifically ‘pragmatic’ character of the *πράγματα* is just what the Greeks left in obscurity; they thought of these ‘proximally’ as ‘mere Things.’ (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 96-97)

The consequence of this retrospective treatment of praxis is a descent into a kind of subjectivism. For Harman, Dasein’s world is the world of the “as”, which is “a tangible and volatile surface derived from a more primary dimension of being.” (Harman, 2010, p.9) Harman rejects all attempts to humanize the “ready-to-hand” into a mere “tool.” This way of illustrating the tool through the hermeneutic “as structure” (Als-Struktur) ignores the independently existing Object.

Harman illustrates the independence of Object by explaining the two cases of *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*. Harman acknowledges that Heidegger’s considerations also produce a radical reversal of the traditional way of looking at beings. We find that the device has two independent aspects: (1) its irreducibly veiled activity, and (2) its sensible and explorable profile. “In more familiar Heideggerian terms, there is the tool viewed ‘ontologically’ and the same tool viewed ‘ontically.’” (Harman, 2002, p. 22)

However, Harman argues that by both means human Dasein cannot fully approach the tool. That is, the inadequacy of grasping the beings through praxis as well as *theoria*.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf., Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, op. cit., 43.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, op. cit., 44-45.

<sup>4</sup> “I treat causal relations between non-human objects no differently from human perception of them. But it should also be noted that I do not adopt Heidegger’s distinction between “object” (which he uses negatively) and “thing” (which he uses positively). The word “object” acquires in the Brentano School a generalizing power too valuable to be sacrificed to the cult rituals of Heideggerian terminology.” G. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, op. cit., 5.

Both theoretical abstraction and the use of tools are equally guilty of distorting the tools themselves. Insofar as a tool is “used,” it is no less present-at-hand than an image in consciousness. But a tool is not “used”; it is. And insofar as it is, the tool is not exhausted by its relations with human theory or human praxis. (Harman, 2011, p. 44)

In brief, Harman insists that grasping beings through relations, whether by *Zuhanden* or *Vorhanden*, cannot really reach beings themselves. Therefore, for Harman, it is not the use that is important in the existence of the tool, because the tool is not a craft or a device. Harman summarizes his arguments as follows, “Equipment isn’t ‘useful’; it *is*. It can prove to be useful or harmful or indifferent *only insofar as it is*.” (Harman, 2022, p. 186)

## 2. The Problem of Subjectivity, or the Failure of *Being and Time*

So here, Harman asks: what is the being (Seiende)? How should we understand being? Considering this question in the context of *Being and Time*, can being truly be grasped through a relationship like *Zu* or *Vorhandenen*? These are good questions, but unfortunately, Harman gives an incorrect answer.

Harman’s charges come from two main sources. Harman firstly cancels the priority of *Dasein*. He argues,

The fact that *Dasein*’s essence lies in its existence. Never meant to be sized up as a “rational animal” or as the “fusion of body and soul,” *Dasein* can only be understood in the very act of its existence. Any claim to define *Dasein* via some representation or *eidos* or by way of any external properties is incapable of living up to the task. But this irreducibility of *Dasein* to a representation is also shared by hammers, and even by sand and rocks. We have already seen that none of these entities can be understood as if they were simply *vorhanden*. Readiness-to-hand does not mean “usable by people,” but rather “sheer performance of an effect.” Thus, *Dasein* in the second sense is the absolute equivalent of the tool, however counterintuitive this might seem. (Harman, 2010, p. 8)

The most important point here is that with the de-prioritization of *Dasein*, the problem of *Being* also dissolves.

Secondly, with regard to what a being/tool is, Harman argues we should not first understand beings through relations, since such correlation would eventually encounter an epistemic finitude through relations, and therefore we should first see beings as individual Objects.

Therefore, Harman’s main charge is as follows,

1. understanding being from the perspective of *Dasein* through relations, i.e., from the perspective of correlation, cannot fully grasp the entity/reality of being/object because of the limitations imposed by the relation.

A secondary problem derived from it is,

2. in *Being and Time*, whether one understands being from the perspective of praxis or theoria, understanding of these beings is incomplete, and there is an aspect of the beings that is not revealed; thus, there will still be surplus of our understanding about the beings.

From these two charges, Harman concludes that as long as being is understood through relationships, it is impossible to grasp the object totally, and what we understand is nothing but these relationships. The rationale behind this conclusion is that understanding being/object through relationships is inherently deficient.

I agree with Harman that Dasein cannot understand the totality of beings, and I believe he successfully points out this inadequacy in *Being and Time*. There is a subjectivity finitude problem behind the tool-analysis of Dasein. In *Being and Time* Heidegger limits beings to *res*, and uses the ancient Greek concept of *pragmata* to explain the words of beings. Beings are limited as tool-being and bound by the instrumentality of Dasein's subjectivity. Therefore, as a result, such praxis binding turns the *physis*, beings as a whole, into nothing but instruments for humans.

The problem that Heidegger encounters here is the finitude of subjectivity. This finitude is the limit of subjectivity. Dasein is able to understand the Being (Sein) through the relations between Dasein and beings (Seiendes) in a certain context. However, Heidegger also realized the limitations that this relationship imposes. This could be considered as a reason why *Being and Time* was not completed.

In *Being and Time*, we, Dasein, are primarily, and in most cases, engaged, active actors, rather than as thinkers, as theoria which are. Because of this, a being first and most of the time reveals itself before us as ready to be used for our projects; this is the world as Dasein sees it - the whole of beings organized on the basis of our activity. Because we can also observe detachedly without praxis, beings/tools can also be the present-at-hand (Vorhandenes).

It is important to note here that the meaning of Being can only be revealed by examining Dasein, as Dasein understands Being and therefore can provide meaning. This does not mean that meaning is often found hovering around this particular being, so that if we stay close to Dasein we are likely to encounter it. Dasein is not the place where meaning happens to be; Dasein produces meaning. We make meaning by living meaningful lives. When Heidegger says that Dasein understands Being, this verb should not be understood as a passive acceptance of the facts that press upon us, but as an active process of production.

Thus, in *Being and Time*, we see that the first part explains how beings reveals itself, first, by explaining how we find beings in the praxis world, and second, by elucidating the structure of our openness (i.e., disclosure) to being. Heidegger explains exactly how humans direct meaning to entities in *Being and Time*: we grasp (both practically and theoretically) the possibilities and impossibilities of an entity and in so doing grasp the being's situation. For example, for a being/tool to make sense as a teacup is for me to grasp it in terms of what the teacup can be used for and what it should be used for. This "can" does not mean what is logically or physically possible and impossible; it means and only means being revealed in the world.

But this understandability limits the perspective of being as Dasein, because everything

understandable seems to be a priori, and the reason why we understand in such way is precisely because we can understand and the beings are able to be understood. But no matter how we understand it, it is only a possibility of a subjectivity. That is to say, based on an openness that allows us to understand Being, but we fail to capture the finitude: the concealment of Being.

Thus, in *Being and Time*, the temporal structure Heidegger invokes accounts for Dasein's openness to Being without accounting for the finitude of that openness. Thus, the whole world for Dasein can only be a world of as-structure composed of relations. Our subjectivity is limited by finitude.

In contrast, Harman emphasizes that reading anything from a Dasein perspective is incomplete, so we should not place things in a relational-systemic context, but view objects independently away from any relation of subjectivity.

Harman perceives this problem of subjectivity, but he seems to be going in the wrong direction. Harman's solution to the problem of the finitude of subjectivity in *Being and Time* is to deny it, i.e., to argue that we should not consider being from a Dasein perspective, to understand the meaning of things through the relations within the world, but simply to see it as an Object. This approach seems to "transcend" the finitude of the subjectivity. So, the question is, can we really see things without a subjectivity? The answer is quite the opposite: this approach does not allow us to escape from the status of the subjectivity at all, or even to be aware of the limits of finitude.

### **3. To give or to be given, this is the question**

Heidegger's fundamental position can be indeed considered as correlationalism. However, it is a hermeneutical correlationalism, which is unique in that it requires us to consider the subject also as an object in a hermeneutic circle, and only in a hermeneutic circle can we understand Being. This position presupposes the finitude of the subject. The understanding of Being makes sense only in such relation. We cannot see things without a perspective, and be able to arrive at a relationless object.

So why is correlationalism legitimate, but considering things as independent Objects is not? First, the understanding is not only an understanding of independent objects, but also the understanding of the world. Only such understanding is capable of understanding meaning of beings, not only the beingness. Thus, understanding entails something more than discovering facts about particular elements of the world. Understanding in a more authentic sense is what Heidegger calls the revealing of possibilities. The isolated, atomic discovery of one fact after another does not produce an understanding of a meaningful and comprehensible world, but rather a collection of unconnected beingness. An understanding is not an accumulation of objects, but an interpretation of how these facts are possible.

As a special kind of being capable of understanding Being, i.e., Dasein, what we understand is not just the beingness of object, nor a mere accumulation of facts. Harman's Realism sees the beingness of being as its main goal. However, in Harman's view, no matter how many objects we understand, this

accumulation of objects will not produce any meaning and will not form the world we live in. Such correlational understanding is indeed central to Heidegger's thought in *Being and Time*, but unless we view this idea in the context of Heidegger's critique of traditional philosophy, the context of an attempt to recover Dasein's understanding of Being through a critique of traditional metaphysics, we are bound to misunderstand it, which Harman does. Harman's critique misses Heidegger's most central aim, namely, the meaning of Being. What Heidegger emphasizes is that as Dasein we do not only understand through relations, either by using tool-beings or by analyzing them in a theoretical way, i.e., in the ontic dimension, but that as the most particular being we are able to understand Being in the ontological dimension. Here, Harman's charge not only fails to correctly point out Heidegger's mistake, but pushes Harman further into what Heidegger's previously critiqued, abandoning the understanding of Being in order to understand beings.

Secondly, when we try to understand a thing, we also have a finite level of understanding. However, such finitude is a priority, because as a Dasein we cannot understand something beyond the finitude nature of our perception, but only in terms of the relationship between people and things can we understand the meaning of Being. Such finitude and priority give us the relations which belong to Dasein and only to Dasein, and therefore this relation is what makes the belonging-togetherness (*zusammengehören*) of human and Being<sup>5</sup>. On the one hand, this relation limits our cognition; on the other hand, we are able to recognize this finitude so that we can transcend, *ek-sistieren*. Our subjective understanding of finitude makes us human.

Harman and Heidegger view finitude in different dimensions. For Harman, it is the finitude of an objective entity that he tries to transcend, that is, the process of understanding being/object beyond a finite relation. But what Heidegger sees, on the other hand, is the finitude of a subject. That is, why we are able to understand, which is the finitude of this understanding itself.

The way of questioning how human understand Being in *Being and Time* is a process of reduction: from the beings to their Being. However, it is clear that the answer for why we could understand beings only pushes the question back one more step. We experience these types of phenomena because we understand these beings, and we understand these beings because we are Dasein and exist in a particular way. This is illuminating, but the question arises again, why are we existing in this particular way and why are we alone as Dasein able to understand Being? In *Being and Time*, Heidegger has no answer to this, and even if he did, the question reappears after the answer, infinitely regressing into the unexplainable.

No matter how far we go backward, we reach a point that is itself unexplainable. The problem is not that *Being and Time* provides a bad answer, but that it actually gives an answer, that is, an "ultimate" explanation of the fact and manner in which Being reveals to us. Whatever our existence is that can account for our clearing (*Lichtung*) cannot account for itself, so any explanation necessarily leaves the final step unexplained. "All metaphysics leaves something essential unthought: its own ground and

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<sup>5</sup> On Heidegger's account of *zusammengehören*, see *Identität und Differenz*, S. 37.

foundation.” (Heidegger, 1969, p. 100) This is what he means by "groundless reasons": we can find reasons, but these reasons must themselves be groundless. We can give sense of Being, but meanwhile it is the gift given from Being.

Whereas in Heidegger's earlier works Dasein opened up a clearing, now the agency and initiative shifts to Being. Our thoughts are nothing but reactions to the way things strike us; our actions, reactions. The gift from Being is inexplicable, thus undermining any kind of fundamental ontology, any attempt to understand why Being gives and why it is the way it is.

Being offers us no ground and no basis-as beings do-to which we can turn, on which we can build, and to which we can cling. Being is the rejection [Ab-sage] of the role of such grounding; it renounces all grounding, is abyssal [ab-gründig]. (Heidegger, 1991, p. 193)

There is an answer to the question of why Dasein and Being is, and why it is so. But this answer is a non-answer, because it gives (Es gibt). To Dasein who can be aware of Being, Being is a given gift which is already revealed. This is also reflected in the shift in position of Heidegger's concept of truth in the later period.

This hermeneutic definition of Being overcomes any subjectivism in *Being and Time*, since it eliminates Dasein's influence on the being and form of openness. Rather than Dasein projecting away the openness, Being opens itself and draws us into the event of its occurrence and happening itself.

This late Heideggerian process from giving to being given is not one-way; he emphasizes at the same time the mode of operation between the two. This giving is based on a given gift, therefore such be-given giving makes us realize that our thoughts and perceptions are always organized by clear modes of world (one side to the other, subject to object, self to other, and vice versa).

The answer given by Heidegger is the severance of the search for the ultimate answer, which will then form a kind of hermeneutic circle. The intelligible and given character of Being itself is a fundamental attribute of who we are as human beings. It is only in this circle and by transcending this circle that new understandings can arise, not the pursuit of an unchanging and eternal answer.

This understanding of Being could be reduced to the question of subjectivity. It overcomes the transcendental metaphysics that stops at the level of being without inquiring why we have these particular ways of experiencing life. It overcomes subjectivity by removing the initiative and control from Dasein, and moves us from a particular given horizon, Dasein's existentialism, to the givenness of horizontality, the fact that we have a horizon that enables us to be aware of anything.

## Conclusion

For Harman, his focus is not on the question of the finitude of subjectivity, but on how to reach object directly. Thus he remains in the metaphysical dimension to ask the question of being. This Realism view of Harman forgets from the very beginning the human as the starting point for asking



the question, and therefore for Being. This attitude, which is characteristic of metaphysics, is also the object of Heidegger's criticism.

On the contrary, although Heidegger is committed to the "problem of Being" from the very beginning, at the core of Heidegger's philosophy is the problem of the human. The only question for Harman is, to ask directly what is the being, whether it is revealed as a Tool or a Thing or an Object, and thus to try to inquire into the totality of being as an object.

But what Heidegger is really concerned with is the fact that among the many beings, one of them not only knows that something exists, but also wants to know why it exists, and that particular being is human. The only thaumazein for Heidegger is: that we are able to ask further questions about why we understand Being, about the fact and the basis of understanding, and the possibility of what is revealed by this question.

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