

Heidegger and Deep Ecology

Michael E. Zimmerman

The noted German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), took phenomenology down a different road than that envisaged by his mentor, Edmund Husserl. For Heidegger, the major issue for phenomenological investigation was not the intentional structures and correlates of absolute consciousness, but rather the "being" (Sein) of entities. Convinced that human experience and knowledge are finite and historical, Heidegger maintained that people living in different historical epochs have differing ways of understanding what it means for entities "to be." In the technological epoch, for instance, people understand nature as little more than raw material that is valuable solely because it can be used to enhance human power. Because he criticized technological modernity's domineering attitude toward nature, and because he envisioned a postmodern era in which people would "let things be," Heidegger has sometimes been read as an intellectual forerunner of today's "deep ecology" movement. Before examining the plausibility of this ecological reading of Heidegger, let us briefly review his understanding of being, and his account of how being has become so constricted in technological modernity.

In traditional metaphysics, "being" often refers to the ultimate ground or foundation for entities. According to Heidegger, Plato initiated this tradition by defining being as eidōs, the eternal form or blueprint that gives intelligibility to entities in the mutable spatiotemporal realm. For Plato, eidōs is ontologically superior because it is the eternal and unchanging foundation for all entities. Heidegger used the term "constant presence" (Anwesenheit) to describe being as an eternal foundation. He offered at least two criticisms of the "metaphysics of presence." First, being involves finitude, not eternity. Indeed, the reference to the present in "constant presence" indicates a concealed temporal dimension

even in the traditional metaphysical conception of being. Second, being cannot be adequately understood as a foundation or ground, for such an understanding regards being as a superior entity, such as the supreme being, or God. For Heidegger, ontology is not a matter of "telling a story" about where things came from, or how they were produced, but instead is an account of how entities can manifest themselves intelligibly as entities, that is, as things that are. "Being" names the self-manifesting or presencing (Anwesen) by virtue of which an entity reveals itself as such. For such presencing to occur, Heidegger postulated that there must be an "absencing," "clearing," or "opening," which he called time or temporality. Neither being nor time "are" entities; instead, they are ontologically potent "nothingness": the conditions necessary for entities "to be" in the sense of becoming manifest.

Presencing and temporality, being and time, are mediated through Dasein, Heidegger's term for the ontological capacity defining human existence. Human Dasein exists as the three-dimensional temporal "there" (da-) through which being as presencing (Sein) can take place. In his later writings, Heidegger maintained that the clearing is also constituted by language. Dasein's complex linguistic and temporal constitution enables humans not only to understand the intelligible structure of entities, but also to grasp the fact that entities "are" at all. Animals may encounter other entities, but they do not encounter them as things that are, for animals cannot open up the temporal-linguistic clearing in which entities can "present" themselves and thus "be." Hence, Heidegger rejected Aristotle's influential definition of humans as "rational animals."

In everyday existence, Dasein conceives of itself not as the temporal-linguistic clearing for entities to be manifest, but rather as just another type of entity, for instance, a "person" or an "intelligent animal." By disclosing itself in this way, Dasein manages to conceal its own nothingness, finitude, mortality.

When anxiety threatens to reveal the truth about Dasein's mortality, Dasein can choose to exist either inauthentically, by disowning itself and fleeing into distractions, or authentically, by affirming its finitude and thus by inviting its temporality to become more expansive, so that entities can reveal themselves in richer and more variegated ways. As authentic, then, Dasein can "let things be," instead of treating them merely as instruments or objects.

Later Heidegger argued that concealment of being results not because of personal denial of mortality, but rather because being has increasingly concealed itself since Plato's time. As a result, people have focused on entities, not on the disclosive event (being) by which they are revealed as entities. Instead of understanding being as the non-thinglike presencing of entities, then, metaphysicians defined being as a superior type of entity, for example, God or the Absolute. At the start of the modern age, Descartes executed an anthropocentric shift when he proposed that human rationality constitutes the ground for the truth, reality, and being of entities. For Descartes, for something "to be" means for it to be re-presented as an idea whose clarity and distinctness matches that of the cogito, that is, the rational subject's certainty about its own existence. Since only phenomena studied by quantitative sciences such as mathematical physics can meet this standard, however, science came to play a pre-eminent role in defining truth and reality in modern times. Scientific rationality discloses things in a powerful, but limited way: as complex forms of matter in motion.

Modern humanity began defining itself in terms of scientific naturalism. Blind to the fact that human existence constitutes the ontological clearing in which entities can manifest themselves, modern humanity views itself rather as an elaborate mechanical entity, or as a "clever animal." For Heidegger, then, Western metaphysics led not to human "progress," but instead to technological

nihilism in which everything--including humankind--stands revealed as raw material for the goal of greater power and security. According to Heidegger, this arrogant anthropocentric humanism (whether capitalist or communist) not only diminishes humankind, but also wreaks havoc on nature. Human efforts to reform existing practices cannot succeed and in fact will make matters worse, because widespread cultural, social, and ecological crises are symptoms of modern humanity's obsession with control. Hence, Heidegger concluded, humankind can be saved only if there arises an alternative to modern technology's one-dimensional disclosure of the being of entities. In 1966, he said that "Only a god can save us now." Having reviewed basic elements of Heidegger's thought, let us examine the possible kinship between Heidegger and deep ecology.

Deep ecologists, who represent one branch of the radical ecology movement, are said to be "deep" because they purportedly ask profounder questions about the origins of today's ecological crisis. Like Heidegger, deep ecologists insist that this crisis is not accidental, but instead is a symptom of the arrogance of anthropocentric humanism, which diminishes humankind while wantonly destroying nature. Heidegger would agree with deep ecologists that attempts by "shallow" environmentalists to "reform" technological modernity (e.g., by passing pollution-control laws) only serve to further its quest for total control over nature. Like Heidegger, deep ecologists believe that only a basic shift in humanity's self-understanding and its attitude toward nature will prevent social and ecological catastrophe. According to deep ecology, for humanity to realize its genuine potential, and thus to be authentic, people must let other things "be" what they are, instead of treating them merely as resources for human ends. For Heidegger and deep ecologists, existing authentically does not mean achieving ever greater technical power and security at the expense of everyone and

everything else, but rather existing in a manner that lets things manifest themselves in ways that are appropriate to the things themselves. Modernity's interconnected social and ecological crisis will end, then, only when humanity sheds its dissociative attitude toward nature and begins instead to identify more widely with all things. Neither deep ecologists nor Heidegger, however, convincingly explain how such a radical transformation of modern human existence might occur.

There are good reasons for thinking of Heidegger as a predecessor of deep ecology. He loved skiing and hiking in his native countryside; he often described being and thinking in terms of metaphors referring to the characteristics of farmland and trees, mountains and animals; and he criticized modernity's constricted disclosure of being which has led to such reckless destruction of nature. Attempts to portray Heidegger as a forerunner of deep ecology, however, have encountered at least two difficulties. For one thing, whereas deep ecologists tend to portray humans as a living being that arose as a consequence of billions of years of terrestrial evolution, Heidegger rejected all naturalistic accounts of humankind and claimed that the "history of being" began only about 2500 years ago. Does not Heidegger's anti-naturalism preclude efforts to interpret him as an "ecological" thinker?

The second difficulty is that Heidegger the man and his thought have been shown to be far more implicated with National Socialism than most commentators (myself included) previously believed. Since Heidegger used his own thought to support Nazism, and since there are certain parallels between his thought and deep ecology, does this mean that deep ecology tends toward a type of "ecofascism"? Let us address each of these difficulties in turn.

Early Heidegger's anti-naturalism, including his sharp distinction between humans and every other type of entity (including animals), was so strong that one

of his students, Hans Jonas, considered him to be a gnostic, that is, someone who holds that humankind has been "thrown" into a meaningless material world by an inscrutable divine power. Another of Heidegger's students, Karl Löwith, maintained that his mentor was a Cartesian dualist and an anthropocentrist, who tended to ignore the wider cosmos that gave birth to humankind. Heidegger's apparent anti-naturalistic anthropocentrism would seem difficult to reconcile with deep ecology's apparent naturalistic ecocentrism.

Yet Heidegger would have warned deep ecologists against adopting crucial aspects of modernity's naturalistic conceptions of humankind and nature, even while simultaneously condemning modernity for destroying wild nature and diminishing humankind. The concept of "ecology" itself, which is so important for deep ecologists, arose from scientific attempts to explain the relation between organism and environment. The science of ecology discloses ecosystems as complex energy flows, but such a disclosure can be used not only for protecting nature from abuse, but also for justifying exploitative agribusiness practices. Modern science is closely tied to the naturalistic worldview of modern humanism. Naturalists regard humans as clever animals competing for survival with other life forms. Humanists portray people as the highest form of life because they are endowed with rationality. Such rationality allegedly gives humans the "right" to use lower life forms in whatever ways that humans see fit. When naturalism combines with humanism to form "naturalistic humanism," violence against nature ensues, for naturalistic humanism says that humanity's struggle for survival is not only biologically necessary, but morally justified.

Many deep ecologists maintain that by achieving a wider sense of identification with nonhuman entities, people would spontaneously care for those entities just as they care for their own bodies, families, and friends. For deep ecologists, humans are only one life form among many, each of which has a right

to flourish. Because Heidegger seems to privilege humankind and to deny its connection with other life forms, however, he seems to reproduce the very anthropocentrism that deep ecologists hold responsible for ecological violence. Heidegger would reply that insofar as deep ecologists conceive of humans as animal organisms, they reproduce the very naturalism that is partly responsible for modernity's violence against nature. The leading deep ecologist, Arne Naess, however, appreciates Heidegger's attempt to redefine both humankind and nature, so as to recognize humankind's uniqueness and to affirm the inherent worth of nature.

Naess reads Heidegger as saying that humanity is destined to be not the scourge of nature, but rather the open awareness that bears witness to nature and participates in its creative activity. For Naess, as for Heidegger, this open awareness cannot be adequately understood in terms either of naturalistic materialism or of anthropocentric humanism. Moreover, nature cannot be comprehensively defined as a totality of physical processes. Influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, Heidegger, and Spinoza, Naess regards entities not as solid material objects, but rather as phenomena, that is, as temporary manifestations that arise and disappear within an open realm. Like Heidegger, Naess says that human awareness takes place within this open realm, but is not identical with it. Far from being the "possessors" of such awareness, humans are themselves appropriated as the clearing through which entities can manifest themselves. According to Naess, humans realize their highest possibility by compassionately allowing phenomena to occur without unduly restricting or harming them. Naess and Heidegger would agree, then, that the science of ecology says something true about humankind and nature, but overlooks important aspects of both.

Despite early Heidegger's relative lack of interest in nature, his later meditations on pre-Socratic thinkers such as Heraclitus offered him a way combining his personal love for nature with his ontological concerns. He came to interpret physis (a Greek word usually translated as "nature") not as a totality of material entities, but rather as the ontological power that gives rise to all phenomena and appropriates human Dasein as the clearing for their self-manifestation. Since he defined "nature" in what was for him an ontologically more satisfying manner, Heidegger can be viewed as anti-naturalistic only in the sense of opposing modern science's generally reductionistic and materialistic view of nature, a view also opposed by deep ecology. Hence, Heidegger's critique of naturalism does not automatically disqualify attempts to see connections between his thought and deep ecology.

The second difficulty involved in interpreting Heidegger as a forerunner of deep ecology is his support for Nazism. Though deep ecologists oppose fascism, some critics tend to detect "ecofascist" tendencies in deep ecology. Apparent parallels between Heidegger's thought and deep ecology provide ammunition for such critics. Here, it is important to recall that because Nazism so emphasized the relation between healthy nature and pure racial blood, widespread environmental movements could not begin in Europe or America until decades after World War II. Many progressive thinkers, whether socialist or liberal democratic, have suspected that radical environmentalism promotes reactionary, antihumanistic, and possibly racist views. Such thinkers fear that deep ecologists will call for authoritarian political measures (e.g., draconian birth control measures for Third World countries, or widespread suspension of political rights) to "save" the Earth from alleged ecocatastrophe, just as the Nazis maintained that only authoritarianism could "save" Germany from polluted blood and degraded landscapes. I do not believe these fears are justified, however, for

deep ecologists are far more influenced by democratic ideals than Heidegger was. Also, deep ecologists have the advantage of hindsight regarding the dangers posed by Heidegger's critique of modernity. Nevertheless, deep ecologists and Heidegger scholars alike must explicitly address the dangers of fascist authoritarianism.

Heidegger supported Nazism in 1933 because he thought Hitler would save Germany from the twin evils of capitalism and communism by initiating a new beginning to Western history. Though eventually disillusioned by the historical reality of Nazism, Heidegger never disavowed its "inner truth and greatness." But what he regarded as this "inner truth" seems inconsistent with what most people understand by Nazism. For instance, Edward Pois describes Nazism as a "religion of nature," but Heidegger did not promote nature worship of any sort. Further, he defined "nature" in a way foreign to the naturalism adopted by many Nazi ideologues. Whereas Nazism portrayed the German Volk as clever animals competing for survival against subhuman "parasites," Heidegger condemned such racist ideas, because he rejected the view that humans could be understood in biological terms. Given the centrality of such violent racism for Nazism, one wonders why the anti-naturalistic Heidegger could have supported that movement. Jacques Derrida has suggested that even if Heidegger was not guilty of biological racism, perhaps he was guilty of a type of "metaphysical" racism, insofar as he emphasized German's linguistic superiority.

Deep ecology has benefited from the fact that Heidegger, one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century, condemned technological modernity's heedless exploitation of nature. Heidegger also warned against adopting uncritically the powerful, but limited understanding of nature provided by modern science, including the science of ecology. By his wholesale renunciation of modernity, however, Heidegger helped to pave the way for his affiliation with a

violent, reactionary movement. A task for deep ecologists is to learn from Heidegger's thought in their struggle to protect wild nature, but also to avoid repeating his political mistakes. A central issue for deep ecology, then, is how to criticize the dark side of technological modernity, including its mistreatment of nature, while simultaneously furthering and transforming modernity's emancipatory political aims.

Select Bibliography

Bill Devall and George Sessions, Deep Ecology (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985).

Michel Haar, The Song of the Earth: Heidegger and the Grounds of the History of Being, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Bruce V. Foltz, "On Heidegger and the Interpretation of Environmental Crisis," Environmental Ethics, VI, 4 (Winter, 1984), 323-338.

Warwick Fox, Toward a Transpersonal Ecology (Boston: Shambhala, 1990).

Andrew McLaughlin, Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

Arne Naess with David Rothenberg, Ecology, Community and Lifestyle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Charles Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology," in Heidegger: A Critical Reader, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Harrison Hall. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992.

Laura Westra, "Let It Be: Heidegger and Future Generations," Environmental Ethics, VII, 7 (Winter, 1985), 341-350;

Michael E. Zimmerman, "Toward a Heideggerean Ethos for Radical Environmentalism," Environmental Ethics, V, 2 (Summer, 1983), 99-131.

_____, "Rethinking the Heidegger-Deep Ecology Relationship," Environmental Ethics, XV, 3 (Fall, 1993), 195-224.

_____, Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994.