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11-2022

### Why Asking the Question of Being Still Remains a Question for Our Time

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#### Recommended Citation

Lally, Roisin. "Why Asking the Question of Being Still Remains a Question for Our Time." *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual 12* (November 2022): 177–86.

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RÓISÍN LALLY: WHY ASKING THE QUESTION OF BEING  
STILL REMAINS A QUESTION FOR OUR TIME

From *Being and Time* (1927) to “Time and Being” (1962) Heidegger draws us back to Aristotle’s perplexing question – *ti to on* – What is being?<sup>1</sup> Although the titles may suggest a reversal of thinking, it is, rather, a continuation and deepening of the question of being itself. As indicated by the titles, a clue to the puzzle of being points to time. And the two giants who address the question of being in terms of time are Aristotle and Kant. (1) As a first attempt to unravel the mystery of being, therefore, Heidegger excavates their theories of time, concluding that time is the unity of three dimensions – past, present, and future – which he calls “ecstatic temporality.” Thus, temporality is the basic structure of the human being and the horizon of being as such. Later, Heidegger explores (2) time in terms of an extending “time-space,” where things “perdure.” “True time” is four-dimensional and is a pre-spatial perduring whence things unfold.<sup>2</sup> Adopting the language of quantum physics and new materialism, time-space “diffracts,” enfolding multiple temporalities. (3) Thus, history is not a linear chronological past that marches on from a past to the future. Rather, the past is entangled in cultural and natural time-spaces overlapping geological timescales and deep time consciousness, or what I call, perduring in deep time.

*Temporality as the Horizon of Dasein*

Influenced by Husserl’s time marked by intentionality, in *Being and Time* Heidegger develops a fundamental ontology as the ontological analysis of Dasein. Dasein experiences the world through nature (*Vorhandensein*), through artifacts (*Zuhandensein*), and through Dasein’s basic structure of care (GA 14: 6/7). We care about things and other beings, and time is the condition of the possibility of care. He achieves this by setting out how Kant’s doctrine of time fails on two accounts: (1) Kant’s interpretation of time moves within the structures of time already laid out by Aristotle, and with its corresponding problem of succession; and (2) Kant did not make clear the subjectivity of the subject, which is

an error in identity and difference. To address the question of time, we will need to take a brief look at Aristotle's concept of time defined in the *Physics* as "a number of motion in respect of 'before' and 'after.'" <sup>3</sup> Aristotle notes that time cannot always be the same, i.e., it must account for change. There seems to be no time without change: trees lay bare, the ball moves position, the cat grows older. In contemporary terms, change is a necessary condition for our noticing of time. Secondly, the notion of time presupposes a system of measurement, i.e., that the reference to mind is indispensable to the definition of time. Aristotle tells us that only when we delimit or "distinguish [*horisōmen*]" a change do we say that time has elapsed. <sup>4</sup> So, Aristotle had already identified the notion of delimiting change as crucial in the move to define time. Time does need intervals for its existence.

Implicit in this is an existential determination that implies only that which is in the present, "now," can be said truly "to be." Here continuity causes an aporia; if the past is a non-being and the future is a non-being, then the present cannot exist, and it seems clear that past and future are indeed non-beings. Furthermore, only that which is instantaneously present deserves to be addressed as "is." Thus, none of being *is*. This brings up a further difficulty with defining "now" as both "present" and the "instant." The present character of the now is its continual changing position between past and future, while the instantaneous character of the now is its indivisibility, defined as the "indivisible instant." But here arise two more problems with time: (1) Because an instant cannot be considered part of time, time again becomes non-existent, and (2) the identity of "now" means there is no difference between a prior time and a later time.

Kant solves this problem with his claim that the representation of simultaneity and succession must be mind-dependent since they are presupposed in our experience *in* time. Kant formulates his first argument for internal time thus:

Time is not an empirical concept that is somehow drawn from experience. For simultaneity or succession would not themselves come into perception if the

representation of time did not ground them *a priori*. Only under its presuppositions can one represent that several things exist at one and the same time (simultaneously) or in different times (successively).<sup>5</sup>

The implication for this argument suggests that experience is excluded from any possibility of forming a concept. For example, “cat” cannot be an empirical concept since “[cats] would not themselves come into perception if the representation of [cats] did not ground them *a priori*.”<sup>6</sup> Let us examine the claim, “the cat is on the mat.” For this to be a truth claim, we must specify a temporal dimension. The representation of “now” the cat is on the mat, requires a time *prior* and *posterior* to its being on the mat. It exists as the same representation in our inner cognition as the very same cat that presents itself on the mat, but now at a different successive time, where it no longer is on the mat.

This may satisfy the problem of the non-existence of Aristotle’s continuous moments because simultaneous and successive moments may be represented through *a priori* concepts rather than ontological ones. It is not clear, however, how we can ever apply those *a priori* temporal concepts to the empirical world. While the argument for the harmonization of the empirically real and transcendently ideal may stand with regard to space, where difference can be grasped within the unity of a single moment of consciousness (one cat is to the left of the other and, therefore, the cats are clearly differentiated), with regard to time it seems to suggest an infinite regress where we can never truly catch sight of the *difference* between different moments or different degrees of time.<sup>7</sup> As Kant writes, “The finitude of time signifies nothing more than that every determinate magnitude of time is only possible through limitations of a single time grounding it. The original representation of time must therefore be given as unlimited.”<sup>8</sup> As unlimited, time has only one dimension, i.e., succession. “Different times are only parts of one and the same time.”<sup>9</sup> Succession and simultaneity becomes a series of memories from past to present and from future to present. It seems that no two things can remain (persist or endure) simultaneously because only things that exist necessarily, exist simultaneously. Kant,

of course, is confronting the question of how cognition can distinguish between sameness (unity) and difference (discreteness). The answer lies in the *a priori* structures of understanding, his second argument for subjective time.

Heidegger's argument is that while the function of the transcendental aesthetic is to expose the ontological perception, which makes possible the knowledge of the being of a thing *a priori*, time as a "pure" form or idea in the mind can never get beyond the subject. Time can only be understood in relation to space because time is the form of inner space. Heidegger writes, "That which in experiencing the phenomena is held in view from the first, although unthematically and unobjectively, is pure succession [*Aufeinander*]. Time, therefore, is the form of inner sense, that is, of our intuition of ourselves and of our inner states" (GA 3: 47/51). For Kant, time and space refer to two distinct regions of experience. However, time becomes the "formal" condition *a priori* of all phenomena. The more that time is subjective, the more original and extensive is the freedom from limitation of the subject. But

if transcendental imagination is to be the primordial ground of human subjectivity taken in its unity and totality, then it must also make possible a faculty on the order of pure sensible reason. But pure sensibility, according to the universal signification in which it must be taken for the laying of the foundation of metaphysics, is time. (GA 3: 175/178)

Heidegger's point is that because the transcendental imagination is the origin of pure sensible intuition, pure intuition (and thus time) arises from the transcendental imagination. However, it seems impossible that time as pure sensibility can form a unity with the "I think." Pure thought has its roots in transcendental imagination, which Heidegger argues *is* time. Furthermore, sensibility and finite intuition are the same. "As a sensible faculty, the imagination is included among the faculties of knowledge, which are divided between sensibility and understanding" (GA 3: 128/135). The imagination as a mode of intuition does not need

itself to be present, “the imagination does not intuit what it apprehends in its act as something actually on hand” (GA 3: 128/135). It is independent or free of its objects. In other words, it is spontaneous. And because Heidegger already defended the idea of a receptiveness associated with spontaneity, it is also formative. As a result, if time remains an intuition, i.e., time as *form*, then knowledge of the world remains within the cathedral of the mind. Heidegger sees the consequence of this type of formalism submitting to systems of total rationalization equated with the array of technological apparatus, including the hydrogen bomb, a technology that can potentially eradicate humanity.

*Time-Space as the Horizon of Being*

Heidegger is not asking why human beings create such technologies, but what are the conditions that give rise to such technologies. Deepening the question of Being in “Time and Being” he subverts Augustine’s question on time where he asks, what then is Being? Is Being a thing? Is it an ‘is’? *Is* Being at all? Does *It* have a duration of time? The answers to the questions point in three directions: philosopher-artist Paul Klee, philosopher-poet Georg Trakl, and philosopher-physicist Werner Heisenberg.<sup>10</sup> Heidegger recognized that Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle” could solve reductive scientific objectivity inherited from Kant *via* Newton. For Newton, time and space are absolute. Time is an entity that we just occupy. The void is the space wherein motion takes place and matter is positioned therein. The void is infinite and universal; it is pure nothingness. Because space is pure nothingness, it engenders a coloniality of land as *terra nullius* (empty land) leading to the imperial appropriation of Indigenous lands and the subsequent privatization of natural resources. Heisenberg radically transforms static notions of objective epistemology by contextualizing scientific inquiry where the scientist as observer embodies the empirical process of instrumentation.<sup>11</sup>

Physicist Karen Barad agrees that quantum theory, relativity, and quantum field theory offer a critical alternative to Newtonian physics and its totalizing metaphysics. Although we associate reciprocal indeterminacy with Heisenberg, she claims that entanglements of objects

and agencies of observation were already at play as a general relation in Bohr's "principle of complementarity."<sup>12</sup> Reciprocal indeterminacy principle states that a given entity can be in (a state of) superposition of different times. "This means that a given particle can be in a state of co-existing at multiple times – for example, yesterday, today, and tomorrow."<sup>13</sup> Diffraction patterns are a manifestation of a superposition. Superpositions are not a linearity of evenly distributed moments or events but, rather a . . . combination of (different) times.<sup>14</sup> Diffraction patterns, such as wave patterns in the water that ripple and overlap when disturbed by a stone, illustrate how each history coexists with each other.<sup>15</sup> Different times and patterns bleed through each other, overlapping in what she calls "spacetimematterings."

Similarly, in "Time and Being," Heidegger makes the claim that all three categories of time – "has been," "presencing," and "not yet," – enfold and overlap in a unity, which he refers to as time-space. Time itself "is" not. Rather, "true time" is the realm of a three-fold extending that opens up a "pre-spatial" region that first gives a "where" (GA 14: 20–21/ 16). Perdurant determines time and being in their belonging together (GA 14: 7/3). Yet, by constantly passing away, time remains *as* time. Here he gives the example of a human dying: in passing away their time can lead to the notion that time is perishable. However, time remains or perdures as presence. Using Joan Stambaugh's translation, being is "there is." *There is* being and *there is* time. Space and time are, thus, held together or perdure as time-space (GA 14: 18/14). This new dimension of time – the fourth dimension – is no longer associated with the succession of a sequence of nows, nor a prior and posterior now. Space is not an empty void. Nor is it "first and foremost psychological space, *energeia*, *actualitas*, will, but the event of appropriation, or *Ereignis*" (GA 14: 11/7). In short, being as event is an epochal overlapping occurrence that is intrinsically linked to time but is itself not bound by time.

For new materialists such as Barad, the certainty of the past and a linear future based on progress have led, on the one hand, to the present state of militarization, colonial power, and capitalism.<sup>16</sup> On

the other hand, quantum physics has the potential to open up radical spaces for exploring the possibilities for change from inside hegemonic systems of domination.<sup>17</sup> Quantum time suggests that time diffracts, returning to itself from within itself. “Diffraction unsettles colonialist assumptions of space and time: beginnings and ends, continuity and discontinuity, interior and exterior.”<sup>18</sup> This means, theoretically at least, that time travels backwards. Retracing is not about going back to what was, but about the “material reconfiguring of spacetimematterings in ways that . . . produce openings, new possible histories by which time-beings might find ways to endure.”<sup>19</sup> Using Heidegger’s language, time-space is “an extending, opening up the four-dimensional realm” (GA 12: 22/PLT 17). This is the event of “appropriation” or *Ereignis* that lets the past and future withhold themselves while extending themselves in a reciprocal relation where overlapping times bleed through each other.

*Perduring in Deep Time*

This porosity does not mean that history loses its sequentiality entirely. After all, we can hardly deny the fact of the matter that mammoths roamed the earth for thousands of years; they perdure in geological sites and cave drawings that we study and visit today. As new evidence emerges with depleting ice sheets, time diffracts, retelling their story in new ways. David Wood calls these overlapping time-spaces “time-shelters” where times are nested within times. Nestedness means one time-shelter can be set within another, i.e., the past gathers itself into “nests.” With the unearthing/revealing/disclosure of mammoths, we can travel hop into geological time. This time-travel is also tied to “deep time.” Wood explains deep time as coextensive with geological time but operating as the horizon of human Dasein. Where geological time lets us look back to an unimaginable past, deep time refers to the scale of reference when we expand our historicity to geological timescale.<sup>20</sup> The woolly mammoth reminds us of our own cosmic time and the possibility of extinction, which has become an existential threat to humanity. We are also faced with the possibility of the mammoth “re-existing” if successfully cloned. Wood calls such



events “tipping points,” events with a nonlinear, uncertain future.<sup>21</sup> As histories unfold in nonlinear ways, Barad and Wood call for an ethics of remembering such that we take responsibility for our own interpretation of what our lives are and ought to be in a way that we can imagine unimaginable past and future histories.

Perduring in deep time shows up in the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Interweaving Indigenous ways of knowing and scientific knowledge in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she expresses in poetic and impassioned rhythm how human history is entangled in nature. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines nature as a passive intraworldly totality of entities – plants and rock are world poor. Conversely, Kimmerer teaches us that being gives itself in many ways: human-beings, forest-beings, bear-beings, rock-beings. Dichotomies do not exist in the Potawatomi Nation. There is no us/them, black/white, fast/slow, being/nonbeing, either/or. Instead, life perdures in the memory of the earth: “Old-growth cultures, like old-growth forests, have not been exterminated. The land holds their memory and the possibility of regeneration. They are not a matter of ethnicity or history, but of relationships born out of reciprocity between land and people.”<sup>22</sup> To use Barad’s language, the forest-being is superpositioned in nonlinear patterns of spacetime-matterings. Perduring in deep time and remembering the language of nature is an interpretative ongoing process that takes seriously other-than-human entities that occupy and share our world.

NOTES

- 1 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. Richard McKeon, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 1028b 2-4.
- 2 This term is borrowed from Karen Barad's theory of spacetime-matterings. The erasure of cultures, peoples, places, and lives can be found in tracing the entanglements that are inscribed into the materiality of the world, such as atomic bombs, violent ruptures, and tears in the fabric of being. Erasures, she argues, are never complete. Their traces always remain. See Karen Barad, "The Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membling, and Facing the Incalculable," *Eco-Destruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, eds. Matthias Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 226.
- 3 Aristotle, *Physics*, 4.11.219b1-2.
- 4 Aristotle, *Physics*, 4.11.218b32.
- 5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A30/B46.
- 6 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A30/B46.
- 7 It is worth noting that for Aristotle the law of non-contradiction is the firmest of all principles and without it all knowledge would be impossible. He formulates it thus: "It is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing and in the same respect." See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1005b19-20. Spatial comparisons do seem to yield something like this kind of confidence.
- 8 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A32/B48.
- 9 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B47.
- 10 Karen Barad in her seminal work, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, notes that Niels Bohr was in fact one of the main contributors to quantum physics and won the Nobel Prize in 1922 for his quantum model of the atom, eleven years before Heisenberg won the 1932 Nobel Prize in Physics for "the creation of quantum mechanics." I don't think Heidegger's investigation into the nature of time,

which paralleled the work on quantum physics, can be separated. See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 399-404.

- 11 See Babette Babich, "Foreword" to Patrick A. Heelan, *The Observable: Heisenberg's Philosophy of Quantum Mechanics*, ed. Babette Babich (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), pp. xv-xxix. For more on observers and quantum mechanics, see Patrick A. Heelan, *Space-Perception and the Philosophy of Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 207-210.
- 12 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 403.
- 13 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 218.
- 14 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 220.
- 15 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 220.
- 16 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 207.
- 17 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 212.
- 18 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 229.
- 19 Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," 213.
- 20 David Wood, *Deep Time, Dark Times: On Being Geologically Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 61.
- 21 Wood, *Deep Time, Dark Time*, 18.
- 22 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 290.