

Introduction

INGO FARIN AND JEFF MALPAS

“No time has known so much and such a variety about the human being as is the case today. No time has been able to present its knowledge of mankind so urgently and in so captivating a manner as is the case today. No time has previously been able to offer this knowledge as quickly and easily as today. But also, no time has known less about what the human being is than today. In no other time has the human being become as questionable as in ours.”¹ Heidegger wrote these lines in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, published in 1929. World War I was still a fresh memory; World War II was not even a remote possibility. The relatively “stable” phase of the Weimar Republic (from 1925 onwards) was just coming to an end with the rise of the National Socialists and the Great Crash in the autumn of 1929. Seen in a somewhat broader historical context, Heidegger’s note about the unsolved enigma of the human has even more salience, for it was written before Auschwitz; Hiroshima and Nagasaki; before the wars in Vietnam and the Middle East; before the digital revolution, artificial intelligence, and the emergence of the internet; before the Human Genome Project; before the threat of global climate change and the declaration of our geological epoch as the Anthropocene (a declaration that is not without problems of its own). In the last decades, we have also seen the entrenchment of excessively bureaucratic and technocratic forms of governance in many parts of the world, and, more recently, a reemergence, around the world, of populist authoritarianism. After the global financial crisis in 2008, we have witnessed staggering disparities in wealth and income in the world. At no point in

human history were there more people fleeing their home countries because of war and violence. The global pandemic that began in 2019 has ushered in a new period of crisis—not merely a crisis of public health, but also of the balance of private rights and public good, of state control and personal autonomy. The war in the Ukraine with its unspeakable horrors casts a dark shadow on the future of Europe, indeed the future of the world at large.

All of this shows that Heidegger's lines, as quoted above, are as relevant today as they were almost a century ago. While scientific knowledge is growing at ever faster speed, we know less and less about the human being qua *human* being. Our current perplexity is quite real. Human ingenuity in controlling and mastering nature through science and technology has somehow failed to produce a more just society, lasting peace, and the enjoyment of life. The twenty-first century begins with a return to the struggle for bare life. However, we no longer live under the dictates of nature. Our world is shaped by human design, human intervention, and human responses. We find ourselves in a thoroughly "humanized" world and are still haunted by our real ignorance about the human being qua *human* being. Are we really just machines to propagate our genes? Are we just raw material of life, carefully protected and ordered around by an opaque state-bureaucracy? Are we merely passive consumers with an illusionary choice, pried upon and manipulated by an invasive and manipulative surveillance capitalism? We do protest any such notion or tendency. But on what basis? Do we know?

When Heidegger writes that "no time has known less about what the human being is than today," we can easily note the Socratic inflection and the philosophical determination to fend off ready-made or dogmatic answers.² For Heidegger, it is a question that stares each one of us in the face: What am I as a human being? In fact, Heidegger argues that the real conundrum is not so much that we do not know the answer to this question as it is that "we do not even know *how* to pose the question concerning the human being."³ Thus, Heidegger aims to keep the question *open*, and he invites us to experience the truly unsettling nature of it. As Heidegger presents matters, we first must submit to the space of thinking and engage the question concerning the human from a proper philosophical perspective, without any recourse to unexamined concepts. For this reason, he does not mouth pious assurances that philosophy is committed to "humanism," as if to seek public approbation for philosophy. For Heidegger, every humanism is metaphysical, and every metaphysics implies humanism.⁴ Moreover, since he rejects metaphysics, he also rejects metaphysical humanism. However, Heidegger warns against the fallacy in concluding that the philosophical

critique of metaphysical humanism equals the advocacy of barbarism and the inhuman. As Heidegger puts it, he “opposes humanism because it does not set the *humanitas* of the human high enough.”⁵ The proper essence of the human, on Heidegger’s account, resides in the capacity to respond to what there is, *being*. Thus, Heidegger asserts that “the human occurs essentially in such a way that he is the ‘there’ [das Da], that is the clearing of Being.”⁶ As such, the human is never an objectively present entity, and least of all is the human thought when defined in abstraction from the essential relation to being and the world in which the human lives.

How Heidegger’s thought on the human can be brought to bear on our own situation is the main theme addressed in the chapters that make up this volume. In the spirit of Heidegger, none of the essays sets out from a dogmatic position, Heideggerian or otherwise. Many of Heidegger’s key-terms are rethought, expanded upon, and also critiqued, as well as defended against popular misunderstandings. In this way, this volume aims to contribute to a renewed debate about the human in these very unsettling times, as well as to a renewed understanding of the way in which the human arises as a question for Heidegger—and the way in which he responds to that question. The latter question is perhaps more pressing now than it has been previously. Since the publication of Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks* from the 1930s onwards, and in the light of the anti-Semitic comments they contain, as well as Heidegger’s seeming willingness, at certain key moments, to prioritize a certain notion of the “philosophical” over and above the human,⁷ the question of the place of the human in Heidegger’s thought appears more difficult and more urgent.⁸ Surprisingly, there have been few previous works that have directly thematized the topic of the human in Heidegger’s philosophy, and so one aim of the volume is to stimulate a wider and more sustained engagement with the topic. Although there are a very small number of chapters that focus solely on Heidegger, the majority of the contributions adopt a comparative approach, exploring issues of the human in ways that bring Heidegger’s thinking on this matter into conjunction with a wide range of other thinkers from Immanuel Kant to René Char. To some extent this reflects the way in which the questions that concern the human have frequently been at the center of critical engagement with Heidegger’s work. But the volume is not only focused on such comparisons—also important are engagements with a broad sweep of topics from architecture and animality to identity, race, and genocide.

The volume is divided into three parts. Part 1 explores a set of questions around the idea of philosophical anthropology in Heidegger’s work

as it relates to a range of thinkers from Kant onwards. Part 2 explores a set of issues concerning the place of the human in the world, including the relation of the human to forms of otherness, whether the otherness at issue within the idea of the human itself or with respect to that which is beyond the human, as well as ideas of place, play, and openness. Part 3 explores a set of issues that are more directly related to human identity, self, and finitude. There is much that the volume does not address, but that is inevitable given the nature of the topic. The aim is indeed to open up the issues rather than provide a definitive or comprehensive survey.

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, vol. 3 of *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1991), 209. Heidegger himself refers to Scheler's similar statement in his *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, first published in 1928.

2. Hegel writes: "Dogmatism as a way of thinking, whether in ordinary knowing or in the study of philosophy, is nothing else but the opinion that the True consists in a proposition which is a fixed result, or which is immediately known." See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952), 34.

3. Martin Heidegger, *Der deutsche Idealismus (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) und die philosophische Problemlage der Gegenwart*, vol. 28 of *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Claudius Strube (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1997), 17.

4. See Martin Heidegger, "Brief über den 'Humanismus,'" in *Wegmarken*, vol. 9 of *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2004), 321.

5. Heidegger, "Brief über den 'Humanismus,'" 330.

6. Heidegger, "Brief über den 'Humanismus,'" 325.

7. See Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas, "On Overestimating Philosophy: Lessons from Heidegger's *Black Notebooks*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 4, no. 2 (2017): 183–95.

8. The *Black Notebooks* are a stimulus to the questions at issue here but are nevertheless not themselves a focus of this volume. They are dealt with in considerable detail, however, in Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas, eds., *Reading Heidegger's "Black Notebooks 1931–1941"* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).