

HEIDEGGER'S FOURFOLD AND THE ANIMAL: A BRIEF LOOK AT A RECONCILABLE INCONSISTENCY

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Abstract. *In Building, Dwelling, Thinking, Heidegger draws both an ethical and ontological distinction between humans and animals that is problematic per his call for responsible, non-exploitative caretaking of the “four-fold” — earth, sky, divinities, mortals. He indicts the modern technological mindset that authorizes such exploitation but the proper ethic that he feels must be enacted can actually be found within animal communities which do not exploit the earthly in their myriad husbandry tasks. Though Heidegger assigns ontological and ethical value only to the ‘mortal,’ the animal models the very conduct for which he normatively argues.*

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Perhaps lost in the alluring lyricism of Heidegger's “fourfold” (*das Geviert*) is an inconsistency between humans (“mortals”) as a fundamental part of the fourfold — aligning them intimately with “earth,” sky, and “divinities” — but also a characterization of them as ontologically distinct in that they alone are capable of death. Animals, though an integral aspect of “earth,” do not share in this unity as do humans; they are, as Heidegger claims in another work, “world poor”¹ and therefore cannot truly be deemed a *Dasein*.

On the one hand this claim is made about the accord: By a *primal* oneness, the four — earth and sky, divinities and mortals — belong together in one (*Aus einer ursprünglichen Einheit gehören die Vier: Erde und Himmel, die Göttlichen und die Sterblichen ein eins*²). Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and framing, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal (*Gertier*). When we say earth, we are already thinking of the other three along with it, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four³. But on the other: ... mortals are... human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be

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¹ He says this: “We can formulate three distinctions: [1.] the stone (material object) is *worldless*; [2.] the animal is *poor in world*; [3.] man is *world-forming*.” (Heidegger (a), p. 177).

² Heidegger (c), p. 340.

³ Heidegger (b), p. 149.

capable of death as death. Only man dies (*Nur der Mensch stirbt*), and indeed continually, as long as he remains on earth, under the sky, before the divinities⁴.

Jacques Derrida addressed this issue on at least two occasions; he indicts Heidegger as being part of a long historical chain of philosophical thought that reduces *all* animals to the singular “animal,” impugning them as non-rational, unable to speak, respond, abstract from sense perception or socially contract. Here, they are incapable of grasping being toward- death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) in the manner of *Dasein*⁵. One question that can be raised is if this inconsistency undermines the ethical importance of the fourfold which non-demonstratively though assuredly calls for an environmental responsibility to no longer exploit — or support — the exploitation of the “earth”: Mortals dwell in that they save the earth — taking the word in the old sense still known to Lessing.⁶ Saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save really means to set something free into its own essence. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from boundless spoliation (*Das Retten der Erde meistert die Erde nicht und macht sich die Erde nicht untertan, von wo nur ein Schritt ist zur schrankenlosen Ausbeutung*).⁷

This is a lesson that resonates probably more today than when Heidegger gave this lecture in 1951. It’s undeniable that our relationship with the natural world must be one of much greater harmony than the usual historical view that deemed it an exploitable human resource. However, Heidegger’s anthropocentric assertion that it the “mortal” who occupies a privileged niche is inherently problematic — unless Heidegger is drawing a subtle distinction between the priority of the mortal (*Dasein*) as opposed to the “human being” with the latter’s implicit metaphysical baggage; however, as he makes clear, this is not the case: “The mortals *are* (my emphasis) the human beings.”⁸

The call for ecological responsibility is of understandably great importance: In saving the earth, in receiving the sky, in awaiting the divinities, in initiating mortals, dwelling comes to pass as the fourfold preservation of the fourfold. To spare and preserve means to take under our care, to look after the fourfold in its essence. What we take under our care must be kept safe. But if dwelling preserves the fourfold, where does it keep the fourfold’s essence? How do mortals make their dwelling such a preserving? Mortals would never be capable of it if dwelling were merely a staying on earth under the sky, before the divinities, among mortals.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁵ In the fourth chapter of *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (“I don’t know why we are doing this”), Derrida focuses upon two incompatible tenets in Heidegger: one denying that the animal “dies” — the present view — and the other which ontologically distinguishes the animal from the “stone”: “... we can only determine the animality of the animal if we are clear about what constitutes the *living character of a living being* as distinct from the non-living being which does not even have the possibility of dying. A stone cannot be dead because it is never alive.” (Heidegger (a), p. 179).

⁶ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781): German writer, philosopher, dramatist, publicist, and art critic.

⁷ Heidegger (b), p. 150. This is remindful of Renaissance philosopher Francis Bacon’s dictum: “... if a man endeavor to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe, his ambition... is without doubt both... wholesome and... noble....” (Bacon, p. 262).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Rather, dwelling itself is always a staying with things. Dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold in that with which mortals stay: in things. Staying with things, however, is not merely something attached to this fourfold preservation as a fifth something. On the contrary: staying with things is the only way in which the fourfold stay within the fourfold is accomplished at any time in simple unity. Dwelling preserves the fourfold by bringing the essence of the fourfold into things. But things themselves secure the fourfold only when they themselves as things are let be in their essence.⁹

Similarly, the description of the other components of the four-fold resonates environmentally: The sky is the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year's seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of the weather, the drifting clouds and blue depth of the ether. When we say sky, we are already thinking of the other three along with it, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four. The divinities¹⁰ are the beckoning messengers of the godhead. Out of the sway of the godhead, the god appears in his presence or withdraws into his concealment. When we speak of the divinities, we are already thinking of the other three along with them, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four¹¹.

However, the invoking of Cartesianism, even in a muted sense, is assuredly problematic because this perspective was the historical fulcrum forming the philosophical blueprint of the technological and scientific exploitation of the natural world. Heidegger began the discussion with an etymological examination of "dwelling"; however, this important notion is also rendered problematic when the question of the animal is taken into account: *Bauen* originally means to dwell. Where the word *bauen* still speaks in its original sense it also says how far the nature of dwelling reaches. That is, *bauen*, *buan*, *bhu*, *beo* are our word *bin* in the versions: *ich bin*, I am, *du bist*, you are, the imperative form *bis*, be. What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin*, *du bist* mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which we humans are on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling.¹²

Yet, we then learn: To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* insofar as he dwells, this word *bauen* however *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care — it tends the growth that ripens into its fruit of its own accord. Building in the sense of preserving and nurturing is not making anything.¹³

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁰ "Divinities," for Heidegger, do not reflect conventional religious thought. The "gods" in the ancient Greek sense, which is his reference, are "not «personalities» or «persons» that dominate Being; they are «Being itself as looking into beings».... The fundamental essence of the Greek divinities... consists in their origination out of the «presence» or «present» of Being." (Heidegger (d), pp. 111, 110). Divinities, here, would be relayers of Being.

¹¹ Heidegger (b), pp. 149-150.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Thus, animals do not “dwell,” since they cannot perform some of the aforementioned husbandry tasks as do mortals; however, to state that the animal fails to “cherish and protect,... preserve and care” would not be accurate in terms of involvement in their own unique communities; though they may not perform the aforementioned agrarian duties, nest or dam-building, for example, would seemingly demonstrate this ethic of care. And, when “building” in the proper sense — preserving... nurturing... *not making anything* (my emphasis) is taken into account — could it not be said that the animal, too, fails (and thus succeeds) therein? Heidegger draws this contrast: Shipbuilding and temple-building, on the other hand, do in a certain way make their own works. Here building, in contrast with cultivating, is a constructing. Both modes of building — building as cultivating, Latin *colere*, *cultura*, and building as the raising up of edifices, *aedificare* — are comprised within genuine building, that is, dwelling. Building as dwelling, that is, as being on the earth, however, remains for man’s everyday experience that is from the outset “habitual” — we inhabit, as our language says so beautifully: it is the *Gewohnte*. For this reason it recedes behind the manifold ways in which dwelling is accomplished, the activities of cultivation and construction. These activities later claim the name of *bauen*, building, and with it the matter of building, exclusively for themselves. The proper sense of *bauen*, namely dwelling, falls into oblivion.

The “oblivion” of dwelling would be lacking in the animal as they are not productive in terms of “constructing”: would they not, in a sense, dwell in the manner that Heidegger argues is more “proper” (“culturation”) and of which “construction” is ontologically derivative? Similarly, in terms of “saving” the earth — to no longer view/use it as an exploitable resource (what Heidegger refers to as the *Bestand* or “standing-reserve” in *The Question Concerning Technology*¹⁴) — the animal would certainly fit this important proviso: “To save really means to set something free into its own essence. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from boundless spoliation.”¹⁵

Interestingly enough, if there is to be a mediation of this inconsistency between human and animal, it would seem that the human would need to follow the animal¹⁶ in terms of environmental responsibility; in a sense, the animal is the archetypal model for an appropriate relationship with the natural world that would be crucial in promoting the type of harmony that Heidegger extols. To “save the earth” by “setting it free into its own essence” — to radically repudiate the centuries old ethic of its exploitive use — this message is the one that would reverberate with great urgency; it’s just this relationship that is observed in the case of the animal. Far from repeating the usual anthropocentrism, it would be incumbent to not only reinterpret

¹⁴ See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1977, pp. 3-35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁶ To “follow” the animal — to displace the ontological priority of the human — is another important theme that Derrida explores in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*; see, pp. 1-51.

our millennial disharmony with the earth but also our privileged, self-serving association with the animal; both would assuredly help promote the environmental awareness that Heidegger deems essential for the unified fourfold.

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