Heidegger begins his “Letter on Humanism” by noting that our notion of action is too often narrowly thought in terms of cause and effect. Consequently, the human being is conceived as only an acting agent. By action or activity one simply means the power to cause an effect—i.e., a causality. As such, the value we attach to any being or activity is construed only in terms of utility, that is to say, what an act does or can do for a particular end or purpose. Action in this sense is merely a means toward the actualization of mechanical, utilitarian ends. According to Heidegger, we are in the habit of thinking of action within the heteronomy of means-ends, a habit whose genealogy can be traced in the evolution of the idea of making-actual from ενεργεια (energeia) to actualitas to Wirklichkeit, and so forth. One recalls here Hegel’s famous dictum: “Action is the clearest revelation of the individual, of his temperament as well as his aims—what a man is at bottom and in his inmost being comes into actuality only by his action” (See Hegel, Aesthetics, Vol 1, p. 219).

As we shall see, this for Heidegger is the wrong way of understanding the human. In “Letter on Humanism” (1946, published as Brief über den Humanismus, citations here are from Pathmarks, Cambridge University Press, 1998), Heidegger sets out to articulate a humanism that is proper to the truth of Being understood as Da-sein. He does so by establishing a higher, non-instrumental sense of thinking that would be adequate to a philosophy of Da-sein. With this task in mind, Heidegger levels a critique against a certain tradition of philosophical humanism, whose basis in Western metaphysics has led to a pre-ontological misinterpretation of Being, which as a result has generated a severely narrow understanding of action, the human, and with it the true philosophical import of humanism. Yet, it is important to underline at the outset that although Heidegger’s “Letter” constitutes a critique of philosophical humanism, it is in the end an effort to reground metaphysics in a more originary, hence, more supreme form of humanism. Heidegger’s critique of philosophical humanism does not therefore amount to abolishing metaphysics once and for all. As in Kant, who, in writing a transcendental or
critical philosophy, did not deny the possibility of metaphysics but was himself in search of a properly
sic metaphysics, Heidegger elucidates the limits of traditional philosophical humanism in order to
reground metaphysics in a manner that would be adequate to what he calls “the proper dignity of man”
(die eigentliche Wurde des Menschen). Thus, we can say that at the moment the Heideggerian criticism
makes it assault on philosophical humanism, a higher form is posited as philosophy’s essential aim. This
is because for Heidegger the principal task of a genuine philosophical humanism is to return to the
essence of man and thereby preserve the humanitas of the homo humanus. We will see that this
philosophical project to restore man’s humanity to a prior essence hinges on a reconceptualize of
thinking (Denken) as “action” and thematized as a return of man to his proper home.

How to think Being? This question will guide us in our summary and reconstruction of Heidegger’s
arguments in “Letter on Humanism.” But we must first ask what is called “thinking” and by virtue of
what do we think Being? These questions contain a paradox, for when one thinks, when one engages in
the activity of thinking, does not one, in principle, always already presuppose a category of being? Or to
put it another way, when we think, do we not cling to, and in some sense only think of, beings? For
even to think of the idea of nonbeing implies the beingness of such an idea. The paradox concerning the
thinking of Being can be stated in the following way: although Being is always the being of a being, it is
different from beings, for Being belongs to something other and more originary than the simple
objective presence of beings. In short, Being is not itself a being. According to Heidegger, the question of
Being, not only being as being but the Being of beings, the nature of Being as such, has not been
properly thought. Metaphysics has in fact failed to account for the ontological ground of Being because
it has not sufficiently understood what is meant by thinking, that is, it has not arrived at a proper mode
unrecognizable to us” (“Letter,” 275). In many of his lectures, Heidegger demonstrates how in the
history of Western philosophy, from the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, to subsequent thinkers from
Aquinas, Kant, Hegel down to Nietzsche and on, the question of being has been inadequately
formulated. Whether they conceived of being as soul, substance, ἐνέργεια (energeia), Ὀσία (ousia),
spirit, matter, force, consciousness, becoming, life, representation, will, or the eternal occurrence of the
same and so forth, philosophers have merely grasped beings as beings, without properly
comprehending the manner in which beings “be.” For Heidegger, the first and last, most essential,
because most basic, question of philosophy must be the question of the meaning of being in general:
“What does being signify? Whence can something like being in general be understood? How is
understanding of being at all possible?” (The Basic Problems of Phenomenology, 15).

It is the task of philosophy to lay the ground (Grundlegung) for the proper thinking of being. With this
task in mind, Heidegger will want “thinking” (Denken) to mean something fundamentally different from
our everyday understanding of the term. Thinking for Heidegger is a kind of action, but it is not action in
terms of a simple causality. Thinking is presupposed in all action and production, but it is something
that surpasses all praxis. In other words, thinking is not reducible to τέχνη (techné), or technical
reasoning. Heidegger elevates thinking into a higher sense in order to think Being not in terms of factual
existence (i.e., the Was-sein or whatness of beings, its essentia), but in terms of ek-sistence (we will say
more about the concept of ek-sistence below). Heidegger thus proposes a different understanding of
thinking that will enable a more originary, more profound, view of being. It seems to me that what Heidegger has in mind in his aim to reconceptualize thinking is to attain this more profound view of being, and with it a higher meaning of the world. If we may quote once again from Heidegger’s earlier *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, we can sense what is at stake for Heidegger in developing a mode of thinking that would be prior to all factual (empirical) experiences of beings:

*We are able to grasp beings as such, as beings, only if we understand something like being. If we did not understand, even though at first roughly and without conceptual comprehension, what actuality signifies, then the actual would remain hidden from us. If we did not understand what reality means, then the real would remain inaccessible. If we did not understand what life and vitality signify, then we would not be able to comport ourselves toward living beings. If we did not understand what existence and existentiality signify, then we ourselves would not be able to exist as Dasein. If we did not understand what permanence and constancy signify, then constant geometric relations or numerical proportions would remain a secret to us. We must understand actuality, reality, vitality, existentiality, constancy in order to be able to comport ourselves positively toward specifically actual, real, living, existing, constant beings. We must understand being so that we may be able to be given over to a world that is, so that we can exist in it and be our own Dasein itself as a being. We must be able to understand actuality before all experience of actual beings. (§ 2 The concept of philosophy: Philosophy and World-View)*

Everything thus depends on this higher sense of thinking, without which the truth of the world will remain “hidden,” a “secret.” What, then, is thinking? For Heidegger, thinking is described in the “Letter” as the awaiting for “the advent of Being, to Being as advent” (“Letter,” 275). Thinking accomplishes this. It accomplishes this what-arrives (the “advent”) of Being as the very destiny of thinking itself. **It is the bringing or sending forth of man to the fullness of the essence of Being: a kind of self-affectation of one’s sense of be-ing, something not unlike the “I think” of Kant’s transcendental apperception.** Now, in Heidegger, the question “What is thinking?” is necessarily tied to the question “What is Man?,” which is pursued in terms of what is proper to man. As Derrida elsewhere suggests, “for in this question ["What is Man?"] it is man himself who is determining himself by questioning about himself, about his being, discovering himself in this way to be of a questioning essence in the Fragen” (see *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 264). Hence, again, thinking as self-affecting. Before anything else, thinking sends man over to discover and dwell in the essence of his Being as *ek-sistence*. What is important to note in Heidegger is that this more originary thinking is always prior to a mode of thinking that is representational or a giving-form, in the manner of Aristotle. Thinking does not make or cause a relation—it is not a simple causality; rather thinking in the originary sense “brings this relation to Being solely as something handed over to thoughtitself” (“Letter,” 239).

Thinking therefore is a bringing-to or a sending-forth, which is similar to the formulation Heidegger has in *Being and Time* of the “*es gibt*” or “there is” / “it gives,” in which the “it” designates Being. Heidegger famously uses this German idiom to illustrate that Being is that which gives itself to itself, for something must be given if we are able to make beings accessible to us as beings and comport ourselves toward them, hence, experience and understand them. **Everything in Heidegger pivots around this semantic hinge between the “there is” and the “it gives” of *es gibt*.** For Being “is” *as such* only insofar as it gives
itself. In giving itself, Being is thrown in its “there.” This “there” of Being is the “Da” of Da-sein. This giving-itself-open-to-the-“there”-as-thrown is nothing less than the dispensation of Being, its essential destiny (Geschick). Being’s thrownness is thus its opening-up as the giving of itself. And if Being “gives itself,” thinking is the mode in which we apprehend this self-giving of Being. But, Heidegger insists that we do not understand “giving” or “thinking” as simple causal acts. Why? For the principal reason that we do not (and can never) “give” ourselves being. We do not “give” ourselves because we are, in some sense, always already “there” in the dwelling of Being’s thrownness. As he says, if man’s Da-sein is such that we are essentially “thrown” in the “there” [das ‘Da’], this does not mean that we ourselves do the throwing, which means that we “do not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of being, come to presence and depart” (“Letter,” 252). If the being of the human is such that it is always already thrown, the agent of this throwing is not man but Being itself. It is in this sense that Heidegger understands the “es gibt” of Being (“there is” / “it gives”) as an offering of a gift, and this understanding of the gift, or better yet, the thinking of the gift of Being, is done in the mode of “care” (Sorge). (A side note: Heidegger’s formulation of es gibt as “there is” / “it gives” is a play on the semantic nearness, on the one hand, of “Giving” Geben and “gift” Gabe, and on the other, “to think” Denke and “to thank” danke.).

Now, what happens is that we forget all of this and, as a result, fail to allow for this already being-there of Da-sein to have a claim over us. The kind of thinking that Heidegger is rigorously pursuing here is an attempt to bring us back to the element of Being in order to listen to its original claim. Hence, if for Heidegger thinking-as-bringing is figured in terms of an offering—a gift—then what matters is what we “do” with this gift. But whatever we may “do” with this gift, this doing must be outside the order of causality, that is, outside the realm of action or activity in the simple derived sense. This non-causal “doing” is precisely the sort of thinking we have been describing. For outside the modality of genuine thinking, Being would be reduced to simple being as being, that is, to what is actual or worked-on. As we’ve seen it is thinking that brings Being to language, and this bringing-into-language is figured as an offering—a gift. Because the human being is the beneficiary of this gift of Being, the human being becomes “the shepherd of Being” (“Letter,” 252). Of what does this “bringing” of Being to language consist in? And what is the significance that the destiny of man as ek-sisting means that man has to “guard” the Being in which he essentially dwells? This is the point at which Heidegger will argue that thinking itself is a form of action, “thinking acts insofar as it thinks.” Heidegger writes,

Language is the house of being [Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins]. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying. Thinking does not become action only because some effect issues from it or because it is applied. Thinking acts insofar as it thinks. Such action is presumably the simplest and at the same time the highest because it concerns the relation of being to humans... Thinking lets itself be claimed by being so that it can say the truth of being. Thinking accomplishes this letting. (“Letter,” 239)

Heidegger’s notion of thinking—thinking as the letting-be that lets itself be claimed by Being in order to express Being’s truth—is one that breaks from what he calls the “technical interpretation of thinking” or
the type of thinking so prevalent in modernity that is conceived in terms of effecting, or a thinking directed toward rather than of beings (“Letter,” 239). This traces back to Plato and Aristotle, for whom thinking was conceived as a techné, “a process of deliberation in service to doing and making” (“Letter,” 240). Heidegger wants to move away from this philosophical tradition, and to think of thinking not simply as a “practical” affair. That is, Heidegger wants to return thinking back to the pure essence of thinking. In Western philosophy’s desire to become a science, it has abandoned the essence of thinking. (Consider for instance Hegel’s attempt to raise philosophy to the status of science in his Logic). Moreover, as thinking becomes instrumentalized or technicalized in the modern era, language itself becomes moored to a field of instrumentality: language serves the banal purpose of efficient communication in the public realm, whereby language becomes thoroughly absorbed and lost in the “they.” Heidegger writes, “Language thereby falls into the service of expediting communication... language comes under the dictatorship of the public realm, which decides in advance what is intelligible and what must be rejected as unintelligible” (“Letter,” 242). What is lost in the instrumentalization of language is the meaning of Being and hence the essence of language. (See also my post on Heidegger’s critique of technology and modern technicy). This much, then, has been lost or forgotten: Language is the house of being means the truth of being dwells in language. For Heidegger, it is only by being claimed again to Being that we can once again have a sense of the essence of language and being, so that we may have “a home for dwelling in the truth of being” (“Letter,” 243). We can perhaps put it in the following formulation: to be at home is to be near Being. Heidegger’s whole requiem is that in the modern era, we have become unhomely, living in a state of homelessness with regard to our own thought. We are homeless because we have not let-be, we have forgotten, the essence of Being. Our homelessness stems from the fact that we do not “hear” the claim (Ansrpuch) of Being that we, in fact, belong to Being. “Homelessness so understood consists in the abandonment of beings by being. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of being. Because of it the truth of beings remains unthought” (“Letter,” 258). Heidegger’s tone here is one of lament, since according to him, the “homelessness of contemporary human beings” means the fall (Verfallen) from “the essence of being’s history” (“Letter,” 257). What remains crucial for Heidegger, then, is to understand how the question of Being concerns the state of the human, so to return man to his proper dwelling place, his home. Language as the house of being is not language in the everyday sense. Language, for Heidegger, is not simply utterance, not only λόγος (logos), or the symbolic or symbol- or sign-making expression of a living creature. “Language,” Heidegger argues, “is the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself” (“Letter,” 249). To understand the significance of Heidegger’s claim that “Language is the house of being” is to understand that the human ek-sists by dwelling, and as such, belongs to the truth of being, and therefore cares and guards it – this caring and guarding of Being is what we call thinking itself.

What is called thinking and what is its essence? For Heidegger thinking is pure and in the element of essence when “thinking is the thinking of being” (“Letter,” 241). “Thinking comes to an end when it slips out of its element. The element is what enables thinking to be thinking. The element is what properly enables: it is the enabling [das Vermögen]. It embraces thinking and so brings it into its essence. Said plainly, thinking is the thinking of being” (“Letter,” 241). If thinking is of Being, how do we interpret this
genitive? Heidegger insists that thinking as the thinking “of” being should be interpreted as a double genitive. It means, on the one hand, that thinking is “of” being in the sense that it belongs to Being, while on the other hand, thinking (because it belongs to Being) “listens to being” (“Letter,” 241). Thinking then belongs to being and listens to being – this is the double genitive of “thinking of being.” Thinking is what lets being embrace its essence, to favor its essence. Now, this favoring is a bestowal of a gift, for “such favoring means the bestowal of their essence as a gift” (“Letter,” 241). This giving, gift-giving, or the self-giving of Being that is the “thinking of being” is precisely what enables the thinking of Being, the letting-be. Enabling is what is properly ‘possible’ [das Mögliche]. Being enables thinking because it favors itself: “Being is the enabling-favoring, the ‘may be’ [das ‘Mög-liche’]. As the element, being is the ‘quiet power’ of the favoring-enabling, that is of the possible” (“Letter,” 242). Thinking is the “quiet power of the possible” (die stille Kraft des Möglichen).

The thinking of being has something, therefore, to do with the possible, with possibility or possibilization, i.e., the being of “may be” or das Mögliche. But Heidegger notes that concepts like the possible [möglicher] or possibility [Möglichkeit] are often subordinated in terms of actuality – owing, he notes, to the dominance of metaphysics and logic (see “Letter,” 242), which have privileged actuality over potentiality or possibility. Möglichkeit and das Mögliche therefore are kept imprisoned; they have meaning only insofar as they are opposed to “actuality.” Possibility or the possible have only been “thought on the basis of a definite – the metaphysical – interpretation of being as actus and potentia, a distinction identified with that between existentia and essentia” (“Letter,” 242). Why is this? In our everyday practical involvement of things, actuality is prima facie the only thing we seem to take note of. Because we think of truth and being only in terms of what is actual, things around us “appear as actualities in the interaction of cause and effect. We encounter beings as actualities in a calculative businesslikeway, but also scientifically and by way of philosophy, with explanations and proofs” (“Letter,” 243).

Heidegger wants to articulate something not irreducible to actuality/activity, namely, what he calls the “quiet power of the possible” (“Letter,” 242). By this he means not the possible of “a merely represented possibilitas, nor potentia as the essentia of an actus of existentia” (“Letter,” 242). As he says, “I mean Being itself, which in its favoring presides over thinking and hence over the essence of humanity, and that means over its relation to being. To enable something here means to preserve it in its essence, to maintain it in its element” (“Letter,” 242).

When thinking is brought to the service of utility, as an instrument of education or cultural concern and so on, thinking comes to an end. Heidegger is using “end” both in terms of telos and eskhaton, for he is suggesting that when thinking is instrumentalized, a telos is supplied to thought which severely limits it, and in making thinking teleological, it becomes the end/finishing of thinking itself. This is what happens to thinking when thinking becomes instrumentalized as techne. Philosophy – even as it tries to regain for itself an autonomy – becomes increasingly technical and instrumental, precisely when it a technique or system for explaining the cause of things. This is most evident, Heidegger remarks, when “isms” begin to proliferate, and circulate in a competitive relation to one another.
What is the human, humanity, and humanism? Now, if we are concerned with getting back to the essence of thinking and language, is this question primarily about the human as such? Is our return to the essence of Being only about reaching an understanding how man (homo) becomes human (humanus)? He will say “yes” and “no.” Heidegger wants to raise the question of Being to a more supreme, more dignified humanism, which in his analysis will involve a certain decentering of man. In articulating the humanitas of the human, Heidegger will say that the essence of this humanitas, namely the truth of Being as ek-sistence, is proper to man, but is in some way necessarily more than man. Humanity consists in the essence of the human being, or what is the same thing, the Being of human, but a being that is more than the being designated when we say “human being.” This “more than” has been obfuscated by the humanism of metaphysics because it has only thought of the Being of the human being in terms of being as being. But in criticizing this line of humanism in Western metaphysics, he is at pains to remind the reader that his critique of humanism is in no way a defense of the inhuman, it is not an espousal of barbarity or brutality. (He will say just as much concerning his critique of ratio or logic, that his position is not about celebrating the irrational but simply to trace logos λόγος back to its essence, to return to the “dawn of thinking,” see “Letter,” 265). Rather Heidegger’s point is to show that the history of philosophical humanism has not approached in a more original way the question of “humanism,” that, indeed, metaphysics has misinterpreted Being and consequently has mystified the question of what is “human.”

But what exactly does he mean by humanism? By humanism he means “meditating and caring [Sorge], that human beings be human and not inhumane, ‘inhuman’, that is, outside their essence” (“Letter,” 244). For now, what is important to keep in mind is that Heidegger is interested in articulating this essence that is proper to man that constitutes man’s humanity, man’s humanitas. What distinguishes Heidegger’s articulation of the humanitas of the human is that it is directed away from the anima or animalitas of the human as animal rationale. This line that draws the human along the contours of the anima, precisely as animal rationale, is what characterizes philosophical humanism, in spite of its attempt to render autonomous the ratio of the human that would elevate it above animality. Heidegger departs from this and seeks a more primary determination of humanitas, whose essence belongs not only to the human being per se but to Being. Indeed, Heidegger’s is largely an attempt to withdraw the thinking of man—human Da-sein—from the “zoological” tradition of ζώον λόγον ἔχον.

Humanism, from the Romans, Goethe, Marx to Sartre, is often understood as a general “concern that the human being become free for his humanity and find his worth in it” (“Letter,” 245). The history of philosophy attests to the fact that there are many and divergent paths toward the realization of such a conception of humanism as having to do with the relation between freedom and nature. Even Christianity, Heidegger notes, is a sort of humanism, insofar as its doctrine and teachings are based on an idea of human salvation (salus aeterna), in which the history of man is the story of its redemption. What binds in common philosophical humanism and Christian humanism is the idea that the humanity of the human being, the humanitas of homo humanus, be “determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole” (“Letter,” 245). This is problematic for Heidegger because every humanism so far has approached the question of man’s humanity with a deficient, pre-comprehended interpretation of being...
without first asking about the truth of being. From the first form of humanism (the Romans) to the present, the humanism of metaphysics has presupposed what it means to be human as a simple given: namely, the human being as animal rationale. Every humanism thus far metaphysical in its form, which is problematic because in defining what the humanity of the human being is as animal rationale, it has not bothered to stop to ask what the relation of Being is to the essence of the human being. The human being as animal rationale has already and always been decided in advance; they have decided without asking the question. (Animal rationale is the Latin translation of ζῶον λόγον ἔχον (zoon logon echon). This, for Heidegger, is laden with a metaphysical interpretation of the human being. It is important to keep in mind, however, that although this definition of man is thoroughly conditioned by metaphysics, Heidegger does not consider it false. It merely remains to be regrounded to its true essence.)

Why has metaphysics failed to ask the question of Being? What does Heidegger mean when he says that metaphysics has put Being into oblivion? To understand Heidegger’s misgivings about metaphysics, we can turn to an earlier piece, his “Introduction to ‘What Is Metaphysics’” (1943). In this essay, he shows how the truth of Being has remained concealed from and obfuscated by metaphysics from Anaximander to Nietzsche. Heidegger begins with Descartes’ image of philosophy as tree: the roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches are what issue from the trunk as other sciences. To use this metaphor, the basic limitation of metaphysics according to Heidegger is that metaphysics has not thought of what the soil on which the tree of philosophy stands consists in. In other words, metaphysics has not considered the essence of its own ground (Grund). Metaphysics has not been true to itself; it has not become metaphysics in its essence as “a questioning in which we inquire into beings as a whole, and inquire in such a way that in so doing we ourselves, the questioners, are thereby also included in the question, placed into question” (The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, 9). Consequently, the “humanism” of metaphysics has thought of the human being only in terms of animal rationale or as “person” whether understood as substance or spiritual-ensouled-bodily being. It has become blinded by a pre-comprehended interpretation of Being and so merely occupied itself with representing beings as being. Heidegger writes,

From its beginning to its completion, the propositions of metaphysics have strangely involved in a persistent confusion of being and Being.” Metaphysics remains in the representational mode: it merely represents beings as beings and does not think how Being in its essence is a revealing. Metaphysics fails to think about the essence of Being as un concealedness or revealing, which for Heidegger, is something of more primordial truth. The essence of Being remains veiled in metaphysics because it has only represented beings as beings and does not recall Being itself. Heidegger writes, “Philosophy does not gather itself upon its ground. It always leaves its ground – leaves it by means of metaphysics. And yet it never escapes its ground” (“What Is Metaphysics,” 278).

It is in this sense that Heidegger conceived of Being and Time as setting out the way “to prepare an overcoming of metaphysics” (“What Is Metaphysics?”, 279). Indeed, for Heidegger, when we ask about the meaning of the Being of beings, when we think the truth of Being, metaphysics is at once overcome. We have taken flight from metaphysics when think of the Being of beings. The existential analysis of Being that was set forth in Being and Time was meant to supplement, to extend, and to help succeed the philosophical effort “to go back to into the ground of metaphysics,” and in so doing, we “bring about
a change in the human essence, [which is] a change accompanied by a transformation of metaphysics” (“What Is Metaphysics?”, 279). He explains his intervention in *Being and Time* in the following way: “The thinking attempted in *Being and Time* is ‘under way’ toward bringing our thinking onto a way through which it may enter the relation of the truth of Being to the essence of man, toward opening up a path for thinking on which it may explicitly ponder Being itself in its truth. On this way – that is, in the service of the question concerning the truth of Being – it becomes necessary to meditate upon the essence of human beings...[it] involves the crucial conjecture that in accordance with the unconcealedness of Being the relation of Being to the human essence belongs to Being itself” (“What Is Metaphysics?”, 282). Thus, what is at stake for Heidegger is a re-grounding of metaphysics back into its “soil.” And in our re-grounding of thinking back to its essential ground, we recall Being itself, whereby we let-be the relation of Being to man to “light-up.” Thus, the ontological analysis of Being as *Da-sein* leads necessarily to a change in how we think the essence of the human. “Letter on Humanism” can therefore be considered as a continuation of Heidegger’s attempt to think the relation of the truth of Being to the essence of man. But “Letter on Humanism” is not an attempt to nullify or abolish metaphysics. It is rather, like the task he set for himself in *Being and Time*, an attempt to correct and supplement the humanism of metaphysics and re-ground it to the essence and truth of Being, *in order to* and *for the sake of* a more dignified and proper understanding of the *humanitas* of man. Heidegger, one can therefore say, is articulating and performing a higher form of humanism. In “Letter,” Heidegger states this quite explicitly on p. 251,

*Through this determination of the essence of the human being the humanistic interpretations of the human being as animal rationale, as ‘person’, as spiritual-enclosed-bodily being, are not declared false and thrust aside. Rather, the sole implication is that the highest determinations of the essence of the human being in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of the human being. To that extent the thinking in Being and Time is against humanism. But this opposition does not mean that such thinking aligns itself against the humane and advocates the inhuman, that it promotes the inhumane and deprecates the dignity of the human being. Humanism is opposed because it does not set the humanitas of the human being high enough.*

Although metaphysics has attempted to identify something specific to the human being as distinct from other living beings, such as plants, beasts, animals, God, etc, namely the *ratio* of the *animal* (reason, “faculty of principles,” etc.), metaphysics has nonetheless remained largely in the realm of *animalitas*, even if this *anima* of the human being as *homo animalis* is understood as the soul or spirit (*anima*). What is faulty about metaphysics concerning the question of the human, according to Heidegger, is that “Metaphysics thinks of the human being on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas*” (“Letter,” 247).

Heidegger’s task is to articulate the humanity of the human being, the essence of what makes man properly human. This is a question of what is proper to man, his proper essence that constitutes precisely his *humanitas*. Now, for Heidegger what is proper to man is his being as *ek-sistence*. *Ek-sistence is what is proper to man, for it is the essence of his being.* This proper essence of man belongs exclusive to the human, because man is the only being with *ek-sistence* as his destiny (Geschick). Unlike animals or stones, man is the only being destined to think the essence of his own being. The essence of
the human being therefore lies in his ek-sistence. Animals and stones do not share this way of being as ek-sistence. For Heidegger, the human body is something essentially other than an animal organism or an inert object of nature. “The human being is, and is human, insofar as he is the ek-sisting one. He stands out into the openness of Being” (“Letter,” 266). Yet, when Heidegger argues that the essence of human being lies in his ek-sistence, this attribution of an essence that distinguishes man from other beings is something more originary than previous philosophical attempts at rendering man exemplar, either as a being possessing an immortal soul or endowed with reason.

What does Heidegger mean when he says that the essence of the human being lies in his ek-sistence? First, ek-sistence is not thought in the grammar of existentia. As we recall, existentia (actual existence, Existen in German) is the concept of actuality that is contraposed to the meaning of essentia as possibility. Existentia is a metaphysical determination of being as something that is simply actual. In Medieval philosophy, existentia was thought in terms of actualitas. For Kant, existentia basically referred to the actuality or reality of the objects of sensible experience. In Hegel, existentia was the self-knowing idea of absolute subjectivity, or the concept that actualizes itself. And in Nietzsche, existentia was thought in terms of the eternal occurrence of the same. Heidegger’s concept of ek-sistence as the essence of the human being departs from these ways of understanding beings, all of which privileged in their own way existentia. Existentia is actuality or actualitas, it merely designates the realization of something that “is.” In other words, the philosophical tradition that has prioritized existentia merely thought of the question of being in terms of whether the human being actually is or not, which is to say, it has concerned itself only to the “Who?” or “What?” of Being. According to Heidegger, philosophy from the Greeks to Nietzsche has only led to the banal conclusion that “man exists,” that in his existence man is actual.

Second, Heidegger departs from the metaphysical tradition of philosophical humanism by arguing that “man ek-sists,” in which ek-sistence “means standing out into the truth of Being” (“Letter,” 249). If ek-sistence is the essence of man, it is not “essence” in the sense of esse essentiae nor esse existentiae but rather the ek-static character of Da-sein. Man ek-sists means that he is “thrown” into the clearing of being to which he attends it as “care.” It is in this sense that man’s essence as ek-sistence (“eksistent essence”) is also man’s destiny, his being-thrown as a destinal sending. The hyphen marks a kind of displacement. Ekstasis in Greek means literally stepping forth. For if the essence or nature of Da-sein is to be, that is to say, to exist, then Dasein “steps forth” into a world by virtue of its originary thrownness. It is in this sense that ek-sistence signals the ek-static or ek-centric character of Dasein. This is why Heidegger will often write Existen as Ex-sistenz or Ek-sistenz with hyphens to stress a “stepping forth.”

Is this not also the displacement one hears when Heidegger speaks of Being as “es gibt”—the formulation of Being as: “there is / it gives”?

We recall a sentence from Being and Time, “The ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence’” (BT, p. 39 [42]). Heidegger supplies the proper interpretation of his sentence: this sentence says, “the human being occurs essentially in such a way that he is the ‘there’ [das ‘Da’], that is, the clearing of being” (“Letter,” 248). Now, for Heidegger if ek-sistence is the “essence” and “substance” of man, “essence” and “substance” must not be interpreted in the way that metaphysics has interpreted these terms, that is to say, as processes of actualization. Doing so will run the risk of thinking the being of man as simple
objective presence. To say that the essence of man lies in his ek-sistence is to show that “the human being in his proper essence becomes present to Being [in his] ecstatic inherence in the truth of Being” (“Letter,” 251). Yet, Heidegger will also insists that although ek-sistence is that which is proper to man and that which belongs exclusively to man, the essence that ek-sistence embodies consists in something more than the merely human; that is to say insofar as ek-sistence pertains to Being, this Being is by definition more than the “being” designated in the “human being” because the interpretation of Being that is in question goes beyond the being of the human being. This means that the kind of humanism that Heidegger is pursuing here is also more than the previous humanisms, insofar as Heidegger’s articulation of the humanitas of the human has bearing beyond the being of the human being, namely Being itself.

Third, Dasein as ek-sistence means that man is ek-static to Being, which means that he is at once near to and far from Being. Heidegger writes, “Being is the nearest. Yet the near remains farthest from the human being” (“Letter,” 252). Being is near to us comparatively to Being’s relation to animals or rocks. But Being is also farthest from us in terms of our access to its primary, essential truth; this is evidenced by the fact that the history of philosophy has failed to ask the question of Being properly. Because we have failed to ask the question of Being, we experience a “falling” (Verfallen) from the essence of Being. The name of this falling from the essence of Being is homelessness.

Man, in his homelessness, has become alienated from the truth and essence of Being. This is where Heidegger begins his critique of Marx, particularly the latter’s materialism and the metaphysical interpretation of Being it implies. Heidegger identifies that Marx’s materialism derives from Hegel. Marx’s theory of labor is the inversion of Hegel’s idea of actualization, in which the objectification of the actual is performed by the self-realizing principle of the concept, in which an ideal form is imposed onto the material world objects. The point for Marx is to show the ways in which the capitalist mode of production has alienated man from what is most proper to him, i.e. labor. One must therefore appropriate labor-power back in order to reverse the effects of social alienation, that is to say, to appropriate the means of production that was once proper to and a property of man. This is the register in which Marx’s anthropos experiences homelessness in the social world. For Marx, the humanity of man has been degraded by the inhuman conditions of the capitalist mode of production. But Heidegger argues that although Marx supplies for us an adequate conception of history, Marx nonetheless obfuscates the truth of Being insofar as the humanitas of the human being, the essence of his being, is thought only in terms of labor. All beings for Marx are products of labor and as such Marxism remains immured in a preontological understanding of Being as simple objective presence.

Heidegger ends by saying that “[w]hat is needed in the present world [of] crisis is less philosophy, but more attentiveness in thinking” (“Letter,” 276). If, for Heidegger, thinking acts insofar as it thinks, what thinking does is to bring to light the truth of the Being of man as ek-sistence. The truth of Being is the “es gibt,” which it gives to man the destining of his own being. As destining, what is disclosed by this gift is the proper end of man, the proper end that is the essence of the humanitas of the human being. It is precisely on this point that Derrida will put pressure on the discourse of the proper, of property, and propriety in Heidegger’s humanism: “the end of man is the thinking of Being, man is the end of the thinking of Being, the end of man is the end of the thinking of Being. Man, since always, is his proper
end, that is, the end of his proper. Being, since always, is its proper end, that is, the end of its proper” (Derrida, “The ‘Ends’ of Man,” in Margins of Philosophy, p. 134). It remains as a question in Heidegger’s thought in what precise sense this relation of Being to man, which defines the essence of man’s humanity as humanitas, lights up and lays open the experience of freedom under conditions of finitude and world-alienation.

— Paul Nadal

Image: George Condo, Atlanta, gold bronze, 2002.