On Experiencing the Happening and Happiness of Being

An Encounter with:
Matthew King. *Heidegger and Happiness: Dwelling on Fitting and Being*. New
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There are many ways to encounter the work of an author, but one of the best is to treat the work on its own terms. In the case of Matthew King's *Heidegger and Happiness: Dwelling on Fitting and Being* some explicit direction is offered in this regard. "From the standpoint of phenomenology, we only understand an author when we share the experience out of which the author writes" (58). *Heidegger and Happiness* is certainly a book about Heidegger's work, but it is also more than that. It is a book rooted in the kind of essential experiences of being out of which Heidegger wrote. King has long been interested in what he believes are the same kind of experiences, and rather than wander off into scholarship for scholarship's sake his goal is "to show" the reader the nature of these experiences in order to facilitate a "shared experience" (58). At the same time, King is an attentive scholar who helps his reader with useful explication and clarification where necessary.

If I am to take King's book on its own terms, I can do no better than to respond to it in the way that King has responded to Heidegger's work—that is, by aiming to root my encounter in the kind of experience out of which King writes, and by being attentive to judicious explanation.

However, in order to discover the kind of experiences out of which King writes I must interpret his book. Again, King himself provides some explicit direction.

[T]he work as a whole constitutes one significance-imparting horizon, but until we have a sense of the work as a whole, we import other horizons into our reading of the work, which allows us to ease our way into the circle... Thus we begin to develop an understanding of the situation. But we are still, for the most part, outside the situation, investigating it, piecing it together. Moreover, we do not know at this point... why the situation is supposed to be interesting to us (60-1).

My task, which is to circle in on the sense of King's book in very brief compass, is no simple one. Even though the book is not exceptionally difficult to read, its subject matter is almost completely neglected by everyone except a few other Heideggerians. For virtually all of us, "the being of beings" is of no interest because it is utterly useless with respect to our pursuits, which makes it very difficult for us to see the point.

You might say all of this overly complicates what should be a straightforward account of what King says about what Heidegger says about being, but not much work is required to show that the straightforward approach runs into serious trouble as soon as it gets started.

King begins his book with a distinction familiar to readers of Heidegger: "starting with Plato" "*that* something is is taken for granted," so that "the concern of ... everyone ... in the Western metaphysical culture of thinking ... is to know *what* is" (1). We have been concerned with what things are (involving questions such as how they work), not with what it means for something to be—that it is.

But what is being? The question is in fact unanswerable. We attempt to question being in the same way we question what things are, so we look for the causes of being, its features, or a necessary and sufficient condition definition of it. But the being of beings is not itself a being, or, we might say, "that something is" is clearly different in kind from "what something is," and so

accounts that attempt to explain the former by means appropriate to the latter must fail. If “*that* something is” is to be questioned, not *what* it is, then we are dealing with an issue that exceeds what-ness as such.

Oddly, we are sometimes aware of being, at least minimally, and the being of things is universally fundamental, for without it there would be no things—nothing at all—but it is very difficult to imagine what sort of account of it would be appropriate.

It is well known that Heidegger turned from the way in which he originally posed the question of being. We encounter myriad beings each day—keys, books, people, food, clouds, characters, concepts, etc. They are the beings of which we are aware—they reveal themselves to us. Whatever is not revealed to us we do not encounter. Besides the availability of beings nothing is encountered in experience. Thus we must avoid falling into conceptualising the being of beings as a kind of super-thing behind beings. The focus of inquiry needs to shift from the being of beings (rather than what beings are) to the self-revealing of beings to us (rather than what they reveal themselves as). For Heidegger, “after the ‘turn’, what is salient ... is not the ground of the self-showing, but rather the self-showing itself” (55). This self-showing is a “happening to us”—*Ereignis* (7-9). Thus the being of beings is that happening “by virtue of which beings become and remain observable” (Heidegger, quoted in King 108). “What is so difficult to grasp—and yet so obvious once it is grasped—is that what we are looking for is the seeing itself ... and not any thing that can be seen” (56-7).

Philosophers must turn to experience, not merely cognitive experience, and wonder a little like Shakespeare’s Hamlet if perhaps there is anything more than is normally discussed in philosophy. We must consider whether or not experiences of being are possible, if they are significant, and if we can discuss them in ways that might lead others to them. King has certainly

considered these questions. He attempts to show that experiences of being occur—they have occurred to him—and that such experiences are deeply significant and tied to what he calls “deep happiness.” Thus by both careful explanation, and a series of five extended phenomenological sketches, he attempts to show us the way to experiences of being.

Let me backtrack to a simpler starting point. Consider that the members of one culture might relate to the forest they inhabit as a hunting ground, whereas the members of another might relate to it as a lumber resource, or as a national park. These are clearly different and each involves very different practices and impacts. A few centuries ago a forest and its first nation inhabitants in what is now Canada would be very different from the same forest today leased to a logging company, and both would be very different from the same forest established as a national park. For example, a clearing in the forest might be a special spot in which to find game or make ritual offerings, an ideal area in which to park heavy logging equipment, or a pleasant location for nature photography. In each case the clearing is something different, the individuals in it act differently, and the effects on the forest are different—three very different little worlds.

Generalising, we may say we are bound by cultural epochs in each of which the members of the epoch relate to all things—not only to clearings and forests—in a distinct way. Furthermore, no member of such a culture has to be aware that the world for him or her is culturally particular. We encounter the many and various beings of our world as the beings of a particular kind of world, and we always seem to have forgotten that this is the case.

Following Heidegger’s analysis, King argues that the world in which we live is a technological one. Fundamentally, we encounter the many and various beings of our world “including ourselves ... as actual or potential force” (103). Everything is thoroughly malleable—e.g., wilderness is to be developed, behaviour is to be modified, and opportunities are to be

exploited. The beings of our world are available to us *as technological beings* in this sense. A very particular mode of availability, the technological presentation of beings, which gives us our world, is such that “human beings ... live under the assumption that there is no limit to the realization of human will” (103). But this assumption constitutes a great danger, for that in virtue of which the technological world is available to humans is not a force subject to the human will. The availability to humans of beings as technological beings has happened to humans. It continues to happen to humans. Humans are not making it happen, but the particular happening to humans of technology allows humans to assume that everything is subject to human will. We assume we have unlimited capacity to make the world we want, but this very assumption was not made by us.

Under the sway of technology, not only do we forget that we encounter the many and various beings of our world as the beings of a particular kind of world, but also the happening to us of being is deeply “disguised” by the technological assumption of prowess (106). Thus the great danger is that we technological humans will be unable to recognise that the availability of beings happens to us.

The happening to us of the availability of beings is being—i.e., the being of beings. The being of beings is that happening “by virtue of which beings become and remain observable” (Heidegger, quoted in King 108). For Heidegger, “figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Nietzsche, who are typically considered to have founded paradigms of metaphysical thought,” “are the thinkers who find the fitting description of the way that being is sent to us in a given epoch” (6). Thus it is Nietzsche who most accurately describes the essence of the technological epoch—the epoch of the will. Heidegger himself addresses something more profound—“*that* being happens at all” (7). Whereas Nietzsche said what is essential about beings in the world

being revealed as subject to the will, Heidegger tried to say what is essential about the happening of being as such.

Essentially, being as such, as epochal being, happens to us, and so there is a deeply fateful sense in which we are, in the current epoch, technological. If there is danger in the happening to us of technology, we shall suffer the danger. Technology and its danger are always already coming to us; we are always already receiving it. Nevertheless, the happening to us of technology is but one particular epochal happening of being. We might ask if we could respond to the happening of being as such.

Again let me backtrack, this time to very briefly run over the order of the book. In his short first chapter, King looks to Plato and Aristotle's discussions of *eudaimonía*, which we normally translate as happiness, to argue that it "is intimately tied to ... being as is fitting for one [to be], and also to ... a fitting relation between the human and the divine" (30-1). He contrasts the Greek view with the modern view of happiness, which has its roots in Hobbes. "Hobbes is probably the philosopher who, more than any other, laid the groundwork for the dominance of the hedonistic view of happiness" (32). King points out some of the difficulties recent philosophers have had giving a full account of happiness, assuming as most do that it is a subjective emotion rooted in a Hobbesian world of matter in motion. But there is little real argument here. The point is rather to give a characterization of modern happiness (according to the dominant trend in contemporary philosophy) that will seem "impoverished" in contrast with King's conception of deep happiness developed on the basis of both Heidegger's discussion of being, and ancient conceptions of happiness as fitting.

Chapter 2 deepens the discussion and makes more explicit use of etymology. The element of fitting in the notion of happiness is developed, as is Heidegger's later understanding of being.

The chapter closes with King's first extended phenomenological sketch, which deals with his experience of Robert Frost's poem, *The tuft of flowers*.

King rejects as mistaken the view that Heideggerian etymology involves searching for the authentic or original meaning of language—a mistake he attributes to Derrida (47). Rather, in the face of the “compulsive exactness” of contemporary philosophical analysis, he argues, Heideggerian etymology restores “to language its natural flexibility and ambiguity” (48). In so doing, past usages are retrieved and added to our vocabulary “to allow words to present to us as much being as possible” (58, and see 48). Language “always both reveals and conceals by bringing being to presence in some ways and not in others” (47). So the language of our epoch conceals alternative ways of being, and etymological research may “recover potentialities of thought, which simultaneously means potentialities of being, that have been lost over time” (47).

However, if it is indeed true that “language cannot speak falsely”—for even the “language of our time, of the epoch of *das Ge-Stell* [the essence of technology], does not speak falsely” (47)—then in what sense is technological language, and all that goes with it, impoverished? When we speak it, and when we behave in terms of it, are we not receiving and corresponding to—fitting together with—“the way that being is sent to us in a given epoch” (6). What else could we be doing? In a very crucial sense it is impossible for us not to fit together with the epoch's self-revealing of beings. If such fitting were not occurring, we would not experience things at all. If we are always fitting with being, and if experiences of fitting with being are tied to deep happiness, why are we not always happy? The answer is that deep happiness is a matter not of fitting with the happening of the particular way in which being is sent to us in an epoch, but rather of fitting with the happening of being as such. “Deep happiness ... does not attune us to one of the historical modes of being ‘sent’ to us or ‘destined’ for us in

Ereignis; it attunes us to *Ereignis*, the happening of being, itself” (21). To transcend the merely epochal reception of being, more than what is at work in the epoch must be experienced, and because etymology provides access to that more, etymology allows “more of being to happen to us” (48).

Humans are unique in having the capacity to receive the self-revealing of beings, and when that “happens to us ... we can be said to fit together with being ... What is most fitting for us is to dwell in our fitting together with being” (11). The Greeks were attuned to this, for they saw rightly that happiness (*eudaimonía*) consists in finding our fitting place in what and who we are, which means essentially fitting with what is uniquely both beyond and available to us as humans. Neither animals nor artificial intelligence machines are able to do that.

Chapter 3 moves from the human side of the relation, asking what in essence humans are as the beings who receive the happening of being, to their fitting together with being. “If deep happiness has something to do with what is fitting for human beings, and we want to see where deep happiness lies, then we need to know what is fitting for human beings” (68-9). Like us, other “animals are immersed in being,” but they are “captivated” by beings. They “cannot recognize being as such: only to humans can being manifest itself *as* itself (though we are *mostly* captivated by beings as well)” (72). “[W]hat is most fundamental about human being ... is that it allows for being to happen” (70). Other animals are not presented with beings as such. We might note that so far as we know other animals do not have any abstract views—i.e., views about beings as such. They do not seem to have developed any religious, metaphysical, or scientific theories, whereas we have theories about everything, exhibiting our relation to things as such. Being, the happening of the availability of beings as such, does not happen to other animals. Being happens to us uniquely; we alone fit with being. If we would be irrevocably oblivious

without being, being would be utterly withdrawn without us. “Being and human being need each other. The essence of each lies in the other; each, we may say, essences towards the other, fulfilling itself in its fitting together with the other” (74).

To grasp the special nature of the happening of the availability of beings is to see in a deeper way what we saw earlier, that the being of beings is not itself a being. Since explanatory accounts appropriate to beings are not appropriate to being, we are left with the sinking feeling that the happening of the availability of beings is inexplicable. There is “no solution” to this problem; in fact there is “not even a problem. If there were a problem, the problem would be to account for the possibility of being, but it is immediately evident (as long as we keep being in sight...) that there is no possible solution to such a problem” (67). No thing available to us—nothing—could be used to account for that by virtue of which things as such become and remain available to us.

Chapter 3 contains three of King’s extended phenomenological sketches. Dealing with his experiences of the novel and film *Babette’s Feast*, Barnett Newman’s painting *Voice of Fire*, and love, King tries to show us experiences of being. We recognise them as similar to experiences we have had but were unable to interpret.

Chapter 4 moves through the major epochs of being via King’s fifth and final extended phenomenological sketch. The epochs of being are treated not merely as historical periods, but also as ways in which beings are made available to us such that they can appear despite the dominance of any particular historical epoch. King takes us back through the major epochs of being by describing a walk from the edge of the city to the forest beyond it—from the epoch of technology, to the epoch of presocratic *physis*, and ultimately to *Ereignis* itself.

Rather than summarise any of King's phenomenological sketches—which deserve to be read in full—let me offer a very brief account of an experience of my own that I believe King would recognise as the right sort of experience in which to root, and with which to close, the discussion of his book. I often used to sit on the bank of the Gatineau River in the province of Quebec and look across at the massive hills that loomed on the other side, and it sometimes occurred to me that they must be about to make themselves heard. Standing up and stretching out before me, they dominated and confronted everything around them, and I kept expecting them to resound throughout the valley. They seemed both to be making themselves be seen, and to be about to do something. It was as if they were announcing themselves to me. I found myself fittingly put in my place, wondering at the being of these great beings. Later I recall thinking to myself that the experience had been stunning and wondrous. I believe King would recognise this as something very much like an experience of both the happening of being as such, and deep happiness.

We in the technological epoch have no time for extended musings about such experiences. They do not address any problems. We overlook them. But to overlook experiences of the happening of being as such is to overlook what is most fundamental. Heidegger argued that under the sway of technology, “there is *danger* in the highest sense.” The technological epochal happening of being takes no notice of itself, conceals the happening of being as such, and conceals humans from what they are in essence. “But,” Heidegger continued, quoting Hölderlin, “where danger is, grows / The saving power also” (Heidegger 309-10). As the danger grows we step back and question technology itself, and in so doing we begin to experience the epochal happening of being, as well as its home, the happening of being as such. “The matter is

to interpret and describe these experiences so that ... we are not inclined to discount them” (117), for

our oblivion of being, which has reached its peak in the current technological epoch, is a disaster for human well-being in the deepest sense, and ... we will be better off—we will be more at home in ourselves; we will be more fittingly—if and when the epoch turns such that the oblivion of being is overcome. Perhaps we cannot *will* that turning; perhaps we cannot even will it for our lives, let alone for the epochal relationship between being and human being. But we can catch a glimpse of it. Indeed, if we could not, it could never come about at all—and to catch a glimpse of it is already to begin the turning (4-5).

In general *Heidegger and Happiness* is concise, well-written, and clear. It is to be recommended both as a useful introduction to Heidegger’s basic thinking as well as an insightful reading of Heidegger with respect to experiencing the happening and deep happiness of being.

Works Cited

Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977.