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Eckhart, Luther, and the Buddha in the Marketplace: Heidegger's Great Synthesis of the Mystical and the Existential

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Abstract
Heidegger's existentialist phenomenology is one of the key contributions to twentieth century philosophy. He uses the concept of an Augustinian 'inner man' to convey a situated and embodied account of human experience that is later described by phenomenologists and existentialists such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. The author shows show how Heidegger borrows one understanding of human experience from the scholastic and mystical tradition (that of self-transcendence), another understanding from the existential and anti-mystical tradition of Luther and Kierkegaard (that of intense self-individuation), and synthesizes these into a single and coherent picture of existence; a vision far more inclusive and far-reaching than the purely existentialist philosophies of his supposed successors. He suggests that such a synthesis has been prefigured several times in the history of the West, though often incompletely, and that Heidegger has achieved an adequate and well-grounded presentation of this synthesis for the modern era

Introduction and Methodology

In the famous preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception,* Maurice Merleau-Ponty rejects the Augustinian 'inner man' for a fully situated and embodied account of human existence.[1] It seems that depth, for the existentialists, should no longer be equated with inward or 'deep' experience (except in metaphor and linguistic convention only). The concept of a disembodied internal world to be explored without reference to the external world of work and play is a derivative fiction, a Platonist abstraction fermented behind the monastery walls of scholastic piety and mysticism. It is well known that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the fully contextualized nature of experience and cognition is built on Heidegger's notion of *being-in-the-world* from division I of *Being and Time.* Heidegger is thus seen as the originator of 'existentialist phenomenology', the discipline which aims to describe the structures of experience as they are lived concretely, particularly as embedded in a material, social, and historical environment.

In this essay I will argue that Heidegger actually preserves the Augustinian 'inner man' along with the situated and embedded account of

experience relied upon by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and others. I will show how Heidegger borrows one understanding of human experience from the scholastic and mystical tradition (that of self-transcendence), another understanding from the existential and anti-mystical tradition of Luther and Kierkegaard (that of intense self-individuation), and synthesizes these into a single and coherent picture of existence; a vision far more inclusive and far-reaching than the purely existentialist philosophies of his supposed successors. I will suggest that such a synthesis has been prefigured several times in the history of the West, though often incompletely, and that Heidegger has achieved an adequate and well-grounded presentation of this synthesis for the modern era.

The two frameworks of selfhood, which form the background of Heidegger's synthesis, are found largely in the theological and spiritual heritage of the Occident; though both, arguably, have their parallels in the East as well. No apology will be made for the major place that the history of religion occupies in this paper, for Heidegger states:

> **Without this theological background, I would never have come onto the path of thinking.**[2]

Heidegger distills from these traditions a specific ontological core, a certain structure for conceiving the nature of the self and its comportment to reality as a whole. His personal and intellectual relationship to theology, from his seminary training through his interest in early Christianity and so on, has already been examined as a subject in its own right.[3] It is not the purpose of this essay to explore a territory which has already been so well traversed, but to shed light on a specific contribution that Heidegger's philosophy offers to the ontology of selfhood, ontology in general, and, perhaps, the philosophy of religion. This synthesis of the mystical and the existential in Heidegger's thought has been previously overlooked, barely noticed, or outright denied. Indeed, Kiesel suggests that Heidegger never accomplishes it.[4] I argue that he does.

I. The Self and its Ground: Heidegger and Mysticism.

> **This is the place of the infinite spirit;**
> **achieving it, one is freed from delusion;**
> **abiding in it even at the time of death;**

one finds the pure calm of infinity.

Bhagavad-Gita.[5]

A. History

The ego or self stands at the center of our experience, directing our body through its environment much as Arjuna tugs the reins of his chariot towards the field of battle. The chariot driver, as ego, may asserts itself as master, thus facing a world of external objects and barriers to be manipulated and surmounted. Or he may hand the reins of his chariot over to the disinterested and serene Krishna, who watches the whole affair of ego and world unfold like two aspects of a single drama. When this happens the delusions of self and other, subject and object, lose their power to bewitch us, and that which transcends and contains all of these dualities is allowed to disclose itself for the first time. All things are then seen as what they really are: individual moments emerging from one underlying reality. In the symbolism and passages of the *Bhagavad-Gita* then are encapsulated both kernels of world mysticism: the call for self-transcendence, and a vision of the totality of existing things, including ourselves, as nothing but emanations from a deeper truth.

It comes as no surprise that the image of the chariot with its corresponding symbolism is found in the writings of Plato, for a similar worldview stands at the heart of the Near East as it does the East. The soul may either identify with its worldly needs and thus disperse itself over the flux of sense experience, or it may immerse itself within the eternal and unchanging principle behind appearances. This metaphysical ethics soon spread to the West and remained vividly present throughout the entirety of medieval intellectual history. From Augustine and Anselm through the mystics of the fourteenth century, philosophical reason was still far from degenerating into a mere tool for calculative thinking as it would during the course of modern philosophy. Heidegger is therefore correct in stressing the commonalities between scholasticism and mysticism, for the mystic just actualizes in life what the philosopher discovers in thought: that the true goal of reason is a 'transcendent primal relationship of the soul to God', wherein the self is finally released from its infatuation with particular beings to stand in the presence of Being itself.[6]

Heidegger originally looked to scholastic philosophy and mysticism for a fresh perspective upon the nature of intentionality, particularly with the intent of weaning from the medieval tradition a reconciliation of subject and

object, where the intentional act, or *directedness* of consciousness somehow bridges the gap between the perceiving mind and perceived object without reducing the latter to the former. From an early work on Duns Scotus to his course on the *Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism*, Heidegger hoped such research would lead to the establishment of a deeper metaphysics free from the objectifying tendencies of traditional metaphysics and epistemology.[7] To help accomplish this task, the living side of the medieval world-view would have to be placed over the dogmatic side, and a mysticism of living experience preferred over the more academic and scholarly work of the philosophers.[8] While Heidegger planned to use the work of the German mystic Meister Eckhart for this early project, his intellectual preoccupation with medieval thought was soon replaced with a passion for the tenets of early Christianity and Luther. However, the Neoplatonic mysticism of Eckhart would never leave Heidegger's interest completely. Perpetually lurking beneath the surface of his philosophy throughout each stage, Eckhart's mysticism would re-emerge most visibly in the essays of his later work. Caputo claims Heidegger actually makes reference to Eckhart in *What is Metaphysics?* and *What is Called Thinking?*.[9]

B. Renunciation

'The man of eternal renunciation...' Krishna instructs Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, '...is one who neither hates or desires; beyond dualities, he is easily freed from bondage.'[10] In bondage to its worldly wants and desires, the self faces an environment of objects and entities to be coveted, ignored or feared. Let the self assert complete dominion over the world leaving nothing for it to fear, it remains a victim to its own need for control like a petty tyrant in a small country. Thus tightening its own boundaries, the self alienates itself from the ground of its own being in which no such borders exist and all dualities like that of ego and other have yet to arise. This primal condition, the 'still desert' of the soul, is available only to the self who has renounced the need for asserting itself over the world. The experience of selflessness then brings with it an understanding of reality in which the world is no longer a mere collection of things to be used or conquered.

Great mystics from different cultures and languages have often invented their own unique terms for this principle of renunciation. Eckhart's own notion of *Gelassenheit*, or detachment, has made such a powerful mark on the German language that a philosopher living six hundred years later

would feel compelled to employ the very same term, a philosopher well-known for coining his own words to express his thoughts. Then again, part of Heidegger's originality with language consisted not so much of coining new words but of tracing key terms back to their original meaning. The one addition that Heidegger would contribute to the concept of *Gelassenheit* after all was the idea that to free oneself from attachment to the 'public superficies of existence' is to allow one to tap into historical possibilities of existing, possibilities long since forgotten.[11] The historical possibility in this instance is the Contemplative belief that truth enters the soul of one who has renounced the self to 'become a nothingness'.[12]

The activity of intellectual discrimination is suspended along with the will to master in the practice of *Gelassenheit*. Our tendency to neutralize the richness of existence by categorizing it into small conceptual boxes has proven just as vexing as the need to conquer it; hence the Contemplatives of the Middle Ages emphasized the activity of 'unknowing' at least as much as ascetic self-renunciation.[13] Heidegger likewise warned of the forgetting of Being for the acknowledgment of only particular beings. The danger, here, is not merely the dicing of the world into units for our material utilization, but the sectioning off of reality for the numerous intellectual sub-disciplines which typically make up the sciences and humanities. And it is not science and technology themselves which have ever been guilty (Heidegger is not asking us to live in caves), but the taking of these regions of inquiry as the most basic understanding of existence. As a corrective to this, and in the manner of mystical traditions spanning from monastic Contemplation to Taoism, Heidegger prescribes the placing of one's mind and volition in abeyance in order to allow uncategorized Being itself to enter our view. Like the Contemplative view that the unblemished truth is received only by those divested of self, Heidegger continually insists that it is the contingent and groundless nature of human existence, which allows Being to show itself in the first place. Human existence, as a project continually pitted over its possibilities, is not so much a thing at all, but an event; a stretch of open space or 'clearing' by which the totality of Being is made visible.

C. Being

And what is this Being? Krishna, the embodiment of the infinite Brahma, explains His true nature to Arjuna:

> **The whole universe is pervaded by my unmanifest form; all creatures exist in me, but I do not exist in them.**[14]

All things exist within the Absolute, yet the Absolute itself *is* no particular thing. In a seeming contradiction, Krishna earlier proclaims:

> **He who sees me everywhere and sees everything in me will not be lost to me, and I will not be lost to him.**[15]

While the Absolute is not exhausted or identified with any particular thing, everything manifests the Absolute to the one who perceives the world in the right way. For the absolute, as no particular thing, is *everything*, '...being, nonbeing, and beyond'.[16]

Such a panentheistic conception of deity is so removed from the transcendent God of traditional theism, that medieval mystics like Eckhart have typically felt the need to distinguish between 'God' on the one hand and the true God or Godhead on the other. The former is the *prime mover* or *first cause* of the theologians and scholars, the God who hangs over and above creation like a silver ball and sends out rewards and punishments to the earth below. God's most naked being, however, the Godhead of the mystics, is less of a personal God than an impartial ground of all being, the field and primordial unity from which all things derive their source and existence. In the true spirit of the Contemplative tradition, Eckhart asks us to *unknow* the transcendent God in order to prepare ourselves for the 'eternal abyss of divine being', the God beyond words.[17] Like Brahma, the Godhead is no *particular* thing, not even the greatest of all things or 'that-which-nothing-greater-than-can-be-conceived'.[18]

Because the Godhead, as Being itself, is no particular being, Eckhart often describes God as a kind of pure nothingness (as he does with the soul in the practice of *Gelassenheit*). The depiction of the Absolute as a primordial nothing is a common device in mystical literature, and is seen in classic texts as diverse as the *Tao-Te-Ching* and the *Zohar*. Heidegger employs this same metaphysical use of Nothingness in his conception of Being, for nothingness

> **does not remain the indeterminate opposite of beings but reveals itself as belonging to the Being of beings.**[19]

Being is therefore no particular being but

> **nearer to man then every being, be it a rock, a beast, a work of art, a machine, be it an angel or God.**[20]

It is because we are so thoroughly immersed in Being through and through that it repeatedly resists conversion into a mere item of knowledge or object of thought. This is why Heidegger places such a stress upon pre-intellectual styles of knowing like anxiety and boredom, for these are more tacit modes of awareness which rely on the whole of our existence to disclose the nature of Being. It is in fact our very rootedness in Being which makes the question of Being possible to begin with; so much so that the study of Being is undertaken by Heidegger in the language of forgetfulness and remembrance rather than ignorance and knowledge. This last feature is prevalent in the history of religion and mysticism as well. From Neoplatonism to Sufism, the encounter with truth is rarely described as a novel discovery, but instead depicted as either a restoration of an original unity from which we have fallen, or the uncovering of a child-like state of spontaneity and clarity of vision which has somehow become clouded and soiled over time.

Heidegger alerts us to the prejudice of treating Being as simply the 'most universal concept' superimposed upon the data of experience in an intellectual fashion; for it is because Being is the very medium in which we actually live that it first appears to us as so conceptual and arcane.[21] It is therefore instructive to see how Heidegger's unique rediscovery of Being finds expression among the more literary existentialists, philosophers who emphasize the concrete through particularized characters and realistic settings. Sartre here speaks through the mouth of his protagonist in *Nausea*:

> **Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of 'existence'. I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them, "The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull," but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an 'existing seagull'; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is *us*, you can't say two words without mentioning it, but you can never touch it.**
>
> **...If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root**

was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer.[22]

Where the hero of Sartre's novel reacts to the empty nature of the self and the inescapable presence of Being with confusion and disgust, Heidegger sees in these things the source of all value and meaning. Heidegger presents in his own peculiar way the same principles heralded by the world's mystical traditions. First, that one of the pinnacle moments of human existence is to serve as an empty container or open window through which an appropriation with a reality greater than ourselves is made possible. Second, that the reality to be encountered is no existing thing at all, but the ground and plenum of all existence and non-existence; that out of which all things, including ourselves, are nothing but transient parts. To debate whether Heidegger's thought can be likened to mysticism in actual content or structure only is beside the point; that the secular writings of a contemporary thinker can allude to the very same things described by the mystics serves as a wonderful testimony to the truths spoken about by both.[23] In fact, it is Heidegger's fresh and non-traditional style of philosophizing, which enables him to capture both principles in one elegant expression: 'Man is the shepherd of Being'.[24]

II. The Self as Unmediated Project: Heidegger and Existentialism

There seems to be the same difference between hell, purgatory, and heaven as between despair, uncertainty, and assurance.[25]

Luther, *Thesis Sixteen*

A. History

The self, while placed in the midst of a larger nexus of meaning, finds it all too easy to shirk the painful responsibility its own existence requires. Anything from the highly ritualized worldview of a primitive community to the equally ritualized over-structure of a modern society may provide the self with enough external distraction and mediation that it fails to experience the birthpangs of genuine self-awareness and autonomy. Religion has often served to engender this unfortunate process; the most prominent instance of this being the mystic who, as described in the last section, calls for the annihilation of the self into a greater ground of reality.

Enter Luther. Though his well-known *Ninety-Five Theses* is little more than a protest against a specific church practice (the sale of indulgences), thesis number sixteen embodies the very shift of focus Luther would bring to the development of religion and culture in the West, namely the move from cosmology to phenomenology, from abstract speculation concerning the nature of reality to a psychology of the spiritual life. In contrast to the systematic and integrated metaphysics of a Thomas Aquinas or a Meister Eckhart, Luther's 'anthropocentric theology'[26] remains centered upon the self as it actually exists: as a kind of desperate tightrope walk over the possibility of infinite condemnation on the one hand and that of infinite salvation on the other. Luther's challenge to the philosophical and mystical legacies of the Middle Ages then contains both principles of the existential turn in world culture: the stress on stark individuation in opposition to the immersion of the self under a larger envelope of significance, and the self's continued acceptance and even will-full affirmation of its perpetually incompleted and ungrounded nature.

Luther's theological revolution did not occur in a vacuum; Bainton, in fact, labels Luther's thought as 'the theology of Paul heightened, intensified, and clarified'.[27] It is this reinvigorated Pauline theology which set the stage for the 'inner-mind' of Luther and greatest of the existentialists, Soren Kierkegaard, as well as the foundation for the Neo-orthodox theology of the twentieth century (Barth, Brunner, Niebuhr...etc.). It is in this last movement in which some of the themes of the previous thinkers find their most explicit formulation: that the individual must shipwreck his/her own efforts to establish the meaning of their life, and that the individual must enter alone into a spiritual crisis through which he becomes a new person. This is an experiential philosophy quite different then that of the mystics; for the pantheistic and Neoplatonic conception of reality oversteps the great divide between the transcendence of God and the finitude of man so necessary for the violence and rigor of true faith. There is a 'Basic opposition', explains Emil Brunner, 'between the Biblical and the idealist, pantheist, and mystical thought concerning God'.[28]

It is this finite, creaturely understanding of man found in the Bible which Heidegger found so useful for a phenomenology of lived experience. His interest in religion thus moved from Eckhart and medieval philosophy to Paul and early Christianity (with the influence of the historicist philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey). Heidegger's obsession with Paul is evident in his

Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion course, and his subsequent interest in Luther is found in his *Augustine and Neoplatonism* course in which Luther's theology is employed as a corrective to Augustine's Neoplatonic influence.[29] Heidegger's reading of Kierkegaard would play an unparalleled role in *Being and Time*, and his infatuation with this brand of theology was most evident throughout his extensive work with Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich at Marburg.

B. Individuation

We have seen that the ecstatic self is the one who has escaped the narrow boundaries of the ego, the one who has left behind the need to maintain an identity and preserve it through a world, which stands opposite to it. We have also seen that this state of selflessness is accompanied by an understanding of things as parts of an undifferentiated whole, an Ultimate beyond dualities. Such a vision of reality is the goal of intellectual mysticism as well as religious mysticism, the practice of philosophical idealism and Contemplative piety alike. 'The systematic Idea,' says Kierkegaard, 'is the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being'.[30] Both pantheism and philosophical schematization attempt to swallow the individual into a closed system, an arrangement with nothing left out, 'not even such a little minikin as the existing Herr Professor who writes the system'.[31] But concrete existence, for Kierkegaard, means the facing of our future possibilities. Human life is essentially an open-ended affair, never to be understood in a closed system unless in a joke only. The person who would attempt to incorporate the existing person in the system, be it the dialectical system of Hegel or the acosmistic system of the Vedas, is seen by Kierkegaard as similar to the man who would build a great palace and yet live in a doghouse next door.[32] Mysticism is therefore to be counted alongside Idealism as another way we ignore our existence, a way we dodge the passion and personal involvement which are the true hallmarks of the religious life, what in fact, for Kierkegaard, constitutes the very definition of spiritlessness.

To distance ourselves from our first person perspective on reality is to make no sense of the passion and commitment required for authentic living. A genuine relationship, whether to God, a work of art, or another human being, requires a flesh and blood *I* to respond to a *Thou*, since a disembodied and undiscriminating love for everyone is really a love for no-

one at all. This is why a social existentialist like Buber warns us against a mysticism which would dissolve the I into the Thou, for it was with his whole being with which Job, the great fore-father of existentialism, brought himself before God in hope and anguish.[33] A true ethics, certainly an existentialist ethics, is simply impossible without the total person.

Heidegger never formulated an explicit ethics; his philosophical task from the beginning to the end of his career was devoted to the knowledge of Being. Nevertheless, Being for Heidegger is only known through the entity in whom the question is made possible: it is an existing, concernful creature whose own life is at issue for itself and whose existence is found inseparable from a culture and environment (without being reducible to either). Here we have come as far from the armchair metaphysics of traditional philosophy as possible, for the true nature of objects, world, time, and history, are known in the third person in their derivative form only. This early and most influential of Heidegger's attempts to uncover the nature of Being begins with the context in which Being is first made intelligible, namely through a finite being who projects itself into the future while inheriting a past, who either succumbs or transcends the status-quo of the herd, and who either flees or bravely anticipates its own death. The methodology of *Being and Time* thus consists of bottom-up approach in which the experiential structures of the individual are of primary concern, for this gritty phenomenology of human existence constitutes the window through which Being can appear. Even before the writing of *Being and Time*, it was on these grounds that Heidegger criticized Rudolf Otto's *Idea of the Holy*, a popular study of the mystical experience. Heidegger claims that Otto's singling out of the *numinous*, or the non-rational character of the holy over and above its moral elements, is a metaphysical distinction unrooted from the personal and historical phenomenology of the individual.[34]

C. Ungroundedness

There is a speech given at the end of Bergman's *Winter Light* to the distraught priest who serves as the film's protagonist. In this second of the supposed 'silence of God' film trilogy, a minor character recounts the passion and suffering of Christ to help place the priest's crisis of faith into perspective.[35] Christ's physical pain during the crucifixion, explains the character, was short. The real pain was the moment of extreme alienation and loneliness experienced by Christ on the cross, the feeling of being

deserted by both his disciples and God, and the prospect that all of his life's work and martyrdom had been in vain. This was Christ's darkest moment, where the Gospels record his famous utterance: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'[36] The gravity of this dialogue is accentuated visually with a carving of the tormented Christ hanging over the altar, a symbolic portrait of the priest's own state of desperation.

Central to genuine spiritual existence for Luther is an inner trial called *Anfechtung*; the utter despair of the self in its alienation from God, the mood of living precariously without the certainty of redemption.[37] Far from the mystic who rests absorbed and completed within the Absolute like a child in its womb, it is in our identification with the suffering Christ where we are finally vindicated before God. An adherent of Luther's 'theology of the cross' may then state with Kierkegaard that the greater the anxiety 'the greater is the man'. Anxiety is the yoke of authentic living, the terrible freedom faced by the self who accepts itself as it really is: a project pitted over its future possibilities, the highest of which is the leap of faith in which its own efforts to justify its existence are crushed.[38] This dying and rebirth of the ego, inner movements of the self which parallel the passion and resurrection of Christ, is a process to be renewed without end. Indeed, Kierkegaard compares this highest possibility of human existence to the repetitive strokes of a swimmer or the strides of a dancer.[39] The stirring last words of *Winter Light* are spoken as our troubled priest turns to face his congregation: 'Holy, holy holy Lord of Hosts...' One gets the sense that this is an affirmation he will need to relive throughout the course of his life.

The writings of Kierkegaard are replete with rich depictions of personality-types who run from this uncomfortable condition of genuine selfhood. Instead of taking will-full responsibility over the contingent and open-ended nature of experience, the majority of the human race attempts to escape themselves for some kind of universal existence, perhaps an objectified social role, or the basking in some pantheistic conception of deity or Hegelian Absolute Spirit.[40] This was perhaps the thinking of Paul whose admonition for the early Christian community to await the *Parousia* or Day of Judgment was designed to shake the early Christians away from just this sense of security and complacency. The second coming, Paul believes, will inevitably catch us by surprise, for '...the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night'.[41] Paul thus adds a strong temporal element to the role of anxiety in the spiritual life, a futural, anticipatory one in particular. This

kairological[42] character of lived time plays an unparalleled role in *Being and Time*.

It is predominately in *Being and Time* in which Heidegger would synthesize most all of the themes mentioned above, though purifying them from any explicitly theological content. Human existence, when fully actualized, is an anxious and future-oriented affair, a resolute acceptance of mortality and the fleeting nature of one's life, along with a connection and responsibility to a history and a generation. When approached in an intimate sense as a possibility, which can occur at any time, death is a frightening and unsettling thing. The masses of people try to sidestep the uncomfortable awareness of their own contingency by throwing themselves into a shallow and public existence. Here, the gossip and distraction of everyday life is used to achieve a safe state of selfless anonymity in which the personal implications of death, guilt, and commitment are never experienced. In an interesting but rare display of his religious influences, Heidegger labels this latter possibility of human existence *fallenness*, and the switch to the former more resolute and kairological possibility, *Augenblick* or 'the moment of vision', an open reference to Kierkegaard.[43]

Whatever style we choose for our existence requires constant renewal, since human existence, for Heidegger, is fundamentally different from something like a rock or a tree, things that are already identical with themselves and exist as fixed objects. We, however, are not objects but activities, and possess possibilities through which we are free, within certain bounds, to define our very being. Our true nature is then an unstable one, an incompletion to be either dodged or affirmed in irresolute and resolute existence respectively. Mystical union with an Absolute of any kind is the ultimate form of fulfillment and completion, and is thus commonly seen as the biggest antithesis to this view of the human person. Even scholars who write on the subject of Heidegger and mysticism (most often on the points raised in section I of this paper) acknowledge the limits this presents to any comparison of mysticism with Heidegger's situated and project-like view of the self (called by Heidegger *Dasein*, or 'being-there'). Sikka writes:

> Nowhere in any of Heidegger's works is there a description of a state quite like that of the completion of the soul in mystical union. In *Being and Time*, Dasein, as existing being-in-the-world, is always incomplete, always lacking and striving. If it were to gain the completion in which mystical union consists, it would no longer be Dasein, would no longer be there (see SZ, 236). In fact, in mystical

union, 'human being' is no longer there and so such union is often described as a form of death, although this death is supposed to equal absolute fulfillment, not the end, in the sense of cutting off, of possibility. If such death dies into any kind of life, it then cannot be the life of this world, since absolute fulfillment cannot belong to being-in-the-world.[44]

It is telling that a few of the existentialists who have built off of Heidegger's work were outright atheists. Sartre for instance held God to be a contradiction, the impossible goal of a consciousness, which yearns to discover a secure foundation for itself while simultaneously preserving its own freedom. But consciousness is *doomed to be free*, a perpetual state of becoming which can *never* be reconciled with a stable ground of any kind without its free and project-like character then congealing and collapsing into a static mass or finished set of meaning. For Sartre, there is the density and meaninglessness of Being on the one hand, the uprooted and meaning-seeking nature of consciousness on the other, and nothing in-between. Man is a 'useless passion', and to introduce any Absolute whatsoever into the picture would kill the ambiguous and open-ended nature of the human condition.[45]

To those who feel that Sartre has just taken Heidegger's early philosophy to its logical conclusion, there is then an unbridgeable gap between the Heidegger of *Being and Time* and the teachings of world mysticism. Furthermore, since it is the late and supposedly more Being-centered philosophy of his, which is often compared with mysticism, a gap is then also placed between the early and later chapters of Heidegger's thought. Where the mystics prescribe self-transcendence and immersion into a greater ground of reality, the early Heidegger is commonly seen as stressing a more intensified self-individuation as well as affirmation of the unmediated and project-like nature of human selfhood.

III. The Self as Project Standing Out of its Ground: Heidegger's Mystical Existentialism.

Bare-chested and bare-footed, he comes out into the market-place;
Daubed with mud and ashes, how broadly he smile!
There is no need for the miraculous power of the gods,
For he touches, and lo! the dead trees are in bloom.

Kaku-an.[46]

We have seen the emphasis on self-transcendence in the mystical

tradition, where the self dissolves its stubborn independence for an appropriation with a greater ground of being prior to the dualities of self and world, ego and other. A Zen master named Seikyo, who illustrated the search for spiritual attainment with the symbolism of a man seeking an ox, depicted this level of non-duality with the image of a pristine white circle completely emptied of content. Even the dualism of the non-enlightened spiritual seeker on the one hand (the man) and the goal of enlightenment on the other (the ox), ceases to exist in the Buddha-nature. The circle thus represents pure Being without differentiation.

Kaku-an, another Zen master from the same period, felt that Seikyo's illustrations misrepresented the final stage of enlightenment. The self in Zen Buddhism does not completely disappear into some milky void beyond distinctions and remain there for good. It instead carries on with its existence, working and living in the world as it did before. Standing out of its ground in the Buddha-nature, the self's motions are engendered with an enriched sense of harmony and earnestness; its activities less self-centered, its relationship to others more compassionate. For this reason Kaku-an added additional stages to Seikyo's original work, the last of which depicts an enlightened Buddha walking into a marketplace and mixing with the general public. In his commentary to the picture, Kaku-an writes:

> **Carrying a gourd he goes out into the market, leaning against a staff he comes home. He is found in company with wine-bibbers and butchers, he and they are all converted into Buddhas.**[47]

It is arguable that this is the moment of return shared by the whole of world mysticism, and exemplified by the lives and writings of mystics East and West. Many of the Christian mystics, for instance, could be seen as anticipations of the reformation, the majority of whom spoke of an active form of contemplation in which communion with God occurs *through* the activity of everyday life. When in touch with the ground of the soul, formerly good deeds become 'living works', selfless instead of contrived, spontaneous instead of calculated. Meister Eckhart belonged to this perspective:

> **And whoever truly possesses God in the right way, possesses him in all places: on the street, in any company, as well as in a church or a remote place or in their cell.**[48]

This picture of the self as existing out of its ground is core to understanding Heidegger's comments on Sartre from the *Letter on Humanism.*[49] While Sartre insists on the priority of our freedom in forming the structure of our existence, Heidegger replies that it is exactly this freedom of ours, which discloses our source in Being. An experience cannot occur without a context anymore than a figure can exist without a ground; even something perpetually outstripping itself requires a base from which to shoot out from. It is in fact this launching movement of the self, which provides enough distance for the base to be seen in its entirety, much as a large hill in a thick forest permits a view of the whole span of woods.

This projection and lift of the self out of Being creates an expanse or stretch of non-being through which Being can surface. There is then a hole created in the distancing of the self from its base, a void or nothingness, which parallels the nothingness of Being itself (since Being is *not* any particular being).[50] Nothingness, for Heidegger, is then an essential part of both: the open and transcending nature of the self through which Being is made manifest, and the very transcendental and non-objectifiable reality of Being. We are a free and existing creation standing out of our ground in something greater than ourselves, a situation in which neither self nor ground precludes the existence of the other. Sartre is therefore wrong. The self in its search for an Absolute in no way seeks to mediate the risk and freedom of living, nor is there a contradiction between these things and our inherence in Being. In the words of Alan Watts, the inconceivable is 'not so much the abyss into which we are falling; it is rather that out of which we act and live, think and feel'.[51] Kierkegaard's complaints about pantheistic-style systems are no longer a worry, since the ground does not at all swallow up the self but instead presents it with a measure of buoyancy and support (something not entirely different from Kierkegaard's own notion of personal salvation). Buber's complaints about mysticism also have no bearing here, since there *is* a flesh and blood 'I' to relate to a 'Thou' after all.

Intimately related to the nothing, the experience of *angst* is another connection between the mystical and existential sides of Heidegger's synthesis. On the one hand, anxiety reveals the decisive and insecure nature of genuine living; the experience of the self who retrieves his or her possibilities from the complacency and safety of the herd, and who faces his or her mortality in a state of fortitude and responsibility. On the other hand,

anxiety, as that which reveals the groundless nature of our being, is the mood from which we attempt to flee by running to the world for support. But just as anxiety is connected to the center of our existence and not to anything in the world, such attempts are fruitless. Our hold on the things of the world then begins to 'slip away',[52] stranding us before the naked and inexpressible presence of Being which hangs, dreamlike, as no particular being at all. It is helpful here to recall Holden Caulfield's breakdown in the *Catcher in the Rye*, whose frustrations climax in his hallucination of falling through a sidewalk. When his tenacious attempts to cling on to reality finally collapse, he experiences not the chaos of insanity but sheer wonder at existence, awe at something as unimportant and nonsensical as the sight of his little sister revolving around a carousel. The impression of reverence and amazement that anything *is* at all and is not completely nothing; this is the experience from which, according to Heidegger, true metaphysics begins.[53]

Heidegger's use of things like mood and emotion as types of knowledge has already been mentioned in section I. But now we finally know why. Being is not something that stands opposed to us like the conservative God of the neo-orthodox theologians, but is instead the foundation from which we arise like a spark from a fire. But Being is not something we then automatically 'have'. As the very medium of our existence, Being is closer to us than we are to ourselves, yet "the near remains farthest from man".[54] And it remains farthest from ourselves not only by way of our need to categorize and manipulate, but in our tendency to avoid our own life extremities. The alternative to this, also mentioned earlier, is the more genuine but dreadful form of living in which we freely take up our personal and cultural history while anticipating death. This individualized and unmediated acceptance of our freedom and finitude cleaves us away from the petty occupations of the present by pointing us toward the future and adjoining us with the past. Our existence thus has a stretched quality, and it is this fundamentally lived and futural form of temporality through which Being itself is brought to light. The point is that in genuine existence we become *transparent* to Being; that is, we have the ability to actualize the ground through our life in the way a glass of water allows itself to be permeated through and through by a colored dye. A shallow, distracted existence conceals our ground in Being. A genuine, resolute existence serves as its conduit.

The self as a finite project standing out of its ground in Being and as

either transparent or opaque to this ground is the one picture running consistently throughout Heidegger's philosophical career. A large part of the *Kehre* or 'turn' between the early and later Heidegger consists of a change of perspective on this same picture. The Heidegger of *Being and Time* uses human existence as the vantage point for understanding Being, and the later Heidegger looks at Being more directly; seeing human existence as the window supplied by Being in order to make itself known.[55] Being is truly the most fundamental theme on both sides of the *Kehre*, and human existence is seen equally on both sides as the project whose activities and ways of life either help or hinder its unfolding into view. This is Heidegger's great synthesis of the mystical and the existential.

This synthesis, as a true synthesis, incorporates the essential and defining feature of both ontologies. It is notable that the existentialist wing of Heidegger's synthesis goes even further than the moment of return in traditional mysticism. While the Buddhist saint and Christian contemplative carry on with their existence even while reconciled with the Absolute or God-head, nowhere in the literature of either form of mysticism is there the same importance placed upon the contingent and creaturely qualities of that which stands on the hither side of the appropriation. And certainly is there nothing near the investigation Heidegger presents into the earthbound nature of our existence; for the Heideggarian self is essentially strewn across an environment of equipmental and social artifacts, and partially defined by this environment and its history.[56] This is an investigation conducted with such precision that it remains one of the most respected influences on practically every scientific and philosophical inquiry into the situated and embodied nature of the human self; from the 'existentialist phenomenology' of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, to contemporary work in psychology and cognitive science.[57]

One gets the sense that if Heidegger never left the seminary and remained a theologian in *Being and Time*, he still would have had to leave behind Neoplatonic mysticism as it is found in its pure form. If one's very being is defined by his or her mortality and inseparability from a milieu or set of circumstances, it makes no sense to ask one to transcend the body and identify with an ideal world lying beyond the dungeon of sense experience. An essential feature of Heidegger's reconciliation of the existential and the mystical is his placing of Being *underneath* us rather than over us, and its availability to us through things like mood and guilt rather than the

disembodied vehicle of reason. Heidegger thus saves the deepest impulse of Neoplatonic thought by, quite literally, turning it on its head. It is in our desperation as finite and anxious selves that we are brought close to Being, and it is in the process of abstraction and objectification in we are pulled away. It is in this way that Heidegger rescues the Augustinian 'inner man' from both extremes: the hierarchical and intellectualized metaphysics of traditional Neoplatonism on the one hand, and the completely worldly and situated framework of the French existentialists on the other.

Concluding thoughts

The idea that important truths are made present through a mode or state of our own being, what I have called *transparency*, is the kernel of Heidegger's synthesis of the mystical and the existential. Whether transparency can be achieved by our own volition or not is beside the question.[58] What is more interesting is the similar use of the term by one of Heidegger's major influences. For Kierkegaard, genuine selfhood is the state in which '...in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it'.[59] That is, the self must accept itself as the singular and concrete project that it is, while founding itself upon the rich mysteries of faith. A century before Sartre's analysis of theism as the belief in a hopeless contradiction, Kierkegaard effectively created all of the major tenets of existentialism while remaining a deep Christian theist. Yet the ground to which the self is made transparent is a narrow one, and too far above the world from which we live, work, and breathe. Kierkegaard, good existentialist that he was, exiles us from our root in Being by violently opposing the notion that existence can be a spiritual home for us in any way. Even while proving the consistency of existentialism and theism, Kierkegaard, as shown earlier, maintains a strict exclusiveness between existentialism and anything resembling mysticism.

While Kierkegaard forgoes the universal for the individual, Augustine forgoes the individual for the universal. Not even the depth of Augustine's emotion, passion, and despair can rescue the existential side from his ultimate goal of union with an abstract and atemporal God. It took Heidegger the fervently anti-Greek theology of Luther to temper Augustine's Neoplatonism enough to make any use out of it.

If there is any historical figure who most closely approximates the synthesis, it is Paul, the common ancestor from which both Augustine and

Kierkegaard spread out into two opposite historical and ideological poles. It is in Paul's writing in which joyful mysticism ('...it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who liveth in me.'[60]) and anxious freedom find their first major synthesis in the West. Such a synthesis would not be as fully established again until the twentieth century with the writing of Heidegger. Heidegger thus resembles a secularized Paul for the modern world.

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Notes

[1] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xi.
[2] Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, p. 70.
[3] For instance, in the writing of Kiesel and Caputo. I make use of their work throughout this essay.
[4] Kiesel, *The genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, p. 218. He labels the self's transparency and dependence upon God as the childlike sense of religion, and the more active and resolute self as the adult sense of religion:

> **Of course, these two, the childlike and adult senses of religion, are not incompatible, but Heidegger never quite gets around to resolving the Pauline paradox of trust and confidence on the one hand, and the despair of decision on the other...**

[5] *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Council in Time of War*, p. 39.
[6] Heidegger quoted by Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, p 71.
[7] Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, pp. 71-75.
[8] John Caputo, "Heidegger and Theology," pp. 271-72.
[9] Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, pp. 28-29 and 154.
[10] *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Council in Time of War*, p 57 The yoga of renunciation has been labeled elsewhere as *Karma Yoga* The self still works and acts in the world, but non-egotistically. It instead dedicates the fruits of its activities to God
[11] Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?* p. 106.
[12] Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, p. 145.

[13] One important work of medieval mysticism is titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written by an unknown monk of the fourteenth century.
[14] *Bhagavad-Gita*, p. 83.
[15] *Bhagavad-Gita*, p. 67
[16] *Bhagavad-Gita*, p. 105.
[17] Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, p. 205
[18] To Anselm's famous argument for God's existence in his *Proslogion*, Paul Tillich replies that the proof presupposes a derivative conception of deity, namely that it objectifies God by portraying Him as an object among other objects, a thing among other things. It is interesting that Tillich bases his objections on his view of God as 'being itself', and in strikingly similar fashion to Eckhart, the 'God beyond God'. These remarks are found in Tillich, *Systematic Theology volume I*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1951, and *the Courage to Be*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1952. Tillich was, of course, highly influenced by Heidegger.
[19] Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?* p 110
[20] Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, p. 210. Heidegger is referring here to the transcendent God of the scholars and philosophers, not, say, to Eckhart's concept of the Godhead.
[21] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 2.
[22] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, tr. L. Alexander, New Directions 1964, p 127
[23] In *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, Caputo claims that Heidegger's writing, in its non-theistic and non-denominational character, resembles mysticism in the structure of its ontology but not in its content. Sikka, *Forms of Transcendence*, pp 266-67 disagrees.
[24] Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, p 210
[25] Martin Luther, *Ninety-Five Theses*, in *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, p 491.
[26] I borrow this term from Paul Hacker's study of Luther's theology: *The Ego in Faith*.
[27] Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 51
[28] Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, p 89
[29] See Kiesel's enlightening chapter on the 'The Religion Courses' in *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*
[30] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. R. Bretall, New York: The Modern Library 1946, p 205.
[31] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, p. 204.
[32] This is one of Kierkegaard's most famous analogies. See *The Sickness Unto Death*, pp 43-44.
[33] Many of Buber's remarks against otherworldly styles of mysticism are found in *Between Man and Man*, tr M Friedman, New York: Macmillan Publishing 1965. As an interpreter of Hasidic Judaism, Buber was always quick to stress the ethical and this-worldly nature of this mystical movement.
[34] Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, pp. 96-97.
[35] In his second biography, *Images: my life in Film*. Bergman denies that this trilogy is really a trilogy at all. But this is irrelevant to this essay.
[36] Matthew, 27:46.
[37] Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 31
[38] *The Concept of Dread*, p. 155
[39] See *Fear and Trembling*.
[40] Kierkegaard calls this form of existence *despair*, and sums them up nicely in the *Sickness Unto Death*.
[41] Thessalonians, 5:2-11. See Kiesel's chapter on 'The Religion Courses' in *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*
[42] The *Kairos* is the Greek and New Testament term for time as it is taken up in this decisive and non-objective sense
[43] Bruce Ballard claims that Heidegger simply takes the early Christian anticipation of the Day of Judgment and replaces it with death. See *The Role of Mood in Heidegger's Ontology*, p. 110.
[44] Sonya Sikka, *Forms of Transcendence*, p. 221.
[45] Sartre is, in the opinion of the present author, among the most despairing of the existentialists, as well as one of the most rewarding. The whole second half of *Being and Nothingness*, tr. H. Barnes, New York:

Washington Square Press 1956, according to Sartre can be boiled down to man's fruitless attempt to become God.

[46] From "The Ten Ox-herding Pictures," tr. D. T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, p. 134.

[47] Ibid. In some interpretations of this passage, the gourd represents emptiness, or the self in a state of non-attachment. This is the interpretation of Suzuki among others. In other interpretations it is a wine gourd, an open defiance of the prohibition of alcohol in monastic Buddhism. This is a typical feature of Mahayana Buddhism, a tradition that attempts to vanquish the line between monastic and lay Buddhist practice.

[48] Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, p. 9. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegge's Thought*, p. 138 contains an interesting discussion of Eckhart's use of a passage from the *New Testament* to illustrate exactly this theme

[49] Heidegger, *Letter on humanism*, in *Basic Writings*, pp. 208-9.

[50] Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?* in *Basic Writings*, p. 105, states:

> **Holding itself out into the nothing, Dasein is in each case already beyond beings as a whole.**

This state of being 'beyond beings' reveals Being.

[51] Watts, *The Way of Liberation*, p. 18.

[52] Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?* in *Basic Writings*, p. 103.

[53] Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?* in *Basic Writings*, p. 112, expresses this more formally as: "Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?"

[54] Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, in *Basic Writings*, p. 210.

[55] Sikka, *Forms of Transcendence*, p. 154, comes very close to making the same observation:

> **...whereas the early Heidegger tends to think of the being of beings in terms of a project of Dasein, the later Heidegger, after the so-called *Kehre*, is more inclined to think of Dasein as a project of being and to think the being of beings accordingly...**

Though her stating of Heidegger's earlier notion of Being as "a project of Dasein" seems to relativize Being to man, instead of seeing the project of Dasein as what it really is in *Being and Time*: the context of intelligibility through which Being appears.

[56] One of Heidegger's terms for human existence is "Being-in-the-world."

[57] For instance, the work of Andy Clark, Hubert Dreyfus, George Lakoff, and others.

[58] There is no substantial difference between either side of the *kehre* even on this issue. In *Being and Time*, an involuntary *call to conscience* serves as a necessary condition for a genuine, resolute existence.

[59] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 131.

[60] Galations, 2:19-20.