

The Fourfold Revisited: Heideggerian Ecological Practice and the Ontology of Things

Wendell Kisner

Wendell Kisner is an Assistant Professor at Athabasca University where he currently teaches for the MA-Integrated Studies program. He received his PhD in philosophy from DePaul University in Chicago, has published work on Heidegger, Hegel, and Derrida, and has been teaching both online and in the classroom for over 15 years. His research interests include nineteenth-century and contemporary European philosophy with special emphases on political philosophy and environmentalism.

The nature/artifice dualism and the end of nature

The relation between humanity and nature has been a thorny philosophical problem at least since the Greeks made the distinction between what emerges out of its own process, *phusis* or nature, and what is produced by another, *techné* or artifice. The persistence of this nature/artifice distinction in the sphere of environmental ethics has not only failed to resolve it but, in certain respects, has even exacerbated it by turning it into a hard and fast dualism. Such a nature/artifice dualism is defended in Robert Elliot's essay "Faking Nature,"¹ for instance, and is further maintained and defended in Eric Katz's "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature,"² in which Katz asserts that "the imposition of human plans—human ideals, goals, and designs—converts natural processes into human artifacts. The natural environment cannot be redesigned or restored and remain natural."³ The claim here is that any human intervention in nature transforms the latter into artifice and so, once this has occurred, 'nature' can never really be restored but will henceforth always be marked by that intervention. This thesis sets up an opposition between artifice and nature that renders the restoration of the latter impossible. Any restoration will only be an artifact since it is something produced by human intervention, and so it amounts to

'faking nature' in Elliott's terms or, in Katz's terms, merely the 'big lie' of replacing nature with artifice and then pretending that the pristine natural state of the former has been restored. But, predictably enough, rather than bringing humanity back to nature this assumed nature/artifice dualism actually leads to the abandonment of nature altogether, even resulting in the announcement of "the end of nature" by some environmentalists. In a book appropriately entitled *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben argued that there is no longer any 'nature' out there that is untouched by human intervention, and so what nature there is has already long been divested of its purely natural character. This situation leaves us with *only* an artificial environment.

Stephen Vogel has called attention to the self-defeating character of this sort of dualism with respect to environmental activism. Since any activism at all is human intervention, at best environmental activism can only hope to 'fake nature' once again.⁴ This leaves us with a kind of environmental fatalism. Rejecting all such nostalgia for a lost natural purity, Vogel instead embraces it: "The 'end of nature,' it turns out, may be something that has always already occurred."⁵ This acceptance in turn allows the full recognition of human involvement in nature and thereby also the action necessary to ensure its preservation rather than destruction.

But Vogel cautions us that if we reject the nature/artifice distinction we run the risk of landing in an environmental relativism: if

all landscapes are already "artificial" (humanized) ones, then there seems to be no way to distinguish in a principled manner between the blighted landscapes of modern technology and the sorts that environmentalists typically want to preserve and indeed to protect against further technologization.⁶

On the other hand, the charge of idealism is laid at the feet of social constructivists "because the claim that we somehow 'construct' our own environment seems simply to ignore the fact that nature is absolutely real and not a possible object of our construction at all."⁷

In the end, Vogel advocates a kind of ethic of self-awareness, suggesting that acknowledging the social character of one's practices and thereby "knowing oneself" is better than remaining unaware of it. Thus human actions are evaluated according to "the degree of self-consciousness they evince."⁸ But without supplementing this account with a moral philosophy it is difficult to see why one *ought* to prefer such self-consciousness over a satiated ignorance or, on the darker side, why one should not become thoroughly self-conscious by openly acknowledging the social character of one's practices while engaging in environmental destruction for the sake of technological progress or

market consumption. If we rely upon traditional anthropocentric moral systems, we might then be able to say that an awareness of how environmental destruction impacts certain *human* populations will provide the criteria for moral evaluation. Left with the “end of nature” without such an anthropocentric moral system, however, it is unclear how mere self awareness of the social character of one’s practices could in itself provide a moral criterion. Without falling back on well-worn anthropocentric moral systems, it is difficult to see how one could make a moral distinction between destroying and preserving natural environments insofar as both can equally be carried out in full self-awareness.

Environmental thought and activism has hereby come to an impasse in the ancient nature/artifice distinction. On the one hand, assuming a hard nature/artifice dualism leads to environmental fatalism, and on the other hand, rejecting the dualism in favour of artifice in an acknowledgment that all nature *is* now artifice, may lead to an environmental relativism in which we cannot make any ethical distinction between a natural ecosystem and an industrial refinery. Vogel’s ethic of self awareness fails to provide a genuinely moral criterion and so merely amounts to a strategy that, at best, might shame those who are destroying ecosystems by exposing their actions to a public that habitually accepts anthropocentric values. It is at the point when environmental thought confronts this impasse that I think Heidegger’s late ontology of ‘things’ becomes relevant.

The ontology of things: The fourfold

The series of essays concerning the ontology of “the fourfold” belong to the late thought of Martin Heidegger and together they sketch out his attempt to overcome the ontology of objective presence (*Vorhandenheit*) and to free things from the modern technological enclosure (*Gestell*) that frames them in advance as objects on hand and available for resource, data, reserve, etc. In *Being and Time* (1928), Heidegger had already been attentive to the importance of things. The account of spatiality provided there shows that “space” is more originally “place” and is articulated through things. It is through things that human existence is spatial. It is not that we first begin from an inner subjective sphere (à la Descartes) and from there go out to meet things in the world; rather, we are always already ‘outside’ among things,⁹ and humans tend to misunderstand what they are in terms of things. The representation of beings as objectively present (*vorhanden*), Heidegger argues, gets in the way of a more phenomenologically

clarified account of human existence in its everyday worldly involvements and thereby also covers over the phenomenon of “world” itself. A more phenomenologically clarified account of this world reveals that, before things appear as objectively present, they are manifest as implements or gear within a horizon of handiness (*Zuhandenheit*). It is only in a subsequent abstraction from this inner-worldly involvement that they come to appear as objects with properties to cognitive reflection. But even the ontological horizon of handiness does not let the thing show itself from out of itself *as* a thing in its own right insofar as handiness is still determined by human existence in its worldly involvements and is thereby caught up in a totality of significations that do not, *qua thing*, necessarily belong to it. Indeed, this fact may also facilitate the impression that the abstraction of the thing from *all* involvements in the representation of it as an object with properties is what it actually *is* as a thing. But as a “deficient mode” of or abstraction from handiness, it too is merely a determination of human existence and fails to let the thing be manifest in its own terms.

Thus *Being and Time* concludes by calling for a return to a phenomenology of things, since in the account of human everydayness they still did not really get a hearing. From the beginning of Heidegger’s philosophical trajectory, the “ontological difference” between Being and beings was invoked in order to avoid “reifying” Being—that is, to avoid representing Being as itself *a* being. Husserl before him had been concerned to avoid reifying consciousness. The verb *to reify* is derived from the Latin word for “thing” (*res*). It literally means to “thingify,” that is, to conceptually represent as a thing. But Heidegger points out that it is precisely the “thing” that should be put in question here. The concern to avoid reification itself already assumes a concept of the thing that has not been critically examined, and so Heidegger indicates the necessity of this examination. What is this “thing” that we are so concerned to avoid? This question is particularly acute for Heidegger given the fact that the analysis provided in *Being and Time* of human existence as a being-in-the-world showed that existence to be inextricably bound up with things in the midst of which it exists. If humans tend to misunderstand themselves in terms of things—viz., as objectively present objects—then it is likely that not only human beings but also things are misunderstood. Thus Heidegger asks, “Why is being ‘initially’ ‘conceived’ in terms of what is objectively present, *and not* in terms of things at hand that do, after all, lie still nearer to us?”¹⁰

Attention to handy implements returns again in the 1935 lecture *The Origin of the Work of Art*, where above and beyond *Being and Time*’s overriding concern with their projection onto a horizon of serviceability

within a framework of everyday worldly involvements, a more ontologically clarified level of their phenomenality is found in the reliability they offer. Although this notion may seem irrelevant when considering many of today's mass-produced disposable commodities, one certainly appreciates reliability when it comes to essential items for our work and livelihood—such as a reliable automobile that doesn't leave one stranded, or a coat that consistently keeps one warm through the winters. But nonetheless, reliability once again comes down to human concerns even if this notion carries a greater sense of the integrity of things than the everyday context of worldly involvement with mere handiness otherwise might admit.

In 1935–36 Heidegger held a lecture course entitled “Basic Questions of Metaphysics.” Since this lecture was a sustained philosophical analysis of the being of “the thing” per se, focusing especially upon its modern form in Kant's philosophy, it was subsequently published under the title *What Is a Thing?*¹¹ The section that concerns us most here is the one that attempts to reveal the essential differences between the experience of the thing as it shows itself in Aristotelian philosophy on the one hand as opposed to the ways Galileo and Newton conceived of it on the other hand, the latter providing a segue into an account of why Descartes had to ground things in the being of the subject as a *res cogitans* (thinking thing).¹² According to Heidegger's account, when we place Galileo's conception of nature as *natura* against the earlier Aristotelian thought of nature as *phusis* one can discern all the essential features of the modernist representation of nature, a representation Heidegger calls the “mathematical project” and which subsequently receives a more explicit articulation in Newton's famous “principle of inertia.” In this modern representation, “the concept of nature in general changes”:

Nature is no longer the inner principle out of which the motion of the body follows; rather, nature is the mode of the variety of the changing relative positions of bodies, the manner in which they are present in space and time, which themselves are domains of possible positional orders and determinations of order and have no special traits anywhere.¹³

Because nature is now understood this way, quantifiability becomes a demand and nature is now *constrained* to show itself according to quantifiable relations. Hence Galileo held that the universe itself is written in the language of mathematics,¹⁴ and Descartes asserted that the only acceptable principles in physics are those of mathematics and geometry.¹⁵ The “mathematical” henceforth takes on a pivotal role.

Heidegger's final point about this transformation in the understanding of nature from *phusis* to *natura* is that the *manner of questioning* nature changes. It becomes less a matter of attending to what shows itself in

beings after the Aristotelian mode and more of a *demand* or *interrogation* put to nature. According to Heidegger, this interrogative mode is demanded by the way beings as a whole are now showing themselves in the modern post-seventeenth-century world. Furthermore, it paves the way for what Heidegger considers to be the essence of modern technology—that “totalizing framework” (*Gestell*) which for Heidegger is not just an instrumental means to an end but is a way of revealing things in the modern era. As the translators of *What Is a Thing?* point out, this interrogative mode and its projective character is perhaps best illustrated in Kant’s assertion about early modern scientists like Galileo, Torricelli, and Stahl:

They learned that reason only gains insight into what it produces itself according to its own projects; that it must go before with principles of judgment according to constant laws, and constrain nature to reply to its questions, not content to merely follow her leading-strings.¹⁶

In the mathematical project Heidegger asserts that, as opposed to the Aristotelian account in which natural bodies had a *telos* or an inner goal-oriented impetus, what now constitutes a natural body has no hidden interior: “Bodies have no concealed qualities, powers, and capacities. Natural bodies are now only what they *show* themselves as, within this projected realm.”¹⁷

Things are now nothing more than what they *show* themselves to be. Given Heidegger’s own emphasis on the verb “to show,” this statement might at first seem odd since Heidegger’s entire point of departure had been the phenomenological method that attempts to articulate the way things *show* themselves. Wouldn’t the mathematical project then be a phenomenological godsend, finally opening up and disclosing the thing in such a way that nothing any longer remains hidden? But in a 1929/30 lecture course¹⁸ Heidegger had made it clear that what is at stake is not the openness of the clearing *per se*—not disclosure itself—but rather the *concealment* or *closedness* that first makes unconcealment or disclosure possible. It is in the face of the closed refusal of beings that thrusts itself forward in moods like profound boredom or anxiety that human existence first comes before itself as possibility—not this or that *particular* possibility but, in the refusal of all possibilities, human existence is explicitly revealed *as possibility per se*. Giorgio Agamben’s reading of the 1929/30 lecture course suggests that the point at which human existence is most properly human (*eigentlich*) is also the point of the closest proximity with animal life—an openness to a closedness.¹⁹ I will return to this 1929/30 lecture course below in order to discuss this proximity in greater detail.

However, if “closedness” or the withdrawing of being into concealment is the crucial point at which the possibility of truth as such is first opened, then the elimination of all closedness in the mathematical project does not indicate what things *are* as such, but rather how things are manifest *within* that project. Phenomenologically speaking, things are manifest in the mathematical project *as* nothing more than what they show themselves to be in its terms. But it can readily be seen that such a mode of disclosure presents a profound challenge to any attempt to thinking about things outside of this horizon insofar as, in its banishment of any and all closedness, it mitigates against any *other* possibility of disclosure. Things are just this and nothing more.

There is an irony in this banishment of all closedness, an irony to which our attention is perhaps called by Heidegger’s emphasis on the verb “to show”: it is in this seemingly innocent “nothing more” that Heidegger had earlier located that very closedness—the “nothing” upon which the very manifestation of beings as “just this” depends.²⁰ It is as if, in its exile, closedness now must collapse into the disclosure of the totality of things in the mathematical project and thereby appear as identical to this disclosure. The very *disclosure* of beings in the mathematical project is thus *itself* a closedness that refuses any possibility outside its own horizon. Hence its stubborn insistence on being the only ‘real’ way of talking about things—when push comes to shove they are, after all, merely quantifiable objects with certain specifiable properties appearing within a homogeneous space of extension. The oft repeated Heideggerian formula of “oblivion of being” is thus an *oblivion to closedness, to concealment*.

The kind of thinking that remains within the mathematical project is what Heidegger called “representational thinking.”²¹ What is meant by representational thinking? Heidegger claims that in the modern era all objectivity is “subjective,” not meaning “subjectivity” in the sense of the arbitrary opinion of an individual ego, but in the sense that “what encounters us comes to be established as an object standing in itself.”²² This “establishing” is human reason establishing its own law for itself whereby it becomes the tribunal that “declares that in the future only what is placed before it in and through representation and is thus secured for it may be considered a being.”²³ Heidegger follows Kant in understanding “representation” to be a kind of apprehension that does not just passively take in what is given to it, but rather actively gives to itself what is present and what is to be present.

In the modern era, this representation takes on the form of a tribunal insofar as it makes itself its own law—reason gives to itself its own criteria and thereby determines what is. In striving to bring whatever is to count as a being under its law in such a way that it gives to itself the

determinations of being, “the essence of subjectivity of itself necessarily surges toward absolute subjectivity”—viz., the understanding of subjectivity later articulated by the German idealists. This representation that strives toward the absolute wherein anything that *is* must first be given and determined through reason, not as something external to it but as its own self determination, is also “will” or “willful self-knowledge.” This in turn means that “reason is the absolute reality of the real, the Being of beings,” that is, Hegel’s “absolute spirit.”²⁴

Heidegger understands “representation” as that which “distinguishes what is represented in contrast to and for the one who is representing” and so for him, “representation is essentially this differentiating and dividing”²⁵ that gives to itself the determinations of being. But this self-giving and determining transpires within a thinking subject, and hence it must tacitly maintain the distinction between what is represented and the one representing—and hence it remains mired in the Cartesian subject/object framework. So, for Heidegger, the rise of the modern scientific representation of nature in Galileo goes hand in hand, ontologically speaking, with the Cartesian grounding of being in subjectivity—both transpire within that *representational thinking* characteristic of the mathematical projection.

Though Heidegger himself traces this development up to Hegel, we might also understand the contemporary ‘postmodern’ assumption of social constructivism to be itself merely another shape of the mathematical projection. Even though social constructivism replaces the Enlightenment idealism of reason with the empirically pragmatic concept of a social order based on material conditions, nonetheless this very cognitive move strives “to bring whatever is to count as a being under its law in such a way that it gives to itself the determinations of being.” In other words, at least in its most extreme form, social constructivism may be merely another mode of the mathematical project that brings all that exists under its representation and makes it appear there as just what this representation determines it to be and nothing more. In spite of the fact that it dispenses with the idea of a detached observer who can objectively measure quantifiable things, it remains “mathematical” in Heidegger’s sense—viz., in that it banishes all closedness as ‘mystification’ and makes everything appear in *its* terms, rather than in terms of the things themselves. Indeed, insofar as any and every notion of “the things themselves” is understood *a priori* to be constructed and hence posited by human beings, any gesture outside this representation is closed off in advance—once again underlining the fact that its very “disclosure” is itself a closedness that

conceals itself as such and eliminates any other possibility outside its representation.²⁶

Thus in spite of the title *What Is a Thing?*, the *thing itself* still has not been heard. This Heideggerian text merely shows how, in the context of the mathematical project and the representational thinking that remains within it, things have been made to appear in such a way that it seems to be the only way, or the only way that can be taken seriously. Hence, the phenomenological imperative that first gets phenomenology off the ground—Husserl’s motto “to the things themselves”—has not only not been fulfilled but can no longer even be heard.

Heidegger henceforth became increasingly concerned with technology and how things appear from out of the “essence of technology,” leading him to the characterization of this essence as a mode of disclosure within which things are made to appear as “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*)—that is, as constantly on hand and available for manipulation, calculation, and consumption. But his concern about how things might show themselves in their own terms, irrespective of the essence of technology and the mathematical project, is a repeated theme throughout the Heideggerian corpus. After repeated gestures toward a phenomenology of things that always seemed to get sidetracked or taken up into other concerns—the analytic of human existence, the mathematical project, the account of things in Kantian philosophy, the artwork—Heidegger finally engages in a concerted attempt to address things *qua* things in a series of essays from the early 1950s on the “fourfold.”²⁷ Here the part played by things is given its due. No longer are they merely handy in a context of everyday involvements, nor are they passively assembled by the artworks created and set up by human activity. Rather, in their phenomenality they condition us in certain ways, and this integrity is what Heidegger wants to think in the step back out of the representational thinking that demands in advance to be the master of whatever is to constitute an object for it.

While these essays may well appear to be among the most ‘oracular’ of Heidegger’s work, they are nonetheless Heidegger’s attempt to overcome the ever dominant representation of things as objects within the mathematical project, a more superficial understanding of being that continually thrusts itself forward in every attempt to think at a more fundamental level, and to release things from the totalizing framework that reveals them as standing reserve. Although much has been made of this releasement (*Gelassenheit*) and even of the freedom implied in it,²⁸ not as much attention has been paid to the integral part played by things with respect to this releasement. Indeed, without things, there would be no freedom and no releasement. Likewise, much has been made of *Ereignis* as the “appropriative event” that opens up a world horizon, but

without *Austrag*—the carrying out of this opening up by the things that bear it—there is no *Ereignis*. And so the theme I want to invoke here and keep in view is Heidegger’s assertion about the relation of mortal human beings to things.

We are—in the strict sense of the German word—the ones “be-thinged” or conditioned [*die Be-dingen*]. We have left the presumption of all unconditionedness behind us.²⁹

Heidegger hyphenates the German word for “conditioned” here as *Be-Dingen* in order to highlight its literal sense of “be-thinged.” This does not, in a manner to be discussed below, indicate a mere passivity on our part. On the other hand, it obviously precludes the notion that we simply exercise an active power over things, determining them in advance as objects as in representational thinking.

“Being” is an opening of unconcealment that makes beings manifest in certain ways, but now that opening is re-understood and rearticulated in terms of things. The ontological framework of “Being” that casts its net over the whole of beings will henceforth be relegated to that Western metaphysical oblivion which culminates in the essence of technology as a way of revealing the whole of beings as objects constantly on hand and available for inspection and calculation. In his phenomenological analyses of mortal dwelling and things, Heidegger attempts to release both of the latter from this metaphysical enclosure.

At this point I will provide a brief exegesis of the lecture “Building Dwelling Thinking” paying special attention to the example of the bridge and with reference to the lecture “The Thing” as well, in order to fill out what how “things” might be understood beyond the metaphysical enclosure that represents them as quantifiable objects.³⁰ Heidegger’s most prominent examples are, in terms of the nature/artifice distinction, strictly artifacts—a bridge, a jug, a peasant farmhouse. But not only does Heidegger suggest the possibility of also understanding things that are not artifacts outside that metaphysical enclosure, but his late ontology of things suspends the nature/artifice distinction *per se*, allowing us to conceive of things in such a way that this distinction is no longer the guiding determination. This means that we can also embrace the ‘end of nature’ along with Vogel, but with these stipulations: 1) we embrace the end of nature as *natura* within the mathematical project which determines in advance how all things must appear as objects within it, and 2) we also reject any Romantic project of a ‘return’ to nature. Rather, 3) the nature/artifice distinction in its entirety is suspended, which means that the ‘end of nature’ equally means the ‘end of artifice.’ This suspension in turn opens up new possibilities for environmental philosophy that are neither romantic

nostalgia for a lost nature nor a mere acknowledgment of human intervention in nature. In Heidegger's late ontology of things, human beings are neither the masters and exploiters nor the bad guys who must be exiled from the garden.

Building Dwelling Thinking

Heidegger begins the essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," which was actually first delivered as a lecture to a symposium on "Man and Space" in 1951, with an analysis of building. Insofar as buildings are primarily dwellings and only secondarily used for other things, this in turn leads him to an examination of what "dwelling" is.

"Building Dwelling Thinking" is primarily concerned with those things that are built, although Heidegger also initially suggests that the "things" implied in dwelling can also be those that are cultivated. Things that are built and things that are cultivated may initially seem to be an unpromising point of departure for an attempt to articulate a non-anthropocentric conception of things. However, the analysis of built things in "Building Dwelling Thinking" is one of the most concrete and accessible of Heidegger's attempts to articulate this phenomenological account of things outside the mathematical project, and just as this account provides some indications of how we might also think of cultivated things, it is also provides some indications of how we might think of what we would otherwise call "natural" things—eagles, deer, mountains, rivers, and so on.³¹

In these essays Heidegger understands human existence in terms of mortal dwelling, and "dwelling in the sense of the sojourn of mortals on the earth."³² To dwell on the earth at the same time signifies "under the sky" and "with others"—others who can die and so are mortal as well. Heidegger also adds "remaining before the gods," perhaps the most problematic member of the fourfold.³³ The primal four: earth and sky, gods and mortals, "belong together in one."³⁴ Earth and sky is the region of regions—the original and ultimate spatial closure for human existence. The closure of a region is not merely its circumference, but is that which provides the definition of the region, its specific character and "atmosphere." Thus the closure pervades throughout the entirety of the region it determines. The ultimate spatial region, phenomenologically speaking, is the horizon of earth and sky, and this horizon pervades every other region within it. Only within the context of this horizon are particular regions, locales, sites, and places themselves determined.

“Mortals dwell insofar as they save the earth.”³⁵ “Saving” here means bringing a thing to its own most proper manner of appearance, that is, allowing it to show itself in its own terms irrespective of the mathematical project. Thus such saving “does not merely rescue something from a danger; to save properly signifies: to release something into its own proper manner of emergence.”³⁶ In other words, saving is not merely reactive, acting against a threat, but above and beyond this it attends to the integrity of that which it wishes to save—and only thereby truly saves it. Such “saving” may thereby indeed be a precondition of the environmentalist desire to “save” natural ecosystems, particularly if environmentalism takes upon itself the task of thinking and understanding that which it seeks to preserve. Any attempt to “save the earth” without a fundamental re-thinking will only appear within the mathematical project as a fanciful projection of subjective values onto a collection of indifferent objects that are valueless in themselves.

Dwelling comes to pass when the four are each ‘released’ into their essential manner of appearance and thereby allowed to belong together in one. In this way, dwelling preserves the fourfold. But dwelling is always a dwelling alongside and among things. If it were not for things, “the fourfold” would be only an empty abstraction. Thus Heidegger writes:

How do mortals accomplish their dwelling as this preserving? Mortals would never be capable of this if dwelling were only a residence on the earth, under the sky, before the divinities, with mortals. Rather, dwelling is always already a residence alongside things. Dwelling as preserving secures the fourfold in that with which mortals reside: in things.³⁷

Dwelling allows the four to be gathered together into one, and this gathering can only happen in things. It does not primarily happen as representations in our heads—we don’t imagine the four together in a neat mental picture. Rather, the four are concretely gathered together and brought into presence in *and only in* concrete things.

The importance of things in Heidegger is not only often overlooked but, no doubt following the now-classic aversion to ‘reification,’ the thought of the “thing” is sometimes even made out to be the enemy. For instance, Damon Young claims the problem is that “Being, including the Being of humans, is understood as ‘things’,” and he claims to be “following Heidegger” in asserting that “this ‘thingly’ mentality is linked not only to ecocide, but to cultural commodification and the worst aspects of modern capitalism . . .”³⁸ Likewise Shellenberger and Nordhaus assert that

Environmentalism is today more about protecting a supposed “thing”—“the environment”—than advancing the worldview articulated by Sierra Club founder John Muir, who nearly a century ago observed, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” Thinking of the environment as a “thing” has had enormous implications for how environmentalists conduct their politics.³⁹

Heidegger’s argument, however, is not that the thought of things is the problem. Rather, the problem lies in the lack of attention to things. The problem with the “thingly mentality” of commodification is that it *does not attend to things at all*. It is only when we attend to the phenomenality of things that we rejoin Muir in his observation that things are “hitched to everything else”—that is, to be a thing is to be a site of gathering or assembly.

Heidegger immediately adds that “residing alongside things” is not an additional property or supplementary feature that has been subsequently introduced. If dwelling is accomplished through things, this means that things must be themselves released into *their own* manner of appearance—for according to Heidegger their manner of appearance *consists precisely in this gathering of the four into one*. Hence “things themselves secure the fourfold *only when* they themselves *as* things are released in their manner of appearance.”⁴⁰ How are things “released” in this way? One way—one among other implied possibilities—is when mortals, in their dwelling, build things through cultivation and construction. This leads Heidegger to his discussion of the bridge as such a thing.

The Bridge

The phenomenology of the bridge provided in this text is one of Heidegger’s most well-known examples of his late ontology of things. The preparation for this ontology can already be seen in the earlier analysis of the Greek temple’s manner of appearance in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. It is no accident that Heidegger’s primary example of a work of art is a temple—a work of architecture that resists curatorial isolation as much as it resists the interpretation of art as a representation of something. The Greek temple is said to open up a region of unconcealment by simultaneously assembling and gathering within that region the beings that surround it—“tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket,” the storm that only “rages” when the temple opens up the space in which it can be manifest as the storm that it is.⁴¹ Thus Heidegger writes that such a work “clears room”⁴² for a place in which the beings gathered around can then appear relative to it. Already the

reference to the whole of beings drops out and we are looking at things that are manifest in and through a localized *place* or *region* (*Bereich*)—temple, sea, trees, eagles, and snakes.

But what the later ontology of the fourfold shows us is that the work of art is not the only contributor to this disclosure—the things assembled around it make a contribution as well. The temple gathers eagle, cricket, and forest around itself, bringing them to appear in a certain way which they would not have otherwise, but the eagles, crickets, and forest also contribute to the disclosure of the temple. It is not a one-way relation. Indeed, this point is especially clear with respect to Greek temples—one has only to see the Parthenon surrounded by city streets and the modern corporate buildings of Athens, with tourists taking snapshots from behind the closed off areas—as opposed to being surrounded by eagles and crickets—to get a sense of how the site and space of the temple region has undergone a dramatic modification. The artwork is still there, but the world it assembled necessarily included the things assembled, each with its own manner of gathering.

As is usually the case in phenomenological inquiries, before approaching the examination of the bridge we must take special care to suspend our customary representations—especially the representation of beings in terms of objective presence. If we begin with the latter representation, or if we inadvertently smuggle it in somewhere along the way, we will invariably see everything Heidegger says about the bridge as something added to it by our own imaginations—added to *an already determined ontology*—and thereby fail to think at a properly ontological level at all.

Heidegger's phenomenological method entails embracing the well-known "hermeneutical circle" in which we always already begin with a vague and general understanding of that which we are inquiring about prior to beginning the inquiry. The task of interpretation then is not to seek to avoid the circle but to enter into it and make the pre-theoretical and pre-objective understanding of being thematic. Heidegger's text is a series of formal indications which the reader must then enact with respect to the matter of inquiry, and its legitimacy can only then be determined with respect to the disclosure (or lack thereof) of that matter of inquiry. In "Building Dwelling Thinking," the first part of the essay lays the groundwork in its argument that building responds to dwelling, and dwelling in turn implies the fourfold. Now we are in a position to examine the concrete ways in which things might serve as sites of gathering for these "four world neighbours," first bringing them into the mutual proximity of their belonging together. We can see a hint of the thing as a "gathering" already in the etymology of the word itself, etymology which Heidegger takes to be a trace left in language insofar

as at least one way that disclosure happens is through language. The English word “thing” shares its etymology with the German “*Ding*,” and signifies a *gathering* or *assembly*.

As previously noted, at the very outset of Heidegger’s philosophical trajectory in *Being and Time*, he remarked that a return to the ontology of things would be necessary. In spite of the more fundamental manner of the disclosure of things determined there, the problem with that analysis is that the disclosure of things in terms of “handiness” depends upon the totality of significations that is the world of everyday involvements pertaining to human existence. That is, things themselves do not really contribute to this disclosure as such. Rather, they are taken up in a totality of significations that lies beyond them, and hence they are “projected” onto possibilities that become manifest within that worldly context.

We get closer to a proper ontology of things per se in the *Origin of the Work of Art*, in which we begin to see the deficiencies of their disclosure as mere implements to be used and thereby used up. But here only those things that can be designated as artworks, along with implements or “equipment,” are explicitly discussed. Even in this context of artworks, however, it becomes apparent that the “workly” character of the work is not exactly the same as the “thingly” character of things, and so again the necessity is suggested of returning to this “thingly” element per se, attending to its own manner of appearance without reference to either implements or artworks:

To determine the thing’s thingness, neither consideration of the bearer of properties, nor that of the manifold of sense data in their unity, and least of all that of the matter-form structure regarded by itself, which is derived from equipment, is adequate. Anticipating a meaningful and weighty interpretation of the thingly character of things, we must aim at the thing’s belonging to the earth.⁴³

In its ontological character—that is, according to the manner of appearance that most properly belongs to the thing *qua* thing, what exactly *is* a “thing”?

In *Being and Time*, the phenomenological analysis leads us to step back away from customary and habitual representations of beings within the ontological horizon of objective presence to the prior and more fundamental manner in which they appear in terms of worldly handiness. In the *Origin*, we again “step back”—this time from the everyday context of handiness to the more fundamental ground of that everyday world found in the strife between world and earth, a strife that is brought to presence in the work of art which thereby contributes to establishing the terms of phenomenality from which that world takes its

measure. Now in the late ontology of things, we step back once again from the strife between world and earth to the (perhaps ultimate) horizon of phenomenality: the gathering together of earth and sky, divinities and mortals. Just as the strife between world and earth is brought to a stand in the work and only thereby becomes a strife at all, so the fourfold are provided a site for their gathering in the thing. *Only through things* are earth, sky, divinities, and mortals brought forward in their belonging together and thereby become a “fourfold” at all.

Heidegger takes this gathering to be *the very concreteness of things*—that “thingly” element that has proved so elusive for philosophy yet is so close to us. As is often the case in philosophy, we find that what we habitually represent to ourselves as ‘concrete’—e.g., in this case the idea that things are objects with particular properties—turns out to be precisely what is an *abstraction* from the way things are manifest at the pre-objective, pre-thematic, and pre-abstract levels. Just as our habitual representations in terms of objective presence conceal the more concrete phenomenal level of handiness in our everyday worldly involvements, so also here both handiness as well as objective presence get in the way of the phenomenality of things as they are manifest in their own terms without reference to those impositions. In this ontology of the fourfold lies Heidegger’s final attempt to rescue things from the mathematical projection and, perhaps more urgently, from the totalizing framework of standing reserve.

Heidegger has been accused of being provincial and even reactionary in his choice of the old country bridge that “brings wagons and horse teams to the surrounding villages.” But as a site for the fourfold, each thing gathers in its own way, and so Heidegger immediately adds: “The highway bridge is tied into the network of long distance traffic, paced and calculated for maximum yield,” thereby not only disclosing the haste and efficiency of the essence of technology as the totalizing framework that discloses things as mere standing reserve, but also exceeding that imposition in the way it brings into presence “the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks and in the end, as mortals, to the other side.”⁴⁴ Here again we have bank and landscape, now as standing-reserve scenery blurring by as we hasten to the next destination. But in disclosing this haste it implicitly also reveals the way in which modern humanity dwells in the context of that ultimate spatial horizon—viz., on the earth and under the sky—filling up the time between birth and death hurtling toward the final destination as the ultimate temporal horizon. If we should pause long enough encounter this bridge, it may bring us to at least momentarily reflect on this revealing, what this all means and what the

point of it might be, and perhaps even the divine may become manifest in its absence.

Now we may immediately and reactively take it as the height of imaginative fancy when we first come across assertions in Heidegger's writing like the following: "Even where the bridge covers the stream, it holds its flow up to the sky by taking it for a moment under the vaulted gateway and then setting it free once more."⁴⁵ However, it is not that the bridge merely makes explicit a relationship between the stream, its banks, and the sky that is already there and objectively present—as if the bridge merely makes us, as conscious subjects, aware of something which in itself is 'there' regardless of the bridge. If this relationship is not merely objectively present, then we must think of the bridge as holding and maintaining this relationship in its own way—not as a causal production, to be sure, but as providing a site for it such that it can occur in this particular way (and it never occurs apart from a particular *way* of occurring, that is, a particular way of appearing, the "how" of its phenomenality). The specific "how" of this relationship between the stream, its banks, and the sky is mediated and articulated by things as sites of the fourfold gathering which lets them belong to one another in their mutual distance.

Spatiality and Place

Heidegger writes:

The bridge is surely a thing *of its own* kind; for it gathers the fourfold in such a way that it grants [*verstattet*] a place [*Stätte*] for it. However, only that which is *intrinsically* a site [*Ort*] can make room [*einräumen*] for a place. The site is not something already objectively present before the bridge is there. Certainly before the bridge is situated, there are many positions along the stream which something can come to occupy. One of these yields a site and indeed does so *through the bridge*. Thus the bridge does not first come to a site and then stand in it, but rather a site first comes to be through the bridge. The bridge is a thing, gathering the fourfold, yet gathering in such a way that it grants a place for the fourfold. From out of this place are determined the locations and routes through which a space [*Raum*] gets opened up [*eingerräumt*].⁴⁶

As a site, a thing can make room for a place which, in turn, admits the fourfold in a way that is specific to that site and place. With respect to such a place, various locations, courses, paths, roads, and routes can then be determined. Through all these locations and routes, space is opened up. In this way things first make space possible—as opposed to the customary representation of space as a homogeneous container into

which things are put or which could just as easily remain empty. Thus human spatiality is ontologically made possible by and through things. To put it another way, space is made possible by place, and place is established through things. Even with this “space,” long before it becomes the abstract extension bequeathed to the modern world by Descartes, Galileo, et al., it is a space that is cleared for camp and settlement. Space is something cleared and opened up within a limit or boundary which itself is not merely an external limit where extension ceases but is that from which and in terms of which space is first cleared. This leads us to the crucial concept of limit and thereby also to a remarkable genealogy of abstract space which deserves careful attention.

As a site, the bridge opens up a space into which earth, sky, divinities and mortals are admitted and gathered. With respect to the place established through the bridge and its placement, other places are also opened up in relation to it. These places themselves are variously near or far in relation to the site of the bridge. Nearness and remoteness here are not yet or are not immediately determined in terms of quantifiable distances, but are qualitative and are measured in terms of everyday human existence and its worldly involvements. Thus phrases such as “a stone’s throw,” “a hop skip and a jump,” “a long haul,” etc. are more phenomenologically descriptive of space as it is actually experienced prior to its representation in terms of quantifiable distance, even if they are impossibly vague and useless from the perspective of the latter.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger characterized human spatiality by what he then called “making-near.”⁴⁷ Phenomenologically speaking, when one is engaged in a conversation with someone, that person is nearer than the glasses on one’s face or the shirt on one’s back. When one encounters a friend on the street, that person is phenomenologically closer than the pavement under one’s feet even though the person may be several yards away. In terms of objective presence this makes no sense—obviously the person in each of these examples is a greater measurable distance from one’s body than the clothes one is wearing or the pavement that is touching the soles of one’s feet. But in terms of the way we exist in the world among things which appear in terms of that world horizon, what may be ‘objectively’ more distant can be brought near and so ‘closer,’ phenomenologically speaking, than something which is objectively less distant.

As soon as we represent things as objects that are present in a homogeneously extended abstract space, whose various positions within that space can be quantitatively determined, we have abstracted from the world horizon. As Heidegger writes, “What is at hand in the

surrounding world is, after all, not objectively present for an eternal spectator exempt from human existence.”⁴⁸ Making-near is an *active* way in which human beings “spatialize” themselves—they orient themselves in and through space in such a way that things are brought near out of a vague and generalized background of indeterminacy, and space is first articulated in terms of *places*, only subsequently coming to be represented as a single homogeneous and abstract “space.” Heidegger says that “remoteness is never understood as measurable distance.”⁴⁹ Indeed, it is this making near that first discovers something like “remoteness.”

Two points are as little remote from each other as two things in general because neither of these beings can make-near in accordance with its kind of being. They merely have a measurable distance between them which is encountered in making-near.⁵⁰

In a way that harks back to his own earlier account of spatiality in *Being and Time*, Heidegger says of the bridge:

Even when we relate ourselves to those things that are not in our immediate reach, we are staying with the things themselves. We do not represent distant things merely in our minds—as the textbooks have it—so that only mental representations of distant things run through our minds and heads as substitutes for the things. If all of us now think, from where we are right here, of the old bridge in Heidelberg, this thinking toward that location is not a mere experience inside the persons present here; rather, it belongs to the essence of our thinking *of* that bridge that *in itself* thinking gets through, persists through, the distance to that location. From this spot right here, we are there at the bridge—we are by no means at some representational content in our consciousness. From right here we may even be much nearer to that bridge and to what it makes room for than someone who uses it daily as an indifferent river crossing.⁵¹

What is now added to the earlier account is the suggestion that place and space are not primarily the result of human activity as causal agents, but rather that such places and spaces are established by things. Certainly humans build things such as bridges, but this building is itself a response to dwelling on the earth under the sky before the divinities and alongside other human existences. Such sites and places don’t happen simply because human beings choose to do it, but nor do they come about without human participation. Human participation allows such sites to be established by building and making things in their dwelling. In a response to dwelling, humans co-respond by building and making.

However, because there are other places variously near or remote from the site opened by the bridge, we can then abstract from these things—that is, we can abstract from the things as gatherings that open up site

and place—and represent them as bare positions. At this point we have, in a mental representation, subtracted the things and have something more like points whose distance from other points or positions can be marked off. This initial measurable distance is what Heidegger traces back to the Greek word *stadion*, which is the kind of space opened up by bare positions in abstraction from the concreteness of the things that first made place possible and hence also made this abstraction possible. The *stadion* understood as a spatial interval⁵² between bare positions abstracted from things then passes into Latin as *spatium*. In this way, Heidegger argues that “nearness and remoteness between human beings and things can become mere distances and intervals of space” between various positions, themselves mutually external and indifferent to such distances.⁵³ In light of this representation, “the bridge now appears as a mere something at some position, which can be occupied at any time by something else or replaced by a mere marker.”⁵⁴

But further abstraction can still be made by representing the intervals of *stadion/spatium* in terms of the three dimensions of height, width, and depth, yielding a conception of pure space without even the necessity that it be marked off as distances between positions. As long as space is an interval between positions, it is still at least tied to a vestige of place as position and to a bare echo of things conceived as points or markers within that space. But this further abstraction removes the “between” character of space and represents it as a “pure manifold of the three dimensions.”

It is here that we finally arrive at modernity’s conception of abstract space as pure homogeneous extension—the *extensio* of Descartes and the space from which Kant takes his point of departure in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and which, as a pure form of sensibility, allows for the arrangement and ordering of the manifold of sensory data by the categories. Here we recognize the mathematical projection of ‘nature’ as a sphere of space-time relations, quantifiable in terms of position (to which bodies are indifferent) and externally imparted motion (measurable distance between positions). And once nature is understood this way, as we saw earlier, quantifiability becomes a demand and nature is now constrained to show itself according to quantifiable relations.

Because place and site have been completely covered over and concealed in this series of abstractions, “one can call this mathematically opened space ‘the’ space,” the one ‘actual’ space. Because no other space is visible any longer, it presents itself as the only ‘real’ space, and then it appears as if anything more than that could only be something added on to this abstraction by way of subjective

projection. And so Kant simply took over this representation without further question as if it is the ‘pure form’ of sensory ordering and arrangement that the human understanding must always assume. But the problem is that

‘the’ space in this sense contains no spaces and places. In such space we never find sites, that is, things of the kind the bridge is. Conversely, however, in the space that is opened up by sites there always lies space as interval and in the latter in turn there lies space as pure extension.⁵⁵

The strong argument here is that beginning with concrete site and place established in and through things, one can trace the development of space as mere homogeneous extension through a series of abstractions that are made from and away from things. On the other hand, if we begin with the conception of space as mere homogeneous extension, we will never arrive at concrete site and place established in and through things by way of adding properties. To put it more succinctly, we can get from place to space, but we cannot get from space to place. Hence, once again, we see the continuing Heideggerian theme that the ontological horizon of objective presence overlooks the world. With its capacity of abstraction, human reflection can simply reflect itself right out of the world. Here more specifically we can see that it completely passes over concrete human dwelling, and it is at best questionable whether or not beginning with the ontological assumption of objective presence we can ever get to such dwelling—or even raise it as an issue worthy of thought—by piecing together objectively present properties added on to a subject conceived as an objectively present physiological and/or psychological entity, whether through behaviourism or neuroscience.

So Heidegger in his late work comes back full circle to the being-in-the-world alongside things and with other human existences, now ontologically specified through phenomenological clarity in such a way that things are given their due and retain their integrity rather than merely being externally determined by human interests. Human existence requires this integrity and substantiality of things in order to provide concrete situations in which to dwell and an enduring foundation for our activity. One might fairly say that the thing was never really thought at all in the Western philosophical tradition. Prior to Heidegger’s contribution, the latter lacked an interpretation of the thing that was actually interested in the thing per se—the thing was always made to fit some predetermined ontology. The thing itself as such never got top priority. The irony here is that the last thing philosophy gets to is what we intimately spend our entire lives with—things. As Heidegger put it, “The nature of the thing never comes to light, that is, it never gets a hearing.”⁵⁶

The way “Being” shows itself is a spatial and temporal showing. It is things that spatialize and temporalize Being. The world is always a measure that defines a particular limit on the basis of which beings are then manifest. That limit or measure is determined by the things themselves. They co-define their own mode of unconcealment with respect to each other. Mortals do not just become what they are through an individuated being-toward-death as *Being and Time* had it, but also within the larger context of the fourfold. And so we return to the theme mentioned above:

Thinking in this way, we are called by the thing as the thing. We are—in the strict sense of the German word—the ones “be-thinged” or conditioned [*die Be-dingen*]. We have left the presumption of all unconditionedness behind us.⁵⁷

The collapse of the nature/artifice dualism in the thing

The ontological determination operative here is “thing”—not the abstraction of ‘thinghood’ or even the earlier “thingly character” from *The Origin of the Work of Art*, but *things* in their concrete phenomenality as gatherings that spatialize and temporalize the world in terms of which human existence is articulated. Since “the thing” is the primary ontological determination, other determinacies, such as “nature” and “artifice,” are subordinate ones rather than guiding categories in terms of which things are classified. This suspension of the nature/artifice distinction is implied by Heidegger’s suggestion that among possible things we might find not only artifacts like “the jug and the bench, the footbridge and the plough”:

But things in their own way also are tree and pond, brook and mountain. Things, each for a while thinging in its own way, are heron and deer, horse and bull. Things, each for a while thinging after its own manner, are mirror and brooch, book and picture, crown and cross.⁵⁸

Viewed in terms of the ancient distinction between *phusis* and *techne*, this list of things would seem to have little in common insofar as it blurs together artifacts such as jugs and brooches with natural entities such as mountains and herons. But Heidegger’s account here suggests that the nature/artifice distinction is collapsed in the thing. Or, to put the point more cautiously, in Heidegger’s ontology of things, the nature/artifact distinction is no longer the guiding determination. Thus rather than embrace ‘the end of nature’ in favour of artifice as Vogel seems to do,⁵⁹ Heidegger’s ontology suggests that we suspend the entire nature/artifice distinction in a phenomenology of things that

attends to how each thing “things”—that is, gathers, spatializes, and temporalizes the beings around it—in its own way and after its own manner. This “in its own way” (*nach ihrer Weise*) indicates the necessity of carefully attending to the manner in which a thing gathers, spatializes, and temporalizes without assuming the nature/artifice distinction in advance as an interpretive principle. As “the conditioned ones,” we attend to the “own way” in which a thing is manifest.

Heideggerian ecological practice

The much-celebrated Heideggerian notion of *Gelassenheit*, variously translated as “letting be” or “releasement,” means to step back out of representational thinking into a kind of thinking that is not in a hurry to impose its ordering and calculations on things—it is not on a mission to follow the modernist project of putting questions to nature and forcing her to answer but rather, contra Kant, allows itself to “follow her leading strings.” But the key point here is that *Gelassenheit* is not a subjective stance toward things, nor is its point of locus and orientation in human existence, but rather in the things themselves. Any mere “shift of attitude” would still accord primacy to the subject, and so it would not be *things* per se that count but rather the subject’s stance *toward* them. This is the problem with all talk about becoming more conscious or of changing consciousness such as Vogel’s suggested ethical criterion of self-awareness mentioned above. Such recommendations still begin and return to the subject as the seat of consciousness, and the things once again pass into obscurity or are tacitly represented as objects within the mathematical project—objects to which, in addition to their physical properties, we may also impute other values more in keeping with environmental concerns.

For this reason, also, what Heidegger here calls “the thing” is not a generalized paradigm or universal model whose formal features can be routinely applied to anything and everything. This too would again relegate it to the status of a subjective representation that is then ‘applied’—and we would be back within a quasi-Kantian schema in which formal categories of the understanding are mediated by the imagination in their application to sensory givens. The understanding would again be the active agent giving to itself in representation what is to count as a thing. The suspension of such generally applicable conceptual models—that is, the suspension of representational thinking—is indicated when Heidegger writes that each thing “things” in its own way.

In his letter to a student that forms the epilogue to the essay “The Thing,” Heidegger noted that the thinking that attends to things is inseparable from that which attends to representational thinking, remarking that people tend to “listen happily and attentively” to his semipoetic account of jugs and bridges, but

immediately close their ears when the talk turns to objectness, the standing forth and arrival of production—when it turns to the totalizing framework [*Gestell*]. But all this belongs necessarily to the thinking of the thing, a thinking that thinks of the possible advent of world and, so remembering this, perhaps in the smallest and unpretentious matters helps such advent reach the point of the opened region that belongs to humanity’s essence.⁶⁰

We might venture to put it this way: attending to things in the step back out of the mathematical project is inseparable from explicitly examining the character of that project, which entails stepping back into it again. We never simply leap out of the prevailing mode of unconcealment that defines our own historical epoch. Heidegger is emphatic on this point: “The step back out of the representational thinking of metaphysics does not reject or disavow this thinking.”⁶¹ Rather, it steps back out of it into a thinking that remains attentive to the phenomenality of things. The step back is not a rejection or disavowal, and hence it does not spurn representational thinking by banishing it to the status of Heideggerian anathema. This means that the way is open to return to that very representational thinking from out of the step back.

It is this return, it seems to me, that allows for effective political action and practice to be carried out within modernity’s horizon of the mathematical projection. Thus a Heideggerian approach does not eschew conservation, strategies of sustainability, and the thoughtful allocation of the things we need from nature etc., which all would seem to transpire within the mathematical projection rather than outside of it insofar as it cannot avoid the calculation of ‘resources’ at some level. The phenomenology of things does not directly address the latter concerns, but neither must it minimize their importance, and in addition it may foster a kind of ontological sensitivity such that when we do return to the modern horizon from the step back that lets things be things, we return with an added sense of what must be preserved and saved and we can thereby operate within the mathematical projection by making use of it for purposes that may well lie outside of it.

For instance, within the representation of all things as quantifiable objects occupying positions in homogeneous space, and more so within the framework that makes them appear as mere standing reserve, it makes little sense to speak of the beauty or integrity of things. Locked within such horizons, all talk of beauty or integrity looks like mere

subjective attitudes and affectations having nothing to do with the things themselves, which for their part remain external and indifferent to any such human concerns.⁶² However, having allowed the phenomenality of things to come to presence in our thought as sites of world-gathering—as spatializing/temporalizing *events* rather than as atomistic substances abstracted from relation or mere *relata* in a network of forces or information—we are then free to make use of the mathematical projection without being confined by it. This is what saves the Heideggerian account from lapsing onto a form of pacifism or quietism. And this also shows that Heideggerian ecological practice has nothing to do with adding poetic descriptions or fanciful subjective sentimentality to things which otherwise are mere objects, as if the latter is the default value and starting point, but rather is a kind of subtraction that steps back from representational thinking. It's not a matter of adding something to things but of subtracting from them our own habitual representations in order to first let them appear as things, viz., as the sites of gathering or assembly that they then show themselves to be.

Even if they are not mere 'products' in the sense of having their phenomenality exhausted by the production process, the things to which Heidegger devotes the most sustained attention are made by human beings (the jug, the bridge and, earlier, artworks). When Heidegger does mention things that are not made—"tree and pond, brook and mountain . . . heron and deer, horse and bull"⁶³—he passes them by without comment. With the possible exception of "horse and bull," these things are not produced by human beings in any sense, but Heidegger does not give us much in the way of guidance regarding how to think their phenomenality as things. Hence the task of thinking such phenomenality remains open.

One might object that if the distinction between *phusis* and *techne* is no longer determinative, are we not reinvoking that very distinction by calling attention to the fact that the things Heidegger takes as exemplary are created by human beings as opposed to the 'natural' entities like trees, mountains, and deer? However, the point is not that we cannot conceive of such a distinction anymore, but rather that this distinction is no longer *ontologically determinative*—any more than, say, other empirical distinctions we might draw between the respective properties of a jug and footbridge considered as objects. Indeed, in a discussion of the way in which things "stand forth" as independent or self-subsistent, Heidegger writes that such "standing forth has the sense of coming from somewhere, whether this be a process of bringing itself forth or of being produced."⁶⁴ Here the distinction between *phusis* as "bringing itself forth" and *techne* as "being produced" is implicitly invoked. Thus

the distinction is operative but not determinative—that is, the distinction does not mark out two kinds of entities that are ontologically distinct insofar as both are things. Each thing “things” in *its own* way—that is, each thing has its own specific manner of gathering—and so careful attention must be given to the phenomenality of each thing in its own right and in its own terms without assuming in advance that because it can be situated within a category like artifice or nature, *techne* or *phusis*,—or even “thing” for that matter—it must exhibit certain predetermined ontological characteristics.

Thus, when Heidegger says that each thing “things in its own way,” he seems to be indicating a *radical heterogeneity*. For this reason we should avoid thinking that, on the one hand there are things *like* bridges and jugs that “thing” in a certain way, and on the other hand there are things *like* deer and trees that “thing” in a different way. This would be to re-establish the distinction between *phusis* and *techne* as marking a fundamental ontological dividing line between the natural and the artificial. Indeed, any interpretive framework that seeks to place all “things like x” in a certain category has already failed to step back out of representational thinking. This compounds the difficulty for it increases the care with which thought must approach things. However the deer “things”—in whatever way it may show itself as a site of gathering or assembly—it must be allowed to show itself in its own terms rather than in terms of a predetermined paradigm or model. This means that we cannot take the bridge or the jug as providing such a model. As previously mentioned, the “thing” is not an abstract formal universal that can be routinely applied to phenomena.

In this vein as well, one may wonder how the rustic bridge or the jug differs from mass produced commodities like disposable lighters or Styrofoam cups. Given the suspension of the nature/artifice distinction, one may wonder how “tree and pond, brook and mountain” differ from “parking lot and corporate tower, industrial factory and oil pipeline.” Have we landed back in the very relativism that Vogel rightly worries about? But the heterogeneity Heidegger indicates in this ontology of things precludes such a formal universality that would subsume all these various phenomena under a single category. This means that in attending to the way each thing “things in its own way,” we may well discover that “way” to be radically different when the phenomenon in question is a corporate tower as opposed to a rustic bridge. Indeed, it also means that we cannot simply assume in advance that every phenomenon will necessarily even show itself to be a “thing” in the sense of a gathering.

How then might the deer Heidegger mentions in passing be a gathering in this sense of a “thing”? We might approach the question along the

lines of Heidegger's semi-poetic way of letting philosophical thought and poetry reside together, attempting to let what appears in and as a deer show itself in its own terms without taking it up into the representational thinking as an object for consciousness to examine.⁶⁵ The deer is not an isolated organism-entity except by abstraction. One can certainly represent the animal this way in thought, but only by extracting her from the forest in which she has her life and being. The trees provide shelter and the bushes sustenance for her foraging. The deer invokes in her presence the forest of which she is a part, and thereby also the earth from which the forest emerges and rises upwards toward the sky. The flora among which she has her shelter and into which she flees from danger reach up to the sky for light, bringing the sky's light down into themselves and into the deer, who nourishes herself from them. Thereby, the deer's presence carries with it the sky. As a gathering, she gathers earth and sky into a single presence. The forest too is a thing in the sense of a gathering: it assembles earth and sky as well as the plethora of living beings inhabiting it into its quiet presence, a presence teeming with life on the earth, under the sky.

Knee-deep in the shallows of a pond, the heron waits motionlessly for signs of movement from the water beneath its patient gaze. It gathers into one presence the earth as marsh, the waterways that meander toward the sea, the interface between land and water in which the heron negotiates its living process. Repeating the pattern of the reed in its motionlessness, it takes into itself the pattern it repeats and thereby deceives the hapless frog who will be its next meal.

One cannot help but notice that introducing the "divinities" or perhaps even the "mortals" into the way these things "thing" or gather would seem to be a matter of externally importing something for the sake of applying a predetermined model of the "fourfold." Perhaps these things do not gather gods and mortals but only earth and sky, along with the further specificity of earth as forest or marsh. Perhaps the sky is only gathered in the most general way as light and darkness, or perhaps more specifically depending on the manner in which each thing gathers—for instance, as the guiding orientation for migratory birds.

On the other hand, if human existence belongs to the entire context of a world that is gathered as a fourfold (or perhaps a "whatever-fold"), then the gathering that deer, forest, heron, and marsh gather may well include the human existence that now must watch over it and preserve it, only thereby letting them "thing" rather than get used up in the globalized exploitation by which perhaps no things any longer can remain untouched. And this context may indeed also invoke something like a divine element as the temporal limit of this world horizon, a

historical temporality that opens up in the step back out of the distanceless oblivion of the totalizing framework.⁶⁶

However, if we return to Heidegger's only sustained attempt to provide an ontological account of animal life, there may be yet another way of situating living beings within the world-gathering of the fourfold—albeit perhaps completely outside of Heidegger's own intentions.

Animals, the open, and death

In his discussion of the part played by the mortals in the fourfold, Heidegger repeats intact the well-known distinction that had been asserted in *Being and Time* between human existence as capable of dying (*sterben*) and animal life as merely capable of perishing (*verenden*): “To die means to be capable of death as death. Only human beings die. The animal perishes. It has death as death neither before itself nor behind itself.”⁶⁷

Although much has been made of the way Heidegger's division between humans and animals functions rhetorically in its reestablishment of a classic metaphysical opposition and its importance to the latter,⁶⁸ that is not my concern here. I only wish to note that this reference to the animal is 1) hastily mentioned in passing, not in order to say anything at all about animals per se, but rather to provide a rhetorical contrast with the mortality of humans, and 2) markedly inconsistent with claims Heidegger himself had earlier made regarding animals. It is to these earlier claims that I now wish to turn, after which I will bring them to bear with respect to the ontology of the fourfold.

From early on, Heidegger was quite ambivalent as to the question of whether or not the animal has a world and what the implications might be if it does. In *Being and Time* he asserts the same distinction between dying and perishing (*sterben* as opposed to *verenden*) that reappears in the “The Thing.”⁶⁹ But also in *Being and Time* he writes the following remarkable sentences: “In the broadest sense death is a phenomenon of life. Life must be understood as a kind of being to which belongs a being-in-the-world.”⁷⁰

In a 1929/30 lecture course he characterized the animal as world-poor (*weltarm*), as having a world in not having one.⁷¹ Then a few years later, in 1935, he not only denied the animal a world, but denies it an environment (*Umwelt*) as well: “World is always a world of the spirit. The animal has no world nor any environment.”⁷²

But it was in the earlier 1929/30 lecture course that Heidegger had made his most sustained attempt to articulate the ontological structure of animal life, an account that must confront the death of the animal. For Heidegger, death “belongs to the innermost essence of life.”⁷³ Given the structure of being toward death that characterizes human existence, Heidegger is very attentive to the phenomenon of death when it comes to non-human life as well.

The 1929/30 lecture course argues that the animal is caught up in a kind of enthrallment or captivation (*Benommenheit*) with its environment, and as such is “essentially exposed to something other than itself, something that can indeed never be manifest to the animal either as a being or as a non-being.”⁷⁴ What the animal is open to in general is what Heidegger calls a “disinhibitor,”⁷⁵ which roughly corresponds to what biologists sometimes call a “trigger.” The disinhibitor is that to which the animal is in some way open through its self-enclosure, and which releases or “disinhibits” that self-enclosure as a stimulus, thereby also releasing the possibility of instinctual movement or drive. The animal is not open to beings or non-beings, but in its enthrallment the animal is an openness to the disinhibition. In closing his attempt to think the essence of animal life—an attempt to which he will never return—Heidegger remarks, “Rather that which disinhibits, with all the various forms of disinhibition it entails, brings an essential disruption into the essence of the animal.”⁷⁶ This “essential disruption” is Heidegger’s attempt to articulate the death of the animal as distinct from the death of human beings. But the way in which death belongs to non-human life remains ambiguous and problematic, so much so that Heidegger must conclude:

Earlier on we emphasized that having the possibility of the manifestness of beings withheld constitutes merely *one* structural moment of captivation and cannot therefore be the essential ground of the whole as such. But we can now reply that in the last analysis we have not yet clarified the essential organization of the organism sufficiently at all, so as to be able to decide the significance of this withholding, and that we cannot clarify it until and unless we also take into account the fundamental phenomenon of the life process and thus death as well.⁷⁷

There are several curious junctures in Heidegger’s lecture course that indicate a region of “closest proximity” of animal life to what he takes to be the most authentically *human* structural characteristic of existence. The point at which human existence becomes most authentically human is *not* first and foremost characterized by an openness to beings and to the possibilities that come to light therein. Indeed, this point is not characterized by “openness” at all. To be sure, such openness is a structural characteristic of human existence, but it is

only itself made possible when human existence is completely *closed off from all possibilities* in moods like “profound boredom,” in which one cannot seem to do anything with anything. It is only in such moods, in the withholding and suspension of those worldly involvements in terms of which human beings go about their daily affairs projecting various possibilities, only when all possibilities and all openness is *withheld*, that human existence can first come before itself *as pure possibility per se*—not possibility of this or that, but existence itself as openness to possibility. In his own discussion of the 1929/30 lecture course, Giorgio Agamben points out that the openness to possibility characteristic of human existence is only itself opened up by beginning “from a deactivation of single, factual possibilities.”⁷⁸ Thus the celebrated Heideggerian “clearing” of openness to beings is itself grounded in closedness, and the very givenness of beings is first opened up by the withholding of beings in moods like boredom and anxiety.

Nearly the entire first part of the 1929/30 lecture course is devoted to a sustained discussion of the mood of boredom. As is well known, earlier in *Being and Time* Heidegger has thematized the mood of anxiety as bringing about this closedness or withholding of beings and their possibilities, thereby exposing human existence to its own ontological structure as possibility. From the same period, in Heidegger’s 1929 inaugural lecture entitled “What is Metaphysics?”, he again thematizes anxiety, but also mentions other possible moods in which beings as a totality are manifest: profound joy and, again, profound boredom.⁷⁹ Agamben suggests that the point of proximity “in which human openness in a world and animal openness toward its disinhibitor seem for a moment to meet—is boredom.”⁸⁰ It is not that the animal experiences boredom *per se*, but that the animal in its own way experiences the closedness that human existence for its part experiences in boredom. The point is that both animal and human are, “in their most proper gesture, *open to a closedness*; they are totally delivered over to something that obstinately refuses itself.”⁸¹

Agamben does not however point out another curious proximity to which David Krell has called attention: the word *Benommenheit* (along with its verbal form *benommen*) is not only the word Heidegger uses in the 1929/30 lecture course for the way in which the animal is “captivated” in its disinhibitors, but in *Being and Time* the same word also characterizes human existence in two important and diametrically opposed respects. On the one hand, the word characterizes the way in which human existence is caught up in an inauthentic selfhood (via *das Man* or “the they”) and confuses its own being with that of objects and implements. But on the other hand, it also characterizes the way in which human existence, in anxiety, is brought before its own authentic

being.⁸² As Krell characterizes this tension between a *benommen* inauthenticity and an equally *benommen* authenticity: “Dasein as forlorn creature, very like a dazed animal, and Dasein as crystalline, transparent self. In both cases benumbed.”⁸³

Human and animal: both benumbed, and both open, but open to a closedness. Agamben spells out what he takes to be the implications of Heidegger’s account of this curious proximity between human and animal, a proximity that appears to be unavoidable even in the heart of an account that tries very hard to differentiate them:

Dasein [human existence] is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened *from* its own captivation *to* its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human.⁸⁴

In this way anthropocentric *privilege* is superseded by *difference*, a difference in the way that animal concealedness is encountered.

Immediately following the above-cited denial of animal death in “The Thing,” Heidegger explicitly refers to death as “the shrine of the nothing.” What is meant by this invocation of “the nothing”? Heidegger is explicitly harking back to the period of the 1929/30 lecture course in which he presented the inaugural lecture “What is Metaphysics?,” which was occupied with a sustained discussion of “the nothing.” According to that analysis, behind the more superficial meaning of logical negation, the nothing turns out to be an experience of the “nihilation” of the totality of beings. This nihilation does not consist in the literal annihilation of everything, but rather refers to the specific way in which the totality of beings comes to presence in certain moods. Specifically attending to the mood of anxiety, Heidegger there argues that in this mood the totality of beings is present, but they are present *as* superfluous, *as* receding or “slipping away.” It is this whole-of-things-as-superfluous that Heidegger claims is the more primary manifestation of “the nothing” long before we appropriate this experience in the “not” of logical negation.

“The nothing” then names this refusal of beings which, thrust forth in their utter opacity and superfluity, are withheld from the horizon of the everyday understanding that seeks to grasp them in terms of habitual worldly involvements. In other words, “the nothing” names *the very closedness to which the animal is likewise open*. Therefore—insofar as we are under no necessity to follow Heidegger and forget his own earlier painstaking attention to animals in the 1929/30 lecture course—we might venture to suggest that if the animal is structurally determined as an openness to a closedness, and if that closedness is manifest as “the nothing” in human moods, then the animal too experiences the “shrine

of the nothing,” though perhaps without the religious/mythical overtones invoked by the notion of a “shrine.”⁸⁵

Back to the fourfold

Now since Heidegger mentions “deer” and “herons” as things that gather in the sense he has indicated with respect to the jug and the bridge, and since these are ‘animals,’ how do things look if we regard these animals as things? As we have seen, Heidegger makes rhetorical use of the concept of the animal in “The Thing” merely to set off human “dying” against animal “perishing.” But this renders its importance suspect insofar as his account purports to be an attempt to let things be things and which regards we humans as the conditioned ones. These considerations, taken together with careful attention to the 1929/30 lecture course, might seem to suggest that an age-old metaphysical division has been imposed on ‘the animal’ with little attention given to the way in which this being might be manifest in its own terms.

What happens if we make the thought-experiment and read Heidegger’s own earlier account of the animal into the late ontology of things as gatherings of the fourfold? First of all, against Heidegger’s later denials, we would insist that animals do indeed die, and that as such a kind of being-in-the-world belongs to them. Secondly, we may even go so far as to nuance this manner of being-in-the-world as a “having of world in not having it”—viz., as what Heidegger had called “world-poor.” In what does such world poverty consist? It consists in the assumption that the world does not appear “as such” to the animal. Rather, the totality of beings is withheld from the animal—it is only open to this closedness or concealment of world, and can only respond to what disinhibits it from out of that closedness. In its encounter with closedness, the latter is not present explicitly—the animal doesn’t experience the closedness *as* closedness. But its entire experience is nonetheless “essentially disrupted” when it dies. Human existence, on the other hand, is open to this closedness first and foremost through moods such as profound boredom or anxiety. Having already rejected the metaphysical representation of human specificity as an animal with the added property of reason or *logos*, nonetheless there remains a distinction between the human and the animal in the way in which each is open to a closedness. As Agamben puts it, a human being “is simply an animal that has learned to become bored” and thereby awakens “to its own being-captivated.”⁸⁶

If animals do indeed die, then they belong within the sphere of mortality as mortal life, and this is what is gathered by things along with the other world neighbours: earth and sky, divinities and mortal life. Even a desolate landscape, gathering earth and sky, may also invoke mortal life in its absence much as the empty sky according to Heidegger invokes the divine in its absence. Mortal life forms a covert throng gathered in the fourfold as the life that emerges in the space opened up by earth and sky.

In this light, not only does Heidegger's dismissive account of animals in "The Thing" seem hasty, but so also does his relegation of any assumed connection between mortals and life to the metaphysical notion that represents what is proper to humans by adding the predicate of reason to the conception of a living being.⁸⁷ His own earlier account of animals yields a markedly different conclusion: that humanity and animals share the point of closest proximity in that both are equally open to a closedness, and it is precisely this closedness that first brings human existence before itself as possibility and thereby opens up the authentically human sphere.

However, insofar as mortal humans experience closedness explicitly in moods, they are in a unique position to preserve that closedness—to shelter it as the earth that refuses disclosure, rising up through world in both artworks and in things. This sheltering, saving and preserving of earth's closedness—captured in Heidegger's one word *schonen*—is only made possible through things, and by letting them be things. It is only in this sense, with respect to concrete things as sites of world gathering, that Agamben is correct to assert that "the supreme category of Heidegger's ontology is stated: letting be."⁸⁸ But this "letting be" in turn is only possible through the step back out of the mathematical projection and out of the subsequent arraignment of things within the framework of standing reserve, a framework that conceals its own refusal in refusing to let them be anything other than what they have already been determined to be in its terms. As Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus have suggested,

What the environmental movement needs more than anything else right now is to take a collective step back to rethink everything. We will never be able to turn things around as long as we understand our failures as essentially tactical, and make proposals that are essentially technical.⁸⁹

Because of the necessity of human interaction, even if it is not simply a matter of human control and technical manipulation, I prefer an expanded version of Agamben's 'supreme category'—not just "letting be," which might connote mere passivity, but "letting things be things," which denotes human involvement in the step back. We are the

“conditioned” ones, but we are involved in allowing this to come about, and so human *participation* is essential.⁹⁰

Conclusion

The above are no doubt at best provisional, beginning attempts to think of living beings, and what we would otherwise call “natural ecosystems” like forests and marshes, as things in an admittedly cursory manner. But these attempts are merely meant to indicate in a very general way how one might begin to step back out of representational thinking and thoughtfully encounter things other than the “produced” things with which Heidegger tended to limit his own analyses. Each thing gathers in its own way, and we are the conditioned ones: this indicates the kind of practice that Heidegger’s thought pointed toward without necessarily carrying through, leaving that to others to do. It is this practice that we carry with us when, from the step back out of the mathematical project, we step forward into it again in our attempts on multiple fronts to establish sustainable relations of human existence to a world that can be gathered and assembled by things as sites of such gathering. In this way the things belonging to what we might otherwise have called ‘nature’ are fostered and preserved along with those that we might otherwise have called ‘artifice,’ thereby moving us beyond the commodified world in which all things, whether ‘natural’ or ‘artificial,’ tend to count as so much usable resource kept on hand in constant availability. Thus, contrary to the views of Elliott and Katz, who worry about ‘faking nature’ with artifice, it is by suspending the “nature/artifice” dualism in the care for preserving things as sites of world-assembly that we may learn to dwell among those things in non-exploitative ways that neither alienate our humanity from the world nor banish us from the garden. And a care for things that does *not* make the nature/artifice distinction paramount may be what is needed for a real vision of alternative living that can open up a world-context without which the merely tactical and technical stop-gap measures of recent environmentalism fizzle out with diminished expectations and underwhelming results.⁹¹

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 2004. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Bigger, Charles. 2005. *Between Chora and the Good: Metaphor's Metaphysical Neighborhood*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1989. *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1989. *Of Spirit*. Trans. Geoffrey Benington and Rachel Bowlby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Descartes, Rene. 1985. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 1. Trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch. New York: Cambridge U. Press.
- Elliott, Robert, ed. 1995. *Environmental Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1954. *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Verlag Günther Neske Pfullingen.
- . 1959. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. R. Manheim. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- . 1967. *What is a Thing?* Trans. W. B. Barton and Vera Deutsch. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co.
- . 1983. *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit*. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann.
- . 1991. *Nietzsche*, v. III. Trans. David Krell. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
- . 1993. What is Metaphysics? In *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell. San Francisco: Harper.
- . 1995. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Boomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1996. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2001. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1965. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Katz, Erik. 1997. *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Krell, David. 1992. *Daimon Life: Heidegger and Life-Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Llewellyn, John. 1991. *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience: A Chiasmic Reading of Responsibility in the Neighbourhood of Levinas, Heidegger and Others*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.
- Mayr, Ernst. 1982. *The Growth of Biological Thought: Diversity, Evolution, and Inheritance*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Peters, Michael, and Irwin, Ruth. 2002. Earthsongs: Eco-poetics, Heidegger and Dwelling. *The Trumpeter* 18 (1): 1–17.
- Schalow, Frank. 2000. Who Speaks for the Animals? Heidegger and the Question of Animal Welfare. *Environmental Ethics* 22 (3): 259–272.
- Shellenberger, Michael, and Ted Nordhaus. 2005. The Death of Environmentalism: Global warming politics in a post-environmental world. *Grist: Environmental News and Commentary* (January 13).
(<http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-reprint/>)
- Thiele, Leslie Paul. 1995. Nature and Freedom: A Heideggerian Critique of Biocentric and Sociocentric Environmentalism. *Environmental Ethics* 17 (2): 170–190.
- Vogel, Steven. 2002. Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature. *Environmental Ethics* 24 (1): 23–39.
- Yeuk-Sze Lo. 1999. Natural and Artifactual: Restored Nature as Subject,” in *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Fall 1999), pp. 247-266.
- Young, Damon. 2002. “Not Easy Being Green: Process, Poetry and the Tyranny of Distance. *Ethics, Place and Environment* 5 (3): 189–204.
(<http://www.philosophy.unimelb.edu.au/staff/Young/nebg.pdf>)

Notes

¹ Reproduced in Elliott 1995, pp. 76 ff.

² In Katz 1997, pp. 93 ff.

³ Ibid., p. 93. For a critique of Katz and the nature/artifact dualism on different grounds than that undertaken here, see Yeuk-Sze Lo 1999.

⁴ Vogel 2002.

⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

⁹ "Communication is never anything like the conveying of experiences, for example, opinions and wishes, from the inside of one subject to the inside of another . . . In talking, human existence expresses itself not because it has been initially cut off as 'something internal' from something outside, but because as being-in-the-world it is already 'outside' when it understands. What is expressed is precisely this being outside . . ." (Heidegger 1996, p. 152). (In all citations of Stambaugh's translation as well as in my own translations, I will commit the Heideggerian sin of replacing the customarily untranslated German word *Dasein* with "human existence" in the hope of making his thought a bit more accessible in ordinary English.)

¹⁰ Heidegger 1996, p. 397.

¹¹ Heidegger 1967.

¹² Ibid. section B5: "The modern mathematical science of nature and the origin of a critique of pure reason," pp. 65 ff.

¹³ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁴ Cited in Mayr 1982, p. 39.

¹⁵ "For I freely acknowledge that I recognize no matter in corporeal things apart from that which the geometers call quantity." (Descartes 1985, p. 247).

¹⁶ Heidegger 1967, pp. 88–89, fn 22. (The original text cited can be found in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965, p. 20.)

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁸ Heidegger 1995. This is a translation of the 1929/30 lecture course published in German as *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit* (Heidegger 1983).

¹⁹ Agamben 2004, p. 65.

²⁰ See "What is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings* (Heidegger 1993, 89 ff.).

²¹ This phrase roughly translates the German word *Vorstellung*.

²² Heidegger 1991, p. 221.

²³ Ibid., p. 219.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 222.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 223.

²⁶ Indeed, one does not have to be a Heideggerian to see that the assertion, "Everything is socially constructed," must also apply to this assertion itself, which then makes its claim to tell us something about the way things "really are" suspect. If that is not "mystification," then I'm not sure what would be . . .

²⁷ These lectures are "Building Dwelling, Thinking," "The Thing," and "Poetically Man Dwells," published in Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Heidegger 1954). They are available in English translation in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (Heidegger 2001). Where the

translations are mine, references to this work are listed Heidegger 1954 / Heidegger 2001; where I have adopted Hofstadter's translation, the references to this work are listed as Heidegger 2001; Heidegger 1954.

²⁸ For example, see Schalow 2000 and Thiele 1995.

²⁹ Heidegger 1954, p. 179; Heidegger 2001, p. 181.

³⁰ My understanding of Heidegger is greatly indebted to the clarity of Gregory Schufreider's unpublished lectures on the subject, lectures which first opened up the Heideggerian corpus to me. Professor Schufreider's way of reading that corpus has remained with me and, in my view, still stand as the most compelling of the interpretations out there.

³¹ We will have to carefully qualify this generalization, however, since the "thing" as Heidegger thinks it is not a formal universal that can be routinely applied to anything and everything.

³² Heidegger 1954, p. 149; Heidegger 2001, p. 149.

³³ The "divinities" are said to be "the hinting messengers of the godhead." (*winkenden Boten der Gottheit* - Heidegger 1954, p. 150; Heidegger 2001, p. 150). The German *Wink* means a sign, wink, hint, suggestion. *Bote* means "messenger" or "herald," and is the word that is applied to Christ's twelve apostles: *die Zwölf Boten Christi*. By *Göttlichen* Heidegger may mean something like "hints of the divine." In a world of quantifiable objects, the god does not appear. Perhaps all we have in the technological era of the totalizing framework are *hints* of holiness, hints that herald the divine in its absence. The main thing I would be concerned to avoid here are metaphysical conceptions of a transcendental divine sphere beyond the world. Whatever we make of "the divinities" here, they are what they are only in relation to the others within the fourfold, and *this relation only happens in and through things*. Thus in Heidegger's thinking there is no "divine" in and for itself. There is no "absolute" apart from things. Even when such a belief is adopted, God is immediately conceived as the creator—that is, as the support for things. There may always be a desire to isolate each member of the fourfold, but in order to make that attempt one must abstract oneself out of the world. Any time human beings have ever encountered the divine in any way, they have always been on the earth, under the sky, and mortal.

³⁴ Heidegger names the unified belonging-together of the "four world neighbours" *das Geviert*, the "fourfold." *Vier* means "four," so *vierfach* would then be "fourfold." Heidegger seems to be trying to indicate something verbal rather than nominal here: the four *happens*. The mutual relating of the four is an *event*. In the previously mentioned lecture on "The Thing," he calls it the "round dance of the four." If *vier* were a verb, *viere* would mean "to four." Much as Heidegger will take the German noun *Wesen* ("essence") and employ it against ordinary German usage as a verb, he here takes the adjective *vier* as a verb and uses the past participial form of it, *Geviert*, then adds a definite article to reinscribe the nominal sense, winding up with *das Geviert*, quite literally "the having fourfold." Perhaps "the fouring" would be a better translation. But to make it more legible in English I will keep to Hofstadter's now traditional translation as "the fourfold," with the proviso that we keep in mind the verbal, eventive sense Heidegger wants to convey with this term.

³⁵ Heidegger 1954, p. 150; Heidegger 2001, p. 150.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, the German word *Wesen* here is usually translated by the English word "essence," but since this latter term implies an ahistorical nature that persists beneath changing appearances, and since this is decidedly not what Heidegger means by it, I've translated it here with "manner of emergence" to more closely approximate

Heidegger's usage. I also variously render it as "manner of appearance." The word *Wesen* in Heidegger signifies the way in which a thing emerges into appearance and shows itself from out of itself in its own terms rather than in terms of a predetermined representation or theory of being.

³⁷ Heidegger 1954, p. 151; Heidegger 2001, p. 151.

³⁸ Young 2002.

³⁹ Shellenberger et. al. 2005.

⁴⁰ Heidegger 1954, pp. 151–2; Heidegger 2001, p. 151.

⁴¹ Heidegger 1954, p. 28; Heidegger 2001, p. 42.

⁴² Heidegger 1954, p. 31; Heidegger 2001, p. 45.

⁴³ Heidegger 2001, p. 69; Heidegger 1954, p. 57.

⁴⁴ Heidegger 2001, pp. 152-3; Heidegger 1954, p. 153.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Heidegger 1954, p. 154; Heidegger 2001, p. 154.

⁴⁷ Heidegger 1996, p. 97 ff. The German word here is *Entfernung*, which Stambaugh translates more literally but rather awkwardly as "de-distancing." I prefer the more readable but less literal "making near" (Heidegger also uses this formulation in German). The idea is that human existence recognizes something like remoteness and, in doing so, brings that remoteness near in a way. In my citations of Stambaugh's translation here I have replaced her "de-distancing" with "making near."

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 98.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 97–8.

⁵¹ Heidegger 2001, pp. 156–7; Heidegger 1954, p. 157.

⁵² The German word here is *Zwischenraum*, literally a "between-space."

⁵³ Heidegger 1954, p. 156; Heidegger 2001, p. 155.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Heidegger 2001, p. 170; Heidegger 1954, p. 168

⁵⁷ Heidegger 1954, p. 179; Heidegger 2001, p. 181.

⁵⁸ Heidegger 1954, p. 181; Heidegger 2001, p. 182.

⁵⁹ On the other hand, viewed within the context of the mathematical project which subsumes the ancient distinction between *phusis* and *techne* under the modernist conception of nature as *natura* (so much so that to "naturalize" now means to describe something in purely mechanistic terms), everything would be "explainable" in terms of the mechanisms giving rise to its production, whether those process be traditionally considered to be natural (as in the natural selection that produced the heron) or artificial (as in the industrial production of the brooch, which in the end according to the evolutionary psychologist is also explainable in terms of natural selection that produced the heron). Thus in an important sense the nature/artifice distinction has already collapsed in the mathematical project, for which everything is explainable under the same "natural" processes. So whereas Vogel collapses the nature/artifice distinction on the side of artifice, the mathematical project had already collapsed it on

the side of "nature" (understood as mechanistically determined *natura*). Heidegger offers a third alternative.

⁶⁰ Heidegger 1954, p. 184; Heidegger 2001, p. 185.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Thus, even though J. Baird Callicott, for instance, wishes to valorize Aldo Leopold's criteria of "beauty and integrity" in the latter's "Land Ethic," he remains within the mathematical project when he asserts that "there can be no value apart from an evaluator, that all value is as it were in the eye of the beholder. The value that is attributed to the ecosystem, therefore, is humanly dependent . . ." (Callicott 1989, p. 27; see also pp. 133ff.). From a Heideggerian perspective, the problem begins with the emphasis on *value*, which implies a valuing subject and thereby drags along with it the entire ontological horizon of objective presence.

⁶³ Heidegger 1954, p. 181; Heidegger 2001, p. 182.

⁶⁴ Heidegger 1954, p. 166; Heidegger 2001, p. 168. The corollary German concepts here are "*ein Sichhervorbringen oder ein Hergestelltwerden*."

⁶⁵ In this journal Michael Peters and Ruth Irwin have called attention to the importance of "ecopoetics in relation to the work of Martin Heidegger and his concept of dwelling," adopting a certain version of ecopoetics as an approach to nature with a view toward environmental sustainability (Peters and Irwin, 2002). They write, "Poetry is one of the best ways that people have to bring the Earthly into language. This does not occur through an apparent representation but through a truth factor that is irreducible to the calculus of science or governmentality. Poetry is not a-political but a principle of politics." (Ibid.) Though rightly refusing to separate poetry and politics, however, they do not give sufficient attention to the ontology of things. The approach I am suggesting does not neglect the latter and so does not advocate an "approach to nature," ecopoetic or otherwise, but rather a step back out of the mathematical project that allows things to be encountered, from which we can then return to that project while holding the nature/artifice duality in suspension.

⁶⁶ I am indebted to Gregory Schufreider for the suggestion that Heidegger's notion of the divinities (*die Göttlichen*) along with the "mortality" heard in the "mortals" might indicate the temporal horizon of world much as earth and sky indicate its spatial horizon.

⁶⁷ Heidegger 1954, p. 177; Heidegger 2001, p. 178.

⁶⁸ As Peters and Irwin point out, "But when it comes to the status of humanity in relation to other forms of life, Heidegger retains the prejudices of his times." (op. cit.) See also Agamben 2004; Krell 1992; Derrida 1989.

⁶⁹ Heidegger 1996, sections 47 and 49.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 246. Heidegger later retracted this statement in a marginal caveat: "If we are talking about human life—otherwise not—'world'." (Ibid.)

⁷¹ Heidegger 1995, pp. 176 ff.

⁷² Heidegger 1959, p. 45.

⁷³ Heidegger 1995, p. 266.

⁷⁴ Heidegger 1995, p. 273.

⁷⁵ *das Enthemmende*.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 273. "Essential disruption" translates the phrase *wesenhafte Erschütterung*.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Agamben 2004, p. 67.

⁷⁹ Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings* (op.cit.), p. 99.

⁸⁰ Agamben 2004, p. 62.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 65. This is the crucial point overlooked by Peters and Irwin when they assert of animals as characterized in the 1929/30 lecture course, "The utter absorption in the lived environment (often called instinct) is a compulsion that excludes awareness and agency. Heidegger regards it as closed and captured by existence. [Human] Conduct, on the other hand, is the openness to the manifest experience of things in the 'Open of the world.'" (op. cit.) What is at issue here is not "Being" but *closedness*, and it is this closedness that humanity shares with animals! Peters and Irwin come close to this observation when they immediately add that "on a larger scale Heidegger's notion of the epoch and the Enframing of technology is just such a finite and totalizing system and subsumes agency in a similar manner." (Ibid.)

⁸² Krell 1992, pp. 9 ff. The words *Benommenheit/benommen* are translated as "captivation/captivated by" in the 1929/30 course and are variously translated in *Being and Time* as "numbness/benumbed," "be numbed by," and "taken in by" in Stambaugh's translation, and as "fascinated by" in the Macquarrie/Robinson translation.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸⁴ Agamben 2004, p. 70. Agamben is more interested in the further suggestion, outside the topic of this paper, that "the understanding of the human world is possible only through the experience of the 'closest proximity'—even if deceptive—to this exposure without disconcealment" (Ibid., p. 62), leading him to ultimately abandon the project of discovering the authentically human and replace it with one that attempts "to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Sabbath of both animal and man." (Ibid., p. 92) These radically non-anthropocentric implications remain to be developed.

⁸⁵ The German word *Schrein* here also means "cabinet," and although it would certainly sound less grandiose to refer to the "cabinet of the nothing" it might be more appropriate given that animals too encounter it in some way.

⁸⁶ Agamben 2004, p. 70.

⁸⁷ E.g., in "The Thing" (Heidegger 1954: 177; Heidegger 2001: 179). Heidegger was more careful in his earlier attempts to address the relation between human existence and life—cf. Heidegger 1996: pp. 22, 45, 154–5. For a more thorough discussion of the difficulties surrounding Heidegger's claim that an ontology of life is only accessible through a privative interpretation of the ontology of *Dasein*, see Krell (op. cit.).

⁸⁸ Agamben 2004, p. 91.

⁸⁹ Op. cit.

⁹⁰ Following suggestions by both John Llewellyn and Charles Bigger, we might best characterize this participation as a "middle voiced" phenomenon rather than relegating it to either the passive or active voices. Much as musical creation and dance happen by relinquishing the rigidity of control and "letting" it happen, and yet neither takes place without the participation of the musician or dancer, so also "letting things be

things" comes about only through a human involvement that lets it happen in the step back out of representational thinking and technical manipulation (see Llewellyn 1991 and Bigger 2005).

⁹¹ For a hard look at these meagre results in the United States and the lack of overall vision behind them, see Shellenberger and Nordhaus (*op. cit.*).