WHAT IS A THING?

by Martin Heidegger

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Henry Regnery Company • Chicago

A Gateway Edition

A. Various Ways of Questioning About the Thing[1]

1. Philosophical and Scientific Questioning

From the range of the basic questions of metaphysics we shall here ask this *one* question: What is a thing? The question is quite old. What remains ever new about it is merely that it must be asked again and again.

We could immediately begin a lengthy discussion *about* the question "What is a thing?" before we have really posed it. In one respect this would even be justified, since philosophy always starts from an unfavorable position. This is not so with the sciences (*Wissenschaften*), for there is always a direct transition and entrance to them starting out from everyday representations, beliefs, and thinking. If one takes the everyday representation as the sole standard of all things, then philosophy is always

[1] The following footnote appears on the first page of the authorized German text from which this translation is made: "A transcript of this lecture was reproduced without the knowledge of the author and was put on the market outside Germany without mentioning the source." *Trans.*

something deranged (*verrücktes*). This shifting (*Verrückung*) of the attitude of thought can be accomplished only after a jolt (*Ruck*). Scientific lectures, on the other hand, can immediately begin with the presentation of their subject. The plane of questioning thus chosen will not be abandoned again when the questions become more difficult and complex.

Philosophy, on the other hand, executes a continuous shifting of standpoint and level. Therefore, one does not know for a time which way to turn in it. However, in order that this unavoidable and often beneficial entanglement does not go to excess, there is a need for a preliminary reflection about what should be asked. Otherwise there is the danger of one's speaking long-windedly about philosophy without considering its meaning. We shall use the first hour, and only it, to reflect on our intention (*Vorhaben*).

When the question "What is a thing?" arises, a doubt immediately announces itself. One may say that it makes sense to use and enjoy things in our reach, to eliminate objectionable things, to provide for necessary ones, but that one can really do nothing with the question "What is a thing?" This is true. One can start to do nothing with it. It would be a great misunderstanding of the question itself if we tried to prove that one can start to do something with it. No one can start to do anything with it. This assertion about our question is so true that we must even understand it as a determination of its essence. The question "What is a thing?" is one with which nothing can be started. More than this need not be said *about* it.

Since the question is already very old (as old, in fact, as the beginning of Western philosophy in Greece in the seventh century B.C.), it is therefore advisable that this question also be outlined from its historical point of view. Regarding this question, a little story is handed down which Plato has preserved in the *Theaetetus* (174 a.f.):

Ὥσπερ καὶ θαλῆν ἀστρονομοῦντα . . . καὶ ἄνω βλέποντα, πεσόντα εἰς φρέαρ, θρᾷττά τις ἐμμελὴς καὶ χαρίεσσα θεραπαινὶς ἀποσκῶψαι λέγεται ὡς τὰ μὲν ἐν οὐρανῷ προθυμοῖτο εἰδέναι, τὰ δ'ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρὰ πόδας λανθάνοι αὐτόν. "The story is that Thales, while occupied in studying the heavens above and looking up, fell into a well. A good-looking and whimsical maid from Thrace laughed at him and told him that while he might passionately want to know all things in the universe, the things in front of his very nose and feet were unseen by him." Plato added to this story the remark: *ταὐτὸν δὲ ἀρκεῖ σκῶμμα ἐπὶ πάντας ὅσοι ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ διάγουσι.* "This jest also fits all those who become involved in philosophy." Therefore, the question "What is a thing?" must always be rated as one which causes housemaids to laugh. And genuine housemaids must have something to laugh about.

Through the attempt to determine the question of the thing we have unintentionally arrived at a suggestion about the characteristic of philosophy which poses that question. Philosophy, then, is that thinking with which one can start nothing and about which housemaids necessarily laugh. Such a definition of philosophy is not a mere joke but is something to think over. We shall do well to remember occasionally that by our strolling we can fall into a well whereby we may not reach ground for quite some time.

There remains the question as to why we talk about the fundamental questions of metaphysics. The term "metaphysics" here should indicate only that the questions dealt with stand at the *core* and *center* of philosophy. However, by "metaphysics" we do not mean a special field or branch within philosophy in contrast to logic and ethics. There are no fields in philosophy because philosophy itself is not a field. Something like a division of labor is senseless in philosophy; scholastic learning is to a certain extent indispensable to it but is never its essence. We therefore want to keep the term metaphysics

free from all that historically adheres to it. For us it signifies only that procedure during which one runs the danger of falling into a well. Now, after this general preparation, we can more closely delineate the question "What is a thing?"

2. Ambiguous Talk About the Thing

First, what are we thinking about when we say "a thing"? We mean a piece of wood, a rock, a knife, a watch, a ball, a javelin, perhaps a screw or a piece of wire. But also a huge building, or a depot, or a giant spruce are referred to as "huge things." In the summertime we speak of many things in the meadow: grasses, herbs, the butterflies and the bugs. The thing there on the wall—the painting—we also call it a thing, and the sculptor has many different finished and unfinished things in his workshop.

By contrast, we hesitate to call the number five a thing, because one cannot reach for the number—one cannot hear it or see it. In the same way a sentence "The weather is bad" is not a thing any more than is a single word "house." We distinguish precisely the thing "house" and the word which names this thing. Also, an attitude or disposition which we maintain or lose on some occasion is not considered as a thing.

If, however, a betrayal is in the air we say, "There are uncanny things going on." Here we do not refer to pieces of wood, utensils, or similar items. When, in making a decision, it depends "above all things" on this or that consideration, the other things which have been omitted are not rocks or similar items but other considerations and decisions. Also, when we say "things aren't right," "thing" is used in a much broader sense than at the start of our inventory. Now it has the sense which our German word had from the very beginning, namely a court trial or an

affair.[2] Similarly, we "clear things up somewhere," or as the proverb states, "Good things take time." Also that which is not wood or stone, but every task and enterprise needs time. And someone for whom "things are going well" is a man whose affairs, wishes, and works are in good order.

It now becomes clear that we understand the term "thing" in both a narrower and a broader sense. The *narrower* or limited meaning of "thing" is that which can be touched, reached, or seen, i.e., what is present-at-hand (*das Vorhandene*). In the *wider* meaning of the term, the "thing" is every affair or transaction, something that is in this or that condition, the things that happen in the world —occurrences, events. Finally, there is still another use of this word in the *widest* possible sense; this use was introduced within the philosophy of the eighteenth century and was long in preparation. With respect to this, Kant speaks of the "thing-in-itself" (*Ding an sich*) in order to distinguish it from the "thing-for-us" (*Ding für uns*), that is, as a "phenomenon." A thing-in-itself is that which is *not* approachable through experience as are the rocks, plants, and animals. Every thing-for-us is as a thing and also a thing-in-itself, which means that it is recognized absolutely within the absolute knowledge of God. But not every thing-in-itself is also a thing-for-us: God, for instance, is a thing-in-itself, as Kant uses the word, according to the meaning of Christian theology. Whenever Kant calls God a thing, he does not mean a giant gaslike formation that acts somewhere in hidden depths. According to strict usage, "thing" here means only "something" (*etwas*), that which is not nothing. We can think *some-*

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[2] *Das Ding:* From Germanic legal language, originally designating the tribunal, or assembly of free men. The *thing*(ORG) was a cause one negotiated or reconciled in the assembly of judges. Heidegger in a later work refers to this in setting forth the notion of *thing* as what *assembles* a world. *See* the lecture on *Das Ding* in Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (*VA*) (Pfullingen: Verlag Neske, 1954), pp. 172-74. *Trans.*

thing by the term and concept of "God," but we cannot experience God as we do this piece of chalk, about which we can make and prove such statements as: If we drop this piece of chalk it will fall with a certain velocity.

God is a thing insofar as He is something at all, an X. Similarly, number is a thing, faith and faithfulness are things. In like manner the signs $> <$ are "something," and similarly "and" and "either/or."

If we again ask our question "What is a thing?" we realize that this question is not in good order, because what should be put into question, that is, the "thing," is ambiguous in its meaning. What is to be put into question must be sufficiently defined to become questionable in the right way. "Where is the dog?" "The dog" cannot be searched for if I do not know whether it is our own dog or the neighbor's. "What is a thing?" Thing in what sense—in the limited, the wider, or the widest? We have to distinguish three different meanings even if the means of distinction is still uncertain:

1. A thing in the sense of being present-at-hand: a rock, a piece of wood, a pair of pliers, a watch, an apple, and a piece of bread. All inanimate and all animate things such as a rose, shrub, beech tree, spruce, lizard, and wasp. . . .

2. Thing in the sense in which it means whatever is named but which includes also plans, decisions, reflections, loyalties, actions, historical things. . . .

3. All these and anything else that is a something (*ein Etwas*) and not nothing.

Within what boundaries we determine the meanings of the term "thing" always remains arbitrary. With respect to this the scope and direction of our questions will change.

It is closer to our linguistic usage of today to understand the term "thing" in the first (narrower) signification. Then each of these things (rock, rose, apple, watch) is also something (*etwas*), but not every something (the number five, fortune, bravery) is a thing.

In asking "What is a thing?" we shall adhere to the *first* meaning; not only because we want to stay close to the usage of language but also because the question concerning the thing, even where it is understood in its wider and widest meanings, mostly aims at this narrower field and begins from it. As we ask "What is a thing?" we now mean the things around us. We take in view what is most immediate, most capable of being grasped by the hand. By observing such, we reveal that we have learned something from the laughter of the housemaid. She thinks we should first look around thoroughly in this round-about-us (*Um-uns-herum*).

3. *The Difference in Kind Between the Question of Thingness* (Dingheit) *and Scientific and Technical Methods*

As soon as we begin to define these things, however, we run into an embarrassment. All these things have really been settled long ago, and, if not, there are proven scientific procedures and methods of production in which they can be settled. What a stone is can best and most quickly be told by mineralogy and chemistry; what a rose or a bush is, botany teaches reliably; what a frog or a falcon is, zoology; as to what a shoe is, or a horseshoe, or a watch, the shoemaker, the blacksmith, and the watchmaker, respectively, give the best technical information.

It turns out that we are always too slow with our question, and we are immediately referred to quarters which already have a far better answer ready or, at least, experiences and methods to give such answers quickly. This only confirms what we have already admitted, namely, that we cannot start to do anything with the question "What is a thing?" But since we intend (*vorhaben*) to clarify this question, especially with regard to immediate things, it will be necessary to make clear what else we want to know in contradistinction to the sciences.

With our question "What is a thing?" it obviously is not our purpose to discover what granite, a pebble, limestone, or sandstone is but rather what the rock is as a *thing*. We do not care to know how to distinguish at any time mosses, ferns, grasses, shrubs, and trees, but what the plant is as a thing, and similarly in respect to animals. We do not care to know what pliers are in comparison with a hammer, what a watch is in comparison with a key; but we want to know what these implements and tools are as things. What this means, of course, must be further clarified. But if one once admits that we can ask the question in this way, then obviously one demand remains: namely, that we stick to the facts and their exact observations in order to discover *what* things are. What things are cannot be contrived at a desk or prescribed by generalized talk. It can be determined only in workshops and in the research laboratories. And if we do not confine ourselves to this then we will be exposed to the laughter of housemaids. We are inquiring about things, and yet we pass over (*überspringen*) all the givens and the opportunities which, according to general opinion, give us adequate information about all these things.

This is how it actually looks. With our question "What is a thing?" we not only pass over the particular rocks and stones, particular plants and their species, animals and their species, implements and tools, we also pass over whole realms of the inanimate, the animate, and tools, and desire to know only "What is a thing?" In inquiring this way, we seek what makes the thing a thing and not what makes it a stone or wood; what conditions (*be-dingt*)[3] the thing. We do not ask concerning a thing of some species but after the thingness of a thing. For the

[3] *Be-dingt;* verb *bedingen:* "conditioned"; "to condition." As already suggested, Heidegger wants to connect *dingen* with the notion of "assembling." Thus he writes: *"Das Ding dingt. Das Dingen versammelt."* "The thing things. The thinging assembles" (*VA*, p. 172). Here he seems to want to call our attention to the original significance of *bedingen.* The original legal connotation

condition of being a thing, which conditions the thing as a thing, cannot itself again be a thing, i.e., something conditioned. The thingness must be something un-conditioned (*un-bedingtes*). With the question "What is a thing?" we are asking for something unconditioned. We ask about what is all around us and can be grasped by the hand, and yet we alienate ourselves from those immediate things very much more than did Thales, who could see only as far as the stars. But we want to pass beyond even these things to the unconditioned, where there are no more things that provide a basis and ground.

And, nevertheless, we pose this question only in order to know what a rock is, and a lizard taking a sunbath on it, a blade of grass that grows beside it, and a knife which perhaps we hold in our hands while we lie in the meadow. We want to know just that, something that the mineralogist, botanist, zoologist, and metallurgist perhaps don't want to know at all, something that they only think they want to know while actually wanting something else: to promote the progress of science, or to satisfy the joy of discovery, or to show the technical usage of things, or to make a livelihood. We, however, desire to know what these men not only do not want to know but perhaps what they never can know in spité of their science and technical skill. This sounds presumptuous. It doesn't only *sound* so, it *is*. Naturally this is not the presumptuousness of a single person any more than our doubt about the desire and ability of the sciences to know passes sentence on the attitude and conviction of particular persons or even against the utility and the necessity of science.

The demand for knowledge in our question is a presumption of the kind found in every essential decision (*Entscheidung*). Although we are already familiar with this decision, that does not mean that we have already passed through it. It is the decision whether we want to

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of these words must not be overlooked. An "assembly" does condition something. *Trans.*

know those things with which one can start to do nothing —in the sense of this figure of speech. If we forego this knowledge and don't ask this question, then all remains as it is. We shall pass our examinations, perhaps even better, without asking this question. Even if we ask this question, we shall not overnight become better botanists, zoologists, historians, jurists, or physicians. But perhaps better or more cautiously put—certainly different teachers, different physicians and judges, although even then we can start to do nothing with this question in our professions.

With our question, we want neither to replace the sciences nor to reform (verbessern) *them.* On the other hand, we want to participate in the preparation of a decision; the decision: Is science the measure of knowledge, or is there a knowledge in which the ground and limit of science and thus its genuine effectiveness are determined? Is this genuine knowledge necessary for a historical people, or is it dispensable or replaceable by something else?

However, decisions are not worked out by merely talking about them but by creating situations and taking positions in which the decision is unavoidable, in which it becomes the most essential decision when one does not make it but rather avoids it.

The uniqueness of such decisions remains that they are prepared for only by questions with which one cannot start to do anything insofar as common opinion and the horizon of housemaids are concerned. Furthermore, this questioning always looks like a pretense to know better than the sciences. The term "better" always means a difference of degree in one and the same realm. However, with our question we stand outside the sciences, and the knowledge for which our question strives is neither better nor worse but totally different. Different from science but also different from what one calls a "Weltanschauung."

4. *The Everyday and Scientific Experiences of the Thing; The Question Concerning Their Truth*

The question "What is a thing?" seems now to be in order. It is at least roughly determined: (1) *What* is put in question, and (2) That whereafter we ask regarding what is put in question. Put in question is the "thing" in its narrower meaning, which refers us to the present-at-hand (*Vorhanden*). That whereafter the thing is asked and interrogated, as it were, is thingness, what determines a thing as such to be a thing.

Yet when we start to ascertain this thingness of a thing we are immediately helpless in spite of our well-ordered question. *Where* should we grasp the thing? And besides: we nowhere find "the thing," but only particular things, these and those things. What makes this so? Is it only we, because, first and foremost, we strike only the particular and then only afterward, as it seems, extract and pull off (abstract) the general, in this case the thingness, from the particular? Or is the fact that we always meet only particular things inherent in the things themselves? And if it is in the things, is it then only their somehow basic or accidental caprice to meet us in this way, or do they meet us as particulars because they are within themselves particular, as the things which they are?

In any case, this is where our everyday experience and opinion about things is directed. But before we continue this line of our questioning, it is necessary to insert an intervening examination of our everyday experience. There is not at first, nor later on, any valid reason to doubt our everyday experiences. Of course, it is not sufficient simply to claim that that which everyday experience shows of the things is true, any more than it is sufficient to maintain in a seemingly more critical and cautious way: after all, as individual humans we are individual subjects and egos, and what we represent and

mean are only subjective pictures which we carry around in us; we never reach the things themselves. This view, in turn, will not be overcome, in case it is not true, by talking about "we" instead of "I" and by taking into account the community rather than the individual. There always remains the possibility that we only exchange subjective pictures of things with one another, which may not thereby become any truer because we have exchanged them communally.

We now set aside these different interpretations of our relation to the things as well as the truth of this relation. But, on the other hand, we do not want to forget that it is not at all sufficient to appeal only to the truth and certainty of everyday experience. Precisely if everyday experience carries in itself a truth, and a superior truth at that, this truth must be founded, i.e., its foundation must be laid, admitted, and accepted. This will become even more necessary when it turns out that the everyday things show still another face. That they have long done, and they do it for us today to an extent and in a way that we have hardly comprehended, let alone mastered.

Take the common example: The sun's diameter is at most half a meter to one meter wide when it sets behind the mountains in the form of a glowing disk. All that the sun is for the shepherd coming home with his flock does not now need to be described, but it is the real sun, the same one the shepherd awaits the next morning. But the real sun has already set a few minutes before. What we see is only a semblance (*Schein*) caused by certain processes of rays. But even this semblance is only a semblance, for "in reality," we say, the sun never sets at all. It does not wander over the earth and around it but the reverse. The earth turns around the sun, and this sun, furthermore, is not the ultimate center of the universe. The sun belongs to larger systems which we know today as the Milky Way and the spiral nebula, which are of an order of magnitude compared to which our solar system must

be characterized as diminutive. And the sun, which daily rises and sets and dispenses light, is ever growing colder; our earth, in order to maintain the same degree of warmth, would have to come always closer to the sun. However, it is moving away from the sun. This means it rushes toward a catastrophe, albeit in "time spans" in comparison with which the few thousand years of human history on earth amount to not even one second.

Now which of these is the true sun? Which thing is the true one, the sun of the shepherd or the sun of the astrophysicist? Or is the question wrongly put, and if so, why? How should this be decided? For that, obviously, it is necessary to know what a thing is, what it means to-be-a-thing, and how the truth of a thing is determined. On these questions neither the shepherd nor the astrophysicist informs us. Neither can or needs to pose these questions in order to be immediately who they are.

Another example: The English physicist and astronomer Eddington once said of his table that every thing of this kind—the table, the chair, etc.—has a double. Table number one is the table known since his childhood; table number two is the "scientific table." This scientific table, that is, the table which science defines in its thingness, consists, according to the atomic physics of today, not of wood but mostly of empty space; in this emptiness electrical charges are distributed here and there, which are rushing back and forth at great velocity. Which one now is the true table, number one or number two? Or are both true? In the sense of what truth? What truth mediates between the two? There must be still a third one according to which number one and number two are true in their way and represent a variation of this truth. We cannot save ourselves by the favored road of saying: whatever is asserted about the scientific table number two, the spiral nebula, and the dying sun are but viewpoints and theories of physics. To that the retort is: on this physics are founded all our giant power stations, our airplanes, radio

and television, the whole of technology which has altered the earth and man with it more than he suspects. These are realities, not viewpoints which some investigators "distant from life" defend. Does one want science even "closer to life"? I think that it is already so close that it suffocates us. Rather, we need the right distance from life in order to attain a perspective in which we measure what is going on with us human beings.

No one knows this today. For this reason we must ask everyone and ask again and again, in order to know it, or at least in order to know why and in what respects we do not know it. Have man and the nations only stumbled into the universe to be similarly slung out of it again, or is it otherwise? We must ask. For a long time there is first something much more preliminary: we must first again *learn* how to ask. That can only happen by asking questions—of course, not just any questions. We chose the question "What is a thing?" It now turns out: the things stand in different truths. What is the thing such that it is like this? From what point of view should we decide the being-a-thing of things? We take our standpoint in everyday experience with the reservation that its truth, too, will eventually require a foundation (*eine Begründung*).[4]

5. *Particularity and Being-This-One* (Jediesheit). *Space and Time as Determinations of Things*

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[4] *Begründung:* "A foundation," "establishment," "argument," "reasons for," "explanation," "proof." The English "ground" is equivalent to *Grund;* but the German includes the idea of a foundation of a building. Heidegger seems to emphasize this aspect of its meaning. Therefore, in the related words this sense will be adhered to where possible. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics,* James S. Churchill, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 3, n. 1. *Trans.*

10. The Historicity (Geschichtlichkeit) *of the Definition of the Thing*

It was shown that the answer to the question "What is a thing?" is the following: A thing is the bearer of properties, and the corresponding truth has its seat in the assertion, the proposition, which is a connection of subject and predicate. We said that this answer as well as the reason for it is quite natural. We now only ask: What does "natural" mean here?

We call "natural" (*natürlich*) what is understood without further ado and is "self-evident" in the realm of everyday understanding. For instance, the internal construction of a big bomber is by itself understandable for an Italian engineer, but for an Abyssinian from a remote mountain village such a thing is not at all "natural." It is not self-evident, i.e., not understandable in comparison to anything with which such a man and his tribe have everyday familiarity. For the Enlightenment the "natural" was what could be proved and comprehended according to certain determinate principles of reason based upon itself, which was, therefore, appropriate to every human as such and to mankind in general. In the Middle Ages everything was "natural" which obtained its essence, its *natura*, from God and, because of this origin, could then form and preserve itself in a definite mode without further intervention from God. What was natural to a man of the eighteenth century, the rationality of reason as such in general, set free from any other limitation, would have seemed very unnatural to the medieval man. Also the contrary could become the case, as we know from the French Revolution. Therefore, it follows: What is "natural" is *not* "natural" at all, here meaning self-evident for any given ever-existing man. The "natural" is always historical.

A suspicion creeps up from behind us. What if this so "natural" appearing essential definition of the thing were

by no means self-evident, were not "natural"? Then there must have been a time when the essence of the thing was not defined in this way. Consequently, there also must have been a time when the essential definition of the thing was first worked out. The formation of this essential definition of the thing did not, then, at some time just fall absolute from heaven, but would have itself been based upon very definite presuppositions.

This is in fact so. We can pursue the origin of this essential definition of the thing in its main outline in Plato and Aristotle. Not only this, but at the same time and in the same connection with the disclosure of the thing, the proposition as such was also first discovered and, similarly, that the truth as correspondence to the thing has its seat in the proposition. The so-called natural determination of the essence of the truth—from which we have drawn a proof for the correctness of the essential definition of the thing, this natural concept of the truth—is, therefore, not "natural" without more ado.

Therefore, the "natural world-view" (*natürliche Weltansicht*), to which we have constantly referred, is not self-evident. It remains questionable. In an outstanding sense this overworked term "natural" is something historical. So it could be that in our natural world-view we have been dominated by a centuries-old interpretation of the thingness of the thing, while things actually encounter us quite differently. This answer to our interjected question of the meaning of "natural" will prevent us from thoughtlessly taking the question "What is a thing?" as settled. This question seems only now to be becoming more clearly determined. The question itself has become a historical one. As we, apparently untroubled and unprejudiced, encounter things and say that they are the bearers of properties, it is not we who are seeing and speaking but rather an old historical tradition. But why do we not want to leave this history alone? It does not bother us. We can adjust ourselves quite easily with this conception of things. And

suppose we acknowledge the history of the disclosure and interpretation of thingness of the thing? This changes nothing in the things: the streetcar goes no differently than before, the chalk is a chalk, the rose is a rose, the cat is a cat.

We emphasized in the first hour that philosophy is that thinking with which we can begin to do nothing immediately. But perhaps mediately we can, i.e., under certain conditions and in ways no longer obviously seen as forged by philosophy and as capable of being forged only by it.

Under certain conditions: if, for example, we undertake the effort to think through the inner state of today's natural sciences, non-biological as well as biological, if we also think through the relation of mechanics and technology to our existence (*Dasein*),[10] then it becomes clear that knowledge and questioning have here reached limits which demonstrate that, in fact, an original reference to things is missing, that it is only simulated by the progress of discoveries and technical successes.[11] We feel that what zoology and botany investigate concerning animals and plants and how they investigate it may be correct. But are they still animals and plants? Are they not machines duly prepared beforehand of which one afterward even admits that they are "cleverer than we"?

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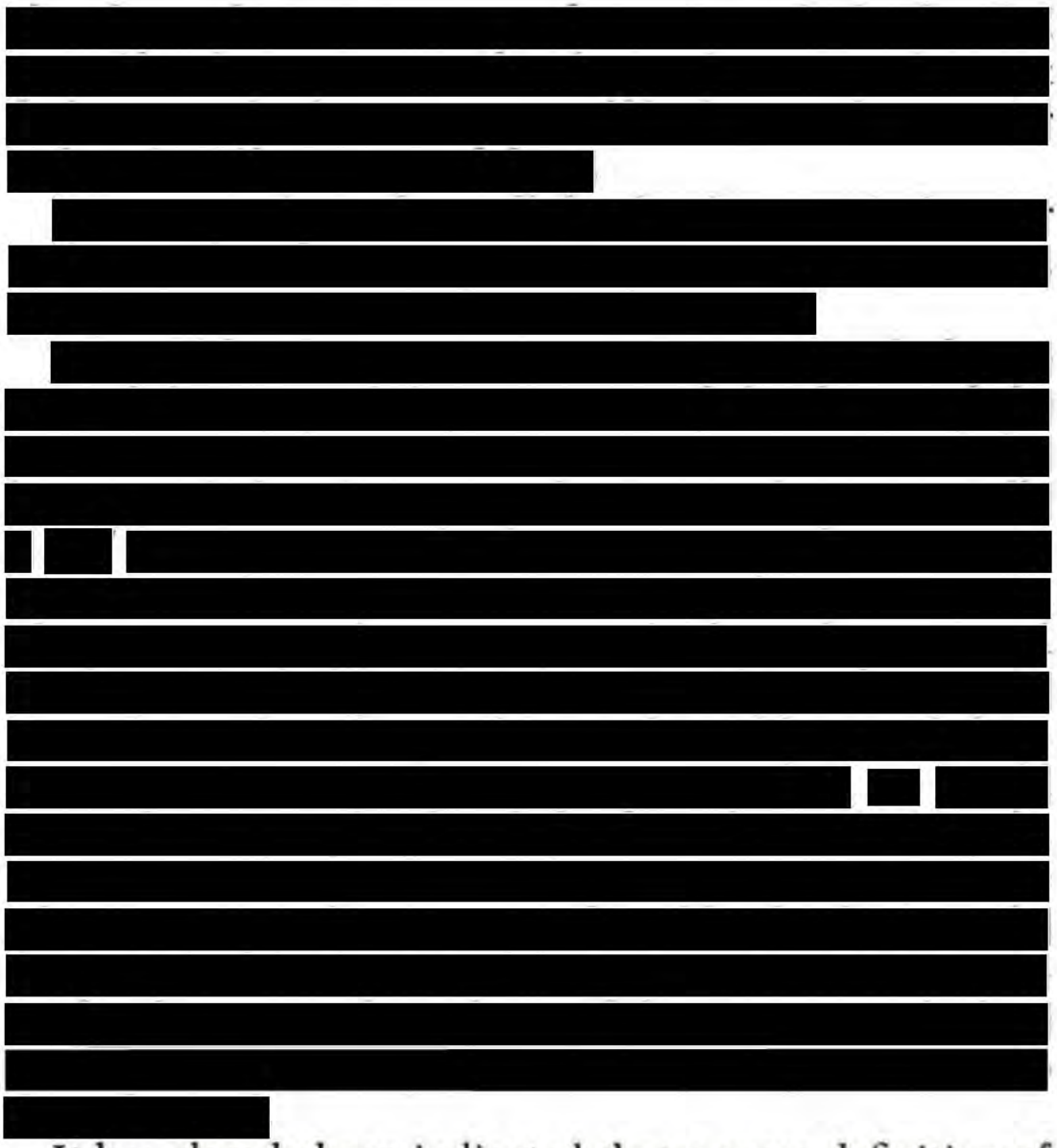
[10] *Dasein:* Literally, "being-there." It is a common German word applicable to the presence of any thing. It is often transliterated in English. Heidegger's use of the term refers to man's own unique way of existing in contrast to other entities. *Trans.*

[11] In *Die Frage nach der Technik* (Pfullingen: Verlag Neske, 1962), p. 13, Heidegger points out the danger in the progress of modern technology for man to misinterpret the meaning of technology: ". . . endangered man boasts himself as the master of earth." Everything man encounters appears entirely as man-made. However, true thinking leads one to see technology (τεκνή) as that by which the forces of Nature are challenged to the revelation and unconcealedness of the truth (ἀλήθεια). *Trans.*

Once during his lone walks Nietzsche wrote down the sentence: "Enormous *self-reflection!* To become conscious not as an individual but as mankind. Let us reflect, let us think back: let us go all the small and the great ways!" (*Will to Power* [*Wille zur Macht*], §585).

We go here only a small way, the little way of the little question "What is a thing?" We concluded that the definitions which seem so self-evident are not "natural." The answers we give were already established in ancient times. When we apparently ask about the thing in a natural and unbiased way, the question already expresses a preliminary opinion about the thingness of the thing. History already speaks through the type of question. We therefore say that this question is a historical one. Therein lies a definite direction for our purposes, should we desire to ask the question with sufficient understanding.

What should we do if the question is a historical one? And what does "historical" mean? In the first place we only establish that the common answer to the question about the thing stems from an earlier, past time. We can establish that since that time the treatment of this question has gone through various although not earthshaking changes, so that different theories about the thing, about the proposition, and about the truth regarding the thing have regularly emerged through the centuries. Thereby it can be shown that the question and the answer have, so to speak, their history, i.e., they already have a past. But this is just what we do not mean when we say that the question "What is a thing?" is historical, because every report of the past, that is of the preliminaries to the question about the thing, is concerned with something that is static. This kind of historical reporting (*historischen Berichts*) is an explicit shutting down of history, whereas it is, after all, a happening. We question historically if we ask what is still happening even if it seems to be past. We ask what is still happening and whether we remain equal to this happening so that it can really develop.



It has already been indicated that a mere definition of the thing does not say much, whether we dig it out in the past, or whether we ourselves have the ambition to solder together a so-called new one. The answer to the question "What is a thing?" is different in character. It is not a proposition but a transformed basic position or, better still and more cautiously, the initial transformation of the hitherto existing position toward things, a change of questioning and evaluation, of seeing and deciding; in short, of the being-there (*Da-sein*) in the midst of what is (*inmitten des Seienden*). To determine the changing basic position within the relation to what is, that is the task of an entire historical period. But this requires that we perceive more

exactly with clearer eyes what most holds us captive and makes us unfree in the experience and determination of the things. This is modern natural science, insofar as it has become a universal way of thinking along certain basic lines. The Greek origin also governs this, although changed, yet not alone and not predominantly. The question concerning our basic relations to nature, our knowledge of nature as such, our rule over nature, is not a question of natural science, but this question is itself in question in *the* question of whether and how we are still addressed by what is as such within the whole. Such a question is not decided in a lecture, but at most in a century, and this only if the century is not asleep and does not merely *have the opinion* that it is awake. This question is made decisive only through discussion.

In connection with the development of modern science, a definite conception of the thing attains a unique preeminence. According to this, the thing is material, a point of mass in motion in the pure space-time order, or an appropriate combination of such points. The thing so defined is from then on considered as the ground and basis of all things, their determinations and their interrogation. The animate is also here, insofar as one does not believe that some day one will be able to explain it from out of lifeless matter with the help of colloidal chemistry. Even where one permits the animate its own character, it is conceived as an additional structure built upon the inanimate; in the same way, the implement and the tool are considered as material things, only subsequently prepared, so that a special value adheres to them. But this reign of the material thing (*Stoffdinges*), as the genuine substructure of all things, reaches altogether beyond the sphere of the things into the sphere of the "spiritual" (*Geistigen*), as we will quite roughly call it; for example, into the sphere of the signification of language, of history, of the work of art, etc. Why, for example, has the treatment and interpretation of the poets for years been so

dreary in our higher schools? Answer: Because the teachers do not know the difference between a thing and a poem; because they treat poems as things, which they do because they have never gone through the question of what a thing is. That today one reads more *Nibelungenlied* and less Homer may have its reasons, but this changes nothing. It always is the same dreariness, before in Greek and now in German. However, the teachers are not to blame for this situation, nor the teachers of these teachers, but an entire period, i.e., we ourselves—if we do not finally open our eyes.

The question "What is a thing?" is a historical question. In its history, the determination of the thing as the material present-at-hand (*Vorhanden*) has an unshattered preeminence. If we really ask this question, i.e., if we pose for decision the possibility of the determination of the thing, then we can as little skip the modern answer as we are permitted to forget the origin of the question.

However, at the same time and before all we should ask the harmless question "What is a thing?" in such a way that we experience it as our own so that it no longer lets go of us even when we have long since had no opportunity to listen to lectures on it, especially since the task of such lectures is not to proclaim great revelations and to calm psychic distress. Rather, they can only perhaps awaken what has fallen asleep, perhaps put back into order what has become mixed up.