WHAT IS A THING?

by Martin Heidegger

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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*

In everyday experience we always meet particular things. With this suggestion we resume the pursuit of our question after the above digression.

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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.*

The things are particular. That means first: the stone, the lizard, the blade of grass, and the knife are each-for-itself (*je für sich*). Moreover, the stone is a completely definite one, exactly this one; the lizard is not a lizard in general, but just this one, and so it is with the blade of grass and the knife. There is no thing in general, only particular things; and the particulars, moreover, are just these (*je diese*). Each thing is one such this one (*ein je dieses*) and no other.

Unexpectedly, we meet with something which belongs to the thing as a thing. This is a determination that is disregarded by the sciences which, with their thrust toward facts, apparently come closest to things. For a botanist, when he examines the labiate flower, will never be concerned about the single flower as a single one: it always remains an exemplar only. That is also true of the animals, for example, the countless frogs and salamanders which are killed in a laboratory. The "this one" (*je dieses*) which distinguishes every thing, is passed over by science. Should we now consider the things in this way? With the countlessness of things we would never come to an end, and we would continually establish nothing but irrelevancies. However, we are not directing ourselves exclusively at the particulars, always these things (*je diese Dinge*) one after another, but are after every thing's general characteristic of being "this one": the being-this-one (*Jediesheit*), if such a word formation is acceptable.

But is the sentence "Every thing is a this one (*ein je dieses*) and not another one" at all applicable? There are things which do not differ at all from one another, things which are exactly alike, as two buckets or two pine needles which we cannot distinguish from each other in any respect. The fact, one could say, that we cannot distinguish between the two exactly alike things does not prove that, in the end, they are not different. However, even assuming that two single things are simply alike,

each is still this thing because each of these two pine needles is in another place (*Ort*); and if they are to occupy the same place, they can do so only at a different time point. Place and time point make even absolutely alike things be these very ones (*je diesen*), i.e., different ones. Insofar as each thing has its place, its time, and its time duration, there are never two same things. The particularity (*Jeweiligkeit*) of the places and their manifoldness are grounded in space, and the particularity of the time points is grounded in time. That basic characteristic of the thing, i.e., that essential determination of the thingness of the thing to be this one (*je dieses*), is grounded in the essence of space and time.

Our question "What is a thing?" includes, therefore, the questions "What is space?" and "What is time?" It is customary for us to speak of them both together. But how and why are space and time conjoined? Are they conjoined at all, as though externally thrust onto one another and into one another, or are they primordially at one? Do they stem from a common root, from some third, or better, some first which is neither space nor time because more primordially it is both? These and other related questions will occupy us, i.e., we will not set our minds at rest that there is space and time and that we place them next to each other—space *and* time—by use of the patient little word "and," as in "dog and cat." In order to keep hold of these questions by means of a title, we call them the question of the time-span (*Zeitraum*). We understand by time-span a certain length of time, and say: within the time-span of a hundred years. By this expression we really mean only something temporal. In contrast to this very common usage, which is very instructive for further thought, we will give the composite "*Zeitraum*" a meaning that is designed to indicate the inner unity of space and time. Thereby, the real question applies to the "and." That we name time first, that we say *Zeitraum* and not *Raumzeit*, should indicate that time plays a special

role in this question. But that should not mean at all that space can be deduced from time or that it is something secondary to it.

The question "What is a thing?" includes in itself the question: "What is *Zeitraum* (time-span)?", the puzzling unity of space and time within which, as it seems, the basic character of things, to be only this one, is determined.

We will not escape the question about the essence of space and time, because immediately so many doubts arise regarding the distinguishing mark we gave of the thingness of the thing. We said: Place and time point make even absolutely identical things just these (*je diesen*), i.e., different ones. But are space and time at all determinations of the thing itself? The things, as we say, are indeed within space and time. Space and time are a frame, an ordering realm, with the help of which we establish and indicate the place and time point of the particular things. It might be, therefore, that each thing, if it is determined with respect to place and time, is now just this (*je dieses*), not mistakable for any other. However, these are only determinations which are externally brought to and at a thing through the space-time relation. As yet, nothing is said about the thing itself or what makes it to be this one. We easily see that behind these difficulties hides the principal question: Are space and time only a frame for the things, a system of co-ordinates which we lay out in order to reach sufficiently exact statements about things, or are space and time something else? Is the relation to them of the thing not this external one? (Compare Descartes.)[5]

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[5] Descartes identifies space or internal place with the body which occupies it: "For, in truth, the same extension in length, breadth, and depth, which constitutes space, constitutes body." The distinction we make is only a conceptual one; extension being the common factor, individualized in the case of body, but given a generic unity in the case of space. For this reason Descartes rejects the notion of the vacuum. (*The Principles of Philosophy,*

According to the everyday manner we are used to, we look at what is around us. We can notice: this chalk is white; this wood is hard; the door is closed. But such statements do not carry us to the goal. We want to look at the things with respect to their *thingness*, therefore for *what* presumably characterizes *all* things and *each* thing. When we look at them with respect to this we find that things are singular: *one* door, *one* piece of chalk, *one* blackboard, etc. Being singular is obviously a general, universally applicable characteristic (*Zug*) of things. If we look more closely, we even discover that these single things are just these (*je diese*): this door, this chalk, this now and here, not those of classroom six and not the ones from last semester.

Thus, we already have an answer to our question "What is a thing?" A thing is always a this one (*je dieses*). We now seek to understand more precisely wherein this essential characteristic of the thing consists. The above named characteristic of the things, that they are always these (*je diese*), stands in conjunction with space and time. Through its particular space and time point, each thing is unmistakably this one and not another. However, some doubts arise as to whether with such a reference to space and time we are saying anything about the thing itself. Such statements about the place and time point after all concern only the frame within which things stand

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Part II, Principles X–XVI, E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, trans., *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* [N. Y.: Dover Publications, 1955], 2 vols., 1, 259–62.)

In *Meditation III* and in his reply to P. Gassendi's objections, Descartes asserts the doctrine of continual creation, based on his belief that the moments of time are discrete. Thus he asserts: ". . . that the single moments of this time can be separated from their neighbours, i.e., that a thing which endures through individual moments may cease to exist." (*Ibid.*, II, 219; 1, 163, 164.)

Descartes, therefore, identifies both space and time with the existent thing. Both are considered as external in their relation to the thing only because of the way we conceptually give them generic unity. *Trans.*

and how, that is to say where and when, they happen to stand within it. One could point out that each thing—as far as we know things—has its space-time-position (*Raum-Zeit-Stelle*), and that this relation of the thing to space and time is not something arbitrary. Do things necessarily stand within this space-time-relation (*Raum-Zeit-Bezug*), and what is the basis for this necessity? Does this basis lie in the things themselves? If this were the case, then the aforementioned characteristic would have to assert something about things themselves, about the being-a-thing (*Dingsein*).

First, however, we have the impression that space and time are something outside of things. Or does this impression deceive us? Let us look more closely: this piece of chalk, the room—better, the space of the classroom—lies around this thing, if we must speak of a "lying" around. We say that this piece of chalk takes up a certain space. This space is delimited by the surface of the piece of chalk. Surface? Plane? The piece of chalk itself is extended. The space is not only around it, but directly in it, even within it; but this space is occupied, filled up. The chalk itself consists inwardly of space. After all, we say the chalk takes *up* this space, encloses this space by its surface, in itself, as its interior. Therefore, for the chalk, this space is not a mere exterior frame. But what does interior mean here? What does the interior of the chalk look like? Let us see. We break it into two pieces. Are we now at the interior? Exactly as before we are again outside. Nothing has changed. The pieces of chalk are smaller, but bigger or smaller does not matter now. The surfaces where it is broken are less smooth than the rest of the surface, but that does not matter. The moment we wanted to open the chalk by breaking it, to grasp the interior, it had enclosed itself again. And we could continue this action until the piece of chalk had become a little pile of powder. Under a magnifying glass and a microscope we could still break up these tiny grains. Where this limit

of such a "mechanical" division lies cannot be clearly determined. In any case, such breaking up never yields anything but what was already here, from which it started. Whether this piece of chalk is four centimeters or .004 millimeters only makes a difference in *how much* but not in what (essence).

Following this mechanical division we could carry out a chemical-molecular analysis. We could even go behind that, to the atomic structure of the molecules. But according to the starting point of our question, we want to remain in the realm of the things immediately around us. But even if we go the way of chemistry and physics, we never reach beyond the sphere of mechanics, that is, beyond such a spatial sphere wherein matter moves from place to place or rests in one place. On the basis of the results of our present atomic physics—since Niels Bohr exhibited his model of the atom (1913)—the relations between matter and space are no longer so simple, although fundamentally still the same. What keeps a place occupied, takes up space, must itself be extended. Our question has been what the interior of a physical body looks like; more exactly, the space "there." The result is: this interior is always again an exterior for the smaller and smaller particles.

Meanwhile, our piece of chalk has become a little pile of powder. Even if we assume that nothing of the matter has escaped, that the full amount is still here, it is no longer our chalk, i.e., we can no longer write with it on the blackboard. We could accept that. But we cannot accept that we could not find the space we looked for in the interior of the chalk, the space which belongs to the chalk itself. But, perhaps we did not reach for it fast enough. Let us break the piece of chalk again! The surface where it is broken and the pieces of surface are now the exterior. But this piece of surface which was just previously "interior" is exactly that piece of surface delimiting the grains of chalk, and it was always the exterior of these

pieces of chalk. Where does the interior begin and the exterior end? Does the chalk consist of space? Or is the space always a container, something of an enclosure, of which the chalk consists, of that which the chalk itself is? The chalk only fills space; a place is always placed into the thing. This placing in of space tells us exactly that the space remains outside. Whatever occupies space always forms the border between an outside and an inside. But the interior is really only an exterior lying farther back. (Strictly speaking, there is no outside or inside within space itself.) But where in the world would there be an outside and inside, if not in space? Perhaps, however, space is only the possibility of outside and inside but itself neither an interior nor an exterior. The statement "Space is the possibility of inside and outside" might be true. What we call "possibility" (*Möglichkeit*) is still rather indefinite. "Possibility" can mean many things. We are not of the opinion that we have decided with such a statement the question of the relation between the thing and space. Perhaps the question has not yet been sufficiently posed. Up to now we have not considered that space which especially concerns such things as this chalk, as well as writing tools and implements in general, which we call the storeroom (equipment room: *Zeugraum*).

We were concerned to reflect on whether space and time are "exterior" to things or not. Yet it became evident that the space which appears most likely to be within things is something exterior when viewed from the physical thing and its particles.

Still more exterior to things is time. The chalk here also has its times: the time point (*Zeitpunkte*) now in which the chalk is here, and this next now when it is there. With the question concerning space there still appeared some prospects of finding it within the thing itself. But even this is not the case with time. Time runs over things as a brook passes over rocks. Perhaps not even in this way, because, in the movement of the waters, the rocks are

pushed and driven so that they rub and polish each other. The movement of time, however, leaves things untouched. That the time now advances from 5:15 to 6:00 does nothing to the chalk. We do say "with" time or "with the passing" of time things are changing. It is even said that the ill-famed "tooth" of time is "nibbling" on things. That things are changing in the passing of time is not to be denied. But did anyone ever observe how time nibbles at things, that is, generally speaking, how time goes to work on things?

But perhaps time is identifiable only with some outstanding things. We know such things: clocks. They show the time. Let us look at this clock. Where is time? We see the figures and the hands which move, but not time. We can open a clock and examine it. Where here is time? But this clock does not give the time immediately. This clock is set according to the German Observatory in Hamburg. If we were to travel there and ask the people where they have the time, we would be just as wise as before our journey.

If, therefore, we cannot even find time on that thing which shows time, then it actually seems to have nothing to do with things themselves. On the other hand, it is after all not merely empty talk when we say that we can tell the time with the help of clocks. If we deny this, where would that lead? Not only the schedule of everyday life would fall to pieces, but every technical calculation would also become impossible; history, every memory, and every decision would be gone.

And yet, in what relation do things stand to time? With every attempt to determine this, the impression is renewed more strongly than before that space and time are only perceptual realms for things, indifferent toward these but useful in assigning every thing to its space-time-position. Where and how these perceptual realms really are remains open. But this much is certain: only on account of this position do particular things become just

these (*je diesen*). And there is then, after all, at least the possibility of many same things. Precisely when we look at the question from things themselves and not from their frame of reference, each thing is not unmistakably a single one (*je dieses*); it is that only with respect to space and time.

Now, it is true that one of the greatest German thinkers, Leibniz, has denied that there ever could be two identical things. Leibniz established, with regard to this, a special principle which ruled throughout this philosophy, of which today we hardly have an idea. It is the *principium identitatis indiscernibilium*, the principle of the identity of indiscernible things. The principle states: Two indistinguishable things, i.e., two alike things, cannot be two things but must be the same, i.e., *one* thing. Why, we ask? The reason Leibniz gives is just as essential for the fundamental principle as for his entire basic philosophical system. Two alike things cannot be two, i.e., each is irreplaceably this one (*je dieses*) because two alike things cannot exist at all. Why not? The *being* of things is their creation by God, as understood in the Christian theological interpretation. If there ever were two alike things, then God had twice created the same, i.e., simply repeating something eternal. Such a superficially mechanical deed, however, contradicts the completeness of the absolute Creator, the *perfectio Dei*. Therefore, there can never be two alike things, by reason of the essence of being, in the sense of being created. This principle is based here upon certain more or less explicit principles and basic perceptions of what is in general and the being of that; moreover, upon certain conceptions of the perfection of creation and production in general.

We are not now sufficiently prepared to take our stand with respect to the principle expressed by Leibniz and its foundation. It is necessary always to see again to what lengths the question "What is a thing?" immediately leads. It could be that this theological argument of the

principle is impossible for us, even disregarding the question of the dogmatic truth of Christianity. However, one thing remains certain; in fact, it now first comes to light that the question concerning the character of the being of things, to be singular and "this one," is completely and entirely hung up in the question concerning being. Does being still mean to us being created by God? If not, what then? Does being no longer mean anything at all to us, so that we are only staggering around in a confusion? Who can decide how it stands with being and its determination?

But we first ask only about the proximate things around us. They show themselves as singular and as "just these." From our reference to Leibniz, we concluded that the character of the things, to be "just these," could be based on the being of things themselves and not only with reference to their position in space and time.

6. *The Thing as Just This One* (je dieses)

But we shall let alone the question from where the character of a thing as "just this one" is determined, and pose a still more preliminary question, which is wrapped in the preceding one.

We said that the single things around us are "just these." When we say of something which encounters us that it is *this*, are we saying anything about the thing itself at all? This, namely, the one here, i.e., that which we now point out. In "this" lies a pointing, a referring. We indicate something to the others who are with us, with whom we are together. It is a reference within the range of the "here"—this one here, this here. The "this" means, more precisely, here in our immediate neighborhood; while we always mean something more distant by "that," but still within the range of "the here and there"—this here, that there. The Latin language has in this connection still sharper distinctions. *Hic* means "this here," *iste* means

"that there." *Ille* means "that far away," the Greek ἐκεῖ—by which the poets intend what is at the periphery—what we call the ulterior (*Jenseitige*).

In grammar such words as "this" and "that" are called demonstratives, for these words demonstrate, they point at. . . . The general verbal character of these reference words comes to expression in the term demonstrative pronoun (*Für-wörter*). The Greeks said ἀντωνυμία, which became the standard for Western grammar (Ἀντωνυμίαι δεικτικαί). In this designation of such words as "this" and "that" lies a quite definite explanation and interpretation of their essence. The interpretation is indeed significant for Western grammar (which, in spite of everything, still governs us today). Yet it is misleading. The name "pronoun" (*Für-wort*), considering a word as a noun (*nomen*), a name (*Name*) and substantive, means that such words as "this" take the place of substantives. It is true that they *do* this, yet it is only what they do *also*. We speak of the chalk but do not always use the name, using instead the expression "this." However, such a substituting role is not the original essence of the pronoun; its naming function is more primordial. We grasp it immediately when we remember that the article "the" is derived from the demonstrative words. It is customary to place the article *before* the substantive. The naming reference of the article always goes beyond the noun. The naming of the substantive itself always occurs on the basis of a pointing-out. This is a "demonstration," exhibiting the encountered and the present-at-hand. The function of naming, which is performed in the demonstrative, belongs to the most primordial way of speaking in general. It is not merely a substitution, i.e., not a second or later order of expression.

To consider what has been said is important for the correct evaluation of the "this." It is somehow included in every naming as such. Insofar as things confront us, they come into the character of "this." But thereby we are say-

ing that the "this" is not characteristic of the thing itself. The "this" takes the thing only insofar as it is an object of a demonstration. Those speaking and thinking, however, who use such demonstrative words, i.e., human beings, are always single subjects. The "this," instead of being a character of the thing itself, is only a subjective addition on our part.

7. *Subjective-Objective. The Question of Truth*

To see how little, indeed, is said by the statement that "this" is only a "subjective" determination of the thing is recognizable from the fact that we are just as justified in calling it "objective," for *objectum* means something thrown against you. The "this" means a thing insofar as it faces us, i.e., it is objective. What a "this" is does not depend upon our caprice and our pleasure. But even if it depends on us, it also equally depends upon the things. This only is clear, that such determinations as the "this," which we use in the everyday experience of the things, are not as self-evident as they may appear to be. It remains absolutely questionable which kind of truth concerning the thing is contained in the determination of it as a "this." It is questionable which kind of truth in general we have of things in our daily experience, whether it is subjective or objective, whether both together or neither.

Up to now we have only seen that beyond the sphere of daily experiences the things also stand in different truths (the sun of the shepherd and of the astrophysicist, the ordinary table and the scientific table). Now it becomes clear that the truth about the sun for the shepherd, the truth about the ordinary table, e.g., the determination "this sun" and "this table"—this truth about the "this" —remains opaque in its essence. How shall we ever say something about the thing without being sufficiently in-

structed about the kind of truth which is proper to it? At the same time we can state the opposite question: How are we to know something about the essential truth of the thing if we do not know the thing itself to determine what kind of truth can and must be proper to it?

It is now clear: to go straight to the things cannot be carried out, not because we shall be stopped on the way but because those determinations at which we arrive and which we attribute to the things themselves—space, time, and "this"—present themselves as determinations which do not belong to the things themselves.

On the other hand, we cannot invoke the common answer which says that if determinations are not "objective" they are "subjective." It could be that they are neither, that the distinction between subject and object, and with it the subject-object relationship itself, is a highly questionable, though generally favored, sphere of retreat for philosophy.

Hardly a gratifying position—so it seems. There is no information about the thingness of the thing without knowledge of the kind of truth in which the thing stands. But there is no information about this truth of the thing without knowledge of the thingness of the thing whose truth is in question.

Where are we to get a foothold? The ground slips away under us. Perhaps we are already close to falling into the well. At any rate the housemaids are already laughing. And what if only we ourselves are these housemaids, i.e., if we have secretly discovered that all this talk of the "this," as well as similar discussions, is fantasy and empty!

The worst, however (not for our daily livelihood but for philosophy), would be if we wanted to escape from the above bad position by trying to steal away on some clandestine path. We could say: our everyday experiences are still reliable; this chalk is this chalk, and I take it if I

need it and leave it aside if I do not. This is as clear as day, certainly, if we are concerned about daily use. But now it is a question of what the thingness of this thing is and whether the "this" is a true characteristic of the thing itself. Perhaps we still have not understood the "this" sufficiently clearly. We renew our question of whence and how the truth of a thing as a "just this" (*je dieses*) is determined. Here we come upon an observation which Hegel has already made in his *Phenomenology of Mind*.[6] To be sure, the approach (*Ansatz*), level (*Ebene*), and intention (*Absicht*) of Hegel's way of thinking are of a different kind.

The suspicion arose that a thing's characteristic as "just this" is only subjective, since this characteristic depends on the standpoint of the experiencing individual and the time point in which, on the part of the subject, the experience of a thing happens to be made.

Why is the chalk "just this" and no other? Only because it is just right here now. The "here" and the "now" make it to be *"this."* With the demonstrative characteristic "this" we refer to the "here," i.e., to a place, to a space, and, equally, to the now, i.e., time. We already know this, at least in general. Let us now pay special attention to the truth about the chalk: "Here is the chalk." That is a truth; the here and the now hereby characterize the chalk so that we emphasize by saying: *the* chalk, which means "this." However, this is almost too obvious, almost offen-

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[6] It is interesting to compare Heidegger's analysis of "this" with that of Hegel, whom he apparently has in mind throughout this section. For Hegel, at the level of sensory experience, "pure being" breaks into "thises": "I" on the one hand and "object" on the other. Together they make up "the This." The This exists in the twofold form of the Now and the Here. But Hegel wants to establish that the Now and Here, as well as the This, are Universals. It is not the individual thing that continues to maintain itself but the Now and Here. (G. F. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, J. B. Baillie, trans. [2nd ed.; New York: Macmillan Co., 1949], section A, 1, 151–52.) *Trans.*

sively self-evident. But we want to do something more and elaborate still further the self-evident truth about the chalk. We even want to write down this truth about the chalk to avoid losing this great valuable.

For this purpose we take a scrap of paper and we write the truth down: "Here is the chalk." We lay this written statement beside the thing of which it is the truth. After the lecture is finished both doors are opened, the classroom is aired, there will be a draft, and the scrap of paper, let us suppose, will flutter out into the corridor. A student finds it on his way to the cafeteria, reads the sentence "Here is the chalk," and ascertains that this is not true at all. Through the draft the truth has become an untruth. Strange that a truth should depend on a gust of wind. Usually philosophers tell each other that the truth is something which is valid in itself, which is beyond time and is eternal, and woe to him who says that truth is not eternal. That means relativism, which teaches that everything is only relatively true, only partly true, and that nothing is fixed any longer. Such doctrines are called nihilism. Nihilism, nothingness, philosophy of anxiety, tragedy, unheroic, philosophy of care and woe—the catalog of these cheap titles is inexhaustible. Contemporary man shudders at such titles, and, with the help of the shudder thus evoked, the given philosophy is contradicted. What wonderful times when even in philosophy one need no longer think, but where someone somewhere, occasionally, on higher authority, cares to provide shuddering! And now the truth should even depend on a draft! Should it? I ask whether perhaps it is not so.

But finally, this simply depends upon the fact that we have written only half of the truth and entrusted it to an unstable scrap of paper. "Here is the chalk and right *now*." We want to define this "now" more exactly. So that the written truth will not be exposed to the draft, we intend to put the truth about the "now," and thus about

the chalk, on a blackboard. Now—*when* now? We write on the blackboard: "Now it is afternoon." All right, just now, this afternoon. We suppose that after the lecture the classroom will be locked up so that no one can creep to the written truth and secretly falsify it. Only early the next morning the custodian is permitted to enter and to clean the blackboard. He reads the truth: "Now it is afternoon." And he finds that the statement is untrue and that this professor has made a mistake. The truth became an untruth overnight.

What a remarkable truth! All the more remarkable since every time we want sure information about the chalk, it itself is here and always now here, a thing present here and now. What changes is always only the determination of the "here" and "now," and, accordingly, of the thing. But the chalk remains always a "this." Therefore, in spite of everything, these determinations belong to the thing itself. The "this" is a general characteristic of the thing and belongs to its thingness. But the generality of the "this" demands generally always to be determined as particular (*jeweilige*). The chalk could not be for us what it is, that is, "a" chalk, i.e., "this chalk" and no other, were it not always a now and here. Of course, we shall say that *for us* the chalk is always a "this." But we finally want to know what the chalk is *for itself*. For this purpose we have made the truth about the chalk independent of us and have entrusted it to a scrap of paper and the blackboard. And observe: while in truth something about the chalk itself was to be truly preserved, the truth changed into untruth.

This gives us a hint for approaching the truth about the chalk in another way, namely, instead of entrusting this truth to a scrap of paper or to the blackboard, to keep it with us, to guard it much more carefully than we have so far done, whereby we drop our peculiar fear before subjectivism or perhaps even endure it. So it could be that the more we understand the truth about the chalk as

our truth, the more we come closer to what the chalk itself is. It has been shown to us more than once that the truth about a thing is connected with space and time. Therefore, we also may suspect that we shall come closer to the thing itself if we penetrate into the essence of space and time, although it always again appears as though space and time are only a frame for the thing.

Finally, the question shall arise whether the truth concerning the thing is only something that is carried to the thing and pinned on it with the help of a scrap of paper —or whether, on the contrary, the thing itself hangs within the truth, just as it does in space and time, whether the truth is not such that it neither depends on the thing, nor lies in us, nor stands somewhere in the sky.

All our reflections up to now have presumably led to no other conclusion than that we do not yet know either the ins or outs of the thing and that we only have a great confusion in our heads. Certainly, that was the intention —of course, not to leave us in this confusion, but to let us know that this happy-go-lucky advance toward the things has its special circumstances in *the* moment. Therein we wish to know how it is with the thingness of the thing.

If we now remember our position at the beginning, we can determine, on the basis of our intentional and peculiar questioning back and forth, why we have not come closer to the thing itself. We began with the statement: Things around us are single, and these single things are "just these." With this latter characteristic we reached the realm of reference to the things; seen in reverse: the realm of how things meet us. Reference and encounter— that means generally the realm in which we, the alleged subjects, also reside. When we attempt to grasp this realm we always run into space and time. We called it "time-space," which makes reference and encounter possible. This is the realm which lies around things and manifests itself in the compulsive bringing up of space and time.

8. The Thing as the Bearer of Properties

Perhaps we can never experience anything concerning things and make out anything about them except as we remain in the realm in which they encounter us. Meanwhile, we cannot get loose from the question whether or not we approach the things themselves, at least within this realm, whether in it we aren't always already with them. If this is so, then starting from here we shall make out something about the things themselves, i.e., we shall acquire some conception (*Vorstellung*) of how they themselves are constructed. It is decidedly advisable to disregard the frame around things and look exclusively at their construction. In any case, this way exerts as strong a claim as the previous one.

We again ask: "What is a thing? How does a thing look?" Though we are looking for the thingness of the thing, we now cautiously go to work, stopping first at the single things, looking at them, and holding fast to what is seen. A rock—it is hard, gray, and has a rough surface; it has an irregular form, is heavy, and consists of this and that substance. A plant—it has roots, a stem, foliage. The latter is green and grooved. The stem of the foliage is short, etc. An animal has eyes and ears and can move from place to place; it has, in addition to the sense organs, equipment for digestion and sexual reproduction—organs which it uses, generates, and renews in a certain way. Along with the plant, which also has organs, we call this thing an organism. A watch has gears, a spring, a dial, etc.

In this way we could continue indefinitely. What we ascertain thereby is correct. The statements we make are taken from a faithful fitting to what things themselves show us. We now ask more definitely: As what do the things show themselves to us? We disregard that they are a rock, rose, dog, watch, and other things and only consider what things are in general: a thing is always some-

thing that has such and such properties, always something that is constituted in such and such a way. This something is the bearer of the properties; the something, as it were, underlies the qualities. This something is what endures, and we always return to it again as the same when we are in the process of determining the qualities. This is how things themselves are. What accordingly is a thing? It is a nucleus around which many changing qualities are grouped, or a bearer upon which the qualities rest; something that possesses something else in itself (*an sich*). However we twist and turn it, this is how the construction of things shows itself; and around them are space and time, as their frame. This is all so intelligible and self-evident that one almost shuns lecturing expressly on such commonplaces. All is so very plain that one does not understand why we make such a fuss and still talk about "this" and about questionable metaphysical principles, about steps of truth and so forth. We said that the inquiry ought to move within the realm of everyday experience. What is closer than to take things as they are? We could continue the description of the things still further and say: If one thing changes its qualities, this can have an effect upon another thing. Things affect each other and resist one another. From such relations between things further qualities then derive which things also again "have."

This description of things and their interdependence corresponds to what we call the "natural conception of the world." "Naturally"—since here we remain completely "natural" and disregard all the profound metaphysics and extravagant and useless theories about knowledge. We remain "natural" and also leave to things themselves their own "nature."

If we now allow philosophy to join in, and we question it, it becomes clear that philosophy too from ancient times has said nothing else. That the thing is a bearer of many qualities was already said by Plato and above all by

Aristotle. Later on perhaps it was expressed in other words and concepts. However, basically the meaning is always the same, even when the philosophical "positions" are as different as, for instance, those of Aristotle and Kant. Thus, Kant states in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*A* 182: *N.K.S.*, p. 212)[7] as a principle: "All appearances (i.e., all the things for us) contain the permanent (substance) as the object itself, and the changeable as its mere determination, that is, as a way in which the object exists."

What then is a thing? Answer: A thing is the existing (*vorhanden*) bearer of many existing (*vorhanden*) yet changeable properties.

This answer is so "natural" that it also dominates scientific thought, not only "theoretical" thought but also all intercourse with things, their calculation and evaluation.

We can retain the traditional determination of the essence of the thingness of things in the familiar and usual titles:

1. ὑποκείμενον[8]	—συμβεβηκός
Foundation (*Unterlage*) (what underlies)	—what always already stands along with, and also comes in along with
2. *Substantia*	—*accidens*
3. The bearer (*Träger*)	—properties (*Eigenschaften*)
4. Subject	—predicate

[7] References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* accord with Raymund Schmidt, *Philosophische Bibliothek* (Hamburg: Verlag Meiner, 1956). In the Preface to the fourteenth edition, written in 1930, Schmidt expresses his special thanks to E. Franck in Marburg, Norman Kemp Smith in Edinburgh, and M. Heidegger in Freiburg for their valuable suggestions. "A" refers to the first edition and "B" to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. "N.K.S." refers to the translation by Norman Kemp Smith (London, 1929).

References to quotations Heidegger utilizes from the *Critique of Pure Reason* remain in the text as they were originally placed. Occasionally we have given translations in footnotes when Heidegger has given only references. *Trans.*

[8] ὑποκείμενον: Derived from ὑπόκειμαι. In ancient philosophy

9. *The Essential Construction of the Truth, the Thing, and the Proposition*

The question "What is a thing?" has long been decided with general satisfaction, i.e., the question is obviously no longer a question.

Moreover, the answer to the question, i.e., the definition of the thing as the present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) bearer of properties present-at-hand on it, has been established (and in its truth is at any time capable of being established) in such a way that it cannot be improved upon. For the establishing is also "natural" and, therefore, so familiar that one must especially emphasize it even to notice it.

Wherein lies this basis for the truth of the familiar determination of the essence of the thing? Answer: In nothing less than the essence of truth itself. Truth—what does it mean? The true is what is valid; what is valid corresponds to the facts. Something corresponds to the facts when it is directed to them, i.e., when it fits itself to what the things themselves are. Truth, therefore, is fitting (*Anmessung*) to things. Obviously, not only do single truths have to suit themselves to single things, but the essence of truth must also. If truth is correctness, a directing-to (*Sich-richten*) . . . then this must obviously be really valid

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ὑποκείμενον signified the foundation in which something else could inhere, also what is implied or presupposed by something else. But at least three senses must be distinguished: (1) ὕλη (matter), the substrate that received form. The so-called material cause (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 983ª 30); (2) the substance, including matter and form, in which the accidents (συμβεβηκός) inhere (*ibid.*, 983ᵇ 16). It is interesting that Aristotle says of the substance: καὶ γάρη οὐσία ἕν τι καὶ τόδε τι σημαίνει, ὡς φάμεν (*Metaphysics*, 1037ᵇ 28). "For substance means a 'one' and a 'this,' as we maintain." (*The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon, ed. [New York: Random House, 1941], p. 803.) *See also* the comment of W. D. Ross on this passage in *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1953), II, 205; (3) the logical subject to which attributes and properties are predicated (*Metaphysics*, 103ᵇ 5).

Heidegger takes account of (2) and (3) only. He uses *Träger*, the "bearer," as the most general term to include all that traditionally was meant by the ὑποκείμενον and *substantia*. *Trans.*

all the more for the essential determination of the truth. It must fit itself to the essence of the thing (its thingness). It is necessary from the essence of truth as fitting that the structure of things be reflected in the structure of truth.

If we thus come upon the same framework (*Gefüge*) in the essential structure (*Wesensbau*) of truth as in the essential structure of the things, then the truth of the familiar determination of the essential structure of the thing is demonstrated from the essence of truth itself.

Truth is a fitting to things, a correspondence (*Übereinstimmung*) with the things. But what is now the character of what fits itself? What does the corresponding? What is this about which we say it may be true or false? Just as it is "natural" to understand truth as correspondence to the things, so we naturally determine what is true or false. The truth which we find, establish, disseminate, and defend we express in words. But a single word—such as door, chalk, large, but, and—is neither true nor false. Only combinations of words are true or false: The door is closed; the chalk is white. Such a combination of words is called a simple assertion. Such an assertion is either true or false. The assertion is thus the place and seat of the truth. Therefore, we likewise simply say: This and that assertion are truths. Assertions are truths and falsities.

What is the structure of such a truth as assertion? What is an assertion? The name "assertion" is ambiguous. We distinguish four meanings, all of which belong together, and only in this unity, as it were, do they give a complete outline of the structure of an assertion:

assertions of (*Aussagen von*)	—proposition (*Satz*)
assertions about (*Aussagen über*)	—information (*Auskunft*)
assertions to (*Aussagen an*)	—communication (*Mitteilung*)
to declare oneself (*Sich-Aussprechen*)	—expression (*Ausdruck*)

Someone called to court as a witness refuses to give a

deposition (*Aussage*), i.e., in the first place, he does not speak out, he keeps what he knows to himself. Here assertion means communicating, speaking out into the open, in contrast to silent concealment (*Verschweigung*). If the assertion is made it does not consist mostly of single incoherent words, but is a report (*Bericht*). The witness who decides to give a deposition tells (*erzählt*). In this report the state of facts is asserted. The assertions set forth the event, e.g., what occurred and the circumstances of a just observed burglary attempt. The witness asserts: The house lay in darkness, the shutters were closed, etc.

The assertion in the wider sense of communication consists of "assertions" in the narrower sense, i.e., of propositions. Asserting something in the narrower sense does not mean speaking out, but it means telling information about the house, its condition, and the entire state of things. To assert now means in view of the situation and circumstances to say something about it from them, as seen from their point of view. Assertion, that is giving information about. . . . This information is given in such a way that assertions are made about what is under consideration, about which information is given. Thirdly, assertion means to talk starting from that which is under consideration, e.g., from the house, to take what belongs to the house, to attribute to it what properly belongs to it, to ascribe it, bespeak it. What is asserted in this sense we call the predicate. Assertion in the third sense is "predicative"; it is the proposition.

Assertion, therefore, is threefold: a proposition giving information and which, when carried out vis-à-vis others, becomes communication.[9] This communication is correct

[9] Compare this summary of the threefold character of assertion with *SZ*, p. 156: "When we take together the three analyzed meanings of 'assertion' in a unified view of the complete phenomenon, we may define assertion as a communicative and determinative pointing out." *Sein und Zeit* (Tubingen: Max Niemeyer, 1957), symbolized by "SZ." *Trans.*

when the information is right, i.e., if the proposition is true. The assertion as a proposition, as an assertion of "a, b of H," is the seat of truth. In the structure of the proposition, i.e., of a simple truth, we distinguish subject, predicate, and copula—object, assertion, and connective (*Satzgegenstand, Satzaussage, und Verbindungswort*). Truth consists in the predicate's belonging to the subject and is posited and asserted in the proposition as belonging. The structure and the structural parts of the truth, i.e., of the true proposition (object and assertion), are exactly fitted to that by which truth as such guides itself to the thing as the bearer and to its properties.

Thus we take from the essence of truth, i.e., of the structure of the true proposition, an unambiguous proof for the truth of the definition which gives the thing's structure.

If we survey again all that characterizes the answer to our question "What is a thing?" then we can establish three aspects:

1. The definition of the thing as the bearer of properties results quite "naturally" out of everyday experience.
2. This definition of thingness was established in ancient philosophy, obviously because it suggests itself quite "naturally."
3. The correctness of this definition of the essence of the thing is finally proved and grounded through the essence of truth itself, which essence of truth is likewise intelligible of itself, i.e., is "natural."

A question which is answered in such a natural way and can be grounded just as naturally at any time is seriously no longer a question. If one still wanted to maintain the question it would be either blind obstinacy or a kind of insanity which ventures to run up against the "natural" and what stands beyond all question. We shall do well to give up this question "What is a thing?" as one that is settled. But before we expressly give up this settled question, let us interject a question.

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"?

We can, of course, spare ourselves the effort of thinking these paths through. We also can, furthermore, stick to what we find "natural," that is, something with which one

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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.*

thinks no further. We can take this thoughtlessness as a standard for the things. The streetcar then goes exactly as before. The decisions which are made or not made do not take place in the streetcar or on the motorcycle, but somewhere else—that is, in the sphere of historical freedom, i.e., where a historical being (*Dasein*) decides its ground, as well as how it decides, what level of freedom of knowledge it will choose and what it will posit as freedom.

These decisions are different at differing periods and among different peoples. They cannot be forced. With the freely chosen level of the actual freedom of knowledge, i.e., with the inexorableness of *questioning*, a people always posits for itself the degree of its being (*Dasein*). The Greeks saw the entire nobility of their existence in the ability to question. Their ability to question was their standard for distinguishing themselves from those who did not have it and did not want it. They called them barbarians.

We can leave alone the question of our knowledge about the things and suppose that someday it will set itself right on its own. We can admire the achievements of today's natural sciences and technology and need not know how they got that way, that, for instance, modern science only became possible by a dialogue carried on (out of the earliest passion for questioning) with ancient knowledge, its concepts, and its principles. We need know nothing and can believe we are such magnificent men that the Lord must have given it to us in our sleep.

But we can also be convinced of the indispensability of questioning, which must exceed everything up to now in significance, depth, and certitude, because only in this way can we master what otherwise races away beyond us in its self-evidence.

Decisions are not made by proverbs but only by work. We decide to question, and in a very detailed and drawn out way, which for centuries remains only a questioning. Meanwhile, others can safely bring home their truths.

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.

Therefore, we do not ask about opinions, viewpoints, and propositions which appeared in earlier times about the thing in order to arrange them one after another, as in a museum of weapons where the javelins are ordered by particular centuries. We do not ask at all about the formula and the definition of the essence of the thing. These formulas are only the residuum and sediment of basic positions taken by historical being (*Dasein*), toward, and in the midst of, things taken as a whole, and which it took itself. However, we ask about these basic positions and about the happening in them and about the basic movements of human beings (*Dasein*) that have occurred, movements which apparently are no longer movements because they are past. But a movement need not be gone just because it cannot be established; it can also be in the state of quiescence (*Ruhe*).

What appears to us as though past, i.e., simply as a happening that is no longer going on, can be quiescence. And this quiescence can contain a fullness of being and reality which, in the end, essentially surpasses the reality of the real, in the sense of the *actual* (*Aktuellen*).

This quiescence of happening is not the absence of history, but a basic form of its presence. What we normally know as past, and first represent, is mostly only the formerly "actual," what once caused a stir or even made the noise which always belongs to history but which is not history proper. What is merely past does not exhaust what has been. This still has being, and its way of being is a peculiar quiescence of a happening of a kind determined in turn by what happens. Quiescence is only a self-contained movement, often more uncanny (*unheimlicher*) than movement itself.

11. Truth—Proposition (Assertion)—Thing

There can be various forms and reasons for the quiescence of the happenings of ancient times. Let us see how

it is with our question in this respect. We heard that in the time of Plato and Aristotle the definition of the thing was set forth as the bearer of properties. The discovery of the essence of the proposition was made at the same time. Also simultaneously arose the characterization of the truth as the fitting of the perception to the things, which truth has its place in the proposition. All this can be presented in detail and unequivocally from the discussions and essays of Plato and Aristotle. We also can point out how these teachings about the thing, the truth, and the proposition changed with the Stoics; furthermore, how again differences appeared in medieval Scholasticism, and some others in our modern times, and again, still others in German Idealism. Thus, we would tell a "history" (*Geschichte*) about this question, but not ask historically at all, i.e., we would, thereby, leave the *question* "What is a thing?" completely quiescent. The movement would then consist only in the fact that, with the help of a report about theories, we may contrast these with one another. We bring the question "What is a thing?" out of its quiescence by inserting the Platonic-Aristotelian determinations of the thing, the proposition and the truth into specific possibilities, and by putting these up for decision. We ask: Do the definition of the essence of the thing *and* the definition of the essence of the truth occur at the same time only by accident, or do they all cohere among themselves, perhaps even necessarily? If such proves to be the case, how do these definitions cohere? Obviously, we have already given an answer to this question when we refer to what has been cited to prove the correctness of the essential definition of the thing. Thereby, it is demonstrated that the definition of the essential structure of truth must conform to the essential structure of things on the basis of the essence of truth as correctness (*Richtigkeit*). This establishes a certain interdependence between the essence of the thing, of a proposition, and of truth. This also shows itself externally in the order of the determination of the thing and

the proposition according to which the subject-predicate relationship is fourth (cf. p. 34). We should certainly not forget that we cited the reference to the so viewed connection as the opinion of the common and "natural" conception of this question. But this "natural" opinion is absolutely *not* natural. This means that its supposed firmness dissolves itself into a series of questions. These run as follows: Was the essential structure of truth and of the proposition suited to the structure of the things? Or is it the opposite: Was the essential structure of the thing as a bearer of attributes interpreted according to the structure of the proposition, as the unity of "subject" and "predicate"? Has man read off the structure of the proposition from the structure of the things, or has he transferred the structure of the proposition into the things?

If the latter were the case, then the further question would immediately arise: How does the proposition, the interpretation, come to present the measure and model of how things in their thingness are to be determined? Since the proposition, the assertion, the positing, and the telling are human actions, we would conclude that man does not adjust himself to things, but the things to man and to the human subject, as which one usually understands the "I." Such an interpretation of the relation of origin between the determination of the thing and that of the proposition seems improbable, at least among the Greeks. For the "I" standpoint is something modern and, therefore, non-Greek. The *polis* set the standard for the Greeks. Everyone today is talking of the Greek *polis*. Now, among the Greeks, the nation of thinkers, someone coined the sentence: *πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν* ("Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not.") The man who made this statement, Protagoras, supposedly wrote a work with the simple title *ἡ Ἀλήθεια*, *The Truth*. The statement of this proposition is temporally not too far from Plato's time.

Perhaps this implies that the structure of the thing adjusts itself to the structure of the proposition, rather than the contrary, not "subjectivism"; only later opinions about the thinking of the Greeks are subjective. If, indeed, the proposition and that truth settled in the proposition, understood as correctness, be the measure for the determination of the thing; if now the facts are different and reversed from what natural opinion holds, then the further question arises: What is the ground and guarantee that we have really hit on the essence of the proposition? Whence is it determined what truth is?

Thus we see that what happened in the determination of the essence of the thing is by no means past and settled, but at most bogged down and therefore to be set in motion anew and so still questionable today. If we do not want simply to repeat opinions but to grasp what we ourselves say and usually mean, then we immediately come into a whole turmoil of questions.

First of all, the question relative to the thing now stands thus: Do the essences of the proposition and of the truth determine themselves from out of the essence of the thing, or does the essence of the thing determine itself from out of the essence of the proposition? The question is posed as an either/or. However (and this becomes the decisive question), does this either/or itself suffice? Are the essence of the thing and the essence of the proposition only built as mirror images because both of them together determine themselves from out of the same but deeper lying root? However, what and where can be this common ground for the essence of the thing *and* of the proposition and of their origin? The unconditioned (*Unbedingt*)? We stated at the beginning that what conditions the essence of the thing in its thingness can no longer itself be thing and conditioned, it must be an unconditioned (*Un-bedingtes*). But also the essence of the unconditioned (*Unbedingt*) is co-determined by what has been established as a thing and as condition (*Be-dingung*). If the thing is taken as *ens*

creatum, a present-at-hand created by God, then the unconditioned is God in the sense of the Old Testament. If the thing is considered as that which, as object, faces the "I," i.e., as the "not-I," then the "I" is the unconditioned, the absolute "I" of German Idealism. Whether the unconditioned is sought beyond, behind, or in things depends upon what one understands as condition and being conditioned (*als Bedingung und Bedingtsein*).

Only with this question do we advance in the direction of the possible ground for the determination of the thing *and* the proposition *and* its truth. This, however, shatters[12] the original ways of posing the questions concerning the thing with which we began. That happening (*Geschehen*) of the formerly standard determination of the thing, which seemed long past but was in truth only stuck and since then rested, is brought out of its quiescence. The question of the thing again comes into motion from its beginning.

With this reference to the inner questionability of the question about the thing, we ought now to clarify in what sense we take the question as historical. To question historically means to set free and into motion the happening which is quiescent and bound in the question.

To be sure, such a procedure easily succumbs to a misinterpretation. One could take this as belatedly attributing mistakes to the original determination of the thing or at least insufficiency and incompleteness. This would be a childish game of an empty and vain superiority and afterthought which all those latecomers may at any time play with those of earlier times simply because they have come later. Insofar as our questioning is concerned with critique at all, it is not directed against the beginning, but only against ourselves, insofar as we drag along this beginning

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[12] Heidegger entitles the section in *SZ* where he calls for a renewal of the question of being from the standpoint of its *historicity*, "The Task of the Destruction of the History of Ontology" (*SZ*, p. 19). *Trans.*

no longer as such, but as something "natural," i.e., in an indifferent falsification.

The conception of the question "What is a thing?" as historical is just as far removed from the intention of merely reporting historically about former opinions about the thing as it is from the mania for criticizing these opinions and, by adding together what is temporarily correct, from figuring out and offering a new opinion from past opinions. Rather it is a question of setting into motion the original inner happening of this question according to its simplest characteristic moves, which have been arrested in a quiescence. This happening does not lie somewhere aloof from us in the dim and distant past but is here in every proposition and in each everyday opinion, in every approach to things.

12. Historicity and Decision

What has been said about the historical character of the question "What is a thing?" is valid for every philosophical question which we put today or in the future, assuming, of course, that philosophy is a questioning that puts itself in question and is therefore always and everywhere moving in a circle.

We noticed at the outset how the thing determined itself for us first as single and as a "this." Aristotle calls it τόδε τι, "this here." However, the determination of the singleness (*Einzelnheit*) inherently depends also on how the universality of the universal is conceived, for which the single is an instance and an example. Also, in this regard, certain decisions set in with Plato and Aristotle which still influence logic and grammar. We further observed that a closer circumscription of the "this" always involves the help of the space-time relationship. Also with regard to the essential determination of space and time, Aristotle and Plato sketched the ways on which we still move today.

In truth, however, our historical being-here (*Dasein*) is

already on the way to a transformation which, if stifled in itself, only experiences this destiny because it does not find its way back to its own self-laid grounds in order to found itself anew out of them.

It is easy to derive from all that has been said what our task must be, if we are to set our question "What is a thing?" into motion as a historical question.

It would first be necessary to set into motion the beginning of the essential determination of the thing and the proposition of the Greeks, not in order to acknowledge how it was before, but to pose for decision how essentially it *still* is today. But in this lecture we must forego carrying out this fundamental task, and this for two reasons. The one is seemingly more external. The task mentioned would not be fulfilled by putting together a few quotations about what Plato and Aristotle said here and there about the thing and the proposition. Rather, we would have to bring into play the whole of Greek *Dasein*, its gods, its art, its polity, its knowledge, in order to experience what it means to discover something like the thing. In the framework of this lecture all the presuppositions are missing for this approach. And even if these were supplied we could not follow this path to the beginning, in regard to the task posed.

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.

13. Summary

We now summarize in order to arrive at the final delineation of our intention. It was emphasized at the outset that in philosophy, in contrast to the sciences, an immediate approach to the questions is never possible. It necessarily always requires an introduction. The introductory reflections on our question "What is a thing?" now come to their conclusion.

The question has been characterized in two essential respects: What is put in question and how it is questioned.

First, with regard to *what* is in question—the thing—with an admittedly very poor light we have searched the horizon in which, according to tradition, the thing and the determination of its thingness stand. We reached a double result: first, the frame of the thing, time-space, and the thing's way of encountering, the "this," and then the structure of the thing itself as being the bearer of properties, entirely general and empty: to form the one for a many.

Second, we tried to characterize the question in regard to the manner in which it must be asked. It turned out that the question is historical. What is meant by that has been explained.

The introductory reflection on our question makes it clear that two leading questions permanently go along with it and, therefore, must be asked with it. The one: Where does something like a thing belong? The other: Whence do we take the determination of its thingness? Only from these as they are asked along with our question result the clue and guideline along which we must go if everything is not to tumble around in mere chance and confusion and if the question concerning the thing is not to get stuck in a dead end.

But would that be a misfortune? This is the same question as the following: Is there, after all, a serious sense in posing such questions? We know that we cannot begin to do anything with its elucidation. The consequences are also accordingly if we do not pose the question and ignore it. If we ignore the warning of a high-power line and touch the wires, we are killed. If we ignore the question "What is a thing?" then "nothing further happens."

If a physician mishandles a number of patients, there is the danger that they will lose their lives. If a teacher interprets a poem to his students in an impossible manner, "nothing further happens." But perhaps it is good if

we speak more cautiously here. By ignoring the question concerning the thing and by insufficiently interpreting a poem, it appears as though nothing further happens. One day, perhaps after fifty or one hundred years, nevertheless, something has happened.

The question "What is a thing?" is a historical question. But it is more important to act according to this historical character in the questioning than to talk about the historical character of the question. Herewith, for the purposes and possibilities of the lecture, we must be content with an evasive way out.

We can neither present the great beginning of the question with the Greeks, nor is it possible, in its full context, to display the precise determination of the thing, which has become preeminent through modern science. But, on the other hand, the knowledge of that beginning as well as of the decisive periods of modern science is indispensable if we are to remain equal to the question at all.