

Commentary on the Exergue of *Being and Time*

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Exergue (p.19)ⁱ

H begins the short prefatory remark to the book (which is known as an ‘exergue’) with a quote from one of Plato’s dialogues, the *Sophist* (specifically, from 244a). In this passage one of the characters of the dialogue—the Visitor—expresses perplexity about *being*. H begins in this way because the driving question of *Being and Time* is, as H puts it here: *what is the meaning of being?* It’s common, in H scholarship, to refer to this question using H’s own term in German: the *Seinsfrage*—the ‘question of being’ (*Sein* means ‘being’, and *Frage* means ‘question’). Attempting to answer the *Seinsfrage* is the domain of *ontology*—the philosophical inquiry into being.

Here in the Exergue, H puts forward three central tasks of the book, all of which have to do with the *Seinsfrage*:

- (a) To ‘awaken’ our understanding of the question.
- (b) Through doing so, to get us to feel the force of the question—e.g. to realize that it’s a real question, one of fundamental importance, as well as a highly perplexing one.
- (c) To *answer* the question: that is, to achieve the aims of ontology—and more specifically, to propose that *time* is “the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of being.”

Until H completes task (a), he will not have clarified the *Seinsfrage*. However, a first introduction of the question (which we will later see needs revision) would be this: what concept exactly is it that’s expressed by the verb “to be”? This might sound at first as if it’s primarily a linguistic question (a question about a piece of language), and specifically a semantic one (about the meaning of that piece of language). This isn’t quite right: H wants to inquire, not so much into the *verb* “to be” as into being *itself*. However, as I’ll attempt to make clear later, there are certain complications for understanding what’s at stake in the *Seinsfrage* that, at least initially, require us to attend to our use of this verb.

ⁱ All page numbers refer to the translation of *Being and Time* by John McQuarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).