Martin Heidegger came on the German scene in the mid-1920s, but, unlike his mentor Edmund Husserl, he was late arriving in America. In Husserl’s case, a mere four years after he published *Ideen I* in 1913, the overall thrust of his program was fairly well known in the United States.\(^1\) By contrast thirty-five years would pass after the publication of *Sein und Zeit* (1927) before the true nature of Heidegger’s project became clear to American scholars. One reason for the long delay was no doubt the legendary obscurity of his philosophical language. Another may have been that Heidegger never finished his *opus magnum*—he left it a torso, minus the culminating section that was to fulfill the book’s promise—as well as the paucity of his publications in German between 1927 and 1960. In 1940 Princeton University’s Walter Cerf was right on the mark when he said of *Sein und Zeit*: “Few people [in the United States] know of it, and still less have read it.”\(^2\)

Any attempt to periodize the reception of Heidegger in America is, of course, a construct, but nonetheless some important dates stand out, for example:

1. 1963, when William J. Richardson established the “classical paradigm”—the “being-paradigm”—for reading Heidegger, thereby upending much of the previous scholarship.

2. 1975, when Heidegger began publishing his *Gesamtausgabe* (GA; 90 volumes as of 2015, with twelve more to come), including dozens of lecture courses that shed light on his philosophical development.

3. 1989, when Heidegger’s long-awaited *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (GA 65) finally appeared, prompting scholars to rethink the entirety of his program.

4. 2014, when the first of Heidegger’s “Black Notebooks” (GA 94) appeared, igniting a firestorm of protest over its anti-Semitic remarks.
One can also make out at least five overlapping approaches to understanding Heidegger that have emerged in the seventy years since World War II:

1. 1945 to 1963: the existentialist paradigm, focused on human existence (Dasein) as elaborated in Sein und Zeit.

2. 1963 on: the “classical paradigm” that reads Heidegger as a philosopher of “being” (Sein).

3. 1970s on: the Derridean paradigm (if it is that): an assortment of readings inspired by Derrida and directed at select elements of Heidegger’s work, such as language and the deconstruction of metaphysics.

4. 1980s on: the analytic/pragmatist paradigm of Hubert Dreyfus, focused on only the first half of Sein und Zeit.

5. 1990s on: a growing awareness of the instability of the classical paradigm and of the need for an interpretation grounded in the whole of the Gesamtausgabe.

These five hardly exhaust the spectrum of trends and interpretations. There are also, for example, the neo-pragmatist interpretations of the late Richard Rorty, as well as the rejectionist readings thrown up by John D. Caputo and Tom Rockmore in reaction to the 1978 revelations of Heidegger’s Nazism. On the more conservative end of the spectrum there is the ultra-orthodox school gathered around Parvis Emad and the journal Heidegger Studies, not to mention the Pious Order of Discalced Heideggerians of the Strict Observance, sworn to changing not a jot or tittle of the Master’s ipsissima verba and dedicated to the rote chanting of his texts in modo psittacino. —There are various others, of course, but given the limitations of a short essay, I will focus on only three paradigms of Heidegger research that have emerged in America since 1945.

The existentialist paradigm. In 1947, Heidegger’s “Brief über den Humanismus” (Letter on Humanism) revealed a major change in the style and focus of his later philosophy, a shift that came to be known (incorrectly) as die Kehre, “the turn” in his thinking. But that shift notwithstanding, as late as 1959 American scholars were still interpreting Heidegger as an existentialist, deeply influenced by Kierkegaard and in turn influencing Jean-Paul Sartre. The first book-length treatment of Heidegger in English, Michael Wyschogrod’s Kierkegaard and Heidegger (1954), held to this existentialist view, while arguing that Heidegger’s existentialism had in fact betrayed
Kierkegaard’s.\textsuperscript{4} Five years later Thomas Langan’s \textit{The Meaning of Heidegger} likewise interpreted him within a \textit{Dasein}-centered framework, and specifically as “absolutizing \textit{Dasein}” to such a degree that “truth is what \textit{Dasein} does, has done, and will do.”\textsuperscript{5}

The existentialist paradigm held forth for more than fifteen years largely because of the scarcity of English translations of Heidegger prior to 1960. (See the bibliography for details.) By 1949 only five essays were available:

- “What Is Metaphysics?” (German, 1929)
- “On the Essence of Truth” (German original, 1930)
- “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” (German original, 1936)
- “Remembrance of the Poet” (German, 1943)
- “Postscript to ‘What Is Metaphysics’”

In 1951 an article from the late 1930s appeared in English but garnered little attention:

- “The Age of the World View” (German original, 1938).

In the late 1950s two important texts from Heidegger’s later period appeared:

- “Introduction to ‘What Is Metaphysics?’” (German, 1949, ET 1957)
  \textit{Introduction to Metaphysics} (German original, 1935; ET 1959).

These last two revealed a very different Heidegger from the alleged “existentialist” of the 1920s. The programmatic essay “Introduction to ‘What Is Metaphysics?’” provided the first clear overview of Heidegger’s entire program, while \textit{Introduction to Metaphysics} showed how deeply invested he was in reinterpreting ancient Greek philosophy. Finally, in 1960 two more essays appeared:

- “The Question of Being” (German, 1955)
- “Identity and Difference” (German, 1957)

But even with this new information American scholarship still lacked a robust understanding of whether—and if so, \textit{how}—the early emphasis on human being and the later focus on “being itself” could possibly constitute a unity.

**The “being” paradigm.** The early 1960s witnessed a revolution in Heidegger studies. In 1962 the two main texts of his early period appeared in English:

\textit{Being and Time} (German, 1927)
along with two important articles from the later period:

“Plato’s Doctrine of Truth” (German: 1943)
“Letter on Humanism” (German: 1947).

American scholarship now had strong representations of both the earlier and later works, but the question remained: How was one to fit together these two Heideggers?

The answer came in 1963 with the magisterial work that would guide mainstream Heidegger scholarship for the next forty years: William J. Richardson’s *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought.* With that book was born what I call the “classical paradigm” or “being-paradigm,” anchored in the conviction that Heidegger’s thinking had undergone a momentous “turn” (*Kehre*) in the 1930s from existence-centeredness to being-centeredness, from *Dasein* to *Sein*. As Richardson put it: “[In the early period] Being (the World) was considered basically as the project of There-being [= *Dasein]*” whereas “the focal point of Heidegger's [later] reflection passes subtly from There-being to Being itself.”¹⁶ Moreover, in the later work Being itself seems to take on a life of its own. “[It is] experienced as an active force, a process that assumes an initiative of its own by revealing itself to *Dasein*—but concealing itself as well.”⁷

This new paradigm finally put paid to the notion that Heidegger was an existentialist à la Sartre. It showed to the contrary that his project encompassed—and subverted—the entire tradition of metaphysics from Parmenides to Hegel. Already in the “Letter on Humanism” Heidegger had drawn the line against existentialism. Whereas Sartre had declared in 1946: “We are precisely in a situation where there are only human beings,” in his “Letter on Humanism” Heidegger retorted: “We are precisely in a situation where first and foremost there is Being.”⁸

The being-paradigm gave birth to the heyday of Heidegger scholarship in North America: its establishment, diffusion, and major impact on other disciplines (literature, theology, etc.). Since 1963 two generations of American scholars have been trained in the classical paradigm widely construed, and in turn have produced a solid body of work, some of it quite original but much of it commentaries on or elaborations of Heidegger’s own texts. Today this mainstream interpretation of Heidegger is characterized by an expansive plurality that includes fruitful engagements with other Continental philosophies (e.g., Lacan, Levinas, French feminism) as well as non-Continental thought (Wittgenstein, analytical philosophy, pragmatism). But given such variety, how can one
still speak of “the” classical paradigm? Hasn’t it evolved into a manifold of relatively independent approaches?

I speak of “the” classical paradigm because even as they range widely, the multiple trends in mainstream Heidegger scholarship still remain anchored in the three basic tenets of the being-paradigm: the primacy of Sein over Dasein; the agency of Sein in revealing and concealing itself; and the centrality of the “turn” in Heidegger’s thought.

A paradigm shift? The dozens of GA volumes that have appeared since the classical paradigm took hold fifty years ago reveal just how questionable its three main tenets are.

First of all, das Sein in Heidegger does not mean “being” in any usual sense of the term, and certainly does not refer to the quasi-hypostasized “Being Itself” of recent American books. Rather, it means “the presence of things,” their Anwesen, and more specifically:

1. the current and very changeable
2. meaningful presence of things, i.e., their significance
3. to someone concerned about those things
4. within a given “world” of meaning.

Secondly, the final focus of Heidegger’s work was not this Anwesen (aka “being”) but rather what he called the “essence” of Anwesen: whatever it is that makes such meaningful presence/significance possible and necessary for human beings. Heidegger argues as follows:

1. To see how a thing is meaningfully present (“has being”), we must “take it as,” i.e., understand it as having this or that significance.
2. In taking-something-as we understand how it is meaningfully present for now: what its current Anwesen is.
3. But to take-something-as is to act discursively.
4. What is it, then, that requires us to think and act only discursively? Whatever it may turn out to be, that is the sought-for X of Heidegger’s philosophy.

Heidegger called that sought-for X not Anwesen (or “Sein”) but Anwesen-LASSEN (or “das WESEN des Seins”). Locutions such as “being itself,” “being as being,” and “the essence of being” are only heuristic stand-ins for the sought-for X that requires us, and allows us, to take-something-as and thereby to understand its significance, its meaningfulness, its so-
called “being.” In this regard one must say that when Heidegger employed the language of Sein, he was notoriously lax in distinguishing between

1. Sein when it refers to Anwesen, and
2. Sein when it refers to the source (Herkunft) of Anwesen: that which makes discursive meaningfulness possible and necessary for us.

Only the latter, the source of meaningful presence, was the focal topic and goal of Heidegger’s philosophy. It would be better, then, to drop the word Sein entirely and to speak only of Anwesen and the X that is its source.

Third, the sought-for X that makes it necessary for us to think and act discursively is our own essence as thrown-open-ness (Geworfenheit). A priori—and not by any will-act of our own—we are made to “stand out” (ex-sistere). We are thrown-open (geworfen) or stretched open (erstreckt) as the “gap” or “space” or “clearing” between things and their possible meanings, a gap that makes it both necessary and possible for us to take-things-as. To express the a priori nature of this thrown-openness, the later Heidegger says we are always already “ap – propri - ated” (er-eignet) to our proper state as this space or clearing. Thus in the later Heidegger the technical term Ereignis or “appropriation” takes over for the earlier term Geworfenheit.

Fourth, this a priori ap-propri-ation to being-the-clearing is precisely what opens up (or “gives”) the clearing, which in turn makes it possible for us to take-something-as and thus understand its current meaningful presence. Insofar as our essence is a priori thrown-openness, that very Existenz is the “it” that “gives” the clearing. It is the X that opens up and sustains the space for all taking-as and thus for any meaningful presence of things. One’s Existenz is the giving-of-the-clearing—in Heidegger’s words: “das Dasein ist das je vereinzelte ‘es’, das gibt; das ermöglicht und ist das ‘es gibt.’”

Fifth, English phrases such as “Being conceals itself” (which in fact means “The sought-for X conceals itself”) are mistranslations of the faux reflexive “sich verbergen.” Far from indicating some quasi-agency on the part of “being itself” whereby it can choose to hide itself from us, the German phrase is better rendered as “X is intrinsically concealed.” This de-hypostasizing of “being itself” helps clarify much of Heidegger’s obfuscating language about “the mystery of being.”

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All the above calls into question the first two tenets of the classical paradigm. (Lack of space prevents me from taking up the third.) However, we have to ask: Is this
really what Heidegger meant? Finding out whether these five points *do* in fact represent what he was driving at throughout his career would require revisiting and rethinking many if not all of the 90 (and soon to be 102) volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe*. But who is up for such a lifetime of research? —And so the Heideggerian jury is still out on this question, and presumably will remain so for years to come.

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Albert Chandler, “Professor Husserl’s Program of Philosophical Reform,” Philosophical Review 26 (1917) 624-43.


Endnotes

1 The first article on Husserl published in the United States was Albert Chandler’s “Professor Husserl’s Program of Philosophical Reform,” *Philosophical Review* 26 (1917).

2 Walter Cerf, “An Approach to Heidegger’s Ontology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1, 2 (December, 1940), 177-190; here, 177. This was originally given as a lecture to the Princeton Philosophy Seminar (February 1, 1940) one year before Cerf got his doctorate there. Among the early English-language articles on Heidegger it is the most knowledgeable. On Cerf see http://dailyprincetonian.com/news/2002/10/late-philosophy-professor-cerf-gs-41-bequeaths-6-53-million/


7 Ibid., 621.17-19 for the shift from Dasein to Sein.


11 GA 73, 1: 642.28–29.