Why Is There Material Culture Rather than Nothing?

*Heideggerian Thoughts and Archaeology*

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**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate and discuss a fundamental, ontological question which appears to have been forgotten and simplified in the discourses of contemporary archaeology. This question is, ‘Why is there material culture rather than nothing?’ In accordance with its purpose, and the question just put forward, this paper is quite philosophical in nature. It presents a discussion that is probably unfamiliar to most archaeologists. Despite this fact, I would encourage the reader to continue, because the actual discussion leads to further questions that are of crucial relevance both to archaeologists and to archaeology.

Irrespective of which theoretical approach we take, we can easily agree that the past material culture that we deal with as archaeologists exists before our eyes, but what about its Being? By Being, and this is a central point, I do not mean the visibility or appearance of phenomena. In accordance with the later reasoning of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, I rather refer to Being as the process that makes everything that is manifest, that makes it appear. It is Being that renders possible, and determines, all that is (Heidegger, 1927: 2–15; 1953: 14–15; 1954b: 16–17, 85, 106, 137–149; 1957: 57–67). This argument concerning the ontological difference between Being and beings is probably unfamiliar...
to most archaeologists, because we usually refer to the Being of material culture as the fact that it is manifest in a physical way. It is there in front of us, it is present before our eyes, and it can be experienced. We do not distinguish between Being and beings.

How then do we conceive of the Being of the megalith shown in Figure 3.1? And how do we conceive of the Being of the illustration itself? In the fact that they are visible and manifest, or in the process that renders them manifest?

Traditional Ontology

Probably most of us would refer to the Being, both of the megalith and of the illustration, in accordance with the first proposal, i.e., as the fact that they are manifest in a physical way. We, then, approach the Being of these beings in the same way as the traditional Aristotelian and Pla-tonic, post-Socratic philosophers. But at the same time we are not aware of Being as the process that renders phenomena manifest. In this traditional approach, Being as process becomes just the visible appearance of phenomena, instead of the crucial process that makes them appear, i.e., there is no awareness of the ontological difference between Being and beings.

This traditional view of Being has been with us since Plato and Aristotle, and it was further developed and strengthened by, for instance, Descartes and Kant. Plato interprets Being as idea, as that which is seen in the visible, the aspects that are offered by the phenomenon in its presence (Plato, 1935: VI, VII). Thus, Plato lets the consequences of Being (the appearance and presence of beings) take the place of Being as process, and Being and being are considered identical. The ultimate outcome of the unawareness of Being as the process of appearance is