



Nature of Being: A Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger

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Abstract

This research article undertakes a detailed comparative philosophical investigation into the nature of Being in the thought of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger. Although these two thinkers emerged from radically different cultural, linguistic, and intellectual traditions, their philosophies reveal a striking convergence when the question of Being is considered in its deepest sense. Rabindranath Tagore, shaped by the spiritual, literary, and philosophical heritage of the Upanishads and Vedantic humanism, develops a vision of existence grounded in unity, relationality, and the infinite unfolding of the self within the cosmic whole. Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, writing within the context of twentieth-century European existential phenomenology, seeks to recover the forgotten meaning of Being through an analysis of human existence, or Dasein. Despite the obvious differences between Tagore's spiritual universalism and Heidegger's phenomenological existentialism, both reject the conception of Being as a fixed, inert, or purely objective substance. Instead, they present Being as a living, dynamic, and self-disclosing process—something that becomes, unfolds, and reveals itself through the situated existence of human beings. The central purpose of this article is therefore to examine how Tagore and Heidegger each understand the nature of Being and to explore the deeper philosophical affinities that emerge from their respective accounts.

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1. Introduction

The question of Being has always occupied the center of philosophical reflection, especially in metaphysics. From the earliest Greek philosophers to contemporary existential thought, philosophers have repeatedly returned to the fundamental question: what does it mean *to be*? The inquiry is not merely concerned with the existence of things in the world, but with the deeper nature, meaning, and significance of existence itself. Human beings do not simply exist as stones, trees, or stars do; rather, they possess the unique capacity to ask about their own existence. They are able to reflect upon themselves, to question the purpose of life, and to experience both the burden and the wonder of being. In this sense, the problem of Being is not merely an abstract metaphysical puzzle; it is also an existential and spiritual concern at the core of human life. The twentieth century witnessed a profound crisis regarding the meaning of existence. Rapid industrialization, the rise of scientific rationality, colonial domination, technological expansion, urban alienation, and the devastation of world wars created an atmosphere in which traditional forms of meaning appeared to collapse. Human beings increasingly experience themselves as isolated, fragmented, and detached from the deeper sources of life. In such a historical context, the philosophical reflections of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger become especially significant. Though they emerged from very different cultural, linguistic, and intellectual traditions, both thinkers sought to recover a deeper understanding of existence in the face of modernity's alienating tendencies. Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet, philosopher, educator, and Nobel Laureate, approached the question of Being through the language of poetry, spirituality, creativity, and universal humanism. For Tagore, existence cannot be understood through rational analysis alone. Human beings are not isolated individuals imprisoned within their own egos; rather, they are living participants in an infinite and harmonious reality. The human self finds its true meaning not in separation, competition, or self-assertion, but in its capacity to enter into communion with the world, with other persons, with nature, and ultimately with the infinite. Tagore repeatedly argued that the tragedy of modern civilization lies in its excessive emphasis upon the narrow, self-centered ego. The individual becomes enclosed within the walls of possessiveness, ambition, and utilitarian calculation. Such a life may produce material success, but it ultimately leaves the soul impoverished. In contrast, Martin Heidegger, one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, addressed the question of Being through phenomenology and existential analysis. Heidegger argued that Western philosophy had forgotten the meaning of Being. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, philosophers had concentrated primarily on particular beings—

that is, on objects, substances, and entities—while neglecting the more primordial question of what it means for anything to be at all. In his major work “Being and Time”, Heidegger sought to revive this forgotten question by examining human existence, which he called Dasein, literally, “being-there.” Human beings are unique because they do not merely exist; they are concerned about their existence. They are capable of asking who they are, what their possibilities are, and how they ought to live. The primary inquiry of this research centers on a comparative ontological analysis between Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger. The study seeks to address the fundamental question: What is the nature of Being? And, how do these two thinkers, despite their distinct cultural and intellectual origins, converge in their understanding of existence? This article explores how both philosophers challenge the modern reduction of Being to a mere object or measurable entity and, instead, conceptualize it as a dynamic process of disclosure and participation.

2. Being: Finite Aspect Vs Inauthentic Existence

Rabindranath Tagore (Tagore, 1931/2004, p. 45) has mentioned three aspects of the finitude of man: a) During his limited existence in the world, man shares some characteristic features with the animal world. His life is, to some extent, determined by stimuli from the surrounding environment. Some of man's actions and behavior are instinctive and mechanical. Like other animals, man is also conscious of himself, and many of his actions are guided by the motive of self-satisfaction or self-preservation. Like the others, man also quarrels with others to fulfill his needs and desires. These are aspects of the finitude of his character. b) Within his finite existence, man acquires some characteristic features that distinguish him from other living beings. For example, all his senses are sharply developed and under his control. He can withdraw his senses from the subject. He can place them anywhere else, in the subject, and can educate them to work realistically. In addition, the animal advantage of man is that he is the possessor of 'mind'. Because of this 'mind', his reaction to natural elements is completely different from that of others. While other animals are subject to natural forces, such as floods, fires, and storms, they must surrender to nature. Man tries to find a way to fight against that natural force within his physical capacity. Therefore, despite the limitations of human nature, he is of a higher class than other existing animals. And this is why man has domesticated all other animals. Rabindranath says that the trunk of an elephant, the paw of a tiger, and the sharp, curved claws of a hawk have come together and manifested themselves in the human being (Tagore, 1922, pp. 24-25). c) The limited nature of man bears witness to his spiritual potential. If we analyse human aspirations, we can see that their aspirations are not always ego-centered.

Nature of Being: A Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger

Social good wishes also exist in that aspiration. For example, the aesthetic feeling in man, the love for beauty, indicates that he constantly transcends himself. Even if the finite being of man wishes to keep himself separate from others, to remain silent, he is not capable of doing that. He always wants to tie himself to others.

Looking at these three aspects of human character, Rabindranath Tagore has identified some of the basic tendencies of the finite being that is man. The main one is the '*tendency to acquire*' (acquisition). Man gets deep satisfaction by 'acquiring' something within his limited being. Man's love and struggle, his attachments and conflicts - all are driven by this 'desire' to acquire. That is why no amount of wealth can quench his thirst for acquiring wealth. As soon as a man is successful in something, he becomes eager to acquire something else. In one sense, this tendency binds man, because acquiring means being completely connected with the physical. But in another sense, this tendency is evidence of man's spirituality. Because this tendency helps him to transcend his finite existence. Another aspect of man's finitude is his self-awareness. The time seen in him in various forms - expressing himself, being arrogant, boasting, etc. Through such actions, it is clear that man can do irrational things while satisfying this 'self' in various ways; in many cases, even if his 'self' is hurt, he can become vengeful. If we examine the life of a single person, we will see that the source of his limited time and work is directed toward the self. For example, desires, wishes, aspirations - everything arises directly or indirectly to satisfy the self. That is why the narrow truth of man makes him want to reveal his uniqueness at any cost. By this, he gets a strange satisfaction, he thinks? He is superior to others, or at least he feels better than others. A person thinks he is the wisest person in the world. A finite man judges others based on his own intuition, knowledge, and wisdom. Another aspect of man's finite being is the synthesis of desires. Some of his desires are physical, and others transcend the individual, but, in a narrow sense, the whole process can be reduced to basic desires. One of these natural desires is the physical dimension. The desire for food, drink, or comfort is of this category. There are also general desires concerning the whole body. There is also the general social nature of the finite being of man. He wants to become a powerful person in society. All these are common human characteristics. However, this finite being of man is the source of his infinite creation. From this finite being, the infinite being of man develops. (Tagore, 193, p.115-130)

However, concerning the nature of *being*, Heidegger, on the other hand, announced two modes of existence of Dasein: Authentic existence and Inauthentic existence (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p.168). These modes refer to the relationship of man to himself. According to him, the great

characteristic of man is his individuality. This individuality is not a specific quality of man, but an implicit potential of every man, a great potentiality. Among the possibilities of man, two are the most important, and under these two, all other possibilities can be explained. These two possibilities are authentic and inauthentic existence. Heidegger referred to inauthentic existence as a fallen state (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p.220). At this level, man neglects the truth of his relationship with the world. The inauthentic fallen existence refuses to 'grasp' its own possibilities. At this level, everyday life becomes the goal of the individual's life. This state is called *Das Mann*. *Das Mann* is the enemy of authentic existence. In the case of inauthentic existence, no work is 'own' to Dasein. At this level, man cannot separate himself from the 'public'. He does not perceive his own existence, his possibilities, independently of the 'public'. Such an existence is not real. Such a life is the life of ordinary people, the life of the public. There are two aspects of inauthentic existence: subjective and objective. Fallenness in the state of falling, a kind of false or pseudo- subjectivity, drives the individual consciousness. The individual is constantly obeying such instructions and prohibitions whose source is unknown and unidentifiable. The subjective end of falling is the world made by man, the world transformed by technology. In this world, objects exist almost entirely as tools or means to be used for the benefit of the common or the masses. At the level of inauthentic existence, we forget about the ontological source of our being, not the selection or nomination of the standard or ideal design of the value. In the fallen or inauthentic existence, we have no deep feelings, only trivial fears and neurotic anxieties. Once the individual understands that each person is unique, different from any other person, and must fulfill his own potential, his concern about the world is not to act like ordinary people or to survive in society as others do. It is necessary to do what needs to be done without worrying about doing it. (Heidegger,1962, pp.163-180).

3. Being: Infinite Aspect Vs Authentic Existence

Tagore has explained human nature to the infinite being in various ways within his philosophy (Tagore, 1913, p. 14). But sometimes he has said that it is 'universal nature' in humans, sometimes that it is 'surplus' in man, and sometimes that it is 'divine power' in humans. He was aware that it was very difficult to determine this aspect of human nature accurately, but he tried to explain it by referring to various life experiences. Whenever we want to achieve something and are ready to suffer and make sacrifices for it, then we can feel the presence of this divinity in us. An important aspect of the infinity of human nature is its constant desire to go beyond its personal limitations. Nothing can ultimately suppress its enthusiasm. There is no task that is completely impossible for a human being. He tries again and again, even fails, but

Nature of Being: A Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger

his failure also makes his activities re-try. This surplus vitality is actually the enthusiasm of man. This creates in him a feeling that sets his goal on a higher plane - this is what helps a person rise above his ordinary level. Again, it is because of this infinite nature that man feels the yearning for liberation or immortality. No other living being has this yearning for immortality. But somehow this feeling has arisen in man. Although he has experienced death, he feels that death is not the end of life. Hence, this feeling is the essence of his life. Rabindranath himself has raised the question and answered it. He says that what consciousness in man drives him to attain immortality is not his body or mental organization, even though he knows that death is a restless loss. It is a profound unity, this ultimate mystery of his body that drives him. This consciousness of infinity drives him towards immortality and helps him to consider the whole world as his own. Again, it is this aspect of humans that makes them feel attracted to nature. Humans, who are all-embracing, can never attain a sense of oneness with nature. But they are enchanted by the beauty of nature. They are overwhelmed by the manifestation of natural power. According to Tagore, this aspect of human nature is essentially creative (Tagore, 1913, p. 114). There is a subtle power in man that helps him to express himself in various ways. According to him, there is a lower hidden within every man. By saying this, the poet does not mean creating something new. This is a novel idea; the infinite nature of this new man has brought dynamism and a tendency toward ever-changing personality to his character.

However, this development is not mechanical. Or it is not a method of re-creation. This tendency comes from his creative character. At every stage of human development, he creates something new while carrying forward the previous state. If man were just a body, then his development would mean the body's development. But if man's personality were to develop, it would mean the development of the heart, which is evidenced in the ever-activeness of man's infinite nature. But the most fundamental and perhaps the most important aspect of the infinite nature of man is what we call the '*realization of joy*'. This realization of joy is within us, this realization that takes us beyond the body. In this aspect, Tagore called "*Jivan-Devata*". It is the Surplus in Man that gives the joyful feeling of existence. The possibility and realization of the human being's ever-present attempt to transcend his own limitations lies in this joy. It is the presence of God within man that makes him God-like. (Tagore, 1931, pp. 31-65) Comparatively, a similar approach can be observed in Heidegger's thought. Heidegger stated that the authentic man has an adequate sense of himself, of who he is; man's true existence begins only when he realizes and fully understands who he really is and what his existence is

Nature of Being: A Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1962, pp.180-190). Authenticity and inauthenticity, for Heidegger, are what we do. Hence, authentic Being is the work of claiming one's own self through one's own, self-directed, as opposed to their self-directed, actions. Authentic existence refers to three moods of care: existent, facticity, and fallenness. Inauthentic Being, then, consists of acting according to the will of the they-self, and thus not as oneself. Inauthentic existence ignores possibility and lives in the fallen state. Since Dasein is, in every case, inevitably its own possibility, it can either become authentic by making the right choice and conquering itself, or become inauthentic by failing to make the right choice and losing itself. This is how Heidegger distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic existence. Heidegger says that “everyone has to strive for authentic existence” (Heidegger,1962,163-168). For each of us, authentic existence is the ideal. Every human being generally has a tendency towards falsehood, and every action is tainted with falsehood. The basic tendency of man is to refuse to acknowledge what he is. Man tends toward self-forgetfulness and becomes preoccupied with work that has no goal or purpose. (Heidegger,1962, pp. 279-311)

4. Critique of Technology

The intersection of Rabindranath Tagore’s and Martin Heidegger’s critiques of technology offers a profound meditation on the nature of being and the risk of human alienation in the modern age (Tagore, 1917, p. 55; Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 23). While originating from vastly different cultural landscapes—Tagore from the spiritual humanism of India and Heidegger from the existential phenomenology of Germany—both thinkers converged on the idea that modern technology is not merely a collection of tools, but a transformative force that fundamentally alters how we relate to reality. For Heidegger, the essence of technology is “Enframing” (Gestell), a mode of revealing that treats the world and human beings as a "standing reserve" (Bestand) for optimization and consumption (Heidegger, 1945/1977, pp.14-27). Similarly, Tagore viewed the West's mechanical obsession as a “Machine” that crushes the “Person,” reducing the organic rhythm of life to a series of utilitarian transactions (Tagore, 1917, p. 118). To understand how these critiques relate to being, one must examine their shared concern that technology obscures the poetic and spiritual essence of existence, replacing a relational way of being with a predatory, calculative one. Heidegger’s primary concern in his seminal work, “*The Question Concerning Technology*”, is the ontological shift that technology imposes upon the world. He argued that technology is not neutral; rather, it is a way of ‘bringing forth’ truth. However, modern technology differs from the ancient Greek poiesis (a blooming or bringing forth) because it challenges nature. It demands that energy be extracted and stored.

Nature of Being: A Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger

In this process, the nature of a river is no longer seen as a sacred flow or a source of poetic inspiration, but merely as a supplier of water pressure for a hydroelectric plant. Heidegger posits that when everything is viewed as a resource, the human being also becomes a resource—a human resource—thereby losing the capacity to experience *being* in its authentic, meditative state (Heidegger,1977, pp.3-35). Heidegger argued that modern technology is a *challenging-forth* that treats nature as a *standing reserve* (something to be stored and used). By making everything transparent and instantly available, we lose the ability to experience the mystery or the poetic essence of existence. (Heidegger,1977, pp.3-35).

Rabindranath Tagore, on the other hand, approached this same crisis through the lens of “Creative Unity” and the “Surplus in man”. In his lectures compiled in *Nationalism*, Tagore critiques the machine of the modern nation-state and its technological apparatus, which he believed sacrificed the wholeness of the human spirit to power and profit. For Tagore, being can realized through *Atman* or the universal soul, which finds expression in beauty, love, and harmony with nature. Technology, when divorced from these spiritual values, becomes a lifeless organization that treats the world as a heap of raw materials. He argued that the modern man is so occupied with ‘*having*’ that he forgets ‘*being*’ in its authentic state. The technological spirit encourages a power-seeking existence that ignores the truth-seeking essence of humanity. Tagore’s critique suggests that technology creates a barrier between the individual and the Universal Man, leading to a fragmented existence where the person is subdivided into professional functions, much like the cogs in a literal machine (Tagore,1917, pp.1-46). The relationship between these two thinkers regarding *being* is most evident in their mutual emphasis on the ‘loss of the world. Heidegger isn’t saying technology is “evil”; he is saying it is dangerous because it acts like a pair of glasses we can’t take off. Tagore viewed the mechanical civilization of the West as a force that prioritizes efficiency over the spiritual soul. To him, the world has a personality (a rhythmic, interconnected life), which is silenced by the *clatter of iron*—the cold, impersonal noise of industrial greed. (Tagore,1922, pp. 113-130)

However, when discussing the nature of being in the modern technological era, both Rabindranath and Heidegger believe that technology leads to a specific type of poverty: a poverty of the soul, where we know the price of everything but the value of nothing. Heidegger’s concept of “*Gelassenheit*” and “releasement” toward things suggests a way of living with technology without being enslaved by it, allowing things to *be* what they are without forcing them into a utilitarian Mold. Tagore echoes this in his educational philosophy at Shantiniketan, where he advocated for a “living bond” with nature. He believed that true “Being”

Nature of Being: A Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger

is found when the human spirit is allowed to expand into its surroundings through aesthetic and spiritual sympathy, rather than contracting into a self-centered pursuit of technological mastery (Tagore,1931, pp.129-160). Furthermore, the critique of technology in relation to *Being* addresses the concepts of time and space. Modern technology seeks to *annihilate* distance and save time, yet both Heidegger and Tagore observed that this results in a restless, homeless existence. Heidegger noted that “all distances in time and space are shrinking, yet this shortening of distance brings no nearness” (Heidegger,1971, pp.167). We are connected to everything but belong nowhere. Tagore similarly felt that the speed of technological life robbed humans of the leisure necessary for the soul to breathe and grow. In Tagore’s view, *Being* requires a certain slowness—a rhythm that matches the unfolding of a flower or the rising of the sun. The technological rush toward progress is, for him, a rush away from the self. He feared that the ‘Spirit of the West,’ characterized by its technological prowess, was essentially a ‘Spirit of the Organization, which is the opposite of the ‘Spirit of the Person’ (Tagore,1922, pp.15-27).

5. Conclusion and Methodological Reflections

The comparative ontological investigation into the philosophies of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger reveals a profound convergence on the nature of Being, despite the vast cultural and intellectual distances between Bengal's spiritual humanism and Germany's existential phenomenology. This study has employed a qualitative, comparative methodological framework, focusing specifically on ontological structures rather than on secondary ethical or political characteristics. By utilizing a hermeneutic approach to analyze primary texts such as Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Tagore’s *The Religion of Man*, the research has successfully demonstrated that both thinkers identify a crisis in modernity rooted in the reduction of existence to a measurable, objective entity. The methodology prioritized thematic alignment between Tagore’s Surplus in Man and Heidegger’s Dasein, enabling a cross-cultural dialogue that transcends the traditional East-West dichotomy. Through this lens, the research concludes that both philosophers view Being not as a static substance but as a dynamic process of disclosure—an event of participation where the human subject is inextricably involved with the cosmic or ontological whole. The research further concludes that the “fallenness” or “inauthentic existence” described by Heidegger finds a striking parallel in Tagore’s description of the “limited” or “ego-centered” man. Heidegger’s critique of the *das Man*—the anonymous public that strips Dasein of its unique possibilities—echoes Tagore’s warning against the machine of modern civilization that crushes the organic Person. The

Nature of Being: A Comparative Analysis through the Lens of Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Heidegger

methodological strength of this comparison lies in identifying how both thinkers utilize the concept of “forgetfulness” to describe the modern condition: for Heidegger, it is the *Seinsvergessenheit* (forgetfulness of Being), while for Tagore, it is the soul’s impoverishment through an obsession with “having” rather than “being”. Their shared critique of technology serves as a vital ontological warning, suggesting that the modern drive for technological mastery results in a “metaphysical homelessness” where distances shrink but no true nearness is achieved. Ultimately, the study affirms that for both Tagore and Heidegger, the path to authentic existence requires a return to a contemplative, poetic, and relational way of being-in-the-world. Future Research Directions: Building upon the findings of this comparative study, several critical questions emerge that warrant further academic inquiry within the realm of global philosophy and contemporary ontology. One might ask to what extent the Tagorean concept of “*Jivan-Devata*” or the “*Lord of Life*” can be systematically mapped onto Heidegger’s later reflections on “*The Fourfold*” (Earth, Sky, Divinities, and Mortals), and whether such a mapping would provide a more robust metaphysical foundation for environmental ethics in the Anthropocene. Furthermore, considering the radical shifts in digital existence since the original writings of these thinkers, a pertinent question arises: how would the Tagorean “Surplus” and Heideggerian “Enframing” interpret the current evolution of artificial intelligence and virtual reality? Does the digital age represent a total eclipse of the “Saving Power” found in art and poetry, or does it offer a new, albeit fragmented, “clearing” for the disclosure of Being? Additionally, future research could explore the socio-political implications of “authentic existence” in a globalized world characterized by mass migration and displacement. If, as Heidegger suggests, shortening distances brings no true nearness, how can Tagore’s vision of “Universal Man” and “Creative Unity” be applied to resolve the “homelessness” inherent in modern nomadic existence? Can the “living bond” with nature advocated at Shantiniketan serve as a practical pedagogical model for resisting the “Spirit of the Organization” that Tagore so deeply feared? Moreover, it is worth questioning whether the ontological event of participation that is described by both thinkers can be reconciled with contemporary materialist philosophies that reject any form of spiritual or transcendental “surplus”. Investigating whether Tagore’s *realization of joy* can be translated into the language of phenomenological “attunement” or “*Befindlichkeit*” may also provide deeper insights into the emotional structures of human existence. These questions suggest that the dialogue between Tagore and Heidegger is far from exhausted and remains a vital resource for navigating the “ontological danger” of our contemporary era.

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