KRITIKE VOLUME NINETEEN NUMBER FOUR (FEBRUARY 2026) 8-17

Article

Heidegger and the Forgetting of Walking in Manila

Remmon E. Barbaza

Abstract: This essay seeks to show, mainly through Heideggerian phenomenology, that the forgetting of walking in Manila is not merely a problem that requires a practical or technical solution. Rather it is more radically and ontologically rooted in what Heidegger famously referred to as *Seinsvergessenheit*, or "the forgetfulness of being," particularly our way of being human. The forgetting of our being human in turn reveals itself in the way we design our cities, the spaces we inhabit, which yet again determines how we move about and navigate through such spaces. The acceptance of the way we are as humans, built as we are primarily to walk, is surely the first step in finding our way to retrieving this long lost habit. But there is also language to guide us. A brief consideration of the Filipino language itself shows that walking is so much part of who we are as human beings.

Keywords: Heidegger, Manila, forgetting, walking

Manila ranks among the world's least walkable cities. Streets are often unsafe for pedestrians, sidewalks—where they exist—are narrow or obstructed, and crossing the road can be an exercise in risk-taking. The dominance of private cars, coupled with an inefficient and often costly public transport system, has resulted in an urban environment that all but discourages walking. Long-time mobility advocate, Robert Siy notes: "Only 6 percent of Filipino households own a private car; in Greater Manila, the percentage of households with cars is 11.5 percent, only a small minority. And yet, road congestion in many cities is already at crisis levels."[1] For its part, the Asian Development Bank describes how, in Manila,

[1] Robert Siy, "Our worsening mobility – 1," in *The Manila Times* (22 November 2025), <https://www.manilatimes.net/2025/11/22/business/top-business/our-worsening-mobility-1/2229316>.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.4.a1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026b/barbaza_february2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

"pedestrians are being corralled into very narrow spaces to ensure that vehicle flow is not affected."[2]

From a purely practical perspective, Manila's mobility crisis has familiar straightforward solutions: better sidewalks, protected crossings, efficient trains, rapid bus transit, traffic-calming measures, reduced car ownership. Similar proposals have been implemented in cities across the world, from Seoul to Bogotá, with varying degrees of success.

Yet if we stop at the practical level, might we not miss the depth of the problem? The same crisis manifests in cities with vastly different histories, cultures, and geographies. That it appears across such diverse contexts suggests that the roots go deeper than urban policy or cultural habit. What if the question is not merely how to make walking possible again, but how the forgetting of walking came to be? And what if the forgetting of walking is a mere symptom of our forgetting of being in general, and in particular the forgetting of our being as the human beings that we are, that is to say, our way of being as humans?

Heidegger is known to have brought to our awareness not only the forgottenness of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*), but also its retrieval (*Wiederholung*) as a question.[3] The forgottenness of being in general has profound consequences that also involve forgottenness of the being of particular beings, such as human beings, environment, nature, language, and technology. Viewed from this perspective, we can see that the forgetting of walking might indeed have something to do with the forgetting of being in general. That we now see nature as "one huge gas station," as Heidegger famously said in the "Memorial Address" as a kind of a foreboding of a tragedy waiting to happen—if indeed it hasn't happened yet—is only one glaring example of how the forgetting of being in general can alter the way we stand in relation to beings, in this case, nature.

Thus, in this essay, I approach the phenomenon of the forgetting of walking in Manila from a Heideggerian perspective in hopes that we might be able to go beyond mere practical or technological solutions to the problem, however admittedly necessary they are, and consider more meditatively its ontological roots. I would like in particular to touch on Heidegger's concepts of dwelling, nearness, and technology. As we shall see later, walking as an everyday human experience belongs, in general, to our dwelling as human beings; it also involves, in particular, our sense and experience of nearness as

[2] James Leather, Herbert Fabian, Sudhir Gota, and Alvin Mejia, "Walkability and Pedestrian Facilities in Asian Cities: State and Issues," in *ADB Sustainable Development Working Paper Series*, 17 (February 2011), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28679/adb-wp17-walkability-pedestrian-facilities-asian-cities.pdf>.

[3] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. and with a foreword by Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 1ff.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.4.a1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026b/barbaza_february2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

well as the kind of technology we choose to use in navigating both the near and the far.

These three concepts—dwelling, nearness, and technology—already appear in Heidegger's fundamental ontology found in *Being and Time*. In expounding on the concept of being-in-the-world as the "fundamental constitution" of Dasein, Heidegger tells us, via an etymological reflection, that "being-in" means "dwelling, staying near, being familiar with …" and so on.[4] This means that it is fundamental to our being human that our way of being is one of dwelling, and that such dwelling involves a staying near something or someone that belongs to our concrete world.

For example, fishermen in the Central Caroline Islands of Micronesia have long been known for their traditional navigation knowledge and techniques, relying only on their sensorial knowledge and experience of their surrounding world, which includes the stars in the sky. "Lacking writing, local navigators have had to commit to memory their knowledge of the stars, sailing directions, seamarks, and how to read the waves and clouds to determine currents and predict weather."[5] One can see, therefore, that for the Carolinian fisherman or voyager, the sky is near, nearer to them than some distant land in the Americas or Europe. They are at home in the sea and are familiar with it, even as at the end of each voyage or expedition they will return to their homes and families on land—all of these belong to their being-in-the-world, their being at home.[6]

Obviously, fishing and voyaging involves technology, which in the case of the traditional Carolinian fishermen and voyagers means the building of long-distance canoes.[7] The materials they use in building the long-distance canoes, their shape, dimensions, colors—all of these belong to the world of the Carolinian fishermen and voyagers. Over time, they have come to know and develop an "appropriate" and "human scale" technology long before they became buzzwords in contemporary environmental ethics and philosophy of technology.

What has the consideration of traditional voyagers in Micronesia got to do with our inquiry into the unfortunate situation of the pedestrian in a

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[4] *Ibid*., 54–55.

[5] Ward Goodenough and Stephen Warren, "Traditional Navigation in the Western Pacific: A Search for a Pattern," in *Expedition* (*Penn Museum)*, 29:3 (1987), 3-14, <https://www.penn.museum/documents/publications/expedition/29-3/Traditional.pdf>.

[6] I tried to describe, phenomenologically, how water is experienced as alluring, necessary, but at times also terrifying in "The Boat Will Rise, Too: On the Necessity, Allure, and Terror of Water," in *Coastal Urbanities: Mobilities, Meanings, Manoeuvrings*, ed. by Rapti Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Kelvin E.Y. Low, Noorman Abdullah, and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 50–62.

[7] UNESCO, "Carolinian Wayfinding and Canoe Making," <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/carolinian-wayfinding-and-canoe-making-01735>.

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https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026b/barbaza_february2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

city like Manila? The important thing to realize is how the structure of existence that Heidegger laid out in his fundamental ontology—dwelling, staying near, being familiar with, having useful things at hand—is as much true for the voyager or fisherman as it is for pedestrians navigating their way through the chaos of a megacity like Metro Manila. What stars are for the Carolinian voyagers could be neon lights for inhabitants of Metro Manila.

One of the greatest classic modern Filipino novels, in fact, is titled *Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, authored by Edgardo M. Reyes, which was translated into English for its movie version as *Manila in the Claws of Lights*.[8] Interestingly, the main protagonist, Julio Madiaga, is a fisherman from the province who decides to go the city of Manila to look for his lost love. The context may have changed as Julio moved as a fisherman from the province, then as a construction worker to the city, but the same fundamental structure of human existence, of being-in-the-world, remains even as, tragically, Julio's experience of staying near and being at home is negatively transformed as one of getting lost in the urban jungle and painfully experiencing the distance of his lost love.

We can see the continuity of Heidegger's understanding of nearness and distance from *Being and Time* all the way to his lectures in the 1950s, notably in "The Thing," "Building Dwelling Thinking," as well as "The Question Concerning Technology." Not only does Heidegger show in *Being and Time* that our fundamental way of being-in as the humans that we are is one of dwelling and staying near, but he also states that being-in itself is constituted by "de-distancing" (*Ent-fernung*) and "directionality" (*Ausrichtung*): "As constitutive characteristics of being-in, de-distancing and directionality determine the spatiality of Dasein, for its being heedfully and circumspectly in discovered innerworldly space."[9]

What Heidegger shows us here is the human being's tendency to bring-near by, as it were, removing the distance (the German word for "remove" is *entfernen*, literally, to remove the distance, or to bring near what is otherwise far). We are initially intrigued or terrified by what is alien, what is foreign, that is to say what is far from us, but once the distance is bridged and it is brought near, then they become familiar to us.[10]

In a series of lectures that he delivered in public in the 1950s, we see Heidegger returning to the question of nearness. In "The Thing," Heidegger raises what at first seem like mere questions, but at a deeper level are more

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[8] Edgardo M. Reyes, *Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, 2nd ed. (Manila: C&E Publishing); Lino Brocka, director, *Manila in the Claws of Light*, (Cinema Artists, 1975), 2hr., 3m.

[9] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 107.

[10] I reflected on this fundamental characteristic of our being human in a commentary of historian Vicente Rafael's book, *The Promise of the Foreign*. See Remmon E. Barbaza, "Commentary on *The Promise of the Foreign*," in *Kritika Kultura*, 9 (2007), 61–66.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.4.a1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026b/barbaza_february2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

like a post-mortem for a catastrophe that has already happened, in the form of rhetorical questions:

> What is nearness if it fails to come about despite the reduction of the longest distances to the shortest intervals? What is nearness if it is even repelled by the restless abolition of distances? What is nearness if, along with its failure to appear, remoteness also remains absent?
>
> What is happening here when, as a result of the abolition of great distances, everything is equally far and equally near? What is this uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near—is, as it were, without distance?
>
> Everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness.[11]

One might wonder how far we have veered from our initial consideration of the forgetting of walking in Manila, and why we bothered at all to go through the torturous path of Heideggerian thinking. But the choice before us remains: whether to understand the forgetting of walking in Manila as solely a practical and technical problem requiring a practical and technical solution, or to heed the invitation to think meditatively (*Besinnung*) and situate walking as belonging to something fundamental to us human beings, the way we are and the way we were meant to be.

In our modern technological age, the predominant way of thinking is one of calculation coupled with the predominant approach of problem-solving. The environment, for instance, is primarily a problem to be solved, and the way to solve that is mainly by calculation. In many cities around the world, for example, local governments saw mobility as primarily a technical problem, and solutions to the perennial problem of traffic congestion often involve the widening of roads or streets to add more lanes, which also often involve the cementing of the ground and the cutting down of trees; the building of "skyways" or elevated roads, at times over rivers or streams; and so on.

Heidegger's lecture, "The Question Concerning Technology," delivered in 1955 at the Technische Hochschule in Munich, begins with a

[11] Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry Language Thought*, trans. and with an introduction by Albert Hofstader (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 163–164.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.4.a1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026b/barbaza_february2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

startling claim: the essence of technology is nothing technological.[12] To understand what he means, we can think of other domains. The essence of art is not a particular artwork or even the artist; the essence of a sport is not a specific game or this or that athlete.[13]

At the heart of this insight is of course the concept of the ontological difference that Heidegger first expounds in *Being and Time*. But the ontological difference, i.e., between *Sein* and *Seiende* (or being, thought more as a verb than a noun, and beings), must be thought along with the unity between the two. Two passages that appear in *Being and Time* express this relationship, as follows: "The being of beings is itself not a being," and "Being is always the being of beings." In a later work, Heidegger would refer to this as "the duality of being."[14]

We can see that in the history of philosophy, the ontological difference is not quite unique or original in Heidegger, as thinkers such as Plato already thought of the difference between the sensible and the intelligible worlds, all the way to the modern period when, for example, Kant distinguished between *das Ding an sich* and the thing as it appears. What is radical in Heidegger is not only that he insists on the unity of the two despite their difference, but more so that the two go together and that being and beings can only be understood when the two are taken together. One cannot overestimate the import of the thinking of the duality of being to the history of thought.

Only when we are able to grasp the duality of being are we in a position to understand Heidegger's thinking on technology and nearness, both of which are necessary in reflecting, from a Heideggerian perspective, on the experience of walking and its place in human existence, particularly in the urban setting. Thus, we now see that technology, too, has an essence that transcends devices and machines. This essence shapes how we encounter the world, often without our awareness.

If we confront the mobility crisis only at the level of traffic lights, road widths, and vehicle bans, we are still caught within the technological frame. Here we recall Ladelle McWhorter's thought-provoking essay, "Guilt as Management Technology: A Call to Heideggerian Reflection."[15] Whether we

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[12] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and with an introduction by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 3–35.

[13] See Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and with an introduction by Albert Hofstader (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 17–79.

[14] Martin Heidegger, "Moira," in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. by David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 87.

[15] Ladelle McWhorter, "Guilt as Management Technology: A Call to Heideggerian Reflection," in *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, 2nd expanded ed., ed. by Ladelle McWhorter and Gail Stenstad (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 5–16.

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ISSN 1908-7330

pat ourselves on the back when we succeed in our projects, or feel guilty when we fail, it is us human beings who will have to manage the results or consequences. We take both credit and responsibility in everything that we do. In other words, we claim our human agency first and foremost, if not solely. Thus, human beings see their primary relationship with nature as one of management. Because the environmental crisis is perceived mainly as a case of mismanagement, the solution lies in simply managing it well.

As we near the conclusion to our present reflections, we might do well to hear another startling claim that we hear from Heidegger in his 1950s series of public lectures, which in the context of our present reflections deserves to be quoted *in extenso*:

> It is language that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature. In the meantime, to be sure, there rages round the earth an unbridled yet clever talking, writing, and broadcasting of spoken words. Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. Perhaps it is before all else man's subversion of this relation of dominance that drives his nature into alienation. That we retain a concern for care in speaking is all to the good, but it is of no help to us as long as language still serves us even then only as a means of expression. Among all the appeals that we human beings, on our part, can help to be voiced, language is the highest and everywhere the first.[16]

Now, concerning walking, what do we learn when we listen to the Filipino language? For one, the word *lakad* literally means "to walk." Yet our everyday expressions show that it carries a much broader meaning. We say, *Saan ang lakad mo ngayon?* ("Where are you going today?") not only to ask about a stroll, but about any outing or engagement. To say, *May lalakarin lang ako* ("I just have something to take care of") might involve no walking at all. Even *kalakaran*—the customary way of doing things—contains *lakad*, suggesting that movement, passage, and the rhythm of walking are embedded in our language and thought.[17]

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[16] Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and with an introduction by Albert Hofstader (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 144.

[17] I owe this insight into how walking is embedded in the Filipino language to my wife, Arlene Florendo Barbaza, who pointed this out to me in one of our occasional philosophical conversations.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.4.a1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026b/barbaza_february2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

This linguistic richness hints at a cultural intuition: walking is not merely locomotion. It is a way of inhabiting the world. Yet in Manila today, this dimension of life is all but erased by the dominance of car-centric planning and the absence of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. The forgetting of walking is not only the loss of a habit—it is the loss of a certain way of being.

Viewed within Heideggerian thinking, the forgetting of walking is not just an unfortunate byproduct of urban growth—it is but one of the many manifestations of how technology shapes our existence. The car is not merely a faster way to move; it restructures our sense of distance, speed, and even time itself. We begin to measure space not in steps but in minutes behind the wheel. We redesign cities around cars, not people, and in doing so, we forget other ways of moving through the world.

The irony is that automobility—literally, the ability to move on one's own, but portrayed in popular culture as "freedom of movement"—turns into *auto-immobility*. The more we depend on cars, the more we create traffic congestion, noise, and pollution that immobilize us. We widen roads, cut down trees, and pave over soil in the name of speed, only to move more slowly and less freely. Urban planners call this "induced demand": more road space attracts more cars, perpetuating the cycle. Federico Fellini captured this self-defeating logic in the opening scene of the movie, *8 ½*.[18] Trapped in a suffocating traffic jam, the characters are immobilized, enclosed, and seemingly unconcerned. The scene is a haunting image of our thoughtlessness—our capacity to choke ourselves with the very tools meant to set us free.

If our crisis is not only technical but ontological—*if it concerns our way of being*—then any solution must address not just infrastructure but thoughtlessness itself. Cities can be redesigned for walkability, but unless we also cultivate the capacity to dwell differently, in a way that is mindful, we risk repeating the same mistakes in another form. This is not a call to romanticize slowness or to reject technology outright. Walking is not inherently superior to driving. Rather, walking can disclose a different pace of life—one that is neither hurried nor idle but attuned to human scale and rhythm. It can remind us that we are beings who inhabit the earth with others, not merely operators of machines moving through a neutral grid of coordinates.

To make cities walkable again is, in part, a design challenge: safe, shaded sidewalks; connected pedestrian networks; transit-oriented development. But it is also an invitation to remember walking as a way of being. The spaces we create must allow for the possibility of awakening from

[18] *8 ½*, directed by Federico Fellini (Columbia Pictures, 1963).

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https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026b/barbaza_february2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

our thoughtlessness—spaces where the walker can feel the texture of the city, encounter its smells and sounds, and meet others face-to-face.

In walking, we may rediscover what the Filipino language has preserved in the word *lakad*: movement not as a mere means to an end, but as a way of being we may find again that human pace that belongs neither to the idleness of the couch nor the frenzy of the highway, but to the measured step of a being at home in the world. When the cry goes up for our cities to "slow down," the answer might not be in the traffic code but in our own feet—taking the first steps, literally, toward a way of life we have forgotten. In learning how to walk again, perhaps we may learn again how to dwell on earth, in keeping with our being human.

Department of Philosophy, Ateneo de Manila University
Quezon City, The Philippines

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ISSN 1908-7330