The World as a Meaningful Totality*

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Abstract

This paper shows how Martin Heidegger revolutionized epistemology by reflecting on the meaning of objects, coming to the conclusion that persons are not objects and objects do not have an existence independent from thinking. His critique of Western epistemology is analyzed, and a draft proposal is presented reconciling the classical subject-object distinction and Heidegger's hermeneutics.

1 Introduction

What is the meaning of existence? This is a very old philosophical question, although not the foundational one. Starting with Thales, Ancient Greek philosophers asked the question of the origin of all

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things: Where does everything come from? When Aristotle established his theory of causality, he distinguished four different causes, one of them being the final cause (*telos*): the purpose of something for someone. But how does this cause fit in a world view dominated by *material* and *efficient* causes? Edmund Husserl established the method of eidetic reduction, trying to reveal the structure of pure consciousness. Martin Heidegger objects that this project is untenable, because pure consciousness does not exist. Whereas Husserl argued that intentionality is essentially related to consciousness, Heidegger said that there is no intentionality without meaning, and since meaning is created by consciousness, there can be no consciousness without any pre-understanding.

2 Meaning in *Being and Time*

2.1 The structure of Dasein

Because Heidegger does not want to be connected to the dualistic tradition of subject-object distinction, he introduces the term *Dasein* which he used instead of the term 'subject'. A Dasein is basically an entity that is conscious of its own existence. (BT 32) "Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence - in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself." (BT 33) It is quite different to analyze the ontological structure of things and Dasein itself. When analyzing things we differentiate according to certain categories, as we do in an Aristotelian or Kantian tradition. (BT 70) According to Heidegger, analyzing Dasein is different: Since understanding takes place within

Dasein, understanding Dasein is formal (without content). The structure of Dasein must be defined in "terms of existentiality" (BT 70), meaning the states of Being that are necessary for the Dasein to exist.

Understanding takes place within our consciousness. At the same time understanding constitutes consciousness, because consciousness without understanding is "empty": Heidegger's teacher Edmund Husserl thought that consciousness is always *intentional*, it needs to create 'objects of thinking' which are put into a meaningful relation, finally constituting an act of thinking. In Chapter 31 of *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger writes: "If we interpret understanding as a fundamental *existentiale*, this indicates that this phenomenon is conceived as a basic mode of Dasein's being." (BT 182 / OS 115). *Existentialia* (pl. of *existentiale*) are certain characteristics of the structure of Dasein, which are necessary to constitute Dasein.

Heidegger introduces the concept of "ontological difference" by equating *Sein* (which is described as the *horizon of understanding*) and understanding: Only what is understandable can actually exist. *Sein* is the precondition to *Seiend*, because things can only be perceived as beings (recognized that they are) by understanding them (recognized how they are). *Sein* and *Seiendes* are identical in difference. This difference is also reflected in the distinction of the understanding (Dasein) and the thing(s) to be understood. Trying to understand oneself, a person usually projects the comprehension of the world's *Sein* to himself, which makes him belief that he is himself a thing, which Heidegger rejects: Humans only exist in performing their life (*Lebensvollzug*).

Now Heidegger's definition of the *Sein* of the *Dasein* ("the totality

of Dasein's structural whole.", BT 317) shall be analyzed: "Ahead-of-oneself-being-already-in as being-alongside."[1] This rather incomprehensible summary covers very important points:

1) "Sich vorweg sein" (being ahead of oneself) displays Heidegger's concept of *existentiality*: One has a pre-understanding of the world; the *Dasein* has a pre-understanding of *Sein* in order to be able to ask the question of *Sein*.

2) "Schon sein in" (being already in) displays Heidegger's concept of *facticity* or *thrownness*. The *Dasein* is thrown into Dasein and does not find any reason for this having happened or for anything to exist.

3) "Sein bei" (being with) displays Heidegger's concept of *Verfallenheit*. Because of its thrownness into the world, the *Dasein* is mainly determined by the *Man*, which is the cultural, historical and social background of *Dasein*.

2.2   Meaning and Understanding

Essential characteristics of the structure of Dasein are defined as *existentialia*. These do not only include the possibility of intentionality, as Husserl pointed out, but meanings as defined relations of intentional objects. Not all relations can be created by the Dasein. Its "thrownness" into reality implies that it has a pre-understanding of some meanings, at least those which are sufficient to be self-aware: "Understanding is the existential Being of Dasein's own potentiality-for-Being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses in itself

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[1] "Sich-vorweg-schon-sein-in (einer Welt) als Sein-bei (innerweltlich begegenenden Seienden)"

what its Being is capable of." (BT 184 / OS 117)

When we 'create' an object in our consciousness, we establish the idea of this object as being part of a 'web of involvements'. We project possible uses and origins into this idea, making the object related to previous objects we know. This is also true for our own Dasein, when we try to understand it: we try too see it in the totality of its involvements: "As long as it is, Dasein always has understood itself and always will understand itself in terms of possibilities." (BT 185 / OS 118)

We see here that Heidegger's method is similar to the one of Descartes and Kant. Descartes tried to establish criteria for absolute knowledge, starting from 'I think', coming to the conclusion that the only thing I can know for sure - when I doubt everything that is doubtable - I cannot deny that I as a thinking entity (*res cogitans*) exist. Kant builds his theory on this undoubtable knowledge, extending it by the structures of intuition which transform sensual into conceptual perception (*categories*). Heidegger basically denies that this 'a priori' knowledge is enough to establish self-awareness. The Cartesian idea, that the 'I' is conscious of its own process of doubting, is very similar to Heidegger's definition of Dasein: an entity that is aware of its own existence. But this awareness is not - as Descartes claims - without any presupposition. Making the statement 'I think therefore I am', one already has concepts of 'I', 'thinking', 'existence' and a concept of logical implication. And this makes Heidegger's concept of Dasein even more primordial, yet at the same time not foundational: His philosophy accepts that any form of knowledge needs some pre-understanding, and we cannot go back to one basic concept upon

which everything is based. According to Heidegger, even the phenomenological "intuition of essences" - as developed by Husserl - are grounded on existential understanding (C.f. OS 119).

2.3 Fore-structures

Because of the interpreter's fore-structures (*Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht* and *Vorgriff*), meaning cannot exist outside of *Dasein*. (OS 122) Hence hermeneutics (understanding something in the world) always requires investigating the ontological structure of Dasein. This structure "emerges as Dasein comes to articulate the as-structure of its Being as understanding." (OS 17) Including the structure of Dasein, ontological hermeneutics points out that an entity must be seen "*as something* in its totality of involvements". (OS 18)

When we try to understand a new concept or object, we summarize all possible interactions it can have with us or with things we have already understood (our fore-having). For example, when we see a key without ever having seen either a door or metal, nor ever having experienced the need for privacy, we would not understand this new object. We might admire the fine structure of the key and see it as an object of art. But in the web of involvements of a person in our current society, the concept of a key is understood quickly. The concept of key is connected with doors, the feeling of security and privacy, and with the locksmith that formed metal into this particular form. Having an origin and a purpose, the concept key extends our web of interrelated meanings and fits nicely within in.

The question of purpose is much more important than origin. We

can have a proper concept of 'key' even if we don't know how it is made; the material out of which it is made is as well irrelevant. What is important is to assume that an item is made for a certain purpose. When understanding an object we project our own Dasein into possible worlds, where the Dasein interacts with this object: "As understanding, Dasein projects its Being upon possibilities." (BT 188 / OS 120) We have a fore-sight of all possible involvements.

Interpretation [Auslegung] is the development of understanding (OS 120). "In interpretation, understanding (...) becomes itself." (BT 188 / OS 121) It is the "working-out of possibilities projected in understanding" (Ibid.) It is not the case that we simply project all possible purposes into an object giving it an unambigious meaning, but the meaning of a concept is always open for change and extension. The possible involvements do not even have to be coherent: For example an abstract term (like 'justice') can be applied and rejected at the same time for a certain situation, depending on the concept of justice (for example a utilitiarian and deontological conception). It is not an exeptional case but quite normal that a concept comprises contradictory involvements.

In order to understand concepts we have to fit them in into our previous web of meanings. When interpreting a text that makes references to these meanings and puts them in certain relations, we can only understand these relations by using and reflecting on our fore-having. "[T]he interpretation operates in Being towards a totality of involvements which is already understood - a Being which understands." (BT 191 / OS 122). Interpretation extends our fore-having and creates - based on the fore-having as groundwork - a more-dimensional web of

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possible extensions. (I further explain this idea in the next chapter using "models of reality".)

Heidegger symbolizes this necessity of a fore-structure in order to understand and interpret something new with the concept of the *hermeneutic circle*, which we cannot avoid (There is no presuppositionless or foundational knowledge) but only learn to "come into it in the right way"(BT 195 / OS 125). "An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us." (BT 191f / OS 123)

How does something become intelligible as something? Intelligibility does not mean knowledge. It means that a connection from the fore-having to the object can be created; that there are consistent extensions of the fore-having that include the new object or concept. The process of this fitting-in is the process of interpretation. "In the [hermeneutic] circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing." (BT 195 / OS 126)

3 The Concept of Reality

3.1 Language

Language is quite often ambiguous, and a very important part of Martin Heidegger's philosophical journey is examining some of these ambiguities. The verb 'to be' can be used in various ways in the English and German language. It can be used as an auxiliary or a main verb, or it can be substantiated, which is the most problematic action. In German there are two possibilities for substantiation: every verb can

be substantiated without making any changes on the verb itself or one can create a progressive form similar to the English language. The first possibility is usually equal to the progressive form in English: If one literally says "the go" ("Das Gehen") in German, one means the process of going - but usually in a very abstract sense, not one particular act of going. A substantiated verb 'to be', in German 'Sein', can be translated 'being' or 'existence'. But what is actually referred to? For this particular verb, the meaning is usually not equivalent to the progressive form. 'Das Sein' can have two meanings: Either it stands for the individual existence of a person (my or your being), or it can refer to the world / universe as a whole.

The second option - referring to the universe as a whole - is shown by Heidegger to be unsatisfactory. The question is whether mental entities, such as my individual existence, are a part of the world as a whole. This is also where Heidegger modifies Husserl's phenomenological method: The world does not stand in contrast to the subject, but the subject is a part of the world. Heidegger's objective is to reconcile the ideas that the world is constituted by the experiencing person AND the experiencing person is a part of the world.

3.2 Properties and Concepts

Reality is considered to be everything there is. The universe is considered to be equivalent either to reality or to the observable part of reality.[2] Everybody has a concept of 'existence' and everyone is able

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[2]Some people say there is a 'multiverse' consisting of different universes. Others say that there is a platonic world or there is a God which/who is existent but outside of the universe. Let's assume here that the word reality also includes all possible extensions.

to count. We cannot count everything there is, but we usually think, if we had enough time, we might be able to do so. That is because we suppose OBJ: "The universe consists of objects"[3] and FIN: "The amount of objects in the universe is finite." But actually these premises are disputable and, moreover, there is not just one universe: Every universe we think of is a concept in our mind. And we can think of different kinds of universes: finite or infinite, Euclidean or non-Euclidean, grainy or continuous. Universes are therefore embedded as modal objects within our inner intuitive space. We only assume (OR) that there is one single universe "out there" that matches - completely, partly, or maybe not at all - one of our models.

Why do we think the universe consists of objects? This might be because objects are the basic elements of mental perception. Sensory perception, on the contrary, is a wholeness which out of itself does not bring about cognition. Cognition starts by making distinctions. A certain part of the sensory input is "cut out" in order to establish an object of thinking. This act of identification is the very first step of rationality. An image of the chosen part of the outer perception is mirrored into our inner perception and is given the predicate "existent". The criteria according to which a certain part is chosen are usually established by a perceived difference. There are certain sensory inputs that are not in cognition, but rather irreducible feelings that call for action: hunger, pain, sexual desire. Most properties are in relation to these basic concepts. At the same time this foundation gives a structure to the set of relations; it gives them a "meaning".

One can also call this the universe, as the etymology unversus=whole implies.

[3]In the word reality the origin 'res' (=thing) suggests OBJ.

In our mind there is an inner perception consisting of possible models of reality again consisting of objects which are determined using properties, with the law of non-contradiction as method and prerequisite.

What is not clear thus far is the process that determines a certain part of the sensory input to be an object of perception. How can a baby recognize a milk bottle as a milk bottle? Why can't it recognize a watch as a watch? The answer is easy: the milk bottle is a part of the baby's life-world (*Lebenswelt* - as introduced by Edmund Husserl), for thinking always has its roots within life.[4] According to Heidegger, no object can have an independent existence, without any meaningful relations. Objects of perception are constituted by establishing or discovering references to one's own life and to prior meaningful objects; they are things in space and time, which means they have an appearance, a history and a future. The history correlates to the question "where does it come from?" and the future to "what is its purpose?", the latter being the more important. A milk bottle is identified as a milk bottle only after seeing it as "something that looks like the image of a milk bottle that I have in my head and something that has the purpose to still my hunger". Heidegger points out that not every concept can be established using this method, since there are always fundamental concepts that cannot be further defined. In this example, 'hunger' is such a concept. Contrary to Kant's view, this *interpretation horizon* ("Verständnishorizont") is not only for-

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[4]Wilhelm Dilthey actually stated that thinking can never go beyond life. Here I remain with a weaker version. C.f. Dilthey, GS XIX, S. 346f.

mal[5] but already 'contains' meaning (c.f. Chapter 2). For Heidegger, ontological questions begin here, not by splitting the world up into independent objects as in the Aristotelian approach.

Where does this rather relativistic approach of objects lead us? We would have to rethink the premise OBJ stating that the world consists of objects or modify our concepts of world and reality. OBJ can be maintained by reducing the set of existing objects to possible fundamental physical particles. This would leave all objects of perception to be simple agglomerations of particles and would not explain why certain agglomerations can be given a meaning and others cannot.[6] Rather, the concept world can be comprehended as a *meaningful totality* ("sinnhafte Totalität"). The world therefore contains all possible objects of perception and all possible meaningful relations between these objects, and hence, can never be perceived completely. It exists prior to setting up any relations; it is the precondition for the possibility of experience; it is transcendental.

3.3   The Ontological Dimension of Being

The theses hitherto are somewhat disturbing: Universes are theoretically in our mind, yet the world and its objects exist prior to human experience. However, it is important to emphasize that the subject finds itself to be a part of this meaningful totality; it recognizes that not all meanings are simply established but some are indeed discov-

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[5]According to Kant, certain categories and the understanding of time and space are a priori (before experience), all objects of perception are a posteriori.

[6]For example, the agglomeration "the moon and my shoes" is not considered an object of perception; not even cohesive agglomerations like "the right half of my body".

ered. Therefore, the subject assumes that the meaningful totality is unique as well as consistent. Inconsistencies in our thinking can indeed only be determined by applying them to an independent and supposedly consistent reality; several models of reality within our inner perception are incoherent only if there is just *one* reality.

Hence the assumption of one consistent objective reality is strongly connected to the process of thinking. Our actions are usually determined using one of our models of reality in order to predict and achieve a certain outcome. In a decision process we may sometimes use more than one model, for example with the goal of minimizing risks. But we consistently make the assumtion that some worlds are better models of reality than others. The idea of reality is 'constructed' as a limit of infinitely improving models. But how would one model be determined better than a different one? The main criteria are consistency, coherency and parsimony. Coherency usually means a compliance of implications of the model and sensory inputs. According to Poppers falsificationism, a theory is valid as long as it is not disproved by experiment. The problem with the criterion of coherency is, what Hilary Putnam and others noted, that any reference to an object is theory-dependent and, as Quine pointed out, that particular sentences can never be verified or falsified in isolation, since every theory can be modified to comply with unpredicted sensory data (Duhem-Quine-Thesis). The principle of parsimony as a ground rule of rationality states that - out of two incoherent but consistent theories both having equal strength of explanation and prediction - it is rational to accept the one with less ontological assumptions and irrational to accept the other. Accepting a theory usually means making it the foundation of

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every-day decisions.

The claim that there is a objective world independent from our mind is usually referred to as realism. I tried to explain why realism needs to be accepted in order to be able to make reasonable decisions. Anti-realism on the other hand does not necessarily reject that there is an objective reality but rather implies that the set of possible models cannot be ordered according to the quality of compliance to the real world.

3.4   Knowledge

Realism and Conceptual Constructivism seem to be mutually exclusive. Heidegger tells us that concepts can only be understood if they fit into a totality of previously known meanings. Most of the concepts are related to purposes and based on their indirect relation to fundamental existential experiences. Is the fact that these fundamental experiences are the same for all of humanity the main reason that we can understand one another? Is knowledge just that submodel of reality on which there are no disagreements because of the common existential structure of all Dasein?

I would like to propose a thought experiment. Assuming there is a Dasein that is not only aware of its own existence but also has a fore-having that includes the maximality of possible extensions of the basic human fore-having; the world would be held in this absolute Dasein, similar to the metaphysical concept of Objective Idealism, as for instance opined by George Berkeley or Georg W.F. Hegel. The difference from classical definitions of 'world' to this thought experiment is

that here 'world' is *not* a consistent concept. It includes all possible consistent models of the world, but these models can be contradictory towards one another.

It is quite interesting to compare this idea to Ludwig Wittgenstein's definition of 'world'. In his Tractatus Logico-philosophicus he wrote that the world is the "totality of facts, not of things" (TLP 1.1); a fact is the existence of states of affairs; a logical picture of facts is a thought, and a thought is a proposition with a sense (meaning) (TLP 2-4). Especially Wittgenstein's claim that "the facts in logical space are the world" (TLP 1.13) can be interpretated as the world being the universe of all possible facts. Since facts are thoughts and thoughts are meaningful propositions, the world then is the universe of all possible consistent systems of interrelated propositions.

Here the limits of a relativism (pluralism) of meanings are clearly demonstrated. The debate on the question of philosophical relativism of meanings (which is a view many people like to conclude from hermeneutics) is very much related to the debate on relativism in the philosophy of mathematics. There, pluralism is mostly rejected, because even if one can formulate logically contradictory axiomatic systems (like, for example, Zermelo-Fraenckel set theory with and without the Continuum Hypothesis), one can establish a system that contains all logically formulatable axiomatic systems: the universe of all possible sets.

4 Conclusion

Heidegger condemns traditional Western epistemology because it usually leads to a reductionistic ontology: "Only as phenomonelogy, is ontology possible" (BT 60). Knowledge is therefore not achieved through deduction from general and formal laws (as it is in natural sciences), but is grounded in the understanding of Being.

The problem this method faces is that it shifts knowledge away from objectivity. Martin Heidegger makes the destinction between objective existence ('Vorhandenheit') and subjective present-at-hand existence ('Zuhandenheit'). It is hard to reconcile Heidegger's epistemology which is based on *Dasein* with non-idealist claims, namely that there are certain facts (like the energetic state of a molecule) even without any person seeing or knowing it. Some empirical facts have a truth value even if it is logically impossible to determine this truth value, as in the statement "The number of galaxies in the universe is even." Also mathematical knowledge seems to be independent from human thinking: Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems imply a form of mathematical platonism.[7]

As I already postulated in my thought experiment, I think the only way to reconcile Heidegger's epistemology with realism is exactly the way George Berkeley reconciled his subjective idealism with the idea of a material world that is independent from the human mind. Berkeley's objective-subjective idealsm was nicely summarized in a limerick by Ronald Know and an anonymous reply:[8]

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[7]C.f. Gödel 1995, 147.
[8]Knowles 1999, 442.

There once was a man who said "God

Must think it exceedingly odd

If he finds that this tree

Continues to be

When there's no one about in the quad."

Dear Sir, Your astonishment's odd

I am always about in the quad

And that's why the tree

Will continue to be

Since observed by

Yours faithfully,

God.

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