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Why Ontologize?

Melvin Woody
Connecticut College, jmwoo@conncoll.edu

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Why Ontologize?

WHY ONTOLOGIZE? Why should we supplant or supplement the scientific conceptual vocabulary that psychiatry has developed in the course of the past century and start thinking in terms of Being and beings. That question is bound to arise for any psychotherapist upon first encounter with existential ontology—as it did for the participants in the Zollikon seminars. Angelica Tratter responds to that question from the side of psychiatry by explaining how existential psychotherapy develops out of Heidegger’s turn to fundamental ontology, both illustrating and contributing to that development by her own further elaboration of Binswanger’s phenomenology of world designs and Merleau-Ponty’s notion of emblems of being.

I will try to complement Tratter’s essay by tackling the same question from the side of philosophy—by showing how the turn to ontology follows from a critique of the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Heidegger’s teacher and colleague, and why that led to the reformulation of transcendental phenomenology as existential ontology and how that motivates adopting a conceptual vocabulary that most clinicians find alien and perplexing.

Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology

Husserl (1962) developed phenomenology in defense of the objectivity of science and mathematics against a historicism and psychologism that threatened to reduce logic to an expression of how humans happen to think and, perhaps, only how they happen to think in a particular historical culture. He claimed to found a new, presuppositionless science of phenomenology that would set aside all metaphysical assumptions about what sort of reality to ascribe to the objects we find in sense experience or imagination—or in abstract logic and mathematics and science. With all such metaphysical questions ‘bracketed,’ phenomenology describes and analyses all such phenomena just as they present themselves in experience. Husserl compared this project with Descartes’ use of systematic doubt to arrive at certainty about his own thoughts as thoughts and he argued that transcendental phenomenology would provide a comparable certainty as a basis for vindicating the objectivity of the several particular sciences. We cannot undertake to explore the subtleties of Husserl’s phenomenology here. For our purposes, it will suffice to cite what he concluded about being. In his Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology Husserl wrote that:

the whole spatio-temporal world, to which man and the human Ego claim to belong as subordinate singular
realities, is according to its meaning mere intentional Being, a Being, therefore, which has the merely secondary relative sense of a Being for a consciousness. It is a Being which consciousness in its own experiences (Erfahrungen) posits, and is, in principle, intuitable and determinable only as the element common to the harmoniously motivated appearance manifolds, but over and beyond this it is just nothing at all. (1962, 153)

But . . . what then are we to make of the being of consciousness? And how are we to account for its existence?

Heidegger (1962) and Sartre (1956) both recognized that Husserl had not actually set aside all metaphysical assumptions. He had conceived of consciousness as a sort of container or field within which all else falls. But that contradicts the intentional character of consciousness implicit in his claim that that all beings are merely intentional. Husserl had adopted Franz Brentano’s (1973) view that consciousness is always conscious of some object that it intends or means. It never just exists by itself, apart from any object. As Sartre put it, “A consciousness which would be consciousness of nothing would be an absolute nothing” (1956, 790). It follows that the being of consciousness depends upon the being of its objects. Consciousness, therefore, should not be conceived as a container or field within which its objects fall, but more as an arrow directed at and dependent on some being other than itself. The world cannot be within consciousness; consciousness must be within the world.

**BEING IN THE WORLD: THE ONTLOGICAL TURN**

Husserl had fallen into a Cartesian trap because he had not shed the metaphysical assumptions inherent in the traditional, post-Cartesian notion of the conscious mind. Heidegger managed to avoid that trap by shunning any appeal to consciousness or ‘the human Ego.’ In *Being and Time* (1962), he starts with being instead and forges a new phenomenology by describing and analyzing what sort of beings we are, using terms that he drew from ordinary German and refashioned in ways that challenged himself and his readers to a fresh view of human existence, not as a transcendental Ego containing a world, but as being in the world, engaged with other beings. The world itself is not a single being or object, but a diverse complex of other beings with which we (Daseins) are engaged. We do not ordinarily or originally experience other beings merely as things on hand, but as hammers and nails, shoes and socks, as crops or weeds, as accountants or nurses, plumbers or consultants, all of which are linked together by meanings that in the end refer back to us, to Daseins as beings who understand what they are for.

By recognizing the role of meaning in the constitution of the world, Heidegger transformed phenomenology. Because meanings depend on interpretation, Heidegger’s phenomenology incorporates hermeneutics and because those meanings depend on human projects and purposes that change in the course of history, his phenomenology also recognizes the historicity of the beings with which we are engaged. Heidegger dubs these pragmatically understood beings as zuhanden, at hand or handy. He recognizes, however, that we may also regard other beings as independent of our possibilities and projects, as things that are merely objectively present ‘on hand,’ vorhanden. But in fact, this way of regarding them is not independent of human projects, but products of the rather special human project called science, which strips the world of both meaning and purpose, both of which have been proscribed by science ever since Descartes—and especially since Darwin. Science seeks to discover an objective order of nature independent of historical meanings and human purposes. But since the discovery of that order is itself a human purpose, nature is still within the world constituted by Dasein.

**WHY ONTOLOGIZE?**

It should now be evident why the psychiatrists at the Zollikon seminars found Heidegger’s lectures bewildering, and why clinicians in general are skeptical of the ontological turn. Psychiatry has always envied and emulated the natural sciences. Even Freud resorted to interpretation only when he found that neurophysiology could not account for the ills of his patients. With the waning of Freudian analysis, psychiatry has sought to fit itself into a medical model that could found diagnosis and treatment on natural causes and remedies,
thereby escaping from reliance upon interpretation of meanings that cannot be understood by reading functional magnetic resonance imaging studies or by deciphering genetic codes. On the other hand, the appeal to unconscious mental processes has only dovetailed interpretation with the concept of a ‘consciousness’ for which cognitive science can supply no mechanistic, ‘natural’ explanation.

If this does explain why scientifically trained clinicians tend to find Heidegger’s turn to existential ontology uncongenial or baffling, it should also explain why any therapist who finds it necessary to resort to interpretation to understand his patient’s illness should welcome existential psychiatry. Heidegger’s (1962) ontological analysis of Dasein, our kind of being, not only vindicates the importance of interpretation in psychotherapy, but opens the horizon to novel therapeutic possibilities proposed by his successors, as Tratter’s (2015) essay shows. Recognition that the world is not ‘in’ the mind or consciousness, but that Dasein is in the world—a world constituted by pragmatic meanings—invites a therapeutic exploration of the implicit design and limits of a patient’s world. Recognition of the historicity and temporality of existence opens the way to discovering how fixation upon particular exemplars of being can foreclose an individual’s worldview and sense of possibility.

The analysis of Dasein does not rule out scientific objectivity, but reveals how it depends on stripping the world of meaning and purpose and thereby precludes interpretation and limits understanding to efficient causation and therefore to mechanistic explanations. This entails systematically ignoring the role of meaning in human existence or reducing meanings to mechanistic causation. The resultant ‘understanding’ of ‘nature’ not only fails to reflect the role of meaning in human existence, but also prejudices the understanding of other animals. For we are not alone in being in the world. Biologist Jakob von Uexkull (1982) offered a richer, more plausible understanding of nature by investigating how every animal lives in an ‘umwelt’ or surrounding world defined by its specific perceptual and active capacities and needs while Heidegger’s student Hans Jonas has employed a Heideggerian existential analysis of organic life that opens the way to a non-mechanistic biology in *The Phenomenon of Life* (2001).4

**MIND THE GAP**

I have tried to bridge the gap between scientifically trained clinicians and existential ontology so as to render existential psychiatry more accessible. In so doing, I have avoided relying on Heidegger’s own ontological terminology because the gap is partly owing to that language, which is infamously difficult to translate into English in any case. But the gap is not simply owing to language and is not peculiar to the context at hand. Francois Varela and others attempt to close the same gap in *Naturalizing Phenomenology* (Petitot et al. 1999). It also appears as ‘the hard problem’ of relating consciousness to neuroanatomy in cognitive science and as the mind–body problem that has plagued modern philosophy ever since Galileo and Descartes. I hope that this brief sketch of motives for turning to existential ontology may show that the solution is to refuse the dilemma and ‘save the phenomena’ by redescribing them in a way that neither reduces them to matter nor sublimates them into ideas contained in a transcendental consciousness.

**NOTES**

1. The original German edition was published in 1913. His position evolved in the next thirty years or so, but in what follows, I refer only to the early Husserl of the *Ideas*.

2. Husserl had also invoked meanings, but of a very different sort, in the context of his logical investigations.


4. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) merely remarks, early on, that “Dasein is never to be defined ontologically by regarding it as life (in an ontologically indefinite manner) plus something else” (p. 75 H 50) and, because we cannot reach an ontology of Dasein by building on biology, leaves it at that. However, he returned to this issue at some length in 1929 and 1930 in a lecture course that has since been published and translated into English under the title *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995). Part Two is devoted to “The Question What is World” and explores the difference between Dasein’s being in the world and
the impoverished way in which animals may be said to have a world.

REFERENCES