

Transcendental Reinterpretation of Heidegger's Argument on Living Things

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Abstract

Heidegger's lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is notable for the argument about the ontological structure of living things and the thesis "the animal is poor in world [weltarm]." However, his argument has various ambiguities and difficulties. We can recognize the matter as a result of the fact that Heidegger is not persistent in his own position "metaphysics (of human-Dasein)." We should begin with a transcendental question such as "What kind of understanding of being [Seinsverstehen] do we project when we identify living things'?" This presentation attempts to reinterpret his text as an answer to the question.

Introduction

Since the beginning of publication in 1975, Heidegger's *Collected Works* have been providing many unknown and interesting aspects of his thought. Especially, a lecture course in the winter semester of 1929–1930, called *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*,¹ is quite notable for two points; first a detailed interpretation of "profound boredom" as the founding mood of philosophy, and second, a unique argument about the ontological structure of animal or living things in general. His argument is based on famous three theses: the stone is wordless [weltlos]; the animal is poor in world [weltarm]; the man is word-forming [weltbildend]. After the early indication by Jacques Derrida, many scholars have inquired into the text as a rare resource to recognize Heidegger's idea of "life" in general, which is one of the most important themes for today's philosophy.

However, most of the readers indicated various ambiguity and problems included in the argument, while appreciating its value. First issue is that Heidegger's problematic and description seems to

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, Gesamtausgabe Bd.29/30, Frankfurt am Main, 1983. In English, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, translated by William McNeil and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington, 1995. Below, references to the book are shown in the text with the page numbers of German original in [] and English translation in ().

very close to “philosophical anthropology,” of Max Scheler for instance. In fact, both of Heidegger and Scheler, depended on the same biological or ecological theory that was being established by Jakob von Uexküll and others. Heidegger’s notion, “world-forming” and “poor in world,” obviously corresponds to Scheller’s “[the man is] world-opening” and “[the animal and plant are] bound -to-world.”² On the other hand, Heidegger states, “Max Scheler recently attempted to treat this hierarchical sequence of material, life, and spirit in a unified manner within the context of an anthropology. He did so in the conviction that man is the being who unites within himself all the level of beings—physical being, the being of plants and animals, and the being specific to spirit. I believe this thesis to be a fundamental error in Scheler’s position, one that must inevitably deny him any access to metaphysics” [283](192).

Unlike Scheler, who places the spiritual human on the top of the hierarchy of beings, Heidegger emphasises the “unbridgeable” difference between the human and the animal, and he says that the word “poor” describes only the way of being and has nothing to do with a rank of beings. But everyone would have the same impression as Derrida³ has; the word cannot sweep away the connotation of human’s superiority to animals or plants. In short, Heidegger is still “anthropocentric” and “humanistic.”

We can recognize such ambiguity and problems as a result of the fact that Heidegger is not persistent in his own position, “metaphysics (of human-Dasein).” That is to say, the thesis, “the animal is poor in world” sounds as if it determined the essence of living things as such, but he should have begun with transcendental questions such as “What kind of understanding of being [Seinsverstehen] do we project when we identify living things?”, and “What are the conditions of possibility of the understanding?”

In fact, Heidegger himself is vaguely aware of the problem; his own concrete description and analyses of living things can be reinterpreted as an answer to the transcendental question. Consequently, the word “poor” appears to be merely an expression derives from the more profound ontological structure, which is consisted of “captivation [Benommenheit]” and “disinhibition [Enthemmung].” It means at the same time that the word is nothing but an expression of the finitude of us human-Dasein, who can understand being of other things only in terms of world. The transcendence to world (world-forming) is not an evidence of human-Dasein’s superiority but of the essence of its finitude.⁴

What is necessary to be verified first is that the problem concerning classification of being’s region (das Seinsgebiet) belongs to sciences for Heidegger, and that each science is based on the particular way to project the understanding of being, i.e., on the transcendent of human-Dasein.

Transcendental radicalization of the interpretation

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger states, “The scientific project of the beings somehow always already

² Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, München, 1947, S. 48.

³ Jacques Derrida, *De l’esprit*, Paris, 1987.

⁴ Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Gesamtausgabe Bd.3, Frankfurt am Main, 1991.

encountered lets their kind of being be explicitly understood in such a way that the possible ways of purely discovering innerworldly beings thus become evident. The articulation of the understanding of being, the definition of the subject-matter defined by that understanding, and the prefiguration of the concepts suitable to these beings, all belong to the totality of this projecting that we call *thematization*.”⁵

In the case of understanding of living things, people understand these beings in the ordinary words such as “live,” “grow,” “breathe,” and so on. And a science called “biology” also starts from the ordinary understanding of life, but it is to thematize and conceptualize these phenomena exactly and systematically. And today our common understanding of living things is under the strong counter-effect of modern biology. Heidegger also affirms “[t]he proposition [‘the animal is poor in world’] does not derive from zoology, but it cannot be elucidated independently of zoology either. It requires a specific orientation toward zoology and biology in general, and yet it is not through them that its truth is to be determined” [275](187). Here, the task must be clarification of the substance of biological thematization, and the task cannot be accomplished by biology itself but by some transcendental (metaphysical, or philosophical) reflection on the science.

However, Heidegger’s methodological indication in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is problematic. The words such as “transposing” and “going-along-with,” which are found in the following passages, are not strictly defined and never used in his other works. They sound very psychological and not transcendental (metaphysical, philosophical).

“In general the question at issue concerns the possibility of man’s transposing himself into another being that he himself is not. [...] Transposing oneself into this being means going along with what it is and with how it is. Such going-along-with means directly learning how it is with this being, discovering what it is like to be this being with which we are going along *in this way*. Perhaps in doing so we may even see right into the nature of the other thing more essentially and more incisively than that being could possibly do by itself.” [296–297](202)

Probably due to the ambiguity and inadequacy of the methodological consideration, the characteristic of the thesis “the animal is poor in world,” shakes unstably. At first this is defined as a thesis “to say something about animality as such, something about the essence of the animal” [275](186), but in a later part, he asserts “the thesis concerning the animal’s poverty in world is not an interpretation which remains true to the proper essence of animality, but merely a comparative illustration” [393](271).

In fact, 6 years later in the lecture course *Question to the Thing*, Heidegger writes as follows, as if he tried to supplement the inadequacy in the former lecture, *The Fundamental Concepts*.

“As soon as we begin to reflect on a science in a certain way inside the science itself, we step into the path and level of the transcendental consideration. Mostly we are not aware

⁵ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, 1993. S.363, *Being and Time*, translated by J. Stambaugh, Albany, 1996, p. 332.

of it. Therefore, our deliberations in this perspective are often contingent and confused. But in a certain science, we can make so little founded and fruitful steps without the familiarity with its objects and procedures, we can make so little steps in the reflection on the science without the right experience and exercise in setting the transcendental view.”⁶

According to the Heidegger’s own words, we have to interpret the biological understanding to life-phenomena from a transcendental perspective. The materials are sufficiently provided by Heidegger himself.

Heidegger’s concrete interpretation of ontological structure of the animal

First, let us sketch a biological knowledge that is provided by Heidegger himself as an example describing the ontological structure of being of the animal. It is an experiment to explain the bee’s ability to return to the hive without any signs like color, smell or other landmarks.

“If we imprison a bee which has just arrived at its feeding place inside a dark box and only release it after a few hours (during which time the position of the sun in the sky has changed significantly), the newly freed bee will seek its hive in the wrong direction. The bee does not fly disorientedly or indiscriminately in any direction whatever, but the direction in which it flies off deviates from the direction of arrival by exactly the same angle that corresponds to the changed position of the sun.” [357](245)

What have these operations and observations revealed? Of course, this experiment shows that bees fly according to a certain relation with the direction of the sun. In the natural environment, it takes only few minutes to fly back and forth between hive and feeding place, and meanwhile the sun stays almost the same position. Therefore, bees can come back to the hive in this manner. (Today, it is known as the “sun compass” accompanies with the “waggle dance.”)

At the same time, however, this means that bees do not fly toward the hive itself, and they know nothing at all about the “hive” as a being. We can only say that they relate themselves to the sun. But Heidegger insists that the bees never recognize the sun as such, too. “In” a bee, there is a capability [Fähigkeit] to behave (for example, to fly) in a certain way. The mechanism and energy to realize the capability are already arranged in the animal but inhibited in some way, and the sun or sunlight removes the inhibition. And so, according to Heidegger, this relation should be expressed as “the sun disinhibits the bee” or more precisely “a light that has particular wavelength disinhibits bee’s drive to fly according to the direction of the right.” The light source such as the sun can function as the disinhibiting factor without being recognized, understood or perceived as something at all. This mechanism, which is called “disinhibition” allows a bee to go back to the hive under

⁶ Heidegger, *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, Gesamtausgabe Bd. 41, Frankfurt am Main, 1984, S. 182. (my translation)

the condition that it does not take too much time. Bees are captivated by whole the structure consisted of hive, feeding place, sun, time and bees themselves. And the capability itself—capability to be disinhibited by the sun—is only dinhibited by the repletion of the stomach.⁷ Let us listen to Heidegger's own words.

“The *captivation* of the animal therefore signifies, in the first place, essentially *having every apprehending of something as something withheld from it*. And furthermore: in having this withheld from it, the animal is precisely *taken by things*. Thus animal captivation characterizes the specific manner of being in which the animal relates itself to something else while the possibility is withheld from it—or is taken away from the animal, as we might also say—of comporting and relating itself to something else *as* such and such at all, *as* something present at hand [vorhanden], *as* a being. And it is precisely because this possibility—apprehending *as* something that to which it relates—is withheld from it that the animal can find itself so utterly taken by something else.” [360–361](247–248)

“Capability for...and thus behavior itself is open for such occasions, for stimuli, for that which initiates, i.e., disinhibits the capability for...in such and such a way in each case. That which the animal's behavior relates to is such that this behavior is open to it. This other is taken up into this openness of the animal in a manner that we shall describe as *disinhibition*. Since capability for...thoroughly governs the animal's specific manner of being, a being such as the animal, when it comes into relation with something else, can only come upon the sort of entity that ‘*affects*’ or initiates the capability in some way.” [369](254)

This fundamental structure “captivation” and “disinhibition” are so universal that biologists can also recognize them in the vertebrates, which are much more complicated and closer to the human than the bee. What the ethologist Konrad Lorenz has found as “releaser” for birds is nothing but “disinhibiter” in Heidegger's word.⁸ Of course, we can find the same structure in the plants or microscopic organisms, too.

And then, Heidegger admits that the structure has priority over the characteristic of world-poverty of living things, and that all the situations are only realized through the world-forming of the human.

“Poverty in world is not the condition of the possibility of captivation, but rather the reverse, captivation is the condition of possibility of poverty in world, insofar as the animal is viewed from the perspective of man to whom world-formation belongs.” [394] (271)

However, Heidegger does not show explicitly how world-forming functions when we discover

⁷ Cut away carefully the abdomen of a bee while it is sucking honey, and we find the bee carry on letting the honey flow out of its stomach and never flies away. [352](242)

⁸ Konrad Lorenz, *Studies in animal and human behavior*, translated by Robert Martin, Cambridge, 1970–1971.

and understand the fundamental ontological structure of living things constituted of captivation and disinhibition. Therefore, I will clarify the relationship between world-forming and biological projection in the next section.

The function of world-forming and its finitude in understanding living things

What is world in first place? Heidegger's characterization of world has some variations, and in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* he argues as follows.

“The naive concept of world is understood in such a way that world basically signifies *beings*, quite undifferentiated with respect to ‘life’ or ‘existence,’ but simply beings. In characterizing the way and manner in which the animal lives we then saw that if we can speak meaningfully of the world and world-formation of man, then world must signify something like the *accessibility of beings*. But we also saw in turn that with this characterization we get caught up in an essential difficulty and ambiguity. If we determine world in this way, then we can also say in a certain sense that the animal has a world, namely has access to something that we, *for our part*, experience as beings. But then we discovered that while the animal does have access to something, it does not have access to beings as such. From this it follows that world properly means *accessibility of beings as such*. Yet this accessibility is grounded upon a *manifestness [Offenbarkeit] of beings as such*. Finally, it was revealed that this is not a manifestness of just any kind whatever, but rather *manifestness of beings as such as whole*.” [411](284)

Unlike the animal, to the human as Dasein beings as such are manifested. And on the fundamental “manifestness” we human-Dasein can understand, utilize and name beings such as the sun, food or house, due to the “Logos.” However, Heidegger emphasizes that the Logos does not refer to beings one to one, but it always relates to the totality of the beings. Moreover, world as the totality is not simply given, but constantly being formed by Dasein itself.

“The *pre-logical being in open for beings*, out of which every *λόγος* must speak, has in advance always already completed [ergänzen] beings in the direction of an ‘as a whole [im Ganzen].’ By this completion we are not to understand the subsequent addition of something hitherto missing, but rather the *prior forming of the ‘as a whole’ already prevailing*.” [505](348)

In Heidegger's terminology, our acts in general are characterized as “projection” [Entwurf], and all the projections are based on world as totality. Hence, world-forming is the fundamental projection which enables the other projections or acts.

“[P]rojection is world projection. World prevails [*waltet*] in and for a letting-prevail that has the character of projecting.” [527](362)

Of course, here we cannot project a detailed inquiry of the phenomenon of projection, and only attempt to clarify a meaning of the totality of world in biological projection.

For the problem of biological projection, what is important is to remember the fact that all the living things also relate themselves to a kind of totality and that they can live only in the totality, which is usually called “environment” or “nature.”

“In this connection the totality of the organism would not merely consist in the corporeal totality of the animal, but rather this corporeal totality could itself only be understood on the basis of that original totality which is circumscribed by what we called the *disinhibiting ring*.” [383](263)

The animal and the plant depend on the totality because disinhibition can achieve a meaningful fruit only in a specific environment in which the disinhibiter and the other factors (the sun and hive, for example) are arranged appropriately. This arrangement constitutes the “disinhibiting ring.” And based on the original totality, biologists project a certain experimental situation and introduce some difference in the totality to let the disinhibition go out of the ring. In our case, imprisoning the bee in a box in a few hours is the differentiating operation, and this projection is “letting-prevail” because success of the experiment requires the normal physiological function of the bee as a whole and the function itself requires particular prevailing conditions. Although we can list the conditions such as temperature, air pressure among others, the list is never completed because these conditions themselves depend on the total state of the universe that is never quantified or described.⁹

Biologists appear to be considering only a certain factor (for example, the sun’s position), but actually they care the total conditions, i.e., world. To form or to project world as totality does not mean to create the world, but to arrange the conditions totally to let something occur. In other words, projection is selection of possibilities, and this selection depends on the binding characters of things which determine what possibilities are actualized or kept inhibited.

“The projection is thus in itself *that* occurrence that lets the *binding character* of things spring forth as such, insofar as such occurrence always presupposes a making-possible.” [528](363)

The projection of experimental conditions lets certain possibilities of living things be actualized, and biologists can formulate the relation between the conditions and possibilities. But they can never realize the total conditions of the possibilities itself. Hence, biological knowledge is always relative to the way of our world-forming, although it can be improved endlessly.

In this context, the concept of self-organization, which is sometimes considered to be a pre-phenomenon of life, is interesting. From the physical or chemical viewpoint, self-organization means “nothing occurs” except entropy increase, which is the universal tendency of the universe.

⁹ Charles Taylor, “Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. by Charles Guignon, Cambridge, pp. 317–336.

Only the setting of the initial conditions and articulation of the system in the total world, i.e., world-forming, determines whether something occurs or not. Heidegger's choice of the unfamiliar word "disinhibit" may be understood as an attempt to express the uncertainty.

In addition, as long as the arrangement of conditions and articulation of the system depend on our languages, the inner limit of world-forming corresponds to the finite nature of human languages. Heidegger writes as follows.

"When we say that the lizard is lying on the rock, we ought to cross out the word 'rock' in order to indicate that whatever the lizard is laying on is certainly *given in some way* for the lizard, and yet is not known to the lizard *as* a rock. If we cross out the word we do not simply mean to imply that something else is in question here or is taken as something else. Rather we imply that whatever it is is not accessible to it [lizard] *as a being*." [291–292] (198)

Heidegger maintains "we ought to cross out the word", but in fact, he does not and never be able to do so. The human is able to understand living things only through a concept or word such as "rock" which is never given to the other living things themselves. And the very word, i.e., Logos, blocks us out from the inner "experience" of them. (Of course, the word "experience" itself is used only analogically.)

Conclusion

Based on the above argument, it was proved that the thesis "the animal is poor in world" describes halfway the situation. If we prefer to keep the economical connotation of the proposition alive, it would be better to say "the animal is to rent world." In daily life, we loan a world to living things not for them but for ourselves, because we can say nothing without supposing as if they shared the same world with us. But in a scientific projection, we dispossess the world again from them to describe living things as something only captured in "disinhibiting ring," and this dispossession prompts the illusion that living things were poor in world. In other words, we are forced (disinhibited!) to loan a world to living things—especially to animals—in order to keep the totality of our own world, and this fact is clearly indicates the fundamental finitude of human-Dasein.¹⁰ Therefore, if we want to understand the humankind biologically, what we should do first is to clarify the ontological structure of the finitude of our world itself, and this task must be called "transcendental philosophy."

¹⁰ Traditionally, humankind is defined as "animal rationale (reasonable animal)," and Kant has inquired the inner finitude of the human reason. But Heidegger says "the philosophical tradition unknowingly treats—under the title of *λόγος*, of *ration*, of reason—what we are seeking to unfold as the problem of world" [508](350)