

# Heidegger

by Bart Nooteboom

40 Being in the world

published 28-9-2012

When considering the good life, we should note that life is being in the world, with 'being' as a verb, not a noun, a process, not a thing. Not *spectator theory*: the self is not pre-established, looking at the world from outside, but is constituted by action in the world. This view was propounded, in particular, by Martin Heidegger (in his *Being and time*, with much obfuscation in weird terminology), and together with other work (e.g. of Nietzsche) formed a basis for *existentialism*.

This is, I think, the ultimate philosophical basis for pragmatism and my view of knowledge as presented in previous items of this blog (23, 26, 28). At any moment we act from ideas, views, normative assumptions and goals that we have, but we adjust them depending on what we encounter in problems and new opportunities.

Going back to the discussion of meaning, and in particular *hermeneutics*, in item 36, I note that Hans Georg Gadamer, with my preferred brand of hermeneutics, was inspired by this view of Heidegger. He adds that when we interpret texts or actions, we do so from the perspective of prejudice or unconscious presumptions or *horizons*, as that literature calls it, which are embodied in our language, in an accumulation of shared experience in the past.

However, as I discussed previously, language and the meaning of words are not monolithic but vary between people, in the repertoires of associations they connect with words, in *sense making*, tapping from their life experience.

The term 'prejudice' is mostly experienced in a negative sense, but prejudices are inevitable. They are *enabling constraints*: enabling and thereby constraining interpretation. See my discussion of *practical prejudice* in item 34.

Thus there is no single, objective, correct interpretation of a text. This does not yield unmitigated subjectivism, with different subjective interpretations existing apart from each other, beyond debate, but yields a basis for debate in which people with different perspectives may revise their interpretations. Interpretation is *dialogical*, a matter of dialogue between alternative interpretative frames. Here I refer back to my discussion of *cognitive distance* in item 55.

While from experience and debate prejudice can be corrected, the outcome remains imperfect: *imperfection on the move* (see item 19). And as I also discussed previously (in item 29), our thought and language may be bound tenaciously to prejudice that is difficult to correct.

Another implication is that a text has a much wider range of possible meanings than the author intended. I think many if not all authors have experienced this: surprise, sometimes, at how one's texts are interpreted. At first, this upset me, with a feeling that 'my' text was violated, but later I became intrigued and tried to learn from surprising interpretations. That lends much greater scope to one's text, and leaves a longer trace of novel interpretations. I hope that this will happen also to this blog, and that readers will tell me.

## 90. Ethics, art and education

published 23-4-2013

The Dutch philosopher Fons Elders proposed that ethics concerns protest against what exists: *This is not as it should be*, while aesthetics concerns acceptance of what exists: *This is what it is*. And indeed, the classical Greek term *aesthesis* means perception, seeing what is. Aesthetics is being in the world.

This reminds us of Heidegger. In item 40 of this blog I discussed Heidegger's *being in the world* as a process by which the self is constituted by action in the world. I connected this with *pragmatism* (see items 23, 26, 28): the view that ideas guide action but are also changed in action. So, being in the world is not static, but a movement of constitution, of self and of ideas. This forms one of the sources of *existentialism*.

In item 41 I made a connection with *entrepreneurship* as a pragmatist search for novelty by exploring the limits of what exists in the economy, by adapting and transforming ideas and practices as they fail or open up novel opportunities.

As I discussed in item 80, Heidegger referred to art as *world making*. This indicates a change, replacement or alternative to what exists. That may entail protest against what is, but it may also leapfrog any such protest in going ahead to make a new world, in moving away from what exists. In preceding items in this blog I discussed how art goes about taking us outside what is, in world making.

Ethical protest entails criteria for good and bad. Where do those come from? Are they independent, outside from what is? Can one criticize what is without first creating a perspective from which criticism is made? Perhaps ethics requires art to create such new perspective.

What is the relation between art and education? If education includes ethics and ethics requires art, then education requires art.

But this goes deeper. *Education* is derived, literally, from the Latin *educere*, which means 'leading outside' from a given situation. In other words, education is not initiation into what exists, and certainly not subjection to existing authority in knowledge or ethics. It is giving means to find one's own way. It is guidance to freedom.

If immersion and then departure from what exists arises in art, in forms, colours, movement and sounds, and arises in entrepreneurship, in action in the economy, and if education is helping to depart from what exists, then education needs art, not only for ethics but for life more widely, including entrepreneurship.

So why are modern societies saving on art? Will that not entail a thwarting of ethics, education, and entrepreneurship?

## 108. The self as work in progress published 26-8-2013

Heidegger is said to have abolished the *spectator theory* of the subject, the self as autonomous, disconnected and looking at the world from outside. Instead, the self is involved in the world, and is constituted by actions in that world. Thought and action interact. I discussed this before in this blog, in item 40, on *being in the world*.

The rejection of spectator theory arises also in pragmatist philosophy, as in the work of George Herbert Mead, with the idea of the self as constituted by interaction with others in the world.

This is part of a wider shift of thought from a static view of the self, with a given mind and body, a given identity or authentic self, to a dynamic view of the self as work in progress. This is found also in the thought of Nietzsche and of Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard described the self as ‘a relation that is itself related to itself’. I understand this in terms of the idea of *embodied cognition* that I discussed in the items on cognition (23-29). The brain constructs representations of the body, which yield a feeling of coherence of the self, and representations of the world, and higher level representations of representations, on different levels of cognition. On some level, representations of representations may constitute self-consciousness.

The idea of the self as work in progress, in being in the world, in existence, forms the crux of *existentialism*, of which Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Heidegger are seen as the fathers.

As I discussed in a preceding item on Wittgenstein (item 105), meanings of words get established in their use in practice, yielding *language games* with their rules of legitimate usage.

The idea was carried further by Michel Foucault, who analysed how legitimate meanings and conversations get established in practices that reflect the interests and positions of persons or institutions in control. See his studies of prisons, health care and education.

This leads to a view of the human being as caught in the power of institutionalized discourse that eliminates freedom, in a suppression to which those subjected themselves contribute, in their tacit acceptance or inevitable entanglement in the language games to

which they are brought up to submit. This suppressive power is all the more sinister for its being hidden in what is taken for granted, in the tacit rules of the language game, to the point that what is in fact submission is seen not only as well intended but as beneficial.

As I discussed in item 50, towards the end of his life Foucault tried to find a way for the individual to break out by 'turning its life into a work of art'. That is what rebelling intellectuals and artists do, and entrepreneurs (as I indicated in item 41). They try to create a new game but thereby break the rules of established games and suffer for it.

In item 107 I proposed that hope turns into despair, and loss of trust, when one gets trapped in conditions one can neither choose nor influence, in established systems and corresponding language games. Kierkegaard proposed that we can only escape from despair by surrendering to God. Rebellious intellectuals, artists and entrepreneurs find other ways to create new hope.

#### 146. Meaning nihilism

published 18-5-2014

*Meaning nihilism* entails that words and expressions have no individual, determinate and fixed meaning, regardless of context, but depend on perspective and situational conditions. If one endorses the *correspondence view* of truth that certain elementary notions or expressions correspond with elements in objective reality, then meaning nihilism is related to *epistemological nihilism*, the lack of certain, objective knowledge and truth.

Wittgenstein (in his later work) and Heidegger proposed that in our cognition and language ideas and words have meaning not as individual, isolated entities, but only holistically, as a coherent system associated with a body of practice and discourse.<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein called those constellations 'language games' and 'forms of life'. Heidegger called it 'Being' as acting in the world. Knowledge, language and practical conduct are not grounded in abstract, absolute, objective, basic notions and logic. It is the other way around: practice is primary and abstractions follow. Understanding is not contemplation of truths but ability to perform a practice. Mostly, we do not rationally develop and justify beliefs before we adopt them but take them for granted as we adopt them.

One absurd consequence of predetermined meanings would be that all future uses are enfolded in the beginning, which is equivalent to saying that there can be no future. Meanings change along with the practices in which they arise.

We are socialized and cognitively formed in practices that are taken for granted and form our terms of reference, which have no outside foundation and we cannot step out of. We can only point to established practice, in some community or context. There is no

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lee Braver, 2012, *Groundless grounds; A study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, MIT press.

ultimate justification. Rationalization remains *internal* to the practice, delving from within the terms in which the justification is made. At some point all we can say is ‘this is how it is done’. Notions of right and wrong can arise only within, not between language games. One can say in chess that a certain move is illegitimate, but one cannot say that chess is wrong.

This response to semantic nihilism yields the same cultural relativism as Richard Rorty’s response to nihilism more widely, discussed in the preceding item in this blog: judgement of legitimacy operates only within cultures.

This is reminiscent of a famous debate in the philosophy of science, with Thomas Kuhn’s notion of *incommensurability* between different *paradigms*.

As before, in the preceding item this blog, my problem with this is that if all attempts at debate across language games, paradigms or cultures are renounced as hopeless, the result is either mutual indifference and isolation or a settling of differences by power and violence. That would eliminate the potential of variety for intellectual and spiritual growth, and it would entail surrender to war and conflict.

While I admit that differences can be so fundamental as to preclude any meaningful debate, I think that most of the time some commonality can be found, in some similarity of experience, from which with clever metaphors some bridges of understanding can be built.

Earlier in this blog (in items 57, 58, and 66) I discussed this in terms of *cognitive distance* and attempts to bridge it. I discussed *meaning* and its change in items 37, 36, and 37.

## 170. Wittgenstein and Heidegger as ethical opposites      published 3-11-2014

Wittgenstein and Heidegger had strikingly similar ideas concerning knowledge and meaning, as based on habit and practice, discussed in preceding items in this blog. David Hume had similar ideas. So did Aristotle, with his notion of practical wisdom. Here also, the meaning of a concept varies across contexts, in practical conduct, is not fixed, exact and universal. Knowledge is mainly unreflected know-how, acquired in learning-by-doing.

The criterion of adequacy of action and speech lies in legitimacy in established language games. Meanings arise within games and are diffuse, varying across different games for different practices.

In ethics, on the other hand, Wittgenstein and Heidegger are opposites.<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein took the path of Schopenhauer, and Buddhism, in wanting to subdue the will and lose the self, in *ataraxia*. Heidegger, by contrast, similarly to Kierkegaard, and to Nietzsche,

---

<sup>2</sup> Here, as before, I employ Lee Braver, 2012, *Groundless grounds; A study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, MIT Press.

celebrated the will, commitment to existence, and thriving of the self, taking ownership of life, choosing to choose. They gave rise to *existentialism*.

Braver (2012, p. 50) put it as follows: 'What Heidegger seeks to ignite, Wittgenstein stamps out'. I side with Heidegger on this.

But how can Heidegger reconcile this individual, voluntaristic choice with his earlier recognition of submission to community judgement ('Das Man') of adequacy and legitimacy? How to move from 'das Man' to individual authenticity?

The source of this problem lies in the view that social practice precedes meaning and knowledge, and that therefore the human being is 'thrown' into the collective of 'das Man'.

I propose the following. People indeed develop thought from action in the world, in interaction with other people. But they do so along individual life paths, and as a result the cognition they develop varies, yielding what earlier I called *cognitive distance*.

How, then, can people get away with differences of view and cognition, given the discipline of social practice? Because meanings are diffuse. They may vary not only between language games but also between people.

More precisely, the logic of this derives from the analysis of meaning that I gave, at several places in this blog, as having two faces: *reference* and *sense*. Social practice is viable as long as people categorise, identify things as something, with the same result, in a given context or language game. But underlying that common reference is a variety of sense between people, a variety of connotations attached to a shared concept, on the basis of different experience along different life paths. They identify the same things differently.

One can deviate in thought, interpretation, intention and skill while sufficiently conforming to the rules of a game. A game can be played in different styles.

Tapping from different individual repertoires of connotations, people take part in different language games, and this difference in patterns of practice develops, confirms, and consolidates their differences in sense.

If this were not the case, if there were not this variety between people, how could new practices and language games arise or spin off from existing ones?

242. What response to fascism?

published 24-1-2016

Simon Critchley opened my eyes to a terrible insight<sup>i</sup>. He claims that the whole of Western thought, from Judaism, Christianity, and all through the Enlightenment, and in liberalism, has been an audacious saga, hubris, of a subject that is self-identifying, self-

possessing, self-constituting, self-legislating, constituted by reflection, in sovereign freedom of reason, with spirit superior to the body and reality. That was also Kant's ethical project: separation of freedom, in the ethical will, from causal necessity.

In contrast with liberalism, Hitler's fascism saw the 'elemental rootedness of the human being, identity of the self and the body, sensitive to the urgings of the blood and appeals to heredity. .. Man's essence lies no longer in freedom but in bondage, with appeals to sincerity and authority'.<sup>ii</sup> There is a straightforward link from rootedness to nationalism.

Now I also see more clearly the affinity between Nazism and Heidegger, in the embodiment and rootedness of the self, existing and developing by action in the world.

Much of it also lies in present postmodern philosophy and its modifications. If rootedness, in the body, history, and location, has philosophical justification as well as a deep emotional appeal to people, how can we proceed without falling back into the maws of fascism? It will no longer do to simply condemn the urges as irrational or counterproductive. That is precisely the liberal, Enlightenment view that is up for change.

Now, fascism entails more than just the rootedness. It also entails the rule by a charismatic leader who acts as the voice of the people, without need for intervening democratic procedure, and disdain for the 'elite' of elected and appointed officials. More ominously, it also entails, I think, a glorification of the existential kick of violence.<sup>iii</sup>

We witness populist right wing parties appealing to these urges. They have felt well these urges among the population, with fear of foreigners fanned by waves of terrorism and refugees.

I think that underlying this is something more basic. I propose that this lies in an instinct for 'parochial altruism' that I discussed in item 205 of this blog. To recall: humans (and several other kinds of animal) have an instinctive, probably genetically embodied, drive to extend altruism within the group, accompanied by suspicion towards outsiders.

Authoritarian leaders exploit these urges of rootedness and parochial altruism to reinforce and maintain their positions of power. Part of that is the classic stratagem of diverting internal discontent by attributing all wrongs to outsiders (preferable recognizable in a different appearance and conduct) and the apparent failure, the inevitable imperfection, of representative democracy. If only all the power goes to the leader as the voice of the people, who cannot be wrong, society would be perfect.

So, is there a way out that takes into account the combined forces of biological, instinctive and political forces, answers to the philosophical arguments, and does not fall into fascism?

I don't think we can go back to the illusions, the dreams of liberalism. I have no final solution, between liberalism and fascism. Is there a transformed liberalism that deals with the problems?

My hunch, developed in his blog, is that we may develop a combination of existential rootedness and an ethic of the self as opening itself to the other. Heidegger plus Levinas, so to speak. With a renewed love of the other, to relieve the phantom pain of Christianity cut off. The persistent drive of this blog is to explore that.

243. Heidegger, Levinas, and more<sup>iv</sup> published 27-1-2016

Heidegger and Levinas share the postmodern opposition to Enlightenment views of the rational, autonomous, disembodied subject, separated from the object, the world. The view here is that mind and spirit are embodied, and hence finite, in death. The subject is constituted by action in the world. Abstractions, concepts, are preceded and trumped by largely tacit, unconscious hunches and heuristics that are partly instinctive and partly cobbled on the fly.<sup>v</sup>

Concerning embodiment and identity, I recall a thesis offered in several items in this blog (e.g. 24). I employed the work of Antonio Damasio<sup>vi</sup>, according to whom in our brain we build different levels of representations in the form of neural connectivity, first of bodily processes, then of the world we act in, and then representations of representations that may constitute consciousness. I argued that what these levels of representation have in common is the body, in which they arise and connect. The body as a nexus of those representations is what gives some coherence in the form of identity, though it remains multiple, not fully coherent, even conflicting, and subject to shift, as mental construction and destruction proceeds.

Now, if there is no transcendence of God or Platonic ideas, is there any other pass beyond the finality of death?

According to Heidegger. In 'being thrown into the world', we live 'unto death', that is, death wakes us to live life authentically, seeking expression, creation, ecstasy. However, these are momentary, they come and go, and ultimately we crash into the blind wall of death, with no aperture to any beyond.

Here, one is reminded of Schopenhauer's view of the Will to exist, with desires that are never fully fulfilled, and if they were this would evoke an unbearable boredom.

In both Schopenhauer and Heidegger, ethics becomes aesthetics: seek art to escape the boredom of fulfilled desires or the itch of unfulfilled ones or grasps for authenticity.

Levinas does not accept this. According to him<sup>vii</sup> there is a form of continuity in Discontinuity of the self, in fecundity, in having a child. The child continues one's identity without being identical.

I don't go along with this.<sup>viii</sup> I grant that it may be part of a sense of continuity after Death. But there is much more. There is also, and perhaps more importantly, cultural

posterity. That may lie in medical care you gave to people, or in education or teaching, or in producing art, or laws, or in offering security. And so on.

This is quite simple and does not require philosophical contortionism.

---

<sup>i</sup> Simon Critchley, *The problem with Levinas*, Oxford U. Press, 2015. Concerning my quote in this piece, Critchley was inspired by an essay on Hitlerism by Emmanuel Levinas.

<sup>ii</sup> Critchley, p. 35

<sup>iii</sup> The term 'fascism' is derived from the Roman 'fasces', a bundle of sticks with a hatchet, carried in procession ahead of the magistrate, to be used for corporal punishment or decapitation at his command. It was a symbol for the Spanish fascists under Franco.

<sup>iv</sup> This item has been inspired and informed, in part, by Simon Critchley, *The problem with Levinas*, 2015, Oxford U. Press.

<sup>v</sup> For example, I am thinking here of the decision heuristics presented in social psychology, e.g. in the work of Kahneman.

<sup>vi</sup> In his *Self comes to mind*.

<sup>vii</sup> In his *Totality and infinity*.

<sup>viii</sup> Apart from the fact that Levinas talks only about father and son, leaving out mothers and girls. And what about childless people? Is there no hope for them?