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Beyond Westphalia: Rethinking Fundamental Ontology in IR

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'Our task is to broaden our reasoning to make it capable of grasping what, in ourselves and others, precedes and exceeds reason'
– Maurice Merleau-Ponty[1]

The Western philosophical tradition has been entrenched in a particular understanding of human beings by Plato's love for theory. Theory, the notion that the universe can be understood in a detached and abstract way, by finding the principles that underlie the abundance of phenomena was surely powerful. And in effect, Plato held that we could have a theory of everything, even human beings and their relation to the world.[2] Man had to crawl out of the cave, where his existence had been meek *shadow imagery*. To be sure, this means that Plato had an implicit theory of how human beings relate to things. As such, the tradition has been build on the basic understanding of human beings as *subjects* contemplating, or relating to, *objects*. Man is a *cogito*, a thinking subject – a rational animal – in a world of objects. The consequence of this assumption is a categorical split between the *mind* and the *world*. So much becomes clear in the philosophy of René Descartes, who tried to doubt everything until there was only one thing he could not doubt: his own existence. Hereby, he famously asserted *cogito ergo sum*, *I think therefore I am*.[3] The outside world is then translated into mental representations or ideas in the mind, of which we can obtain knowledge.[4] Ever since, philosophers have been caught up by the *epistemological* problem of clarifying how the ideas in our mind can be true to the external world. In fact, Kant declared, it has been a scandal that no one has proved the existence of the external world.

In much the same way, the tradition of political thought has undergone the same development. The fascination with theory and its ability to explicate social life and answer the basic question, "*what is the best constitution*?", has in effect, since Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, been the only way to think about human being in society.[5] Theorizing about power and social life has since then been preoccupied with constitutional writing to the extent that the actual exercise of power has been rendered *unintelligible*.[6] It was Hobbes who in *Leviathan* laid down the foundations for the future of Western political thought.[7] The rational animals, in a world of insecurity, created the most rational entity in the world to protect themselves. The question, or rather the problem, of sovereignty has now become the prime concern: states, nations, citizenship, *self* and *other*, territory, law, security and so on, are the categories available for its solution. To this day, all these categories have been taken as the inescapable starting point for modelling any form of political community; the model of the state system of Westphalia seem to be the limit of our reflection. More to the point, the modern political imagination has been firmly located in the mental representations of their study, as such they, as R.B.J. Walker argues, 'remain preoccupied either with sovereign states that are presumed to be isolated from other states or with modern individual subjects caught between desires for autonomy and desires for collectivity.'[8] The political system of today, in that sense, resembles an intellectual and conceptual prison, of which there is no escape; the hopes of renewing the political life of today into a better tomorrow start to fade. To be sure, the very desire to go '*from* a politics of "the international" *to* a politics of "the world"' is made impossible by the very theoretical construct that enable us to speak in those terms.[9]

Nevertheless, and although we could point out that Descartes's meditations has given rise to *mind-world dualism* in the social sciences, most prominent the neo-positivists, there still is something more elusive going on here.[10] The

similarities between the tradition of philosophy and that of political thought are no coincidence, and although the two traditions *need not* directly imply each other, and even though it is tempting to argue so, it will simply be suggested, following Walker, that 'the limits of the international are already foreshadowed in early-modern accounts of the unbridgeable gap between man and the world.'[11] Platonic love for theory and Cartesian dualisms has disillusioned our political imagination. However, there is reason to propose, I would argue, that the reconceptualization, or rather dis-solving, of the former will make it possible to rethink the latter.

The limits of the international – of our political imagination – constitute a problem in that we have great difficulty in answering the question: what does it means to go beyond state system of Westphalia? This essay will challenge the worldview of traditional philosophical and political thought. More specifically, its belief that there can be an exhaustive theory of human beings and their world. To see what lies *beyond* Westphalia, we must allow ourselves, in contrast to the philosophical grandchildren of Plato, to *imagine political life in the shadows*. Relying on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger it will be shown just that: first, the *phenomenology of being-in-the-world* and its implications for the platonic worldview will be spelt out. Second, continuing with what being-in-the-world means for community and having language, the author hopes to present a manner in which we can challenge the dominant view of the sovereign states in a system of states. Third, and last Heidegger's *non-foundationalist philosophy* and his insistence of re-appropriating the *hermeneutic circle* enables us to reimagine *Life in the shadows*. Through this process, we will arrive at the basic argument that *real change of the political requires that we change ourselves, our understanding of what it is to be a human being*.

The Phenomenology of being-in-the-world

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger held the belief that the Western philosophical tradition had been in error since Plato. Diverging from established conventions, he tried to show that 'one cannot have a theory of what makes theory possible.'[12] Hence, a theory of how human beings are exactly that, *beings*, is impossible. To be sure, Heidegger is not against theory: 'He thinks it powerful and important, but limited' and therefore gives it a different emphasis, as I will present below.[13] In other words, Heidegger accepted the reasonable use of reason but rejected the worship of reason, which led to the unreasonable and excessive use of reason. In large, according to Hubert Dreyfus, Heidegger calls in question 'both the Platonic assumption that human activity can be explained in terms of theory and the central place Cartesian tradition assign to the conscious subject.'[14] To Heidegger, being human involves something more fundamental than what can be explicated in subject/object terms. In fact, Dreyfus explains that Heidegger 'insists that we return to the phenomenon of everyday human activity and stop ringing the changes on the traditional oppositions of immanent/transcendent, representation/represented, subject/object.' Furthermore, Heidegger is not only against such dualisms, but he also adheres to a form of 'methodological individualism' where he is convinced that 'the social context [is] the ultimate foundation of intelligibility' and, therefore, he holds the view that 'most philosophical problems can be dis(solved) [sic] by a description of everyday social practices.'[15] To Heidegger, they are but pseudo-problems.

In the traditional Western Philosophical view, we tend to think of human beings as subjects contemplating objects. That is, we think of ourselves essentially as minds directed at a collection of things that constitutes what we call the world, which itself is represented by ideas in our minds. This is the basic way we are hooked-up to the world. It is this *fundamental ontology* that Heidegger questions; he would, in contrast to Kant, say that it is a scandal that anyone is even trying to prove the existence of the world, as if we were stuck in the internal world of the mind. To him, the Western philosophical tradition has forgotten the question of the meaning of being. Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, set out to do exactly that: carry out a fundamental ontology that can answer the question of *being*; not only human being, but in effect also *things*, *abstractions*, and *language* and their relation to human being.[16]

To describe this fundamental ontology or human being, Heidegger uses the word '*Dasein*', which means *there-being*, *being-the-there-in-the-situation*, or simply *being-in-the-world*. In doing so Heidegger is a 'contextualist' – holding that, because we have no access to forms and categories of pure reason, our only possible starting point if we want to avoid groundlessness, we necessarily must be the depiction of our everyday situations in the world. That is, a phenomenological investigation of everydayness, where philosophy starts from the examination of our own personal existential grasp of what it is to being human. This is what he means when he says, that 'the question of Being is

nothing other than the radicalization of an essential tendency-of-Being which belongs to Dasein itself – the pre-ontological understanding of Being.'[17] What remains is an understanding of human existence that is finite, contingent, and contextual, which makes the individual subject dependent upon common social practices, not the other way around.

Heidegger begins with a description of life in its everydayness where one is caught up in a 'non-thematic circumspective absorption' of familiar activities, and where one 'loses oneself' in what one encounters in the world.[18] As such, the way we encounter things is with a 'concern, which makes use of them without noticing them explicitly.'[19] In that sense, human agency is described as already happening. We are coping with the situation, the people, and the totality of things around us that exist in an ordinary context without us being aware of it. Depending on the context, we perceive different situations and things as significant to us, in that they represent a web of means/ends relations in relation to our projects. Such contexts seem familiar to us and we perceive them as holistic fields of involvements. That is, the 'ready-to-hand' relation to the world. To take one of Heidegger's examples: When everything is running smoothly in the workshop, the hammer – to the carpenter – appears *in* hammering, *in order to* fasten boards together, which is *for* building a particular object. The hammer becomes transparent to him; he does not need to be aware of it – he can talk or think about other stuff while hammering. Therefore, on the one hand, the context gains its significance and structure from his sense of what he is doing in it. Whereas, and just as important, on the other hand, who he is as an agent is defined by the context in which he is engaged: in the workshop he might be an *expert* or a *novice*, but not a nurse or a professor.

In sum, *Dasein*, the being-the-there is actively being *a* situation in which directed activity is going on. Hence, it is so that when we look to the 'ready-to-hand' relation to objects, such as a hammer, we do not find a subject contemplating an object. Thus, the way human beings are related to the world is not as subjects related to objects; awareness and consciousness are, in the first instance, *irrelevant*. We are not primarily knowing-being, but rather coping-beings: that is, being-beings. To be sure, *Dasein* is not a conscious subject, but first and foremost a coping one.

Nevertheless, sometimes things go differently than planned: the hammer might be too heavy, the nail might have slipped, or the carpenter might have hit himself by mistake. He then notices the problem and becomes a problem-solver, or rather in familiar terms, a rational animal keen on solving the problem. This is what Heidegger calls the 'un-ready-to hand': when we become aware of the situation. What is more, sometimes, when we just gaze at an object, we can see it as having properties. Heidegger calls this the 'present-to-hand' – the ability to see things as mere objects. This, however, requires a change-over in our stance towards objects, which we should understand in terms of de-contextualization, or *theorizing*.

Dasein therefore has three modes of *being*, so to speak: First, the ready-to-hand of everyday coping; second the un-ready-to-hand where we become rational animals dealing with problems; and last present-at-hand where we can regard at objects as having properties. Hence, a clear sequence of *everydayness-problems-theory* emerges from this phenomenology. Notice, however, how this sequence is different from the traditional position – what is real arises here, not from everydayness, but from what theory can apprehend. For Heidegger, it is clear that the fundamental ontology of the everydayness of being is impossible to make explicit. As Pierre Bourdieu would say: 'practice has a logic that is not that of logic.'[20] The shadows of everydayness are not projections of fundamental ideas but shadows in their own right. – they are nothingness, the *bedrock* of existence – There is only, what Heidegger calls, a 'clearing' suspended over the 'abyss of meaninglessness' on which we can make anything intelligible. This 'clearing' is made possible only by our ability to cope with the world, and *meaning* therefore resides here in the everydayness. Thus, Plato's prominence of theory and Descartes's subject/object divide is dissolved and the sequence is turned backwards: The Cartesian subject only arises out of its ability to cope with the world; prior competence in coping with practical involvements is a pre-requisite for contemplating objects as 'present-at-hand.' To put it in Dreyfus's terms: we can only *know–that* because we possess *know–how* – to know *that*. This is the different emphasis Heidegger puts on theory; it is not unimportant, but it has limits – it cannot account for the everydayness activities that constitute *Dasein*. Thus, so far, we have changed the conception of ourselves, but what of communal life? What are the possibilities of a theory of the political?

Shadows and Community

Cartesians have the same problem towards other subjects as they do with the outside world: how do we know they exist? For Heidegger, however, it is important that the individuals come in from the very start. His description of everydayness implicitly shows us how our lives are always rooted in the broader context of a specific historical culture. Our possible field of self-interpretation and our ways of acting towards others are generally guided by public roles, standards, or conventions, which we, in turn, have been socialized into while growing up in a communal life-world. In effect, we mostly are partakers and placeholders in what Heidegger calls the 'They': 'We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as the see and judge. […] The "They" […] which (we) all are, thought not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.'[21] By acting in accordance to these certain public schemes – we obtain identity in our everydayness without knowing it, in a similar manner as the example of the objects that are ready-to-hand transparent to us. This is why Heidegger says that 'The "*they*" is an *existentiale*; *and as a primordial phenomenon, it belongs to Dasein's positive constitution* [emphasis in original].'[22] What any subject, or *Dasein*, is doing at anytime –its thoughts, feelings, or gestures– only has a point or makes sense on the background of practices and institutions of a community. To give an example, a meeting amongst a group of diplomats only counts as a diplomatic conference on the background of the state system. Hence, we understand the world as a field of significance arranged by public practices, 'the "they" itself articulates the referential context of significance.'[23] As such, human beings exist in a shared 'clearing' in which objects as well as entities can show up as significant, relative to our lives.

Out of this, we can now say, raises *Dasein's* fundamental threefold structure: first of all, we are 'thrown' into, or find ourselves situated within, familiar contexts where things matter to us because of prior stimulus. In other words, *Dasein* has disposition because the world is already being structured in a particular way that matters to us. There is no way this transparency can easily be forfeited and, thus, there is no way we can simply see *facts*. Second, we are 'outside of ourselves' concerned with our daily life in accordance with what is important in terms of the '*they*.' When we are being-in-the-world, Heidegger asserts, 'Dasein addresses itself to the objects of its concern,' and thereby 'expresses itself too; that is to say, it expresses its *Being alongside* the ready-to-hand.'[24] *Dasein* therefore has *discourse*; the world is always being articulated in terms of the 'They.' It 'expresses itself as a being toward entities' which is articulated through public speak. I shall develop this further below. Third, we are always 'ahead of ourselves' arranging and understanding present situations in the light of future prospects. This is to be understood as a form of 'projection' – human life is in this sense teleological, which Heidegger calls 'being-towards-the-end.'[25] This is not a sort of conscious awareness or mindful planning of what is to come, but simply a drift along being the 'They.' To summarise, being a *Dasein* is being already *in*, *amidst* things, and always *ahead* of itself. The structure of *Dasein* therefore fits with the all too known categories: *past – present – future*.

As I mentioned before, *Dasein* 'expresses itself' in its being among things in everyday contexts. In these contexts, there are normal ways of articulating our everyday environments into a field of significance which are fixated and ordered in advance by a background of intelligibility which is opened by *discourse*: 'intelligibility has always been articulated, even before there is any appropriative interpretation of it. Discourse is the articulation intelligibility. Therefore it underlines both interpretation and assertion.'[26] *Dasein*, then, is essentially a communal being whose sense of what is real is pre-shaped by the way the 'They' formulates significance. Language, as such, is the *vehicle* in which our shared understanding of ourselves and our world, that is our *Dasein*, is placed and sustained. This furthermore, means that it is not people that speak, but rather the *language that speaks through people*: 'communication in is never anything like a conveying of experiences, such as opinions or wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another. Dasein – with is already essentially manifest in a co-situatedness and a co-understanding.'[27] In sum, the shared 'clearing' of a particular *Dasein* is opened by its *discourse*. In fact, Heidegger would argue that we have a history of different *Daseins*. In simple terms this means that the Greeks thought of themselves as rooted in the world and had *heroes*, whereas, the Christians thought they were created and had *sinners*; if a Greek hero showed up in a Christian society he would not be thought of as a hero. The same goes for certain activities: *war* for the Romans takes on a different *Dasein* than for people today: the intermediate, which enables us to examine these Dasein's, is there *discursive practices*.[28]

The tradition of political thought has been preoccupied with the problem of power; what is the best constitution? This

in effect created a theory of how power is constituted, that is *sovereignty*. However, with *Dasein* we can see that communal existence is not just a matter of decontextualized features, but rather we are *in* and *of* a context of community, which is transparent to us. The problem with traditional political thought is this preoccupation with theory – as Foucault would say, 'we are yet to cut off the king's head.'[29] Living in a society involves more than what can be made explicit by theory. This is not to say, however, that a theory of power is impossible, but it is to say that such a theory would be limited. It will not account for the everydayness of the exercise of power, for instance. Thus, the efforts of Plato to set up the perfect republic with the use of reason, of Aristotle, with his search for the best constitution, and of Hobbes's attempt to ground sovereign power in the leviathan, were not in vain but they are miss part of the point. Because of their desire for explicitness they become unable to cope with the everydayness of human beings and thus remain as paradoxical as Cartesian dualisms.

Nevertheless, what has been called the Westphalian state system still has a *Dasein*. We can think of Westphalia as a shared 'clearing' in which the whole world of states is *of* and *in amongst*. In this Dasein of system of sovereign states, each of them simply do what they do because that is what *a* state does: it exercises power over a territory, a population, or fights wars to secure its survival; it has the legitimate right to the use of violence; it negotiates trade-right agreements with other states. Similarly, its citizens are different from citizens of other states; they speak different languages, carry different passports, and attach different cultural meanings to events. To thinks in these terms is only possible because we share Plato's love for theory. Without it, we would be blind to all this. Our daily lives, even if we would think globally, would be transparent to us. Hence, where Walker would have us look closer at the politics on 'the line', I would have us look in the shadows. It is only because of the theorization of human beings and loss of meaning that we can talk about a line in the first place.[30] If we were living purely in the shadows there would be no lines on maps, no citizens, no sovereign states exercising power, only our being-in-the-world coping with our practical everydayness activities. Alas, *we do not*. A simple question thus emerges: how can we challenge this system with our understanding of everydayness?

Re-imagining the Shadows

As I have shown above, the explicit 'present-at-hand' awareness of objects is only possible for beings who *possess* the know-how in coping with these objects in their practical involvements. This pre-reflective mastery, or 'hermeneutics as,' of their possessive know-how is made possible only on the background of their participation in the shared 'clearing' of handling things in meaningful situations, which itself is opened up by the *discourse* of the 'They.' Of this follows, that we are caught up in a hermeneutic circle: the objects, with their mean/ends relations, which we find around us are pre-configured by our culturally-defined overview of how things can count for our communal context, *while* that background understanding itself is continuously changed in relation to the encounters in our everydayness. Consequently, it is impossible, in such context, to have access to *raw facts*, which are independent of our pre-understanding. If one is interpreting the 'present-at-hand' and thereby is appealing to what *just* 'stands there,' Heidegger asserts, 'then one finds that what "stands there" in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting.'[31] To be sure, what can be determined to count as a *fact* is unavoidably pre-shaped by the background of intelligibility rooted in our capacity for being. In this sense, as Heidegger points out, *fundamental ontology* asks 'about Being itself insofar as Being enters into the intelligibility of Dasein. The meaning of Being can never be contrasted with entities, or with Being as the "ground" which gives entities support; for a "ground" becomes accessible only as meaning, even if it is itself the abyss of meaninglessness.'[32] In sum, the *Dasein* of *things*, *abstractions*, *language*, and in effect also *human beings*, is constituted by our background of intelligibility – having no deeper ground than the discursive *and* practical practices that have developed in our culture's history.It is the suspension of the 'clearing' that provides a 'blueprint' or 'ground-plan' of pre-understanding which is the only secure ground on which to stand.

This non-foundationalist account of *being* undermines the prospects of discovering an ultimate explanation or justification for our existence. As such, our existence is finite and historical – as 'throwness,' as 'happening,' as 'projection' 'towards-the-end' – in the sense of being an on-going conversation with the past for-the-sake-of the expectations of the future. For some, this might seem as a nihilistic worldview dooming our existence to eternal determination. In contrast, Heidegger sees this as a positive situation: that, by confronting our own finiteness, we are 'thrown' back onto our own existence. By acknowledging that we are caught in a *hermeneutic circle*, we realize that

this gives us the possibility to define our own being. And thus, Heidegger argues, the aim is 'not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way.'[33] In this way, we can take over the 'happening' of our shared history with renewed imagination and rethink the political. Hence, real change *is* possible. As the shadows *in* and *of* the 'happening' are shifting, we can change our understanding of what it is to be a human being. It is by reimagining what happens in the shadows that it becomes possible to move from the *international* to the *world*; it is only there we can make our *reasoning* precede and exceed *reason*.

Conclusion

The Western philosophical tradition has deep-rooted assumption that one can have a theory of everything, including human beings and their world. This assumption has complementarily developed into Cartesian mind-world dualism and, therefore, the world could now be understood in terms of *mental representations*. Heidegger rebelled against this tradition wanting to turn back to the everydayness of existence believing that it is here we find true meaning. He did not deny theory a place, but held that its use was limited.

In Heidegger's philosophy we find first, that the phenomenology of being-in-the-world allows us to question and dissolve both platonic worldview and Cartesian mind-world dualism. Having a theory of what makes theory possible is impossible; there is more to human existence than can be explicated. This, furthermore, means that theories of the political remain incomplete, because of the fact that they are about human beings. Second, it was argued that it is only by virtue of our ability to cope with the world that it becomes intelligible through language. Hence, all categories of political life are linked the discursive practices of our culture, and therefore can be reconstituted. Finally, it was suggested that by getting into the hermeneutic circle in a right way, we can be thrown back upon ourselves in a richer way. It is by reimagining our common 'clearing', by reimagining in the shadows, that we make our *reasoning* precede and exceed *reason* that we can get beyond Westphalia: to reimagine Life.

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