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THE EGOCENTRIC PREDICAMENT: AN ECHO OF ONTOLOGICAL PHENOMENOLOGY ON A NEW DIMENSION OF IDENTITY

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Abstract

An attempt is made in this paper to show how Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976), one of the German classical phenomenologists understood consciousness or ‘disembodied reality’ conventionally asserted to have claimed human’s identity, idiosyncratically in terms of *dasein*. In colloquial German, ‘*dasein*’ means ‘existence’ or more literally ‘being-there’; an everyday human way of being, the technical understanding of which treated consciousness as something not unique, detached from the body like Descartes did, but always being a part of *dasein*’s everyday being-in-the-world, an expression of dynamic and meaningfully dwelling of the world.

Traditionally, conventional philosophy emphasizes upon the mysterious dimension of ‘consciousness’ and always considered it as something metaphysical – a substance or unseen underlying fundamental reality that endures throughout the existence of human beings. It further privileges the subjectivity of consciousness of being transcendental to physical realms. Its uncanny nature although intertwined with body however, possesses independent reality in terms of metaphysical parlance. Hence, it thus claimed the identity of human in the strict sense, despite being associated with an embodied self.

Heidegger in his ontological phenomenology makes explicit the reversal of subject-object dichotomy and goes beyond by embracing its inclusivity in the many modes of *dasein*’s ‘to be’ or in its ‘being-in-the-world’. In this sense, Identity is nothing necessary or overwhelming but contingent and varies, depending upon *dasein*’s everyday involvement in the dynamics of the concept of being-in-the-world. What counts for identity eventually in Heideggerian phenomenology is contextual and embodied over subjectivity, only possible in the lived-engagement of *dasein* in the world.

Key Words: Dasein, Being-In-The-World, Subjectivity, Identity, Corporeality

1. Introduction:

Philosophy basically described as a series of knowledge revolution is apparent in the two contrasted ideas of ego-centrism and lived-dimension of knowledge. The former privileges subjectivity and raised it to the level of ‘dis-embodied reality’ which over and above transcends tangible world, whereas, the later prioritizes corporeality, contexts, and embodied engagement for the certitude of identity. To Heidegger, the entire history of philosophy is trapped in the paradigm of metaphysics that is, a tradition which overemphasized upon reason as the ultimate form of understanding, and accordingly underestimated the bodily existence as something secondary or something that does not matter at all in the quest for knowledge. What matters now as the ultimate concern of this paper is to make explicit how the ontological phenomenology overturn a dominant ego-centrism of western thinking and opens a wider horizon for understanding.

2. The Egocentric Predicament: Philosophy Got Entangled in Descartes’s Web

Western thinking deeply rooted on Platonism asserts that non-material abstract - Form he calls it, and not the material world of change known to us through sensation, possesses the highest and most fundamental kind of reality. Further, the world of ‘Form’ is transcendent to our own world (the world of substance) and is the essential basis of reality. It is the purest of all things, a-spatial (transcendence to space) and a-temporal (transcendence to time), literally neither spatial nor exists within



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any time period. Abstract forms are non-physical, accessible only through reason. This tunes of Platonism relying on subjectivity echoes the entire history of western thinking. Although the succeeding philosophical contemplations are held in various dimensions and scopes, the paradigm has not been changed until the call of overcoming by thinkers like Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard in the 19th century with their concepts of ‘dead of God’, and ‘existentialism’ respectively.

In the Cartesian, Hobbesian, and Lockean traditions, which dominate our culture, we are told that when we are conscious, we are primarily aware of ourselves or our own ideas. Consciousness is not the results ‘of’ interactions, or ‘of’ mind getting encountered with entities; never advocating the inter-play of the mind with the world outside. It is purely a one-sided and non-extended reality activity. Consciousness is taken to be like a bubble or an enclosed cabinet; the mind comes in a box. A ready-made like consciousness is developed in the head, which controls, orders, and directs the body. “Consciousness is defined in the form of a solitary cogito whose essence of cognition is defined qua inquirer, as a ‘thinking thing’ having the same structure as a transcendent thing whose existence Descartes had called into doubt” (Barua, 2009, p. 22). “Impressions and concepts occur in this enclosed space, in this circle of ideas and experiences, and our awareness is directed toward them, not directly toward the things ‘outside’. We can try to get outside by making inference we may reason that our ideas must have been caused by something outside of us, and we may construct hypotheses or models of what those things must be like, but we are not in any direct contact with them. We get to things only by reasoning from our mental impressions, not by having them presented to us. Our consciousness, first and foremost, is not ‘of’ anything at all. Rather, we are caught in what has been called an *“egocentric predicament”*. All we can really be sure of at the start is our own conscious existence and the state of that consciousness”. (Sokolowski, 2000, pp. 9-10).

The world then committed a serious mistake and got entangled in the web of Descartes according to thinker like Martin Heidegger in his phenomenological pursuit. For subjectivity remain the defining characteristic of the whole paradigm of thinking. That dominating ego, considered as qualified to be called the mystery behind existence, after going through layers of test by tracing to the origin of being, however is challenged now.

3. A critique of Metaphysics of consciousness:

For Heidegger, Metaphysics is the misunderstanding of the meaning of Being propagated in western philosophy, a tradition he hoped to radically re-think. Because when we look into the history of metaphysics, we find philosophy’s faith in reason and its faith in the ultimate rationality of the world. We find a world which is intelligible within existing categories, conforms to the laws of logic, and is ultimately explainable. In this usage, philosophy is interchangeable with western ‘rationality’ or what Heidegger calls ‘metaphysics’. In a wider but subtle way, reality may include everything that is and has been (throughout the course of phenomena) whether or not it is observable or comprehensible. A still further consistent view includes everything that has existed, exists, or will exist, a part from the knower mind, or even broadly, what is only apparent in the world. This he terms as “metaphysics of consciousness”, a tradition in which there occurs forgetfulness of Being in its substance-oriented speculation and *ousiological reduction* (something there inevitably is). Criticizing the tradition of western philosophy, which he regarded as nihilism, for as he claimed, the question of Being as such was obliterated in it. And he also stressed the nihilism of modern technological culture. He argues that this dimension of thinking corrupts the mind and draws us toward something abstract, theoretical, irrelevant, and eventually lacks the lived-dimension of knowledge. The challenge then is ‘questioning our being in a questionable way’, not vice versa as conventional metaphysics of consciousness does. His critique of traditional metaphysics and his opposition to positivism have been embraced by leading theorists of post modernity like Derrida, Foucault, and Leotard.

4. Phenomenology, Ontology and the ‘Metaphysics of Consciousness’:

For Heidegger, being-in-the-world or ontology precedes essence, since critical idealism and the phenomenological reduction fails to grasp Being – the essential whatness and existence of a thing. Heidegger seeks to free phenomenology from the logical prejudice of theory in radicalizing phenomenology by returning to concrete existence. This, he hoped can surpass



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the traditional way of treating subjectivity as something ultimate. His ontological phenomenology, in place of intuition privileges corporeality, embodiment, or being-in-the-world. This radicalizes even his predecessor - Husserl's theory of intentionality in returning to the things themselves and performing a reverse bracketing. Because, he saw it as another trend of metaphysical turn of philosophy that has prioritized metaphysics of consciousness as Husserl stated "The whole of phenomenology is nothing more than the self-examination on the part of transcendental subjectivity... the ultimate grounding of all truth is a branch of the universal self-examination that, when carried through radically, is absolute. In other words, it is a self-examination which leads me to the grasping of my absolute self, my transcendental ego" (Guignon C. , 1993, p. 151). Heidegger admits however, that Husserl gave him the eyes with which he could see the phenomena, as phenomenology enabled him to understand *dasein* in the lived dimension of experience. The task of philosophy is now to overcome metaphysics, taking the question of Being as our clue, for Heidegger's interest is moving beyond the mere metaphysical assertions about philosophy to move into ontology. This is a more primordial grasp of Being and the essence of *dasein* as temporality and a being-toward-death as well as the hermeneutics of facticity and an awareness of *dasein's* comportment to the world as worldhood, which relates *dasein* to objects as equipment and ready-to-hand rather than present-at-hand (Heidegger, Martin; J.Macquire & E. Robinson, 2008, pp. 78-84).

Heidegger sets out to identify fundamental ontology as 'inner possibility of metaphysics', the concrete determination of the essences. According to Dermot Morran, with this obsession for Being quest, Heidegger sought to the shape of 20th century philosophy in the following manner:

- A. Its rejection of Idealism and of Neo-Kantianism through its anti-subjectivist and anti-anthropological account of human subject.
- B. That human encounter the world in concerned dealings which are bound up in situations.
- C. With its destruction of philosophy as metaphysics it inspired deconstructionist like – Derrida and other to challenge traditional interpretation of the readings and texts of Pre-Socratics, Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche and others. By dismantling the wrong tradition of philosophy as metaphysics, Heidegger thus paved room for recovering Greeks way of conceiving existence for a deeper exploration of how human relates to the world through phenomenological thinking of Being. (Moran, 2000, p. 195)

5. Re-kindling of the Question of Being: A Quest for the meaning of Identity:

The last sentence of Heidegger's inaugural lecture at Freiburg University reads: "Why are there beings at all why not rather nothing?" (Heidegger, Basic Writings: Second Edition, Revised and Expanded, 1993, p. 110). Heidegger calls this the basic question of philosophy, a question that we all tend to forget. Being is always described as the most universal but the emptiest of concepts that resists every attempt at definition. However, he understands that the question of Being is a question about everything, especially for the ontological description of phenomena or existence in general. Despite the difficulties in understanding the meaning of Being amidst certain prejudices, Heidegger sees the light of how its obscurity can be brought to light. "He argues that interrogation of the meaning of Being requires a fundamental ontology whose point of departure is an analysis of existence" (Heidegger, Basic Writings: Second Edition, Revised and Expanded, 1993, p. 3). However, under such interpretation, what we really aim at by raising the question is to show Being in a manner of determining beings (a specific way of existing) as beings within which beings have always been understood. As the Being of beings is itself not a Being or in other term "entity" as conventional philosophy does. All we can take into account is its ontological nature in opening grounds or horizons where beings as such are determined. Hence, the first philosophical steps in understanding the problem of Being consists in avoiding the *mython tina diegeisthai* in not telling a story, i.e. not determining beings as beings by tracing them back in their origins to another being as if Being had the character of a possible being (Heidegger, Basic Writings: Second Edition, Revised and Expanded, 1993, p. 46). In this dimension of thinking, he employs phenomenological, and hermeneutical way of disclosing truth from the context of human practical being-in-the-world. He thus turned the emptiest of concept into something lively and practical revealed in *dasein* or human existence. More than considering the uncanny and mysterious nature of pure ego, what counts for is *dasein's* embodied engagement in the world



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as the way it is primordially meant to be, which is the starting point for considering identity. This prioritizes corporeality than essence for being-in-the-world precedes consciousness. “Our inquiry, Heidegger says, must begin from the “Existentiell” (concrete, specific, local) sense we have of ourselves as caught up in the midst of a practical life-world” (Guignon C. , 1993, p. 3). As such he employs the concept of ‘Being’ here as the horizon of disclosure of the reality including the defining characteristics of human’s identity.

6. Approach to Being through Dasein: Emphasis on Corporeality:

Heidegger asks in the introduction of Being and Time, what is the being that will give access to the question of the meaning of Being? His answer is that it can only be that being for whom the question of Being is important, the being for whom being matters (Heidegger, Being and Time. In J. Macquire & E. Robinson, 2008, p. 31). In fact, there’s no other being other than human who questions their own existence. And this question calls for an analysis other than human who questions their own existence. And this question calls for an analysis of the entity that has some prior understanding of things: human existence or humans that make possible an understanding of Being). Heidegger’s claim that *dasein*’s pre-theoretical (or pre-ontological) understanding of Being, embodied in its everyday practices opens a “clearing” in which entities can show up as, say tools, protons, numbers, mental events, and so on (Audi, 1995, p. 13). This primordial nature of *dasein* entails its nature of using the world as original as the way it meant to be, engaged with the world as primordially designed beforehand. It a situation where *dasein* finds itself ‘thrown’ in a way helpless, but to cope with the natural settings of the world.

Here the fundamental structure of *dasein* is always understood “a priori”, a state of being, that is grounded on what is technically called “being-in-the-world”, which refers to its engagement with the world in a more compulsive existential condition. It refers to a state of being, that is embodied, culturally and linguistically conditioned to practically engaged in daily works, the overall characteristics of which cannot be measured only by referring to rationality or capacity to think. What defines *dasein* basically is its corporeal nature of dwelling the world unreflectively, encountering entities in their original undiluted forms in a more non-representational manner. By the expression being-in-the-world, Heidegger incorporated certain essential relationships where *dasein* finds itself in so as to fulfill its ontological conditioned nature, a unitary phenomenon devoid of choice and deliberation.

Dasein is described as ‘thrown’ in the world without prior choice about its own existence. This also indicates that there already is the world, where there is a harmonious blend of things (being) in which *dasein* but meaningfully and purposefully situated. This is what is described as ready-at-hand, which always shows that the world as such is a balanced one, meaning oriented and sustained on its own. Hence *dasein*’s being-in-the-world is being in the (already) a priori conditioned situations devoid of rational thinking beforehand. Unlike the existential thinking of Sartre, who goes on proclaiming that “each human being creates his own essence; man, first of all exists and defines himself afterwards” (Morris, 2008, p. 35). The thrown nature of being-in-the-world or corporeality precedes the inherent qualities of the capacity to think, which inevitably is believed to have claimed the identity of human in terms of metaphysical degree of precedence.

Dasein is thrown in the world of meanings, to unreflectively coping with it as its essential component of existence. These conditions of comportment include ‘being-there’ – to dwell, to care for the environment, to be mortal, to be with others, etc. defining *dasein* as context bound, embodied being, falling under influence of meaningful relations. Heidegger’s interpretation of *dasein* is such that it pays emphasis on a being that is embodied, culturally and linguistically situated than a being which introspects, aware of itself as a ‘thinking being’ over its embodied nature. The debate of identity then dissolved here, opening a new dimension of thinking by trivializing the mystery of subjectivity.

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