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Chapter 10

THE UNTAKEN ROAD TO PHENOMENOLOGICAL SOCIOLOGY

Patrik Aspers

Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition that is well integrated into sociology. However, few social scientists have taken the direct route to the roots of phenomenology to either Husserl or Heidegger. They have instead been guided and accompanied by other researchers, whose works have functioned like bridges of knowledge. The work of this kind that has spawned the interest among social scientists in phenomenology is without any doubt Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's famous book *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger 1970:15; Berger and Luckmann 1991). It is through their works that social scientists have come to appreciate another Austrian social scientist, namely Alfred Schutz (1899–1959). And with the help of Schutz, some have traveled the road all the way back to the father of phenomenology, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938).

Though much knowledge has been generated by researchers that have taken the Berger and Luckmann–Schutz–Husserl road, it comes with some drawbacks, primarily an egological (atomistic) view on human beings. To rectify this problem, this chapter takes the reader on a tour along the second road to phenomenology, which leads us to the German philosopher, the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). The point of bringing up Husserl and Heidegger is to show that their different versions of phenomenology today are relevant to sociology and other social sciences. The discussion of Heidegger will uncover paradigmatic assumptions (Kuhn 1962) of the social sciences that are taken for granted. It is shown that Heidegger's ontological approach is a more radical sociological starting point than the Husserlian (Cartesian) egological that has come to dominate the social sciences. To show the concrete implication, this text explains how these two approaches give different accounts of what is one of the most central notions in the social sciences, institutions.

The First Road to Phenomenology: Egological Epistemology

The first road to phenomenology is well-known. When talking to people in the social sciences who have used phenomenology, their story is often identical. After having read Berger and Luckmann, they got interested in Schutz, and they may have studied the works of Husserl, or at least have had a look at it.

Phenomenology can be defined as the study of “that what appears.” To Husserl, who wanted to establish a new scientific foundation based on phenomenology, this “what” question is primarily epistemic, though it aims at uncovering ontology. Phenomenology starts with man living in the real life—the lifeworld. Husserl argues that each person, that is each of us, living in the world holds a natural attitude, as a “human person living among others in the world” (Husserl 1989:411); I see my co-workers at work, and I talk to my family; this world is immediately there for me, and I need not do anything but to take part in this world (cf. Husserl 1962:91–93). Husserl, however, argues that this natural world cannot serve as the foundation of true knowledge; it must be questioned.

Phenomenology is a descriptive science, which in the end should result in an eidetic science, or a universal ontology, as it is the “science of the transcendental inter-subjectivity or universe of fact” (Husserl 1945:702). This undertaking aims at generating an ontology, a formal ontology, upon which all regional ontologies, for example of the empirical sciences, can be based. To accomplish this, Husserl readdresses the Kantian question of how knowledge is possible (Zahavi 2003:8). Thereby, Husserl does not take anything of what is considered as true by ordinary people, or by the scientists and philosophers, for granted. Instead, he follows Descartes and asks if there is a justification for his experience, and he answers: “No! I have based my previous life and scientific activities on it without even justifying it” (Husserl 1981:318). Consequently, everything has to be put into question.

Husserl's study, which includes the invention of the reduction, aims at creating a new beginning, a “radical beginning,” or “first philosophy” as he (1962:19–20) calls it. Husserl explains his approach, what he calls transcendental phenomenology, not as a theory instead “it is a science founded in itself [...] that stands absolutely on its own ground” (Husserl 1962:13).

A key idea in Husserl's project, following Brentano, is that all consciousness is intentional, in the sense that there is a mental directedness that defines humans (Husserl 1945:700). This simply means that one thinks of something, wishes, means, intends something. It follows that judgments, values, as well as perceptions of objects are “intended” in the stream of consciousness. What Husserl refers to as phenomenological psychology studies these “objects” of the stream of consciousness, in order to learn “the nature of the psychical,

and comprehend the being of the soul" (Husserl 1945:700). To accomplish this, which is done using my own experience, one must perform what is called psychological reduction, which puts the world, that is "my world," as we know it in brackets, and what will remain can be divided into two parts, the way things are experienced (the noetic) and what is experienced (the noematic).

The transcendental (Cartesian) reduction does not only bracket the real world, but the existence of souls as well. Husserl describes the effect of this reduction:

I am no longer a human Ego in the universal, existentially posited world, but exclusively a subject *for* which this world has being, and purely, indeed, *as* that which appears to me, is presented to me, and of which I am conscious in some way or the other, so that the real being of the world thereby remains unconsidered, unquestioned, and its validity is left out of account. (Husserl 1962:8)

Bracketing represents a shift from "external experiencing of the world [...] into transcendental subjectivity" (Husserl 1997:245). It means that the world, including me as a person living among others, is no longer the center of attention. My experience is bracketed, and the center of attention is the world as mere phenomenon (Husserl 1997:246). By the epoché "the meant" is reached "purely as meant" (Husserl 1960:§23).

The epistemic relation is clearly expressed by Husserl; the world is experienced and known by the transcendental subject in isolation—the ego. It follows that the ego is the constituting pole of both everyday knowledge and the knowledge of the objective world of science that is built on that everyday knowledge (Husserl 1960:§40, 59). The mental becomes the foundation, rather than the external world of objects, as in the objectivistic tradition. This is a radical shift, and Husserl refers to this as a "Copernican turn" (Husserl 1960:§61). All in all, Husserl is outlining a transcendental "community" of identical egos. What we see as social is also seen as a central problem by Husserl, but it is clearly a derivative question, and social communities are "personalities of a higher order" (Husserl 1960:132). This is the grounding of what may be termed egology. This is no interpretation as he says:

This universal concrete ontology (or universal and concrete theory of science *theory of science*—this concrete logic of being) [transcendental phenomenology] would therefore be the intrinsically first universe of science grounded on an absolute foundation. In respect to order, the intrinsically first of the philosophical disciplines would be the 'solipsistically' reduced 'egology', the egology of the primordially reduced ego. Then only would come intersubjective phenomenology, which is founded on that discipline. (Husserl 1960:155)

In other words, this egological approach assumes a subject who somehow reaches out and tries to understand everything, including social life. What sociologists call "social" is in Husserl's view a consequence of interaction between egos; it is a derivate, and not the starting point. That this is a non-social starting point is thus clear, especially in the fifth Cartesian meditation (Husserl 1960), which shows that Husserl's approach remains within the boundaries of the ego and its transcendental world. It is, as he says, an approach that is "first of all monadic, and then intermonadic" (Husserl 1960:156). Its social science offspring is the knowing and acting subject, though this subject is often located in the lifeworld.

The Schutzian Turn to Sociology

Husserl did not show much direct interest in sociology; his ambition was to provide a foundation for all sciences, including sociology. Despite the not so sociological approach of Husserl, his phenomenological ideas were one main source of inspiration for Alfred Schutz. The other main source was Max Weber. Schutz's social science ideas were developed in his dissertation, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Schutz 1976), ideas that he later developed and refined. Though he acknowledges the centrality of phenomenology, Schutz clearly says that he does not follow Husserl's philosophical track: "as we proceed to our study of the social world, we abandon the strictly phenomenological method. [...] The object we shall be studying, therefore, is the human being who is looking at the world from within the natural attitude" (Schutz 1976:97–98, cf., 43–44). According to Schutz, the starting point of the social sciences is, the "*intentional conscious experiences directed toward the other self*" (Schutz 1976:144). This approach is clearly oriented to the mental side of human life but says less on human practice. It is, moreover, no social theory, and despite its focus on the mental, does not represent a full theory of action. What Schutz takes from phenomenology is a theory of meaning. He draws extensively on Max Weber, but adds that what Weber's action theory misses is a theory of meaning. But by accepting Weber, Schutz inherits his non-social starting point. Weber's idea of sociology refers to actions that are oriented to others, but this is merely a sub-category of action (Weber 1978). This is clear from the following quotation from Weber.

We shall speak of 'action' insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior—be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes into account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented to its course. (Weber 1978:4)

In a sense, Schutz marries the egological theory of Husserl, with the egological action theory of Weber. Weber's action theory, at its core, is an action theory

imported from economics, and as such it is egological. It is thus a “perfect match” to bring Weber and Husserl together, but it is sociologically problematic.

Husserl’s work is the baseline for all later phenomenological developments, but it has also created a gulf between philosophical phenomenology and sociological phenomenology. Phenomenologists with a sociological orientation have essentially stayed outside of the transcendental sphere, following Schutz’ abandonment of the “strictly phenomenological method.” Peter Berger, for example, has taken up the Schutzian approach and says that the “Lebenswelt” is the world “in which we, together with other human beings, pursue our ‘normal’ activities” (Berger 1970:15), and it is the reality of the lifeworld that is the “natural” environment for us.

These phenomenologically primed sociological approaches have, however, come to overemphasize the mental side of human life, despite the importance of practice. I have, for example, in my own work built on this sociological tradition of phenomenology, with its roots in Husserl, Schutz and Berger and Luckmann, but taken it in a more empirical direction (Aspers 2006), which led me to develop what I call empirical phenomenology (Aspers 2009).

The Second Road to Phenomenology: Social Ontology

In addition to the main road of phenomenology, at which we find Husserl as the main classic source, there is yet a second road that starts with Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s development of phenomenology can fruitfully be read as a radical break with Husserl’s egological–Cartesian phenomenology. This break has been noted by others: “the strategy of Being and Time [...] is to reverse the Cartesian tradition by making the individual subject somehow dependent upon shared social practices” (Dreyfus 1991:14; Schmid 2009). Heidegger says that the detached subject (*Rumpsubjekt*) in the tradition of Descartes and Leibniz—to which Husserl belongs—is unable to communicate with others. Husserl has tried to solve this by imposing “empathy” between the different ego-poles (Heidegger 2001b:140). In this light, Heidegger argues that Husserl aims to solve a construed problem, which is the result of the *epoché*-method developed by Husserl. Moreover, Heidegger claims that the epistemic approach presumes a distinction between a man and the world “out there” to be detected by a man. This approach already assumes an ontology (Heidegger 2001b:58–66).

Heidegger defines philosophy as universal phenomenological ontology (2001b:436). It is the human being already living with others in the world and a society, and not an externally existing world to be discovered by solitary egos, which is the starting point. The ontological question, Heidegger argues, should start with who we are and our everyday life (Heidegger 2001b:28–31).

Heidegger refers to us as *Dasein* [being-there] (Heidegger 2001b:15). *Dasein* is a being that is always mine—it is me (Heidegger 1979b:325). Human beings, or what Heidegger calls *Dasein*, are essentially already in the real world. According to Heidegger, any question must necessarily departure from “what we know” which is knowledge rooted in the lifeworld. The lifeworld is a historical product of human culture. Our historically situated knowledge is encapsulated in a structure of concepts, which is to say that even our logic and ontology are products of the past (Heidegger 1994:113).

Heidegger argues that we must have a hermeneutic starting point that accounts for our historically contingent positioning and knowledge (Heidegger 1994:109–114). This means that our study is, as it were, affected by the point of view which we have, and thus conditioned by history (Heidegger 1994:115), which is the position that has become central to modern hermeneutics (Gadamer 1990). To deconstruct, that is, to take a part (*Abbau*), our knowledge is an important element in order to understand *Dasein* (Heidegger 1994:117).

Thus, both Husserl and Heidegger are interested in a new grounding of knowledge. In contrast to Husserl’s egological approach that does not situate man in the world, but in an egological universe, Heidegger presents a holism in which the constitution of man must, on the one hand, be understood in relation to “tools” (*Zeuge*) that we use. These are ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*) and make-up categories, which refer to the question “what” (is going on). The form, on the other hand, that is special of humans is called existential (not to be mixed up with existence) (Heidegger 2001b:44–45), and this refers to the question “who” (is doing something); the “what” question only makes sense given the idea of “who.”

Humans have a form of being that is more profound than “objects”; they have a special role as the center of constitution of the world. As a human being, I am with others, and this relation between human beings, in Heidegger’s terminology, is between *Dasein* and *das Man* (that can be translated as “they,” “one,” or “others”). What does the idea of *das Man* imply? The first thing is the different ontological principle that defines and thus separates man from other existing entities. Man can only be with others (*Mitsein*), which is a special ontological relation that characterizes man (Heidegger 2001b:137). That man, according to Heidegger, is already in the world (Heidegger 2001b:53–60) is thus what, ontologically, makes man what he is.

The relation between *Dasein* and *das Man*, that is, “they,” is an essential one, an existential in Heidegger’s terminology. This is ontologically a different relation than between *Dasein* and things. We meet others directly, when they are doing something, for example, at work (Heidegger 2001b), doing a favor, or trading with us. But we also “meet” them indirectly; a boat at the lake

is a boat because it was built and used by someone—a person whom I may know or not—but this or those human beings are not standing in the same as ontological relation as the boat to me. Others are hence noticeable in their indirect presence, in the form of tools that are made for man, and the table that is made by someone, for example the umbrella that is forgotten by someone, in addition to the direct presence of others (Heidegger 1979b:326–329). Man is from the very “beginning” a part of a larger whole, the world, and never alone; others are always there. This is a strong statement and means that also when one or more others are not there (presence in the same spatiotemporal moment), they are still “there”, as, for example, when someone is missed. The relation between man and others, concrete or not, is constitutive of man. A consequence is that also when *Dasein* is alone, others are existentially still there (though not *Vorhanden*). One is then always in one way or the other together with other *Daseins*, who are called *Mitseins*. That man is never alone is an important aspect. Though stones and the sea are part of the world, man cannot be *with* them.

The relation to others cannot be separated from how one primes one another. *Dasein* is what it is because one has taken over the institutions and knowledge one's predecessors; others represent in modern sociological jargon a kind of generalized social being (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Still, my activities are directly, as in activities as a supplier to a buyer, or indirectly, as when one reads a journal article, related to others (one reads a journal article as “one” reads it), related to others. Language, as socially made and evolving “in-betweenness,” is an obvious example of how “they” are present in talk and discourse (Heidegger 2001b:167–170). Language is also the paradigmatic example of an institution (Searle 2008).

It is here not possible to elaborate on the full meaning of Heidegger's project (see, e.g., Dreyfus 1991; Safranski 1994), but one thing should be clear: as one part the constitution of man, that is, what one cannot think away, is other men. Next, I aim to elaborate and explicate what this means in general sociological terms, zooming in on informal, or grown, institutions. This will address the question of how it comes that man is so strongly affected and ontologically primed by “they.”

The Socially Primed Man and Institutions

According to Heidegger as well as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, man cannot be analyzed as something that is non-social. Any making of institutions and order is conditioned by man, who is by definition social. But we have seen that Husserl, Schutz, and Weber in fact do *not* start with a social man. Let us here be clear that it is not Husserl's work that has affected the entire

tradition of the social science; this is an issue that must be accounted for by the Cartesian epistemic approach. Husserl, however, has discussed and most explicitly made use of, and elaborated on, this idea. The egological approach, thus, penetrates sociology much deeper than merely being the ground for rational choice theory or the idea of economic man.

The untaken road to phenomenology is an ontological foundation based on the socioontology of Martin Heidegger. This foundation may provide at least some social constructivist approaches with an ontological foundation that clearly stresses that the constitution of man is social, and not to be found in certain biological (Park 1936) or psychological traits. It is man's relation to others, direct and indirectly (through *das Man*), which constitutes him as a social being. The empirical variation of social forms is an issue that we must study, but this takes place against the ontological foundation. This ontological foundation provides a starting point for scientific reasoning for social scientists and their regional ontologies (what Heidegger calls the “ontic” level). Heidegger adds the opportunity to ground work in ontological ideas that starts out from a social world that is ordered, rather than a world of atoms who eventually create an ordered world.

The relation between man and others (*das Man*) is essential and cannot be evaded. How does this, more specifically constitute man? It is this in-betweenness, that is, in between *Daseins*, that social order is made and maintained as a result of socialization of institutions. Institutions are, since the works of Durkheim ([1895] 1984), an essential part of social analysis. Already in texts by Aristotle, and onwards, two forms of institutions were identified: formal institutions, which are intentionally decided, such as laws, and informal institutions, which are defined as grown and result from a process of mutual adjustment of actors (North 1991). Formal institutions are theoretically and empirically easy to understand; for them to come into being, only a decision for others that can be backed by force or gain support is required. A state laying down a law is a good example. Obviously formal institutions can increase actors' predictability and increase social order.

The more profound informal institutions grow out of mutual adjustment and these are essentially taken for granted, and we are not even necessarily aware of them. They are generated by actors who mutually adjust to one another. Berger and Luckmann (1991) are known for having in detail shown how institutions come about as a result of internalization in a process of socialization. Heidegger does not elaborate on the socialization process. What he analyzes is how human beings are constituted by what we call institutions (Heidegger 2001b:129). The term institution is not used by Heidegger, but it is clear that the phenomenology refers to institution.

The socially constructed norms and activities can never be excluded from how man acts; if so, man would no longer be man. *Dasein* is in-the-world (Heidegger 2001a:138) doing things with others, for others, in the position of others, and with tools and knowledge generated by others, orienting to the norms of man.

A main point of Heidegger is that one is primed by others, but that is also part of others. Put differently, one is partly "others," meaning that they (*das Man*) is always present. The ever presence of they is accomplished by publicness of the interaction that is necessary for the interpretation and what sociologists call institutionalization. *Das Man* is constituted in the public as a result of what people do; it is no one particular man who has made him. This relation conditions one so forcefully that Heidegger even speaks of the dictatorship of others (Heidegger 2001b:126), which forces any deviance to be eliminated. It is a force that pulls one to the middle, to the average (Heidegger 2001b:126–130). The average is not a natural state, but something that is created in the public, meaning that the empirical explication can be different, but what sociologists call institutions are always present. This institutionalization also lifts some responsibility from the shoulders of human beings. At the same time, it reduces and eliminates the possibility of being different, and one becomes more as they. Heidegger speaks of "falling" (Heidegger 2001b:175–180), as an existential state referring to how one is constituted by others and others' doings, meaning that one "knows" it all and can see what will happen; one is one of the others.

How do these institutions show up? It is clear that the more present *das Man* is, the more difficult it gets to debunk it (Heidegger 2001b:128); put differently, the more taken for granted an institution is, the more difficult it is to be(come) aware of it. In their normality, institutions do not show up. Hence, we "take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as one [Man] does, and withdraw from the mass as one withdraws, and finds things shocking as one finds things shocking" (Heidegger 2001b:127). This we do, without thinking much about it.

Institutions are part of what one is and do not normally appear. They are rather that called to our attention in a "negative" way (Heidegger 1979a; 2001b:72–76). Informal institutions show up (or stand out as such) when they are used in an incorrect way, when they are not used, or when they are used, but do not work (malfunction) as shown (Garfinkel 1967). To these three negative ways in which grown institutions show up, one should add the active, or positive, way in which they show up, namely reflection. This reflection comes from, for example, being in contact with an alien culture, and making use of what one learns in another culture, may be the only through way of getting to know one's own culture (Heidegger 2001b:178).

Another Road to Phenomenology

I have argued that the social sciences have not taken what I have called the second road to phenomenology. This road takes us to its starting point, where we shall find the works of Martin Heidegger. Though this road is not directly visible to most social sciences, as there are few links between Heidegger and the social sciences, I have tried to show that there is a fruitful road to take in order to establish a social foundation for the social sciences. Of the two roads to phenomenology, the Cartesian egological and Heidegger's socioontological, it is, unfortunately, the first one that was taken by the founding fathers of sociology, most notably by Max Weber. Thus, though few sociologists have followed Husserl's Cartesian and monadological ideas for establishing a base of knowledge, the egological starting point has become established in sociology. The Weberian idea and definition of social action, which so to speak occasionally is added to a non-social life has given sociology, in my view, is the false starting point. More generally, sociology, in this respect, is only something that has been added on to economics, as in the case of Weber. It is also this assumption of a nonsocial core that has remained, though tacit, in much of social science thinking. The critique of Husserl and other followers of the Cartesian tradition—which was expanded to include economic theory, rational choice, and Weberian sociology—is that man does not have to solve all problems from within the egological house. This egological approach creates quasi-problems, such as prisoners' dilemma, the emergence of the state, and yet other problems.

This egological assumption in the social sciences is at least 100 years old, and there is clearly, sooner than later, that a new start must come. I have only outlined here such an alternative, and only hinted at what could be a new beginning, taking off from what is the second road to phenomenology, namely the ideas developed by Martin Heidegger. His socioontology is an interesting step towards a truly *social* foundation of sociology, grounded in ontology.

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