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The Human Animal: Philosophy and Science in Heidegger's *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*.

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Introduction

I dreamt of beginning my talk like this: “imagine a man – perhaps a philosopher or a biologist, - gazing at a lizard, a lizard resting upon a stone (which is in turn resting upon the earth)”. Heidegger asks us to do just this in his lecture course on the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (FCM) from 1929-30. Between 1926 and 1930 (between *Being and Time* and FCM), Heidegger’s project was to *ground* metaphysics, metaphysics understood as onto-theology, in other words, both ontology and theology. In Aristotle, ontology studies beings as such; theology studies beings as a whole. The question that was left unasked by philosophy, Heidegger says, right up till then, was how these two (ontology and theology) were joined to form one single discipline. What is so exceptional about this particular lecture course (FCM) is that Heidegger speaks of these two “directions of questioning” *in the form that they take* in the 20th century, the two forms of *episteme* or scientific knowledge, philosophy and *science*.¹

My hypothesis here is that from *Being and Time* to FCM, Heidegger tried to think this togetherness in a way that is unified, consistently as an ongoing ontological project that progressively developed from *Being and Time*, to *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1927), to *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (1928), and thence to FCM. The last ontological moment was eventually called “metontology” whereby *fundamental ontology* is understood as the return of ontology to the *ontic*, to beings as a whole. This is something like the application of ontology, of the meaning of being, to entities or beings. So, to rethink the nature of beings themselves, beings as a whole, in light of the new insights we’ve gained into the nature of their *being*.

It is the pivot in my hypothesis about Heidegger’s work of this period to suggest that this ontological moment was not a one-off, a unique experimental interruption, just as soon snuffed out and abandoned. I propose instead that this moment of metontology was just as enduringly necessary as the theoretical gestures we find in *Being and Time* or any of the other texts from this period. And I think that the FCM shows us this, and -in a number of ways- FCM forces us to stop thinking of Heidegger’s thought as a movement of rectilinear progress and more as he himself does, as a series of pathmarks, each of which *remains* essential, standing as a stone does upon the earth.

So, metontology is the movement in which ontology is applied to beings as a whole. Hence the ontologist is called to return to beings as a whole, to *physis*, to nature, in order to *complete* ontology, the study of beings as such – or more precisely, to complete *metaphysics*, by forcing it to acknowledge and understand its relation to *theology*, the study of beings as a whole. And I want to propose that this metontological return is what happens in *FCM*.

I also want to argue for the absolute necessity of this moment, a necessity which is rigorously unfolded in FCM. And so I'll devote some time to saying something *about what* Heidegger does when he finds himself there, in FCM, amidst beings as a whole: here we encounter not simply metaphysics but *physics*, - and this is really the heart of my paper here: what Heidegger is doing here with the natural sciences. So in our explorations of beings as a whole, we find the natural sciences, and the *animals*, amongst whom we find ourselves, perhaps profoundly bored.

My thesis is that FCM constitutes something like a theology, a collection of things which all somehow remind us, and remind the ontologist that while his head is in the clouds, his feet remain firmly on the earth, amidst beings as a whole: boredom, (the fundamental Stimmung, mood or attunement that Heidegger examines here, - and all attunements remind us of our situation within the whole), science (which investigates beings and not being, *Seiende* and not *Sein*), and animals, amongst whom we must consider the human.

Philosophy and science

There are at least two unique things about FCM: its prolonged engagement with contemporary science, and its employment of that science to investigate the life of animals. I'll devote most of my time to science. The first question is this: is this use of natural scientific insights unique in Heidegger's oeuvre, and if so, why does he do it *there* and *then*? If one is going to examine beings as a whole, the realm of *physis*, then "physics" in the ancient sense does seem indispensable. But Heidegger only uses it for this task here, in FCM, - the rest of his *oeuvre* treats science in a very different way, more as a symptom, or in its contemporary form as the most extreme form of metaphysics in the bad sense. It is only here that natural science stands as an ally of ontology as it boldly sets out to explore beings as a

whole. I think it's important to ask this question since in recent times the relation of philosophy to science has become a burning one.

In FCM, Heidegger deploys the sciences of zoology, ethology, and biology, the life sciences, and he uses them to elucidate the nature of the *animal*. Why is he speaking about the animal? He does it in order to elucidate the nature of the *world*, by means of a comparative analysis between the worldlessness of the stone, the world-forming capability of man, and the “world-poverty” (*Armut*) of the animal, the creepy-crawlies that in some way dwell within beings as a whole along with us (we metontologists, at least).²

Heidegger's “crude” thesis on the essence of animal life, that it has a world and yet does not have one, is deprived of it, stands in an intermediate position between the other two theses on stones and human beings, but *it also* stands between two possible relations of philosophy and science (for this thesis in its very form is only *intelligible if* one understands it as attempting to establish a new and proper relation between philosophy and science). So Heidegger is going to use this example of the animals (in part) to demonstrate what he believes philosophy's relation to the sciences *should be*.

The horns of the dilemma to be negotiated are: 1) thinking that philosophy determines the essence of life a priori, entirely *independently* from the science of Zoology, and 2) thinking that science appeals to pure positive facts and has no need of philosophy, nor any relationship with it. So what is the relation supposed to be? Heidegger (naturally speaking from the point of view of the *philosopher*) often speaks of accepting the facts from natural science but providing a *properly metaphysical* or philosophical *interpretation* of them, an interpretation that has the power to correct the *scientists' own* interpretation of the significance of their results.

The best way to understand this is perhaps to describe just what Heidegger himself does in this course. Heidegger suggests that recent research in biology *if interpreted philosophically*, strongly suggests that it will be possible to illustrate his philosophical thesis of the animals' poverty in world. And perhaps we can assume that the nuances of Heidegger's elaboration of this thesis are in a certain way *supplied* by the scientific data. But on the other hand, Heidegger insists that, like *all* metaphysical theses, his thesis on the animal's world-poverty is composed in such a way as to be capable of compelling positive scientific research to engage in a fundamental "*reflection*". Now I assume this means that philosophy can cause science to reflect upon itself and its own presuppositions, and perhaps to change them. One might call to mind here Heidegger's thoughts on the zoologist and ethologist, Jakob von Uexküll.

It has often been noted how close Heidegger's own work on the animal's world is to von Uexküll's, and Heidegger himself speaks very highly of the latter's work and invokes a number of his experiments in FCM.³ And yet the difference between them is telling: Uexküll had devoted his life's work to precisely establishing the fact that animals *have* worlds, that they are inseparable from them. And yet Heidegger wishes to speak of the animal's *poverty* in world, indeed even an absence of world in the strict sense which he restricts to the human being. This suggests that what is to be changed, what reflexion the science is called upon to undertake, is to consider its use of the term "world", and in particular, I believe Heidegger follows Arnold Gehlen in his criticism of von Uexküll, that he is too quick to simply assume that his theory of the *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt* applies to animals and *human beings* in *precisely the same sense*.

So that, in brief, is what science is to take from philosophy, a renewed reflection upon and rendering precise of its fundamental concepts. And it all revolves around the “metaphysical” problematic of the species or levels of being, of the sort which we find in Heidegger’s triad of stone, animal, and man – as I mentioned earlier. So, the work of von Uexküll is absolutely crucial in insisting that there is no *hierarchy* among the animals and among their respective worlds, but he is *warned* by Heidegger’s three *distinct* theses *not* to assert this at the expense of abolishing all distinctions between the various kinds of being (material being, animal being, human being), to end up with a kind of flat naturalism.

What does philosophy learn from science? On Drive

Now, what in turn does philosophy learn from science? And what is it that allows the philosopher in the end to nevertheless assert that there is a fundamental essential difference between animal and man? The lesson concerns potentiality and possibility, and it leads us back to the nature of the world.

Much of the vocabulary of FCM revolves around drive or instinct, *Trieb*. And what Heidegger learns from the natural sciences is an understanding of drive. One should here recall the earliest parts of the lecture course where Heidegger borrows a word from the poet Novalis to describe philosophy itself as homesickness (*Heimweh*), a longing for the home, or as he puts it *a drive* to be at home *everywhere*.⁴ This is precisely what metaphysics is. *The desire* to comprehend beings as a whole. The human animal is driven towards philosophy. Now I would claim that this language of the “metaphysical drive” - the drive to do philosophy – should be read in conjunction with Heidegger’s work on *the animal drive*. So what is the animal drive?

To go extremely quickly, it is a relation between an animal organism and its environment. A certain feature of the environment, relevant for the animal's survival, arrives to stir or "disinhibit" (*enthemmen*) one of the animal's drives, and by way of one of the animal's *organs*, specially *adapted* to this particular feature of the environment, one of the animal's *capabilities* is actualised. Heidegger thus distinguishes the animal organ from a tool or instrument, and the distinction ends up being drawn in terms of capability (*Fähigkeit*) and readiness (*Fertigkeit*), capability belonging to the organ, readiness to the tool. One of the things that distinguishes organic capability from the readiness of the tool is that it is a form of *possibility* which is inherently driven towards its own actualisation. Drive then is understood in terms of the classical metaphysical concepts of possibility and actuality. The animal is captivated (*benommen*) and gripped, "taken" by its finite environment, and this means that its drives are solicited to leave their state of possibility and to become actual.

Plus and minus: turning poverty and finitude into a resource

So how does this understanding of the animal's drive allow philosophy to both learn from the natural *sciences* and nevertheless to use that insight to postulate an essential difference, even an *opposition* between man and animal? How should we understand this difference, and how should we understand poverty, or deprivation?

Here, for lack of time, we have to become slightly abstract. After von Uexküll, philosophers often describe the relation of man and animal by saying that man's world is infinite, while the animal's world is finite, composed of only a finite set of objects, while *we* have the whole universe at our disposal. But it would be strange for *Heidegger* to speak of man's world as an infinite world, when he devotes so much of his time to stressing the importance of man's

finitude. What is finitude for man? It is not simply that he dies and hence has only a limited time upon this earth. It is that this death, this limit has a positive effect. It has an effect on the way in which man treats *his finite* world. Man is in a way just as much confined to a single, finite world as an animal is.

Again, one must be careful not to move too fast here: one might have been tempted to say that the difference between man and animal is that the animal is unaware of the limits of its world and of the possibility of other worlds, while man is not. But there are at least two curious passages in Heidegger's text where he suggests that the animal is at least dimly aware of its imprisonment within what Uexküll calls its environment and what Heidegger calls its "disinhibiting ring". These passages invoke two figures, the *poet* and *St. Paul*.⁵ The whole text is framed by the idea that poetry and art have access to a truth that natural scientists do not. At a number of points Heidegger associates art, religion, and philosophy, as if they possessed a different kind of truth, inaccessible to and perhaps superior to that of the natural sciences. It is a romantic, poetic idea that animals inherently suffer, that, as St. Paul says, the whole realm of nature is suffused with sadness. The basic suggestion is that an animal can feel its limits, but cannot then use this awareness of finitude as a *power* to motivate itself to expand or change its world. The animal can't change a minus into a plus, a deficit into a surfeit.

With man, on the other hand, things are different. Heidegger suggests, albeit quite obliquely, that man has a different attitude to his own impoverishment and limitation, and he can precisely draw from that finitude his own power and *freedom*. And this takes us onto perhaps the most famous of Heidegger's propositions about man and animal, repeated everywhere: man *dies*, animals do not (they merely *perish*).

Concluding Remarks

We will have learnt from Heidegger's earlier work of the "metontological period" I've been describing, that man relates to his own death as the end of all his possibilities, but that he can nevertheless transform this death into the very source of those possibilities which are most his own. To say that animals do not die is precisely to say that they do not have this ability to transform the negativity of their limits into the positivity of possibilities. Possibilities which may indeed be infinite.

Death forces us to recognise the contingency of the fact that we have been thrown into this one particular world. And that precisely does not consign us to gloom and suffering, but motivates us precisely to change our world, either to transform this world, or to swap this world for a new one. Animals may be able to generate organs, based on the capabilities that they have (famously, Heidegger shows that capabilities precede organs: one does not see because one has eyes, one has eyes because one can see). But what they cannot do is generate a whole new set of possibilities. As an aside, the fact that *humans can* do this means that mere organic organs will no longer be enough to actualise these titanic possibilities: new inventions will be needed: instruments, tools, and machines... technology. So animals do not die in that they cannot render a lack positive, or transform a limit into a source of possibilities that are perhaps unlimited.

To conclude, it is curious that it is just this point that most of Heidegger's critics fasten upon. Derrida, one of Heidegger's very best readers, of course, will never have any truck for the thesis that man and animal can be understood simply as opposed. And yet, what is so curious about FCM is that here Heidegger does exactly what Derrida asks of us when it comes to

understanding man and animal, and that is to seek assistance from the natural sciences, zoology, biology etc. Heidegger does just that, and yet precisely by *doing* that comes to reassert the opposition between man and animal.

Today, there are other signs which might give us reason to return to Heidegger here, because the idea has become somewhat current that one might be able to do address the natural sciences, to explain the emergence of man up to a certain point in a naturalistic way, and yet then, with man, to depart from the sciences. One might think here of the Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition, at least the very most recent interpretations of Lacan's thought, Giorgio Agamben's *The Open*, on man and animal, Roberto Esposito's thinking of human nature, and of course, from a much more Heideggerian starting point, the revival of philosophical anthropology with the work of Bernard Stiegler.

What one also notices here, in comparison with Heidegger, is a preparedness to speak of "man" or the human being as opposed to *Dasein* or the mortal. Or more precisely, to think about how one gets from the one to the other. What must have happened in man, what must man be in order that he *can be* *Dasein*, to understand being, and so on?

I think among other disciplines, the old, supposedly defunct discipline of philosophical anthropology studies precisely these questions. And had I had time I would have liked to have spoken about Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, and Helmuth Plessner. But if what is at stake here is the transition from the animal to the human, or perhaps from the human understood as an animal to *Dasein*, then it's very noticeable that, in FCM, Heidegger deploys endless locutions which bind together in different ways the human being and *Dasein*. "The *Dasein in* man, human *Dasein*, man's *Dasein*." Indeed he even speaks of the task of the course, and man's task as such, as "awakening the *Dasein* within him". So precisely this

transition from the human being who might be understood in naturalistic, animal terms, to the man of philosophy, the human being who does metaphysics, is precisely what Heidegger's FCM is about. And this is precisely why this text is still offering us a wealth of resources even today.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, tr. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 33

² FCM, 76-7

³ FCM, 192

⁴ FCM, 5

⁵ FCM, 272-3