

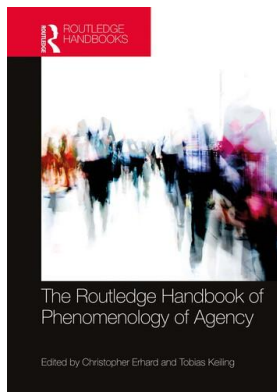
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Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Agency

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315104249-10>

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Published online on: 30 Oct 2020

How to cite :- Sacha Golob. 30 Oct 2020, *Martin Heidegger from:* The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Agency Routledge

Accessed on: 20 Mar 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315104249-10>

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8

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

From fluid action to *Gelassenheit*

Sacha Golob

Introduction

Heidegger's views on agency are central to his philosophy: in both his earlier and later work they form part of an intricate web of notions including responsibility, normativity and activity. At the same time, however, Heidegger's position can be elusive. This is partly due to deep methodological and conceptual differences which make it hard to locate him in relation to the standard analytic or Kantian debates. It is also because his views are subject to a series of complex shifts – for example, during the early 1930s and then again in the aftermath of the war. There is no scholarly consensus on the exact nature of these shifts or on the degree of continuity or change that they imply: as a result, it is impossible to adequately address Heidegger's views on “agency” or indeed any other topic in a single article without radically restricting the chronological range of the discussion. For these reasons, I am going to focus primarily on the period around *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, published 1927): Heidegger's most influential text; it is also the best point of contact with contemporary philosophy of action or with other phenomenologists. I close by sketching more briefly how these themes develop within Heidegger's later work. Throughout I try to avoid an excessive reliance on Heidegger's distinctive terminology: my aim in that sense is to provide an analysis of his views, rather than a recitation of them.

By “agency” I mean the capacity for action, where acts are differentiated from mere movements. Suppose you shove Paul from behind and he falls onto Sarah, hurting her. Intuitively, this is not an exercise of Paul's agency: it was something that was done to him; you could have equally pushed an inanimate object in just the same way. One could make the same point by saying that it was not something that Paul chose to do. Agency is thus closely connected to notions like activity, freedom and blame: Paul is not blamed for hurting Sarah because he did not do so freely or willingly. This basic picture rapidly becomes more complex, however: suppose Paul shoves Sarah whilst in the grip of addiction, or because his early upbringing has made him careless and insensitive. Or consider a case where the relevant “movements” are not physical but mental. Paul is responsible, both epistemically and perhaps morally, for judgments that he makes. But is he responsible for forgetting something – a friend's birthday perhaps? Or for thoughts that occur to him unbidden? Neither is a matter of action in any simple sense. Is he responsible for the sexual images that enter his mind or

only for decision to act on them? Cases like these are designed to pressure the links between responsibility, agency and choice. One option is to try to reinforce such links: one might argue that Paul is at fault for forgetting a birthday just if he chose not to do what was necessary to remember it, such as making notes or other reminders for himself, or because his forgetfulness testifies to the problematic lack of importance which he judges the celebration to have.¹ All these issues will be in background of any adequate discussion of agency, but the place to begin is with the nature of action itself.

Heidegger and phenomenological approaches to action

Early Heidegger develops a highly original and systematic picture of human existence, his so-called “existential analytic of Dasein” (SZ: 13). At its core is a hierarchical structure in which certain forms of experience or understanding have explanatory priority over others. For example, he identifies “cognition” [*Erkennen*], in something like Kant’s sense of the term, as a “founded” or derivative mode of experience – one made possible by “being-in-the-world” (SZ: 61–62). Heidegger’s full picture is immensely complex, and resists easy summary. This is partly because it is unclear how “being-in-the-world” relates to familiar categories such as perception or judgment: from a Heideggerian point of view, this unclarity is a necessary consequence of the move beyond such frameworks and the pseudo-problems, such as skepticism, attendant on them (SZ: 56–57, 228–229). It is also because his story interweaves descriptive and normative elements: whilst the first half of SZ focuses on life in its “average everydayness” (SZ: 16), the second half addresses both the temporal structures which supposedly underlie that life and “authenticity”, a privileged form of existence that escapes the banality and “idle talk” supposedly pervasive in social contexts (SZ: §§35 and 53). Even to sketch Heidegger’s overarching framework would take a chapter in itself, and so I propose to concentrate here on what has undoubtedly been the most influential aspect of his early philosophy of action. The best way to approach that is via one of the most famous examples in the history of philosophy: Heidegger’s hammer.

In developing an analysis of “average everydayness”, Heidegger introduces a characteristically artisanal scenario: a craftworker, completely absorbed in their task, silently discards a hammer that is too light and takes a more appropriate one (SZ: 69, 157). The case foregrounds several points: the paradigm case of action for Heidegger occurs fluidly and unreflectively within a meaningful context, tacitly structured by my goals and by the equipment around me (SZ: 70, 129). At its core is what he labels the “for-the-sake-of-which”: the agent’s self-understanding, where that is cashed in terms of the norms to which the agent is committed, the skills she exercises in pursuing them and the shifting configuration of the world which is thus manifest to her (SZ: 87). To take a simple example, Joan understands herself as a professor insofar as she encounters and evaluates the world in terms of that identity. Here is Heidegger’s own description of the attendant phenomenology:

Coming into the lecture-room, I see the lectern . . . What do “I” see? Brown surfaces, at right angles to one another? No, I see something else. Is it a largish box with another smaller one set on top of it? Not at all. I see the lectern at which I am to speak. You see the lectern from which you are to be addressed and from which I have previously spoken to you . . . I see the lectern in one fell swoop, so to speak, and not in isolation, but as adjusted a bit too high for me. I see—and immediately so—a book lying upon it as annoying to me (a book, not a collection of layered pages with black marks strewn across them).

(GA 56–57: 71–72)

To switch to Heidegger's own terminology: "the referential totality of significance (which as such is constitutive for worldhood) is 'tied up' with a 'for-the-sake-of-which'" (SZ: 192).

The result is a picture of the world in which self and world go hand in hand: objects are encountered as means to specific ends, tasks appear as desirable or obligatory, all ordered, or in Heideggerian terms "disclosed", on the basis of the agent's self-understanding (SZ: 192). Many contemporary Heideggerians, drawing on Gibson, express this by talk of "affordances and solicitations" (Gibson 1979): for Joan, the pile of scripts teetering on the desk "affords" reading, whilst for Harry, the room cleaner, it is manifest simply as an obstacle to be moved aside. For the skilled craftsperson a certain weight of hammer is manifest immediately as right without, Heidegger cautions, her needing to predicate any particular mass of it (SZ: 154).

This sketch introduces some central Heideggerian themes and concepts, and it raises a number of exegetical questions – for example, why exactly is the craftsperson's experience different from one of judging that the hammer is the right weight? But my present concern is primarily philosophical rather than textual, and so I want to focus on two of the key ways in which this early Heideggerian picture has been developed. Heidegger's own hammer example, however, hides a complex twist, and so at least initially I will use a simpler case. Suppose Tom is working out how to complete a difficult project: he sits down, weighs the options, thinks through the various pros and cons, and then acts, taking a series of steps to realize his plan. This is a prime case of "reflective" or "deliberative" action, i.e. action chosen by the agent after some extended process of rational thought. But such cases are relatively rare: the very same day, Tom performed countless other acts, few of which required any kind of reflection. For example, he drove to the shops, fluidly tracking a whole range of social and legal norms covering where, when and how he can turn or park. SZ's focus on "average everydayness", of the silent setting-aside of a tool within fluid and absorbed action, exemplifies this. Let's call such acts "non-reflective". We can now introduce the two key Heideggerian claims.

First, Heideggerians argue that philosophy has over-focused on the reflective or deliberative case, and generalized from it. Wrathall, for example, accuses analytic philosophy of precisely this error:

[A]nalytic agency theory takes deliberative action as its paradigm – that is, action in which the agent aims at an end or goal that he or she envisions, and pursues that end in a rational way.

(Wrathall 2014: 208)

Crowell and Okrent raise a similar objection to Kantian theories such as Korsgaard's. As they see it, Korsgaard's mistake was to analyze agency in terms of one specific mental state, self-conscious reflection (Okrent 1999: 70; Crowell 2007: 321). Korsgaard writes:

[O]ur capacity to turn our attention onto our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them and to call them into question . . . I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a reason to act?... And this sets us a problem no other animal has. It is the problem of the normative.

(Korsgaard 1996: 79)

Here it is reflection which separates human behavior from that of animals and so which introduces notions like responsibility and normativity. On this Kantian picture, I am not

directly responsible for my impulses: they are understood as natural events resulting largely from factors beyond my control such as genetics and upbringing. But I am responsible for whether I reflectively endorse them.² The boundary between mere “happenings”, including those that occur within my body such as “impulses”, and agency is thus aligned with reflection. But what now about Tom’s driving – his fluid switching down of gears? It obviously doesn’t seem like a series of purely animalistic impulses but nor is it a matter of a reflective decision. Korsgaard’s response is to claim that such behavior is not preceded by a decision but nevertheless still “embodies” one (Korsgaard 2009: 127). The Heideggerian suspicion is that such talk “remains a metaphor” (Crowell 2007: 328): in the crudest terms, how effective can a model based on self-conscious reflection be once reflection is removed from the equation?³

Second, Heideggerian accounts argue that it is in fact absorbed or engaged or fluid action which has explanatory priority, and that an account of agency should begin there. In Dreyfus’s influential terminology, we should start with “coping” (Dreyfus 1991: 67–75): with Tom’s driving, not his planning the project. As Crowell puts it:

What is needed is an approach to the categorial structure of action that arises from a description of non-deliberated action, and this is just what Heidegger provides.

(Crowell 2013:267)

This move brings with it some immediate challenges. On the one hand, Heideggerians must explain why such action differs from mere instinct or from the kind of responsive behavior of which non-human animals are capable. Unless they can do this, they risk losing the links between agency and responsibility. If Tom drives into someone, he’ll be called to answer for it; this is hard to grasp unless his behavior can be separated from the kind of responsive training capacities found in dogs. Wrathall again provides a neat formulation of the issue:

The problem for the paradigm of fluid action, however, is preserving the idea that bodily movements are “full-blooded actions,” as opposed to a merely instinctive, animalistic response to stimulations.

(Wrathall 2014: 197)

On the other hand, however, some story is still needed about the relationship to deliberative thought: it is one thing to highlight a mode of action missed by the tradition and another to claim that it has explanatory priority. To put it another way, why isn’t Heidegger simply inverting the biases of the canon, switching from an obsession with deliberative agency to an obsession with non-deliberative agency? To this end, Dreyfus developed an influential “two floors” model of agency on which deliberative action emerges only when fluid action hits some form of obstacle – thus explaining its secondary status (Dreyfus 2005 provides a particularly detailed presentation of this view). Deliberative agency would be, like Kantian cognition, a “founded” or secondary mode of “being-in-the-world” (SZ: 59).

The two main Heideggerian claims I have identified are in a very literal sense phenomenologically driven: they are motivated by first-person descriptions of action which seem to undermine the deliberative or reflective model. For example, here is Wrathall introducing the key idea of solicitation, a notion that I will discuss in more detail below:

Consider Superbowl MVP Phil Simms’ recollection of what it was like to play American football at a professional level: “You take the ball. You get it. And man, you react and you throw it. And you go, ‘well I don’t know why I did that, but I did it, and let’s just

move on.’ . . . You know, my mind couldn’t focus on anything too much. It really, it just reacts. It’s amazing. You react to: well, I saw a helmet move. And you whoa! And you think, ‘gosh, why did I do that?’ Then you see the film, and everybody parted . . . and you go, ‘ohhh, that’s why I did it.’” As this description suggests, highly skilled, fluid actions are experienced, not as the deliberative outcome of my aims and desires and beliefs, but as being drawn out of me directly and spontaneously by the particular features of the situation, without the mediation of occurrent mental or psychological states or acts. Of course, the actions that are solicited or drawn out of the agent depend on his or her current way of being involved in the situation.

(Wrathall 2014: 195)

Simms’ remark serves as a kind of phenomenological test case for Wrathall: whatever model of agency we come up with must do it justice. Dreyfus, in critiquing both Searle and Husserl, similarly appeals to Larry Bird’s memories of the court:

Heidegger would like basketball player Larry Bird’s description of the experience of the complex purposive act of passing the ball in the midst of a game: “[A lot of the] things I do on the court are just reactions to situations ... A lot of times, I’ve passed the basketball and not realized I’ve passed it until a moment or so later.”

(Dreyfus 1993: 28)

One can see the similarity to Heidegger’s original scenario: just as the craftsperson reacts fluidly to the obstacles the material poses, Bird navigates the shifting challenges posed by his opponents almost as if on auto-pilot. As with Wrathall, the tactic is to use phenomenology to motivate an alternative to reflective or deliberative theories of agency. Cases like Bird’s thus form the basis of Dreyfus’s account of “skilled coping”: essentially an analysis of absorbed or non-deliberative action that emphasizes the skilled management of multiple variables – from the position of onrushing opponents to the precise angle of the bounce. As Dreyfus puts it:

According to Heidegger . . . skillfull coping does not require a mental representation of its goal at all. It can be purposive without the agent entertaining a purpose.

(Dreyfus 1993: 28)

Again, the intended contrast is with a deliberative model on which the agent sets out some particular goal before taking steps to realize it. We can now see, incidentally, why Heidegger’s own hammer example is not the ideal introduction, insofar as it can call to mind both the fluid “coping” he wants to highlight and a prior “planning” stage in which the craftsperson deliberates over materials, goals, resources – a planning stage that fits much more naturally with a Kantian or analytic approach (Heidegger is aware of the tension and occasionally warns against the artisanal model on this basis – see, for example, GA 24: 150–151).

Phenomenology versus logical analysis?

The Heideggerian points just discussed are phenomenological in a straightforward sense: they are motivated by the distinctive first-person experience of absorbed action. But how helpful is such a phenomenological approach when thinking about agency? Perhaps the best way to approach this is via the extended debates between Dreyfus and John Searle.

For Searle, phenomenology is at best a starting point: as he puts it, “phenomenological approach is inadequate to solve the problems that bother me . . . logical analysis has to go far beyond phenomenology” (Searle 1999: 277). Indeed, for Searle, phenomenological theories of agency are positively dangerous because they foster what he labels the “phenomenological illusion”.

We do not, when playing tennis have a conscious experience of having propositional representations of conditions of satisfaction. . . . and of course, there is no propositional content running consciously through your head. But all the same, the entire logical apparatus of intentionality applies. If you describe the phenomenology and stop there, you miss the underlying logical structures.

(Searle 2004: 327)

Searle’s point is this. Obviously, much action is absorbed or fluid rather than deliberative. But that is only the first step: we need then to undertake logical analysis to identify the conditions of satisfaction for such acts – conditions which hold despite the evident fact that the agent has no phenomenological awareness of them. For example, my doing *x* requires not just that *x* occurs but that it occurs as a result of my intention to do *x*: a case where I intend to raise my arm and it happens to go up because you shock it electrically is not a case where I have managed to act (Searle 1983: 85). In short for Searle, phenomenology barely scratches the surface: indeed, by the end of the series of exchanges he talks of the “bankruptcy” of phenomenology (Searle 1999: 277).

Searle’s frustration is evident throughout his dialogue with Dreyfus, and it speaks to deep terminological differences between the phenomenological and analytic approaches to agency. For example, Dreyfus reads talk of “representations” as phenomenological and so meets it with examples such as the Bird case: he takes Bird to show that “skillfull coping does not require a mental representation” because Bird describes an experience completely absorbed in the game (Dreyfus 1993: 28). But for Searle, as for almost all analytic philosophy of mind, to say that a given act is “representational” is simply to say that it has:

[T]ruth conditions, obedience conditions, conditions of improvement, and conditions of satisfaction generally. As I remarked earlier, representation for me is a logical, not a phenomenological notion. The expression “mental representation” does not imply “sentences or pictures in the head.”

(Searle 2004: 327)

Bird’s act of shooting is representational in this sense because it can succeed or fail: the challenge as Searle sees it is to work out what, beyond the ball going through the hop, needs to be included in those conditions – how exactly, for example, do we rule out the electric shock case just mentioned?

The lesson here is not confined to the analytic case. The attacks on Korsgaard discussed earlier have validity precisely because reflection is at least partly a phenomenologically defined state: it is very hard to see in what sense Bird or Simms is reflecting. But most commentators understand Kantian talk of transcendental apperception or the “I think” in a logical fashion: as they see it, the point is not, of course, that we go around deliberating or talking to ourselves, but that our acts have an inferential and syntactic structure which depends on the faculty of understanding and which animals thus lack.⁴

The points so far might be simply summarized like this: the fact that reflection or deliberation are unusual states is entirely compatible with the view that action possesses a representational or propositional structure, and that this is well illuminated by considering those more explicit instances. More broadly, pushing the Dreyfusian approach to its extremes will create internal problems. For example, motivated by cases such as Bird's, Dreyfus occasionally denies that absorbed action contains any awareness of the self: there is "awareness but no self-awareness" (Dreyfus 1991: 67). Exegetically, it is difficult to square this with Heidegger's own emphasis on the *selbstweltlich* or "self-worldly" nature of experience: the "for-the-sakes-of which" that structure the manifold (GA 61: 95). Furthermore, as McKinney notes, it makes it hard to understand the connection to deliberative thought when the latter does occur. In Dreyfus' story, deliberation emerges when absorbed action hits some kind of obstacle; yet to see "a difficulty as a summons to deliberation demands that I be able to regard the difficulty *as* a difficulty in relation to *my* purpose" (McKinney 2017: 78). As we will now see, removing self-awareness from the picture also obscures a key part of Heidegger's positive story.

Normativity and Heideggerian approaches to agency

The results of the previous section should make us wary of straightforward appeal to phenomenology when analyzing agency. In a sense this is unsurprising: it is hard to motivate the claim that certain facts are both phenomenologically evident and yet systematically denied by one's opponents. In this section, I want to examine some of the ways in which the most sophisticated Heideggerian theories move far beyond such straightforward appeals, interweaving phenomenological analysis with detailed work on normativity: after all, no true phenomenologist, particularly not one with Heidegger's hermeneutic background, would automatically take a first impression as giving the truth of the matter.

To do this we need to flesh out the Heideggerian framework: there are complex textual issues in play here, and what follows is only a snapshot, but it will be enough for our purposes.⁵ As discussed, for Heidegger agents primarily encounter objects as instrumentally, phenomenologically and normatively structured by our "for-the-sake-of-which" or self-understanding: when Joan enters the classroom, she experiences it not simply as a space of a given size and magnitude, but as ordered by that identity: the pile of scripts on the far table is highly salient; it is "nearer" in that sense than the floorboards beneath her feet (SZ: 107).⁶ Furthermore, the pile does not just blankly loom large: it is experienced with a particular teleological and motivational valence, it is seen as "requiring marking", a perception that may grow gradually oppressive as its size mounts. The desk at the front, meanwhile, is seen as an appropriate place for doing that marking. In contrast, for the contractor come to price new flooring, it is the floorboards that are the salient feature and the pile of scripts and the table are merely obstacles that hinder measuring up.

This gives some grip on the role of normativity in the Heideggerian picture: our experience is saturated with awareness of what is appropriate or required. But what is the connection between normativity and action? Crowell, the most influential exponent of this line of thought, provides a succinct summary. He starts by glossing actions, as opposed to mere movements, in terms of intentions and intentions in terms of norms:

An action, in this sense, is an attempt to realize an intention, and for this reason what belongs to the action must not only conform to the norm but must also be done in light

of that norm. To be an act of revising my paper, it is not enough that my bodily movements realize that goal (as though I were a machine or a zombie). I must also be making such movements in order to revise my paper.

(Crowell 2013: 264)

Actions here are defined in normative terms: they are attempts to do something that can succeed or fail. Furthermore, those success conditions must be “immanent” to the act: my car exploding is evidently a failure in some sense but not an action:

If there is no such standard . . . for determining what it is supposed to be, then action cannot be distinguished from mere movement. And the standard must be immanent to the act, since if it is completely external to the experience, then it is irrelevant for an account of practical intentionality.

(Crowell 2013: 264)

This approach has notable connections to Searle’s own: Searle analyzes action in terms of conditions of satisfaction which are precisely norms in Crowell’s sense, standards that an act may meet or fail to (Searle 1983: 90). The problem, as Crowell sees it, is how to specify these conditions or norms when one moves beyond cases of deliberation: there I decide to do x and my subsequent movements either do or don’t meet that goal, making talk of success or failure easy. But what about the act “that does not follow upon a process of deliberation? Whence does it derive its normative orientation?” (Crowell 2013: 264).

It is here that Crowell appeals to Heidegger’s “for-the-sake-of-which”: it is this identity which determines the conditions by which my actions must be judged as success or failures.

Were I not committed to being a writer, what I am doing could not be determined. Am I revising my paper or creating an artwork? . . . [W]hat I am trying to do depends on what I am trying to be.

(Crowell 2013: 273)

We have here an account which cashes out action in terms of “trying to do” and “trying to do” in terms of “trying to be”, that is, in terms of my ongoing attempt to realize some for-the-sake-of which. This meshes well with the characteristically absorbed phenomenology of everyday life: John might see himself as a tough guy and try to live up to the characteristic norms of that identity without having engaged in any reflection about it. When deliberation does occur, it will be against a backdrop of such fluid, normatively structured acts.

Before assessing this account, I want to introduce a closely related position, that defended by Wrathall. As mentioned in Simms’ example, Wrathall understands fluid action in terms of solicitations: we can think of this as a complex pattern of salencies and attractions ordered around my self-understanding, as in Heidegger’s lecture hall case. It is because Simms understands himself as a quarterback that particular movements are salient and invite, without his even thinking about it, a quick release, whilst other movements fade into the background, below the level of awareness. Actions are then distinguished from mere happenings in terms of the pattern of such salencies:

What distinguishes a doing from a happening, on the model of fluid action, is that the solicited action is the result of the individual that I am – that it would not have been

solicited were I not myself, and I would not be myself were I not individuated from other possible actors.

(Wrathall 2014: 212)

As with Crowell, actions are responses to the normatively structured situation generated by my self-understanding: the solicited pass manifests itself simply as “what ought to be done”.

I now want to highlight several points regarding such accounts.

First, we need to hear more about the relative roles of “trying”, “solicitation” and “skills” in these stories. Suppose that the very moment the world solicits Simms to throw an out route, I trigger an electronic charge to his hand, propelling the ball loose. Simms’ “throwing” here is not an action and Wrathall can plausibly concur on the grounds that the act is not “*the result* of the individual that [Simms is]” (emphasis added) – note though that it meets his other conditions, “it would not have been solicited were [Simms] not [himself]”. Now suppose Joan is incredibly nervous because she cares so much about grading, and when trying to take a sip of water, her hand spasms, spilling the whole glass. Here the movement *is* the direct result of Joan’s solicitations. The individuating role of the “for-the-sake-of-which” highlighted by Crowell also still applies: the event is individuated by what Joan is trying to be, it is a ruining of papers, not a political protest. Finally, for both Crowell and Wrathall the explanatory grounds for an action must lie at least partly in the agent’s exercise of skills (Crowell 2013: 267; Wrathall 2014: 196): again, it seems like this condition is met (Joan was exercising the skill of handling the glass). Do we have an action? If so, why is there no action in Simms’ case simply because the source of the jolt lay within Joan’s body? If not, when would we have an action – what if Joan spills only a little, something a clumsy person might habitually do?

Second, Heideggerian approaches raise interesting questions around the links between responsibility and action. Take the example of a friend’s forgotten birthday – clearly this was not done in order to do anything, but it makes sense to apologize and to feel guilt for. Wrathall’s model could allow us to accommodate such cases by recruiting them as acts: my forgetfulness flows directly from the way the world solicits me – a solicitation that manifests a lack of concern for someone to whom I should be more attentive.⁷ Alternately, one could simply sever the link between responsibility and activity: exegetically, this might be developed via Heidegger’s account of guilt as an unavoidable and ontological condition (SZ: 269).

Third, the “nervous spill” case highlights an interesting methodological point: Heideggerian accounts of agency will typically be suspicious of the causal chain counter-examples that dominate the analytic literature. Consider an influential case, adapted from Chisholm. George intends to kill his uncle. Thinking about the prospect whilst driving, he becomes so excited he loses control, fatally striking a pedestrian who happens to be his uncle (Chisholm 1966: 37). It seems true that George didn’t intentionally kill his uncle, a point hard to capture on the Heideggerian accounts for the same reason as with our nervous grader: the crash was the result of an exercise of skill in accordance with the distinctive patterns of solicitations that individuate George. The interesting issue here is not whether Heideggerians might finesse their position in some way so as to avoid such cases. It is more the divergent attitude to such elaborate thought experiments: in analytic debates on agency these are regarded as central means for isolating necessary and sufficient conditions, whilst the natural Heideggerian reaction is to treat them as derivative on an account which must first be established via more everyday examples.

Fourth, what about the possibility of actions unconnected to my self-understanding, to “what I am trying to be” in Crowell’s terms or to the “individual I am” in Wrathall’s? Presumably the response would be that either some such connection exists – perhaps a prima

facie random act is motivated by a self-conception as unscripted and spontaneous – or that the behavior is indeed not an action but something akin to Kant’s “mere happening” where my body is. But clearly more details are needed on the precise form of connection required.

Fifth, one can see how theories of agency will closely link to theories of freedom. For example, from a Kantian perspective, the natural question for Wrathall’s account is whether I have control of what solicits me, and if not whether I am able to stand back and distance myself from such draws and pulls – this emphasis on distancing, seen above in Korsgaard’s theory, is designed to guarantee my freedom to do otherwise when the pattern of solicitations remains fixed. Heidegger’s attitude toward freedom is extremely complex; what I want to flag here is simply that what is a core constraint for Kantians, preserving my ability to always do otherwise, is not in play in most Heideggerian accounts.

Authenticity and *Das Man*

So far, I have focused on the case of individual action. I want to conclude the discussion of Heidegger’s early work by looking briefly at the social context of agency. From the perspective of *Being and Time*, there are two key questions.

First, to what degree does the social context make individual agency possible? Many commentators, particularly those influenced by Dreyfus, take Heidegger to argue that a public or shared understanding of the world is a transcendental condition on individual agency. It is this “everyday understanding of the world as publicly available” that “allows us to identify ourselves as individuals in the same world” (Carman 1994: 218). One way to understand this is in terms of a content externalism closely linked to the for-the-sake-of-which: insofar as understanding myself as *x* involves the exercise of certain skills and the use of certain equipment within a public context, the available options are not simply up to me. It is impossible to now perform many of the actions that defined the samurai way of life: I could physically make the movements, but in the absence of the right social context this would only be going through the motions.⁸ Jonathan Lear gave a famous example of this when he argued that, after a certain point in the changes in Crow society, nothing could count as planting a coup stick anymore (Lear 2006: 32).

Second, to what degree does the social context limit or restrict individual agency? The key here is Heidegger’s account of *das Man*: I follow Dreyfus in translating this as “the one” (Dreyfus 1991: 141–145). Drawing on familiar Enlightenment themes, Heidegger presents this as a form of conformism, motivated in part by a refusal to question pre-established social norms and conventions. By doing what “one does” agents dodge responsibility for their behavior, in favor of a “tranquilizing” conformity (SZ: 127, 178). In its most extreme form, this evasion of responsibility is so severe that Heidegger talks as if it is no longer an exercise of my agency: as he puts it, “the one” is the “realest subject of everyday life. . . the self of everyday Dasein is a one’s self” (SZ: 129). In contrast, authentic Dasein who has freed itself from domination by “the one” lets its “ownmost self” take action (SZ: 342).

The complication is whether one should read such remarks as denying that the inauthentic have agency, or whether they express the view that such agency has been radically limited, perhaps as when in the grip of an addiction. The latter alternative seems much more plausible: after all, Heidegger seems to hold such individuals partly responsible insofar as they preferred tranquilizing certainty over radical questioning (GA 20: 384–386). A full answer, however, would have to wait on detailed discussion not just of authenticity, but also of the

relationship between *das Man*, the everyday and a third notion that Heidegger dubs “undifferentiatedness” and which seems designed to provide a neutral point between authenticity and inauthenticity (SZ: 331).⁹

Later Heidegger – *Gelassenheit*, Activity and Passivity

I now want to turn to Heidegger’s later thought. As indicated, the question of how many “phases” there are to Heidegger’s development and when exactly any changes occur is controversial, and what follows is largely neutral on the details. My aim is to introduce one fundamental strand of that later thought, a strand which revolves around a challenge to agency.

To start we need to distinguish two questions. One, what defines agency – what distinguishes an action from a mere happening? This has been our earlier focus. The other is whether there are privileged or problematic forms of agency? I touched on this when discussing authenticity, and in Heidegger’s later work it comes center stage. Very roughly, his view is that a range of what traditional philosophy would identify as both epistemic and social problems are ultimately rooted in the dominance of a certain model of agency. To combat this, he attempts to valorize an alternative, one which downplays activity in favor of a meditative receptiveness. The place to begin is with the problematic form of agency.

During the 1930–1940s, Heidegger develops a reading of the history of philosophy as the triumph of the willing subject. Within this, both individual agents and being in general are conceived in terms of the will:

In the subjectivity of the subject, will comes to appearance as the essence of subjectivity. Modern metaphysics, as the metaphysics of subjectivity, thinks the being of beings in the sense of will.

(GA 5: 243)

The problem as Heidegger presents it is an appropriative and domineering vision of agency: as he puts it in the Nietzsche lectures, “To will . . . is to will-to-be-master [*Herrsein-wollen*]” (NII: 265). Perhaps the clearest example comes in his account of modern technology as a state in which all entities, including ultimately ourselves, are understood as possible energy for exploitation within a calculative framework – “modern metaphysics” is thus able to slide seamlessly from a Nietzschean glorification of the will, a glorification of such exploitation, to a conception of individuals merely as “human resources” (GA 7: 18). Heidegger’s solution is to emphasize an alternate way of thinking about agency, one which brings “the measure of meditative thinking decisively into play against mere calculative thinking” (Gel: 21). The shift is encapsulated by the term *Gelassenheit*: this marks an attitude of contemplative attentiveness to entities and to being. It is not a purely passive comportment, nor is it simply a “denial of willing” (GA 77: 77). Instead, it is best glossed as a receptivity in which we wait attentively, without letting our expectations determine and limit that which we are open to (Gel: 42/68).

These moves have been widely criticized, particularly by authors who read early Heidegger as a decisionist whose account of authenticity would valorize radical choice irrespective of its content. Thus Habermas:

The language of *Being and Time* had suggested the decisionism of empty resoluteness; the later philosophy suggests the submissiveness of an equally empty readiness for subjugation.

(Habermas 1987:141)

This worry will be particularly acute if one reads Heidegger's later talk of being [*Sein*] or being [Seyn] as ascribing it some form of agency, perhaps of a supernatural type. Wolin, for example, accuses Heidegger of "a secularized replay of medieval ontology", in which our agency must be sacrificed in the face of Being-God's (Wolin 1990: 152).

Some of these objections are uncharitable: Heidegger is insistent that *Gelassenheit* remains a form of action and absolutely not a "letting self-will go in favor of divine will" (Gel: 33–34). Indeed, this is one of several points on which he explicitly separates himself from theologians such as Eckhart (for helpful discussion, see Davis 2007: 127–140). But how are we to assess the story even rightly construed? Clearly, much hangs on Heidegger's larger history of philosophy; much also depends on his later notion of being and on his attempt to demarcate that questioning from metaphysics (GA 65: 173). I cannot do justice to these issues here, but perhaps the best that can be said is this. Heidegger's later work valorizes a mode of agency that is intended to allow a genuine receptivity to that which it encounters: listening, for example, is identified as prior to speech (GA 12: 142, 165) and moods such as reservedness [*Verhaltenheit*] supposedly prepare us to notice what is otherwise crowded out (GA 65: 33–34). As Kisiel observes, in this sense there is a close continuity between it and his earliest work, immediately after World War I, when he grapples with the issue of receptivity:

Do we really apprehend, grasp, take . . . the immediacy of experience in its sense? Instead of *Hinsehen*, a *Hingabe*, a receptive submission: heeding, and not looking, more of a suffering than an action? Or somewhere in the middle, that Greek voice which will continue to recur as Heidegger moves from Paul's verbs of God to Aristotle's search for a middle between passion and action?

(Kisiel 1993: 226)

Much of Heidegger's later thought turns around a sustained reflection on this stance between passion and action. My suggestion is that he is attempting to solve the very same problem that occupied him in *Being and Time*, namely how to "secure the right access" to that which he is investigating (SZ: 15). How, in other words, can one be genuinely open to what one encounters given the insight that all inquiry comes with presuppositions? In that sense, Heidegger's later philosophy of agency remains first and foremost an exercise in phenomenology: it is an attempt to model a stance in which the phenomena might show themselves as they are, undistorted.¹⁰

Related topics

Chapters 2 (on Pfänder & Husserl), 17 (on Dreyfus), 24 (De Monticelli).

Abbreviations

I use the following abbreviations for Heidegger's work. The pagination refers to the standard German edition which is given in the margins of all English translations. "GA" references are to the *Gesamtausgabe* edition (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975–). Where translations exist, I have consulted these but often modified them; the relevant translations are listed below.

Gel *Gelassenheit*, Pfullingen: Neske 1992; *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J. Anderson and E. Freund, New York: Harper and Row 1966.

NII *Nietzsche. Zweiter Band*, Pfullingen: Neske 1982.

- SZ *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Niemeyer 1957; *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, New York: Harper & Row 1962.
- GA 5 *Holzwege* (1977); *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002.
- GA 7 *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (2000).
- GA 20 *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs* (1979); *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. T. Kisiel, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1992.
- GA 25 *Phänomenologische Interpretation von Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1995); *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1997.
- GA 56/57 *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie* (1999).
- GA 61 *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles* (1994).
- GA 65 *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (1989); *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1999.
- GA 77 *Feldweg-Gespräche* (2007).

Notes

- 1 For recent discussion see Clarke (2016), Smith (2005) and, from a more empirical standpoint, Murray, S., Murray, E., Stewart, G., Sinnott-Armstrong, W. and De Brigard, F. (2019).
- 2 These claims, often framed in terms of the “Incorporation Principle”, are central to the Kantian picture of action and ethics. For a highly influential discussion see Allison (1996: 129–133). I say that I am not “directly” responsible for impulses to avoid cases where I deliberately improve or worsen my natural inclinations, for example through some kind of training program – given Kant’s other commitments, such cases introduce complex questions that I cannot address here.
- 3 Crowell is discussing the original 2002 lecture presentation of Korsgaard’s position; I cite the later 2009 published version since it is more widely available.
- 4 This structure is set out in the Metaphysical and Transcendental Deductions of the first *Critique* which are thus pieces of logical analysis in Searle’s sense (Kant 1998). As Ameriks observes, it is frankly impossible to see how Kant’s talk of self-consciousness could perform any of the roles it does in those sections if it is understood in something like Dreyfus’s sense (Ameriks 2003: 12).
- 5 Despite the issues raised in the preceding section, Dreyfus (1991) remains by far the best introduction to these aspects of Heidegger and is the place to start for a fuller analysis.
- 6 Heideggerian identities are thus separable from institutional ones: Joan may continue to be employed as a teacher whilst having long lost any commitment to it; conversely, she may see life in terms of opportunities for teaching irrespective of whether she draws a salary for it.
- 7 On this reading, Wrathall’s account has similarities to views such as Smith’s where responsibility accrues to behaviors that reflect our evaluative judgments (Smith 2005:253).
- 8 For a rigorous debate centered around the role of public intelligibility in *Being and Time* see Olafson (1994) and Carman’s 1994 reply.
- 9 I discuss these issues in Golob (2014: 214–238).
- 10 I would like to thank the editors and an anonymous referee for their extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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