Intersubjective constructionism

Part 1: Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenological psychologies

by Ian R. Owen[1]

The aim of this two-part paper is to develop social constructionism along the lines of the phenomenological psychologies of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in an approach which follows their ground breaking work in the first four decades of this century. With respect to these writers this view should be called intersubjective constructionism as it follows continental philosophy and sociology, rather than those enterprises within the human sciences which are dominated by the thoughtless methods of natural science which refuse to understand ontological and hermeneutic complexities or ground humanity's knowledge of itself (Husserl 1970: 168).

The story of phenomenology according to Husserl and Heidegger is a detailed intertwining of action and reaction, ideal and actuality. On the personal level between the two men it is a story of mentorship and betrayal. The matters that concern social constructionists though, are to do with understanding the intellectual tensions between their work and adapting their writings for the greater benefit of grounding social or intersubjective constructionism. The story begins with Husserl and the differences between three hypothesized attitudes which represent the way in which the world is understood. The everyday world of Westerners is called the natural attitude or the life-world attitude. The assumptions that exist within the ideology of natural science are the same as those within the natural attitude where consciousness is seen as integral to, and analyzable by, the same sciences and technologies that are used to build bridges and make cars.

Contrary to this Husserl proposed entering the psychological attitude which he felt was created by an epoche, an alleged process of clearing away ideological and interpretative debris. The psychological epoche allegedly suspends the everyday attitude of unreflective awareness, the factual external world and its reifying assumptions and everyday projections from the past. Husserl's phenomenological pure psychology is a qualitative descriptive procedure for grounding later empirical research in a similar way to the way in which geometry and pure mathematics ground empirical physics. Husserl thought that when he analyzed his own experiences of time

---

that he was able to see in a non-interpretative manner the direct truth of his own inner world which he argued must be the same for other persons. He also thought that a second transcendental epoche could be initiated which would begin a similar process of the direct seeing of the essences and phenomena of existence, called the transcendental attitude. Again, not just for himself but for others also.

The psychological and philosophical results of his inner meditations could then be shared with other co-workers who would then be able to verify his findings. In this way he proposed that philosophy would be able to ground psychology like all the other sciences of specific objects of the world. Husserl's work went through several stages and developments. His work prior to 1927 was before Heidegger's phenomenology, who was his close friend and collaborator in the years prior to their estrangement. In overview then, Husserl's pure psychology concerns the non-factual and non-empirical investigation of the psychological prior to its empirical investigation (Kocklemans 1994; Grieder 1995). Firstly, it makes no claims about the existence of transcendent objects outside of the consciousness of the pure psychologist. Psychological events are investigated as appearances and appearance constituting acts. Secondly, pure psychology is non-factual insomuch that it is makes no claims about the actual existence of psychological processes either, apart from Husserl's own assertions about temporality and the existence of the inner and outer worlds. Thirdly, it is non-factual as it investigates the realm of possible and imaginable experiences. Husserl's pure psychology is an inexact study that seeks to describe the gestalt aspects of the perception of one object which may have many appearances because it can be viewed from many different perspectives at various times. Within the overall process of pure psychology, the various aspects that have been mentioned so far, the temporal analysis, the epoche, the seeing of essences of consciousness and intersubjectivity are all aspects of the same process which works towards the same ends. Phenomenology provides a method of moving from the natural attitude through the psychological one to the transcendental attitude of philosophy.

Heidegger's response

However, Heidegger could not accept the idea that Husserl's phenomenology could liberate psychologists and philosophers from the constraints of the past and from cultural and ideological bias so easily. He kept some core aspects of Husserl's method while abandoning others and provided a new impetus which is at the heart of much post-modern, semantic, social historical,

linguistic, critical and radical thinking within the human sciences and philosophy today.

One of Heidegger's aims is to perceive directly the nature of what exists as an *ontology of everyday life*. This process is a continuation of the philosophical questioning of the assumed relations between, and the ontological natures of beliefs. For instance, the proliferation of schools of thought within the human sciences seems to indicate that no common agreement has been found on the basic starting points by which we can know other human beings in a regular, rigorous and repeatable manner. Also, the human sciences are built on empathy, insight and interpretations of its practitioners. Ontology may be defined as the study of that which truly exists; as opposed to assuming that all which is believed to exist actually does so. Not only does ontology differentiate between ungrounded assumption, illusion and mere appearance, it also attempts to study how more complex judgements and conceptual entities may be justifiably derived from simpler ones. In the human sciences this involves distinguishing between true and faulty intersubjective perceptions about the mood, motivation, feelings and beliefs of self and other. An ontology of the everyday would also study the major conceptual definitions and empirical experiences that ground it, by a descriptive and logical method. An ontology of intersubjective experiences in society would try to find how we may be more certain about the qualities that we distinguish in self and other. This ontological view of the human sciences aims to put its faith in finding more dependable interpretations. As a consequence of this, psychological knowledge will hopefully be clearly separated from ideologically biased and reified interpretations which need to be identified and avoided through the processes of debate and clarification that philosophy provides. As will be described below, Heidegger starts with the belief that ontology and hermeneutics are allied and an inherent and fundamental part of human nature. His reflections lead him to believe that it is necessary to understand Dasein first of all, and then understand the process by which Dasein interprets the nature of all people, concepts and things. All theoretical claims are secondary in comparison to the most fundamental way in which Dasein relates to the world through projection of prior understandings, caring about a specific set of issues and the uses to which all things are put.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, involves the comparison of the object to be interpreted with ontological schemata in the production of meaning, of "reading" the object to be what it is. Interpretation in Heidegger's sense is always about projecting a prior understanding onto the

object, process or person to be interpreted. Also, in carrying out any interpretation, we are torn between the ideal of *letting something be seen for what it is*; and the actuality of *how we look at it determining what we see*. To find the origin of how we interpret something to be what it is and not something else, involves working out how we habitually look at something. This process is a mystical riddle about seeing the invisible ontological essences which are hidden, disguised, forgotten, concealed, gone, lost and covered over which are nevertheless projected onto ourselves and others about us. This requires all who interpret for a living to spot what is missing from the current pattern, or to divine what is not present by a clear demonstration of what is present. Therefore, being-in-the-world, human existence, is a multifaceted interaction within aspects of the whole which cannot be reduced to simplistic descriptions which are inevitably one-dimensional in comparison to the original experience. Complex being-in-the-world is prior to clever talk about texts and this is where the original existential analysis differs from the post-modern approach.

Although it was Husserl who began the awareness about the importance of interpretation in psychology and philosophy it was Heidegger who took these ideas to a further stage of development. The awareness of how things are interpreted to have an ontological nature was first stressed by Heidegger in 1927 (Heidegger 1962: 51/2). He sought to disclose the essences of the overall structure of the individual (Ibid: 70) by trying observe the inherent truth of humanity itself whilst being aware of the hermeneutic circle, how assumptions are taken to objects with the aim of distinguishing between the actual object and the impositions placed onto it (Ibid: 192). Heidegger writes that the way to interpret is to come into the hermeneutic circle *the right way* by rejecting a priori assumptions and preferring an on-going search for truth which compares the ancient roots of current words to their current meaning. Its not just that there is an inescapable circle between already existing perspectives and appearances. This circle has to be traversed to bring out differences between the present and past usages which can only be found in this form of semantic analysis. The liberation from the past and oppressive ideology is attempted to be brought about by careful comparison.

There is much current debate about texts in social constructionism, but to what do these texts about humanity refer? People are not texts however good this analogy is at turning our attention to semiotics and signification. Also, there is a lived physiological base to which words refer. We are the base for interpretation of complex interrelating factors. Emotions and relationships are real and interpreted as something in relation to someone's prior knowledge. People, on the whole, do not become guilty over society, texts or the nature of language. They

become guilty over letting friends down. They become depressed over the break up of an actual relationship. People are in a world which has been valued, differentiated and described in many different and conflicting ways. We exist amongst complex patterns of habitual ways of interpreting, expecting, feeling and relating to others and ourselves. We exist in a field of multiple ways of life and multiple priorities, possibilities and actualities. Also, objects are endlessly interpretable against various backgrounds. Therefore, there is a need to be clear about how any writer has interpreted, by making clear the schema for the creation of the given view.

These thoughts have many implications for social constructionism. In a self-reflexive note on the act of criticism, before it is possible to criticise, something is being held true in order for that criticism to take place. Therefore, criticism should start at home and investigate the conditions that give rise to itself and the values which it has chosen not to criticise. Even in a critical psychology there is some notion of the allegedly authentic character of humanity which is applauded and said to be true, in favour of lesser theories. The effect of such assumptions should be lessened within a self-aware psychology. For instance, the assertion that "there is no evidence" requires some evidence and logical argument, rather than a flat assertion. Ontological and hermeneutic phenomena are both hidden and appearing, but are not capable of being seen by the senses. Reference is the term from linguistics which studies the processes of words refer to objects. In Heidegger this subject is covered within the overall context of a theory of truth.

But the problem of the various arguments over the ontological nature of people and human processes is that these claims are invisible. A phenomena may be apparent to the senses but its actual true meaning is something which may not be agreed by other workers within the field of the human sciences. So how do we recognise something we have not seen? How do we see what is a hidden truth? How do we know when truth is obscured? If we always know in comparison to a prior event, then what are these grounding prior events, and how can we trace them from the perspective of the current state? What perspective do we take to see the truth? This is the sort of thinking that Heidegger would wish us to pursue. Truth as individual *truth for one,* does not tally at all with scientific notions of truth, and these do not tally with Husserl's notions of truth set by the example of Euclidean geometry and mathematics, that are *true for all time and all persons* who know them. Heidegger rejects Husserl's original project and places a grounding for the sciences in hermeneutic-ontological analyses of what humans take for granted in everyday being-in-the-world as the foundation for science. As regards the making of knowledge, some questions cannot be answered by oneself alone, but need to be discussed and agreed by taking in the perspectives of others. But what are these words really pointing to? In

order to answer this question in a hermeneutic phenomenological manner, the second half of this paper turns to the definitions of the Latin words for "alienation" and "other" which reveal a surprising contemporary flavour when read in conjunction with thoughts of an intersubjective de-centred selfhood, either within the realms of severe psychopathology as defined by DSM IV, or by reference to other states of neurosis and suffering within post-modern, post-industrial, anomic capitalistic societies.

Problems to be overcome

There are problems with all forms of psychology due to the intractable, partly present and partly hidden nature of consciousness and the interpretative ideologies which are part of ourselves and the others whom we seek to understand and generalise about in perhaps drawing out themes and making hypotheses. There are three major aspects to humanity and its understanding of itself. Conscious awareness and its description has been adopted as the object by cognitive psychologists. Intersubjectivity is studied by social psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists. But the main problems arise in the domain of interpretation, in the ousting one dogma only to replace it with another. Heidegger asserted that the projection of ontological schemata is inescapable and applies to all processes.

There are problems that arise from the practical and hermeneutic-philosophical considerations of trying to carry out the project of a social constructionism that is influenced by the assumptions of Husserl. Firstly, he assumes that consciousness exists in a manner that can be investigated in a regular and rigorous manner, that the irreducible contents of the imagination are neither superfluous appearances without a function, nor are they simply presented in internalised language games. However, consciousness, the psyche, is not distinct from the internalisation of the external world and the temporal horizons and cultural flux that is there which it takes into itself.

It is not possible to see the universal structures of consciousness and intersubjectivity or to gain access to the direct and truthful immediate experience of the psyche and its eidetic structures. It is only possible to see the consciousness of oneself. This, others and the intersubjective world are places for projection, distortion, deletion and generalisation of various kinds. Finally, for constructionism to be a science its co-workers must be able to share and agree their interpretative results and otherwise produce intersubjectively confirmable results, hypotheses and conclusions of a science. From 1913 onwards Husserl believed that a

self-reflexive meta-study should exist for phenomenology to keep itself on track by providing feedback between empirical and theoretical considerations. The aim is to develop a meta-phenomenological critique and clarification of the project and so develop it based on what is truly achievable from a reconsideration of the ideals set for it by Husserl and Heidegger.

The second part of this paper comments on the nature of being human with respect to the root Latin words to do with alienation and alterity, and makes links to concepts of self-responsibility, psychoanalysis and psychopathology. The purpose of this commentary is to emphasize the ways in which both unity and integration, otherness and splitting occur within the "individual". This essay aims to follow in the style of existential analysis (Heidegger 1962) and therefore applies an epoche to sweep away all received wisdom, except phenomenological aims and methods, and contemplate key meanings and experiences themselves.

The view of selfhood that Heidegger expressed is that there is a moral imperative towards human individuation which he alleged to be the true nature of humanity, which is called authenticity (Heidegger 1962: 68). Previously, the subjects of ownness and individual authorship of self were both present within Kierkegaard and Husserl. This distinction is also part of the philosophical debate about what is immanent to psyche and what is transcendent to it. This paper argues against "individualism" that the assumptions that Heidegger made about the links between an individual and the consequent behaviour appropriate for any given social context, need rethinking in the light of anthropological knowledge and current lifestyles at the end of the twentieth century. Heidegger made individualistic assumptions about the truth of human nature, despite acknowledging the tension between self and others with his concepts of thrownness and falling with inauthentic others. For instance, Heidegger believed that people share the same world, which cannot be true from an anthropological view. Also, the breaks in intersubjectivity that occur due to a discourse of individuality are many due to a denial of the presence and influence of others.

What characterised the early work of Husserl and Heidegger was that they sought the essences of humanity. They found that object-directed awareness, temporality and intersubjectivity were three major dimensions. These three qualities only occur together in a complex and it is artificial to break them down the whole of being-in-the world into self and other, then and now. The main inspiration for Heidegger's analyses of the human experiences of time was the phenomenology of time-consciousness in Husserl. Husserl's method of finding the a priori essences of the structure of consciousness were focused on his self-investigations of his own experiences of time. These laid the ground for Heidegger's 1924 and 1925 lectures on time

and his thoughts on the nature of the social construction of time as a fundamental ontological experience that is a priori to the formation of a sense of self in connection with others, and the consequent sets of social actions that give rise to the construction of multiple views of ordinary everyday life, as well as the construction of academic perspectives.

Therefore, it is the work of Heidegger, Husserl and Scheler, to name a few of the original phenomenologists, which is also an element to deconstructionist, post -deconstructionist, Lacanian and post-Lacanian "thought". The point of returning to the original phenomenologists is that their writing, although often poor, is more accessible than those of the purposefully imprecise French school of gobbledygook, who cannot be bothered to write properly so create elitist distinctions and squabbles over mastery and ownership of what could be a discourse in which readers could more easily participate.

References

Grieder, A. (1995) Husserl, phenomenology, and psychology. *Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis*, 6.2, 2-12.

Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and time* (Trans J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Husserl, E.G.A. (1970) *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenological philosophy*. (Trans D. Carr). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Kocklemans, J.J. (1994) *Edmund Husserl's phenomenology*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.