

ANTI-CARTESIAN REPRESENTATION AND HEIDEGGER'S ANALYSIS OF SPATIALITY*

Daniel Quesada
(Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

1. Basic criticism of Heidegger's anti-representationalism

Representations are freely postulated in today's philosophy of mind and cognitive science. They are ubiquitous in many kinds of philosophical theories about the mind and in scientific theories about a very large number of mental processes. It is fair to say that the presence of connectionist approaches to cognitive phenomena has not put a halt on their use, nor does the dispute around connectionism mean an immediate threat to a realist view of the mind. This pervasive presence of representations makes that the neo-Cartesian view of the mind—as some philosophers call it (e.g. García-Carpintero 1995) on account of its realism—corrects in important ways the classical Cartesian picture, since the representations involved are representations of discrete items that are seen by many as *independent* from the mind and in this sense *objective*. In the central cases, they are also *external* to the body of the cognizer, and for the most part they are so that the subject has no conscious access to what the representations represent, and in any case, conscious awareness is not necessary. All these features of representations make it rather obvious to call them anti-Cartesian representations. We could then say that—even if there are of course dissenting voices—much of present day opinion about the mind has it that corrections to Cartesian *ontology* which are nowadays perceived as necessary do not at all jeopardize the possibilities of a science of the mind.

Present day externalism about mental states—the view that that they are environment dependent, to put it broadly—is indeed an important correction to Descartes.¹ It is so both because of its epistemological and anthropological consequences. But it admittedly presupposes a universe of representable entities, primarily material or spatio-temporal objects; and so, it does not represent, so to speak, a maximum of anti-Cartesianism, at least not from an ontological viewpoint. Rather, at the far end—the most radical—of the spectrum of anti-Cartesian positions, we find Heidegger's criticism of Cartesian ontology, which Heidegger conceived as epitomizing the history of Western ontology.

According to Heidegger, *both* mental entities and physical objects are regarded by the Cartesian tradition as *occurrent* or *present-at-hand* (*vorhanden*). This tradition includes not only Descartes himself, but his empiricist rivals, and also Kant (cf. SZ, 203-4). Indeed, it could even be seen to encompass the whole of Western ontology since Parmenides, up until *Sind und Zeit* (SZ, henceforth; see, e. g., SZ, p. 100). But entities are more fundamentally encountered as *available* or *ready-to-hand* (*zuhanden*). The difference between being *present-at-hand* and being *ready-to-hand* emerges only as a result of revealing the particular way in which human beings are in the world, and is involved in the complex structure that the world in which human beings are involved turns out to be, according to Heidegger (cf. Brandom 1992, especially 50-52, for a particularly conspicuous account of the structure at issue).

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¹ See Burge (1986a), (1986b), and McDowell (1987) for different views—moderate and radical, respectively—of externalism, indeed, of what I am calling here 'anti-Cartesian representation'.

Roughly, to be ready-to-hand is like it is for us, for example (an important kind of example), a piece of equipment (a tool) when it is being used to carry out a task. The tool is involved in a particular way in our task, and we are concentrated using it, not watching it. The tool is one in an equipment whole, and plays a complex role or is peculiarly involved in a task for which that equipment whole is used. Piece of equipment and equipment wholes have meaning in socially defined tasks. This characterizes partially the way in which we, basically, “encounter” —a technical term— items in the world. This basic way is not the way of detached contemplation but of concerned handling. As against this, to be an object of detached contemplation is a central example of being occurrent (present-at-hand). But, according to Heidegger, objects appear to us as occurrent only through a process of decontextualization from the kind of situations in which they are encountered ready-to-hand. Being ready-to-hand is thus ontologically more basic than being present-at-hand or occurrent. Correspondingly, the kind of knowing to which we apply the ordinary term ‘know how’ is more basic than theoretical knowledge, knowing of facts and knowing of things.

Heidegger conceives the primacy of the practical in extreme terms, along the lines sketched above. Indeed, he takes it as denying that representation takes place at the fundamental level. Since representation would imply a representing subject, this would amount to recognize a distinction between subject and object that would be frontally opposed to the way in which he views “our” fundamental implications with the world, or the way “we” encounter objects.²

Now, even if the exposition and critical appraisal of Heidegger’s ontology in SZ is, of course, an enormous task, we can give candidly the reasons for being against his radical opposition to Cartesian ontology, vindicating at the same time the comparatively less radical position of anti-Cartesian representation if we focus on the consequences of his views just described.

Think then of an artisan busily trying to hammer a nail. Suppose he is under the effect of alcohol, so that his movements are clumsy, applying more or less force than required, striking the nail at the wrong angle, hitting sometimes the fingers with which he is holding the nails, missing altogether occasionally, etc. The drunken artisan is made a mess because he is unable to estimate correctly the distance between, say, his elbow and the nail, the direction of the nail, its position, etc. When he is not drunken, he is skillful and things go smoothly. He is then (unconsciously) estimating all those parameters correctly.

What this case makes clear is that there is a lot of (egocentric) representation going on in a simple act of hammering a nail. We cannot account for this act in terms of pure dispositions to act. There are correctness conditions for the estimated distances, angles, positions. They may be right or wrong. And where we have correctness conditions we have content.³

Think the issue this way. For explaining many of our simple actions we must take into account what Campbell calls ‘causal indexicals’. Some things we consider heavy, light, too heavy, too hot, etc. If I reckon a thing as too heavy for me, this has immediate consequences for my actions; most obviously, (*ceteris paribus*) I will not try to lift it. If a thing is simply “heavy” I may try to lift it, but I will prepare accordingly by my making my arm ready to

² Notice the scare-quotes here around the personal pronouns. Heidegger, of course, writes ‘Dasein’ instead, trying not to presuppose the notion of a subject. In general, I will leave the personal pronouns in place (without the scare quotes). And, other than in quoting Heidegger, I will use ‘Dasein’ only when paraphrasing him.

³ See the analogous argument of Peacocke against O’Shaughnessy on knowledge of the position of our own body in Peacocke (1992) pp. 92-93. Cf. also Campbell (1994), p. 116.

apply a considerable force and my body to compensate for the weight. 'Heavy', 'too heavy', 'too hot', and all the expressions that have this sort of direct connection to action are causal indexicals.⁴

The significance of all those concepts is closely related to the implications for action. In this sense they contrast vividly with more theoretical concepts, such as spatial relations like betweenness, adjacency on incidence. But it is crucial to realize that they cannot be *reduced* to their implications for action—they cannot be *defined* in terms of those implications—because even in the cases in which they are involved, the actions depend also on our purposes. Exactly as it happens with practical skills in general. Thus, even if there is all the difference in the world between the way the practical knowledge a skillful artisan applies and the knowledge a detached theorist may have, there is still content in practical concepts, there is still right and wrong, and so, there is still representation (cf. Campbell 1994, § 2.2). And, of course, where there is representation there is a subject. Not a Cartesian subject, because we are not talking of conscious representations; but a subject nevertheless. And also, accordingly, a difference between subject and object.

2. Heidegger's views on spatiality

Even if comparatively small, a very significant part of the task of confronting Heideggerian anti-Cartesian ontology can be carried out in a more detailed way by considering Heidegger's views on space or spatiality.

I hope that this will become apparent in the following discussion, but, to point to briefly to some reasons for this claim, we have, first, to take into account the fact that some spatial entities are primary examples of items ready-to-hand. Moreover, they have apparently some of the character of ready-to-handness even more basically than other ready-to-hand entities (SZ, 104). Furthermore, the kind of spatiality that characterizes what is in-the-world, and, in particular, human beings as beings-in-the-world (what Heidegger calls, at a point, "existential spatiality"⁵) is taken to be more fundamental than the kind of spatiality we think about when we characterize physical objects as spatial. What is more, in some respects the "construction" of this sense of spatiality out of primary existential spatiality should be a kind of model for the transition from what is ready-to-hand to what is ocurent or present-at-hand. Thus, in focusing on the subject of space and spatiality, we are not at the periphery but at the core of Heidegger's ontological views.⁶

⁴ See Campbell (1994), §2.2 for this notion. Some of these causal indexicals are *spatial* causal indexicals: 'within reach', 'too far to reach', 'too wide to jump', 'to the right' and even, perhaps, 'at walk distance', or 'too far to walk'. The first of these are egocentric spatial classifications, and so the considerations we will make in the next section about the implications of recognizing an egocentric point of view apply here as well.

⁵ Cf. SZ, 56. "Existential spatiality" is revealed in the different ways of *being in* in which human beings are in the world (and only through them). Examples of such ways (all of them belonging to the *caring* way of being) are: "having to do with something, producing something, to look after something and attend to something, employing something, giving up and consider something as lost, undertake, imposing, examining, questioning, considering, exposing, determining..." (56-57). (All of the translations from SZ are my own, although I have taken into consideration Dreyfus's terminology and his translations of some passages.)

⁶ Of course, this is also true for time, but focusing on the views of time in *Sein und Zeit* would be not only to enter into a much more intricate subject, but into a very different strand of Heidegger's ontology. Certainly, anyway, his views on space appear more tractable. Perhaps it is also appropriate to bring in here the following remark by such an outstanding Heidegger scholar as Dreyfus: "The problems of this chapter [the one on Spatiality and Space] can be seen as the sort of difficulties that led Heidegger to abandon the project of a fundamental ontology" (Dreyfus 1991, 133).

Although I regard the discussion of these views of Heidegger as paradigmatic and even fundamental to any coming to terms with the ontology in SZ, my attempts here to bring the discussion of spatiality to bear on the broader issue of Heidegger ontological views will be made explicitly only in connection to their radical consequences mentioned in the previous section, most specifically the blurring of the subject/object distinction.

Sections 22-24 of *Sein und Zeit*, which are devoted specifically to the analysis of spatiality, just follow section 21 entitled "Hermeneutic discussion of the Cartesian ontology of the world" in which Heidegger presents Descartes's ontological views as the epitome of the western ontological tradition that practically, since its inception, —Heidegger mentions specifically Parmenides— would have overseen the "phenomenon of the world" as Heidegger conceives it. In concentrating on Descartes, Heidegger makes also clear that he is opposing his view of material objects as being fundamentally objects of representation, as objects occurrent or present at hand (cf. SZ, 99-100).

Contrary to Heidegger's high expectations for the analysis of spatiality, it seems to me that it is at most of an anthropological or psychological interest, because its relevance for ontology founders in view of a fundamental difficulty which I will try to make plain below.

Heidegger sets out to show that the specific spatiality of the beings encountered in the environment [what Heidegger calls the "environmentality" or "aroundness" of the environment] is founded upon the worldliness of the world, and not, contrariwise, the world is occurrent in space" (SZ, 101-102). The point of departure for such an undertaking is an analysis of the spatiality of beings ready-to-hand in the world. It is this analysis that will concern us here first.

Consider the philosopher at work sitting in her chair and writing at her desk. She has writing tools in front of her perhaps paper and pen, —perhaps a personal computer, some books more or less spreaded around on the table, perhaps some additional pens and pencils, a couple of folders, a bookrest, etc. She is busy working, using the pen or the computer—, and then the books and the notebooks as tools, reading in them and writing. The things that are on the desk build a totality of tools defined by the respective purposes of their being there, or, in other words, the roles they play in the task at hand.⁷ "Inside" this meaningful totality, each thing or tool has a place. It need not be a fixed, determined, place; it can "be somewhere around" ("*liegt herum*") on the desk. That it has a place is clearly noticed for example, when something or somebody intrudes and the thing is no longer where it belongs or "at its place" (maybe a child has hidden the pen behind the computer).

We can say, with Heidegger, that the things (the tools) which our philosopher-writer is using are near, in a distinct sense, not determined by distance. The computer before her in which she is busy writing or the dictionary she sometimes consults is, in this sense, nearer than the floor her feet are touching.

Again, with Heidegger we should say that the desk at which our philosopher is writing constitutes a region (*Gegend*). A region of her house or of one of its rooms. But regions are not defined by spatial situation in relation to reference objects. The desk could be in another part of the room or in another room. "There, where the desk is", or "there, near the desk" are expressions that show how we treat the desk as a "region".

Places, defined with respect to a task and the totality of tools used in it, *being near*, in the distinct sense not dependent of distance, and *regions*, as specific meaningful places where

⁷ SZ, § 18. The totality at issue is called by Heidegger an "involvement-whole" (*Bewandnisganzheit*). For Heidegger, involvements (*Bewandnisse*) are such only inside an involvement-whole (p. 84). Involvements have been interpreted as some kind of roles by Haugeland and other recent authors; see Haugeland (1992), p. 31.

things or tools can themselves have a place, together characterize the specific spatiality of the entities with which we have to do when busily involved in our tasks. In Heidegger's words:

This orientation of the multiplicity of places with respect to regions belonging to what is ready-to-hand makes up the roundness, the round-about-us of the entities that are encountered as nearest environmentally. (SZ, 103)

Things are spatial for us immediately because they are "around" in this characterized sense.

The specific sense in which things are "encountered" as spatially situated is due to the specific spatial way in which we (*Dasein*) are in-the-world. This way, in turn, is defined by two features. One of them is a basic ability we constantly exercise. We bring things near to our consideration, when they satisfy the two conditions of being something with which we are busy with, and something that absorbs our attention. The floor on which we step is usually not brought near in this sense (neither condition is fulfilled), a friend in another city, in which we are thinking, is also not brought near in the same sense (condition two is satisfied, but not condition one). We use constantly our senses of sight and hearing for bringing things near. Even somebody heard in the radio can be brought near in that same sense, on Heidegger's explicit admission (p. 105), and so, presumably, somebody seen on TV.

This bringing near is called by Heidegger "Ent-fernung", in a word play that means literally the abolishing of distance, but that in fact is something different from this. Of course, it does not mean abolishing physical distance. It means making things present in the combined sense described above. Even in this sense, however, distance is not "abolished", because presence can be a matter of degrees. Expressions of everyday language, such as "that place is only at walk distance", "it is only a jump to there", "within a stones throw" mark degrees of "distance of something that has previously been dis-stanced".

To this "dis-stancing"⁸ we must add a second basic feature defining the specific spatial way in which we are in-the-world. This is *orientation* (*Ausrichtung*). "Dis-stancing" is always oriented. How is, however, this orientation to be thought of? It seems that Heidegger takes as basic the orientation determined by the direction of a region: "Each bringing near has beforehand already taken a direction in a region from which what is dis-stanced comes close to us, so that its place can be found with respect to it." (SZ, 108). As I read this difficult passage, "with respect to it" (*hinsichtlich*) makes reference to the region.⁹

We may ask now which is the relation of this basic orientation with the directions which we describe as "to the right" or "to the left"? Heidegger says that "Out of this orientation arise the fixed directions of right and left. Just as with its dis-stances, *Dasein* constantly takes these directions along with it." (SZ, 108) The use of the verb *arise* (*entspringen*) in the first of these two sentences seems to indicate that orientation is somehow primary or more fundamental than the directions,¹⁰ and "orientation with respect to a region" would provide a more concrete content to the claim. But Heidegger does not explain the way in which

⁸ This is the translation favored by Dreyfus. See Dreyfus (1991), p. 130.

⁹ This interpretation provides also a way of interpreting an important claim that, otherwise, seems to remain fully opaque. See next note and the corresponding text.

¹⁰ More explicitly this is brought up in the first sentence of the following passage (SZ, 109-110): "Being oriented to the right and to the left is founded in the essential orientation of *Dasein*, which in turn is essentially co-determined by Being-in-the-World". The second sentence would perhaps point out to the basic determination of orientation by the regions that I mentioned in the text corresponding to the previous note.

right/left orientation "arises" out of this more fundamental orientation, be it orientation with respect to regions or any other that can be found to fit Heidegger's claim. What is more, it is not easily seen how he could do this. How, indeed, could anybody give an account of the orientation left/right to things from places conceived as "regions"?

The issue does not concern just left/right directions, but also front/back directions, and perhaps, to a extent, also up/down. They do not seem to make sense without any reference to a human body.¹¹ Dreyfus notes the difficulty. He says that Heidegger "seems to hold that orientation is a result of the fact that not all equipment is accessible at the same time." (Dreyfus 1991, 137) The resulting "incompatible fields of action group simultaneously accessible things together in opposed regions called right/left, and also front/back." He finishes:

But still without the body there could be no account of why there are just these regions. We would not be able to understand, for example, why the accessibility of right and left is not symmetrical, or why we must always "face" things in order to cope with them. On Heidegger's account these would just remain unexplained asymmetries in the practical field. (*Loc. cit.*)

Dreyfus does not say which is the textual evidence for his claim that Heidegger "seems to hold that orientation is a result of the fact that not all equipment is accessible at the same time." Actually, what I believe we have evidence for, is the claim stated above that Heidegger considers the directions up/down, front/back and right/left as somehow "generated" or "arising" from regions. 'Up', 'down' and 'back' are introduced in § 22, the first of the sections devoted to spatiality, the very same paragraph in which "regions" are introduced. The lack of mention of front seems entirely casual. It is true that 'right' and 'left' make their appearance in the next section, in what appears to be a different context, and so, on first reading, it seem as if they receive a different treatment in SZ. But I have explained why we must think otherwise, and the lack of reasons for differentiating it from the other directions (at least from front/back) —implicitly recognized by Dreyfus in the above quotation— provides additional confirmation for linking them also to regions.

In any case, I fully concur with Dreyfus that Heidegger is in effect separating "the issue of Dasein's embodiment from the issue of orientation" (*loc. cit.*). But this, rather than merely "unsatisfying", which is Dreyfuss judgement about the situation, seems to me a decisive mistake that points to what is erroneous with Heidegger whole approach. Indeed, it does not seem that we can somehow add a human body to the Heideggerian picture and make orientation basically dependent on it, leaving the remaining undisturbed, and so, modifying the doctrine of orientation by relating it to human bodies would, in effect, imply recognizing a primitive form of the distinction between subject and object which Heidegger is at pains to deny.

To think of basic orientation in the new way is to think of orientation using an egocentric frame of reference. A basic form of orientation cannot presuppose a strong concept of ego (not, then, a Cartesian ego!). It is certainly a problem how to characterize the ego of egocen-

¹¹ The case of up/down is special. Up and down directions seem to respond to mixed criteria. On the one hand, 'up' is not where the head is or 'down' where our feet are, as it is easily recognized if we think about giving these directions when lying or being inclined; it seems that the gravitational field is involved in determining these directions. But, on the other hand, there seems to be a sort of residual bodily reference in these concepts, as is seen in the difficulties children or illiterate people have with antipodes (tales about they going "upside down" range from worries to —at the very least— not understanding).

trical.¹² But however this may be characterized, the two main points to bear in mind here are, first, that we would not act at all the way we do — *a fortiori* we would not go busily around in the “circumspect” (*umsichtlich*) way Heidegger takes as fundamental, were it not for the asymmetries of our bodies. And second, even if we finally were to arrive to the conclusion that the egocentric axes cannot be defined in terms of the body or any of its parts, it is still true that they cannot be eliminated in terms of spatial relations than are not egocentrically characterized (see Campbell 1994 § 1.2 for a defense of this thesis).

Let us follow now again Heidegger's own steps to see the issue from another angle. He, talking about the directions left/right, manifests his agreement with Kant¹³ on that a mere feeling of the difference between the two sides would not help for orientation (SZ, 109-110). Kant puts forward the case of somebody to whom a room and its objects are completely familiar, but that finds himself in it after the position of the objects in the room has been changed so that they are disposed mirror-symmetrically with respect to their former disposition. Kant claims that even if he would immediately feel the queerness, he would be able to orient himself only after he remembers the (former) place of a concrete object of the room. In Kants words, he needs for orientation a concrete object “whose place [he] has in memory”. Again, Heidegger agrees with Kant, but he finds that leaving things at that does not go to the root of the problem. To appeal to memory, says Heidegger, is “at bottom an appeal to the existential constitution of being-in-the-world”. That is, appealing to memory makes sense only against the background of the “oriented dis-stancing” that Heidegger's doctrine of space makes truly fundamental. Kant does not bring out this existentiary constitution. It is true, says Heidegger, that Kant does not focus on the meaning of orientation; he simply wants to show that each orientation needs a subjective principle, which here should come to saying that things are *a priori* oriented to the right or to the left. Then, Heidegger concludes his comment on Kants position restating his point in the following way:

However, the *a priori* character of the orientation to the right and to the left is founded in the “subjective” a priority of being-in-the-world, which has nothing to do with a determination which is limited beforehand to a worldless subject (*loc. cit.*).

Focusing on this text will let to make clear what seems right and what wrong in Heidegger's position. The text contains two claims. The second brings forth exactly the position to which the defenders of anti-Cartesian representation would agree with him. Indeed, they could subscribe entirely to this claim: “That I am already in a world, is for the possibility of orientation not less constitutive than the feeling of right and left (*loc. cit.*)”. But they would take exception with the way in which Heidegger wants to conceive this constitution. And they would be right to do so, because it does not seem that he can answer the question prompted by the first sentence of the text above: *how* is orientation founded in the “subjective” character of being-in-the-world? Rather, it seems that, as we have seen, we must take the right/left orientation (and

¹² For example, there is no part of the body that can function well as a center for the frame for all cases. And it can be that we must take the axes front/back, left/right and up/down as primitive, that is, as not defined in terms of the body. Peacocke makes the first point in Peacocke (1992) § 3.1., and Campbell argues forcefully for the thesis that an egocentric frame (taking as basic the egocentric axes) is more fundamental than the notion of body-centeredness in Campbell (1994), § 1.2.

¹³ The reference is to “Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?” from 1786, vol. VIII, pp. 131-147 in the edition of Kant's complete works by the Berlin Academy.

the orientation with respect to the other egocentric axes) as fundamental. It seems then that we cannot agree at all with Heidegger's conclusion on this matter:

Disstancing and orientation determine, as constitutive ingredients of the being-in, the spatiality of Dasein's being concernfully and circumspectely in discovered innerworldly space. The explanation given of the spatiality of what is innerworldly ready to hand and the spatiality of being-in-the-world provides the presuppositions for making clear the phenomenon of the spatiality of the world and posing the ontological problem of space. (SZ, 110)

The matter is not to be lightly taken, also in Heidegger's own count. If egocentric orientation turns out to be fundamental, then we should take out the scare quotes around 'subjective' in Heidegger's text (see the quotation on Kant above), and give up his fundamental opposition to the distinction between representing subject and represented object. Also, further, it will also turn out that there has not been a "phenomenon of the world" which has been overseen in the ontological tradition of the western. The world has been recognized all along as something in which we move and act, and to move and act in the way we do, we need to have egocentric and non-egocentric representations which point to the borders between us and the environment. Anything else of fundamental ontological import that Heidegger could mean to have been forgotten by such tradition should rather be claimed under a less misleading and also perhaps less flashy denomination.

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