

Existential anthropology: what could it be? An interpretation of Heidegger

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ABSTRACT

Based on an interpretation of the work of Martin Heidegger, this article offers a shift away from social and cultural anthropology, which explores sociocultural aspects, and also from general anthropology, which aims to summarise all dimensions of human being. The author defines the specificity of existential anthropology: observing and conceiving human beings as they exist and continue to exist towards death. With a few twists in relation to Heidegger's thought, the author discusses what is theoretically and methodologically at stake in this perspective, opening existential anthropology to a large empirical field.

KEYWORDS

existential anthropology; Martin Heidegger; existence; observation; theory; relation; death; individual

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Existence cannot solely be presented as an effect of enunciation, of modes of perception or categorisation. In its singular and detailed expression, it is an extra, a leftover, not reducible to the groupings of the social sciences or to the effects of relations and trajectories. Then what should be done with existence in anthropology? Could the anthropological act start with making all beings strange, not necessarily through cultural distance, but based on a kind of astonishment and wonder at their presence? “The presumed soberness of mind and superiority of science become laughable when it does not take the nothing seriously” (Heidegger, 2010b: 56). Science, methods, descriptions and concepts come next.

In this article, my aim is not at all to explain Martin Heidegger’s thought and proclaim loyalty (this point is crucial), but rather to help explain how an empirical and theoretical anthropology — an existential anthropology — can work on the human condition and its specificity. Heidegger, “wandler” (Malabou, 2011: 9) of the anthropological tradition: why not? As we will see, this implies “converting” Heidegger, who was critical of the sciences in general and of anthropology in particular. Among those pages in which Heidegger’s philosophy confronts the demand for a “concrete anthropology”, some strong points will arise: singularity, existentials and the concrete human being. Another key question will be raised: what makes human beings exist as they do? These open onto a broad empirical space that anthropologists will have the task of deciphering. This view takes a certain distance from anthropology’s sociocultural tradition, as well as some reflection on a definition of human beings as they exist with their characteristics, and on the epistemological issues involved in an existential anthropology of this kind.

DEFINITIONS OF THE HUMAN BEING AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Regarding definitions of the human being, Heidegger first presents at least two points of criticism. The first concerns the division into body, soul and spirit, which “designate areas of phenomena which are thematically separable for the sake of determinate investigations” (Heidegger, 2010a: 48¹). Heidegger responds that human beings cannot be the sum of these various characteristics, an animal material and a human material, corresponding to specialised research. The second criticism concerns the error committed by ancient, Christian “traditional anthropology”, defining the human being as an *animal rationale*, a “rational life” (Heidegger, 2010a: 48), a representation that had lasted a long time and still persisted instinctively, according to Heidegger,

¹ The page number refers to that indicated in the margin of the book.

on the consciousness or the subject (Heidegger, 2010a: 49). Disputing the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, to whom Heidegger dedicates *Being and time*, he does not see the human being as a subject, person or spirit, giving rise to an anthropology that emphasises “consciousness” and the “context of experience” (Heidegger, 2010a: 49).

Then what, according to Heidegger, constitutes their unity, their “totality”? In what currently constitutes anthropology, human specificity relates to a social and cultural dimension, as illustrated by the narratives of origin written at various points in the history of anthropology, for example those of Bronisław Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Maurice Godelier or others, emphasising a cultural, relational, symbolic or transmissive human being. As for the “total” understanding of human beings, Heidegger would have criticised Marcel Mauss for his use of traditional categories (biological, psychological, *etc.*), and for the dominant permeation by the “sociocultural”, as illustrated by his well-known study on the techniques of the body. For Heidegger, it is also a question of the unity of the “being-in-the-world”. But as I have just shown, when he evokes “existential determinations”, he is showing that they “are not pieces belonging to something composite, one of which might sometimes be missing, but a primordial coherence [*Zusammenhang*] is woven in them which constitutes the totality of the structural whole that we are seeking” (Heidegger, 2010a: 191). Furthermore, anthropology, as a human science, cannot reasonably be the synthesis of other disciplines, cannot be a study on the human being as a being made up of a body, soul and spirit. Heidegger points out that such a science would be imprecise (Heidegger, 1997: 145–147). This criticism is still made today against an anthropology that is too general, too soft.

Heidegger ultimately elaborates a forceful vision of human beings. He does not want to consider them as animal organisms, but as “ek-sistence”, because only humans possess this way of being. After long critical discussions, Heidegger finds this unity in temporality; it is death that Heidegger’s analysis has in sight. Existence is then not understood as subjectivity, but rather as mortality. This idea of existence would provide a foundation for anthropology and re-justify it. Heidegger accuses the sciences, psychology, anthropology and sociology of disregarding this unconditional point: *Dasein*’s understanding of itself as mortal. Grasping this aspect is crucial. For Heidegger it is “the foundation for any biographico-historical or ethnologico-psychological inquiry into death” (Heidegger, 2010a: 247). According to the philosopher, most investigations are reduced to giving “information” and overlook the “dying Itself”, in the sense that this term designates “the way of being in which *Dasein* is toward its death” (Heidegger, 2010a: 247).

By presenting human beings as existence, considered in their unity as temporality, understanding of themselves and mortality, have we not defined

anthropology's "object"? It would be the empirical and theoretical science of "existents" as they exist. It would be an existential anthropology with its own specificity: to observe existence as the entirety of the human being. Whereas social and cultural sociology or anthropology studies the sociocultural dimension of individuals in their belonging to societies and cultures according to various theories and paradigms, existential anthropology would study the existentiality of beings. It would describe and conceptualise beings who are in the process of existing, that is to say continuing, and therefore continuing towards death. It invites comparative descriptions according to different parameters: sociocultural parameters of course, but also those relating to psychology or different ages, from young children to very old people. Existential anthropology could thus produce descriptions that are bridges to other disciplines studying limited spheres of beings, such as sociology, psychology, cognitive science and geography. In the face of the infinite number of individual acts of existing, an existential anthropology would achieve its methodological and conceptual specificity: the observation of singular individuals, a meticulous observation of one individual at a time, comparisons between existences and theorisation. How can Heidegger help anthropologists with this objective?

HEIDEGGER'S EXISTENTIALS

Heidegger thinks:

that anthropology, psychology, and biology all fail to give an unequivocal and ontologically adequate answer to the question of the kind of being of this being that we ourselves are (Heidegger, 2010a: 50).

Clarifying the meaning of being, Heidegger continues: "The existential analytic of *Dasein* is *prior* to any psychology, anthropology, and especially biology" (Heidegger, 2010a: 45). Thus nearly a century ago, Heidegger pointed out that the structure of these disciplines, "(not the 'scientific attitude' of those who are working to further them), has today become completely questionable and needs new impulses which must arise from the ontological problematic" (Heidegger, 2010a: 45).

Heidegger's goal is not to establish the foundations of anthropology (Heidegger, 2010a: 200). He repeatedly says that his research is not "a concrete anthropology" (Heidegger, 2010a: 194) and that he does not want to practice this. Is this a fear of the sciences? Contempt for empiricism (Monod, 2009)? We know that Heidegger is particularly attached to his native territory. Can this explain his "aversion" to actualist anthropology and his fear

of the studies about technology, cities, states, trade, cosmopolitanism, the media, *etc.*? In any case, Heidegger does not claim to consider concrete human beings. Indeed he proclaims his rejection of the “ontic” in favour of the “ontological”, and his rejection of the empirical in favour of fundamental structures, those of *Dasein*, which he intends to situate far from ontic (that is, concrete) manifestations.

Without any doubt, any reference to Heidegger to legitimise an empirical anthropology implies a certain twisting of his philosophy. My aim is to attempt to convert Heidegger’s thought into anthropology. In this regard, it should be noted that Ludwig Binswanger, who in psychiatry was greatly inspired by Heidegger’s analyses, explained what separated him from the philosopher, quoting Heidegger’s own words:

Unlike fundamental ontology, which sets out to analyse the fundamental structures of existence “with explicit orientation toward the problem of being” (“existential analytic of *Dasein*”), the task of existential anthropology is to portray “in their general features and connections,” and interpreting “according to their existential structure” (Heidegger) the factual existential possibilities, which existence has itself either chosen, stumbled into or developed in (Binswanger, 2000: 310).

Let us explore what Heidegger calls “existentials”, which are without doubt an important tool for an existential anthropology, even if Heidegger characterises them as “fundamental structures”, not elements of concrete description. *Being and time* explains the characteristics of *Dasein*, that is the existentials. It is not possible to present all of them here. Among other characterisations, Heidegger presents *Dasein* as surrounded by things and tools — this is a well-known point (Dreyfus, 1990) — and also as existing in a world that is common and shared with others: *Dasein* is a *Mitsein*, a being with others. In another paragraph of *Being and time*, Heidegger evokes a “being-in-the-world”, which experiences “moods” (Heidegger, 2010a: 134): moroseness, monotony, dullness causing *Dasein* to be perceived as a “burden”. The euphoric mood, which can soothe, “discloses the burdensome character of *Dasein*” (Heidegger, 2010a: 134). The human being thus experiences “thrownness”: “We shall call this character of being of *Dasein* which is veiled in its whence and whither, but in itself all the more openly disclosed, this ‘that it is’, the thrownness [*Geworfenheit*] of this being into its there” (Heidegger 2010a: 135). Also, depending on how it is “attuned”, “*Dasein* ‘sees’ possibilities [...] in terms of which it is always already attuned” (Heidegger 2010a: 148).

And this is why “as everyday being-with-one-another, *Dasein* stands in subservience to others. It itself is not” (Heidegger, 2010a: 126). *Dasein* drifts into the “they”, which has its ways of being, particularly

“averageness” (Heidegger, 2010a: 127). “We enjoy ourselves,” Heidegger continues:

and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way they see and judge. But we also withdraw from the “great mass” the way they withdraw, we find shocking what they find shocking (Heidegger, 2010a: 127).

In the casualness of day-to-day life, the “myself”, which is always in need of “being”, gets lost, disburdened of its existence. According to Heidegger’s interpretation, *Dasein* lacks self-appropriation; it is not itself.

In this way, the they disburdens *Dasein* in its everydayness. Not only that; but disburdening it of its being, the they accommodates *Dasein* in its tendency to take things easily and make them easy. And since the they constantly accommodates *Dasein* by disburdening its being [*Seinsentlastung*], it retains and entrenches its stubborn dominance (Heidegger, 2010a: 127–128).

Being-in-the-world also unfolds “in the mode of an evasive turning away” (Heidegger, 2010a: 136). Thus *Dasein* ignore itself through the everyday blindness of life. This is *Dasein*’s “falling prey” (Heidegger, 2010a: 175), as it is scattered in the “they”, ready to the “dispersion”: these are important characterisations of “the everydayness of *Dasein*” (Heidegger, 2010a: 167). Heidegger clarifies what he means by “idle talk”: “gossiping” and “passing the word along” (Heidegger, 2010a: 168). Added to the “groundlessness of idle talk” is curiosity, a way of meeting the world, “the tendency toward ‘seeing’” (Heidegger, 2010a: 170), going from novelty to novelty, not in order to experience wonder but “just in order to have known” (Heidegger, 2010a: 172). More precisely, Heidegger says curiosity is made up of two factors, “not-staying in the surrounding world taken care of and distraction by new possibilities”. And this generates the “never dwelling anywhere”: “a new kind of being of everyday *Dasein*, one in which it constantly uproots itself” (Heidegger, 2010a: 173). Heidegger says that all of this “reveals something like a flight of *Dasein* from itself” (Heidegger, 2010a: 184). The “turning away” results from anxiety in the face of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 2010a: 186). But this can re-emerge in the middle of “falling prey”, when “*Dasein* gets tangled up [*verfängt*] in itself” (Heidegger, 2010a: 178). This creates a whirling effect revealing “the movement of throwing and the movement of thrownness” (Heidegger, 2010a: 179).

What is one to think of this glimpse of a few existentials? It seems very symptomatic and reinforces Claude Romano’s diagnosis:

The human being, he who is born and dies, he who has a body and possesses a gender difference, never stops haunting *Dasein* like a burdensome double from which *Dasein*

struggles to free itself. Anthropology continues to haunt fundamental ontology, despite its author's repeated denials. The reputedly erroneous interpretation, which sees in the analytic of *Dasein* a variant of philosophical anthropology, cannot simply be a "misinterpretation" (Romano, 2010: 464).

Pierre Hadot seems even more enthusiastic when he writes that Heidegger "excellently describes what is called everyday life" (Hadot, 2001: 205). The characteristics of *Dasein* are most certainly those of the human being that we are and know. Though Heidegger presents his *Dasein* as an abstraction, it looks like a very concrete human being. Moreover, many philosophers have not failed to point out that Heidegger's point of departure remains the human being. Husserl himself saw *Being and time* as philosophical anthropology, to the great displeasure of Heidegger, who wished to situate his work on a more fundamental level. Hubert Dreyfus suggested that the best way to understand what Heidegger meant by *Dasein* was to think of the expression "human being", which designates a form of being that is characteristic of all human beings, and also of any person in particular (Dreyfus, 1990: 14). Heidegger himself injected ambiguities that could potentially be fruitful for anthropologists: "*Dasein* exists. Furthermore, *Dasein* is the being which I myself always am" (Heidegger, 2010a: 53). It is even one of its essential characteristics: "it is essentially possible as authentic, that is, it belongs to itself". Heidegger distinguishes this from "the inauthenticity" of "this everyday indifference of *Dasein* averageness" (Heidegger, 2010a: 42–43).

Thus I believe it is important to not widen the potential gap between Heideggerian interpretations and empirical interpretations, to continue forging the link between Heidegger and the human sciences (e.g., Kiverstein & Wheeler, 2012), to find conceptual leads in the existential analytic and (why not?) to search for new existential conceptualisations based on empiricism. Even if Heidegger does not want to practice a concrete anthropology, he evokes it because it is possible. Moreover, he points out that, "with a view to a possible anthropology," his analysis, that of *Being and time*, supplies "a few 'parts', although not inessential ones" (Heidegger, 2010a: 17). He even presents *Dasein* as a theme and possible object "of scientific investigations", in the same way as language, space, nature or history (Heidegger, 2010a: 9).² At the Zollikon Seminars in Zurich, where Heidegger met with doctors and psychologists to explore the foundation of the ontic-ontological, existentiell-existential distinction, Heidegger himself accepted the idea of an "ontic anthropology":

This means that there would have to be an entire future discipline with the task of delineating the demonstrable existentiell [*existenziellen*] phenomena of

² See the work of Cristian Ciocan for a very enlightening reflection on the example of biology (Ciocan, 2001).

the sociohistorical and individual *Da-sein* in the sense of ontic anthropology bearing the stamp of the analytic of *Da-sein* (Heidegger, 2001: 125).

At certain moments, Heidegger also indicates that this ontic anthropology:

must be oriented toward the concrete historical existence of the contemporary human being, that is, toward the existing human being in today's industrial society (Heidegger, 2001: 125).

And Heidegger adds that a subdivision is possible, into “a normal anthropology and *Dasein*analytic pathology related to the former” (Heidegger, 2001: 125). During these seminars, he furtively noted the “correlative relationship” (Heidegger, 2001: 207) between his existential analytic and anthropology. He also admitted that it is possible to consider existentials as “the content [of the analytic of *Dasein*]. They exactly co-determine the concrete description of a state of anxiety in a particular human being” (Heidegger, 2001: 205). As Philippe Cabestan and Françoise Dastur have pointed out, *Dasein* analysis, which has until now mainly found application in psychology and psychiatry, designates:

the description of phenomena that concretely appear in a singular *Dasein*; it is a description that, while being directed towards someone who exists, is necessarily oriented by fundamental determinations updated by the analytic of *Dasein* (Cabestan & Dastur, 2011: 10).

EXISTENTIAL ANTHROPOLOGY: A BROAD EMPIRICAL HORIZON

Existential anthropology would thus have its research theme: human beings, who are alone capable of questioning the idea of existence and of knowing their finiteness. When Heidegger describes *Dasein*, let us assume that what he is speaking of is the human being and human beings. This shift of *Dasein* into existents is not a trivial matter. It consists in empiricising the former in the latter, singling it out as an empirical unit. What Heidegger presents as “two kinds of being” (Heidegger, 2010a: 42) — getting lost in inauthenticity and finding itself again in authenticity — now potentially becomes a series of swings between two activities, or a reciprocal modulation at moment *t*. This is what Catherine Malabou has pointed out in different words. She is against reducing Heidegger's thought to a philosophy of the identical, and she very strongly emphasises the swings from one mode to another:

between authenticity, or the proper, and inauthenticity or the improper: the modification of care into preoccupation, preoccupation into care, the “they” into the ownmost power to be, the latter into everydayness and fallenness (Malabou, 2011: 205).

What would an existential anthropology involve? In observation research it is tempting to view these existentials as heuristic guides. This point of view is immediately productive, giving rise to new observation themes. Heidegger would offer “typical attitudes” or “typical properties” of existence, “a kind of purified narrative of the human attitude” (Salanskis, 1997: 17), which is important to compare to an observed reality. The anthropologist would begin with one or another of the existentials and would observe in concrete situations their modes of apparition, realisation and disappearance according to moments and in the continuity of the everyday life: care, preoccupation, anxiety, fear, understanding, curiosity, distraction, *etc.* These are ways of existing, of being-in-the-world and being-temporal, and it is a question of observing and describing them in detail.

In such a detailed perspective, a moment of presence cannot be reduced solely to practical environmental engagement, to skills in an activity and to the relevance of attentive perception. An example of this would be Tim Ingold who describes “capacities of attention and response that have been developmentally embodied through practice and experience” (Ingold, 2011: 11). It seems to me that the empirical translation of Heidegger’s existentials covers a much wider anthropological territory than the “dwelling perspective” which Ingold defines as “founded on the premise that the forms humans build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the currents of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their engagement with their surroundings” (Ingold, 2011: 10). An anthropology of existences should also be enriched by observations and descriptions of anxiety, oblivion, non-consciousness, boredom and also doing nothing with something. To this end, Heidegger attributes to *Dasein* characteristics that I believe are essential for answering the question “what does it mean to exist?”. He of course associates everyday being — which is necessarily “in-the-world”, therefore in a situation — with worry and anxiety, but also with indifference and distantiality. He presents a human being that is “initially and for the most part” (Heidegger, 2010a: 126) — an adverbial phrase that contains a very clear empirical expression — disburdened of its being in a world that is already there, a kind of horizon of pre-constituted understanding (Heidegger, 2010a: 127–128). Heidegger is not mistaken:

This indifference [*Indifferenz*] of the everydayness of *Dasein* is not nothing; but rather, a positive phenomenal characteristic. All existing is how it is out of this kind of being, and back into it (Heidegger, 2010a: 43).

These characteristics are not without connections to the minimal human being (Piette, 2012), who delays, leaves unfinished and suspends, whose cognitive economy, docility, fluidity and distraction mitigate, moderate and

modalise the meaning at play, the preoccupation, exigency and burden of existence, anxiety and “resoluteness” as a lucid way to think something out to its end (Heidegger, 2010a: 305). This would imply observing, describing and understanding the intermingled portions of strangeness and tension on the one hand, familiarity and tranquillity on the other, as they arise in the course of everyday life. Which attitudes are relevant for understanding what is happening in specific situations and at particular moments? “This is why the emergence of a mode is possible only through the modification of another that is thereby torn or caused to burst. A mode,” writes Catherine Malabou, “does not «eliminate» what it replaces” (Malabou, 2011: 222). On the forms of coexistence between these different modes, a vast observation space opens up to the anthropologist.

It is this practice of observation and introspection that can be called phenomenography, rather than ethnography, which is reserved primarily for the observation of groups or interactions (Piette, 2012; Piette, 2015). This moves us further away from Heidegger, who was not very fond of “life experiences”, as I have pointed out. The word “phenomenography” is significant in two senses. Through its etymology, it designates the study of that which appears: the forms, gestures, movements and positions of human beings. And in connection with the word phenomenology, it designates a method, the empirical counterpoint of phenomenology, as studies of experiences, flows of consciousness, states of mind. Does phenomenology not too directly focus on essences through examples trimmed of their contingent details and concrete situations? Pierre Vermersch has pointed out that Husserl sought to clarify and purify his examples, using a procedure that is not empirical but eidetic, favouring intuitive data, also accepting imagined cases, attributing no importance to factual contingencies, with the goal of ridding life-experience examples of their vagueness or characteristic impurities (Vermersch, 1999). But there would also be the risk that phenomenography, transformed into a “psychophenomenology”, would narrowly focus on one single activity, for example doubt, perspective or intuition, just as cognitive psychology too often focuses solely on cognitive mechanisms that are relevant in certain natural situations, even artificial ones. When pursuing an existential understanding, such a perspective only makes sense if it is one level of observation that is integrated with other levels in order to observe the continuity of presences in a situation.

Such observations reveal ever-mitigated existences. Thus the “privative expressions”, as Heidegger called them (Heidegger, 2010a: 75), help, for example, to draw attention to the restrictions of being-in-the-world alongside other humans and objects in such a way that they do not really attract one’s attention. Then why is it that, at a given instant, in a situation, human beings are not “actually turning toward what is talked about in the discourse”

(Heidegger, 2010a: 215)? And when are they discerning and vigilant? At which moments and in what way are they concentrating, feeling tense, experiencing emotion in a situation? The anthropological exercise can consist in following and describing a human being based on what happens from one situation to another, the succession and also the simultaneity of his modes of engagement and distance, of lucidity and concealment, his modes of being present ahead of himself, of already being elsewhere in relation to the place where he stands, of not confronting himself, states of busyness, preoccupation and tension, of activity and passivity. It seems to me that this would imply understanding the difference between states of mind, real-life experiences (which should not be neglected despite Heidegger's misgivings about them), similar to "moods" revealing "how one is and is coming along" (Heidegger, 2010a: 134), between "scenes" where consequential actions unfold and "offstage" situations, transitions between scenes involving different concerns. Is not there indeed a difference between existence and experience? The "experience of" refers to a moment, an activity, a "relation to". It implies looking for relevant elements of this experience of (sickness, power, music, *etc.*). Existence moves the focus onto the existent being who is living this experience, and onto his entire volume of being. This point of view makes it possible to observe that the human being is more than just this experience at the moment he experiences it, and that he continues through other activities after this experience.

What more does this human being not do? He does not confront the idea of death; he sidesteps it. He does not consider it imminent; he prefers distraction and tranquillity, Heidegger repeats. Existing is indeed accompanied by a kind of negative reserve that takes different forms depending on the situation. In a situation, how does an ageing or very sick being think or not think about death? How does he then continue being "towards death"? And what about someone who has decided to commit suicide and is preparing the act? What is he like? How do tension and tiredness combine within him? Because it is also possible to be "wanting-to-have-a conscience" (Heidegger, 2010a: 296) and to engage in "authentic being a self" (Heidegger, 2010a: 298). When does this happen? It is the anthropologist's task to watch the human being in situations: dispensing himself, lucidly anticipating death, but also assuming a "heritage", a constancy of self, a way of being in the present, past and future, with variable intensities — to repeat a few of the modes described by Heidegger (Dastur, 1998).

Phenomenography consists of these kinds of exercises in observation and detailed description. We must admit, along with Milan Kundera, that:

all the great existential themes Heidegger analyzes in *Being and time* — considering them to have been neglected by all earlier European philosophy — had been unveiled, displayed, illuminated by four centuries of the European novel (Kundera, 2005: 5).

But discoveries are infinite, and above all anthropology sees itself as a transmissible science, with observation methods, concepts, as well as comparison and theorisation modalities. Fortunately Heidegger notes that “*Da-sein* analysis as ontic science would be an entirely new science” (Heidegger, 2001: 207). In any case, existential anthropology would consist in describing, in the course of life, the accomplishment of existentials. How do human beings concretely exist, thrown into the world and time, given over to time, discovering temporality, characterised by a set of existential structures? And that being over there, or this being over here: it is quite difficult not to see them as living, with a body, gender, age, as young or old, in a familiar or challenging situation of one kind or another. If the existential analytic ceaselessly claims to be moving further away from the natural being, anthropology should take the reverse approach. I would not conceive of this existential anthropology outside of observations and descriptions that are profoundly empirical. I would go as far as to say that the anthropological interpretation of Heidegger is all the more fruitful if, in the margins, it constantly reminds us that only singular beings exist, real individuals to be watched as they appear in situations. It is in this empiricist spirit that it would be important to “anthropologise”, to “detail” Heideggerian themes, particularly that of finitude, and to appropriate that question very perspicaciously raised by Hans Blumenberg: “how is it possible that human beings were only *able* to survive?” (Blumenberg, 2011: 489).

As detailed observation of the various swings in everyday situations would suggest, this link between the ontic and ontological is realised by human beings themselves, as shown above. This even constitutes its essential characteristic: “it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned about its very being” (Heidegger, 2010a: 12). It is itself a metaphysical questioner of being and existence: “in its being this being is concerned about its very being”. In this regard, Pierre Hadot has noted the opposition set up by Heidegger “between the ordinary, the banal, and a state in which one is conscious of existence [...], conscious of being destined for death (what he calls being-towards-death), and therefore conscious of one’s finitude” (Hadot, 2001: 205). Pierre Hadot explains:

At that moment, existence takes on a whole different appearance, one that is distressing; maybe because of death, but it is also distressing because of the mystery that the fact of existing represents [...]. I should explain that this opposition between the everyday and the authentic absolutely does not mean that one must constantly live in the authentic. Human beings live normally and, one might say, necessarily in the everyday, but sometimes it can happen that they catch a glimpse of existence from a completely different perspective. And that is already a lot” (Hadot, 2001: 205).

This point reminds me of the so-called metaphysical questions of children, and of the various more or less evasive responses of their parents, encouraging them — without necessarily insisting — to “relax” their ontological tension. A nice phenomenographic “object” to work on!

Therefore, this too is the object of existential anthropology: observing an empirical being in its various everyday moods or “affective tones”, understanding its ontological jumps as well as its swings back into the everyday ontic. Humans are special beings, the only ones that question the fact of existing, the only ones from which the question of being arises, the only ones for which being presents a question. George Steiner expressed it clearly:

And his privilege consists precisely in the fact that he alone experiences existence as problematic, that he alone is an ontic presence seeking a relation of understanding to the ontological, to ‘Being’ itself (Steiner, 1989: 81).

It is perhaps not insignificant that in Steiner’s little book about Heidegger I found the expression “ontological anthropology”. It is therefore regrettable, on the one hand, that metaphysics is not more empirical, that its discourse on being is rather abstract and disembodied, and on the other hand, that fragments of concrete being are divided between the sciences. In both cases, the existent’s concrete entirety is suspended, as well as its ontic modalities of existing in finitude. Existential anthropology could make this its empirical and theoretical theme. It would have to unreservedly maintain its methodological course like other sciences, while integrating, even testing, that ontological aim of understanding and describing the fact of existing. I believe it is obvious that an existential anthropology would study what *Dasein* empirically consists of, in this or that place, in this situation, at that moment. “The meaning of being [*Sein*] of that being [*Seienden*] we call *Dasein* will prove to be temporality [*Zeitlichkeit*]”, as we have seen (Heidegger, 2010a: 17).

The emphasis that Heidegger places on this temporal dimension necessarily and as a matter of priority suggests a methodological position that no longer consists in working on thematically chosen activities and situations, but either on moments described in gestural and mental details, or — and especially — on the continuity between activities, moments and situations. This refocuses attention away from relations and forms of coordination in an activity, towards presence modalities and modes of consciousness or unconsciousness. And when Heidegger links this temporal dimension of *Dasein* with its capacity for “being away” (Heidegger, 1995: 64) in the form of absence and oblivion, then an empirically essential set of themes asserts itself: forms of consciousness and lucidity, the thoughts that are involved in an action, those that are associated with it, as well as other thoughts. But what do human beings have in their heads?

What do they think when they are here and there? The detailed observations can lead towards details of presence, peripheral gestures, wandering thoughts, ways of being active, and at the same time (this is crucial) of forms of repose, of being passive. Fundamentally, it is a matter of describing the presence-absence modalities of human beings. This resonates with the notions “minor mode” and “repositivity”, which designate, in various forms, the passivity intrinsic to the presence of human beings.

FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL EXISTENCES

Of course, based on Heidegger’s discourse it would be possible to consider the relational and social dimension of *Dasein*, previously glimpsed.³ But what is the use of reading Heidegger if this is only for the purpose of returning to this widely accepted point, which the social sciences have amply explored? Heidegger certainly presents a *Dasein* that is always “beyond itself”. From the point of view of existential anthropology, I prefer to change the question: what is it like to be this existent in relation, with its constantly shifting way of being? What are its affective tones and states of mind, its actions and gestures?

Would we not be at the heart of anthropology: the individual as an empirical unit? Heidegger of course refuses to conceive of a closed self; on the contrary he conceives of a being that is in relation, a being-with. But he also specifies: “An I is always this being, and not others” (Heidegger, 2010a: 114). As François Raffoul explains well, no one can die in one’s place, and death is that by which *Dasein* belongs solely to itself (Raffoul, 1999). Existence is intrinsically separate and not sharable. This reinforces the principle of singularity: a world of “solitudes”, also engaged in relations, whose singularities are irreducible to the relational and interactional dimensions of situations. Concretely, in existential anthropology, this would imply that when two *relata* are engaged in relations, the anthropologist should focus on one of these, on each of them separately, as they act, speak, interact, think and feel in matters that concern this present relation, and also in matters that do not concern it directly. After their encounter, the two *relata* continue

³ In a key text in existential anthropology, Michael Jackson (2005) makes fewer references to Heidegger than to Jean-Paul Sartre and Pierre Bourdieu. Confronted by critical moments, individuals are especially interpreted as showing their ability to respond and create, based on the past as well. Understanding subjectivity is its major axis, with a direct focus on relations. Nigel Rapport (2012) offers an anthropology that stretches between the singularity of individuals and the specificity of the human condition, with a rather Nietzschean emphasis on the active and creative human being. One can find a dialogue between social anthropology and a few Heidegger’s ideas in James F. Weiner (2001) from an Australian fieldwork.

to exist, each encountering other *relata*. Ideally, the anthropologist would continue following one of the two. Basing observations on an empirical unit does not necessarily imply that it is conceived as subject or cogito. This individual is in fact always out of sync with himself, ahead of himself, beyond himself, as Heidegger would say. This point also presents a major problem in the task of describing moods, states of mind, thoughts, sensations and feelings, variable intensities, various modes of consciousness and especially non-consciousness.

Thus existential anthropology clarifies its objective: to describe and consider existing, continuing solitudes — an aim that moves us away from the social sciences, in which the individual is never alone, and is even less singular, always linked and connected, in groups and networks, dominating these people, dominated by those people, belonging, assessing, evaluating, *etc.* I would observe not the “between” of relations or interactions, but the *relata* in the process of existing, the existences not tied to one activity but continuing in time (Raffoul, 1999). An existence is neither a substance nor a fixed substratum, but a presence that is always mobile. This does not rule out pinpointing — in these preoccupied or disburdened solitudes — social strata accumulated over the course of life trajectories (Piette, 2012). It is also on the basis of the singular existence that fundamental questions necessarily re-emerge: in a situation, where is the social, where is society, where is culture? This is not a matter of putting oneself “in other people’s shoes”, with a view to understanding a group, culture or mentality, but watching, observing someone, one individual at a time, to understand what it means to be this or that person. Heidegger adds this: “*Dasein* does not exist as the sum of the momentary realities of experiences that succeed each other and disappear” (Heidegger, 2010a: 374). The fact that these individuals are not just sums but “entireties”, as Heidegger writes, implies also showing that at each moment in a situation, humans are like “monsters”⁴ laden with accumulated and interlinked presences, actions and past situations, and, to a lesser extent, future presences, actions and situations. That which comes from the past, and social trajectories infiltrates with variable intensities into the daily modes of presence, actions, decisions or choices. In a presence, there are also more or less restless thoughts, as well as mental images linked to actions in both the past and future. Here-and-now, human presence makes itself singular, in a light and obvious way, despite what it is carrying, or by virtue of this. But it can also grow heavy and become strained, experienced to varying degrees as a weight because of what it is carrying, or despite this. Such is the presence of each human, always modulated according to variable doses of lightness and

⁴ In dictionaries, a “monster” is that which has a prodigious, unusual size and intensity, and shocks reason.

heaviness. Numerous rarely conducted observation exercises are possible: at instant t and in continuity, what is an individual like when he has an intention, when he deliberates, decides, prefers, wants, hesitates, when he is highly or little conscious of his action, of his presence? Who observes, in a situation, those moments that philosophers are fond of, but only as part of examples that are often removed from any context: effort, will, decision, choice, intention, belief, the beginning of an action, the continuity of an action sequence, passivity, boredom, oblivion...? It seems to me that this presents a broad empirical horizon for the existential anthropology that can only be associated with meticulous methodologies.

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