

THE PRIMACY OF PRACTICE AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD¹

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ABSTRACT: The pragmatic tradition inspired by H. Dreyfus and M. Okrent uncovers a great pragmatic potential in Heidegger's notions of understanding and possibilities. Pragmatists claim that 1) understanding is based on grasping meaningful possibilities open in a given situation, 2) that meaningfulness as such is grounded in the background practices and 3) that such practices consist in skills, habits and not explicit beliefs. Taken together, this amounts to a thesis also known as "primacy of practice." The problem with such an approach is that the combination of the phenomenological method and the primacy of practice formulated this way leads to the placement of the source of meaningfulness beyond any possible human competence, leaving us without possibility of feedback on it. I will argue that pragmatic motives in Heidegger must be explicated differently: instead of sourcing meaning from the pragmatic ground, we could also demonstrate that meaning itself is pragmatic, i.e. its essence consists in disclosing and maximizing possibilities of acting and thinking. The ecstatic character of Heidegger's notion of understanding, which is "equiprimordially" constituted by significance and for-the-sake-of-which, gives us a thread into such a conception. I will argue is that 1) understanding is guided by the maximization of our ability-to-be, i.e. by the maximization of disclosed possibilities and that 2) practices are created and organized in a way that maximizes such possibilities.

Keywords: Heidegger, Understanding, Pragmatism, Primacy of Practice, Dreyfus

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, H. Dreyfus and M. Okrent made a series of attempts to explicate and develop pragmatic motives in Heidegger's early philosophical project. By putting Heidegger into a dialogue with American Pragmatism, and J. Dewey in particular, they managed to build a highly original and independent pragmatic system, placed within the limits outlined by Heideggerian phenomenology, but which went far beyond from what Heidegger intended to say. The core element of the elaboration was a suggestion that both Heidegger's and Dewey's approaches should be interpreted as committed to the same thesis, known as "primacy of practice," accord-

¹ I'd like to thank Ondřej Švec for reading of the draft of this paper and sharing his thoughts and suggestions.

ing to which any sort of intelligibility and meaningfulness originates from our background practices, which are "complex structures that sustain action"² making it possible for us to cope with the world. Cognition and our search for theoretical truth are further grasped as a "continuation of practice by other means."³

As I understand it, however, the primacy of practice particularly formulated this way combines poorly with the lack of naturalism in the Heideggerian project. In this paper, I'd like to argue that without reference to the evolutionary theory and naturalism (or any other objective criterion of change in the background), approaches that solely explain meaningfulness in terms of the background practices reach an untenable conclusion. Naturalism presents an objectified account of practices, viewing background as a self-subsisting and one-sided source of intelligibility, and sets up an objective criterion – evolutionary adaptation to the environment, – which explains how our background practices occur and evolve. Pragmatic readers of Heidegger preserve this objectified account of practices (at least in a certain specific sense, as I intend to show in the second section) but omit the objective naturalistic criterion obviously incompatible with Heidegger's methodology.⁴ As I will demonstrate, this further obscures the possibility of change in practices, which was already hampered by the objectified description. The principle according to which they occur and evolve remains unclear since any subjective feedback is excluded and the objective criterion is omitted. If considered on the same plane with Dewey, therefore, phenomenological pragmatism appears as inconsistent, as it lacks an essential element in its system.⁵

This doesn't mean that we should give up on developing the pragmatic motives within the phenomenological tradition. Instead of adding the partial primacy of practice to Heideggerian philosophy as proposed by Heideggerian

² H. Dreyfus, M. Wrathall, *Background practices*, p. 4

³ R. Rorty, *Heidegger, Contingency and Pragmatism in: Essays on Heidegger and others*, p. 31; R. Rorty, C. Taylor and H. Dreyfus, *A Discussion*, p. 50

⁴ See, for example, M. Okrent's criticism of Heidegger in: "Heidegger's Pragmatism Redux" in: *Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154; W. Blattner, *What Heidegger and Dewey Can Learn From Each Other*

pragmatists and claiming that it should be complemented with naturalism, we can try to reformulate their thesis so it better fits the phenomenological method. As I will argue, this would primarily mean reconsidering the one-sided relation between practices and meaningfulness: instead of saying that practices one-sidedly grant all possible meaningfulness and thus enable our being-in-the-world (like Dreyfus and others did), I will seek to reverse this claim and demonstrate that practices enable our being-in-the-world exactly because they are meaningful. This presupposes a further investigation into the nature of meaning and intelligibility, which will be based on Heidegger's notions of disclosure and understanding. My main claim is that the task of understanding cannot be reduced to the disclosure of fixed meaning formed and shaped by practice, as Dreyfus and other pragmatists sometimes seem to depict it. It also "equiprimordially" includes possibilities of attaining better understanding and reconsidering of practice itself. Furthermore, I will argue that the criterion for what I find less or more meaningful can be defined as disclosing potential, i.e. the extent and interconnectedness of revealed possibilities of thinking and acting.

The first two sections start with a preliminary analysis of Heidegger's notion of understanding and its consequent reception by pragmatic tradition. In the third section, I will propose another criterion of understanding – disclosing potential – and argue that it plays a more fundamental role in the explanation of meaningfulness than recourse to preexistent practices.

I. Heidegger's analysis of understanding

Heidegger spent a significant part of his early philosophical efforts trying to demonstrate that the way we are related to the world represents a fundamental philosophical problem too often overlooked. One symptom of this is treating such a relation as an ontic relation between two intrawordly beings. For example, perception of a window would mean a relation between the window in one place and a subject standing in another place: if the window is

withdrawn, the relation vanishes. If the subject is withdrawn, it vanishes as well. This is a way of conceiving relations as something belonging to objects, i.e. is based *in* them as a sort of predicate. Heidegger counters this sort of objectivism by drawing on the obvious fact that we can relate to something that doesn't enter into any relation with us. More than that, we can intend things that have never occurred at all. This is possible, says Heidegger, only if we "intend in general"⁶ and such intention is a determination of our ontological structure. Relation doesn't simply belong to us as a possible predicate but constitutes our being as such. The other extreme is to see intentionality as something immanent to a subject, belonging to its "subjective sphere."⁷ This false subjectivation of intentionality, where the latter is conceived as a sort of capsule for the intended,⁸ creates an illusion that studying it is equivalent to studying subjectivity detached from the world. Again, his critique is largely descriptive: what we see and experience are things, not experiences of things. On the contrary, if we start with our own subjectivity, there is no way we can break free from it.

In order to avoid pitfalls of both objectivism and subjectivism, Heidegger stresses that the relation between *intention* and *intendum* necessarily contains something he calls "perceivedness of the perceived."⁹ Now, such perceivedness doesn't alter the content of perceived thing in any sense. A perception is expected to show an object as it is and not its mental appearance; "the mode of uncovering ... must be determined by the entity to be uncovered."¹⁰ On the other side, Heidegger also emphasizes that perceivedness isn't automatically guaranteed by the entity in question. In order for things to show up as they really are, a corresponding sort of understanding must be achieved. We can discover things as they are only *after* such understanding is secured. Think, for example, of Chinese characters. It is possible that instead

⁶ M. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 60

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70

of reading them, I will take them to be some chaotic drawings and, therefore, fail to intend them as they are. So, even though understanding “must be determined by the entity to be uncovered,” the entity in question doesn’t guarantee that such understanding will actually be determined, as it doesn’t contain it among its predicates. That is why Heidegger claims that understanding is irreducible to extantness, saying that “not only do *intention* and *intentum* belong to the intentionality of perception but so also does the understanding of the mode of being of what is intended in the *intentum*.”¹¹

Heidegger offers the following definition of understanding: it is a projection onto possibilities.¹² A first thing that needs to be clarified regarding such a definition is that we shouldn’t conflate the term “projection” (German “*Entwurf*” meaning “draft” or “construction”) with some inner psychological state that is violently imposed on reality. In a psychological sense, projection means something that isn’t “really” there, something untruthful, which must be clarified. Heidegger, on the contrary, stresses the ontological aspect of projection. The point is that we cannot grasp entities as they are simply by looking at them; in order to be accessed, they need to be projected or related to something else. My understanding of what a hammer is, for example, isn’t a contemplation of the handle attached to an iron head. It instead consists of my ability to use it in various ways (hammering nails, crashing things etc.) The understanding of what a hammer is is disclosed by something other than the hammer. So, according to Heidegger things don’t simply occur as themselves but must be somehow *brought* to themselves. Speaking in Heidegger’s terms, Dasein *fre*es things to be themselves. We can see, therefore, why it is so misleading to treat projection psychologically: even though without Dasein there would be no projections, the fact that things can be accessed only through such projection doesn’t follow from some psychological, “merely” subjective will, but from things themselves, a thesis that Wrathall incisively

described as a “relational ontology.”¹³ We disclose things through projection, not by imposing our subjectivity on them. Projection lets things unpack themselves – it lets entities be themselves.¹⁴

But what is projected and where exactly does this projection go? As an ontological structure, Heidegger claims, understanding projects the being of Dasein “equiprimordially” onto “significance as the worldliness of his world” and Dasein’s “for-the-sake-of-which.”¹⁵

The first term – significance – stands for the fact that we understand entities and activities based on a system of references. Projection reveals a specific function that a given entity or activity performs, and the way it is related to other things and activities.¹⁶ By doing this, projection reveals its “in-order-to”¹⁷ showing in what relation this entity or activity should be grasped – as serving to what aim. This is what defines its identity as a specific thing or a specific activity. Significance, in such a way, presupposes a part-to-whole relation: we grasp the entity as a part, in view of some referential whole. For example, to be itself, a chair must be referred to tables and eating, among other things. If conceived without this reference, the chair is hardly a chair at all; it is rather a piece of wood or a stand. Furthermore, the term “for-the-sake-of-which” is meant to emphasize that this system of references cannot be indifferent to Dasein. Significance, claims Heidegger, is grounded in “for the sake of which.”¹⁸ taken as a whole, it doesn’t serve to any further specific aim, but corresponds to Dasein’s ability-to-be. To signify something as relevant for Dasein also means to embody a certain potential for its being. What is disclosed by understanding, in other words, “equiprimordially” uncovers Dasein’s ways of being; it *matters* to him as providing a certain way of living in the world. A projection onto significance is, thus, equiprimordially a projection onto certain praxis of living a life.

¹¹ M. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 71

¹² M. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 277

¹³ M. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment. Truth Language and History*, p. 136

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 103

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78

Heidegger, however, insists that understanding necessarily “co-discloses”¹⁹ (*miterschlossen*) both significance and for-the-sake-of-which. Together, they equiprimordially constitute being-in-the-world as a whole.²⁰ The point is that for-the-sake-of-which doesn’t precede concrete significant things; the latter as “needs in themselves” doesn’t find its realization in the former. Any sort of for-the-sake-of-which, i.e. any such praxis of living a life, must already occur as a concrete comportment of meaningfulness of which is granted by a referential whole. This is a crucial claim. Heidegger’s approach isn’t akin to de La Rochefoucauld’s reflexive strategy that reveals egoistic motivations behind every act. He doesn’t believe, as Spinoza did, that there is something like an objective essence of Dasein that predetermines what significant things it is going to face. What Heidegger wants to demonstrate is that this relation is reciprocal: significance and for-the-sake-of-which come into existence through mutual merging. In this sense, the claim that any kind of entity (whether it be a hammer or Higgs boson) might be grasped only for-the-sake-of Dasein isn’t anything else but a general expression of the ecstatic character of Dasein’s existence. For-the-sake-of-which doesn’t bear with itself any specific content. As ability-to-be, Dasein always has *something* to do (*etwas zu können*); it is this purely formal “something” that belongs to it as a constitutive element. On the contrary, “significance” is what defines for-the-sake-of-which exactly Dasein exists by giving to it some determinate content. Heidegger’s point, therefore, isn’t to show significant things as a manifestation of Dasein’s will, but simply to show that any kind of significance must be potentially contributable to Dasein’s existence. So, a hammer is to hammer nails and build homes; Higgs bosons are to confirm the Standard Model – but all these frame what can be done, observed or created by Dasein as such, all these belong to its being-possible (*Möglichsein*).

To put it differently, an act of understanding discloses things as they are based on their own significance (as

defined by other things and events) and, at the same time, it discloses Dasein as the ability-to-be about such things. By doing this, it transforms subject and object into indivisible components of being-in-the-world. Understanding might be inauthentic if it is lost in significance and treats entities as self-obvious or it can be authentic as long as it remembers that any concrete comportment is enabled only for-the-sake-of Dasein.²¹ The important thing here is that this twofold structure is preserved in every case: *being-in* the world presupposes *beings* in the world and otherwise. These two moments are covered by the term “possibility”: entities have possibilities that make them themselves and, at the same time, they give Dasein some possibility to be. This explains why things in their “ownmost” being still appear as “serviceable”, “usable” and so on.²²

In such a way, through projection, Dasein gets what Heidegger calls the room-for-maneuver (*Spielraum*, literally – a room for play) of its ability-to-be,²³ a key term that is often undertranslated. *Spielraum* is existential space, a network of interconnected possibilities that mutually enable each other, thus, providing a livable place for Dasein, which is livable only because it is mottled by such various possibilities. It is this existential space disclosed by understanding that explains the nature of Dasein’s relation to the world. First and foremost, it doesn’t have beliefs or representation of it. Neither does it make judgements or formulate propositions. Its being is being-possible: for the most part, it is occupied with what can and cannot be done, with projects that can be realized etc., thus, realizing its own being as a possibility. This existential awareness of available possibilities is knowledge of a very specific sort – it has nothing to do with a voluntary creation of a specific plan or immanent

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 134

²⁰ Ibid, p. 134

²¹ The role authenticity plays in understanding is explicated in more details in J. Haugeland’s and S. Crowell’s readings (see, J. Haugeland, *Truth and Finitude* and S. Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger*)

²² Ibid, p. 135

²³ Ibid. (Der Entwurfcharakter des Verstehens konstituiert das In-der-Welt-sein hinsichtlich der Erschlossenheit seines Da als Da eines Seinkönnens. Der Entwurf ist die existenziale Seinsverfassung des Spielraums des faktischen Seinkönnens.)

self-perception.²⁴ It is knowledge of one's way around the world, which is equivalent to the knowledge of one's own self. As understanding, Dasein "'knows' what is going on, that is, what its potentiality of being is."²⁵

However, this understanding still leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Heidegger's holistic emphasis on explanation of possibilities is clear. What isn't at all clear, however, is how these holistic structures are to be interpreted. This gives rise to an astonishingly diverse variety of readings. H. Dreyfus, in his article "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics", roughly divided his interpretations into hermeneutical holists (which covers a broad group of authors ranging from C. Lafont to G.-G. Gadamer) and pragmatic ones, of which one was famously presented by himself. For the aim of this paper, I will not address the hermeneutic readings for the most part (I will also leave aside originative readings within the pragmatic traditions proposed by R. Brandom²⁶, S. Crowell²⁷ and O. Švec²⁸, which complement Heidegger's approach of the game of giving and asking for reasons). Instead, I will concentrate on how pragmatism explicated and took over these Heideggerian motives by linking notions of understanding, meaning and possibility together with public practices.

II. Understanding, Meaning and the Primacy of Practice

As one would expect, the pragmatic tradition inspired by H. Dreyfus and M. Okrent places a great emphasis on Heidegger's notions of understanding and possibilities as not interchangeable with cognition and objects. Consequently, they view them as non-cognitive phenomena founded in average public practices. I'll give a more systematic account of this interpretation below.

According to Dreyfus, the term "possibilities" has even more specific meaning for Heidegger. Heidegger, claims Dreyfus, isn't interested in enlisting of "things that are

logically or physically possible."²⁹ His interest lies in what Dreyfus calls "existential" possibilities, i.e. possibilities that are actually open in a situation, thus, making possible our orientation in it. Borrowing the expression from W. James, Dreyfus speaks of them as "live options"³⁰ that source from our very placedness in a certain context. To give a quick example, my placedness in the kitchen equips me with possibilities of making breakfast or a cup of tea. Logically, it is also possible to sing here, but singing doesn't follow from this position. Taken together, such options/existential possibilities constitute a "room-for-manuever", i.e. set of meaningful and appropriate involvements available for Dasein. In the same fashion, M. Wrathall speaks of the "leeway", situations that "provide us with a range of possibilities for pursuing a particular course of activity or a particular identity."³¹ As thrown, Dasein finds itself always already in a certain situation and already in possession of some possibilities. Even though such possibilities come into being through Dasein, Dasein doesn't get to choose or create them spontaneously from his "free-floating"³² being. Dasein *is* these possibilities rather than just having them: they aren't an addition to his autonomous being-in-itself but constitute its very being as they "limit and make sense what to do."³³

According to Dreyfus, the concrete situation is able to be understood because of our "local background", a "range of possibilities that Dasein 'knows' without reflection,"³⁴ which defines "the room for maneuver in the current situation."³⁵ In particular, concrete possibilities organically follow from the general and non-thematic background possibilities "making up significance" (like, for example, a possibility of hammering follows from the background of building). Dreyfus treats such background as "the average public practices"³⁶: it is our general tech-

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See R. Brandom, *Dasein, the Being that Thematises*

²⁷ See S. Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger*

²⁸ See O. Švec, *The Primacy of Practice and the Pervasiveness of Discourse in: Pragmatic Perspectives in Phenomenology*

²⁹ H. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, p. 115

³⁰ Ibid, p. 115

³¹ M. A. Wrathall, *Heidegger on Human Understanding*, p. 190 in: *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time*

³² H. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, p. 115

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 95

niques and skills built from social training that define what we can do and what makes sense for us to do each time. Only because practices delimitate and specify the use of entities “there can be any understanding at all.”³⁷ In the same way, T. Carman says “the way anything manages to be expressively intelligible is by conforming to the public and anonymous norms governing our shared background practices.”³⁸ Another corroboration (this time Wrathall): “background practices make the world, in general, intelligible to us.”³⁹ And lastly, by Blattner, “the intelligence and intelligibility of human life are to be explained fundamentally in terms of practice, and the contribution that cognition, conceptuality, and theory make to it is derivative of the contribution made by practice.”⁴⁰ In this sense, background skills, habits and norms or, in short, background practices that we are trained into during our socialization ground actual possibilities and meanings accessible for understanding. These practices make us Dasein⁴¹ and sustain us this way by disclosing the very possibility of meaningfully governed activity.

Dreyfus is insisting (bringing Wittgenstein as a witness) that the background doesn't consist of beliefs, which differs Heidegger from theoretical holists such as Davidson and Gadamer.⁴² It is made of “habits and customs, embodied in the sort of subtle skills which we exhibit in our everyday interaction with things and people.”⁴³ Since it isn't a belief system, the background cannot be explicated, justified or even thematized. In support, he again quotes Wittgenstein: “Giving grounds [must] come to an end sometime. But the end isn't an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting.”⁴⁴ So, either we

admit that we need some sort of non-cognitive skill to apply for the purposes of cognition or justification or we fall into endless regress.⁴⁵ Practices themselves are historically contingent and ungrounded as such, as Dreyfus stresses many times. In the end, it is just the way we happened to act. The pragmatic readings, in such a way, “ground” intelligibility in shared practices that are themselves ungrounded.⁴⁶ They view average everyday practices as a sort of practical substrate, i.e. actually existing (although ungrounded and contingent) skills, norms and habits that are sustained and transferred by the anonymous power of publicity.

These three points, namely that (1) understanding primordially is based on grasping meaningful or existential possibilities open in a given situation, (2) that meaningfulness or intelligibility as such is grounded in the background practices and (3) that such practices consist in skills, habits and not explicit beliefs, represent a point of convergence among pragmatic interpreters, which is covered by the rather broad label of “primacy of practice”. This, of course, isn't confined to Heidegger and his interpreters. The similar or co-existent approaches can be found in P. Bourdieu, L. Wittgenstein, J. Dewey, M. Foucault, R. Rorty, E. Reitveld and many others. For methodological reasons, however, I will limit the scope of the investigation to Heideggerian re-interpretations only.

The problem that follows is that the primacy of practice formulated this way places the source of meaningfulness beyond any possible human competence, leaving us without any possibility of feedback on it. Because background practices create and sustain any intelligibility, any possible finding, criticism or creative solution must be already presupposed by the background practices, otherwise it won't be meaningful at all. The background is something that “lends intelligibility to criticism and change.”⁴⁷ This means that any actual success or failure in the world is irrelevant to it: every correction of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ T. Carman, Heidegger's Analytic, p. 236

³⁹ H. Dreyfus, M. Wrathall, Background practices, p. 9

⁴⁰ W. Blattner, What Heidegger and Dewey Can Learn From Each Other p. 59

⁴¹ Here it is worth mentioning that according to pragmatists' readings, Dasein is indeed not interchangeable with human being or consciousness (so, babies have consciousness but they are not Daseins); it is our ability to orient at meaning that makes us Dasein (i.e. socialized individual) and this is achievable only through socialization through practices

⁴² H. Dreyfus, Holism and Hermeneutics, p. 4

⁴³ Ibid, p. 8

⁴⁴ L. Wittgenstein, On Certainty, p. 114

⁴⁵ H. Dreyfus, Holism and Hermeneutics, p. 8

⁴⁶ H. Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World, p. 96

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 99

the practices, every act of learning must be already accounted for by the background practices. Such an approach renders them to be an objectified and self-subsisting force that one-sidedly enables any possible meaning forwards without being enabled backwards. Dreyfus, of course, considers the possibility of change in the background, saying that “new technological and social developments are constantly changing specific ways for Dasein to be.”⁴⁸ He also gives a lot of consideration to Heidegger’s history of being and different epochal disclosures of the world.⁴⁹ But because of an objectified account of practices, this remains a purely nominal possibility. If Dasein (as constituted by public practices) cannot allow any feedback, then what exactly causes a change in the background? Any social change must be first located in the background. Heidegger never mentioned an objective *telos* of practices (whether it be coping with the environment or development of the labor power) and it is hard to suspect him of any sympathy to such attempts. Without it, however, the very idea of a change in the objectified background seems to lose its foundation.

The problem will only deteriorate if we, along with B. Lahire⁵⁰, cast aside a rather dogmatic assumption that there is only one coherent set of practical dispositions available for an individual. Modern societies have made dispositional plurality an obvious fact and plenty of such dispositions are in a state of direct conflict. The task of selection is an open challenge posed to an individual and the result cannot be predetermined by the mere availability of some practical set of skills. Such sets must be better or worse, more or less appropriate, at least in some sense in order to render any selection among them meaningful. How can this decision be made if the background grounds any possible intelligibility? How are we to choose between two conflicting backgrounds? It seems too far-stretched to

explain such a choice by postulating that another background urges us to a decision.

Later in his career, Dreyfus has proposed a different solution to this problem, which, as Wrathall pointed out, is “consistent with the idea that all intelligibility is ultimately grounded in social practices.”⁵¹ He proposed a special account of cultural expertise, a sort of practical “*phronesis*”⁵² which allows Dasein to understand a situation without relying on average norms and skills. Expert Dasein has a much more subtle sense of the situation, which cannot be covered by the rather general and abstract everyday norms. The typical example is a social actor who knows without any explicit rules when to tell the truth and when it is wiser to lie (even though social rules prohibit lying as such). As I see it, however, this account is either incompatible with Dreyfus’s original claim or doesn’t introduce anything new to his original position. It seems that according to such an approach, mastery over practice consists exactly of our ability not to lean on the original background, instead substituting it with a richer and more efficient set of background skills and assumptions. Expertise discloses possibilities that were not accounted for by the average background and consequently adapts the background so it can capture new possibilities. To claim that much more subtle possibilities are already presupposed by the practice means to completely ignore the fact that an expert (exactly because of his expertise) doesn’t follow the same set of rules and can potentially reformulate the very meaning of these practices on a permanent basis. If, on the contrary, Dreyfus holds to the original claim saying that such changes are already presupposed by the background and the expert Dasein is only receptive enough to reflect on such changes, then this solution would not differ from the original one according to which practices change autonomously and Dasein just grasps this *fait accompli*.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 98

⁴⁹ See H. Dreyfus and C. Spinosa, *Highway Bridges and Feasts. Heidegger and Borgmann on How to Affirm Technology*

⁵⁰ B. Lahire, *From the Habitus to an Individual Heritage of Dispositions*

⁵¹ H. Dreyfus, M. Wrathall – Background practices, p. 12

⁵² H. Dreyfus, *Could Anything Be More Intelligible than Everyday Intelligibility?* p. 29 in: *Background practices*

Another approach to the change in the background was proposed by J. Haugeland⁵³ and C. White⁵⁴ (and supported by Dreyfus himself⁵⁵) who draw a parallel between T. Kuhn's account of normal and revolutionary science and Heidegger's notion of authentic/inauthentic understanding. Haugeland claims that our paradigms of understanding can fail and become inappropriate to given circumstances (when a teacher, for example, realizes that the traditional methods of teaching no longer work), which gives us chance to reconsider this paradigm in order to continue the activity. White, along with Dreyfus, outlines a more general analysis claiming that it is possible to commit a "leap from dominant practices to marginal ones" that rediscovers the world for Dasein "when current practices run into anomalies."⁵⁶ Once again, this move, if combined with the primacy of practice thesis, claims more than it is actually allowed to. Kuhn's account of scientific revolution presupposes a task placed outside the paradigm. Namely, a potential integration of all the data into one non-contradictive system, and an explicit proposal of how this can be done in the most efficient way. The primacy of practice, which claims that *all* the intelligibility as such is based on the background practices, excludes the possibility of a meaningful task placed outside them. Any possible failure as well as any possible success, therefore, must be already presupposed by the background. But the following question arise, why does the background predetermine certain practices to fail and why do they occur as such? Is this because they help (or fail to help) to adapt to the environment? Or is it because they are a manifestation of the development of labor power? Once again, the lack of an answer to this question represents a crucial missing element in such interpretations.

I believe that a primacy of practice thesis according to which practices one-sidedly ground intelligibility is applicable to philosophers like Dewey or James, who believe that they occur as a result of the objective process and are

ruled by the objective criterion. However, when applied to phenomenologists who tend to criticize any idea of self-standing objectivity (whether it be objectivity of entities or more subtle second-order objectivity of processes (such as evolutionary adaptation or development of the labor power that further grounds "shifting" objectivity of things)), this conception leads to unresolvable paradoxes caused by radically different methodologies. The "grounding" in practices is a problematic move as it is. Its critique raised by J. Habermas⁵⁷, D. Davidson⁵⁸, H. Putnam⁵⁹ and S. Blackburn⁶⁰ (to name a few) is also well known, and there is no need to dwell on it since it isn't my aim to simply reconstruct the critique of objectified account of social development. My point is to exactly demonstrate that merging of such pragmatic views with phenomenological tradition turns this problem into an open paradox. In what follows, I will try to demonstrate that explication of pragmatic motives within the phenomenological tradition must take a different direction adjusted for its specificity. This might propose not only a more consistent account of phenomenological pragmatism, but help to deal with criticism addressed to pragmatism as such.

III. A Pragmatically-Phenomenological Account of Understanding

Pragmatic interpretations, as I attempt to demonstrate, provide a sort of grounding for understanding, even if this grounding is itself ungrounded and consists in unjustified and unthematized ways of action, skills, etc. This very grounding creates a practical frame within which both our practical and unpractical compartments take place. This means that the nature of our relation to the world is pragmatic because any possible meaning disclosed by understanding as such has a pragmatic source – ungrounded ways of action. This view culminates logically in the account of theory, which isn't anything else but a non-practical method that takes over practical

⁵³ J. Haugeland, *Truth and Finitude*

⁵⁴ C. White, *Time and Death: Heidegger's Analysis of Finitude*

⁵⁵ H. Dreyfus, *Foreword to Time and Death*

⁵⁶ H. Dreyfus, *Foreword to Time and Death*, p. 52

⁵⁷ J. Habermas, *Discourse on Modernity*

⁵⁸ D. Davidson, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*

⁵⁹ H. Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*

⁶⁰ S. Blackburn, *Pragmatism: all or some?*; in: *Truth: A Guide*

tasks (i.e. “practice pursued by other means”). In this section, I want to argue that such framing of any possible meaningfulness isn’t the only way of manifesting the pragmatic nature of understanding. Instead of its grounding in such pragmatic source, we could also demonstrate that meaning itself is pragmatic, i.e. its essence consists in disclosing and maximizing possibilities of acting and thinking. As a result, we can come up with a pragmatism that doesn’t need an objective account of how practices and meanings evolve.

Firstly, let’s get back to the notions of logical and existential possibilities. As we have seen, the idea proposed by the pragmatists was that existential possibilities make sense, whereas logical possibilities don’t. This was explained by the fact that existential possibilities, unlike logical, follow from certain backgrounds or practices. The problem here is that logical possibilities must make at least some sense in order to be intended at all. This fact can hardly be explained solely by the reference to “de-worlding,” i.e. the second-order process of abstraction from the context, as Dreyfus insisted. Our everyday orientation in the world presupposes not binary coding into existential/logical possibilities but an endless variation of deeper/narrower grasps on the situation. Once again, it seems too far-stretched to explain all these endless variations of understanding by the different intensity of abstraction. I think that this impasse can be potentially avoided if we resort to pragmatists’ favorite strategy, translation of rigid oppositions into flexible ones. Instead of treating existential possibilities as meaningful and logical possibilities as meaningless, we could say that both of them are meaningful but to a different extent. In this case, they would only be the extreme parts of the same “equiprimordial” spectrum of meaningfulness. I think such a move will eventually prove itself, as it can potentially describe our everyday experience much more adequately. At this point, however, it provides nothing but further questions. It becomes no longer possible to view practices as a source of meaningfulness: practices don’t make anything meaningful; they

can only make it more meaningful. Practices, therefore, can no longer function as the explanatory principle; on the contrary, now they are what need to be explained in the first place, since it is no longer clear why exactly isolated possibilities are less meaningful than the ones that follow from some background.

We can take, as a guiding example, a possibility of taking a shot in soccer. It might be an existential possibility if a player has certain skills and norms in his background. If he doesn’t, however, the possibility loses its existential character: it would still be possible for the player to kick a ball towards the goalposts, but it wouldn’t make *much* sense for him. Naturally, we can try to explain the rules of the game to this player hoping to transform shooting into a meaningful possibility. So, we start by explaining this very possibility: the player should kick the ball inside the goalposts (1). This is a fairly transparent and understandable task but *what’s the point*, he might ask. What’s the meaning of this? When the trainee raises these questions, we add that (2) there is a goalkeeper trying to parry his shots with hands. Furthermore, we also add that (3) other players from the opposite team will try to tackle the ball and (4) score by themselves. And finally, (5) there also are teammates to whom the player can pass the ball in order to keep possession. As a result of such an explanation, we have introduced the background and thus transformed (1) into a sufficiently meaningful possibility. The same works for each of the mentioned possibilities. We can start the explanation with (5), which taken by itself would be more or less meaningless and then add (3), (4), (1) and (2). Or we could start with (3) and add (5), (1), (2) and (4). Order here is irrelevant: each possibility is made meaningful because other possibilities are included. They receive existential character because of their interconnection to the other possibilities.

Now, what exactly happens between (1) and (2), so they can become mutually more meaningful? Of course, merely placing them alongside each other isn’t enough to explain such a transformation. In order for (1) to make sense, it must somehow interact with (2). But what is a

meaningful interaction? Why do shooting and passing interact meaningfully, whereas hammering and singing don't? Borrowing a term from Heidegger, it could be said that a meaningful interaction sets out "leeway", a room-for-maneuver, where possibilities are limited by the possibilities they interact with and, at the same time, they are disclosed by. This moment belongs to the very meaning of the word *Spielraum*: limitation here doesn't negate possibilities completely but leaves open a chance to overcome it. This gives to the involved possibilities a certain space to maneuver, which enriches their content. Continuing the example, the possibility of a shot can never be the same after we add the goalkeeper to the game. Because the goalkeeper limits scoring, shooting has now subdivided into the possibilities of taking an accurate shot towards the corner (1a), curving the ball (1b), tricking the goalkeeper with a feint (1c) etc.; analogously, goalkeeping now includes the possibilities of parrying the shot with hands (2a), legs (2b) or coming off the line (2c). An interaction between (1) and (2), in such a way, turns into an interaction between (1a) (1b) (1c) and (2a) (2b) (2c) because it enriches both sides of the *relata* through mutual limitation. Each of these freshly disclosed possibilities is context dependent. They aren't conceivable without each other as they presuppose each other analytically: the shot into the left corner presupposes also a possibility of the shot into the right one. Because I can shoot in the both directions, the goalkeeper stays centrally, ready to dive to either side. If one of these possibilities is removed (a right corner shot), the other two (a left corner shot, a goalkeeper dive) becomes meaningless as well: there is not much sense for the goalkeeper to stay centrally if I am going to shoot towards the left side only. But this would mean that there is not much sense to place a shot into the left corner either since the goalkeeper will easily save it. The whole activity is rendered meaningless if the right corner shot is removed. Shooting, therefore, makes sense precisely as a possibility of placing a shot into the top corner/trick shot/etc. – *it is meaningful insofar that it inherently presupposes other possibilities and is presupposed by them.*

On the contrary, shooting, conceived as a mere placing a ball within the net, is barely meaningful because it doesn't presuppose anything but itself.

So, the (1)-(2) couplet something I call disclosive potential, namely, a potential to establish interplay *Spielraum* leading to the disclosure of further, *complex* possibilities, i.e. possibilities inherently presupposing other possibilities. Because of this inherent complexity or richness, we can grasp them as more meaningful. If we add (3) to these two possibilities, it will further increase the disclosing potential of leeway already set by the (1)-(2), because tackling, more goalkeeping possibilities and shooting are disclosed as well. Shooting will also include the possibilities of timing and positioning, tackling will include the possibilities of deciding a distance and blocking, and goalkeeping will presuppose possibilities of cooperation with teammates. Taken together, possibilities (1), (2) and (3) sets out a richer interplay, i.e. they have a greater disclosive potential and, thus, the possibilities disclosed by their interplay are more meaningful than possibilities disclosed by (1) and (2). This means that the practice of (1), (2) and (3) is a better, more meaningful than the practice consisting of (1) and (2) only. The same happens when we add (4) and (5). Each of them becomes more meaningful because it is enriched by the interaction with leeway constituted by different possibilities; and the leeway itself gets enriched by this interaction. Possibilities, therefore, don't interact and become meaningful because they belong to some practice. On the contrary, practices are created and sustained as a result of the specific interaction of possibilities that maximizes disclosing potential. A background isn't anything else but a set of essentially interrelated and mutually disclosed possibilities, not a ground that enables them.

The ability of projection onto possibilities, therefore, is a pragmatic ability from top to bottom, but not because such a projection is based on embodied skills and habits. It is pragmatic simply because it aims at maximization of our ability-to-be: understanding is guided by the necessity to provide more disclosive or more complex possibilities of

being (i.e. possibilities inherently presupposing other possibilities), which enrich our being-in-the-world by giving to it more content. In other words, understanding entrenches our situatedness and intensifies our being-in-the-world by disclosing more possibilities. So, a person unaware of football would hardly recognize the specificity of his own situation if placed on a football field. For him, the related possibility of kicking the laying ball would appear as a logical gesture, which says almost nothing about what can be done in such a situation. On the contrary, for an expert, this possibility discloses the whole world of further possibilities in which Dasein can dwell. In the second case, we have a situation that better discloses Dasein as ability-to-be or as being-possible; we have a richer, more extensive being-in-the-world. Concrete practices, therefore, are not the source of meaningfulness but means of its maximization: configured the way they are, possibilities maximize the disclosive potential and make the most sense, which maximizes Dasein's ability-to-be and helps to make the most sense out of its existence.

To get a clearer idea of this, we can once again revoke Spinoza and his notion of "conatus." Spinoza sees conatus as a fundamental principle according to which "each thing, as far as it lies in itself, strives to persevere in its being."⁶¹ A relation of an individual to the world is, thus, explained as grounded in its determined essence, which aims at a specific self-realization as prescribed by this essence. What happens when we drop the objectified approach to this relation? For one thing, we could no longer describe conatus as "perseverance." For there isn't anything that can persevere: there is no Dasein without the world as there are no baseball players without baseball. We cannot postulate an essence that then finds its predetermined application, because the way Dasein exists is exactly through the world: understanding discloses ways of being in the world equiprimordially with things in this world. So, the reason why we are drawn to the world is not because it is prescribed by our particular essence; it is because of the ecstatic character of our existence that can find its way of

being, only by elaborating it in the world, amidst things themselves. What Dasein's conatus consists of is, in other words, a need to take roots in the world by showing what can be done, said or observed in it. So, understanding strives to enable *some* form of being and to give to Dasein's existence *some* content; *ab initio*, it is guided by the necessity to maximize its ability-to-be.

The approach that treats practices as more or less meaningful (as more or less contributing to Dasein's ability-to-be) paves the way for a much more successful explanation of a change in the background. Possibilities coexist within a given practical frame because they productively limit and disclose each other, contributing to our ability-to-be. Hypothetically, we can always imagine another configuration within a given practical frame, which will include new possibilities or alter current ones. For the most part, however, this remains a mere thought experiment. As J. Haugeland has argued, the functioning of everyday practice is based on the rule of non-contradiction and double-checking: I can imagine me using the hammer differently, but I will fail to hammer a nail.⁶² This rule defines how one should behave in order to reach its goals. In this sense, any re-configuration would only decrease its disclosing potential by disrupting the system of interactions. However, sometimes a new configuration can prove to be more efficient and instead increases such potential. Take, for example, the introduction of the substitution rule in sports. Because the price of any serious foul has now grown, defenders tend to play more cautiously, which discloses more attacking possibilities and invites more complex forms of defense. So, although untypical, it isn't unconceivable that the alteration is introduced because practices as such are constructed based on maximizing the disclosing potential. They occur because they make sense and evolve because they make better sense in a different way. It is our understanding that motivates their occurrence and change.

All of these sit well with pragmatists' critique of the cognitivist approach to understanding and the back-

⁶¹ B. Spinoza, Ethics, part 3, prop. 7

⁶² J. Haugeland, Truth and Finitude, p. 200

ground. Our cultural background might well be composed of non-cognitive, non-conceptual skills, norms and habits that (unlike the discussed example of the football rules) “cannot and shouldn’t be explicated or justified.” The point is that their meaningfulness is under questioning every bit as much as the meaningfulness of possibilities they disclose. Even despite their inexplicability, such elements are still involved in meaningful patterns of life without being placed in a position of an “unmoved mover.” In other words, both the possibilities that skills enables and skills themselves are dependent upon their disclosive potential: they are worth being followed as long as they are linked to other possibilities. If possibilities that skills disclose become somehow less relevant, so do these skills. So, Dreyfus’s favorite example, a skill that helps us to keep personal distance enables a number of possibilities (to hear what other person says and to be heard by him, the possibility of not being clingy and disdainful at the same time). If any of these possibilities vanish (like when we are stuck in the overcrowded metro), it makes lesser sense to hold to this skill, and it doesn’t matter how explicated or cognitivized it is. To conclude, certain skills might be so all-pervasive that they cannot be explicated, but new possibilities can make them irrelevant by making irrelevant possibilities that disclose them and were disclosed by them.

The notion of disclosing potential, in such a way, conglutinates practices and dispositions, skills and their use. Their disjunction leads either to viewing every skill as an implicit validity claim or to the rigidifying of practices, the problem that I was trying to describe in the previous section. In the latter case, Heideggerian pragmatism indeed appears as an abstract negation of reason, as Habermas and others were always glad to point out.⁶³ To claim, along with Dreyfus and other pragmatists, that our existential possibilities are somehow brought into reality by our background practices means to substitute cognition for practices but retain the relation of grounding, which results in deprivation of flexibility and transparency. What

needs to be done to overcome this struggle, however, isn’t to duplicate the basic move of intellectualistic philosophy but to establish a circular relation: neither implicit skills nor explicit possibilities would be possible if not their connection. They mutually enable each other and withdrawing any part of this relation would mean removal of the other.

Conclusion

My interpretation highlights a problem common both to the American pragmatism, Heideggerian pragmatic re-interpretations and to a wide range of other pragmatic trends. Even though they problematize givenness of objects, discard observational theories of knowledge and cognitivism of any sort, they still think that there is a process (the principle of evolution) or phenomenon (public practices) with its own objective logic and firmness that determines or grounds meanings of entities and practices, slipping back onto traditional vocabulary of ultimate grounds and archai of being. In this sense, the primacy of practice (as proclaimed by Dewey and Dreyfus) isn’t such a distant relative of Platonic idea of good: both presuppose that we need some “light” to see entities as they are, but most importantly both view this light as something objectively grounding meaning of entities. In doing this, both are taking refuge in the world handing over the meaning-making to an objective principle. On the contrary, one of Heidegger’s most profound insights, as it seems to me, was the idea that even though the objects are given “as they are,” the way we grasp them and their meaning cannot be derived from or based on any objective process (and this extends to Dreyfus’s ungrounded ground). A notion of disclosing potential that I have introduced was meant to explicate such irreducibility of understanding. The source of meaningfulness is neither an entity itself nor an objectively existing skill or principle. What we call meaning is accessible because Dasein strives to find itself in the world, to dwell in it. What understanding is ultimately aimed

⁶³ J. Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 138

towards is to disclose the richest possible being-in-the-world; and the way this objective is reached is in by no means predetermined.

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