

EARLY HEIDEGGER AND BIOLOGY

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Abstract

In the paper, the author problematizes the attempt to aprioritize empirical sciences as well as the reduction of theoretical capacities of biology in the famous work by young Martin Heidegger *Sein und Zeit*. For this purpose, the relations between his *Daseinsanalytik* and the research findings of biology are examined. The author ties in with the criticism of Heidegger's theses by Julius Kraft and Hans Albert. The aprioritization of everyday thinking as well as the claim of the a priori primacy of

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the lifeworld over the research findings of empirical sciences are rejected. Likewise, Heidegger's thesis is rejected that biology does not give us an answer to the question, what is man, and that a crisis of fundamentals is allegedly at work in it. As Heidegger's critique of biology may be misguided in terms of scientific theory, he may be suspected of a veiled anthropocentrism.

Keywords: apriorization, existential analysis, *Dasein*, scientific knowledge, biology, antinaturalism, lifeworld.

Zgodnji Heidegger in biologija

Povzetek

Prispevek problematizira tako poskus apriorizacije empiričnih znanosti kot redukcijo teoretskih zmožnosti biologije v znamenitem delu mladega Martina Heideggra *Bit in čas*. Avtor zato prouči razmerja med njegovo *Daseinsanalytik* in raziskovalnimi rezultati biologije, pri čemer se sklicuje na kritiko Heideggrovih tez pri Juliusu Kraftu in Hansu Albertu. Članek zavrne tako apriorizacijo vsakdanjega mišljenja kot zatrjevanje apriorne prednosti življenjskega sveta pred raziskovalnimi rezultati empiričnih znanosti. Obenem zavrne tudi Heideggrovo misel, da nam biologija ne daje odgovorov na vprašanje, kaj je človek, in da je znotraj nje na delu kriza temeljev. Kolikor je Heideggrova kritika biologija morda napačna glede na smisel znanstvene teorije, mu je mogoče prisoditi prikrit antropocentrizem.

Ključne besede: apriorizacija, eksistencialna analiza, tubit, znanstvena vednost, biologija, antinaturalizem, življenjski svet.

*In memory of my colleague
Axel Bühler (1947–2024)*

“Wer groß denkt, muß groß irren.”

Martin Heidegger

The anti-naturalistic approach is widespread in modern philosophy; often, it is accompanied by traditional prejudices about the theoretical potential of natural sciences, such as biology. At the same time, it goes together with outdated accounts of natural reality and relationships between it and (human) culture. In this part of the world, this was relatively recently authoritatively advocated by the Yugoslav *praxis* philosophers. However, anti-naturalistic radicalism is present in an even more peremptory form in a whole series of modern European philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger and others. The attempts to aprioristically establish the sciences about reality (in opposition to formal sciences, such as logic and mathematics) lost their credibility in the middle of the last century. So, nowadays this is less common among scientists themselves; however, such views are still present among certain economists who follow the methodological ideas of L. von Mises. Nevertheless, certain philosophical tendencies towards the placement of apriorism in the cognitive structure of the sciences about reality still exist. In recent times, e.g., in the form characteristic of the late phenomenological thought of E. Husserl, and of the derived thesis about the so-called “a priori of the lifeworld.” This tendency is also visible through the specific formulations and peculiar jargon of his student M. Heidegger. In the present text, we comment on his point of view from the early stages of his work as presented in the famous book *Being and Time* (1927),¹ which simultaneously to a certain degree also announced his later controversial theses about the sciences and scientific knowledge of reality, denoting his later writings.

First of all, I would like to establish that the anti-naturalistic starting point of this author is distinctly hinted at as part of his total explication of the thesis

1 All the translations of Heidegger’s theses from (the 12th edition of) *Being and Time* are the work of the author of the paper.

that “man has his environment [Umwelt],” whereby he lays claim that his famous “existential analysis of *Dasein*” and the clarification of the question of what man is, which it offers, “*lies before all psychology, anthropology, and especially biology [erst recht Biologie]*” (Heidegger 1972, 45; my emphasis).

162 With this formulation, which does not express just a locational determination, but is also imbued with a value ranking of what is before and what is after, he hints at his unappreciative view of biology—even in the context of a comparison with other positive sciences. (In this manner, the special allocation of a particular science undertaken here, for which no rational explanation is stated, in all probability simply represents an almost instinctive reaction, driven by a general anti-naturalist background position.) Heidegger has the ambition to be able to philosophically fix “the a priori of the thematic subject of biology,” which consists of the structure of “*having* [the surrounding] ‘world’” (ibid, 57–58). However, the structure itself can only be philosophically explicated, “if it is previously conceived as a structure of *Dasein*.” The latter should manifest itself exactly in that “having,” according to its possibility, is founded in the “existential organization of being-in [des In-Seins].” For in such mode the “substantially existent,” that is, *Dasein* (i.e., man) can “explicitly discover the environmentally encountering being, know about it, dispose of it, *have* a ‘world’” (ibid.).

Heidegger believes that “even biology as a positive science can never find and determine that structure.” In contrast, he thinks that it necessarily “assumes it and constantly utilizes it”—this is precisely that, of which the “a priori” of her research object consists of. But what does Heidegger actually prove with such a conspicuous philosophical inference? Little, in fact, to cover his hardly sustainable pretensions of a far-reaching submission of biology to the authority of existential philosophical analysis. Namely, Heidegger tries to elevate relatively simple statements, concerning the relation of man to his natural environment as that relationship occurs in the everyday experience of ordinary people, to the pedestal of a priori assumptions in the subject of research in biology as a developed empirical (“positive”) science. Biology purportedly cannot break through to such assumptions by itself, but they must be provided to it from the outside, namely from the *Dasein* analytics. The latter, in turn, remains framed by a special kind of anthropocentrism

in the form of the thesis that man has the world and disposes of it, which is not considered valid for any other living being. However, it may be an unacceptable assessment that biology supposedly must assume a thus one-sided starting point, in order to be able at all to build its theories and explanations. One such—not particularly informative—assumption is not the necessary theoretical prerequisite for the building of biological theories, which can easily be carried out, without operating with it. Because, from the point of view of the biological science, it is of the same relevance that a person “has” an environment as that the environment “has” a person (in other, but no less relevant and important modes). And, analogously, that (natural) being is in man, as much as man is (existentially) in being. Starting from a trustworthy natural scientific perspective, it is difficult to assign a kind of privileged (and even determining biological a priori knowledge) status to the first relation in comparison with the second relation. Finally, Heidegger’s subsequent thesis that life “a peculiar kind of being, but essentially accessible only in *Dasein*” (ibid.) thus points to a very anachronistic, unrealistic, and inappropriate view of the abilities and capacities of animals when compared to humans in the wake of scientific findings in biology and sociobiology. Yet, why should life (not only the individual, but also the social) in completely relevant forms not be available to, say, higher primates? The findings of contemporary studies of animal behavior provide sufficient corroboration in this sense.

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It can be said that here, too, we encounter a kind of anthropocentrism—admittedly, not directly on the level of a general worldview level, but primarily within the framework of the theory of living beings, inhabiting our planet, and their inherent capacities, that is to say, within the thematic subject of research in biology as a science. But such a reduced form of anthropocentrism, which does not immediately appertain to the general cosmological worldview structure, is likewise not much less harmless.² Equally, in some of his later writings, Heidegger steadfastly adhered to the thesis about the privileged

2 As is known, in the later phase of his intellectual evolution, Heidegger tried to move away from anthropocentrism, in order to get out of its shadow, which was present, for example, in the conception that the total understanding of Being should be explained through the concern (*Sorge*) of *Dasein*. There is a difference of opinion among the interpreters of his work, whether the attempt was carried out consistently to the end.

position of man; namely, that he is the “place of the truth of Being [Ortschaft der Wahrheit des Seins],” to which the well-known metaphor about man as “shepherd of Being [Hirt des Seins]” can be added.

As problematic can also be viewed the emphasis that biology (as well as anthropology, psychology, etc.) “lacks an unequivocal, ontologically sufficiently explicated answer” to the question about the kind of being that man is, and that “the structure of those sciences today is entirely doubtful.” Such theses can be interpreted as being extremely pretentious; moreover, they seem dubious on their own, since they lack sufficient argumentative support.³ For it is true that biology (and not much less other sciences, which deal with man) certainly has its own well-founded answer to the question of what kind of being man is (for instance, already within the framework of Darwin’s classic idea of man as “social animal”). And biology can offer this answer to anyone who recognizes the approach, cognitive goals, and methodology of a developed empirical science, such as it is; certainly, within the framework of the kind of ontology that is precisely purposeful and sufficient for the research program of biology. In contrast, the existential ontology that Heidegger has in mind is in fact theoretically not very relevant for the construction of biological theories. Finally, in order to question the structure of any science, it must first be comprehended. However, within the relevant reasonings in this work, the understanding of biology as an empirical and nomological science is not recognizable at all.

Heidegger’s insistence that biology as a science of life is “grounded in the ontology of *Dasein*” is exaggerated and unsustainable, although, admittedly,

3 Heidegger was simply poorly informed about the state of contemporary natural sciences, as well as, especially, about the methodology of science and modern logic. However, instead of the advisable restraint in such cases, he promulgated very categorical judgments and evaluations concerning these disciplines of scientific research. He himself was solidly familiar with classical philology, history and theory of culture, and, to some extent, theology, that is to say, with the scientific disciplines primarily from the domain of the so-called “sciences of the spirit” (*Geisteswissenschaften*). In such a state of affairs, his underrating evaluations, according to which sciences “do not think,” can be somewhat understandable, as can be comprehensible also his objections to philosophers’ “running after the sciences,” which he considered allegedly ridiculous and miserable (cf. Heidegger 2014, 71).

formulated with a small enigmatic, unexplained admonition that this grounding is not complete and exclusive. At the same time, he hardly explains what kind of “grounding” it would actually be, which would be non-exclusive and only partial. It seems that this would be an exotic type of combined founding, which raises the question of whether Heidegger himself was at all completely clear with regard to what kind of thesis he actually advocated here. It seems that it implies the possibility of a combined foundation of a particular science, while it remains unexplained and enigmatic with what else its insinuated additional grounding would be realized. If we were dealing with such a heterogeneous factor concerning the existential ontology of *Dasein*, like the empirical data of natural sciences and the picture of the world formed upon its findings, that would open up serious methodological issues of mutual compatibility and parallel functioning of two thus diverse foundations. As Heidegger’s reasonings do not offer any reflections on the matter, not even in indication, let us not dwell further on such a possibility.

Simultaneously, the point of view is put forward by Heidegger that “positive research” of biology, as well as of other life sciences, supposedly “does not see these foundations,” while they form their basis. Existentialist ontology of human existence as exemplified by his *Daseinsanalytik* is, however, of relatively limited scope and relevance for the explanatory questions that biological scientific theories pose and attempt to solve—if it can be considered relevant at all, concerning the cognitive approach and research program of biology. Therefore, its own foundations can hardly be placed on the same level and identified at the same time as the foundations of biological research itself, even within the framework of Heidegger’s methodologically mysterious thesis of non-exclusive and incomplete grounding. Moreover, with the conceptually vague findings of such existential ontology, poorly equipped with informative content, these theories have little to begin with. Their heuristic significance is actually negligible within the standardized biology research programs.

Therefore, it could be said that the empirical consequences of the fundamental insight of *Dasein* ontology, that, namely, man has a world, are so scarce they can hardly contribute anything more significant in comparison with the level of research and explanation of relevant aspects of reality already reached in biology. Returning biology to insights, which Heidegger refers to,

would thus practically mean a cognitive regression with regard to the achieved level of research—and not the invoked reappraisal of the true (and a priori binding) foundations of biological scientific knowledge as such. Karl Löwith, the thinker's former student, rightly stated that nature is missing in Heidegger's philosophy, namely nature "around us and within ourselves."⁴

166 Hans Albert, building on Julius Kraft's criticism of "the apriorization of the empirical" in the phenomenological school, claims that the a priori character of the findings of the analysis of *Dasein* is extremely problematic; namely, it results in „an apriorization of everyday thinking," which "actually only serves to isolate" appropriate assumptions about psychological, linguistic, biological, etc., research. Such assumptions are treated as the acknowledged essence of the given phenomena before the research itself and are not subject to corrections. In this way, through the theoretical and empirical results of such research, the findings of the analysis of *Dasein* cannot be questioned at all. Albert, therefore, notes that Heidegger's approach tends to obtain an a priori validity to certain statements so that they are no longer exposed to any competition from theoretical sciences. Besides that, Albert also believes that the very a priori nature of the given assumptions, as indicated by Heidegger, cannot be convincingly and plausibly demonstrated. On the contrary, the subject matter concerns "reformulations of known factual situations of everyday living and experiencing," albeit rendered in "a very unusual jargon," i.e., with the use of "an archaic way of speaking." (This had been, as I would like to admonish, critically pointed out already long ago, back in the 1950s, by Ernst Topitsch.)

However, in contrast to Albert's criticism, I would like to note that the transcendental procedure of a certain pre-structuring of scientific knowledge through the so-called a priori of the lifeworld as a pre-theoretical a priori is nevertheless a philosophically legitimate enterprise. Simultaneously, looking at things from the perspective of the lifeworld, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, from the perspective of constructed theoretical sciences are in fact two different, despite certain potential points of contact mutually irreducible

4 I am indebted to Hans Albert for the reference to this remark by Löwith, which he formulated in the essay "Zu Heideggers Seinsfrage: Die Natur des Menschen und die Welt der Natur." For Löwith's further critical reflections with regard to Heidegger's history of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*) cf. Löwith 1953.

spheres of cognition. However, specific limited correlations can be determined between them. The explication of such correlations can sometimes also bring about interesting findings. Another issue, however, is the somewhat peculiar performance of the transcendental procedure by Heidegger himself. First, it shows a misconception with regard to the emphasized relationship between the one and the other, insofar as it tries to reduce the foundations of scientific theories to certain lifeworld insights. Consequently, such reasoning further involves a certain epistemic dogmatism, which does not recognize the methodological background and risks of the procedure itself, as Albert also clearly and rightly points out. At the same time, it positions the statements made within the framework of the theoretically extremely limited horizon of average human everyday life as direct essential insights into the subject area of scientific research, which then supposedly can create commitments for all kinds of scientific explanations of reality. Such a transcendentalist procedure today has the status of a particular philosophical attempt to interpret the sciences and is generally only sustainable with the principled openness of lifeworld assumptions to the relevant findings of the developed sciences, such as biology. However, it must assent to corrigibility, that is, accept its susceptibility to corrections. Furthermore, its ultimate reach with respect to directing the research practice of the sciences must be seen as significantly more modest than Heidegger's ambitions contentions.

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In my last book (cf. Jakovljević 2021, 7 ff.), I already emphasized the dubiousness of an a priori alignment of the opinion of everyday life with scientifically based knowledge, and the risks it entails. In particular, it opens the question whether representations and assumptions that aim at the orientation of man's way of life in everyday practice, and his immediate life goals, without further ado simultaneously claim such an epistemic authority that they can also be valid for us as unique a priori foundations of both our everyday knowledge as well as of scientific knowledge. That this leveling can lead to serious fallacies and delusions becomes clear, for example, when we compare opinions about nature from everyday life with the knowledge that developed natural science theories have reached about it. And precisely here the limits and risks of otherwise philosophically attractive attempts to ground scientific knowledge via the "a priori of the lifeworld" can be shown.

Contrary to the appreciation of such indispensable methodological considerations and questions, Heidegger, however, without any hesitation, enthusiastically proclaims—explicitly referring to his teacher, E. Husserl—, that “apriorism” is simply “the method of every scientific philosophy, which comprehends itself” (Heidegger 1972, 50, footnote). The latter, in this regard, most likely follows the classical rationalist-aprioristic tradition in the interpretation of scientific knowledge, especially as it had culminated in Kant and his programmatic fundamentalist insistence that natural science, which deserves that name, “first assumes the metaphysics of nature” (Kant 1911, 371). In relation to such Kant’s strategy of the metaphysical foundation of scientific knowledge in the manner of an aprioristic rationalism, the shift was made only to the extent that “categories” were replaced by “existentials,” the metaphysics of nature by the analysis of *Dasein*, and the place of a priori forms of general causation, substance, etc., by the forms of “the a priori of the lifeworld [das lebensweltliche Apriori],” such as the notion of “the possession of the surrounding world” (by *Dasein*). However, the underlying strategy remained basically the same.

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The question, however, remains to what extent Heidegger, who was insufficiently familiar with scientific methodology, understood the needs of arguing for, as well as the relevant consequences of, apriorism. In my opinion, his scanty attempts at argumentation in support of the attempted apriorization of empirical sciences also remained unsatisfactory. For example, his emphasis on the circumstance that “positive research does not see its own foundations and considers them to be self-evident,” but that this by no means proves “they do not lie at its basis” (Heidegger 1972, 58). Here, Heidegger practically moves in a circle, assuming as proven that which must still be established as proof. For he must, first of all, convincingly prove that the given a priori “groundings” are indeed incorporated into the foundation of scientific knowledge itself as its universally obliging assumptions, before he can state that positive scientific research may not “see” them, i.e., that it overlooks their givenness.

The critique of Heidegger presented here also contains certain ambiguities, which were probably generated against the background of the thinker’s precarious movement within the field of the theory of science. Thus, he states that, with reference to the “absence of an unequivocal, ontologically

sufficiently grounded answer to the question about *the way of being* of the being, which we are ourselves, in anthropology, psychology, and biology, no judgment can be made about the positive work of those disciplines” (Heidegger 1972, 50). However, then there cannot be entirely clear what the point of his criticism is, i.e., what does he actually want to object to with regard to the given scientific disciplines, when he underlines the alleged crisis of their foundations. (It would seem that Heidegger had heard something about the so-called “dispute over the foundations”—the famous *Grundlagenstreit*—in the domain of mathematics and he rushed to impose a similar “crisis” onto other sciences, a crisis, from which his existential analytics should and could rescue them, offering an archaically formulated ontological foundation as a basis for knowledge.) If, on the other hand, he wants to primarily say, in a very indirect, non-explicit, convoluted manner, that the scientific disciplines mentioned may be doing their job well, but their results do not correspond to the needs of his existential analytics, then this could be considered to be a somewhat pretentious stance. Neither anthropology, psychology, biology, nor any other positive, methodically and cognitively developed science is required to fit into any philosophical conception, to adapt and adjust to the particular assumptions and theorems of a specific philosopher.

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Empirical sciences, such as biology, cannot be expected to be dedicated to the specific work of philosophical anthropology, despite the significant occasional cross-contact points. Likewise, the meaning of Heidegger’s thesis that the “missing ontological grounding” cannot be replaced by “integrating anthropology and psychology into one general biology” is also not entirely clear (Heidegger 1972, 49). Firstly, such a thesis is hardly something more than a postulate, based on a previously adopted and poorly explained assumption that the required ontological grounding can only be provided by the existential ontology of *Dasein*. Additionally, the implicit hierarchy of scientific disciplines (in terms of the degree of their inherent generality), from which Heidegger starts, is quite unusual here. Perhaps it would be, considering the recognized character of the given disciplines, more plausible to ponder the possibility of biology and psychology being incorporated into general anthropology (if one is ready to speculate about the possibility of “embedding” some disciplines into others and to start from the thematization of the human phenomenon).

For the possibility of taking Heidegger's attempt as a viable option, it would, on the contrary, be necessary for him to provide the expected argumentation. This would entail delving into the body of knowledge of modern biology, drawing comparisons with the corresponding findings of his analysis of *Dasein*, and then concretely demonstrating what would actually be obtained by the systematic incorporation of the existentials into, for example, the Darwinian paradigm of the theory of evolution. In other words, it would be necessary to show to what possible cognitive shifts, and to what kind of progress of the biological knowledge this would lead. With the somewhat characteristic philosophical-aprioristic peremptoriness, Heidegger claims to be able to make far-reaching judgments about biology from the point of view of his existential ontology, without citing and analyzing any current biological theories, without considering any particular biological theses, etc.

170 Instead, Heidegger is predominantly concerned with the aprioristic claims of his ontology, on which modern biology should be founded, in order to gain the appropriate ontological grounding it now supposedly lacks—and because of this lack it can be considered to be in a state of an alleged crisis. It is not necessary to emphasize the unrealistic nature of such philosophical pretensions. In how deep of a fundamental crisis biology was, was best demonstrated by its subsequent development during the 20th century, in the course of which it gained the reputation of one of the most developed and successful scientific disciplines.

The endeavored discussion can therefore be concluded with the claim Heidegger's youthful and eager attempt to teach biology may be a failure. It also represents one of the weakest theoretical segments of his highly influential work *Being and Time*. This failure is all the more disappointing, as it is precisely modern biology that has a significant role in the building of the general worldview. Insofar as philosophy likewise aspires to assume such a role, a more profound observation of their mutual relationship would be all the more welcome and expected. However, (early) Heidegger's thoughts on biology can be viewed as an unsuccessful interpretive attempt based on dogmatic apriorism and anti-naturalism, lacking insight into the features of the functioning of scientific knowledge of reality and the structure of scientific theories.

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