



Heidegger and panpsychism

Description

Martin Heidegger's teacher Edmund Husserl foregrounded consciousness, though Heidegger adopted a different vocabulary and different concepts. Nor does the term "panpsychism" or anything like it crop up in Heidegger's writing, though no doubt it can be inferred. In his latest book *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* David Chalmers references Heidegger.

The 20th-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger observed that in the most basic case of using a tool such as a hammer, it is "ready-to-hand" so that we use it while hardly thinking about it. In this case the tool becomes an extension of our body. In the same way, the more a tool such as a smartphone is seamlessly ready-to-hand, the better it extends our minds (298).

I decided to use the [OpenAI](#) text completion feature to help me reflect on the relationship between Heidegger's thinking and panpsychism. I primed the automated content generator with the paragraph labelled "Me:" below and the algorithm completed the text in response to a keyboard prompt. The process continued over subsequent paragraphs until I attempted to steer the content by inserting the comment about Heidegger and the carpenter's hammer.

OpenAI asserts no copyright over what the platform produces, but I feel bound to deliver the OpenAI contribution as a quote. Running this short essay through the plagiarism software Turnitin showed no significant verbatim copying from sources. I insert some comments in red.

There's a job of work required to check quotes and sources let alone the way concepts are juxtaposed. The AI process involved building on and assembling patterns evident in the vast repository of source texts on which the neural network was trained. At worse, this is writing for academic effect, uttering the right phrases to give the impression of scholarship to someone who doesn't know the field or who reads it in haste. At best the AI generated text serves as a stimulus for a scholar already versed in the subject.

The dialogue

Me: Heidegger did not address consciousness as a philosophical problem, but wrote about being-in-the-world as a primordial condition of unselfconscious engagement. His philosophy resonates with panpsychism in several respects.

Heidegger described the world as a "clearing" (Lichtung) in which beings manifest themselves. [That requires a bit of explanation. So I would leave it out.] He wrote that "world is not something objective that stands over against subjects. Rather, subjects themselves are world-forming." [I don't think that's a direct quote, but I typed a query at the end of this transcript and the platform says it's from "The origin of the work of art."] This is a notion of world as a context or field of experience that is not separable from subjects. [That's pretty good and what I was hoping to read, that Heidegger's philosophy seeks to dispense with, or at least problematise, the distinction between subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity. From what I have read about panpsychism, it mostly assumes an object world "out there" that happens to be imbued with mind/consciousness.]

Heidegger also wrote that "Dasein is an entity which does not just occur amongst other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it." This is a notion of self-awareness as an essential feature of experience, which is also a key feature of panpsychism. [That's interesting. Whether or not the quote is accurate, the sentiment in quotes seems Heideggerian. I don't think though that Heidegger's place-holder term (Dasein) for something or someone that has issues about its own Being is the same as a being that is self aware.]

Heidegger's philosophy has been criticized for its apparent solipsism, but this is a misunderstanding. [I would leave that out as it seems to belong to a different argument.] Heidegger is clear that Dasein is not a self-enclosed subject, but is always already engaged with the world. As he puts it, "Dasein is not the subject (subjectum) of the mental act, which is conscious of something, but is the being for whom, in its Being, Being is an issue." In other words, subjects are not isolated individuals, but beings who are always already in relation to other beings and to the world. [That seems a reasonable interpretation from what I understand of Heidegger.]

Panpsychism is sometimes criticized for its apparent solipsism, but this is also a misunderstanding. [The common charge that these philosophies are solipsistic is interesting, but not the most relevant point of the comparison.] Panpsychism does not entail that each individual is the only real thing in the universe. [That seems to be a distraction from the idea of comparing the two philosophies. In any case, it's not clear here whether "individual" here refers to a person or thing.] Rather, it holds that consciousness is a fundamental feature of reality, and that all beings are conscious in some way. [Panpsychism holds with that view, but does Heidegger?]

Me: Consider Heidegger's example of the carpenter in the workshop wielding a hammer.

The hammer is not a self-enclosed object, but is always already in relation to the carpenter and to the world. [One of the points about Heidegger's reference to the hammer is that it is outside of the carpenter's conscious awareness as long as it is in habitual use, compared with when there's a breakdown - too heavy, misses its target, etc.] The same is true of consciousness. It is not a self-enclosed property, but is always already in relation to other beings and to the world. [That sounds interesting, but I have yet to search Heidegger's *Being and Time* for explicit references to consciousness.]

In conclusion, Heidegger's philosophy resonates with panpsychism in several respects, including the idea of world as a field of experience, self-awareness as an essential feature of experience, and the relationality of subjects. [That's good enough, but I would have to examine the terminology of self-awareness.]

At the end of the same session I posed a question.

Me: Can you tell me where Heidegger says world is not something objective that stands over against subjects. Rather, subjects themselves are world-forming?

Heidegger says this in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art": "The world does not stand over against us as something objective. It is not the case that we first encounter an objective world and then, as subjective beings, set about interpreting that world. Rather, it is in our interpretation of the world that the world first comes into being for us. This is what Heidegger means [So perhaps this is a quote from a review or a translator's introduction] when he says that the world is not something objective that stands over against subjects. Rather, subjects themselves are world-forming. The world is not something that we passively encounter; rather, it is something that we actively constitute through our interpretation and our engagement with it."

Me: Page number?

The page number is 83.

The process is a little like editing someone's writing, e.g. a PhD student's work - if one has the time.

Bibliography

- Bernstein, Richard J. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
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- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson. London: SCM Press, 1962.
- Holland, Nancy J. *Heidegger and the Problem of Consciousness*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018.

Note

- Featured image is a disused water storage tank in the bushland outside Castlemaine, Victoria (4 April 2022) — perhaps a metaphor for Heidegger's concept of the fraught relationship between earth and world.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

1. consciousness
2. Heidegger
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