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The Very Being of a Conceptual Scheme

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Jeff Kochan's book on what the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) can learn from Heideggerian existential philosophy is fascinating and frustrating in equal measure, and for the same reason. My own review consists of two parts. First, I will describe the fascinating frustration of Kochan's project, then explore some of the limitations that a straightforward adaptation of Heidegger's ideas to the conceptual plane of SSK encounters.

Kochan's work fascinates because he puts two complex sub-disciplines of the humanities – Heidegger studies and SSK – in a constructive dialogue. Kochan isolates seemingly intractable conceptual problems at the heart of SSK's foundational texts, then carefully analyzes concepts and epistemic frameworks from the writings of Martin Heidegger to find solutions to those problems. This open-minded approach to problem solving remains sadly rare in academic culture. Whether or not you think Kochan's analyses and solutions are accurate or best, I think we can all agree that such a trans-disciplinary philosophical project is worthwhile and valuable.

Yet Kochan's work also frustrates because of how vulnerable this makes him to academic attacks. This is ultimately a problem of style on Kochan's part. He is explicit in making the ideas of Martin Heidegger himself central to his critical analysis of SSK; this leaves him vulnerable to criticisms like those of my colleague Raphael Sassower earlier in SERRC's symposium. Essentially, the criticism amounted to "Why bother?"

Presuming the Boundarylessness of Disciplines

Any attempt to apply the concepts and discoveries of one tradition to the problems of another faces a problem that is difficult for any writer to overcome. What one tradition takes to be a reasonable assumption, another tradition may take to be a foundational matter of inquiry.

In Kochan's case, he takes the founders of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge to have saddled their tradition with a dangerous omission. They take for granted that the material world of everyday life does exist as we experience it, and that therefore the relationship of the subject to the world need not be a matter of inquiry.

Yet the foundational thinkers of SSK, David Bloor and Harry Collins, did not consider such an ontological inquiry worth pursuing. It would have kept them from exploring the questions, subject matters, and concepts that were their priorities.

Kochan's book is written under the premise that SSK's indifference to seeking a guarantee for the material reality of the world is a problematic omission. But a premise itself can be called into question, a call that on its own would remove its status as a premise. Premises are, after all, the unquestioned beginnings of any inquiry; they are the conditions of an inquiry's validity.

To question a premise is likewise to question the validity of any inquiry flowing from that premise. So when I question whether the inquiries constituting the core of SSK as a discipline of social and epistemological theory require demonstrating the existence of reality somehow external to the subjective, I have made a decision about what the inquiries of SSK are for.

Such a decision is fundamentally practical. In creating what we now consider the research discipline of SSK, Bloor, Collins, and their fellow travellers developed goals and processes of thinking for their fundamental inquiries. They set the boundaries of what questions and concepts mattered to the pursuit of those goals and processes. And while they may not have explicitly said so, setting those conceptual boundaries simultaneously implies that what does not matter to those goals and processes is irrelevant to the discipline itself.

So if you pursue those other questions, you may be doing something interesting and valuable. But there is no guarantee that your premises, concepts, inquiries, and discoveries will be directly relevant to someone else's discipline. To return this general point to the more direct focus of my book review, there is no guarantee that the premises, concepts, inquiries, and discoveries of a thinker working in one of the Heideggerian sub-disciplines will be directly relevant to someone working in SSK.

The boundaries of all research disciplines work this way. Over my decade of work as a professional-level philosopher, this has typically been the most controversial and provocative point I make in any discussion that puts disciplines and traditions into dialogue. It disrupts a premise that thinkers across many disciplines of philosophy and those related to them: that we are all searching for the one truth.

Limits For Universality

Many thinkers share the premise that the ultimate aim of philosophical work is the discovery and creation of universal truth. Ironically, I do not consider that Heidegger himself shares such a premise. I hope that Kochan will be okay with how I repurpose some of Heidegger's own concepts to argue that his own attempt to blend Heideggerian and SSK concepts and inquiries becomes something of a philosophical dead end.

Start with these two of Heidegger's concepts: enframing, and poiesis. Both of these arise in Heidegger's inquiries on the nature of science and technology, but we should not restrict their relevance to the disciplines of philosophy who alone focus on science and technology.

Remember that Heidegger understands the institutions and cultures of science, as well as attitudes around the use of technology, to be expressions of a much broader framework of thinking. That framework includes all ways in which human action and thinking engages with existence, contributes to the ongoing constitution of being.

Heidegger's purpose for philosophical thinking is understanding the continuing process of movement and coming to be still, or development and decay (*[Of Generation and Corruption?](#)*).

What framework or schema we develop for this most profound task of understanding guides how our own thoughts and actions influence how and what the universe becomes.

Enframing, therefore, is such a conceptual framework of understanding existence, which guides us in our action and thinking to contribute to shaping existence. The framework that Heidegger calls enframing, is a way of thinking that understands all of existence as a potential resource for our own use. You do not understand how to experience or make sense of what exists and what you encounter as having their own way of existence from which you can learn. Understanding existence in a framework of enframing, you wrench and distort all that you encounter to your own purposes.

Thought's Radical Openness

Poiesis is Heidegger's alternative to the destructive, self-centred nature of conceptual schema of enframing. A conceptual framework built according to the principles of poiesis approaches all encounters as opportunities for the creative development of thought.

Whenever you encounter a way of thinking or living different from your own, you investigate and explore it, seeking to understand that mode of existence on its own terms. You examine its powers, capacities, how it forms relationships through encounters of its own, and the dynamics of how those relationships change itself and others.

That Heidegger considers conceptual frameworks of poiesis the alternative to the depressingly destructive schema of enframing, reveals how the philosophy which Kochan advocates as a productive partner for SSK, actually argues against Kochan's own most fundamental premises. This is because poiesis fundamentally denies the universality of any one framework of thinking, action, and existence.

The conception of philosophy as seeking a single universal truth would explicitly oppose how you would engage different research disciplines as poiesis. Like Heidegger's enframing, yoking all inquiries and ways of thinking into a single trajectory wrenches all those modes of thinking out of their own character of becoming and adapts them to the goal of another.

More dangerous even than this, bending all thinking to the pursuit of a single goal which you yourself already holds presumes that your and only your framework of thinking is the proper trajectory. In presuming that SSK is obligated to include an account of how we know our experiences of social and scientific worlds are genuine interactions with a shared materiality, Kochan guides his own philosophical mission in Science as Social Existence using a conceptual framework of enframing.

For Heidegger, This Openness Nonetheless Remains Closed

Conceptual frameworks that are fundamentally of poiesis appear to be a profound antidote to humanity's current crisis of technology, science, and ecology. People who think this way would consider all differences they encounter as learning opportunities, and come to respect

the origins of those encounters as opportunities to make your own thinking more versatile and open.

Heidegger, however, takes this line of thinking in a regressive direction. As Heidegger understands poiesis, the best way to think in accordance with existence itself is to accept, explore, and adapt your thinking to all the varieties of existence that you encounter. You deny that any single way of existence or understanding is fundamentally universal, and instead create many schemes of understanding what exists to suit the singular character of each encounter.

This approach to the encounter with the different and the alien is still being developed today at the forefront of politically progressive activist philosophers. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, for example, is a philosopher doing the best ongoing work with such an attitude, in my own knowledge. However, I am not sure if Kochan, Heidegger scholars, or contemporary SSK researchers would be aware of her work, as she exists outside both their disciplines.

She is characterized academically as working in Indigenous Studies, a label that, despite the good intentions of its inclusion in the contemporary Canadian university system, also tends to marginalize such work for more mainstream professors. So a genuine potential for one set of disciplines to learn from another is stalled by the presumption of too much difference from so-called 'real' philosophy. Betasamosake Simpson would often be dismissed in more conservative disciplines as being 'merely' post-colonial, or 'merely' ethnic studies.

Instead of following the openness of a conceptual framework that supposedly encourages a more open mind, Heidegger conceives of poiesis as a passive and meditative way of existence. This is because he understands a person's encounters in existence as essentially an event that happens to the person, in which that person is acted upon, instead of engaging in mutual action. Openness to the singular logics and processes unique to an encountered other, for Heidegger, means a willingness to accept as necessary the happenstance of where we contingently fall into existence.

What Do We Do With Our Disciplines?

More profound problems lurk in the nature of our existence's happenstance, which guides our best framework for understanding existence, poiesis. The Heideggerian concept of poiesis guides arguments of his infamous *Black Notebooks*. This was the political expression of Heidegger's approach to philosophy as passively adapting your thinking and existence to the circumstances of your contingent existence as a person.

The existence of the migrant, no matter whether colonizer or refugee, is an act of violence against existence, because moving imposes your own logic and desires on alien existence. You disrupt your tradition out of a demand for something different. It disconnects you from the long inheritance of a relationship with the more durable existence of your land and your culture.

These stable beings constitute the place where you contingently fall. To fall contingently into existence is birth, so the land and culture of your birth constitute the ‘There’ in the complete assemblage of a person’s ‘Being.’ So the *Black Notebooks* continue Heidegger’s explication of his concept of Dasein, an inquiry central to all his work. They are no exception.

The language that expresses these concepts in the *Black Notebooks* is horrifying in its contempt for cultures whose global mobility or dispersion breaks them from continuity with a single territory of land at a pace faster than many millennia. It confounds my own everyday political orientations. In its most straightforward terms, it is a pro-Indigenous and anti-colonial, but also anti-Semitic in equal intensity.

One way to interpret Kochan’s program in *Science as Social Existence* is as an advocate to merge the disciplines of SSK and Heidegger Studies, blending their central premises and conceptual frameworks to create a hybrid discipline. But if we think disciplinarily, we may be forced to account for the many other problems in The example of how the *Black Notebooks* express the political implications of Heidegger’s concept of enframing, poiesis, and Dasein is only the most recent of many equally massive issues.

No Disciplines, Instead Concepts

Jeff Kochan’s *Science and Social Existence* is subtitled *Heidegger and the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge*. In both this title and throughout the book, he attempts a very valuable experiment to make a philosophical hybrid of two sets of concepts, inquiries, and methods of thinking. On one hand, we have the social epistemological frameworks and principles in the discipline, Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. And on one hand, we have the conceptions of grounded subjectivity found in the works of Martin Heidegger, and elaborated in the discipline based on interpreting those works.

However, there are two problems with this approach. The first problem is that he misunderstands the reason for his inquiry: sociologists of scientific knowledge need a conceptual account of how we know that the external world exists to be studied.

The way Kochan understands how to solve the external world is brilliantly insightful in how philosophically challenging and creative it is: develop for SSK a concept of subjectivity that pays no mind to any premises of an ontological separation of subject and world at all. He finds such a concept in the works of Martin Heidegger, and explores its epistemological aspects as enframing and poiesis.

Laying our justification problem aside, this other problem helps explain what made it arise in the first place. Kochan’s focus is on the disciplines of SSK and Heidegger interpretation. Yet his inquiry is conceptual, more purely philosophical: adapting a concept of subjectivity that unifies subject and world without needing to make a problem of their separation, to the practice of sociology focussing on the production of scientific knowledge.

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His focus is disciplinary rather than conceptual, talking about what Heidegger and his interpreters have said about Heidegger's own concepts, and the sociologists whose research explicitly continues the general program of the originators of the SSK approach to social science. Such a disciplinary focus unfortunately implies that the related problems of those thinkers themselves complicate our use in thinking of the concepts themselves.

So using in sociological practice any concept that does what Kochan wants Heidegger's enframing, poiesis, and Dasein to do, ends up dragging along the problematic and dangerous elements and interpretations in Heidegger's entire corpus and tradition.

Because he was thinking of the discipline of SSK instead of the techniques and concepts alone, he presumes that the actual practitioners of SSK working in university departments need an alternative conception of subjectivity beyond modernist dualism. They themselves do not need such a concept because they are too busy asking different questions.

Fortunately, practice, concepts, and discipline are only contingently linked. Instead of using concepts from different disciplines to improve an established practice, you can develop new concepts to guide the practice of a new discipline.

The fundamental problem with Kochan's book is that he has misinterpreted its scope, and aimed without the ambition that his thinking actually already requires. He thought he was writing a book about how to bring two seemingly unrelated traditions together, to solve an important problem in one.

Yet Kochan was actually writing a book that had the potential to start an entirely different tradition of sociological theory and practice. Instead of writing about Martin Heidegger and David Bloor, he could have written something with the potential to leave him mentioned in the same breath as such epochal thinkers. He could have become epochal himself.

How about next time, Jeff?

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