

Heidegger and the Nature of Social Learning

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The image of the “active” thinker maintains a central role in the allure of social learning pedagogy. The social learner co-constructs knowledge with others, and, in doing so, brings active cognition to the learning process. At the heart of this process is a particular type of discourse, one devoted not to the communication of already-established knowledge, but to the co-creation of knowledge. As illustrated by James V. Wertsch and Ana Luisa Bustamente Smolka, this model of discourse is particularly compelling when contrasted with the type of discourse prevalent in traditional teacher-centric pedagogy, discourse that revolves around teacher evaluation of student responses to teacher-initiated questions.¹ As numerous critics, including John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, and Paulo Freire have noted, students participating in teacher-centered discourse typically assume the role of passive thinker or even nonthinker, a receptacle to be “filled” with already-known information.² In light of this contrast, social learning shines as an opportunity for students to think for themselves, to be active, agentic learners.

Contrary to this view of social learning, there exists an interpretation of the early work of Martin Heidegger that offers ontological support for claims that social learning fosters the development of conformist thinking. According to this interpretation, the inherently social nature of human existence — in particular, its reliance on communicative discourse — fosters adoption of a shared, culturally developed interpretive framework that dictates the individual’s understanding, and even perception, of phenomenal experience.³ As such, the diversity of opinion and statement characteristic of social learning environments masks the reinforcement of an intersubjective uniformity of criteria by which individuals judge knowledge and interpret experience. Rather than encourage explicit conformity of statement or action — what we might term “behavioral conformity” — social learning fosters a more nuanced, but perhaps more insidious, “criterial conformity,” one that operates transparently on our most fundamental aspects of experience. The antidote to such conformity, according to this interpretation, is a retreat into the self, a concern with seeking private experience capable of enabling the personal interpretative capacity of the individual to flourish.

This view of Heideggerian ontology has engendered divergent attitudes toward social interaction. On the one hand, there are those who accept the call to retreat. Thus, Paul Downes, for example, advocates that Vygotskian social learning environments be supplemented with opportunities for solitary down time that would foster “an enhanced capacity for communication with self and other.”⁴ The other approach, long favored by Marxist critical theorists, and perhaps best exemplified by Herbert Marcuse’s “concrete philosophy,”⁵ rejects the possibility of personal interpretive emancipation in favor of radical social praxis. As Douglas Kellner, Clayton Pierce, and Tyson Lewis elaborate the argument, “since the individual is always a social

individual and since one's possibilities for thought and action are prescribed by the given social-historical situation, the individual project of liberation necessarily presupposes a project of social revolution."⁶ Such an approach is tantamount to rejection of the Heideggerian project on two counts — first, in its rejection of the possibility of truly individual cognition, and second, in dismissing the need for individuation in the process of emancipation. Despite the antithetical positions of Downes and Marcuse, both base their conclusions on the comprehensively dictatorial nature of social discourse, explicitly acknowledging their debt to early Heideggerian ontology. Indeed, I would suggest that Downes's use of Heidegger is merely a more recent application of this long-standing interpretation, one that focuses specifically on its implications for social learning.

While there is some textual support for this interpretation, I find it wanting on several counts. Indeed, I believe that the use of Heideggerian ontology to support claims of social learning conformity is based on a misguided interpretation that labels *all* forms of social discourse criterially conformist. As such, I would like to address the shortcomings of this interpretation through the specific argument offered by Downes, with the assumption that my analysis applies to other positions as well. I propose that, contrary to the conformist interpretation, Heidegger's elaboration of Dasein as "care" both allows for the possibility of an individual's contribution to socially derived interpretive criteria and enumerates the conditions under which social discourse encourages either conformist or nonconformist interpretative capabilities. Thus, rather than utilize Heideggerian ontology to damn social learning to conformist outcomes, we might view it as outlining the parameters of a social learning pedagogy supportive of truly individual thinking.

HEIDEGGERIAN SUPPORT FOR CONFORMITY IN SOCIAL LEARNING

Downes's argument begins with an assertion about the false nature of choice and agency inherent in social learning discourse. While participants in dialogue may express diverse belief claims and claims of experiential understanding, Downes argues that the criteria for interpretation and evaluation of such claims are intersubjectively developed and acknowledged. Thus, the domain of *legitimate* beliefs and interpretations is not subject to individual choice, but rather culturally prescribed. A similar situation exists regarding the criteria for assessment in the process of learning, where the group, not the individual, establishes the measure of progress. Downes states:

The danger of excessive reliance on social group processes for learning in education if a Vygotskian paradigm is applied with full force throughout the educational system is of cultural conformity, through a pressure toward consensus regarding criteria for evaluating knowledge, truth, and experience. Even if the social process and conversation allows for difference of views, the very conversation assumes a common domain of relevance, a common language and largely consensual criteria for evaluation of progress or lack of progress regarding a problem.⁷

Thus, according to Downes, social learning reinforces cultural practices and restrictions to the point where individual interpretive and evaluative choice — that is, choice regarding the criteria for legitimacy — is not possible.

According to Downes, one might look to Heidegger's concept of the inauthentic They-self developed in *Being and Time* for ontological support of the conformist nature of social discourse.⁸ A product of cultural dominance that characterizes

everyday human existence, the They-self is the type of existence that utilizes the interpretive criteria dictated by culture to make sense of phenomenal experience.⁹ It is the antithesis of what Heidegger calls authentic Dasein, the type of self that applies its own interpretive capacities to such phenomena. At its core, the Heideggerian self is continually presented the opportunity to adopt one of these two characters of self — either to interpret the world “in the way things have been publicly interpreted,” or to project its own understanding onto experience (*BT*, 221). On Downes’s interpretation, it is precisely this choice that defines the ontological foundation for choosing between conformist learning and learning that fosters individual thinking. For, as in social learning, Heidegger’s ontology assumes that the first-order choices of daily decision-making do not define conformist or nonconformist behavior. Rather, it is the deeper second-order decision to bring one’s own interpretative tools to phenomenal experience that defines truly agentic choice.

Using Downes’s language, we might say that the everyday Heideggerian self is by nature conformist, as it typically projects an inauthentic self. Heidegger describes this everyday tendency towards inauthenticity as “fallenness,”¹⁰ and attributes its presence to the existential state of being in a world with others. Of particular effect is the nature of daily discourse, which requires a publicly adopted worldview as a precondition for communicative understanding. As Heidegger argues, such discourse continually reinforces the value of public interpretation, seducing us to abandon the need for an understanding of experience that results from our individual interpretive framework. He states:

Idle talk and ambiguity [i.e., general characteristics of everyday discourse], having seen everything, having understood everything, develop the supposition that Dasein’s disclosedness, which is so available and so prevalent, can guarantee to Dasein that all the possibilities of its Being will be secure, genuine, and full. Through the self-certainty and decidedness of the “they,” it gets spread abroad increasingly that there is no need of authentic understanding or the state-of-mind that goes with it. (*BT*, 222)

Given that social learning fundamentally relies on discourse,¹¹ and discourse begets fallenness, it would seem that Heideggerian ontology damns social learning as a pedagogy that encourages fallenness. And fallenness, as a mode of Being determined by a culturally based interpretive framework, is tantamount to Downes’s notion of conformity.

FALLENNESS AND AVERAGE EVERYDAYNESS

We must be clear, though, that such a relation between social discourse and fallenness does not necessarily doom humanity to inauthenticity. While this *is* the conclusion of Marcuse in proposing revolutionary praxis, Downes accepts the possibility of authentic interpretation when he suggests that personal “down time” be incorporated into the educational curriculum as an antidote to the conformist effects of social learning. However, even this proposal reinforces the link between social discourse and fallenness, as it assumes that authenticity is possible only to the degree that one is able to distance oneself from social discourse. Indeed, both Downes and Marcuse claim a necessary connection between discourse and criterial conformity, where discourse requires a common interpretive framework to be possible at all. And they both utilize early Heidegger to support this claim.¹²

While there exists some textual support in *Being and Time* for postulating a necessary relation between discursive engagement and adoption of the They, I want to suggest that such an interpretation fails to sufficiently address Heidegger's elaboration of fallenness, particularly as it relates to the concept of average everydayness. When Heidegger speaks of everydayness, it is in reference to our behavior and experience as we attend to the world in our daily lives. Everydayness applies to the domain of our typical thoughts and actions — putting on our shoes, playing a game, participating in conversation. It is this everyday behavior that is characterized by “fallenness,” which Heidegger defines as a disposition or “essential tendency of [our] Being” (*BT*, 210) to engage the world using a culturally defined interpretive toolset. Fallenness, therefore, permeates the entirety of phenomenal experience, a characteristic that might lead us to commit to the comprehensively dictatorial character of the They. The question, though, is what it *means* for fallenness to be an essential tendency of Being. In what way does it permeate the entirety of phenomenal experience?

As mentioned earlier, fallenness is manifested in a type of discourse called “idle talk.” In idle talk, discussants falsely believe that they fully understand the objects about which they speak. Since the purpose of idle talk is self-expression in the context of being with others (*BT*, 212), discussants focus on what is said *about* the objects of discussion without ensuring that what is said actually derives from the objects themselves. To ensure that such expression is understood by others, individuals tend to accept the commonly understood, vague, ambiguous, or otherwise incomplete conceptions of these entities — what Heidegger deems “average intelligibility” (*BT*, 212). It is this average intelligibility that characterizes everyday phenomenal experience. While Heidegger is short on examples of idle talk, concepts such as justice, beauty, and even the self would seem to be paradigmatic examples of such objects, as their philosophically problematic aspects rarely prevent their use in everyday discourse. However, Heidegger suggests that the extent of deluded understanding extends well beyond the domain of abstract entities. As he states, “there are many things with which we first become acquainted in this way [i.e., through idle talk], and there is not a little which never gets beyond such average understanding” (*BT*, 213).

Yet as an “essential tendency of Being — one which belongs to everydayness” (*BT*, 210) fallenness should not be seen as comprehensively prescriptive of Self. Rather, as Heidegger states, it is a *tendency* — a *disposition* — to approach our everyday interactions with the world in a manner that encourages an interpretation of average intelligibility. Fallenness and everydayness may themselves be necessary aspects of the human condition. However, when conceived as a tendency, fallenness enables us to transcend the pervasiveness of average intelligibility: “This everyday way in which things have been interpreted is one into which Dasein has grown in the first instance, with never a possibility of extrication. In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed (*BT*, 213).

This possibility of “genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating” has profound consequences for discourse. For if idle talk is an aspect of fallenness, and fallenness is a tendency instead of a prescription, idle talk is itself a product of this

tendency. Thus, discourse is not inherently subject to average intelligibility. Rather, there exists the possibility of engaging in “non-idle talk,” talk that transcends the average intelligibility of a culturally defined interpretive framework to sufficiently address the true nature of the entities referenced in discourse. Heidegger claims as much when he states that “discourse, which belongs to the essential state of Dasein’s Being ... has the possibility of becoming idle talk” (*BT*, 213). Such possibility would seem to suggest other discursive opportunities. Similarly, Heidegger’s use of the word “idle” as a qualifier implies qualitatively different types of discourse. Certainly, the phrase “idle talk” is antithetical to the view that *all* talk is idle.

We find further support for Heidegger’s commitment to genuine talk in the introduction to *Being and Time*. Here Heidegger contrasts genuine talk with idle talk, where what is said in genuine talk publicly reveals to discussants the nature of the things discussed:

In discourse, so far as it is genuine, *what* is said is drawn *from* what the talk is about, so that discursive communication in what it says, makes manifest what it is talking about, and thus makes this accessible to the other party.... This mode of making manifest in the sense of letting something be seen by pointing it out, does not go with all kinds of “discourse.” (*BT*, 56)

Thus, in consisting of propositions whose semantic content derives from the things talked about, genuine talk discloses the nature of such things. In doing so, it naturally communicates that disclosure to the parties involved. Genuine talk therefore stands in direct contrast to idle talk, the semantic content of which is divorced from its target. As Heidegger notes, what is said in idle talk has either “lost its primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about, or else has never achieved such a relationship” (*BT*, 212). Absent this relationship, ontological disclosure through discourse is impossible, resulting in a mere “gossiping and passing the word along” (*BT*, 212). Such gossiping scarcely counts as *true* discourse, as Heidegger suggests by placing scare quotes around the word “discourse” in the quote above.

Indeed, Heidegger offers a characterization of hearing that illustrates the ontological possibility of bringing authentic interpretation to discourse, thereby providing a mechanism generative of non-idle talk. In hearing, sound is always-already heard as intelligible. What we hear is not first heard as noises, bits to be subsequently “assembled” into something understood. Rather, sounds are inherently perceived as meaningful. And such meaning is the product of interpretation that precedes hearing. Hearing, then — including the hearing of others — offers an opportunity to bring one’s own interpretive understanding to the table:

Hearing constitutes the primary and authentic way in which Dasein is open for its ownmost potentiality-for-Being — as in hearing the voice of the friend whom every Dasein carries with it. Dasein hears, because it understands. As a Being-in-the-world with Others, a Being which understands, Dasein is “in thrall” to Dasein-with and to itself. (*BT*, 206)

Here, we should interpret the word “understands” as “applies an interpretive framework.”¹³ Read this way, Dasein faces an existential choice when hearing. In being “in thrall” with others — that is, in having a social nature — individuals exhibit a tendency to apply cultural interpretation to that which will be heard. Yet in being “in thrall” to oneself, individuals can choose to apply their personal interpretive

framework. In doing so, what one hears in discourse is not things talked about in their average intelligibility — that is, in a manner divorced from their actual phenomenal manifestation. Rather, one hears propositions the semantic content of which simultaneously discloses the nature of those things as presented in experience.

Given this possibility, the question exists whether Heidegger elaborates a mechanism to overcome the dominance of fallenness. More important for my argument, though, is the degree to which any such mechanism is compatible with discourse, specifically the dialogic discourse of social learning. For if the possibility of overcoming fallenness in discursive engagement remains a mere possibility — even in the absence of a necessary connection between discourse and adoption of the They-self — we would have to accept that Heideggerian ontology dooms social learning to criterial conformity. Heidegger does hypothesize in division I of *Being and Time* that existential anxiety brings us face to face with the ever-present, though veiled, choice between projecting authentic understanding and succumbing to the lure of fallenness and the inauthentic They. Downes himself seems to suggest that personal downtime offers a path to such existential awareness, as if simply sitting with one's own thoughts provides a means of bringing one's angst to consciousness. However, it seems unlikely that an individual firmly entrenched in cultural interpretation of phenomena would all of a sudden see the "existential light" just by mulling things over. Rather, the onus is on Downes to provide a reason why individuals who regularly participate in social learning would not continue to utilize cultural interpretation during such downtime. What is missing here is the impetus for feeling existential angst.

Heidegger, though, provides no such impetus in division I. In fact, he is clear that a focus on personal experience does not offer a path to authenticity. Authentic interpretation requires a non-ontological modification of They, an everyday appropriation and alteration of the shared interpretive framework that would make it one's own. As he states, "*Authentic Being-one's-Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the "they"; *it is rather an existentiell* [i.e., an ontic, non-ontological] *modification of the 'they.'*" (BT, 168, emphasis in original). Such a modification does offer a practical path to authenticity, for unlike a retreat to into the self, a modification of the They is consistent with the necessity of our social embeddedness. That is, the fundamentally social nature of Dasein precludes a retreat into self — doing so would require that we become something we are not.

Heidegger does, however, elaborate the necessary existentiell modification in division I, thus providing the grounds for transcending fallenness. In arguing for the foundational, though circular, nature of interpretation, he offers the following statement:

In the [interpretive] circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception [i.e., our understanding] to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves. (BT, 195)

Here, Heidegger emphasizes that the way we *approach* imminent experience determines the kind of primordial knowledge we obtain about the world. We might label such an approach our stance or “attitude” toward interpretation, the way we comport ourselves to impending phenomena. In preceding interpretation, attitude determines the degree to which we avoid applying a culturally defined interpretive framework. In particular, authentic interpretation requires that such attitude be vigilant and wary of popular conception. It must understand that the “most primordial knowledge” is possible only when the applied interpretive framework has been developed in accordance with “the things themselves” — that is, when what is heard or otherwise experienced is consistent with its phenomenal manifestation. In other words, such attitude must be both aware and skeptical of fallenness.

To say that attitude precedes and determines interpretation is perhaps the fundamental assertion of division I, for it forms the basis of Heidegger’s notion of self as existential “care,” where such care is defined as “ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in-(the-world) as Being-alongside” (*BT*, 237). In always being ahead of itself while already in the world — that is, in always maintaining a stance toward the imminent experience of an existing situation — self is determinative of itself, others, the world, and entities within the world.¹⁴ In other words, the attitude that necessarily accompanies phenomenal interpretation is comprehensively determinative — it forms the basis of all that “is.”¹⁵ And if this is the case, it must determine how we interpret what is said in discourse. Either we can maintain a stance that manifests our tendency toward public interpretation, or we can create a space, an opening, for our own interpretive framework.

LESSONS FOR SOCIAL LEARNING

On this reading of *Being and Time*, discourse is not forever doomed to criterial conformity. Fallenness, and the idle talk that goes with it, is not prescriptive of discourse, but rather a tendency resulting from the communicative intent of discussants. Thus, Heideggerian ontology allows for both authentic and inauthentic discursive interpretation, with attitude toward discourse being the determining factor in the outcome. Specifically, authentic discourse requires that participants maintain an attitude that is both aware and wary of popular conception. In the absence of such attitude, there is little to overcome the disposition toward fallenness, thus enabling a “discourse” that both utilizes the shared interpretive framework defined by culture, and further develops a self whose tendency it is to see the world in conformist terms. Such an interpretation suggests a position contrary to both Downes and Marcuse, one that views Heideggerian ontology as elaborating the conditions for nonconformist social learning. For without an attitude skeptical and defensive of popular conception, without an openness to interpretation that conflicts with the framework established by culture, the tendency of fallenness toward idle talk encourages a social learning experience that simply reinforces the interpretive framework of the They. Inversely, a social learning environment that encourages such skepticism and openness provides the impetus for a dialogic interaction that utilizes one’s own interpretive tools. Thus, social learning is neither conformist nor individuating on its own. It is, instead, a

mode of behavior that must be “done right” if it is to counteract the conformist tendencies inherent in discursive social interaction.

Ultimately, there is a difference between acknowledging the omnipresence of cultural influence and postulating its dominance. The dominance of the They accepted by both Downes and Marcuse is neither an essential characteristic of discourse nor an ontologically necessary comprehensive dominance of Self, but rather an ever-present tendency, the power of which ultimately requires the tacit acquiescence of the Self implicit in an attitude accommodative of shared, public interpretation. Yet, in always being-ahead-of-itself — that is, in maintaining an attitude determinative of imminent experience — Self maintains the possibility of shedding the yoke of the They to engage in self-development founded on authentic interpretation. It is through this attitude that Heideggerian ontology offers the philosophical grounds for a social learning process productive of truly individual thought.

1. James V. Wertsch and Ana Luisa Bustamente Smolka, “Continuing the Dialogue: Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Lotman,” in Harry Daniels, *Charting the Agenda: Educational Activity after Vygotsky* (London: Routledge, 1993), 69–92.

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916); Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

3. Herbert Marcuse, *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Emancipation: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 5, eds. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge, 2011); Paul Downes, “Cultural Conformity Within Vygotsky’s Paradigm for Education: A Critique from the Perspective of Early Heidegger,” *Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny* 2 (2009), 97–116.

4. Downes, “Cultural Conformity,” 107.

5. Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

6. Douglas Kellner, Clayton Pierce, and Tyson Lewis, “Introduction: Herbert Marcuse, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Emancipation,” in *Marcuse, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Emancipation*, 15.

7. Downes, “Cultural Conformity,” 106.

8. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962). This work will be cited as *BT* in the text for all subsequent references.

9. It should be noted that, for Heidegger, there is no phenomenal experience without interpretation. Thus, interpretive criteria are really used for more than “making sense of phenomenal experience.” While this claim is not essential for my argument at this point, it will bear significance later on.

10. The use of the word “fallen” to describe the tendency toward inauthenticity is particularly apt, as the term suggests that the self adopts a specific interpretive perspective without either intending to do so or understanding how it ended up with it. Take, for example, the phrases “fall into a rut” and “fall in love,” which both convey this idea. Heidegger wants to express a similar genesis of inauthenticity, that we become inauthentic without intent and without an understanding of how we got to be that way.

11. Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); James V. Wertsch and Jennifer A. Bivens, “The Social Origins of Individual Mental Functioning: Alternatives and Perspective,” *The Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition* 14, no. 2, 35–44.

12. For Marcuse’s specific debt to Heideggerian ontology, see Marcuse, “Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism,” in *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and Jon Abromeit (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 1–33.

13. See §32 of *BT*, 188–195, for Heidegger’s elaboration of the understanding, part of the tripartite constitution of Dasein as care.

14. Indeed, the four are coexistential in Heideggerian ontology. That is, self, other, the world, and entities within the world constitute a metaphysical holism.

15. Much of division I focuses on the existentially constitutive role of attitude. Long before Heidegger introduces the elaboration of Dasein as care, he discusses the formative concepts of “concern” and “solicitude” as modes of attitude capable of defining the Being of both things and others, respectively. In fact, after introducing the notion of care, Heidegger reminds us that he has been speaking of care in these terms for a while (*BT*, 237).