

On Identity and Interpretation

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For most of us, memories of the catastrophe of September 11, 2001 consist of images of airliners crashing into giant skyscrapers, of flames and smoke shooting from them, and of thousands of terrified people fleeing from the area as those great structures crumpled into themselves amid roiling clouds of smoke and ash.

But the events of that day cannot be reduced to those images...

—Burton M. Leiser, “The Catastrophe of September 11 and its Aftermath”

What do we recall of the events of September 11, 2001? Is it essentially as Burton Leiser describes it: a montage of scattered flashes of planes, smoke, collapsing towers and a subsequent succession of loose words and phrases: “hijackers,” “terrorists,” “Osama bin Laden,” “al-Qaeda,” “Saddam Hussein,” “WMD,” “Operation Iraqi Freedom”—is this stream of images and signifiers what we may today say *occurred*? It seems that we can readily agree that *something* indeed happened, and something with significance, but even today, what that something was and is—what was signified—seems an abyss of incoherent theories and speculations, contradictions and specious accusations. And if we dig into this morass, we uncover reports that beg strange questions, questions that are apparently left unnoticed or resisted at all costs.

It is precisely *this* occurrence we shall pursue here: *the problem of the interpretation of the event*. Our analysis will proceed under the aegis of the phenomenological excavations of Martin Heidegger. The aim is to show that the discourses of rationalization and “theorizing” that characterize the abyss we encounter in asking about the significance of the event is indicative of a more primordial dimensionality of what Heidegger refers to as our “thrown-projectedness” and our historicity; that this character of our “being-in-the-world” is constitutive of and determinative for the operation and formation of paradigms and identities; and, insofar as that, determines our modes of discerning the truth or falsity of a given report or narrative.

Let us first consider the idea of conspiracy and conspiracy theory. It has been asked whether or not the very idea of conspiracy defeats itself. We may note that there is first in this question the objection of a kind of formal error in logic, an error by definition. The logic of the objection appears to run something like this:

1. Either there was no conspiracy or there was.
2. If there was a conspiracy, no one would, by definition, know about it.
3. If one knew about a conspiracy, one would, by definition, be unable to prove it
4. Therefore, there was no conspiracy.

Hence, “conspiracies,” by definition, never exist and have never occurred throughout the history of the world. Of course, the theories persist. They have not gone away but rather evolved in their complexity and multiplicity. As David Ray Griffin and Peter Dale Scott note, “the official narrative about 9/11 is itself a conspiracy theory, alleging that the attacks were orchestrated entirely by Arab-Muslim members of al-Qaeda under the inspiration of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan.”¹ But what is meant here by “theory”?

“Conspiracy theories” are often accorded this “theoretical” ascription insofar as they are determined precisely to lack any ground in truth; when, for example, they lack the rigor

¹ David Ray Griffin and Peter Dale Scott, *9/11 and American Empire: Intellectuals Speak Out* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2006), vii.

of scientific objectivity and methodology. Michael Shermer addresses this attitude in the following manner:

The mistaken belief that a handful of unexplained anomalies can undermine a well-established theory lies at the heart of all conspiratorial thinking (as well as creationism, Holocaust denial and the various crank theories of physics).²

But this is a strange claim; one that can be reworded so that its point is turned back against itself without losing the essential meaning:

The belief that a handful of unexplained anomalies can undermine a well-established theory lies at the heart of the generation of new (conspiracy) theories.

Indeed. A theory in any scientific discipline may be loosely thought of as analogous to a narrative within any individual paradigm or worldview. That is to say that just as the primary concepts of any given discipline—the normative learning that is prior to actual field research, for example—determine what objects of inquiry are appropriate to the discipline in question, so too does an individual’s paradigm determine what reports and narratives are to be investigated as well as how that investigation will transpire. A “conspiracy theory” in this case is, in its ideality, merely one possible narrative as determined by what one’s paradigm finds admissible or not to thinking. This analogy can be taken further.

Martin Heidegger draws attention to the “framing” of scientific research in the following manner: “Fundamental concepts are determinations in which the area of knowledge underlying all the thematic objects of a science attain an understanding that precedes and guides all positive

investigation.”³ Fundamental, guiding concepts in the sciences might include cell and evolutionary theory in biological sciences, for example, or atomic theory and Newtonian laws in physics. Fundamental concepts are then intricately interwoven with the very concept of the discipline itself as informed by the history of its evolution of theories and experiments that are dropped, expanded, re-appropriated and exulted. The idea signifies the essential, necessary learning by which a discipline’s scope and field of inquiry are determined for the student and researcher, but these concepts are, of course, subject to change pending the developments of said research.

Heidegger himself instigated a “crisis” and revision of fundamental concepts in philosophy with his *Being and Time*. In particular, he put the primacy of metaphysics in general into question, especially as lodged in the ideality of the Cartesian subject. For René Descartes, the mind is confronted with representations of an external, outside and objective world to which said representations might conceivably correctly or incorrectly correspond. Heidegger, however, argues that Descartes left something out:

He investigates the *cogitare* of the *ego*—within certain limits. But the *sum* he leaves completely undiscussed, even though it is just as primordial as the *cogito*. Our analytic raises the ontological question of the being of the *sum*. Only when the *sum* is defined does the manner of *cogitationes* become comprehensible.⁴

The Latin phrasing Heidegger plays with here is referring to the “*cogito ergo sum*” of Descartes’s philosophy—the, “I think; therefore I am.” Heidegger is putting the “I am” of this formula into radical question whereby we may more fully situate and grasp the “I think.” In other words, Heidegger is

² Michael Shermer, “Fahrenheit 2777,” *Scientific American* 292, no. 6 (2005): p 38, <http://web.ebscohost.com/>

³ Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 8.

⁴ *Ibid*, 43.

interested in the question of the meaning of being, what he refers to as “fundamental ontology,” and from this question of the being of the subject the problem of the interpretation of the event as mediated through reports and narratives will come more fully into view.

The “I am” of Heidegger’s philosophy is *Da-sein*. *Da-sein* is actually the hyphenated version of a common German word which would normally be translated as “existence.” In invoking the hyphen, Heidegger draws explicit attention to the two root components of the word whereby *Da-sein* would literally be translated as “being-there” or “being-here.” *Da-sein* then, which each of us is, at once connotes both a *definite* and *open* being, open to possibilities for being in its “there.” Already then, we can see that, just as the “I am,” *Da-sein* is purposely formulated as a very indeterminate phenomenon. The only provisional determination Heidegger allows *Da-sein* at the outset of his enquiry is that “in its being this being is concerned *about* its very being.”⁵

This indeterminate character of the first sketch of the being of *Da-sein* is itself characteristic of that being: *Da-sein* (which each of us is) is primordially a being that does what it does—that *is*—for the sake of itself, for the sake of its own possibilities for being. That is to say that I am writing this paper in order to make a point to the reader in order to facilitate some reciprocal thought or dialogue, whose determination and result remains for the moment open and obscure. *Da-sein* is itself always its own “for-the-sake-of-which.” The open-ended character of *Da-sein* in its being towards its possibilities is what Heidegger determines as existential-ontological *understanding*.

However, even the indeterminate future for *Da-sein* is not merely “possibility” in the sense of “anything could happen” in any ungrounded and abstract hypothetical.

Rather, understanding should be thought in terms of “under-standing” or “undergoing.” And what determines how one understands is *attunement*. We may say that we are attuned insofar as we are situated in such a way with regard to our possibilities that we rather simply “find ourselves” in this or that situation—rather than, say, “will” these situations into being. We are born within a certain social order, subjected to certain family values, “thrown” into certain historical frameworks. But this attunement, or the “how” of our situation, is not rooted only in birth. We are always attuned. Heidegger cites our mood as a primary example of this.

Attunement and understanding are primordial dimensions of the “being-in-the-world” of *Da-sein*. Each is further qualified, respectively, as “*thrownness*” and “*projectedness*.” We are “thrown” insofar as our being is “veiled in its whence and whither,”⁶ and we “project” insofar as we are our own ultimate “for-the-sake-of-which” and thereby already have our possibilities for being determined by our thrownness and attunement. Project, in this case, is not a planning out of means and ends but an existential character whereby we always already have definite possibilities for our being, always already have definite possibilities for our ontic plans and “projects.” *Da-sein* is thrown-projectedness, and it is through our thrown-projectedness that the world is and comes to be. This coming-to-be is existential (hermeneutic) *interpretation*. Interpretation is the coming-to-concretion of understanding, the narrowing of possibilities for being into concrete living, making, doing, thinking. “What has been circumspectly interpreted with regard to its in-order-to as such, what has been explicitly understood, has the structure of *something as something*.”⁷ In this very moment, as this paper is being read/written, its open

⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid*, 127.

⁷ *Ibid*, 139.

possibilities for being and for being interpreted are being narrowed in the concretion of its being therein. What is stated here is taking on a definite life, detached from its source and *as* this or that dissemination of subject-matter. This coming-to-be of the text is hermeneutical interpretation. What is subsequently explicitly said of the text or criticized in it is apophantic.

What is key here is that existential interpretation precedes, or in any case does not necessarily imply, the predication of something in a statement or utterance—apophansis. Heidegger has inverted the way we might typically think of understanding and interpretation, and this mirrored-inversion of thrown-projectedness hinges on the statement in a kind of “circular” fashion: *Da-sein understands possibilities which, as understood, are interpreted ‘as’ this or that, and projection may occur too ‘as’ this or that apophantic interpretation of its factual being whereby it reconfigures understanding, and itself, anew.* What is apophantic is not detached and/or removed from existential interpretation but re-appropriates it through our being-with-others.

Through these preliminary sketches, our problem begins to take shape. For in our fundamental constitution, we may see why, for any “thinking thing,” the question of the truth or validity of the mind’s representations with regard to a represented “objective world” is a question that is secondary to our involvement with that world. Regarding Descartes, for instance, we only come to self-interpretation—*Da-sein as* a “circle” of thrown-projectedness, *as* a subject, or *as* a mind-body bifurcation—by cutting out our involvement in and with the world through which “world” is already had in determinate ways. But in our being-in-the-world and being-with-others—that is to say, in our sociality—we are thrown in such a way that these modes of being have been and are determined, delimited, and organized along

institutional and hierarchical lines. In the social realm it rather seems that a certain Cartesian framework prevails necessarily. That is to say that the citizen of a nation-state (or the individual within some socio-political context) is “thrown” in such a way that there is a truth or modicum of truth behind our perceptions of our social realities—that there is a question of correspondence between not the representations of our mind’s eye in this case, but representations that mediate for us a world beyond our own immediate livelihoods and locales. The mediations themselves *are* all we have in our individual being-in-the-world, but these realities are always about more than what the individual has in its immediacy, more than what is at hand.

Thus, when we encounter reports of WMD stockpiles in Iraq, a link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, or reports of the deliberate fabrication and distortion of said threats, there is certainly a legitimate question of whether these reports reflect accurately or inaccurately, whether the representations of reality we have before us in our newspapers, polemics, television broadcasts, and in our everyday conversations correspond or not with the realities being represented. What Heidegger uncovers in the “hermeneutic circle” is constitutive of how we determine the value of a given report:

Interpretation is never the presupposition-less grasping of something previously given. When the particular concretion of the interpretation in the sense of exact text interpretation likes to appeal to what “is there,” what is initially “there” is nothing else than the self-evident, undisputed prejudice of the interpreter...⁸

What we are getting at here is an explicit, fundamental relation between interpretation and identity, between our thrown-historic situatedness and our capacities for knowledge about the world, about each other, about

⁸ *Ibid*, 141.

ourselves.

Conspiracy theories that revolve around 9/11 often elicit responses such as, “Why would the government attack itself?” or “Why would we attack ourselves?” Here then, the idea is taken to presuppose an identification of the enemy with oneself, and this in turn, is taken as a contradiction and therefore impossible. The citizen, as such, is in this case a sign. The citizen is a signifier and touchstone for an extrapolated and extended ideality of identity, a substitute identity for a whole. The “whole,” in this case, is the State (with a capital S). That is simply to say that the State functions as an ideality that directs the actions of its constituents—citizens. It directs their actions insofar as the constituent and constitutive *conduits* of this ideality perceive the ideality (and hence, themselves) to be in peril. The ideality itself can only be gotten at through symbols, signs, reports and narratives, and in the case of ideological and paradigmatic identities, individuals. Just as any interpreted thing or event has the structure of “something as something,” so too does the subject at any given moment have the structure of someone as this or that identity, and an identity as this or that particular someone. Thus American is always *as* this or that particular American. *The ideality of identity itself is a totality had only via the mediation of signs and symbols and therefore always remains something to be under-stood, undergone, lived anew.*

Friedrich Nietzsche writes, “Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things. Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept ‘leaf’ is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects.”⁹ This seems to illustrate both the discovery of a scientific

formula or law of nature as well as the formation of identity in self-abstraction. What is latent in both is the plucking of characteristics of like phenomena, the characteristics that make the phenomena appear alike in the first place, and abstraction into a category of some sort. Nietzsche continues: “This awakens the idea that in addition to the leaves, there exists in nature the ‘leaf’: the original model according to which all the leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured, colored, curled, and painted [...]”¹⁰ What is implicated in this rudimentary sketch of concept-formation is what Nietzsche sometimes refers to as mistaking the cause for the effect. Heidegger’s work uncovers this act as rooted in our being as thrown-projectedness, our *historicity*. Insofar as we are “thrown” into a world in which extant identities are already at work, we are obliged to self-abstract and identify with regard to them—either drawing similarities between ourselves and our most immediate apprehensions of others or otherwise drawing differences and aligning ourselves against them. Moreover, as we are formed through those first apprehensions of the world, we are inclined to seek out experiences, interpretations of reports, reports themselves, and other identities that reinforce our own. We are also inclined and/or mobilized to defend others of the same identity (or simple labels) regardless of the innumerable differences and history that any label carries with it, and we are mobilized to gloss over and/or “rationalize” reports that fall to the outer limits of our paradigms and our ability to know the world through them. That is, “reason” and “rationalization” seem to collapse into the same term in a certain way for the citizen.

To take up all these threads together, what we see is a situation whereby one first enters into the social realm as it has been historically determined with concepts handed down by

⁹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” *Philosophy and Truth* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1979), 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

that same history. This “thrown situation” prescribes how the world may come to be in certain ways in a way that parallels the phenomenal prescriptions of the fundamental concepts of a science. Just as the operation of science in this respect is not an explicitly conscious activity, so too is this coming-to-be of the world through our identities an operation of self-preservation that we are not explicitly aware of as we undergo it. In our sociality, our identities are most explicitly had in citizenship, and hence, our identification with the State. In this way, both the citizen and the scientist appear as the instruments of the self-fulfillment of the histories they are thrown in. Two significant differences in the analogy are that first, the scientist has a more direct encounter with the field prescribed by the fundamental concepts of the discipline insofar as the scientist presumably does go out “into the field” and examine the phenomena in question whereas the citizen is rather removed from the phenomena in question when it comes to reports dealing with the world beyond one’s immediate locale, and second, the concepts of the scientist do not coincide with the scientist’s own self-conception in the manner the identity of the citizen with a broader social context does. The “revision of concepts” for the citizen can take on a very dire character. To suggest that the U.S. had a role in cultivating terrorism abroad, a complicity in the activities and development of our ostensible enemies, for example, is to suggest that God is in league with the Devil, and that we are just as part of that complicity as our mediating agencies.

Of course, all this is itself an ideality and conceptual framework we are working with. It is remarked earlier that Heidegger instigated a philosophical revolution of fundamental concepts in putting forth his own, in the explication of the being of *Da-sein* and in laying the groundwork for hermeneutics, but now it is revealed that what

“fundamental concepts” Heidegger radically put into question were implicitly the fundamental concepts of fundamental concepts themselves. Any concept as such circumscribes a unified field of particular phenomena, but this field itself is constituted only by virtue of other extended chains and webs of conceptual relations. In terms of citizenship, national identity posits an ideal to which our activities are oriented toward and in the interest of. In that activity, the ideal concept takes on a host of manifestations that simultaneously remake the ideal into something lived whilst still holding it out as ideal. Heidegger writes of our historicity, “*Da-sein* ‘is’ its past in the manner of *its* being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion ‘occurs’ out of its future.”¹¹ One way of putting this in terms of citizenship is that our being is historically determined in the interest of achieving itself (its ideality). Again, this is not an activity we are explicitly aware of in our dealings as citizens. It acts in the interest of “achieving itself” insofar as the ideal is ultimately what we must rely on in mediating our encounters, but in this activity, the ideal itself withdraws and elicits new agents of its activity.

But what does any of this have to do with the event of the September 11 attacks?!

Let us return then to where we began. What occurred on September 11, 2001? As a symbol for American identity, the destruction of the World Trade Center seems to have catalyzed a nation for military intervention in the Middle East. At the same time, reports that challenge the auspices under which that intervention seemed warranted have continued to exert their weight in ever greater force. These range from reports of war plans prior to September 11, 2001,¹² to the genesis of al-Qaeda with its roots in the CIA’s

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 17.

¹² David Edwards and David Cromwell, *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 32.

backing of the jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The United States reportedly even went so far as to provide children's textbooks depicting landmines, soldiers, and other images of violence in order to cultivate the desired levels of fanaticism.¹³ The event, insofar as its interpretation is rooted in the hermeneutic circle, is re-appropriated in its *as* over and over again. What happens to Da-sein when its historicity is infiltrated by images and media with little context or content? To whatever extent we concern ourselves with the event, to "remember," as Leiser suggests many do, is not enough. On the other hand, we have indicated that we have a certain dependence on mediating agencies, concepts, and symbolic representations. On this score, Leiser himself effectively falls to the very reduction he here cautions against: the paper from which the above quotation was taken is essentially an apologetic for American unilateralism, thereby contributing to the "catalyzing effect" those images had on a national consciousness.

To refer once more to the activity of science, Heidegger at one point provocatively suggests, "A science's level of development is determined by the extent to which it is capable of a crisis in its basic concepts."¹⁴ Insofar as theoretical conjecture is in a sense all citizens have to begin with in their historicity, what is necessary is a certain historiography, one that attends to the need for a capacity for the revision of our most fundamental concepts about the world. What such research will yield may to varying degrees already be prefigured in our historicity, but the past, in this case, remakes itself, and the present seems all the more open in its possibilities for determination.

¹³ Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The War on Truth: 9/11, Disinformation, and the Anatomy of Terrorism* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2005), 8.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 8.

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