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Heidegger Today: On Jeff Kochan's *Science and Social Existence*

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I have been invited to participate in the present symposium on Jeff Kochan's *Science as Social Existence: Heidegger and the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge*. I would like to preface my response by expressing my gratitude to the editors of *Social Epistemology* for the opportunity to comment on this provocative intervention and by noting the following about my response's intellectual provenance.

I have long worked at the intersection of historical, philosophical and sociological modes of inquiry into the making of scientific accounts and technological interventions in the material world, but at an increasing distance from the field of science and technology studies, widely defined. As a result, I am neither invested in disciplinary purity, nor party in the longstanding arguments over the sociology of scientific knowledge and its presuppositions about the relationship between the social and natural orders.

I must also admit, however, to being increasingly attracted to the ontological questions which the wider field of science and technology studies has posed in recent years. All this is important to how I come to think about both *Science as Social Existence* and the argument between Kochan and Raphael Sassower over the merits of *Science as Social Existence*.

### **Kochan's Problems of the Strong Programme**

As the full title of *Science as Social Existence* evinces, Kochan's principal matter of concern is the sociology of scientific knowledge. He regards this as the field of study that is dedicated to explaining the production of knowledge about the material world in sociological terms, as these terms are understood among proponents of the so-called "strong programme". As Kochan's response to Sassower conveys pointedly, he is concerned with two problems in particular.

The first of these is that the sociology of scientific knowledge is hostage to a distinction between the inquiring subject and the objective world such that it is difficult to understand exactly how this subject is ever able to say anything meaningful about the objective world. The second, closely related problem is that the sociology of scientific knowledge cannot then respond to the recurrent charge that it holds to an unsustainable relationship between the social and natural orders.

Kochan proposes that Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology provides the wherewithal to answer these two problems. This, he suggests, is to the benefit of science and technology studies, the wider, interdisciplinary field of study, which the sociology of scientific knowledge could justifiably be said to have inaugurated but has also grown increasingly detached from the latter. Incidentally, while Kochan himself refers to this wider field as "science studies", "science and technology studies" seems preferable because it not only enjoys greater currency, but also conveys more accurately the focus on practices and materiality from which stems the divergence between the enterprises Kochan seeks to distinguish.

Anyway, as becomes evident in the course of reading *Science as Social Existence*, Kochan's proposal calls first for the correction of Joseph Rouse's and Bruno Latour's arguably mistaken reading of Heidegger, particularly in regard to Heidegger's pivotal distinction between essence and existence, and to Heidegger's further insistence upon the historicity of Being. This is followed by the obligatory illustration of what is to be gained from such a philosophical excursus.

Kochan thus goes on to revisit what has become a classic of science and technology studies, namely the arguments between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes over the former's signal invention, the air-pump. Kochan shows here how Heidegger's thought enables a more symmetric account of the relationship between the social and natural order at issue in the arguments between Boyle and Hobbes, so disarming Latour's otherwise incisive objection that the sociology of scientific knowledge is a neo-Kantian enterprise that affords matter no agency in the making of the world we inhabit. From this point of view, *Science as Social Existence* would not only seem to answer important conceptual problems, but also offer a helpful explication and clarification of the notoriously difficult Heideggerian corpus.

It should also be noted, however, that this corpus has actually played a marginal role in the development of science and technology studies and that leading figures in the field have nonetheless occasionally felt compelled to interrogate texts such as Heidegger's *Question Concerning Technology*. Such incongruity about the place of Heidegger within the evolution of science and technology studies is perhaps important to understanding Sassower's caustic line of questioning about what exactly is to be gained from the turn to Heidegger, which *Science as Social Existence* seeks to advance.

### **Real Love or a Shotgun Marriage?**

Bluntly, Sassower asks why anyone should be interested in marrying Heideggerian existential phenomenology and the sociology of scientific knowledge, ultimately characterising this misbegotten conjunction as a "shotgun marriage". My immediate answer is that *Science as Social Existence* offers more than just a detailed and very interesting, if unconventional, examination of the conceptual problems besetting the sociology of scientific knowledge.

As someone schooled in the traditions of history and philosophy of science who has grown increasingly concerned about the importance of history, I particularly welcome the clarification of the role that history plays in our understanding of scientific knowledge and technological practice. Kochan, following Heidegger to the letter, explains how the inquiring subject and the objective world are to be understood as coming into being simultaneously and how the relationship between the two varies in a manner such that what is and what can be said about the nature of that which is are a matter of historical circumstance.

As a result, history weighs upon us not just discursively, but also materially, and so much so that the world we inhabit must be understood as irreducibly historical. As Kochan puts it while contrasting Kant's and Heidegger's understanding of finitude:

For Heidegger ... the essence of a thing is not something we receive from it, but something it possesses as a result of the socio-historically conditioned metaphysical projection within which it is let be what it is. On Heidegger's account, not even an infinitely powerful intellect could grasp the intrinsic, independently existing essence of a thing, because no such essence exists. Hence, the finitude of our receptivity is not the issue; the issue is, instead, the finitude of our projectivity. The range of possible conceptualisations of a thing is conditioned by the historical tradition of the subject attempting to make sense of that thing. Only within the finite scope of possibilities enabled by the subject's tradition can it experience a thing as intelligible, not to mention develop a clearly defined understanding of what it is (258-9).

Literally, tradition matters. Relatedly, I also welcome how *Science as Social Existence* helps me to clarify the ambiguities of Heidegger's comportment toward scientific inquiry, which would have been very useful some time ago, as I tried to forge a bridge between the history of biology and a different set of philosophers to those usually considered within the history and philosophy of science, not just Heidegger, but also Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.

As I sought to reflect upon the wider implications of Heidegger's engagement with the biological sciences of his day, *Science as Social Existence* would have enabled me to fend off the charge that I misunderstood Heidegger's distinction between ontic and ontological orders, between the existence of something and the meaning attributed to it. Thus, Kochan points out that:

Metaphysical knowledge is, according to Heidegger, a direct consequence of our finitude, our inescapable mortality, rather than of our presumed ability to transcend that finitude, to reach, infinitely, for heaven. Because the finitude of our constructive power makes impossible a transcendent grasp of the thing in-itself — leaving us to be only affected by it in its brute, independent existence — our attention is instead pushed away from the thing-in-itself and towards the constructive categories we must employ in order to make sense of it as a thing present-at-hand within-the-world.

For Heidegger, metaphysics is nothing other than the study of these categories and their relations to one another. Orthodox metaphysics, in contrast, treats these existential categories as ontic, that is, as extant mental things referring to the intrinsic properties of the things we seek to know, rather than as ontological, that is, as the existential structures of being-in-the-world which enable us to know those things (133-4).

The clarification would have helped me to articulate how the ontic and ontological orders are so inextricably related to one another and, today, so entangled with scientific knowledge and technological practice that Heidegger's reading of Eugen Korschelt's lectures on ageing and death matters to our understanding of the fissures within Heidegger's argument. All this seems to me a wholly satisfactory answer to Sassower's question about the legitimacy of the conjunction Kochan proposes. This said, Heidegger and sociology are not obvious companions and I remain unpersuaded by what *Science as Social Existence* might have to offer

the more sociologically inclined field of science and technology studies. This, I think, is where the cracks within the edifice that is *Science as Social Existence* begin to show.

### **An Incompleteness**

There is something unsettling about *Science as Social Existence* and the distinctions it draws between the sociology of scientific knowledge and the wider field of science and technology studies. For one thing, *Science as Social Existence* offers an impoverished reading of science and technology studies whereby the field's contribution to the understanding the production of scientific knowledge and related technological practices is equated with Latour's criticism of the sociology of scientific knowledge, as the latter was articulated in arguments with David Bloor nearly two decades ago.

*Science as Social Existence* is not nearly as interested in the complexity of the arguments shaping this wider field as it is in the heterogeneity of philosophical positions taken within the sociology of scientific knowledge with respect to the relationship between knowledge and the material world. It bears repeating at this point that Kochan defines the latter enterprise in the narrowest terms, which also seem far more attuned to philosophical, than sociological considerations. Such narrowness should perhaps come as no surprise given the importance that the sociology of scientific knowledge has attached to the correspondence theory of truth, but there also is much more to the history of philosophy than just the Cartesian and Kantian confrontations with Plato and Aristotle, which Heidegger privileges and Kochan revisits to answer the questions Rouse and Latour have asked of the sociology of scientific knowledge.

Sassower's possibly accidental reference to a "Spinozist approach" is a useful reminder of both alternative philosophical traditions with respect to materiality, relationality and cognitive construction, and how a properly sociological inquiry into the production of scientific knowledge and technological practices might call for greater openness to the heterogeneity of contemporary social theory. This might even include actor-network theory and its own distinctive reformulation of Spinozist monadology. However, *Science as Social Existence* is not about any of this, and, as Kochan's response to Sassower reminds us, we need to respond to its argument on its own terms. Let me then say something about Kochan's configuration of phenomenology and sociological thought, which is just as unsettling as the relationship Kochan posits between the sociology of scientific knowledge and the wider field of science and technology studies.

Ethnomethodology is the most obvious inheritor to the phenomenological tradition which Kochan invokes to address the problems confronting the sociology of scientific knowledge, and it has also played a very important role in the evolution of science and technology studies. Key ethnomethodological interventions are ambivalent about Heideggerian constructions of phenomenology, but Kochan does not appear to have any great interest in either this sociological tradition or, relatedly, what might be the implications of Heidegger's divergence from Edmund Husserl's understanding of the phenomenological project for the relationship between subjects and knowledge.

Instead, Kochan prefers to weld together existential phenomenology and interactionist social theory, because, as he puts it, “interactionist social theory puts the individual subject at the methodological centre of explanations of social, and thus also of cognitive, order” (372). This, however, raises troubling questions about Kochan’s reading and mobilisation of Heidegger. Kochan equates the subject and Being, but Heidegger himself felt the need to develop the term beyond its more conventional connotations of “existence” as he came to understand the subject and Being as closely related, but not one and the same. As Kochan himself notes Being “is not a thing, substance, or object” (39). This form of existence is to be understood instead as a performative operation, if not a becoming.

Furthermore, Kochan would seem to underestimate the importance of Heidegger’s understanding of the relationship between social existence and the fullest realisation of this form of existence. While Heidegger undoubtedly regards Being as emerging from within the fabric of intersubjective relations, Heidegger also maintains that authentic Being realises itself by extricating itself from other beings and so confronting the full meaning of its finitude. As a result, one is compelled to ask what exactly is Kochan’s understanding of the subject and its subjectivity, particularly in relation to the location of “knowledge”.

### **Possible Predecessors Gone Unacknowledged**

Strikingly, these are the kinds of questions that Foucault asks about phenomenology, an enterprise which he regards as contributing to the consolidation of the modern subject. Yet, Kochan would appear to dismiss Foucault’s work, even though Foucault has much to say about not just the historicity of the subject, but also about its entanglement with *mathēsis*, a concept central to Kochan’s analysis of the encounter between Boyle and Hobbes. Despite the richness and symmetry of the account Kochan offers, it seems quite unsatisfactory to simply observe in a footnote that “Heidegger’s usage of *mathēsis* differs from that of Michel Foucault, who defines it as ‘the science of calculable order’” (234 n20).

Put simply, there is something amiss about all the slippage around questions of subjectivity, as well as the relationship between the historical and ontological ordering of the world, which calls into question the sociological foundations of the account of the sociology of scientific knowledge which *Science as Social Existence* seeks to articulate.

Clearly, Kochan mistrusts sociological critiques of the subject, and one of the reasons Kochan provides for the aversion is articulated most pithily in the following passage from his response to Sassower, in relation to the sociological perspectives that have increasingly come to dominate science and technology studies. Kochan writes:

What interests these critics ... are fields of practice. Within these fields, the subject is constituted. But the fundamental unit of analysis is the field – or system – not the subject. Subjectivity is, on this theory, a derivative phenomenon, at best, a secondary resource for sociological analysis. From my perspective, because subjectivity is fundamental to human existence, it cannot be eliminated in this way.

In other words, if the subject is constructed, then its subjectivity and structures of feeling can provide no insight into our present condition. This, however, is a very familiar conundrum, one that, in another guise, has long confronted science and technology studies: That something is constructed does not necessarily amount to its “elimination”. The dividing issue at the heart of *Science as Social Existence* would then seem to be less the relationship between scientific knowledge and the material constitution of the world about us, and more whether one is interested in the clarity of transcendental analytics or charting the topological complexities of immanent transformation.

My preference, however, is to place such weighty and probably irresolvable issues in suspension. It seems to me that it might be more productive to reconsider instead how the subject is constituted and wherein lie its distinctive capacities to determine what is and what can be done, here and now. Anthropological perspectives on the questions science and technology studies seek to pose today suggest that this might be how to build most productively upon the Heideggerian understanding of the subject and the objective world as coming into being simultaneously.

Perhaps, however, I am just another of those readers destined to be “unhappy” about *Science as Social Existence*, but I am not sure that this is quite right because I hope to have conveyed how much I enjoyed thinking about the questions *Science as Social Existence* poses, and I would just like to hear more about what Kochan thinks of such alternative approaches to reading Heidegger today.

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## **References**

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