

P R E F A C E

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1. THE WAY INTO THE LIFEWORLD

When I peel myself away from this computer screen long enough to turn my head and consider what appears below my window, at once I notice the commingling of vividly colored flowers arrayed in beds amidst the background foliage of the front lawn. And beyond the roofs of houses across the road, I can see the white chop of the windswept wavelets in Vancouver harbor, and the layered mountains that enfold the inlet in shades of blue and gray. But the pull of cyberspace, and of modern technology in general, does seem irresistible. The high-powered abstractions of this realm relentlessly draw my attention. In imposing themselves on my awareness, the world of concrete life is relegated to the background and overshadowed. I am hardly alone in my tendency to succumb to the lure of technology and other heady possibilities on the contemporary scene, and so to become oblivious to the earth in which I dwell. Participating in modern culture renders the lifeworld peripheral. But it is precisely this world that I intend to explore in the present book.

To be sure, that is easier said than done. For one thing, the eclipse of the lifeworld actually long predates the advent of modern technology. The Renaissance was a critical juncture. It was then that there arose a more “individualistic, and rational understanding of nature” (Gebser 1985, 15), one involving a greater sense of detachment from the world and concomitant inclination to objectify that world, accompanied by a more abstract experience of the space and time in which objects were situated (Heidegger 1962/1977). Yet the repression of the lifeworld was well in progress even before the Renaissance. Phenomenological ecologist David Abram (1996) observes that the concealment of the sensuous realm had already begun with the coming to prominence of alphabetic language in ancient Hebrew and Greek cultures. Could I really expect, then, to look out of my window at the flowers, ocean, and mountains and directly experience the innocence and purity of the primal lifeworld?

Has human perception not been veiled by millennia of cultural conditioning that has had the effect of distancing us from nature? So reentering the lifeworld is certainly not simply a matter of walking away from my computer to “smell the roses.” Instead it seems I must find a way of going back to a long forgotten mode of knowing and being.

But should we really want to “go back”? Was the separation from the lifeworld simply a regrettable mistake? I do not think so. It is certainly true that, in the primordial lifeworld, self and other, subject and object, were not dualistically split off from each other as they later came to be. But neither were they consciously fused. Instead subject and object tended to be *confused*; there was a limited ability consciously to differentiate them. Therefore, pre-Renaissance awareness is not something to be idealized. According to philosopher Owen Barfield, this “kind of knowledge . . . was at once more universal and less clear” (1977, 17). The cultural philosopher Jean Gebser (1985) and communications theorist Walter Ong (1977) make it plain that pre-Renaissance experience was less lucidly focused than the mode of awareness that succeeded it. The decisive separation of subject and object served the interest of creating sharper understanding, a greater capacity for reflection and intellectual achievement; in that way it helped to fulfill humankind’s potential. So, far from being merely a pathological departure from an ideal state of affairs, the transition to well-differentiated consciousness was both necessary and beneficial. It does seem, then, that we should not wish simply to go *back* to the primal lifeworld.

However, is there any denying that, in *today’s* world, the splitting from nature has progressed to the point where it not only has reduced the quality of our lives but threatens the very life of our planet? The more detached we have become from nature, the more insensitive to it we have grown. And the more insensitive, the more we have tended to regard it as nothing but dead matter, there at our disposal, held in reserve for our indiscriminate use. The conviction that nature’s processes can be manipulated by us through our technologies, controlled arbitrarily for our own ends—such a view of nature seems largely responsible for the all too well-known state of affairs prevailing today: noxious wastes of every kind seeping into the earth, polluting the oceans and atmosphere, endangering countless animal species; natural resources becoming exhausted with impending shortages of food and energy; ecological balances being dis-

rupted; the syndrome of drought/famine/disease steadily worsening. And because we never really cease to be a part of the natural world from which we distance ourselves, our estrangement from nature brings an estrangement from ourselves and from each other. As a consequence, “fragmentation is now very widespread, not only throughout society, but also in each individual” (Bohm 1980, 1). Psychopathology is rampant and the social fabric unravels. Family and church disintegrate. Ethnic conflicts rage around the world. International banditry and terrorism grow to alarming proportions. Nuclear weapons proliferate out of control.

Where, then, do we presently stand vis-à-vis the lifeworld? We do not wish simply to go *back* to it, yet it seems we cannot survive much longer in the toxic environment that has resulted from cutting our ties to it. Is there any way out? I suggest that there is, though the path in question is difficult and oddly circuitous. I venture to say that we can (re)turn to the lifeworld not simply by departing from the world of abstraction, but by going so far into it that, in a manner of speaking, we “come out on the other side”!

In attempting to clarify this enigmatic proposition, let me first point out that we could not simply depart from abstraction even if we wanted to. The reason is that that is what abstraction is all about: simple departures. The word “abstract” is from the Latin *abstractus*, “dragged away, pp. of *abstrahere*, to draw from or separate.”¹ Abstraction, then, is about separating, drawing boundaries to set things apart from each other in a categorical manner. Under the dualistic rule of abstraction, we strictly adhere to the logic of either/or: we are either here or there, inside or outside, different or the same, mental or physical—*abstract or concrete*. From this we can see that any attempt to leave abstraction behind, to cross its outer boundary and pass into the concrescence of the lifeworld, is certain to be frustrated by the fact that all such crossings are themselves acts of abstraction. So the true end of abstraction cannot *merely* be an end, since any “clean break” of this sort would only testify to the fact that abstraction was actually still taking place! Like the proverbial Chinese finger puzzle, all efforts to break free of abstraction leave us squarely within it, for that is what abstraction essentially entails: the effort to break free, to produce clean breaks.

Still, while abstraction evidently possesses no categorical limit, no exterior boundary whose crossing would simply bring it to an end, might

it not possess an *interior* boundary? Instead of seeking to break out of abstraction, suppose we were to move in the other direction. If we went further with abstraction, went all the way *inside* it, following its own trajectory to its point of fulfillment, might we not then be able to “exit” on the “other side”?

The strange nonlinearity of such a movement is intimated in Heidegger’s essay “The End of Philosophy” (1964/1977, 373–92). It would seem that the lofty abstractions of philosophy could not be further removed from the concreteness of the senses. Philosophical thinking indeed is a prime exemplar of the kind of high-flying intellectual reflectiveness that has obscured our bond with the earth. By the “*end* of philosophy,” does Heidegger mean the termination of such ratiocination, coupled perhaps with a descent into the lifeworld? It is clear that he does not. Rather, “The end of philosophy proves to be the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technological world” (377). That is, philosophy ends with its transformation into the modern sciences—sciences that have now been brought to culmination, and whose objectifications and abstract analyses apparently have brought us as far away as we could possibly be from the world of lived experience. However, in philosophy’s realization of its “most extreme possibilities” (375), Heidegger indicates that one possibility may have been overlooked:

But is the end of philosophy in the sense of its evolving into the sciences also already the complete actualization of all the possibilities in which the thinking of philosophy was first posited? Or is there a *first* possibility for thinking apart from the *last* possibility which we characterized (the dissolution of philosophy in the technologized sciences), a possibility from which the thinking of philosophy would have to start, but which as philosophy it could nevertheless not experience and adopt? (377)

If there were such a “first possibility for philosophical thinking”—one that was unrealizable throughout the history of philosophy but can be broached now that philosophical abstraction has reached its climax in the technological sciences—then the essential task of thinking would be to think that possibility.

But *what is* that possibility? Heidegger alludes to it later in his essay when he asks why the notion of “openness” he has been discussing has

always been misunderstood: “Is it because man’s ecstatic sojourn in the openness of presencing is turned only toward what is present and the presenting of what is present? But what else does this mean than that presence as such . . . remains unheeded?” (390). In speaking of being “turned only toward what is present and the presenting of what is present,” Heidegger apparently is referring to the exclusive preoccupation with *object* and *subject* (respectively). Though we have been engaged in an “ecstatic sojourn in the openness of presencing,” this prereflective movement has been obscured in favor of a mode of reflection in which the subject presents to himself only what is present, the objects that are cast before him. Presencing per se, “presence as such,” is the first possibility for thinking that has gone unheeded through the whole course of Western philosophy. Elsewhere Heidegger refers to such presencing as *Being*. Philosopher Carol Bigwood notes in her reading of Heidegger that “Being is not a being, not God, an absolute unconditional ground or a total presence, but is simply the living web within which all relations emerge” (1993, 3). In other words, Heideggerian Be-ing is none other than the dynamic world of life process, the lifeworld. And, evidently, it is only at the *end* of philosophy, where the abstract splitting of subject and object has reached its culmination and has created the greatest degree of estrangement from the lifeworld, that—having followed the natural trajectory of abstraction to its “last possibility”—we can now (re)turn to the “first possibility” for thinking: the thinking of the concrete lifeworld, which in fact is the source of the abstraction to begin with (that “from which the thinking of philosophy would have to start,” as Heidegger puts it).

Let me emphasize that Heidegger is not suggesting that we merely renounce thinking in favor of unmediated experience. Yet, while he does urge that we *think* Being, the kind of thinking he has in mind is unusual to say the least. Heidegger wants us to think in the *original* meaning of that word. Today, “A thought usually means an idea, a view or opinion, a notion”; in contemporary science and philosophy, thinking signifies “logical-rational representations” (1954/1968, 138). Noting the etymological consanguinity of “thinking” with “thanking,” Heidegger claims that the modern understanding of thinking is an “impoverished” version of what earlier involved not merely an intellectual act but also a heartfelt giving of thanks (139). Spiegelberg (1982) summarizes Heidegger’s radical interpretation of thinking as “an intent and reverent meditation

with the whole of our being . . . heart as well as . . . intellect” (402). Only through a thinking that is also a whole-bodied thanking can we truly think Being, think the lifeworld in a way that does not merely objectify it but gratefully embraces it as that to which we owe our very existence.

It is true, however, that Heidegger tended toward a certain nostalgia for the past that had the effect of seeming to valorize it. Granting that our modern way of thinking one-sidedly favors abstraction and thus estranges us from the lifeworld, is contemporary rationality really just an “impoverished” form of an earlier, more complete kind of thinking to which we must now return? Or did prescientific thought actually not constitute an undifferentiated form of cognition in which mind and heart were to some extent confused? To repeat, re-inhabiting the lifeworld should not entail a going back that would simply negate the forward progress we have made. Nor *could* it really do so. The movement into abstraction cannot simply be reversed, since any such attempt to *cut off* abstraction would in fact be nothing more than an act of abstraction itself. So it is clear that, in reentering the lifeworld, while abstraction per se must be surpassed, it cannot just be dropped.

I suggest there is but one sort of boundary that will permit us to pass effectively beyond abstraction: the “interior boundary” hinted at above. This is the boundary or limit of *limitative thinking itself*. A paradox is involved here. Abstraction’s inner boundary is its natural point of termination, its true end. Yet we have seen that the true end of abstraction cannot *merely* be an end, a “clean break.” In order for abstraction truly to end, there is no avoiding paradox—an end that also is *not* an end, a boundary that is not one. Thus, while we do “come out on the other side” in crossing the inner horizon of abstraction, this movement beyond abstraction is at once a movement within it. Such is the peculiar logic that governs the transition to the lifeworld. Only by remaining *within* abstraction can we radically surmount it. Like the movement from one side of a Moebius strip to the other that paradoxically keeps us on the *same* side, our passage from abstraction to concrecence at once maintains the former (the Moebius strip in fact will play a pivotal role in the topological work of this book). Of course, the *supremacy* of the abstract is not maintained. What we realize instead is an internal harmony of abstraction and concrecence in which the prior meaning of each term changes profoundly.

To be sure, such a paradox boggles the mind. Nevertheless, if our aim is to exceed the one-sided rule of abstraction so we can re-inhabit the lifeworld, it seems the abstract mind needs to be boggled. But while this is a necessary requirement, it is not sufficient. Merely setting these abstract words against themselves is not enough. Beyond the bare assertion of paradox in enigmatic words such as those I have used, the paradox needs to be articulated more fully by being fleshed out. Only then can the lifeworld really come to life. Accordingly, what I seek to realize in the pages that follow is the embodiment of paradox. To that end, I will make use of *topology*, a field of study that is “rooted in the body” (Sheets-Johnstone 1990, 42)—as we will see in subsequent chapters.

2. PREVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

In chapter 1, the topological method of exploring the lifeworld is introduced by placing the mathematical discipline of topology in historical perspective and identifying the core assumptions common to its modernist and postmodern applications. The investigation culminates with the understanding that a different approach to topology is required for engaging with the lifeworld, a phenomenological rendering that does justice to the paradox of Being. The new topological initiative is carried forward in chapter 2 through the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s key ontological concept of *the flesh of the world* is topologically embodied via a phenomenological reading of the Klein bottle (the three-dimensional counterpart of the Moebius strip). But a further step is required in making the fleshly lifeworld a concrete reality. However suggestive the topological narrative may be, it is evidently not enough to write *about* the realm of “wild Being” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 211) and so assume the customary posture of authorial detachment and anonymity. If Being’s actual presence is to be secured in the ontological text, rather than merely predicating Being—signifying it in such a way that it is implicitly projected as exterior to the author’s semiotic act—the author must signify Being topologically by signifying *himself*. The self-signification of the text is taken up in the final section of chapter 2.

The first two chapters comprise part I of the book. This part is devoted to the topological realization of the three-dimensional lifeworld.

In part II, we recognize the existence of lower-dimensional lifeworlds and explore their interrelationships in depth. Chapter 3 introduces the lower dimensions via a late lecture by Heidegger on the ontological nature of time (“Time and Being,” 1962/1972). Here the Klein bottle, the Moebius surface, and two other paradoxical structures are shown to be members of a closely related topological family, each member of which embodies a dimension of the flesh in its own right. In chapters 4 and 5, the diachronic or developmental aspect of topological Being is examined and we see how the several dimensions of the flesh engage in dialectical processes of individuation in which they are organically transformed in relation to one another. To facilitate understanding of how this happens, a metaphor of nativity is invoked, with lower dimensions of Being seen as playing the role of “midwife” in the “birthing” of the higher, “motherly” dimensions.

Having introduced the lower topological dimensions in chapters 3 through 5, their concrete realization is carried forward in the next three chapters. The process is enacted in two stages. First, the relatively abstract treatment of lower dimensionality is fleshed out in chapters 6 and 7 by giving the dimensions more tangible content. Whereas three-dimensional Being is associated with the human *cogito* or thinking subject, the lower-dimensional orders of the flesh are related to noncognitive, nonhuman lifeworlds of ontological action. But, again, writing *about* wild Being does not suffice if Being is to make its presence felt in the text as a living reality. To realize lower-dimensional Being in this manner, the author must once more signify Being by signifying himself. Exploring the question of self-signification in chapter 8, we discover that the written text will need to be accompanied by texts of “greater density,” i.e., texts mediated not by written words but by palpable images, sounds, and root intuitions.

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Apeiron (Rosen 2004), the role of topological phenomenology is explored philosophically in the broad context of historical and cultural change.

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