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## A Heideggerian Perspective on Speculative Realism

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*Uma perspectiva heideggeriana sobre o realismo especulativo*

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### ABSTRACT

In spite of phenomenology's sometimes overtly antithetical relation to realism, recent literature in speculative realism draws heavy on phenomenological sources in order to strengthen its position. This article aims to look at Martin Heidegger's remarks on the relation between the human being and its world through the lens of Graham Harman's proposed litmus test concerning what constitutes 'real realism'. For a philosophical position to pass this test, a position must put object-object-relations on the same level as human-world-relations. With the help of Hans Jonas' theory of the meaning of metabolism, I will hold that Heidegger's own interpretation of his notion of care indeed places an all too restrictive emphasis on the human-world-relation, which unjustly excludes other living beings. However, while this means that animal-world-relations – or even amoeba-world-relations – should indeed be placed on the same level as human-world-relations, I see no evidence in Heidegger that suggests the need to broaden the scope further to include object-object-relations.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology. Realism. Care. Martin Heidegger. Hans Jonas. Graham Harman.

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## 1. Introduction

Phenomenology and realism are a difficult couple. We can see this in the overt idealism of Husserl, and in Heidegger's assertion that even though he wants to position himself outside of the realism-idealism dichotomy, idealism is the more sensible of the two positions (Heidegger, 1962, p. 251). Despite the mostly antagonistic role realism plays in Heidegger's philosophy, recent years have seen a multitude of realist interpretations of Heidegger's work. The most famous one of these being Graham Harman's take on Heidegger's analysis of tool-being.

In this article, I want to use Harman's definition of 'real realism' as a starting point to investigate whether or not Heidegger's philosophy is compatible with speculative realism. In order to do this, I will first shortly explain Harman's version of speculative realism as he puts it forward in *The Quadruple Object* (2011), focusing on one of its most essential traits, namely: that all relations are equally real. After that, I will explain Heidegger's difficult relation to this reading of the notion of realism, mainly focusing on two of his courses: *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (1985) and *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (2001). I will explain how the notion of care problematizes a thoroughly realist reading of Heidegger, because of its focus on human-world-relation. Finally, I will problematize Heidegger's notion of care by relating it to Hans Jonas' explanation of the metabolizing organism in his work *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (2001), thereby calling into question Heidegger's notion that only humans have relations their surrounding world.

## 2. Real realism

Graham Harman lucidly describes his realist position in *The Quadruple Object*. In Harman's realism, objects take central stage. Instead of undermining objects in favor of some deeper, ultimate layer of reality, or overmining them in favor of perceivable qualities, Harman defines objects by their "autonomous reality" (HARMAN, 2011, p. 19). Autonomous reality here means, in Harman's words: "emerging as something above their pieces, while also partly withholding themselves from relations with other entities." (Harman, 2011, p. 19).

Objects are independent realities that are irreducible to either more deeper, fundamental layers of reality, or their relation to other objects. However, even though objects cannot be reduced to their relations, Harman does place great emphasis on these relations. Specifically, he rejects the restrictive Kantian priority of the human-world-relation above all other types of relations. He writes:

Rejecting the post-Kantian obsession with a single relational gap between people and objects, I hold that the interaction between cotton and fire belongs on the same footing as human interaction with both cotton and fire. (HARMAN, 2011, p. 6)

So to believe in an independent reality turns out not to be enough in order to qualify as a realist, at least not as an interesting one. Harman therefore proposes a so-called litmus test in order to separate the realist wheat from the chaff:

[N]o philosophy does justice to the world unless it treats all relations as equally relations, which means translations or distortions. Inanimate collisions must be treated in exactly the same way as human perceptions, even if the latter are obviously more *complicated* forms of relation. (HARMAN, 2011, p. 46)

While Harman recognizes that Heidegger himself never critically examined the Kantian focus on human-world relations, he considers Heidegger's position to be ultimately compatible with a real realism, that is, a realism that place relations between objects on the same level as relations between human beings and objects.

In what follows, I will examine Heidegger's critical stance towards realism and his reasons for adopting this stance. The central notion in this examination is the notion of care, which I will relate to Jonas' notion of metabolism.

### 3. In-being

Heidegger explicitly deals with both object-object relations and his stance towards realism in the third chapter of the first division of *History of the Concept of Time* (1985), a course he taught in Marburg in the summer semester of 1925, which contains many of the ideas that would be come to fruition in *Being and Time* (1965). In this third chapter, Heidegger investigates the world as that *wherein* Dasein – the human being – always already is. Before going into detail about this notion of world, he first investigates what we mean with this in-being:

[I]t designates the kind of being of an entity which is 'in' another, the relation of something 'in' something. When we try to give intuitive demonstration to this 'in,' [...] we give examples like the water 'in' the glass, the clothes 'in' the closet, the desk 'in' the classroom. (HEIDEGGER, 1985, p. 158)

If this is how we understand in-being, then humans being in-the-world becomes a trivial occasion. I, being a human being, am in my office, the office is in Nijmegen, Nijmegen is in the Netherlands, the Netherlands is in Europe, Europe is in the world. Is this the way to understand human being in the world? The short answer is: no. This spatial determination is not the type of relation Heidegger is trying to describe when he says that human beings are always in-the-world:

But 'in-being' as a structure of the being of Dasein, of the entity which I am in each instance, does not refer to this being-in-one-another, 'being-in' as a spatial containment of entities which takes place in the form of an occurrence. (Heidegger, 1985, p. 158)

Rather, with a typical Heideggerian analysis of the etymology of the word 'in', he comes to the conclusion that in-being originally means to signify being familiar with, being at home with, dwelling. That is how he wants to use the term when he considers human beings to always already be in-the-world.

Being as in-being and 'I am' means dwelling with..., and 'in' primarily does not signify anything spatial at all but means primarily a *being familiar with*. (Heidegger, 1985, p. 158)

This notion of in-being is crucial to Heidegger, because it sheds some much needed light on the human world relation. For a long time knowing was seen as the most primary form of human-world relation, causing for all kinds of epistemological problems. According to Heidegger, these epistemological problems and the two most common ways of answering those problems are all due to a lack of attention to the phenomenon of in-being.

The so-called epistemological positions of *idealism* and *realism* and their varieties and mixtures are all possible only on the basis of a lack of clarity of the phenomenon of in-being[.] (Heidegger, 1985, p. 166)

Without delving any further into Heidegger's explication of worldhood, we can already see here that he apparently thinks the human-world relation is a special kind of relation. Humans are in-the-world in a different way than water is in a glass. However, this does

not necessarily mean that objects cannot also have relations to each other, which may be different in kind, but still on the same footing as human-world-relations.

His stance towards object-object-relations become clearer later in the chapter, in a paragraph on spatiality. In this paragraph, he wants to analyze the everyday spatiality of our surroundings. The fundamental concept here is remotion (*Entfernung*). For Heidegger, remotion is the basic notion of spatiality, from which all others are derived. And it quickly becomes clear that objects are only remote in relation to us:

[Remotion] refers rather to the temporally particular nearness or remotion of the chair or window to *me*. Only on the basis of this primary remotion, that the chair, insofar as it is there in a worldly way, as such is removed from me, as such has a possible nearness and distance to me, only on this account is it possible for the chair to be remote from the window.

What this amounts to, is saying that the chair has a certain spatial relation to me and the window has a spatial relation to me as well. Only in that light, from *my* perspective, can the chair and the window have a relation to each other. The chair can be too close to the window because the afternoon sun shines right in my eyes when I sit there reading a book, or too far away from the window for me to effectively spy on people passing by. The chair and window in themselves cannot in the same sense be said to close to – or remote from – each other.

#### 4. Care

At the core of the special emphasis Heidegger places on the human world relation is the notion of care, a notion at the center of a lot of Heidegger's earlier texts and lecture courses.<sup>2</sup> We find one of the earliest explicit mentions of the term in a course he teaches in his early Freiburg years. In the winter semester of academic year 1921/22 he teaches the course *Phenomenological interpretations to Aristotle* (2001) and explains the notion of care in the following way: "Living, in its verbal meaning, is to be interpreted according to its relational sense as caring: to care about something; to live from [on the basis of] something, caring for it." (Heidegger, 2001, p. 68). Care is used here to designate the way life is never isolated, but rather always involved in its environment. What is interesting

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar but more detailed examination of the notion of care, see: Miechels, 2021, p. 644-647

about this formulation, is that Heidegger relates care here to living, not to being human specifically. We will come back to this point.

In *History of the Concept of Time*, Heidegger gives a more restrictive determination of the notion of care: “Care is the term for the being of Dasein pure and simple. It has the formal structure, an entity for which, intimately involved in its being-in-the-world, this very being is at issue.” (Heidegger, 1985, p. 295). Here, care is no longer just linked to the being of living beings generally, but more specifically designated as the being of Dasein. Care, meant in this way, specifies that our relation to the world around us should always be understood in combination with the fact that our own being is always at issue for us.

Heidegger further explains this, when he says:

‘Its own being is the issue for Dasein’: This first presupposes that in this Dasein there is something like a *being out for something*. Dasein is out for its own being; it is out for its own being in order ‘to be’ this being. (Heidegger, 1985, p. 294)

What this being out for itself means, is that Dasein has to anticipate itself and its needs in its relation to the world. In that sense, care means always Dasein is always ahead of itself in a world in which it is intimately involved. Therefore, Heidegger formulates the formal structure of care as: “Dasein’s being-ahead-of-itself in its always already being involved in something.” (Heidegger, 1985, 294) This structure is of course a temporal one. Out for its own being, Dasein is always already involved in the world with a past and certain existing structures, and has to anticipate its needs in the future.

The notion of care Heidegger invokes here is meant to replace the notion intentionality (Denker, 2000, p. 69). Care is claimed by Heidegger to give a broader and richer account of our relation to the world than the notion of intentionality, which is only able to capture our theoretical comportment:

It could be shown from the phenomenon of care as the basic structure of Dasein that what phenomenology took to be intentionality and how it took it is fragmentary, a phenomenon regarded from the outside. (Heidegger, 1985, p. 303-304)

So, to sum up: for Heidegger, human beings are always in a relation of intimate involvement with their surroundings. They are not simply in-the-world like water is in a glass, but rather they dwell in meaningful surroundings, where objects can be frightening

or useful, chairs can be close or far away from tables and the others that I meet are always also involved in their own worlds. The ontological structure underlying this involvement is care. As beings whose being is an issue for themselves, human beings always have to be involved with their surroundings, being ahead of themselves.

## 5. Animals

Based on the *History of the Concept of Time*, we can see that Heidegger indeed prioritizes human-world-relations over object-object relations. We stumbled upon an ambiguity when it comes to living beings, however. For while the fully developed notion of care specifically designates the being of human beings, the earlier version of the notion from his Aristotle-lecture also includes life.

To get a clearer idea of Heidegger's stance on animals, we will take a look at his most explicit analysis of animal life, which he conducts in *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, a course he teaches in the winter semester of 1929/30. In this course, he recognizes that elucidating the concept of world has always been a central aim in his philosophy. He then announces that in this lecture he is going to try a different path towards clarifying the concept of world, namely a comparative examination of the way three different kinds of beings relate to the world. More precisely, he will analyze the concept of world by comparing the following three theses: “[1.] the stone (material object) is *worldless*; [2.] the animal is *poor in world*; [3.] man is *world-forming*.” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 177)

Heidegger first deals with the second thesis – that the animal is poor in world – since this appears to be the most difficult one. The reason for this is that the world-poverty of the animal seems to be somewhere in-between the world-formation of man and the worldlessness of the stone, because “[w]ith the *animal* we find a *having of world* and a *not-having of world*.” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 268). What exactly is the difference between the way the animal and the stone relate to the world? And what is the difference between the way the animal and the human being relate to the world?

The contrast between the world-poverty of the animal and the worldlessness of the stone is clarified by Heidegger by means of an example of a lizard and a stone. If a stone is lying on a path somewhere, it has no relation to this path: the stone won't notice

it if you pick it up and throw it in a pond or take it home, it has no access at all to the world surrounding it. However, when a lizard is basking in the sun on top of a rock, it does not do so by chance:

“The lizard basking in the sun on its warm stone does not merely crop up in the world. It has sought out this stone and is accustomed to doing so. If we now remove the lizard from its stone, it does not simply lie wherever we have put it but starts looking for its stone again, irrespective of whether or not it actually finds it.” (Heidegger, 2001, p 197)

So whereas the rock has no access to the world surrounding it at all, the lizard does seem to have some kind of access to the world, as shown by the fact that it explicitly seeks out the rock to sit on and tries to find it again when it is thrown off. This makes the way the lizard relates to the world seem similar of the way human beings relate to the world, so what exactly is the difference between the world-poverty of the animal and the world-forming of the human being?

Animal behavior is explained by Heidegger in terms of drives. Animals are driven towards such things as food and shelter, and because of these drives they have access to the objects in their environment that allow them to fulfill the needs that they are driven towards. To go back to the example of the lizard, because it is a cold blooded animal, it has a drive to warm up in the morning. Since stones become very warm when lying in the sun, the stone allows him to fulfill this need and therefore the lizard has access to the stone. The drives of the animals lock in to these parts of the environment that are relevant for the drive. These relevant parts of the animal’s environment therefore provoke the animal’s behavior, creating what Heidegger calls a ‘disinhibiting ring’ (Heidegger, 2001, p. 255) around the animal. What this means is that the animal is always surrounded by an environment in which it knows its way around, because the only objects that show up for the animal are objects that are relevant to its drives. It is because of this that Heidegger says that these objects disinhibit the animal’s behavior. So for example, the stone disinhibits the lizard to lie on it, meaning that the stone is normally unavailable to the lizard, until the time comes when his drives urge him to seek it out, for example because he needs it in order to warm up.

So the animal clearly has some manner of access to things other than itself. Yet, Heidegger maintains, the animal is never related to the world *as world*, or to other things *as beings*: “[...] the animal is related to other things. *Related to other things* – although



*these things are not manifest as beings*” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 253-254). Because of the fact that it is the lizard’s drive to become warm that gives him access to the stone in the first place, the stone is only ever available to him as a source of heat, never as a being of the type of a stone. Likewise, the rabbit is never available to the fox as another animal, but rather only as a prey and in the same way the fox is only a predator to the rabbit. If the fox and the rabbit would not have this hunter-predator relationship, neither would lock into the drives of the other, making them unavailable to each other. So this means: “The animal certainly has access to . . . and indeed to something that actually is. But this is something that *only we* are capable of experiencing and having manifest *as beings*.” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 296)

As mentioned the animal only has access to the things it needs at that moment. The lizard will only ever encounter anything when it serves a purpose for him in his current state. So it will encounter the stone as a source of heat when it needs to warm up in the morning, as a possible shelter when it is being chased by predators or as an obstacle when it needs to get to the other side of it. The lizard, however, will never recognize that it is in fact encountering the same stone in all these different occasions: it has no access to the stone as such. Therefore: “the animal [...] precisely does *not* stand alongside man and precisely has *no* world.” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 269). This does not mean that the animal has the same kind of relation to world as the stone, because the drives that characterize the animal constitute a kind of openness that the stone lacks altogether, which marks a fundamental difference between the animal and the stone. World-poverty is thus defined by Heidegger as a: “*not-having of world in the having of openness for whatever disinhibits*.” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 270).

So it is clear that for Heidegger, the stone does not have any sort of relation to the road on which it is lying, or the lizard that is resting upon it. However, the world-poverty of the animal remains a somewhat unclear notion. What does it mean for the animal to be incapable of considering the world *as* world or beings *as* beings? For on the one hand, the animal has to have access to the world as world in some sense, or it wouldn’t be able to meaningfully interact with it at all. On the other hand, as we have seen in the explication of the notion of care, in their involvement with the world, human beings also primordially anticipate themselves and their needs. Is that really that different from animal behavior? Harman recognizes the difficulties of Heidegger’s position here when he writes:

Obviously the animal must in some crude sense encounter world “as” world, or it would be the same sort of thing as a stone. But the human is supposed to possess a higher form of the as-structure, and the philosopher an even higher form of the “as” than the average human. [...] Never does [Heidegger] succeed in developing this rather abstract schema into a theory capable of accounting for diverse entities of various sorts. (Harman, 2011, p. 59)

With the notion of world-poverty, Heidegger seems to suggest an essential difference between humans and animals. However, based on Heidegger’s explanation of care in *History of the Concept of Time*, I will suggest that there actually seems to be equally little reason to exclude animals or even any other living being from this notion. Heidegger’s earlier mentioned formulation of the notion of care in the Aristotle lecture, seems to be the most consistent one in that sense. To elucidate this point, we will take a look at Hans Jonas’ analysis of animal life and the meaning of metabolism.

## 6. Jonas

In his essay *Is God a mathematician*, part of his book *The Phenomenon of Life*, Jonas employs the following thought experiment: When a fully mathematical, materialist God looks at an organism, what would they see? One thing becomes immediately very obvious, namely that there is a difference between the organism and other natural objects, with regard to the notion of identity. We say of this rock that it is and remains *this* rock because its material makeup remains more or less the same throughout time. We therefore say its identity is a material identity. The living being, however, is a metabolizing being, which means we should think of its identity in different terms:

In this remarkable mode of being, the material parts of which the organism consists at a given instant are to the penetrating observer only temporary, passing contents whose joint material identity does not coincide with the identity of the whole which they enter and leave, and which sustains its own identity by the very act of foreign matter passing through its spatial system, the living *form*. (Jonas, 2001, p. 75-76)

In the process of metabolism, the organism exchanges matter with its environment, through eating, drinking, breathing, excreting, etc. and with that constantly renews its physical makeup. It needs to do this to remain alive. We say of this living being that it remains *this* specific living being, not because it consists of the same matter, but because it remains alive over a period of time. A good example of a dramatic change in physical

makeup is the metamorphosis from tadpole to frog, or from a caterpillar to a butterfly. Even though the animal almost completely changes on the material level, we still say that it is the same being, because it retains the same living form over a certain period of time. Its identity is connected with its form of being alive; it enjoys a formal rather than physical identity.

What the mathematical God would see when they look at an organism, would be akin to a wave. A form that is retained by different material particles, a formal entity passively undergoing the changes of its physical components. However, says Jonas, we are living beings ourselves and therefore have insight knowledge of what it's like to be alive. From this perspective, we can see that the mathematical God would completely miss the point of being alive: "the mathematical God in his homogeneous analytical view misses the point of life itself: its being self-centered individuality, being for itself and in contraposition to all the rest of the world, with an essential boundary dividing "inside" and "outside" – notwithstanding, nay, on the very basis of the actual exchange." (Jonas, 2001, p. 79)

Based on this general characterization, Jonas sketches the organism in terms of four characteristics that define organic beings, of which the first is the most important and the rest is derived from this one. These characteristics are: needful freedom, world, the dimension of inwardness and the time horizon.

The most important, essential characteristic of an organism is that it stands in a dialectical relation of needful freedom towards matter. The identity of the organism is not dependent upon material identity, so in a certain sense, it enjoys a freedom from matter. The organism is able to change its physical makeup, without loss of its form; being alive. But, says Jonas, "Its 'can' is a 'must'" (Jonas, 2001, p. 83). In order to stay alive, the organism constantly *has* to change its physical makeup; if it stops doing that, it will die. The organism needs to eat, drink and excrete in order to stay alive. Thus we can see that the freedom from matter also brings about a certain dependence on matter. The organism therefore stands in a relation of needful freedom to matter.

The second characteristic is that of world. In order to provide itself with the matter needed to stay alive, the organism has got to have a certain access to the world around it, because that is where it finds its food. The metabolic need for matter therefore opens up a world and makes the organism transcend itself towards this world. This transcendence

to the world is always imbued with some sense of selfness or inwardness, the third characteristic. This inwardness is an expression of the fact that every organism is concerned with its own being. In order to continue its existence, the organism must stay alive and in order to stay alive it must satisfy its need for food, and feel frustration when its quest for food fails. It therefore needs a self that feels this satisfaction and frustration.

The last characteristic is the possession of a time horizon. As mentioned above, the organism transcends itself towards the world. Apart from a spatial horizon, however, the organism also opens up a temporal horizon. The dependence on matter brings about needs that need to be fulfilled in the future. The self-absorbedness of the organism is focused on continuation of existence through time. The organism transcends itself outwards in space and forwards in time.

These four characteristics tie in close with Heidegger's explanation of care in the *History of the Concept of Time*. The characteristic of needful freedom ties in with the fact that the caring beings relation to the world is always a being out for something, it needs something from the world. The characteristic of world ties in with the fact that as a being out for something, the caring being is always already involved in something, namely in the world. The characteristic of inwardness ties in with the idea that for a caring being its own being is at issue for itself, while the final structure of the time horizon ties in with the final formulation of the caring being as a being-ahead-of-itself in its already being involved in.

To sum up, I hope to have shown that based on Jonas' interpretation of metabolism, there is no essential difference between humans and animals, or between humans and any living beings. For Jonas, the mentioned characteristics hold for humans, as well as animals, plants and amoeba's. The difference between the way an amoeba relates to its surroundings and the way a human being relates to its surroundings, is a difference in degree, not a difference in kind. The essential difference for Jonas and Heidegger is between living beings and non-living beings. Living beings relate to their world because they need to in order to remain alive. Their caring, metabolizing existence constantly pushes them outwards and onwards, looking for the necessary materials to keep on living, and fleeing from threats and dangers. On the one hand, the lizard relates to the stone, because it needs the stone for warmth. If it doesn't do this, it ceases to exist. On the other hand, the stone does not relate to the lizard because it doesn't need to. Its

identity being physical instead of formal, the stone doesn't relate to the lizard because it doesn't need anything from the lizard.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that Harman proposes a litmus test for a philosophical position to qualify as real realism. This boils down to the question of whether or not the philosophical position in question treats object-object-relations and human-object-world as equally real. We have seen that Heidegger prioritizes human-world relations, stating that our relation to our surroundings is fundamentally different from the relation of water to a glass. This prioritization shines through in Heidegger's notion of care, which designates the specifically human way of relating to the world around us as a meaningful whole that matters to us in a variety of ways.

However, already at the very start, an ambiguity crept in with regard to this notion of care. For could the same things Heidegger is ascribing to the human being here not also be said about every living being. We have seen that in his earliest work which includes the notion of care, Heidegger did use it to designate the way of being of all living beings. However in his most explicit elucidation of animal life, Heidegger creates a distinction between the world-formation of humans and world-poverty of animal, thereby implicitly excluding animals from this notion of care.

By looking at Jonas' analysis of the organism, we have seen that this exclusion of animals from the notion of care seems to be questionable. All living beings – including humans as well as animals, plants and even amoeba – have a meaningful relation to the world around them, which they need in order to remain alive. So while Heidegger's philosophy, upon closer inspection, broadens the scope a bit beyond the priority of the human-world-relation, it still does not qualify as a real realist position in Harman's sense.

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