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## Dialogue - On pragmatic constructivism's social ontology

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“If I were a good man, I'd understand the spaces between friends.”

Pink Floyd, *If* (1970)

### 1 Introduction

Pragmatic constructivism is a research paradigm emphasising the researcher's direct involvement in the social settings in question. The main features of pragmatic constructivism are the actor's lifeworlds and language games, and the actor's ability, together with the researchers, to establish new language games and new concepts, thereby seeking to solve real problems (Henriksen, 2022).

The conceptualising method holds a central position in pragmatic constructivism. This method states that problems, conflicts, disagreements, and quarrels are often based on, and are founded in, different uses of language, words, and concepts, in other words, in misaligned language games. This method also states that the way to overcome disagreements is through *dialogue*, where the interlocutors jointly *speak* their way towards a common meaning, towards a new conception of the basis for said disagreements. As dialogue holds a central position in pragmatic constructivist theory and method it is worth taking a closer look at dialogue (Henriksen et al., 2004, pp. 152). This also means that new concepts and new language games are necessary to solve problems thus handling or managing, and facilitating, organisational changes, and for the introduction of new technologies. How? The means to conduct this approach to research is precisely the conceptualising method and dialogue between actor(s) and researcher (Nørreklit, 1978; Henriksen et al., 2004).

This dialogical approach is based on the idea that the relation between the interlocutors, between I and Thou, is a dialogical relation; this means that it is based on a mutual recognition grounded in language, i.e., dialogue. The description of dialogue, in e.g., Henriksen et al. (2004, pp. 152) was very much based on Gadamer's description of the dialogue as it is found in *Truth and Method* (1960/1992, pp. 362). Dialogue is seen here very much as an epistemological tool enabling the interlocutors to work out a common meaning through a Socratic dialogue. Even if there are some hints to a more fundamental – ontological – understanding of dialogue, as when Gadamer writes that one should ‘see the other truly as a Thou’, we need to look elsewhere for a more comprehensive understanding of this I-Thou relation Gadamer is referring to.

The philosophical debates on dialogue and the I-Thou relation were previously at the forefront. Names such as Martin Buber, Karl Löwith and Edith Stein struggled with the problem. Since then, debates have surfaced occasionally such as when Michael Theunissen published his book ‘*Der Andere*’ (*The Other*, 1977/1984) where he once again confronted dialogue through analyses of the philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber and their specific takes on intersubjectivity.

In this paper I try to sort out some of these debates about the I-Thou relationship, intersubjectivity, and dialogue. What would happen if dialogue were to be taken beyond purely epistemological questions into the realm of ontology? And what would such a journey reveal, if anything, for pragmatic constructivism? Theunissen informs us that we are not first human (the transcendental I, Dasein, ego, subject) and then social (inter-subjectivity); rather we become

human through our interaction with the Other, by being social, through our relation to others (Henriksen, 2019). This change in the conception of the intersubjective relation has consequences as it positions dialogue at the centre of our research. This raises the key question of the extent to which a pragmatic constructivist approach reveals or exhibits a social ontology? And if it does, where can it be found and what are the consequences of such a social ontology for research within this approach? In a final section I seek to reasonably plausibly respond to some of the questions that need further attention.

## 2 MITSEIN

The starting point for many discussions on dialogue begin with a critique of Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* (being-with) as it is found in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927/1962, section 26, pp. 153). Here Heidegger sketches out his take on intersubjectivity, but many critics have pointed to the fact that Heidegger's *Mitsein* is only briefly described in *Being and Time*. Therefore, it is often said that Heidegger's philosophy is unable to account for the Other, for the social elements of Dasein's being in the world (Theunissen, 1977/1984 pp. 167; Olesh, 2008; Herskowitz, 2019). In section 26 of *Being and Time*, called 'The Dasein of others and Everyday Being-with', Heidegger explains that Dasein is in the world and in that world, there are things that Dasein relates to, either as ready-to-hand or as present-at-hand. The question then is how Dasein relates to other Daseins – i.e., being social. Heidegger writes:

*'Of course Being towards Others is ontologically different from Being towards Things which are present-at-hand. The entity which is 'other' has itself the same kind of Being as Dasein. In Being with and towards Others, there is thus a relationship (Seinsverhältnis) from Dasein to Dasein.'*

(Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 162).

In his description of *Mitsein* Heidegger argues against a Cartesian description of the subject. *Mitsein* is anti-solipsistic. Dasein is always in a world with others, even when alone. This is because Dasein is in a world made of things made by others and used by others. This also includes language – Dasein did not invent language, but it was handed over by others. This has to do with Dasein's *thrownness* - that Dasein is in a world that is already extant (Gadamer, 2000). If we add to that Heidegger's concepts of care, *sorge*, solicitude, and the concept of *Das Man*, it is obvious that Heidegger's description of Dasein's relation to The Other is, from its outset, social. Even if this is the case, the idea of *Mitsein* has been heavily criticised. First, because of the 'thinness' of the description of *Mitsein* in *Being and Time* (1927/1962, section 26). Critics claim that the idea of *Mitsein* is underdeveloped (Olafson, 1998; Gallagher & Jacobson, 2014). Even Gadamer is in broad agreement with this when he writes: '*Mitsein*, for Heidegger was a concession he had to make, but one that he never really got behind (...) it is, in truth, a very weak idea of the other' (Gadamer, 2006, p. 23).

A more substantial critique is expressed in what has become known as *Dialogism*. This critique was most prominently put forward by Martin Buber in his *Between Man and Man* (Buber, 1947) and on several other occasions (Buber, 1970; Novak, 1985). Buber claims that Heidegger, by taking a point of departure in Dasein's relation to his own being, is unable to establish a meaningful relation to the Other. If the main concern is the being that is aware of his own being, it is, according to Buber, an anthropology and therefore only partly able to show us human existence - Dasein's relation to himself but not the whole of life, which also includes the Other. If Dasein's relation to the Other is through solicitude, then the relation is not a relation that is essential to man, as solicitude is only the means by which Dasein is aware of himself. It follows that Heidegger's analyses misses out a very important aspect of human life, and of lifeworlds, namely the relation to the Other. Here we could say that Heidegger's *Mitsein*, his idea of care in all his anti-solipsist stance, is only to discover about Dasein's being, it does not include the relation to the Other.

Following this critique, Buber turns to the relation to the Other. If Dasein's other is only an object of consciousness, through solicitude, then the relation is not a mutual relation. This means that Heidegger again misses out on an important aspect of Dasein, the mutuality that is an essential part of being human – Dasein's relation to the Other is determined by the fact that the Other is also a Dasein. From this point, Buber continues with a religious critique of Heidegger's inability to account for man's relation to the Absolute. I will leave this aspect of Buber's work here, as this goes beyond the analysis presented in this paper.

## 3 DER ANDERE

Heidegger and Buber met in 1957 and they had the opportunity to discuss their disagreements. There is no account of these conversations during their long walks together. But in later interviews, according to Buber, they never reached any agreement on the subject matter: that is for later generations to figure out (Olesh, 2008; Mendes-Flohr,

2014; Herskowitz, 2019). The meeting in 1957 between Heidegger and Buber was viewed at the time as controversial – the Jewish mystic and the Nazi-professor (Mendes-Flohr, 2014). Buber’s analysis of Heidegger’s *Mitsein* has also met some criticism, which I shall return to later in this paper. One of those that took on the task that Heidegger and Buber left unresolved was German philosopher Michael Theunissen in *Der Andere* (Theunissen, 1977/1984). Theunissen analyses the social ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber. He criticises Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre for being unable to fully do away with, or escape from, the Cartesian legacy. They all face the problems of transcendentalism, meaning that they are trapped in the idea of the ego, the I or the *Dasein* and are therefore unable to convincingly argue for the relation to the Other. Instead Theunissen turns to Buber and his I-Thou relation and what he calls the ‘Between’, (The space between friends?). In an analysis of Alfred Schütz’s *Phenomenology of the Social World* (Schütz, 1967), Theunissen shows that Schütz has severe difficulties arguing for what Schütz calls *Umwelt* and *Mitwelt* – surrounding world and with-world. Because Schütz is still trapped in the transcendental perspective and the other is someone confronting the I and in both ‘worlds’ Schütz is therefore unable to conceptualise the Thou. He is still starting out with the I, not fully recognising the other as a Thou (Theunissen, 1984, p. 346; Henriksen, 2019). Even if Theunissen recognises that Buber’s philosophy is not worked sufficiently through to the same extent as Heidegger’s in *Being and Time*, he maintains that it is necessary to get rid of Husserl’s transcendental ego, and turn to a dialogical approach, if one wants to establish a social ontology. One can argue that the I-Thou and the Between are better points of departure to start the discussion of a social ontology.

Others, however, are not so sure. According to Knudsen (2023), Sorial (2005), McMullin (2013) and others, Heidegger’s *Mitsein*, is actually able to account for the Other, the social and in all of man’s relations to each other. In his book ‘*Heidegger’s Social Ontology*’, Knudsen traces Heidegger’s developmental change in his idea of the social. In his early writings Heidegger worked with concepts like *Umwelt*, *Mitwelt* and *Selbstwelt* (surrounding world, with-world, self-world), trying to conceptualise the social, but leaving this idea behind for the idea of *Mitsein*. *Mitsein* is then presented, first as *Mitdasein* and later as *Mitsein*. With this *Mitsein* and with concepts like *Cura* (Care) and *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) mentioned above, it is possible to see that with *Mitsein* we are social. We are born into an already existing world, and in that already existing world we are given language and that is a world where we care for others. Based on his analyses, Knudsen concludes that ‘Without sociality, no *Dasein*’ and therefore *Mitsein* is a necessary and constitutive part of *Dasein*’s being in the world (Knudsen, 2017, p. 728).

## 4 GADAMER’S CRITIQUE

Gadamer, in later writings as well as in interviews, has criticised both the dialogical approach (Buber and Theunissen) and Heidegger’s *Mitsein*. In the interview with Dottori, Gadamer later brought forward the same arguments about *Mitsein* when he claimed: ‘Indeed, even as he was developing the idea (of *Mitsein*), he wasn’t really talking about the other at all. *Mit-sein* is, as it were, an assertion about *Dasein*, which must naturally take *Mit-sein* for granted’ (Gadamer, 2006, p. 23).

As noted above, we based our approach to dialogue very much in line with Gadamer’s description of dialogue as it is found in *Truth and Method* (Henriksen et al, 2004, pp. 152). Gadamer also presented his critique of the dialogical approach in several articles (e.g., Gadamer, 1999 & 2000) and in some interviews from his later years (see e.g., Gadamer, 2000; 2006; Palmer, 2001). His arguments are quite straight forward and follow the broad contours of Heidegger’s *Mitsein* – which he admittedly found to present ‘a very weak idea of the other’.

First, Gadamer turns to language. Dialogism is based on the idea of the dialogue between I and Thou. Therefore, the dialogical approach presupposes language, and with language we already have the relationship between I and Thou: when we have language, we already have intersubjectivity, dialogue, and the I-thou relationship (Vessey, 2005). ‘We are conversation’ as Gadamer put it in his interview with Carsten Dutt (Gadamer, in Palmer, 2001, p. 39).

Secondly, Gadamer finds that the I-Thou relation is not necessarily a symmetrical relation, as I am not necessarily my Thou’s Thou. There could be all sorts of other things involved in a relation, such as, e.g., power. Therefore, the I-Thou relation cannot be the only relation. The asymmetry also gives the I primacy over the Thou and it follows that this I-Thou is unable to fulfil its own ambition - this is not how we conduct dialogues, where there is a mutual relationship involved.

But, according to Gadamer there are other problems as well. The I-Thou could be seen as an instantiation of the relationship. The introduction of the Between appears to act as an unnecessary super-subject that simply stands in the way of our understanding of the relationship. Because there can be social action, such as in a play or game, where we do not need to point to any specific actor who initiates the action. It is still mutual, and we do not need the Between, as it is unnecessary for establishing the relation. And even further, Gadamer argues that Dialogism cannot establish a larger social community (Vessey, 2005).

‘Oh, please spare me that completely misleading concept of intersubjectivity, of a subjectivism doubled’.  
 (Gadamer, in conversation with Carsten Dutt, in Palmer, 2001)

In all, the idea of Inter-subjectivity, even in the guise of the I-Thou, will always demand subjectivity. The whole idea of intersubjectivity is based on the idea of the subject, and then we are back to square one. Heidegger had already, in *Being and Time*, done away with the subject and there is no reason to get back to that idea (Gadamer, 2000). Instead Gadamer argues that we need to get back to Aristotle and his idea of friendship.

*Consider what Aristotle argues are the minimal conditions for any kind of friendship: goodwill, mutuality, and recognition. All three are present in any dialogue so long as we understand dialogue as Gadamer does: collaborating to come to a shared, articulate understanding about a subject matter.*

(Vessey, 2005)

Gadamer identifies four Aristotelian conditions for friendship: friends live together, friendship is based on self-love, friendship is possible with anyone, friendship is a shared pursuit of the Good. These requirements seem rather extreme and demand some clarification. That friends live together does not necessarily mean under the same roof, but simply that they share something which they have in common. In a note Vessey (2005) points out that conversation has a Latin root that means living together. Once again, Gadamer points to Heidegger’s *Mitsein* as the basis for living together and for dialogue. Self-love means knowing oneself. Knowing that I do not know and knowing my limitations. Consequently, this means that I recognize that someone else can tell me something that I do not know. ‘Only friends can advise’ says Gadamer. From this it follows that in a dialogue I am willing to grant the other authority, willing to let the other tell me something. ‘Openness to the other, then, involves recognising that I myself accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so’ (Gadamer, 1992/1960, p. 361). Being friends with anyone (even master with slave) means that I, because of self-love, am willing to make friends with whom I have something in common and are willing to listen as they might have something to say to me. The final condition, pursuit of good, is seen in the dialogue, where the aim is to reach a shared meaning of the subject matter. Then we are back again to dialogue.

Gadamer’s account of intersubjectivity as friendship, his replacement of the subject with the concept ‘person’ and his return to Heidegger’s *Mitsein* raises just as many questions as it possibly answered. Because who is the person? And we might plausibly ask if this Gadamerian idea of Friendship is not as underdeveloped as were Heidegger’s *Mitsein* and Buber’s I-Thou. There clearly remains much to do.

## 5 WHAT TO MAKE OF IT ALL?

It appears that every argument in this debate is met with a counterargument, and it appears to be a very daunting task grappling with terms such as *Mitsein*, social ontology, intersubjectivity, I-Thou etc. Taking dialogue beyond epistemology into the realm of ontology opens a much, much larger debate than I had ever anticipated. Maybe I should not have been so surprised? Buber and Heidegger are not alone in this. Names such as Karl Löwith and Edith Stein surface in these debates – even a very young Gadamer (Gadamer, 2000). Bakhtin followed Buber and argued for dialogues. Theunissen and *Der Andere* we met above, but many others attempt to deal with the same problem. Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*, where he stated that we are ‘aiming at a good life lived with and for others in just institutions’. Honneth in *Struggle for Recognition*, Arendt with her concept of *plurality*. There is certainly no shortage of flavours of thought to get one’s teeth into.

I could now perhaps conclude that Theunissen was on the right track when he argued, with Buber, that ‘in the beginning is the relation’: we become human through our interaction with the Other. In addition, some would argue for a further investigation into *Mitsein* (Knudsen, 2023), that is, even if it is underdeveloped in Heidegger’s own writings, the idea is so strong that it may be the road to follow (Olafson, 1998; McMullin, 2013).

While many questions appear to remain unresolved, we might, for now, simply be confused on a somewhat higher level. It is, however, inescapable that social ontology and dialogue are of the greatest importance. If we wish to attempt to understand social change and if we want to solve problems in our research, then dialogue is a very good point of departure.

## 6 Pragmatic Constructivism's Social Ontology

Dialogue provides a method for understanding lifeworlds and language games, and as a method for conceptualisation. Therefore, it is by now easy to conclude that Pragmatic Constructivism *has* a social ontology. The emphasis on lifeworld, language, language games, dialogue and conceptualisation all point to the relation to the Other. Whether this relation should be called intersubjectivity, I-Thou, The Between, Mitsein or friendship is of less importance here. What is important is the ability to acknowledge the Other, to take the Other seriously in the research process and to be able to engage in a dialogue, conceptualise and thereby develop concepts and language games and, ultimately, lifeworlds. And then we are right back to the question of pragmatic constructivism's ontology and the ability to solve problems through dialogue. With dialogue, and guided by the conceptualising method, it should be possible to do all this in a hopefully ethically responsible manner.

Starting out with lifeworld (Nørreklit, 2006) and language games (Nørreklit, 2020) we have already presupposed the social, just as Gadamer pointed out in his critique of Dialogism (Gadamer, 2001). The lifeworld obviously includes the other (Paahus, 1988, Nørreklit, 2006), and language games also include the other, as private language do not exist (Wittgenstein, 1958, §243). Wittgenstein in his description of the language game was pointing to this when he noted:

*'Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.'*

(Wittgenstein, 1953, §7).

That is, language and language games exist in an intimate relationship with the lifeworld: 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §19). This emphasis on language as a play – language games – is 'an attack on isolated subjectivity' (Lawn, 2005, p. 23). This is also emphasised in Gadamer's description of play (Gadamer, 1960/1975, pp. 101). That is, talking of language is also talking about the activities which this language is part of – therefore the play metaphor – which again means talking of a lifeworld – or form of life as Wittgenstein calls it (Hunter, 1968). This means that language games and lifeworld are each other's prerequisite, they are inseparable, and they also incorporate an idea of the Other.

But neither lifeworld, nor language games can guarantee that we take the Other seriously, that the relationship is a mutual relationship, that the other is a Thou – this was also part of Gadamer's critique of Dialogism, the I-Thou relationship is not necessarily a mutual relationship. Oppressive lifeworlds and oppressive language games most certainly do exist. But following pragmatic constructivism's conceptualising method, with its emphasis on dialogues, it is obvious that the idea of concept development requires a mutual relationship, mutual recognition, between the interlocutors. If the conceptualisation is to be successful, we need to recognise the other truly as a Thou (Nørreklit, 1978, Henriksen et al, 2004). Adding to this, pragmatic constructivism's ideas of '*topoi*' is also a confirmation of the mutual relationships which is necessary for successful communication and actions in any lifeworld (Nørreklit et al, 2006).

Taking dialogue as the basis for a social ontology, as proposed by Theunissen, we would from the outset have an ethics involved. Much of modern management theory – and a lot of other social theory for that matter – is based on systems, structures, and contingencies and the Other has completely disappeared from these theories. Allowing dialogue to lead we can view the actors involved as actors with intentions who are capable of contributing to problem solving and contributing to any desired solutions or social changes. In this manner we can contribute to the contextual field in question as well as to the scientific community. And we would be able to do all this without falling into that trap which Donna Haraway (1997) called 'The Modest Witness' – the type of researcher who stands outside the social setting in question and with a God's eye perspective is, allegedly, able to report about the actions involved as systems, structures, and contingencies. With a dialogical perspective we acknowledge that this is simply not possible. Instead, we engage through dialogue and do so in a hopefully ethically responsible way. So, any research and any research method involving direct contact with actors in the field, be it action research, actor's methods, participatory methods of any kind, there will be many things to consider in the various questions related to dialogue, the Other and dialogism.

I started out in this paper asking whether a pragmatic constructivist approach reveals or exhibits a social ontology? It is now possible to reasonably conclude, based on key insights from the debates mentioned above, albeit briefly, that pragmatic constructivism does have, in fact must have, a social ontology – even if sometimes implicitly. That said, there is clearly much more to be done to more clearly delineate the contours of such an ontology and how it may guide, or impact on, our research endeavours from the standpoint of a pragmatic constructivist approach.

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