Beyond latour and Heidegger or: How to avoid conceptual gaps when clarifying human sociality

by
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Actor-Network Theory (ANT) seeks to overcome the micro-macro gap in social theory. It aims to do so by abolishing the distinction between, on the one hand, individuals and, on the other, socio-material structures. This article argues, however, that ANT has not sufficiently managed to close the gap because it fails to take a particular kind of social relation into account. It leaves aside early infant-caregiver dyads whose mode of coordination does not fit ANT's socio-material ontology. With the purpose of avoiding a gap in relation to human social relations, the article presents an account of the phenomenon 'phenomenal distance'. Specifically, it explores how the transition from unskilled to skilled socio-material engagements can be clarified by reference to embodied habits. Thus, it accounts for how the unskilled individual comes to participate in social practices.

1. The 'micro-macro gap' in Actor-Network Theory

Considering our everyday life, it makes good sense to follow Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) by assuming that human sociality is based on materiality. We not only live amidst objects including houses, cars and TVs but also use these as mediators of our relations with others. Consequently, socio-practical relations and conventions tend to shape the ways we relate to other people by making use of things. Latour presents ANT as a descriptive theory that has no apparent interest in answering the 'why'-question related to human sociality. Proponents of ANT thus describe socio-material relations and leave aside how socio-material networks emerge. Nevertheless, Latour hints at the constitutional issue

when arguing that ANT avoids the traditional micro-macro gap in social theory. In so doing, he alludes to how sociologists have made unsuccessful attempts at closing the gap between on the one hand, individuals (i.e. the micro) and, on the other, social structures (i.e. the macro) (cf. Turner & Boynes 2006). For Latour, they have failed to do so because they consider the gap as an objective fact. He contests this idea, arguing that the gap is merely a conceptual distinction. One must thus develop an adequate terminology for describing social phenomena, and the solution, he claims, is ANT. Latour writes:

> The notion of network allows us to dissolve the micro macro-distinction that has plagued social theory from its inception. The whole metaphor of scales going from the individual, to the nation state, through family, extended kin, groups, institutions etc. is replaced by a metaphor of connections (Latour 1996: 5).

Although Latour self-confidently states that ANT-terminology avoids the micro-macro gap, my argument is that ANT leaves out key social relations. In fact, ANT opens another gap by using a terminology which makes the assumption that the social and the material are intertwined. In so doing, ANT neglects an important aspect of human social reality by adopting a socio-materialistic ontology that conflates phenomena in social and material aspects. This conflation is reflected in ANT's notion of *actor*.[1] For Latour, we humans cannot be separated from material engagements. Because without materiality

> human actors would remain, even in the midst of the best-designed frame, unable to interpret what is giving: they would remain as unconnected to the meaning of [a given] site as a cat prowling on Acropolis (Latour 2005: 206).

For Latour, humans are essentially characterised by sense-making activi-

ties which revolve around material objects (2005: 205). As actors, however, we partake in networks, meaning that materiality plays a vital enabling condition for not only our social relations but also our sense-making. In short, human existence is partially material.

Inspired by Trevarthen's work (1979; 1993), on the other hand, Gallagher (2011) shows that it makes good sense to treat social reality as comprised of, not only ANT-style socio-material relations, but also what he calls proto-social relations. Accordingly, he distinguishes between two kinds of infant intersubjectivity. This conceptual distinction is also found in the work by Tomasello (1995) where human social reality appears to have a twofold nature. In Gallagher's terms, this appears as two kinds of intersubjectivity:

1) The first characterises the children from birth and is synonymous with innate or early-developed sensory-motor capacities that bring the child into relation with others and allow him/her to interact with them (Gallagher 2011: 60).

2) The second kind of intersubjectivity emerges when children are around one year of age and actively "begin to co-constitute the meaning of the world in their interactions with others" (Gallagher 2011: 62).

In primary intersubjectivity, child and caretaker engage in *dyadic coordination* (cf. Trevarthen 1979). Early interaction draws heavily on basic embodied gestures including mimesis, touch, voice and gaze following. Here, coordination does not involve manipulation of extrinsic objects. Rather, it constitutes a primary kind of sociality deemed *proto-social* in that it is simpler than later sociality and phenomena that include societies, organizations etcetera. By contrast, secondary intersubjectivity is synonymous with the socio-material networks that ANT explores. At this point, the child engages in triadic interactions, meaning that s/he not only relates to the caretaker but also to impersonal thirds (i.e. material objects). S/he thus engages in what Trevarthen (1979) calls *triadic coor-*

dination. This kind of coordination can then develop into more complex social interactions.

ANT's conceptual distinction between proto-sociality and socio-material relations has many problematic consequences. In what follows, I argue that it undermines Latour's attempt to dissolve the micro-macro gap because it commits ANT to a strictly socio-materialistic ontology. For this reason, ANT ignores proto-social relations that are dyadic and that, for the same reason, do not revolve around things and objects. Further, it underlines why the ANT perspective cannot overcome the micro-macro gap without giving rise to a new gap. By focusing exclusively on socio-material reality, ANT keeps silent about proto-social relations. As a result, ANT faces an unresolved constitutional issue which arises from its failure to clarify how proto-sociality evolves into socio-material reality. For self-evident reasons, ANT is of little help due to its self-proclaimed status as a descriptive theory and explicit commitment to a socio-materialistic ontology. Consequently, we need to go beyond ANT in order to avoid creating a new gap.

2. An appeal to phenomenology

A way to avoid a gap when clarifying social relations is by exploring human sociality from a phenomenological perspective and, more specifically, by using this to pursue the phenomenon of *distance*. Before making this step in the argument, it is imperative to consider what a phenomenological perspective entails.

One might be inclined to think that human phenomenology is reducible to the self-conscious subject's point of view, or what Descartes first introduced as the *cogito*. Yet, in the first chapter of *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that human existence involves more than what can be revealed by a *cogito* – or: an *I think*. He stresses that a Cartesian terminology is unsuitable for a phenomenological analysis since it ignores human existential attitudes that enable each of us to relate to our surroundings.

For Heidegger,

> the intention of the existential analytic can be clarified by considering
> Descartes, to whom one attributes the discovery of the *cogito sum* as
> the point of departure for all modern philosophical questioning.
> He investigates the *cogitare* of the *ego* – within certain limits.
> But the *sum* he leaves completely undiscussed, even though it is
> just as primordial as the *cogito* (2010: 45).

The focus of phenomenological research is therefore not limited to a subject's consciousness because this would neglect how subjects actively stand over against, and are situated in, 'the world.' Reference to the *sum* thus picks out what, for Heidegger, is lost in Cartesian approaches that aim to clarify the cogito - or: the existence of the experiencing subject.[2] Heidegger consequently introduces the concept of *Dasein* which, literally translated, means *being there*. *Dasein* designates the being who questions itself in its being as one who "is always we ourselves". Consequently, the "being of this being [*Dasein*] is always mine" (2010: 41). For this reason, *Dasein* should not be seen as *cogito + sum*. Heidegger underlines this when he counters Augustine who rhetorically asks "But what is closer to me than myself?", by stating that what "is ontically nearest and familiar is ontologically the farthest" (2010: 43). Heidegger introduces human existence – or: *Dasein* – as the ontological precedent for reflective subjectivity and, hence, the Cartesian *cogito*. Instead, *Dasein* is characterized by its immediate *being- in-the-world* which for Heidegger is synonymous with our *average everydayness* i.e. our pre-reflective socio-material engagements with things and people.

 Heidegger and Latour have somewhat comparable views on human subjectivity. Latour assumes that human sense-making per definition involves a relation to something material, be it a tool or some other thing (cf. above). ANT's notion of *actor* is thus broadly in accord with Heidegger's view that the relation between subject and thing is a basic

constituent of human existence. In placing *Dasein* first, Heidegger also gives weight to how humans partake in material engagements. Specifically, this is underlined in the primordial existential attitude of *care* ('Sorge') which Heidegger presents as the ontological prerequisite for human existence (2010: 57). We humans exist as *Dasein*, he argues, because we take care of things and people. Heidegger considers caring as our basic existential attitude. It is when taking care of something that we engage with the world. This means that all reflective attitudes derive from our immediate relation with the world and its objects:

> *Dasein* is never "initially" a sort of being which is free from being-in,
> but which at times is in the mood to take up a "relation" to the world.
> This taking up of relations to the world is possible only *because*,
> as being-in-the-world, *Dasein* is as it is (2010: 57).

But we cannot use Heidegger's account to avoid a gap with regards to different kinds of social relations. Following Brandom, this is because Heidegger's phenomenology assumes "the ontological primacy of the social" (Brandom 2005: 216). More specifically, Heidegger asserts the primacy of our skillful socio-material relations – a point on which I expatiate in the next section. Given the primacy of the social, Heidegger neither can, nor expresses any interest in wanting to, explain the constitution of human socio-material reality and, for the same reason, how *Dasein* comes into existence. Rather, *Dasein* is taken for granted in the sense that Heidegger presupposes the social nature of the human subject in its various existential modes. One indication of this is that he refers to *Dasein* as a being having certain traits that 'always-already' pertain to it. This relates to the fact that *Dasein*, on Heidegger's view, lacks a point of origin and, for that matter, any constitutive logic. Heidegger emphasizes this when stating that the world is given beforehand to *Dasein*:

> Things at hand are encountered within the world [which] is already

discovered beforehand together with everything encountered, although not thematically [...]. World is that in terms of which things at hand are at hand for us (2010: 81-82).

Heidegger thus takes the socio-material nature of human existence for granted. Nevertheless, it may well be possible to account for at least one vital aspect of Dasein's constitution by appealing to Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy.

3. *Uncovering phenomenological distance and the nearness of socio-material relations*

Despite Heidegger's narrow view on human sociality, I hold that we can avoid a conceptual gap when we clarify social relations by turning to *phenomenological distance*. More specifically, we can do so by focusing on *nearness*. Before presenting an account of nearness, however, I stress that the fundamental importance of this kind of distance appears in Heidegger's writings. He argues that human individuals typically relate to things at hand which, consequently, are *nearby* ('in der Nähe'). As we shall see, however, his notion of nearness involves a degree of distance and, for this reason, should not be considered as a primordial nearness. Below, I argue that Heidegger's notion of distance pertains to subjects who are already partaking in socio-material practices and, for this reason, are necessarily able to engage with things and people in a skillful manner.

For Heidegger, human existence involves phenomenological distance. But this kind of distance differs from its 'objective' counterpart (i.e. that which is represented by Euclidean space). For as Heidegger posits: "[w]hat is supposedly 'nearest' is by no means that which has the smallest distance 'from us'" (2010: 104). Phenomenological distance cannot be 'measured' by appeal to the metric system or any other 'objectifying' system of measurement. On the contrary, this kind of distance is to be understood in strict phenomenological terms, in the sense that it is relative to our

embodiment, experience and engagement with the world.

Heidegger argues that *Dasein's* everyday activities play out in social practices through skillful relations with tools and other useful things (cf. Brandom 2005: 218). These socio-material engagements are characterized by a degree of phenomenal distance, since we bring certain aspects of the world near as we engage with things. For as Heidegger states, "things at hand of everyday dealings have the character of *nearness*" (2010: 100). A thing must be within reach in order for us to take hold of it. Also, he points out that "things constantly at hand, with which circumspect being-in-the-world reckons from the outset, have their place" (2010: 101). The fact that things 'have their place' implies that, in terms of distance, they are phenomenologically situated as a **there**:

> Place is always the definite "over there" and the "there" of a useful thing *belonging there*. In each and every case *belonging there* corresponds to the useful character of what is at hand (2010: 100).

When things are 'at hand' they are near as a **there**. The fact that they are experienced as 'over there' rather than **here** underlines that Heidegger's notion of nearness involves a minimum of distance. When it comes to *Dasein*, we experientially relate to the purposes of things, and not to the things themselves (i.e. things considered in isolation). For as Heidegger puts it, it is "[t]he work we primarily encounter when we deal with things and take care of them" (2010: 69). Our practical dealings with things transcend the things themselves, meaning that the **there** of a particular thing is constituted by means of our practical orientation towards it and the fact that we actively use it in relation to a concrete purpose. Phenomenologically, the thing is a *thing-in-use*.

But the nearness of the **there** is not a primordial phenomenological nearness. The reason for this is the following: A phenomenal **there** tacitly presupposes that the human subject (*qua* its *Dasein*) is already socialized and has acquired sufficient practical knowledge and skills.

Thus, the subject can use everyday tools and objects without reflecting on what these things are, how to use them, and so on. In other words, our practical knowledge lets us *take care* of things: it allows for *thing-in-use* to be a category. Accordingly, we pre-reflectively engage in socio-material relations and, by so doing, partake in social practices. However, our primordial material engagements are far from skillful and, hence, do not involve a **there**.[3] This is implicit in the fact that human practical relations are not just based on a tacit understanding of what a given thing is and can be used for, but also on how it feels to use the thing. As Malafouris rightly notes, our material engagements typically involve "thinking and feeling *with*" things (2014: 143). As we skillfully engage with a thing, we experientially transcend it. To paraphrase Heidegger: when using a hammer to put a nail in a wall, we focus on its purpose (its relation to the nail and the wall), and not on the hammer by itself. By doing so, we experientially transcend the hammer in its phenomenal presence: its **here**. Phenomenologically, however, useful things themselves are nearer to us than is their functional **there**. The hammer will always be closer to us than are the nail and the wall. Nevertheless, we are practically concerned with the latter when using the hammer.

Besides, Heidegger notes, for practical usage to be smooth, we must refrain from reflecting on how things appear to us since:

> the less we just stare at the thing called hammer, the more we take hold of it and use it, the more original our relation to it becomes and the more undisguisedly it is encountered as what it is, as a useful thing (Heidegger 2010: 69).

Sutton (2007) also underlines the importance of abstaining from reflecting on one's skilled actions as one performs them. For instance, being a good cricketer implies that, when batting, one must avoid thinking about what one is doing. Instead, one should enact a flow and 'live' (rather than 'think') one's relation to the bat and the ball. The same holds for many of our everyday

activities including taking part in first-order language, or *languaging* (cf. Cowley 2011). For instance, some might have a hard time remembering the pin code of their credit card when they are not in front of an ATM and fail to enact their pre-reflective, embodied memory of the pin code.

Heidegger argues that we do not really notice the useful things in themselves, unless they suddenly come to have a weird feel or break down. For Heidegger, the pre-reflective subject starts focusing on things themselves when they have stopped working, and a shift in attention occurs. The thing itself is now the focal point because it has become *conspicuous* ('auffallend') (2010: 72). Also, its **there** has disappeared, since the thing is no longer being used in relation to its purpose. Thus, the subject has stopped being concerned about the thing's purpose. This underlines that a useless thing lacks the **thereness** of a useful thing: in fact, the **here** of the useless thing has taken its place.

In our everyday practical dealings, useful things have phenomenal presence when we use them. The same does not hold for things that are useless: useless things are of no use. I hold that, in terms of phenomenological nearness, a useful thing is present as a **tacit here**. The useful hammer is obviously present in the sense that we experience it. But we do not focus on it as such. Rather, we focus on the hammer's purpose, and, consequently, on its **there**. Only in a tacit manner do we experience the fully functioning hammer as being **here**. For this reason, the **tacit here** is synonymous with the phenomenal presence of a thing-in-use. And the **here** is 'tacit' because we experientially transcend the thing by using it. The functional breakdown of the thing, however, involves a shift in phenomenological distance from **there** to **here** or: from purpose (*qua* thing-in-use) to the considered thing itself.

But why even bother with phenomenal distance? We have seen that skilled socio-material relations imply two kinds of nearness: in social practices, the subject is phenomenally relating to not only a **there** but also a **tacit here**. But this does not hold for other kinds of social relations (including *dyadic coordination*), or when an unskilled subject partakes

in *triadic coordination* (see, for instance, Perinat & Sadurni 1999). Unfortunately, due to his focus on the skilled individual (i.e. its *Dasein*), Heidegger does not offer any clarification on the social relations preceding *Dasein*: he has no interest in investigating what we could call pre-*Dasein*. I hold that, notwithstanding this, it is possible to account for the transition from pre-*Dasein* to *Dasein* by considering phenomenal distance. In fact, by doing so, we also avoid opening up a new conceptual gap when clarifying human social relations.

4. *Avoiding the gap: From 'overt here' to 'there'*

Having argued that the **there** of our skilled material engagements involves a **tacit here**, I now turn to phenomenological distance and, specifically, to the two kinds of nearness and the way they are related. I do so in order to clarify the transition from proto-sociality to socio-material relations or, in Heideggerian terms, the transition from pre-*Dasein* to *Dasein*. But first I will show that human sociality involves two varieties of nearness, 'tacit' and 'overt'.

Clearly, the **tacit here** present in Heidegger's account concerns relations with things-in-use and presupposes, at least historically, what Trevarthen (1979) calls *triadic coordination*. These relations involve a skilled subject (i.e. a *Dasein*) who has experience in using certain things, performing certain routines etc. This is the one kind of nearness. However, a **here** also characterizes proto-social relations, but does so in a slightly different way. As shown in Gahrn-Andersen & Cowley (2017), an important component of early infant socializing occurs in infant-caregiver dyads and triads, with the caregiver exposing the child to normative perturbations. In part because of these extrinsic influences, the child comes to construe her agency in ways that accord with social norms and expectations; in other words, the presence of the caregiver entails a phenomenal **here**. In fact, this phenomenal presence is key to understanding how toddlers, over time, can adapt to their surroundings; consequently phenomenal nearness

not only pertains to our own skilled material engagements, but also to the child's experiences of the caregiver's touches and gestures, including the caregiver's introduction of objects. In other words, the phenomenal **here** is foundational to both proto-sociality (i.e. pre-*Dasein*) and skilled socio-material engagements (i.e. *Dasein*). The proto-social notion of the **here**, however, is at odds with Heidegger's account, which assumes that **here** is derived from our skillful material engagements (cf. Heidegger 2010: 73). This is the other kind of nearness, which I will call **overt**. We must therefore go beyond Heidegger's *Dasein*-phenomenology in order to explain the transition from proto-sociality to social material relations or, more specifically, the transition from **here** to **there**.

To sum up, human sociality involves at least two different kinds of phenomenal nearness. First, the nearness of proto-social relations is manifested as an overt **here**. Here, the subject experiences something or someone. The subject is unskilled and for this reason does not orient him/herself towards a practical purpose (i.e. a **there**). Second, in skilled socio-material relations, the subject – or: *Dasein* – skillfully uses a thing in relation to a purpose. The **here** of these socio-material relations is **tacit** in that it is experientially transcended: the skilled individual focuses on the thing's purpose. In other words, both a **tacit here** and a **there** which is overtly experienced are involved here.

Now, how do we explain the transition from proto-sociality to socio-material engagements that rely on skill? This we can do by reference to habits. The constitutive nature of habits is underlined by Merleau-Ponty who, famously, invokes a blind man navigating his surroundings with the aid of a stick. For Merleau-Ponty, the man's skilled use of the stick entails an experiential transcendence of the stick. Rather than being preoccupied with the stick itself, the blind man relates to surrounding objects by means of the stick. Thus, the skillful use of the stick opens a phenomenal space of potentialities (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2010: 166). Merleau-Ponty argues that skilled use is only possible if one has acquired habits in using the thing in question. For this reason, habits are essential

to our daily routines. As Noë rightly observes, they comprise

> basic and foundational aspects of our mental lives. Without habit,
> there is no calculation, no speech, no thought, no recognition,
> no game playing. Only a creature with habits like ours could have
> anything like a mind like ours (Noë 2009: 125).

Our habitual dispositions enable us to partake in socio-material practices and, hence, become *Dasein* (in Heidegger's sense) because, as he would explain, they enable the experiential transition from **here** to **there**. Habits allow for the constitution of a thing-in-use. In other words, they enable us to transcend the presence of given thing (i.e. a **here**) as we skilfully relate the thing to its purpose (i.e. the **there**). In other words, habits permit the smooth usage that characterises our skilled everyday dealings such as biking, turning on the heater and talking. In this connection, habits imply more than a "motor grasping of a motor significance" (Merleau-Ponty 2010: 165). Compare also that for Durkheim it is

> patently obvious that all education consists of a continual effort to
> impose upon the child ways of seeing, thinking and acting which he
> himself would not have arrived at spontaneously. From his earliest
> years we oblige him to eat, drink and sleep at regular hours, and
> to observe cleanliness, calm and obedience; later we force him to
> learn how to be mindful of others, to respect customs and conventions,
> and to work, etc. If this constraint in time ceases to be felt it is because
> it gradually gives rise to habits, to inner tendencies which render it
> superfluous; but they supplant the constraint only because they are
> derived from it (Durkheim 1982: 53-54).

The social nature of our habits is brought out by the fact that they need to be more than just individual in the sense that they pertain to the subject's embodiment.[4] As Schatzki shows, we become social actors by acting in accordance with social expectations and norms (cf. Schatzki 2013: 189).

It is in part due to our embodied habits that we acquire the social status needed for partaking in the relations constitutive of social practices. Thus, habits are foundational to human sociality.

5. *Wrapping it up*

Latour is mistaken in his claim that his ANT succeeds in bridging the micro-macro gap of social theory because ANT imposes its own gap by neglecting what have been termed 'proto-social' relations. Specifically, ANT opens a gap between, on the one hand, dyadic, and on the other, triadic coordination. Inspired by Heidegger, I therefore introduce phenomenal distance to avoid creating a new gap in human sociality. This is done, first, by changing the ANT gap, such that it separates unskilled social relations that are either dyadic or triadic (i.e. pre-*Dasei*n), from a triadic coordination[5] that is skill-based and, hence, functionally compatible with a given social practice. Each of these social relations involves a particular variety of phenomenal nearness. Social relations can be traced to either an **overt here** or a **tacit here** (including a ditto **there**) depending on whether the subject skillfully engages with things and people or not. Here, what looks like yet another conceptual distinction may in fact be a bridge. By considering the embodied habits of the subject, we can account for the transition from the **overt here** to the **there**, that is, the transition from unskilled to skilled socio-material engagements; and the reason is that habits enable our skillful use of things. In other words, our habits, among other things, enable us to participate in social practices through skillful use of artefacts, instruments, objects, tools, and so on.

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Notes

1 Latour also sometimes uses the term actant to describe the subject.

2 This also goes against Husserl, who grounds his transcendental phenomenology in the Cartesian *cogito*. For Husserl, it is by means of having a *cogito* that we are able to become "acquainted with the world as immediately given" (Husserl 2012: 53).

3 Perinat and Sadurní show that, at around 18 months of age, children begin to develop functional relations to objects, and thus become able to partake in socio-material practices in a very rudimentary way. Prior to these practical engagements, children down to 10 months of age also occupy themselves with objects, but they do so only through *simple manipulations* (Perinat & Sadurní 1999: 63). These manipulations amount to unskilled fiddling, meaning that they lack a purpose and therefore also a phenomenal **there**.

4 Compare also Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*.

5 But also 'derived' singular engagements, such as when a person, in the absence of others, uses things in ways that are determined by social practices and conventions.

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