

Finding Oneself Lost in Enquiry

Being a Researcher

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Abstract

Drawing on Heidegger's later writings on Hölderlin's poetry, this paper explores the existential significance of being a researcher. Heidegger's characterisation of our being-in-the-world is used as a basis for exploring Hölderlin's poem, "Remembrance" in order to throw light on the experience of undertaking research. The paper argues that the very phenomena of familiarity, disorientation, and illumination characterise this process of researching.

Keywords Heidegger, Hölderlin, Researcher, Lostness, Finding, Illumination, Astonishment

Introduction

This paper looks to address the experience of research through an existential lens, in order to arrive at the position that researching itself can be understood more as a dynamic, lived process rather than a rigidly followed procedure or method.

Having previously undertaken research in various disciplines and domains, from business management to psychotherapy, the experience of research itself has prompted me to question our un-

derstanding of the phenomenon of researching. Put otherwise, if we were to strip away all the procedures and frameworks that give shape and structure to any methodological approach, what is the essence of being engaged in research?

To be a researcher, we might say, is a mode of being that characterises and identifies a particular way in which human beings show up or stand out in a certain context of meaning, or 'world'. This necessarily involves both a 'doing' (the 'what') aspect as well as the 'being' (the 'how') of the 'doing'. To put it in a more Sartrean way¹, we might express this distinction otherwise in terms of there being an essence to research (and we might tie this to Husserl's phenomenological project here) – what research is up to, methodologically speaking – as well as its being a particular kind of human activity – its existence – that is distinct from any other in our cultural, social and institutional practices.

In this essay, my aim will be to avoid any overly theoretical, abstractly philosophical or simply remotely-based approach that is unrelated to the world of research. However, I draw almost exclusively on Heidegger's comments on Friedrich Hölderlin's poem, "Remembrance", as a way of relating the meaning of its content to the activity of researching. My analysis introduces Heidegger's particular term, being-in-the-world, and the meaning of 'world' in the context of research, as a way of elaborating on the aspect of being a researcher. I then move on to a description of the researcher's experience of moments of disorientation, which we might articulate as disturbances in the research process. I conclude that such moments or experiences illuminate how we are being as researchers, which itself informs the research being undertaken.

Being in the world of research

Rather than taking the Cartesian starting point of characterising ourselves as detached, objective observers of the world around us, I adopt Heidegger's fundamental ontological position of our human being-in-the-world. This is a unitary phenomenon, which might be better expressed in a similar hyphenation that conveys the inseparable condition of always being-there, or being-in-a-context, never being subjects that are isolated off from a world that, in turn, would render us context-free. However, in keeping with the approach taken in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, I isolate the terms

within this phrase in order to understand better the sense of its meaning as a whole.

Being-in-the-world

We might plausibly ask, what is *any* being-in-the-world? Perhaps one approach is to assert that we are not thinking of ourselves here as autonomous, detached, rational subjects that occupy a 'reality', that is, a Newtonian world of space and time that is independent of our thought, talk, knowledge or experience, but rather, that we are always already enmeshed, embedded and involved in a context of meaning and familiarity that we understand as a *world*. It is in this sense that we are being-in-the-world.

Being-in

As being-in, we are typically *in*-volved in our world. The way in which this manifests itself in the world of research is that we cultivate a particular 'style' of carrying out or 'doing' research. Methodological approaches act as pre-established paths, or more commonly, procedures or sets of rules that are followed in order to arrive at results and findings that, in some sense, justify the methodological approach taken. For example, let us assume that, I as researcher, pursue the question of the experiential moment of being challenged by a therapist in a psychotherapeutic setting. The enquiry is centred around an existential experience that I want to illuminate. Since any theoretically-based methodological approach abstracts from that experience to *another* realm, namely, of explanation, I opt for a phenomenological approach to my enquiry in order to remain 'experience-near'. Whilst the 'doing' aspect of researching is a core element, the way or the 'how' I as researcher engage with the research process is reflected in my stand, or 'understanding', of being a researcher. So, I can engage with this in one of two ways. I can 'own' my experience of being a researcher, acknowledging the difficulties, hurdles, anxieties and moments of meaninglessness that come with this as I experience the process. Alternatively, I might maintain a more detached and 'scientific' attitude through a more tenacious hold on the structure and procedure detailed in my method, such that I experience a certain predictability and groundedness in my activity of research.

World

As human beings, we relate to an open region that allows us to engage in certain meaningful practices that absorb us. The world of research is one particular kind of such practice that makes sense when we are engaging in particular ways. It is a world that is existentially bound off from or different to a world of music, say, although there may be creative ways in which worlds 'meet' or interact with the aim of promoting and being in the service of one or both, as in the case of research on music, or using music creatively to inform research².

Research

The essence of research can be elucidated in various ways, whether it be etymologically, conceptually, phenomenologically, or hermeneutically. Minimally, I characterise the phenomenon of research as an exploration that attempts to illuminate some particular topic, theme, experience or concept that already occupies a familiar place in our social and linguistic practices. Our enquiry is motivated by a re-search, re-turn, or re-visit, to disclosing something that is not necessarily explicitly experienced in our everyday dealings with the particular phenomenon or concept under investigation.

Method in the world of research

Our common understanding of method is based on procedure and a set of steps that direct our actions and ways of investigating the research question. However, this is very much 'doing' – oriented and has the characteristic of closing down some, but admittedly not all, creative elements to the research itself. Typically, the researcher who is wholly devoted to following a particular method is predominantly concerned that he or she is following the prescribed method 'correctly'. In contrast, we should be guided by the origin of the meaning of 'method', namely *μετα* ('from here to there') and *ὁδός* ('way') in order to construe a way of employing it more accurately. As Heidegger puts it in the *Zollikon Seminars*, it is

[a] "way" ... "from here to there", "toward something" ... It is the way we pursue a subject matter. How the particular subject determines the way toward it, and how the way toward it makes the subject matter obtainable³

Being in research and *doing* research are not mutually exclusive terms or approaches, but rather complementary and in a relation of synthesis to one another. The former emphasises involvement, engagement, embodied immersion that affects the being of the researcher, and doing the research intimates actions, behaviours and steps that are pursued and can be counted as events that move the research process along. Being in research evokes, among many other things, uncertainty, anxiety, vulnerability, inspiration, equivocation, steadfastness, ennui, excitement⁴.

Heidegger, Hölderlin and Adventuring

The Phenomenon of Losing and Finding Oneself as Researcher

My reflections on the existential experience of being-in-the-world-of-research, as outlined above, have been significantly influenced by Martin Heidegger's 1942 essay on Friedrich Hölderlin's poem, "Remembrance" (*Andenken*), itself written in 1802 during Hölderlin's journey to, and stay in, Bordeaux, South-West France. My intention here is to draw on Heidegger's creative reading of the poem as a way of illuminating and highlighting the metaphorical significance that it bears on researching any aspect of human experience. My aim here is not to conduct a line-by-line critique of Heidegger's commentary, nor indeed a line-by-line analysis of Hölderlin's poem, but simply to try to say what strikes me as compelling about the meaning of the poem in the context of enquiry.

"Remembrance" describes the journey of mariners (Hölderlin here is really referring to poets), who set sail to foreign lands, with the impetus of the North-East wind behind them. They are travellers, adventurers, who must, as Heidegger puts it, 'know the heavenly bodies and be masters in reading the quarters of the sky'⁵. This illuminates a particular way in which the mariners demonstrate a certain openness to the expanse of possibility, that is, 'sky' understood ontologically. They are open to be struck and astonished by the 'fiery spirit' in the foreign land, as Hölderlin puts it in the first stanza of the poem. In Heidegger's words, they have a 'love for what is not like home, purely for the sake of becoming at home in what is one's own'⁶: the mariners embody a particular type of person who travels to foreign lands precisely in order to prepare to be astonished by what is most close and familiar to him. That is, once in a 'strange land' i.e. away from familiar surroundings that one

might call 'home' and where one 'dwells', the mariner experiences what is 'foreign' to him. It is in this very experience that he undergoes a process of being astounded by the realisation of what is closest to him i.e. particular aspects of his own cultural and social practices are illuminated and made clear to him.

As researchers, therefore, I suggest that we are *also* mariners, setting out on a journey or ad-venture (venturing out), looking to research or 'see again' some aspect of our world, be it the world of psychotherapy or business or academia, by sailing out *from* that world, into a foreign one. In letting us experience its strangeness and unfamiliarity, it illuminates (lights up, throws light on) the very world in which we live in our everyday familiarity and understanding. The question arises, why do we really need to sail out to strange lands to experience this? Understandably, it is because we are not able to simply 'extricate' ourselves from our deeply embodied practices in some simple and straightforward way. To think that we can do so is to conform exclusively to a representational mode of thinking.

The representational mode of thinking is important to us, and has been, ever since we have embraced metaphysics as our fundamental frame of understanding. In relation to Hölderlin's poetry, however, it is itself a meditation *on* poetry, what it is for poetry to *be* poetry, or its meaning. This is certainly what we encounter in "Remembrance". It is not descriptive poetry, in the sense of the poem representing a thing or idea with the words in the poem that describe it, as we find most clearly expressed in, say, representational art. This approach takes it that the role of art – or art when it is working at its best – is a representation or correspondence of 'fit' to the object or idea that it represents. As such, a spectator, the reader or the audience of the art work, can marvel at the accuracy and 'adequation' of the representation to the state of affairs that it depicts. One can even go further in saying that, to find oneself 'lost' in the illusion of taking the art-work for the real thing, is 'true art' in this context.

In the case of Hölderlin's poem, therefore, it is not trying to correspond to the way that something is, or really is, or to some kind of adequation to the facts, such as the fond remembrances of Hölderlin's own journey and stay in South-West France. Rather, it is trying to show us something much deeper – a fundamental truth – about *the kinds of beings that we are*. So, the poem is not reporting on Hölder-

lin's 'subjective' and 'inner' experience, and it is not reporting on what's out there in the world. Rather, it is concerned with our situated position or perspective that is contextually grounded in being-in-the-world.

When we see what Hölderlin is engaged in, we realise that he is attempting to articulate his experience of *dwelling poetically*. Hölderlin is trying to convey what the poet needs to do, the process that he has to go through, in order to really see what is true, proper, his own. But he needs to *appropriate* this, see it and acknowledge that this is what is closest and most disclosive to him in his existence. However, Hölderlin – and, likewise, the researcher – has to undergo a process in which he prepares himself to be open to being astounded, to develop the sensitivity to being struck by what's being called out to him, and to see something new in what is already familiar. This cannot be captured in an explicit, representationally-oriented way.

When we are at our most engaged in research, we are *also* open to finding ourselves *lost*, but not in the context of representing one thing with or for another. In that latter mode of finding oneself lost, there is an anchor or foundation that we return to that is object-based and that renders us able to validate as 'true' insofar as it is a true representation. Rather, we find ourselves lost *when we are in the event or moment of (non-representational) truth*, something that we experience in a very fundamental way that cannot be represented. In that moment of experiencing, we might be lost for words, or have a feeling of being overwhelmed such that we cannot accommodate it into our existing methodological or philosophical framework. Sometimes, we might be lost because we feel that we cannot 'successfully' apply the method that we have adopted, and are therefore feeling frustrated, disoriented, and even dejected. This latter experience, however, is itself a representational way of thinking about the research process, and presents its own internal tensions that can only be undone through embracing a 'being'-oriented approach in research.

The Mood of Being Astounded as a Kind of Lostness

The intention behind this exploration is that, as researchers, we are trying to uncover that which is most 'me' that I can experience in the context of research-ing. When I am in an unfamiliar place or setting, I am overwhelmed, taken over, and even submerged by my experi-

ence of discomfort, anxiety, oddness, strangeness, despair, uncertainty, unsettledness. When I experience this, I can either numb myself into passivity, helplessness or hopelessness, and moreover, stay in this mood, or I can be open to the way in which something is being disclosed to me. When I am open or receptive to such disclosure, a sense of wonder, or even astonishment, can draw me to see exactly what provides me with my grounding of intelligibility when I, for the most part, dwell seamlessly in the practices in which I am familiar, settled, and transparently coping. Why is this important? When I see that being a researcher has to also involve my lostness, because it opens me to the fundamentally existential experience of enquiring, rather than solely following a pre-set procedure that I attempt to adhere to diligently, I embrace the project of research in a more authentic⁷ way. However, it should be noted that the experience of lostness is not something that can be brought about by an act of will. This is important, since we might assume that we have to orchestrate this in the course of our research endeavours.

‘Losing oneself’ can mean different things, however. Our different understandings of being lost all have in common a certain experience of ungroundedness, or of not being able to find or return to the path that directs us towards further investigation of the phenomenon. This might be epistemologically-based (‘I don’t know what I’m doing’, or ‘I don’t know what to do next’, for example), or more existentially founded in terms of a certain mood or disposition (‘I’m bored with the whole question’, or ‘I feel out of my depth, I don’t experience this going anywhere’).

In terms of moods and dispositions, when we acknowledge the ‘being’ of our engagement in research, we can adopt a position of trust towards ourselves and our circumstances (our being-in-the-world-of-researching). As such, we embrace our lived experience of vulnerability, uncertainty, ungroundedness, and lostness. In this experience, we also recognise that this lostness and ungroundedness invites a certain mood of astonishment and disorientation with regard to the phenomenon or topic being researched. In other language, we might call this ‘wonder’, that is, a mood that opens us to the possibility of seeing something in a different way. The experience of ungroundedness illuminates and intimates the fact that we may have been too dependent only on ‘doing’, staying within our rigidly held method, as if it were offering certainty. As a conse-

quence, our experience of being open to being struck, or being receptive to what we encounter in the course of our research – and further, how we do so – furnishes us with a more authentic and rewarding experience of undertaking our enquiry.

Wandering in Wonder

When the 'being' aspect of the experience is acknowledged and embraced, the researcher has the scope to then be open to what becomes manifest in the very disorientation or sense of 'strangeness' that is occasioned at such periods in the research. It is at such times that a 'creative void' illuminates something or other that the methodology that is applied and followed does not accommodate or address in the lived experience of being the researcher. It thus impoverishes the potential wealth of opportunities that can come to the fore in generating creative insights and inspirational moments⁸. Here we acknowledge the valuable work of Max van Manen who, I think, offers some scope for this kind of experience in the very struggles and tensions encountered in writing. As he says,

Writing is a producing activity. The writer produces text, but he or she produces more than text. The writer produces himself or herself. The writer is the product of his or her own product. Writing is a kind of self-making or forming. To write is to measure the depth of things, as well as to come to a sense of one's own depth⁹.

Conclusion

I have attempted to articulate the starting point of our understanding ourselves as being-in-the-world, involved and engaged in the 'regional' or localised world of research, in an existential sense. The implications of this include the possibility that we experience disorientation in its many possible manifestations, and that, as such, we undergo what Heidegger calls, an unready-to-hand relation to our situation: the moment becomes conspicuous, obtrusive or obstinate in its very disorientation. It is a moment or stretch of the temporal in which our habitualised ways of dealing with ourselves and the localised world (of researching) become shaken or 'ungrounded'. At such times, we encounter a positive challenge of seeing something that is so familiar to us about ourselves and our practices but

which is also necessarily remote and withdrawn from us in our everyday engagements. Lastly, the disorientation itself is the necessary means by which illumination of the phenomenon is possible, and without which astonishment and wonder arises. It is precisely this whole process of familiarity, disorientation, and finally illumination that can be understood in terms of being a researcher.

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Notes

- 1 I refer here to Sartre's distinction between essence and existence in his *Existentialism and Humanism*, p.26.
- 2 Heidegger (1927/1962) distinguishes between four conceptions of 'world', and it is the distinction between his first conception, namely the scientific world in which objects and entities that are present-at-hand i.e. objectified, and his third conception, namely, the world of one's engagement and involvement that is relevant here, but this will not be developed in any detail here.
- 3 Heidegger, M. (2001), *Zollikon Seminars* pp.101-2.
- 4 I have purposely omitted mention, let alone discussion, of Gadamer's very important work on method and its relation to truth, since this would require more extensive attention than space allows.
- 5 Heidegger, M. (2000), "Remembrance" p.111.

- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 'Authentic' in Heidegger's (and the Kierkegaardian) sense of being resolute in the finite, temporal, factual situation (1927/1962).
- 8 van Manen (2013) has referred to these as 'inceptual' moments or experiences, *pace* Heidegger's use of the term in his *Contributions to Philosophy*. See his *Phenomenology of Practice* pp.237-239 for further elaboration.
- 9 van Manen, M. (2014), *Phenomenology of Practice*, pp. 364-5.