

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Daniil Koloskov
"Living Without a Ground: A Praxis Being-in-the-World"
Submitted in 2023 at the *Department of Philosophy*

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

Starting from an in depth analysis of contemporary analytic neo-pragmatist views, Daniil Koloskov's thesis shows that they fail to give an account of praxis that would be rich enough for providing a determinate content to the social norms fixing meaning. Claiming that pragmatism requires a phenomenology of praxis as its necessary complement, the thesis then looks at existential phenomenology for fulfilling this requirement. Yet a general theory of significance and understanding implies a careful consideration of how exactly pragmatist and existentialist points can be combined. There are indeed quite a few questions we want to answer – such as the exact role of linguistic norms in meaning fixation (and whether they are purely conventional or depend on pre-linguistic experiences and practices) or the exact relations between the various norms fixing meaning (and whether they all have limited validity within separate significance areas or can be integrated into one single cultural system) – as well as quite a few simplistic explanations we want to avoid – such as mere arbitrary creation by a pure spontaneous subjectivity or mere appropriateness to the world as it is (and can be seen from the view from nowhere) or mere effect of natural selection mechanisms. D. Koloskov looks into the details of these questions and of their possible answers, and eventually provides his own – rather subtle and quite convincing – solution.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

The thesis is fully accomplished both in form and content. From end to end, the text is written in good English without almost any misspelling or typo; it is perfectly clear, well informed, strongly argued and adequately structured.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

The thesis is divided into five chapters of rather similar sizes.

The first chapter presents analytic neo-pragmatist views by focusing on three main contemporary figures, namely Robert Brandom, Richard Rorty and Jurgen Habermas. Despite all differences between them, these authors share claims on the impossibility of the view from nowhere but also on the general inaccuracy of representationalism and theoretism; they claim that theory has to be grounded on practice, that conceptual content needs to be explained in terms of doing and that knowing how is prior to knowing that. Yet they all oppose rational practice of giving and asking for reasons to animals' causal reactions to their environment; rationality is normative and develops in a network of claims, arguments and criticisms. They are also strongly influenced by the linguistic turn of contemporary philosophy; not only is rationality mostly a matter of linguistic norms, but even awareness of sorts and resemblances, and thus significance, is first and foremost a linguistic affair. This is why they are all rather suspicious on the idea of a phenomenology,

which seems to be akin to the “myth of the Given” – i.e. immediate evidence, causally immediate source of beliefs which would also provide immediate justification – as well as to some foundationalist project.

For Brandom’s strong inferentialism, the content of a belief consists in its inferential consequences – governed by a set of (commitment-preserving, entitlement-preserving and incompatibility-solving) inferential rules. This leads to some semantic holism, where each meaning is defined by its place within the space of reasons. The problem is that we would like to know more about the source of these rational norms, as well as of how they are related to the world known through this rational access. D. Koloskov then looks at Jaroslav Peregrin’s solution of mixing inferentialism with “evolutionary holism”, i.e. with the claim that all norms have a survival value in the environment. Of course, this is just a general hypothesis, which can only explain the content of each norm if the whole story of its selection can be reconstructed. Now, this is quite unlikely for the most complex practices in modern societies. Yet, Peregrin says, we could distinguish direct natural selection – working as hardware – and cultural evolution – working as software – which would be oriented by more indirect selection processes. Still, this does not seem to work for our non-instrumental practices, which we pursue for their own sake and which seem to have their own, internal, logic of improvement. So, even though it is surely true that social norms have natural conditions, it is not at all obvious that they can be reduced to these conditions.

For his part, Rorty, following Wittgenstein, deals with language as a bunch of different language games, which serve different aims. There is no unique rationality; consistency only matters within a language game (and according to its specific aims), not between them. Convincing someone can only be done within some language game and according to its rules. And convincing someone to follow the rules of a language game can only rest in showing why it is interesting to pursue these aims and see things this way. So norms are related to aims. But what about the aims themselves? Rorty insists that we should not take them as granted nor try to ground them on anything else. But this means he gives up accounting for them, which is philosophically frustrating. As D. Koloskov says, Rorty only frees us from the tyranny of truth at the cost of submitting us to the tyranny of chance.

For Habermas, meaning is objectivation of (intersubjective) use. There are three different domains of validity, each based on formal-pragmatic (“grammatical”) presuppositions, which somehow replace Kant’s regulative ideas: objective validity is based on the presupposition of an objective world; moral validity is based on the presupposition of the possibility of rules acceptable for all participants; and expressive validity is based on the presupposition of sincerity. Now, how can we ground such presuppositions except in culturally established standards of value? Instead of explaining social acceptance by conformity to appropriate norms, Habermas explains things the other way round; social acceptance comes first. And social normativity cannot even be grounded on pre-rational forms of life since, in Habermas’ model, desires and emotions (including esthetic pleasure) are expelled from the (normative) illocutionary force of the speech acts and only referred to their (extra-normative) perlocutionary effects.

The second chapter deals with existential phenomenology and the way it can provide content to the pragmatist claims by giving a closer look at the being of praxis. While neo-pragmatism tends to epistemize the ontology – by subordinating being to its epistemic access –, existential phenomenology tends to ontologize the epistemology – by first questioning the being of what is known as well as of who knows.

As opposed to Kant’s transcendental subjectivity (necessary as what makes the world possible), the phenomenological subject is factual, contingent, situated, gripped by the world and already engaged with

it. The Dasein is ecstatic: it is not self-subsisting subjectivity, but “transcendent” and performed in the world. Simultaneously the Dasein is what brings the world out of its concealment; the world is made for (even though not “by”) the Dasein. There is thus a relation of “openness” between subject and object.

For phenomenologists, there is existential significance before epistemic significance; and changes of meaning are not just epistemic switches, but changes in our way of being. Meaningfulness is a fundamental determination of being, and does not only come with the “second nature” of language and culture. Meaningful experience comes before linguistic acquisition and it takes part in the assessment of linguistic categorisations as well as of other meaningful practices. These have phenomenological motivations.

Yet this does not force us to abandon pragmatism. For Heidegger, significance is what defines for-the-sake-of which the Dasein exists. Understanding is a projection onto practical possibilities, always related to certain praxis of living a life. *Spielraum* is a network of interconnected possibilities that mutually enable each other, thus providing a livable place for the Dasein. Here again, representationalism and theoretism are challenged. The Dasein does not have representations or beliefs; it is occupied with what can be done, projects that can be realized. Even knowing oneself is knowing one’s way into the world.

This is why some analytic neo-pragmatists, like Hubert Dreyfus, Mark Okrent or Taylor Carman, suggest pragmatic readings of Heidegger’s project. The Dasein is (rather than has) its possibilities; since these possibilities “limit and make sense of what to do”, they constitute its being. Such background possibilities are not implicit beliefs as is the case in Davidson or Gadamer; they are ungrounded ways of acting. Intelligibility is grounded in shared practices which are themselves ungrounded.

Now, D. Koloskov says, if, as Dreyfus and Carman claim, such background possibilities are just fixed by the average public practices (i.e. general techniques and skills acquired through social training), this brings us back to Dewey’s pragmatism; social practices have explanatory priority over being. Change can only come from change in the background, i.e. in practices. But then why do practices themselves change? Commenting Heidegger, John Haugeland and Carol White think of change in Kuhnian terms: when our paradigm of understanding becomes inappropriate to circumstances, it is reconsidered in order to continue the activity. But this requires a place outside the paradigm from where to judge its appropriateness and how it should be “reconsidered”. We get out of pragmatism... As D. Koloskov shows, we’re here back to all questions raised in chapter 1.

Later on Dreyfus will admit that Heidegger’s Dasein has a much more subtle sense of the “situation”, which goes over mere compliance to practice. This should be the object of further investigation.

The third chapter leads such an investigation. Background practices surely form us for the most part but they are not the ground that explains human intelligibility. The Dasein aims at maximizing its ability-to-be, which means maximizing its (mutually compatible) possibilities. Practices are created and sustained as a result of the specific interaction of possibilities that maximizes disclosing potentiality. And the background is just a set of essentially interrelated and mutually disclosed possibilities. This entails that, as source of meaningfulness, practices do not come first; they are results of Dasein’s active search for something to do and for building relations between itself and the world.

Now, becoming a member of the society also increases Dasein’s possibilities; public practices structure the Dasein for the most part because they are often very efficient in maximizing Dasein’s ability-to-be. And, since the disclosure of possibilities hereby permitted comes with the foreclosure of the possibility of not

(maximizing Dasein's ability by) applying public practices, this is why social practices seem to be self-obvious and why human beings are essentially conformist creatures.

By giving to us familiar phenomena of our shared life, everyday disclosedness obscures the phenomenon of disclosure itself. Forgetting such disclosure, the inauthentic Dasein does not recognize itself as a Dasein and closes off its contingent "situation".

Now, D. Koloskov says, this theoretical move – the distinction between authentic and inauthentic Dasein – disbalances relations between the Dasein and the world. The Dasein's self-recognition only depends on itself (and not on the world); it is a matter of inner decision. This leads to some kind of absolute autonomy of the subject who becomes capable of establishing itself based on an existential decision. Later on, however, Heidegger will reject this move: *Ereignis* puts the Dasein in midst of the interplay between disclosure and foreclosure, and the Dasein is no more fully responsible for them. The Dasein is just the witness of *Ereignis*, which precedes the division between activity and passivity. The Dasein is thus the site of the arrival of being, not its source.

But, then again, the question arises: why do certain clearings prevail while others are withheld? *Ereignis* itself does not occur for a reason. A solution, which Heidegger himself does not explicitly take, would be that *Ereignis* could be explained by what it enables; *Ereignis* has an enabling value in Dasein's rooting in the world. This solution would both account for Dasein's contingency and for Dasein's responsibility. Dasein maximizes its being by constant opening and foreclosing of the world (so that it is not stuck into only one set of possibilities). Coherence is not required between all logical possibilities but only between all disclosed possibilities. Cultural style is much influential because it has a great disclosure potential telling much about what we can do and who we can be.

The fourth chapter then comes back to epistemological issues. If "knowing that" is a matter of doing and is grounded on "knowing how", what about adequate representations? Cognitive understanding is a very specific kind of understanding in that it searches for universal truth (and does not want to discard possibilities just because they are incompatible with the ones that are now disclosed). It is a demand to incorporate all possible evidence and to arrive at a truth that is independent to any particular perspective.

Yet, D. Koloskov says, this is still just a project for being-in-the-world, something that makes sense to do. Unlike what Brandom believes, there is no sharp alternative between either starting with cognitive understanding (and the game of giving and asking for reasons) or treating it as just one language games among others. Cognitive responsibility is one of the projects that makes sense, and it is a promising one. This amounts to two claims.

First, the search of universality makes sense in the context of being-in-the-world. Is it because "constitutive practices" delegate the responsibility of appropriateness to the objects themselves while "institutional practices" are just invented and sustained by the community, as John Haugeland (who declares himself an anti-pragmatist) claims? D. Koloskov answers negatively. Even in mere institutional practices like games, it is not the case that everything goes; some rules disclose the potentialities of the game, some make it uninteresting. Then is it because practices are responsible with regard to the overall behavioural economy of an organismic way of life, as Joseph Rouse claims? According to Rouse, practices have an adaptative value but they can also change the environment and affect the evolutionary trajectory – language being an important device in this way, device that tends to gain some autonomy by disclosing new situations

and therefore settling new norms. D. Koloskov does not deny this, but he points that Rouse does not investigate the question of why we enter in particular situations, except in terms of our biological anchorage. Now, human beings seek participation in practices that would hardly be beneficial or even detrimental to their self-preservation. Analysis of meaningfulness can not be reduced to a biological perspective of meaningfulness. The world-disclosive function of meaning, which presupposes maximization of our ability to be, goes far beyond the adaptive function of meaning.

Secondly, the search of universality is a promising type of being-in-the-world. Plato has criticized the Sophists for using dialectics only for looking for practical agreement rather than (unconditioned) truth; for Plato, ideas are what makes sense of discussion leading to agreement. They play a regulatory function (of looking for context-transcendence standpoints, i.e. standpoints that can be confirmed by other standpoints) just as will be the case for Habermas' presupposition of an objective world. Rather than a ground into some specific ontological region, objectivity is an aim. Intelligibility is just a project of the Dasein, something it does. Intelligibility cannot be justified by the existence of an independent world; it is based on an existential commitment to such a world and it can not be conceived outside some effort of the Dasein, effort that is continuous and can never be finalized. Cognitive demands are regulatory; they do not require actual resolution of all contradictions, only some perspective that they could lead to this kind of resolution.

Now, cognitive disclosure comes with the foreclosure of self-awareness of human understanding; what is disclosed is the quasi-independent being of things based on the ontological assumption of the objective world, and what is foreclosed is for-the-sake-of-which. This is why the phenomenal character of understanding is that things appear to me as if they are independent. And this also why, by forgetting this disclosure/foreclosure device, Western philosophy turned truth taken as uncoveredness into discovery of properties of independent beings. But this is misleading; there is no view from nowhere (it would be meaningless); the perspectival character is a necessary constituent of any kind of intelligibility even if it claims for itself absolute, foundational validity.

Cognition, D. Koloskov concludes, is a local form that understanding takes in order to disclose a particular room for our ability-to-be. But universal validity of truth does not exhaust meanings... and it cannot justify its own way of disclosing meaning.

The fifth chapter then asks once again the question of what grounds (the practices of) understanding. There is no uniform "over-arching" principle of understanding; there is no single logic in the world. There are, as Wittgenstein says, various language games and no pre-conceived plan of building the city of meaning. Yet all forms of understanding are efficient ways of maximizing Dasein's ability-to-be and, for that reason, are somehow interrelated into one city.

What should we keep from pragmatism? Practices like hammering onlike make sense in the context of their subordination to further practices like building, while other practices are intelligible in themselves, for their own sake. But all of them are instruments for Dasein's resolute ability-to-be. Now, just like cognitive intelligibility forecloses its own intelligibility, instrumentalisation can be so efficient that it loses its anchoring in the open space of meaningfulness; the Dasein disappears in technological disclosure. Unlike Dewey's pragmatism or other naturalist views of pragmatism that take evolutionary adaptation as the absolute ground, Heidegger's conception is counter-instrumentalist. Not only are lots of practices not instrumental – they do not pursue any goal other than for the sake of themselves – but also many goals

are intra-contextual and not subordinated to any “fundamental telos”. There is no final explanation. Even the Dasein is not the absolute ground of meaning; it is meaning-searching; it does not involve any pre-conceived “logic of signification” or “common sense” but only its own “desire-to-be”.

Yet there is some integration of practices, not because one practice is fundamental and makes sense of the others (as is the case for economical practice in Sartre’s later work), but because practices are interconnected within a cultural life where some practices enhance possibilities related to others. No practice is fundamental for being. Heidegger’s *Ereignis* leaves it all to contingency so that being has no specific content. Fundamentality only appears *a posteriori* and internally, in the context of disclosure; it is a relation of meaning, not a limitation imposed on meaning-formation. And yet, D. Solokov claims, practices get some external foundation... through their mutual enrichment: each practice is somehow justified, not only by what it makes possible but also by the way it makes other interconnected practices more interesting. This of course does not prevent marginal (disconnected) practices to keep some self-standing meaningfulness.

Integration within some cultural *Lichtung* is measured by this ability to nest practices together. Through some equivalence relations between the possibilities they open, practices nest and adhere to one another; they “rhyme”. In this sense, integration plays some quasi-fundamental role, while staying vulnerable in the fact that it keeps depending on the possibilities it offers; more optimal ways of integration could be preferred.

As a conclusion, D. Solokov insists on what existential phenomenology brings to pragmatism. First, unlike what analytic neo-pragmatists claim, the conditions of possibility of meaning cannot be looked at the level of linguistic praxis, but presuppose a more fundamental layer of pre-linguistic experience. Secondly, the flexible productivity of Dasein’s search for new abilities provides motives for meaning-formation, a theoretical model which is better both to unexplained social practices or to a single explanation like natural selection, which would be the ungrounded ground looked for by traditional metaphysics.

1. Structure of the argument

As appears from this long (yet somehow unfair) summary, D. Solokov’s dissertation is very clearly structured and the argumentation is lucid throughout. The author’s goals are always clear as are the means deployed for achieving them.

2. Formal aspects of the dissertation

On every aspect, the form of the dissertation is internally coherent and up to international scientific standards.

3. Use of sources and/or material

The dissertation mostly works with primary sources (in contemporary philosophy) rather than secondary sources. D. Solokov tries to discuss straight with the main philosophers for finding solutions to their problems. For each author commented, he goes for the main ideas and the “general (argumentative) picture” rather than for a step by step discussion of their detailed statements. Yet, in this way of doing, D. Solokov is rather fair to the authors he comments.

4. Personal contribution to the subject

D. Solokov's dissertations surely constitutes very original work, which contributes both to history of philosophy – through better understanding of existentialist and neo-pragmatist claims and arguments– and to contemporary anthropological philosophy – thanks to the proposal of some original and nuanced general theory of meaning-formation.

IV. Questions for the author

This of course raises new questions, which however do not undermine, but only underline D. Solokov's great work. My own questions all turn around the determinacy of content of meaning-formation practices, which is D. Solokov's main concern all along the thesis.

D. Solokov starts by blaming neo-pragmatists for leaving the content of social norms underspecified, except when they naturalize them and refer them to natural selection, which however does not seem to properly account for many of our more complex meaning-fixing social norms. By referring social norms to Dasein's active search for more and more abilities, D. Solokov surely goes a bit further in the explanation. Yet, as he must admit, since Dasein's ecstatic search for something to do "has no terms for its own" (p. 87) and is not "subordinated to any fundamental telos" (p. 171), the question why we do things we do remains somehow unanswered: "for no particular reason; just for the sake of it" (p. 87); "our everyday life is filled with practices [jokes, art, games, ...] that are pursued for their own sake" (p. 171).

Surely D. Solokov is right in claiming that many human activities are their own goal and cannot be reduced to their adaptive value. Yet does that mean that (human) Dasein has "no content of its own" (p. 85) whatsoever? Is there no partial truth in the idea that Dasein's facticity first and foremost rests in its biological nature?

Of course, there is much more in Dasein than animality, including language, culture and "useless" activities. But do we really have to choose between naturalism, which wants to explain all activities in biological terms of adaptation to environment and natural selection, and anti-naturalism, which refuses to explain any human activity in these terms?

Neo-pragmatists oppose animals causally reacting to their environment and human beings rationally interacting with each other according to social norms (p. 18). And then some of them, like Dennett and Millikan, want to reconcile the space of reasons with the space of nature by providing a naturalist account of all reasons. Could it not be possible to give a naturalist account of basic reasons according to biological needs while claiming that further reasons tend to break away from these natural mechanisms? Is this not what Joseph Rouse somehow tries to do by distinguishing practices that have a direct adaptative value and practices that gain some autonomy by disclosing new situations and settling new norms?

It is quite striking that all of D. Solokov's examples of "changes in our way of being" which are not just "epistemic switches" as neo-pragmatist conceives them (pp. 63-70) are still strongly culturally determined (see not only the recurrent example of football game, but also Chinese hieroglyphs and even Higgs bosons). Would natural ways of being not be even more obvious counter-examples to analytic neo-pragmatist views (if we don't take linguistic rationality to be already at work in passivity as McDowell does, of course)?

And again, is it fair to blame Sartre for softening Dasein's pure autonomy and spontaneity (see the early Sartre's voluntarism) by putting forward its biological and economical needs? Surely Dasein's projects do not reduce to such needs. But is it not true that these needs are fundamental, not in the sense that they would be the ungrounded ground, that makes sense of all the rest, but in the sense that, due to its facticity, the Dasein has no choice to start with them and somehow always keep them into account?

Would that already be naturalism?

V. Conclusion

The work submitted meets without any doubt the standard customarily required of a doctoral dissertation.

I recommend the submitted dissertation for public defense with the tentative grade of "pass".

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