

Being in or Getting at the Real: Kochan on Rouse, Heidegger and minimal realism

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ABSTRACT

We discuss Kochan's recent criticism of the work of Joseph Rouse (Kochan 2011). We argue that Kochan fails to show that both Rouse's own work and his Heidegger interpretation are plagued by insurmountable problems. We also try to locate the deeper, meta-philosophical reasons that are responsible for what we take to be Kochan's misreading of Rouse's work. This allows us to throw some light on the standoff that so often seems to characterize debates on scientific realism.

¹ This paper is the result of fully joint work.

The debate between realism and antirealism has been central in the general philosophy of science of the last decades. But ever since the heydays of the debate in the 1980s, there have been authors who have tried to argue for the overcoming or dissolution of the debate itself, by proposing a position that is neither realist nor antirealist. Prominent among these is Joseph Rouse (Rouse 1987). Yet, Jeff Kochan has recently argued that Rouse, despite his efforts to transcend the realism/antirealism debate through his universal practical hermeneutics, ends up an implicit realist (Kochan 2011). Kochan furthermore uses this as an occasion to rectify what he sees as Rouse's influential but misleading interpretation of Heidegger.

In what follows we will take issue with Kochan's diagnosis. We will show how passages from Rouse that Kochan interprets as signs of the former's "confused realism" can be given a consistent, non-realist reading. We will expand a bit on this reading, taking clues from Rouse's later work – which Kochan completely neglects. We aim to do more than merely criticize what we see as a misreading of Rouse's work (including his interpretation of Heidegger), though. The main goal of our discussion will be to further clarify the far-reaching meta-philosophical choices made by thinkers such as Rouse, and which are overlooked in Kochan's analysis.

1. Brute existence

To illustrate the importance of meta-philosophical choices, let us begin by indicating the kind of implicit commitments that lie behind different possible interpretations of Heidegger. Kochan puts a lot of weight on the following passage from §43 from Division 1 of *Sein und Zeit*:

Of course only as long as Dasein *is* (that is, only as long as an understanding of Being is ontically [i.e. factually] possible), ‘is there’ Being. When Dasein does not exist, ‘independence’ ‘is’ not either, nor ‘is’ the ‘in-itself’. In such a case this sort of thing can be neither understood nor not understood. In such a case even entities within-the-world can neither be discovered nor lie hidden. *In such a case* it cannot be said that entities are, nor can it be said that they are not. But *now*, as long as there is an understanding of Being and therefore an understanding of presence-at-hand, it can indeed be said that *in this case* entities will still continue to be. (Heidegger 1962, p. 255 [212], in Kochan 2011, p. 96)

Kochan goes on: “Heidegger drives the point home by stating further that “Being (not entities) is dependent upon the understanding of Being; that is to say, Reality (not the Real) is dependent upon [Dasein]” (Kochan 2011, p. 96). Finally, he glosses this by stating that Heidegger “believes that entities have a brute existence independently of such understanding” (*ibid.*). Since on the contrary “*what* an entity is” does “depend on Dasein’s understanding”, Kochan describes Heidegger as a “minimal realist”, according to whom existence but not essence is completely independent of our interpretations (*ibid.*).

Kochan’s rephrasing of Heidegger’s statement is not at all innocent, however. All that Heidegger is literally saying is that some newly discovered (scientific) entity must be understood as having always already been there; this need not imply that we have to ascribe this to some property such as “brute existence”. In doing the latter, it is implicitly assumed that we need some kind of *explanation* for the fact that we can

understand the entity as having always already been there.²

We will not try to decide the vexed question which interpretation is the right reading of Heidegger when the full context of his work is taken into account. We merely want to point out that a (minimally) realist reading of Heidegger needs to do more than just cite these passages: it needs to make plausible that Heidegger was committed to the need for such, ultimately metaphysical, explanation. (Not only has Kochan failed to provide such independent evidence when providing his gloss, he has also taken over without comment Macquarrie and Robinson's contentious capitalization of "Reality" and "the Real" in their translation of *Sein und Zeit* – which prejudgets exactly this issue by suggesting that we are dealing with some specifically philosophical constructs.)

So this is the meta-philosophical issue at stake: do we require a further, specifically philosophical explanation for the success of our scientific ascriptions of existence to entities?³ It is to this question that Rouse unhesitatingly answers, in line with his understanding of Heidegger: no.

2. Deflating existence

To explicate his meta-philosophical commitment, Rouse introduces a useful analogy with a deflationary⁴ theory of truth (Rouse 1987, p. 160). To explicate the main idea

² Admittedly, our suggestion for this alternative line of interpretation is not more than a sketch that leaves open a great many questions. The basic idea is not foreign to the Heidegger literature, though (see, e.g., Blattner 2004).

³ We call this issue "meta-philosophical" as it concerns the question what we should expect from our philosophical theories.

⁴ Rouse actually talks about "redundancy" (1987, p. 156, p. 160). We will come back to this distinction between deflationary and redundant truth later (see *infra*, section 3). Although we are convinced that Rouse's view only makes sense when read through the lens of a deflationary theory, his slightly

behind this analogy, let us first quote from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy lemma on such theories: “In [a] sense, the deflationary theory is not denying that truth is a property: truth is the property that all true propositions have. On the other hand, when we say that two things share a property F , we often mean more than simply that they are both F ; we mean in addition that there is intuitively a common explanation as to why they are both F . It is in this second sense in which deflationists are denying that truth is a property.” (Stoljar and Damnjanovic, 2012). Similarly, Rouse wants us to stop presupposing that there is an explanatory property (“brute existence”) that all existing entities have in common, merely by their existing.

Rouse further works out the analogy through stating that “[j]ust as what is not a sentence in a language is not true-or-false, there is no fact of the matter about whether things that cannot intelligibly be encountered within a meaningful world exist or do not exist” (Rouse 1987, p. 160; quoted in Kochan 2011, p. 91 – notice the close relation with the Heidegger passage quoted above). This rules out once more the idea of “brute existence”, as it now turns out to be a meaningless concept, besides being “redundant” (Rouse 1987, p. 156). According to Kochan, this implies that since on Rouse’s account “nothing at all can exist (or not exist) unless it is meaningful [...] meaning and existence are somehow equivalent” (Kochan 2011, p. 91). Furthermore, this supposed “assimilation” (*ibid.*) of existence and meaning then renders Rouse’s Heidegger interpretation untenable, as the latter explicitly warns against identifying an entity’s essence (*what* a thing is) with its existence (*that* it is) (*ibid.*, pp. 97-8).

But this cannot be quite right. Kochan understands Rouse as claiming that “existence counts as one such determination” along many other determinations that

maladroit choice of terminology (as we will explain, it is only “brute existence” that is redundant, not “existence”) might well have triggered Kochan’s misreading exposed in this section.

jointly constitute the entity's essence (*ibid.*, p. 91). However, Rouse explicitly states that “‘existence’ is not a real property; it adds nothing to the determinations of the things said to exist” (Rouse 1987, p. 160). What has gone wrong?

We want to propose the following diagnosis. It is only Kochan's assimilation of existence to “brute existence” – i.e., an explanatory property shared by all (existing) entities – that implies that existence is indeed a “determination” of these entities. This then induces the need to keep this determination explicitly separate from the entities' other determinations, e.g., by claiming that contrary to the latter it in no way depends on our interpretation of them. Hence on this reading, Heidegger's legitimate insistence on the distinction between essence and existence fits hand in glove with his presumed minimal realism. But as we saw, Rouse's deflationary move is intended precisely to block the understanding of existence as “brute existence”. And this also allows him to accept that existence and essence are separate without this forcing him (or Heidegger) into a minimal realist position.

3. Temporal existence

Even if we have given a correct construal of Rouse's explicit intentions, this will not do according to Kochan. He quotes a couple of passages from Rouse's writings that supposedly show that his own language, notwithstanding his professed non-realism, actually betrays the necessity of introducing the brute existence of entities as an explanatory factor. Among the passages quoted are the following:

[T]he possible ways a thing can be depends upon the configuration of practices within which they become manifest [...].

This configuration of practices [...] allows things to show themselves as they are in a variety of respects.

(Rouse quoted in Kochan 2011, p. 93)

Kochan comments that in these statements “‘thing’ refers to an entity whose ways of appearing are constrained by [... a] world [of meaning], but whose existence is not. The impression [...] is of an entity lurking somewhere behind the scenes, awaiting its cue to leap out onto the world stage. Manifestation thus seems to presuppose existence” (Kochan 2011, p. 93). According to Kochan, Rouse’s talk of manifestation thus invites a vertical reading, on which “ordinary norms of intelligibility” (*ibid.*, p. 110) force us to accept that there is an underlying level of reality, independent of all our practices, that explains why anything can “show up” at all within these practices.

There is another sense of manifestation, however. We submit that these passages should be given a *temporal* rather than a vertical reading. The relation between what can manifest itself and its actual manifestation should be conceived as a temporal rather than as a quasi-spatial relation. Let us illustrate this by one of Rouse’s own examples, involving the discovery of the hormone TRH within biochemistry. Kochan claims to find the same equivocation in Rouse’s language here:

Once biochemists succeeded in attributing a chemical structure to what Rouse also refers to as “the stuff in the fractions,” that stuff was no longer an unstable artefact but manifest [sic] itself as a genuine “substance” (Rouse 1987, p. 163). Hence, Rouse distinguishes between “unstable artefacts” and “stuff,” on the one hand, and “things” and

“substances,” on the other, arguing that only the latter can be properly recognised as candidates for existence. What he refers to as “the complex of practices [... of biochemistry]” comprise the conditions for the existence of TRH (Rouse 1987, p. 163). Yet it then becomes rather puzzling what the terms “unstable artefact” and “stuff” are meant to refer to if not something which exists. It seems more reasonable to say that the terms refer to something about which we can say *that* it is but not *what* it is. (p. 94, italics in original)

First notice that Kochan introduces very awkward distinctions (not at all in line with Rouse’s own use of these terms): once we have identified something as an artefact it is by definition excluded that it would manifest itself as a genuine substance.⁵ Likewise, there is no puzzle about the reference of “artefact”: an artefact denotes a stable or unstable phenomenon initially thought to possibly be an entity which turns out to be noise – i.e., a negative existence claim contesting the previous positive one. It is only “stuff” that can come to manifest itself as substance. But, and this is crucial, about this stuff we cannot yet say “*that* it is” exactly because it is not yet determined whether it is referring to a substance or to an artefact (i.e., to something that is not). Notice, too, that Kochan does implicitly recognize, in his usage of words like “once” and “no longer”, that manifestation can indeed have a temporal dimension; and it illustrates how temporal vocabulary *prima facie* also meets “ordinary norms of intelligibility”.

Whereas Kochan has chosen to focus exclusively on Rouse’s earliest work, it is important to stress that part of his later (and still current) work aims to make the

⁵ That this is no accidental lapse on Kochan’s part is shown by the fact that later on, he talks twice about “the unstable artefact that would become TRH” (Kochan 2011, p. 106).

temporal articulation hinted at here more perspicuous, most notably with respect to normativity. With the latter term, Rouse denotes the question of how scientific inquiry is accountable to natural phenomena. For the (minimal) realist, it is clear that an answer should somehow invoke the brute existence of entities as the crucial constraining factor. But for Rouse, normativity is “an essentially temporal phenomenon. It amounts to a mutual interactive accountability toward a future that encompasses present circumstances within its past” (2007, p. 51). Temporality denotes a directedness toward future disclosure that is constrained but not determined by the configuration of practices that have emerged from the past (1996, p. 152; 2002a, p. 176).⁶

That said, already in his 1987 book, Rouse’s crucial and Heidegger-inspired use of “something being at issue” and “at stake” was present (e.g., p. 67, p. 154). Kochan does not take up this temporal vocabulary at all, but paying attention to this aspect of Rouse’s work allows us to sketch an alternative picture of what is going on in the case study discussed. According to this picture (that avoids the admittedly maladroit notion of “stuff”), there is no pre-existent thing in the process of being stabilised. Yet, there is “something at issue”, focused around what is happening in the test tubes and the questions arising from it, which will prospectively turn out to be either a (stable or unstable) artefact, or a gradually stabilised entity. We can add that in both scenarios, the resolution of the issue deeply affects the future possibilities for action and being, which is “what is at stake” in the research – for example, what it means to be healthy or sick and, thus, how to deal with both. What our research endeavours are about, is what we can now do, say, and contest; how we do that, matters for how we ourselves can be.

⁶ For more on temporality, see e.g. 1996, pp. 141, 162, 192; or 2002b, pp. 314, 337, 357.

This makes clear that ascriptions of existence (besides those of essence or meaning) will often be of paramount importance for the successful continuation of research practice. But existence remains an empirical question requiring an empirical answer. It is in the practice itself that it will be ascertained, through material-discursive interactions within a context in which something is at issue. It is the concrete differences for our possibilities for action and talk that are introduced by the possible existence of the entity in question that affect our understanding of what there has always been and will be. There is no extra philosophical question regarding “brute existence”. We can empirically ascertain of clouds, bacteria, higgs-bosons, good intentions, and economic crises whether they exist, but there is no further property that they share for that reason.⁷

Thus, on our reading, saying that something manifests itself as something existing in a determinate way, is shorthand for the complex temporal process in which something which is at issue gets gradually resolved into new possibilities for being, as encoded in the ascription of existence (or non-existence) to an entity. And as something can only be at issue within the context of some specific (research) practices, at no point does this process refer to a level of reality that lies beyond or behind all such practices. It only points beyond itself in the *temporal* sense: that the present situation is always intrinsically oriented, or projected, towards the future while understood to be rooted in the past. At least *prima facie*, the latter would seem to be more in keeping with the spirit of (or going along “the grain of” (Kochan 2011, p. 98)) Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*.

⁷ Insofar as we need to invoke entire “theories” of existence (since Rouse himself does not do so), the above suggests that Rouse’s position would be much closer to a deflationary theory rather than to a redundancy theory. There is room for useful, non-redundant talk about existence: talk that helps reconfigure or focus the field of possibilities open for action and being, and that thus allows us to express the direction of research. However, this should not be misconstrued as having more ontological import than it need have – such talk is not referring to “brute existence”.

4. Changing-over existence

This brings us to Kochan's last complaint. He believes that Rouse can only be saved from himself by reconciling him with Heidegger on exactly the one point where he explicitly but wrongly distances himself from the latter. And this would have the beneficiary effect of challenging Rouse's status "as the predominant expositor of Heidegger's philosophy of science" (Kochan 2011, p. 83).

The point at issue is Rouse's contestation of Heidegger's interpretation describing science as dealing with entities that are present-at-hand, in contrast to the entities ready-to-hand with which we deal in our everyday activities. Kochan wants to counter Rouse's recurring complaint that Heidegger merely asserts that such a "change-over" from practical circumspection to theoretical discovery takes place without ever adequately describing it (e.g., Rouse 1985, p. 203; Rouse 2005, p. 181; more references are provided in Kochan's footnote 17 on his page 107). To this end, he discusses a number of passages where he believes Heidegger does exactly this, more specifically the famous discussion on equipmental breakdown in §16 of Division 1, and §69 of Division 2. But it is hard to imagine that anyone giving *Sein und Zeit* even only a cursory reading would not realize that these are the passages where Heidegger discusses material that is most relevant for the presumed change-over. Obviously, Rouse would be aware of this. On top of this, Kochan notes that in an article of 1981, Rouse stated that "Heidegger has *carefully described* the various possibilities of equipmental breakdown" (Rouse 1981, p. 276; emphasis added by Kochan, p. 107, footnote 17); and he adds: "Of course, equipmental breakdown is central to the change-over. To the best of my knowledge, Rouse has never

acknowledged, much less offered an explanation for, this dramatic and consequential shift in his interpretation of Heidegger.” (Ibid.) Wouldn’t it be a much more straightforward interpretation to assume that Rouse never went through such dramatic conversion, but rather seems to believe that giving an account of equipmental breakdown is not at all sufficient for explaining the change-over?

That this must indeed be the case becomes clear when we see how Kochan does describe the specifics of the change-over. On his reading, equipmental breakdown confronts us with the brute existence of things (p. 102), after which science provides this brutally existing entity with a modified, scientific essence (p. 103).⁸ Kochan attributes Rouse’s denial that Heidegger has provided a proper description of the change-over to his lack of attention for the multiple meanings that “present-at-hand” has for Heidegger (p. 101). But we can turn this diagnosis on its head: it is exactly because Rouse sees no place for one of these presumed meanings (i.e., brute existence as a property), that he notices a gap in Heidegger’s arguments. Equipmental breakdowns occur, and they do confront us with things in their unintelligible – because completely decontextualised – present-at-handness. But this is merely a limit case of our ordinary meaningful dealings with things: in no way does it provide us with a privileged access to their property of brutally existing to which science could then attach a modified essence. There *is* no merely existing entity to “remain constant across change-overs in the way it is understood” (p. 109).

Rouse’s own alternative consists in the view that science only attaches itself to things that matter, i.e., it never ceases dealing with “something *with which* we are involved” and at no point is dealing with “something *about which* we show our

⁸ This is also explicitly repeated on p. 109: “[E]xistence underpins modifications of essence. Hence, the recognition that our understanding of an entity has changed over presupposes the fact of that entity’s existence. The existence of the entity remains constant across changes-over in the way it is understood.”

concern” (Heidegger 1962, p. 200 [158]; quoted in Kochan 2011, p. 103). Or to put it in his own terminology: there is always something at stake. Science might never “get at the Real” (Kochan 2011, for instance p. 82), but it nevertheless matters profoundly for our way of being in the real.

Of course, if one were to convincingly show that Heidegger does indeed hold the meta-philosophical commitment implicitly ascribed to him by Kochan, this would fill in the gap exploited by Rouse to offer his alternative view on the relation between scientific and everyday practice. But so long as this is merely prejudged, as is the case with Kochan’s arguments, then we can return his charge that Rouse is simply begging the question against Heidegger (Kochan 2011, p. 107), and claim that Kochan is simply begging the question against Rouse in his interpretation of Heidegger.

5. Conclusion: The realism debate and philosophical stances

In the end, it is primarily of historical interest whether Heidegger holds the meta-philosophical commitment ascribed to him by Kochan. But the difficulties we came across in properly interpreting Heidegger do testify to an important characteristic of the debates on scientific realism: they have the tendency to bottom out in irresolvable positions that are not always easy to articulate. It is not accidental that arguably the main protagonist of the debates over the past decades has proposed reconceptualizing these positions as philosophical stances rather than more traditionally conceived as primarily involving beliefs (van Fraassen, 2002). We have seen that Rouse’s position can indeed not be properly understood if one overlooks or misunderstands its animating stance. This also implies that his overcoming of the realism debate is no Hegelian *Aufhebung* that would close off the debate once and for all, but rather

involves a shifting of our priorities and main valuations as philosophers. In this short discussion, we have merely tried to show that this shift can be consistently made. We have not attempted to directly defend its value. But it is important to reiterate that it is not primarily exegesis that we should be interested in; what really matters is the commitments we want to uphold today. It should not be forgotten that Rouse's 1987 book has for subtitle: "Toward a political philosophy of science".

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