

Dasein, The Early Years: Heideggerian Reflections on Childhood

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ABSTRACT: Like most philosophers, Heidegger gave little attention to childhood, but his philosophical emphasis on pre-reflective practice and understanding seems uniquely qualified to help make sense of a child's experience and development. Moreover, it seems to me that many central Heideggerian concepts are best defended, exemplified, and articulated by bringing child development into the discussion. A Heideggerian emphasis on pre-theoretical world-involvement opens up a rich array of phenomena for studying child development, which can improve upon standard theories that have over-emphasized exclusive conditions or criteria. I begin by laying out some basic features of Heidegger's conception of being-in-the-world as a preparation for understanding the world of the child. Then I will briefly discuss some of Heidegger's remarks on childhood, followed by some reflections on language acquisition and the correlation of anxiety and meaning.

WE ARE ALL BIG BABIES—thrown by our birth and beginnings and thrown out with the bath water by philosophy. Childhood and child-rearing have not been given sufficient consideration in philosophy, most likely because philosophy engages in complex conceptual reflections and articulations that are not indicated in a child's abilities and experiences. Childhood has either been ignored or retrospectively described as a primitive precursor to, or deficiency of, mature rational competence. Descartes, for example, took childhood to be ruled by the body's appetites and sense perceptions. Accordingly, childhood helps explain the difficulty of arriving at mature spheres of rational knowledge. Even adult beliefs are not as "solid as they should have been had we had complete use of our reason since our birth, and had we been guided by its means alone."¹ The predominance of reflective paradigms has produced much distortion of the child's world and its relation to adult experience. Even when we grant the importance of advanced rational capacities, the fact that such capacities have a history in an individual's life, that they emerged out of, and often in tension with, other quite different modes of being, suggests that child development should be of pressing interest to philosophy.

I am convinced that most philosophical questions would be well served by a consideration of child development, as a necessary condition for understanding how human realities are historical phenomena in a special sense: namely, the intersection

¹*The Philosophical Works of Descartes I*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 88. For a collection that gathers traditional and more current selections by philosophers on childhood, see *The Philosopher's Child: Critical Essays in the Western Tradition*, ed. Susan M. Turner and Gareth B. Matthews (Rochester NY: Rochester University Press, 1998).

of personal and cultural history in the milieu of child rearing—since the raising of children is always informed by the historical influences upon, and cultural expectations of, care-givers and teachers at every level of engagement. One way to address this matter is to sense the radical implications of Aristotle’s claim that knowledge is marked by the capacity to teach, rather than mere experience (*Metaphysics* 981b8ff.). What I find interesting in this remark is that the longstanding philosophical stipulation that knowledge must somehow exceed immediate experience is here expressed *not* in terms of some transcendent source or “pure” faculty of cognition, but rather the *practical* setting of pedagogical repetition, which simultaneously preserves and creates cultural phenomena by “leading” someone (*educere*) toward acquiring insights and skills that have shaped the experience of predecessors. Education exhibits the temporal/historical structure of being, and it is the lifeblood of culture, which survives the passage of time through the rearing and shaping of children. We should note that the Greek word for education, *paideia*, which also denotes the idea of culture and learned accomplishments generally, is derived from *pais*, the word for child; so in *paideia*, the Greeks named an intrinsic relationship between children, education, and culture.

Like most other philosophers, Heidegger gave little attention to childhood, but his philosophical emphasis on pre-reflective practice and understanding seems uniquely qualified to help make sense of a child’s experience and development. Moreover, it seems to me that many central Heideggerian concepts are best defended, exemplified, and articulated by bringing child development into the discussion: Consider how potentiality, temporality, and the historical repetition of tradition can be seen to mark child-rearing as the beginning of Dasein’s situated emergence; consider also how the hermeneutic circle and especially Dasein’s thrownness are perfectly intelligible in terms of having been reared. A Heideggerian emphasis on pre-reflective world-involvement opens up a richer array of phenomena for studying child development, which can improve upon standard theories that have over-emphasized exclusive conditions or criteria: for instance, cognitive development (Piaget), psycho-sexual development and abnormal behavior (Freud), external conditioning (Skinner), and biogenetic forces (sociobiology).² I want to begin by laying out some basic features of Heidegger’s conception of being-in-the-world as a preparation for understanding the world of the child. Then I will briefly discuss some of Heidegger’s remarks on childhood, followed by some reflections on language and the correlation of anxiety and meaning.³

Dasein is being-in-the-world, which means it is never separable from world involvement, and it cannot be understood as a discrete subject on one side of a

²For an excellent critical survey of standard theories, see R. Murray Thomas, *Comparing Theories of Child Development*, 5th edition (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 2000). For a study of child and human development that accords well with Heidegger’s thought, see Bernard J. Boelen, *Personal Maturity: The Existential Dimension* (New York: Seabury, 1978), especially chaps. 2–3. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James E. Edie (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 96–155.

³Portions of what follows are drawn from my book, *Ethics and Finitude: Heideggerian Contributions to Moral Philosophy* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

self-world relation. Da-sein is the “there” of being, the disclosive opening of and to being. For Heidegger, Dasein’s existence is ek-static, in the sense of standing-out, which is to say, not the “inside” of a discrete consciousness, not even an outside as the “other side” of consciousness, but a standing *in* the out, an immersion *in* the “there” of being that characterizes Dasein’s prereflective involvement in the world.⁴ Before the detached, reflective standpoint of theoretical reason and scientific objectivity, we are “always already” shaped by everyday concerns, practical involvement, moods and affects, inherited customs and traditions, social relations, and language uses. These spheres cannot be bracketed or displaced in any philosophical inquiry that aims for a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of being. Contrary to the idea of knowledge as the discovery of free-standing facts or truths independent of human involvement—some uninterpreted “given” out of which inferences can proceed from unadulterated, stable foundations—Heidegger insists that all forms of thought are saturated with prior modes of understanding that Dasein brings to any inquiry. Consequently, philosophical thought must be hermeneutical, it must work on and with already operating forces and capacities, rather than see itself as the search for some purely objective ground. Hermeneutics discounts the possibility of a “view from nowhere.” No inquiry begins from scratch; it is always shaped by prior modes of understanding or direction that usually go unnoticed *because* of their tacit character.

Childhood can be seen as the ontogenetic “origin” of Dasein’s tacit understanding of being. As a result of child-rearing, each mature Dasein brings to any endeavor the effects and influences of its enculturation since the first moments of life. And this is a crucial sense in which Dasein is *Mitsein*, or socially shaped all the way down. Child-rearing opens up issues that undermine the modern, individualistic conception of the self and that lend credence to Heideggerian phenomenology. The prevailing view has taken social relations as a second-order sphere compared to the original immediacy of self-consciousness. And epistemologically, the emphasis has been on monological reason, where knowledge is understood from the standpoint of the individual mind, its faculties, and rational procedures. Heidegger follows Hegel in arguing for a social self. Dasein is “essentially *Mitsein* (being-with).”⁵ For instance, the practices of Dasein’s world are primarily social practices, as a relatedness to others and their practices (my writing for readers with pen and paper made by others, and so on). Social relations are not inside-out connections between mutually secluded selves. Others are part of the disclosive “there” of Dasein’s being. Being-with is part of Dasein’s being-in, part of Dasein’s inhabitive dwelling (*BT*, p. 155). In everyday dealings, I do not “launch” myself into social relations from the standpoint of a discrete, interior consciousness. I *am* with others in innumerable co-concerns and social transactions that continually occupy my life. This is not to deny individuality, or distinctions between self and others,

⁴See Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 283–84. In my text I will employ the spelling “ekstatic” in order to distinguish Heidegger’s specific meaning from other possible connotations.

⁵Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 156, hereafter *BT*.

or the inwardness of self-conscious reflection, but only to assert an interactive social milieu that is more original than the individualized model of the conscious self. Primal sociality is most obviously evident in child-rearing, considering the essential dependence of the child on others for its enculturation into a world of practices and language use.⁶

For Heidegger, being is not an object and the world cannot be understood as simply a collection of objects. The being of the world is a context of meaning organized around the phenomenon of care. His analysis begins with a consideration of practical dealings with things in terms of use and production (*BT*, p. 96), something opened up by the phenomenon of tool use, which is characterized as *zuhanden*, meaning in use and at use, as opposed to something *vorhanden*, or merely present before an attentive gaze. *Zuhandenheit* refers to practical familiarity, competence, and involvement, which is generally designated as circumspection (*Umsicht*), which names the field of purposive practices and tacit competencies animated by existential concerns.

As is typical of Heidegger's approach, the meaning of this field of circumspective concern is disclosed by way of a negation, that is, in a breakdown of the practice-field occasioned by a disruption or malfunction. As Heidegger puts it: "everything positive becomes particularly clear when seen from the side of the privative."⁷ When a breakdown interrupts my practice, I now become more explicitly aware of the purposive background by force of the interruption. The breakdown also turns my attention to relevant properties and aspects of the tool that in use are not in my attention (thus Heidegger's contention that objective, *vorhanden* disclosure is a second-order account, derived from disturbances to *zuhanden* practices). Objective descriptions and talk of mental beliefs are not false, but such second-order descriptions cannot do justice to a phenomenology of nonreflective competencies. It is true that learning new practices and skills comes with a sense of reflective distance from practice and analytical divisions between mental beliefs and conditions in the world separate from beliefs. But such learning milieus always bank on other background competencies and tacit familiarities that make the learning possible. In addition, when the new skill has been mastered, the learned practice then becomes an unreflective, skillful, familiar competency; that is to say, it becomes the "second nature" of habit. This entire complex of learning new habits by way of prior habits is prepared by child-rearing, the original milieu of habituation.

Heidegger's organizational term for the "whole" of Dasein's being-in-the-world is care (*BT*, p. 227). Care gathers in one term a complex of existential meanings: (1) caring about, a concerned mattering,⁸ (2) taking care and caring for (*BT*, pp. 157, 243), and (3) a negative sense of worries and burdens (as in the cares of the world). This last sense leads to Heidegger's emphasis on anxiety (*Angst*). Mood

⁶See Katherine Nelson, *Young Minds in Social Worlds: Experience, Meaning, and Memory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁷Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 309, hereafter *BP*.

⁸Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 294, hereafter *HCT*.

(*Befindlichkeit*) is essential to Dasein's understanding of its world. Anxiety, for Heidegger, is a basic mood that opens up the general meaning of care, particularly in terms of being-toward-death. Anxiety is an experience in which meaning recedes and Dasein encounters a kind of "nothing." In anxiety, Dasein is *unheimlich*, no longer at home (*BT*, p. 233). The nothing experienced in anxiety is not the negation of the world per se, but the negation of its *meaning*, and thus its being in Heidegger's sense of the term. But Heidegger insists that this encounter with meaninglessness is not the opposite of being or meaning, but rather the correlate of being and meaning, as the existential contrast that discloses meaning in the first place. We care about the world and our place in it *because* we are radically finite. Anxiety wrenches us out of familiar world-involvement and discloses the heretofore concealed meaning of that involvement, in a manner analogous to the disruption of *zuhanden* conditions. The meaning of being, for Heidegger, is always charged by an absence; and the primal interruption of anxiety charges us with engaging the radically finite meaning of being.

What does all this have to do with childhood? Heidegger does offer some occasional remarks about childhood that are of interest. He says that the child's world too is laden and charged with Dasein's meaning structures (*BP*, p. 171). He also grants that being-toward-death is a one-sided phenomenon, that a full articulation of temporality must include birth, that care is a stretching between birth and death (*BT*, pp. 425ff.). It would do well, I think, to explore further this temporal stretching with respect to child development. Heidegger says very little in this regard, except for some tantalizing passages in the 1928/29 lecture course *Einleitung in die Philosophie*.⁹ The child is no less a human Dasein than an adult is (*GA* 27, p.123), but the child exists in a kind of "twilight" condition and as a "helpless deliverance in the world" (pp. 125–26). Our birth and early experiences are not just a temporal beginning, they are the early manifestation of being-in-the-world that "does not simply lie behind us," that is still close to us in some way (p.124).¹⁰ The twilight character of the child is described as rest, warmth, nourishment, sleep, and a kind of nontelic directedness of movements toward and away from elements in the environment (p. 125). The child comes into the world crying, and negative experiences of shock and fright continue to shape the child's comportment (p. 125). Heidegger here is able to draw on his phenomenology to show that such comportment belies the notion that an infant is "closed in on itself." The spontaneous disturbances in a child's experience are disclosive modes of *Befindlichkeit*. The child is not an enclosed subject, but is ecstatically "outside among" its world (p. 125). The child's modes of turning-toward and turning-away, of approach and resistance in its world, are an early version of Dasein's being-in-the-world, charged with limit experiences such as fright, shock, and disturbance. The child, then, exists in a twilight condition of ekstatic finitude.

⁹Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klosterman, 1975ff.), Vol. 27, hereafter *GA* 27.

¹⁰As Boelen says, maturity is a continuing dialogue with early development, rather than a "perfection" that leaves behind early stages (Boelen, *Personal Maturity*, p. ix).

Now let us turn to some topics that can help articulate how childhood is constituted by modes of finite being-in-the-world, beginning with the issue of language, which is crucial to Heidegger's phenomenology. Rather than engage in a mere formal analysis of language, Heidegger explores the existential setting of speech-practices, exchanges of speech in Dasein's inhabited world. In stressing language as a social practice, we come to findings very different from the philosophical tradition's emphasis on ideas in the mind externalized by linguistic signs. Language is essentially a public, communicative engagement, a shared articulation of Dasein's dwelling in the world. Language should be understood more as something situated in the world, rather than as something originating in conscious thought and then launched out to others in the outside world. Indeed, like other modes of existence, language is ekstatically "there" in Dasein's world (*BT*, p. 205). In addition to communicative practice, an analysis of language should include sounds, movements, intonations, rhythms, nonverbal gestures, silences, hearing, listening, and responding (*BT*, p. 206). All this is much more complex than a science of linguistics that examines words as *vorhanden* entities and explores their verbal meanings, references, relations, structures, usages, and so on (*BT*, p. 209). Indeed, when considered from the standpoint of immediate practice, language and even signification are *zuhanden* phenomena (*BT*, pp. 95–107, 114, 204).

Heidegger came to correlate the emergence of being with the world-disclosive function of language. For Heidegger, language cannot be understood simply as a function of object designation or as representations of things in the world, because such models bank on modes of disclosure already presented in language. To think that the world is a set of pre-linguistic things that are designated by words is to overlook the fact that "thing" is a word (as are "world," "is," "a," and so on). This is why Heidegger correlates language and being, since any disclosure will unfold by way of already inherited linguistic meanings and uses. Consequently, Heidegger calls language "saying as showing,"¹¹ as the very manifesting of the world's meaning, and thus of being. Language is the "house of being" in which humans dwell.¹² Even with supposed non-verbal experiences, if these are meaningful experiences (and expressible as such), they presuppose a host of orientations and understandings that trace back all the way to childhood and enculteration into language.¹³

It is no wonder that a child's first words are such a momentous event. Is this not the threshold of the child's emergence out of its twilight state? When a child learns to speak, the world begins to open up, and the child begins to develop in ways that far exceed prelinguistic conditions. It is interesting to note that the word "infant" comes from a Latin term meaning "incapable of speech." Such incapacity, of course, is not a sheer absence but an anticipation; and *naming* infancy as speech-less shows how central linguistic capacity is to human existence.

¹¹Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz and Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 123.

¹²Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, 2nd Edition, ed. David F. Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 217.

¹³For Heidegger's remarks on how experience carries linguistic articulation with it, see *BT*, p. 190 and *HCT*, p. 56.

The setting of child-rearing shows that language should not be understood simply as the employment of words, but as a symbiotic development of the child's capacities for understanding and behavior in the midst of a prompting linguistic environment. In fact, it is clear that language is a multi-faceted environmental influence on children from their first moments of life. If language were simply the speaking of words, then all the verbal behaviors that we naturally engage in with infants before they learn to speak would seem to be a wasted activity. But research has shown that our instincts here are appropriate and crucial for the child's full development later on (even for brain development). This suggests that infants are exposed to a preverbal "rehearsal" of a complex linguistic environing-world from the very start: in terms of facial expressions, touch, physical interactions, gestures, sounds, rhythms, intonations, emotional cues, and a host of behavioral contexts.¹⁴ It should also be noted that a melodic, lilting, high-pitched pattern of speech directed toward infants (sometimes called "motherese") seems instinctive and universal across cultures; and that such tonal patterns seem to communicate basic meanings such as praise or danger, again found across cultures. It may be that the musicality of speech—which, of course, marks the common cultural forms of poetry and song—is not a mere ornament, but rather a function of a primal sensuous register of language beginning at the earliest stages of communication and expression.¹⁵

In more advanced stages before the advent of speech, parents are constantly engaging the child's activities by way of the above complex together with now more focused and deliberate verbal associations, especially in terms of purposive behavior. Research in developmental psychology demonstrates that language acquisition, including preverbal rehearsals, is essentially an inter-subjective process that precedes and makes possible later developments of focused individuation *out of* an original social nexus (again, *Mitsein* all the way down).¹⁶ For one thing, we can note that the phenomenon of pointing, a precursor to language development, seems unique to humans (the original *Da?*), and it also exhibits an inter-subjective structure because when infants point, they look back at adults to see if they notice it too (a ubiquitous feature of child behavior called "social referencing").¹⁷ Pointing exhibits a triangular structure of pointing *to* something in the world *for* someone else's attention.

In addition, even the development of self-consciousness can be shown to emerge out of the social field of language practice. In developmental psychology, the notion

¹⁴See "New Insights Into How Babies Learn," *Science* (August 1997), p. 641, for how early "baby talk" to neonates and various interactive behaviors actually contribute to brain development. See also Jerome Bruner, *Child's Talk* (New York: Norton, 1983).

¹⁵For a discussion of the full range of infant-directed speech, see Melanie Soderstrom, "Beyond Babytalk: Re-evaluating the Nature and Content of Speech Input to Preverbal Infants," *Developmental Review* 27 no. 4 (2007): 501–32.

¹⁶See Chris Moore and Philip Dunham, eds., *Joint Attention: Its Origins and Role in Development* (New York: Psychology Press, 1995), and Alison Gopnik, Andrew N. Metzoff, and Patricia K. Juhl, eds., *The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains, and How Children Learn* (New York: Harper, 2000).

¹⁷See Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View From Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) and Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

of “inner speech” or “private speech”—meaning self-directed verbalization—accounts for how language is implicated in self-consciousness. Research shows that inner speech is the most important factor in the development of self-awareness, the capacity to become the object of one’s own attention, one’s own thoughts and behaviors.¹⁸ Such a process occurs originally in children but in adults as well (p. 2). Fully immersed experience is not self-conscious. A kind of “distance” between the observer and the observed is required for the self-awareness of observation. Inner speech provides this kind of distance (p. 7). It is important to stress that such a development is derived from the original *social* milieu of language, so that self-awareness arises from the *reproduction* of social mechanisms by way of self-directed language (p. 5). The case of Helen Keller is instructive because she claimed that consciousness first existed for her only after she gained access to language (p. 9).¹⁹ There is also neurophysiological evidence mapping the processes here described (pp. 8ff.).

Private speech in young children (talking to oneself in task performance) has often been met with concern by parents; and Piaget had taken it to be a stage of egocentrism. But L. S. Vygotsky initiated the dismissal of this scheme by arguing that private speech is essential for the cognitive and behavioral development of the child, because here the child takes over the regulative role of the social world.²⁰ Language begins as collaborative tasking and conversation; private speech is a redirection of this milieu toward independent functioning. Cognitive and behavioral capacities begin in a social-linguistic network, and private speech begins a process that over time leads to the *internalization* of these capacities that now can operate “silently,” as it were.²¹ In sum, mature development, individuation, and self-consciousness are the result of an internalization of the social-linguistic environment, mediated by inner or private speech.

In addition to the child’s with-world, the practical environing-world (*Umwelt*) is also relevant to this discussion, in terms of the child’s *zuhanden* relations in its practical, behavioral milieu: the cultivation of various skills, habits, and performances in a host of making, doing, and playing scenarios. The Heideggerian idea of pre-reflective practice seems to be the full measure of childhood activity, the meaning of which can best be articulated by *Zuhandenheit*, rather than the questionable attribution of “concepts” or “theories” to a child’s mind. We can also consider how correlations of the child’s behavior and the environment exhibit the well-known dyad of nature and nurture with respect to human development. The relation between a child’s nature and its environment seems to be a fluid, reciprocal, intersectional correlation that reflects well the kind of dynamic, holistic structure of being-in-the-world.

¹⁸Alain Morin, “Possible Links between Self-awareness and Inner Speech,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 12 nos. 4–5 (2005): 115–34. Pages numbers given in the text above are from this article.

¹⁹Keller also tells of how the meaning of things was hidden from her until she was finally able to access language and communication through the sense of touch. See *The Story of My Life* (New York: Bantam, 1990), chaps. 5–7.

²⁰Adam Winsler, et. al., “The Role of Private Speech in the Transition From Collaborative to Independent Task Performance in Young Children,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 12 (1997): 57–79. This particular point is on page 60.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 61,77.

In this regard, the nature-nurture binary does not hold up under scrutiny. The consensus among most investigators into this question is that a child's nature is neither strictly biologically determined nor wholly malleable by the environment.²² The "second nature" of developed habits and skills represents a confluence of nature and culture that cannot be reduced to either brute facts or arbitrary superimpositions.²³ The intersection of nature and nurture is not even clearly delineable into two discrete cooperating factors. Even the womb is a contributing environment for the biological development of the fetus, and an infant's behavior will influence how caregivers in the social environment will respond to the child (and vice versa).²⁴ We have mentioned how language requires both an intrinsic capacity and a prompting environment for it to develop in a child. Then language itself becomes a crucial environment influencing human development (simply saying something cruel or kind can have at least as much impact on a child as a physical event). With Heidegger we can see this linguistic environment as intrinsically open, since language is able to give presence to the absences of past and future, and accordingly extend immeasurably the possibilities of, and influences on, human experience, thought, and action. In sum, from a Heideggerian perspective, what is natural to the human condition can be understood as anything but fixed and invariable.

The important role of imitation in various linguistic, social, and behavioral developments in a child's life can be taken as a perfect illustration of Heideggerian ekstasics. Mimetic development shows that what is ekstasically *there* in the child's environment precedes a fully formed self that is "inside" so to speak. Children may need to be shown what to imitate, but not how to imitate.²⁵ An intrinsic mimetic capacity in children suggests that the direction toward self-formation is first cued by ekstastic absorption in environmental prompts. Evidence for the ekstastic nature of imitation can be found in the phenomenon of "invisible imitation," where infants will operate imitatively with parts of the body such as the face that are not visible to the infant. Piaget had suggested that such a capacity requires the development of a "body schema" around the age of 8–12 months. But there is evidence of this mimetic capacity right after birth, for instance, with tongue protrusion. This early capacity suggests an immediate outward immersion that need not require some inner formed sense directed outward.²⁶

²²See Michael Rutter, *Genes and Behavior: Nature-Nurture Interplay Explained* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006).

²³For important discussions of second nature in response to various conundrums of modern philosophy, see John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²⁴See Elliot Turiel, Melanie Killen, and Charles C. Helwig, "Morality: Its Structure, Function, and Vagaries," in *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*, ed. Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), Ch.4.

²⁵According to Aristotle, imitation (*mimēsis*) is a natural capacity from childhood, and human beings have an advantage over the lower animals because we are the most imitative and learn first by means of imitation (*Poetics* 1448b5ff.).

²⁶See Andrew Meltzoff and M.Keith Moore, "Imitation of Facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates," *Science* 198 (1977): 75–78, and "Newborn Infants Imitate Adult Facial Gestures," *Child Development* 54 (1983): 702–09.

What is particularly interesting in child development is the role of motor mimicry, which is essential to an extensive range of learning experiences. Motor mimicry is a mode of transpositional embodiment, in which, for example, we spontaneously wince at other people's pain, smile at their delight, recoil at their peril, ape their movements, and so forth. Such behavior has been generally perceived as a puzzle by psychologists.²⁷ Why is it done, especially when we ourselves are not undergoing the movements? It seems, though, that the role of motor mimicry in early childhood provides answers, and a Heideggerian ekstasis greatly contributes to an understanding of such behaviors. Mimetic response, especially in a child's early face-to-face engagements, would seem to be a fundamentally ekstastic phenomenon. In spontaneous mimicry we can presume, as we have suggested, that the "outside" comes first in a way and is productive of the child's "internal" states. Indeed, psychologists speculate that an infant comes to learn about the self primarily through the emotional responses of others, a process that then can be looped back to allow vicarious learning about the experiences of others.²⁸

Returning to the question of language, with the host of preverbal linguistic rehearsals in play right after birth and throughout early stages of development, an important insight emerges: What happens *before* a child learns to speak shows that language is a complex constellation of practices and is from the beginning an active, performative, affective, embodied, purposeful environing-world that is (in Heideggerian terms) *there* shaping the child's sense of things. The general configurations of this *zuhanden* life-world are further articulated when the child learns to speak and develops linguistic competence in transactions with the social environment.²⁹ It seems to me that Heidegger's views on language and his phenomenology of being-in-the-world are given an enhanced strength and concreteness when this crucial developmental milieu is brought into view.

In particular, I want to suggest that a Heideggerian correlation of language and being can be given some specificity in the context of my discussion. First, language acquisition can be understood as the dawning of being in a child's world. Second, language can be characterized as what I call *differential fitness*, in a manner that illuminates two elements of the finitude of being essential to Heidegger's phenomenology: (1) that presence is always animated by traces of absence; and (2) that human existence is a thrown involvement in a meaning-saturated world, rather than a subject-based autonomy or disengaged cognition.

Language as differential fitness is understood in the following way: (1) Immediate conversational speech in face-to-face circumstances is directly disclosive for participants ("That's the right wrench; you can use it to tighten these bolts clockwise."). The same is true for indirect speech and written communications ("She told me she forgives you." "I am pleased to report that your article has been accepted

²⁷Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer, eds., *Empathy and Its Development* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 322–23.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁹For a discussion of how pointing, imitation, and infant-directed speech contribute to the full range of development in the child, see Robert Storey, *Mimesis and the Human Animal* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 75ff.

for publication.”—rare the radical skeptic in this situation!). With such practices, language is experienced as immediately fitting, as presumed to be appropriately disclosive and functionally suited to experience. Language fits the world more in the manner of hand and glove than in “correspondence” relations based on stipulated divisions between internal subjective utterances and external objective conditions. (2) At the same time, the sheer difference between words as phonic talk and the worldly references of such talk produces momentous transformations of experience and understanding, both synchronically and diachronically. Besides the array of differential relations *within* language,³⁰ I want to highlight the difference *between* worldly entities and wordly entities, the latter being distinct phonic phenomena with the crucial features of retentionality and portability. Beyond the immediate disclosive power of words (their fitness), their repeatable retention in speech without their references permits giving presence to the absences of past and future, thus opening up a far richer articulation of temporal experience beyond common animal capacities of memory and anticipation.

Two remarks are in order here with respect to Heidegger’s thought. First, the differential character of language here described and the temporality of being fit hand in glove. Second, Heidegger’s approach to truth can be specified in this context. In normal circumstances of speech acts in face-to-face modes, truth is usually tacit in its disclosive function (“Look over there, the cat is on the mat.”), a fitness that is amenable to what Heidegger calls unconcealment.³¹ The “problem” of truth motivating the correspondence theory stems from possible misfits between present utterances and the absences of past and future states (“The cat gets on the mat every day after eating.”). Yet the fitness character of language would have to be primal in a sense, otherwise language could never get off the ground or function effectively in the rearing of children.

Differential fitness helps account for various elements of language acquisition in a complex environment of reciprocal behaviors between a child’s natural capacities and nurturing social reinforcements. The fitness feature is paramount since initial occasions of language learning are reciprocal transactions in the immediate face-to-face present. Yet differential features function in this milieu as well, especially in variants of affirmation and negation (Yes and No) regarding success and failure or good and bad behavior. And children must adjust to the initially frustrating temporal structures confronting their experience (“You can’t have a cookie now; wait until after supper.”). In general, children learn to incorporate the ineluctable blend of positive and negative forces in the meaning structures of their world.

To conclude, I want to extend this discussion of meaning and negation to the question of anxiety. The Heideggerian finding that the negative recession of meaning in anxiety animates the disclosure of being receives strong reinforcement in

³⁰Internal differentiation includes phonic differences that play out in pronunciation, conceptual differences that correlate meanings (e.g., up and down), and functional differences that orchestrate usage. This makes language systematically dynamic and unsettled. The differential character of language animates the work of Derrida, which was inspired by Saussure. See *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), especially pp. 27–73.

³¹Consider Heidegger’s example of the skewed picture on the wall (*BT*, pp. 260ff.)

considering child development, especially with regard to the universal experience of separation anxiety.³² Human attachments and negative experiences of separation from attachments occur throughout human life in various forms and contexts: for example, losses of, or threats to, possessions, things, people, habits, beliefs, possibilities, environments, or roles; and encounters with something different, novel, strange, or unfamiliar. Despite the difficulties and traumas accompanying such experiences, human growth and development are impossible without separating from certain attachments and confronting new situations; so facing anxieties is essential to human development.³³ Particularly important is the role of separation anxiety in early child development, and I note that in *GA 27*, Heidegger refers to *Angst* in his discussion of childhood disturbance (p. 125). Acute separation anxiety usually occurs around 8–10 months of age, typically in the context of care-giver separation and object loss. Separation anxiety alters an earlier, more undifferentiated relation to care-givers and things. For this reason, separation experiences are correlated with the course of individuation.³⁴ In true Heideggerian fashion, then, it can be said that separation anxiety is a double movement; it is not a fully negative phenomenon because its affective force helps sharpen a child's experience of itself and things in the world, thus enriching experience and fostering development.³⁵ In anxious separation, a bipolar concentration gathers the urgent meaning of the absent person or entity together with the needs and interests of the self that is deprived by the absence. Again consistent with Heidegger, it appears that the process of early separation and individuation is less a cognitive-perceptual phenomenon, and more an emotional-motivational-developmental phenomenon.³⁶ Additionally, around the third year, mostly facilitated by language development, the child develops a sense of object constancy, that absent things can still exist, and in such a context, memory and anticipation help mollify anxiety and promote a toleration of separation.³⁷

In Heidegger's phenomenology, the relationship between anxiety and care is a reciprocal double-movement. The finitude of being is understood in terms of the disclosive significance of *unheimlich* experiences. Yet Heidegger insists that the *unheimlich* involves an intrinsic correlation with gatherings of meaning, a correlation that avoids extremes in either direction, whether a fixation on beings or a romanticized celebration of nomadic abandon. A life without estrangements and losses would be a life without meaning and growth. Yet too much estrangement can lead to disintegration, trauma, incapacitation, or perhaps excessive attachments as a refuge from finitude. The plausibility of this kind of balancing movement is borne out by developmental psychology.³⁸ In early life, experiences of loss and responses

³²Much of what follows is taken from Jonathan Bloom-Feshbach and Sally Bloom-Feshbach, eds., *The Psychology of Separation and Loss* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987).

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 8ff.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 97. See Boelen, *Personal Maturity*, pp. 27ff.

³⁶*The Psychology of Separation and Loss*, p. 22.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁸See *ibid.*, pp. 42ff.

to separation are an index to a child's development and adjustments in later life. Too much care or too little care are both detrimental.

One final remark. The universal phenomenon of separation anxiety and its role in child development may provide some support for what I always thought was a rather tenuous or groping claim in Heidegger's *unheimlich* maneuver: namely, that anxiety is "more primordial" than world-familiarity, indeed that the latter is a "mode" of the former, and that "anxiety is always latent in being-in-the-world" (*BT*, p. 234). If separation anxiety operates at the very dawning of selfhood, Heidegger's claim seems much less of a stretch.

It is obvious that I have provided only the barest sketch of the topics at hand in this essay, and there are numerous other topics to explore. I am convinced that this is an important, unexamined area of research. A Heideggerian exploration of child development will both enrich this crucial field of study and add further concretion and scope to Heidegger's phenomenology of finite being-in-the-world.