

An everyday account of witnessing

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Abstract This paper presents a discussion of an everyday ontology of witnessing drawing on the writings of Martin Heidegger, cognitive science and presence research. We begin by defining witnessing: to witness we must be *present*; and that which is witnessed must be *available*. Witnessing is distinguished from perceiving in that it implies and requires a record (a representation) of what has been perceived. *Presence* and *availability* are (relatively) uncontroversial but finding a place for *representation*, which is a classically dualistic concept, in an ontological account potentially presents difficulties. We address this problem by recognising that being available, ready-to-hand and proximal can also serve to represent the very thing being witnessed.

Keywords Presence · Witnessing · Representation · Availability · Affordance

1 Introduction

This paper considers what is involved when we witness an event from an (everyday) ontological perspective, by specifically applying, at least initially, the language and philosophy of Martin Heidegger. The use of ‘everyday’ is important because it distinguishes his flavour of ontology from other classical accounts which are concerned with getting to the ‘core’ of phenomena or as Husserl put it ‘[to] the things themselves’. This everyday or existential ontology is an account of *being* referenced on the everyday

experiences of people (*Dasein*)¹ rather than to an abstract philosophical notion.

We begin with the simple premise that to witness requires *Dasein* to be present. Therefore to understand witnessing, we must understand that most important and necessary pre-condition, namely, that *Dasein* is present in the world. Indeed from a Heideggerian perspective, *Dasein*, by definition, means *being present in the world*. However, we immediately encounter a raft of difficulties as the more widely accepted definitions of *being present in the world* as proposed by the ‘presence research’ community—(see the International Society for Presence Research-ispr.info) typically treat it as it were a consequence of experiencing virtual reality technology or enjoying an immersive experience (e.g. a trip to the local IMAX cinema), rather than being a primordial condition in its own right. Thus, presence research has sought to understand the conditions required to create a sense of presence and to measure it thereafter. Presence has been treated as a commodity which can be increased, diminished, broken (interrupted) and otherwise manipulated (e.g. Brogni et al. 2003; Freeman et al. 2004—amongst many others). However, I argue that taking *being present in the world* as a primordial state means that (1) we regard it as a propensity or readiness to act or perceive and (2) it is geared towards the world and all that it comprises (more of this in the next section). In treating *presence* as a readiness to engage with the world, to cope with the world, to deal with the world and to witness events, people and things, then *witnessing*

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¹ A quick word of explanation on *Dasein* before we continue. The German word *Dasein* (lit. being-there) is traditionally left untranslated and is taken to stand for ‘human being’ and is usually printed in a different font—like this. Being undefined, *Dasein* is recognized as being contingent or seen as a ‘placeholder’ for ‘who’ and ‘what’ we are.