

What is fundamentally unknown?

Introduction

What is fundamentally unknown to us? It is a strange question, as we ought to know what we cannot know. We are immediately met with a paradox, or, perhaps, a question: if the unknown is itself unknown, can we even write or speak of it? Arguably, the unknown arises from the fact that we, as mortals, are fundamentally limited; we cannot know it all. Given this circumstance, one is only capable of addressing a *known unknown*, which leads us towards an investigation into knowing and knowability. Knowing implies realisation, which implies “realisability”, or intelligibility. By consequence, we can only know ourselves and our environment if we are situated and immersed in a world that is at least partially intelligible – this can be spoken of as an *enmeshment*. Our own finitude is expressed in the finitude of our world, beyond which humans tend to reach for the mystical: The inherent limit or horizon incorporated in the sense of “world” that sets the boundary of what is to be known. Anything beyond this horizon *is* unknown, but it does not need to *remain* unknown. The search for the unknown arises from a scientific sentiment, as the practice of science is engaged in continuously uncovering and revealing what has previously been unknown. To then discover what is *fundamentally* unknown would mean pointing at science’s own limitation, and, in the course of this, perhaps discovering a much larger cosmos than the current scientific framework is able to convey. To conduct a thorough exploration of what is fundamentally unknown, this essay will focus on two exchanges between thinkers of vastly different disciplines, these being the correspondences between Wolfgang Pauli and Carl Gustav Jung as well as Martin Heidegger and Werner Heisenberg. Moreover, the philosophical underpinnings of each exchange are elucidated by rediscovering some of the philosophical works of Friedrich Schelling and G.F.W. Hegel.

Pauli and Jung – Exploring the mysterious *Unus Mundus*

Intuitively speaking, the encounter of two minds engaged in profoundly different domains of study – be it physics or psychology or other disciplines of varying methodology – is bound to result in nothing other than superficial discussions on the impact and public perception of their respective fields. What then may come of it if both minds not only have an understanding of each other's fields of study, but also maintain a considerable level of mutual respect? Precisely this encounter took place between two such great minds, the theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli and the analytical psychologist Carl Jung, in letter exchanges between the 1930s and 1950s. The fruitfulness of this correspondence was guaranteed by the two gentlemen's common aim: Giving an account of the *unus mundus*, the common foundation of both matter and psyche.

Pauli, in his letters, described memories of vivid dreams involving a variety of concepts that a theoretical physicist engages with on a daily basis, be it atoms, nuclei, or abstract concepts such as energy conservation. He suspected that the scientific themes of his dreams carried symbolic meaning that Jung could help unveil. Jung did not only provide a thorough analysis of Pauli's dream motives but also claimed that such psycho-physical correspondences found in dreams are also to be found in accounts of medieval and ancient alchemy.

Jung understood alchemy and astrology as initial proto-sciences that had not yet undergone a strict separation of the mental and the physical. In other words, the *unus mundus* was either not yet differentiated or was still at a transitory stage between an undifferentiated whole and a decomposition of that whole into the material and psychic realms. Jung, who described entities at this stage as *psychoid* (not yet entirely psychic), thus attempted to layout a foundation for his overall model of the psyche. In this, he tried to avoid philosophical speculation (despite often referencing Kant and Schopenhauer) and strove to establish a conceptual basis that would put the study of the psychic realm on an equal footing with that of the material world.

The unity and nature of the *unus mundus* is fundamentally mysterious and hence unknown, given its foundation in mystical and gnostic teachings. Anything the *unus mundus* reveals to us about itself is simultaneously accompanied by a concealment of its deep essence since the origin of all knowledge cannot itself be known. Jung himself claimed not to have been very proficient in philosophy and was therefore not aware of the philosophical debates concerning the ground of existence among the ranks of German Idealist thinkers. Jung, however, explicitly rejected the idealist philosophy of G.F.W. Hegel in favour of Arthur Schopenhauer's understanding of the world as Will and Representation. Jung regarded Hegel's notion of the absolute spirit as totalising and perceived it as a misguided reduction of the mysterious *unus mundus* to only one of its aspects, namely the spirit (*Geist*). In contrast, Jung understood Schopenhauer's Will as a much broader concept that could better capture the totality of the *unus mundus*: He understood the Will as a blind amorphous force that separated into an objective Will and a subjective Will (Representation or *Vorstellung*), thus mirroring his own ideas of an objective *Self* and a subjective *Ego*. Jung and Schopenhauer both found inspiration in Eastern perennial philosophies such as the ancient Hindu *Upanishads*, which describe the differentiation of a small soul (*Atman*) from a large, holistic soul (*Brahma, the One*). In a similar way, Jung describes the emergence of consciousness as a differentiation of the Ego from the *Collective Unconscious*.

To summarise, Jung posits an underlying unity called the *unus mundus* that is neither physical nor psychic (*psychophysically neutral*) and that lies at the ground of both the physical and the psychic, as well as the conscious and the unconscious. In the attempt to describe this ground of existence, Jung used expressions that Schelling had already employed in his *Treatise on Human Freedom* such as "undifferentiated". Schelling, who used the term *Ungrund*, taken from Boehme to refer to the un-

ground, or rather, the groundlessness of the ground, had overcome the German Idealist attitude to describe all of Being in terms of spirit. He had inadvertently overcome German Idealism itself when the unground was made the origin of all existence, giving rise to will, spirit, love, and longing alike. Interestingly, Schelling remained unaware of his contribution to the self-overcoming of German Idealism.

Heidegger and Heisenberg – Science in the Shadow of *Being*

Many years later, Martin Heidegger would explore Schelling's treatise to uncover the development that had taken place in Western thought. In the following paragraphs, a brief description of Heidegger's relevance to the question of the unknowability of the *unus mundus* shall be given. This introduction will elucidate two core points: Firstly, the unknowability of the ground of existence in terms of human existential limitation; and secondly, the unknowability of this ground from within a scientific worldview in reference to Heidegger's correspondence with theoretical physicist (and personal friend of Pauli) Werner Heisenberg. This correspondence was just as complementary and fruitful as the correspondence between Jung and Pauli.

The core of Heidegger's exposition on fundamental ontology is the distinction between *Being* and *beings* (*Sein* und *Seiendes*). *Being*, namely the ground for the existence of beings as such cannot itself be a being among others and thus requires a different, special kind of explication. This foundational expression of the sense of *Being* by consequence guides metaphysical accounts of logic and theology alike. Heidegger claims that Hegel (and, in fact, all Western philosophy) had made the error of “short circuiting” the question of *Being* by “identifying” it with nothingness (as written in Hegel's *Science of Logic*), thus barring us from any possibility of making meaningful statements about it at all. In fact, Heidegger claims that the entirety of Western philosophy had missed or skipped (*versäumt*) the question of *Being* by either deeming the question meaningless (“Being is nothingness”) or identifying *Being* with a highest or most general being (“Being is the Absolute”). He further argues that Schelling had avoided this error by conveying a sense of *Being* that is more fundamental than that of Hegel: Whenever an equivalence or property is predicated in conjunction with using the word “is” (e.g. “the man *is* good”, “the man *is* a carpenter”, or “evil *is* good”), the authentic (*eigentlich*) understanding should be one of a “silent” kind of *dual-aspect monism*. This means that the predicate and the predicated are participants in an underlying mysterious unity that is creatively (*schöpferisch*) revealing two aspects of its hidden essence. That essence, however, remains evasive, seemingly paradoxical, as conveyed by Hegel's identification of “Being is nothingness”. Hegel, however, immediately moves past the mystery of *Being* (in part because he regards it as inherently inaccessible to reason and to philosophy by consequence) towards a sense of *Being* that expresses a kind of reflexive identity: *Being* and nothingness are identical insofar as they both condition the sameness of

beings with themselves: something “is there” (*Dasein*) only insofar as it is itself and *not* another (*Fürsichsein*). Nothingness is here represented by that “*not*”.

Heidegger expressed that each theology is contingent upon an implicit sense of *Being*: The way the ground of *Being* (*God*) is inherently understood simultaneously implies a sense of the *Being* of that ground and vice-versa. According to Heidegger, Hegel’s misaligned sense of *Being* leads to him necessarily mistaking the ground of *Being* for the *Absolute Spirit*. His understanding of the ground of *Being* mirrors his sense of the *Being* of that ground, namely the sense of reflexive identity. Schelling contrarily expresses Heidegger’s more generative (*schöpferische*) sense of *Being* when he describes the intelligibility, wilful longing, and love of the spirit of God as a meaningful relationship between the ground and its existence: God becomes himself only through the becoming of existence. This becoming is eternally reaching out of the ground of existence and back into it. It is eternal insofar as it is always moving from *Being* into nothingness and from nothingness into *Being* at once; an existence which unfolds through an openness of *Being*, opening up the horizon on which beings appear, disappear, and reappear as meaningful entities.

It is exactly at this point that Heidegger diverges from Schelling whose concepts are still steeped in the academic language of German enlightenment philosophy. Inspired most likely by Nietzsche’s profound nihilism, Heidegger shifts his focus away from the theological question of the ground and back towards the existential analysis of *Dasein* (*being-there*). As a result, Heidegger alleges that Schelling’s account of the separation of ground and existence reaches a dead end, as the monistic impulse to find oneness would thus urge one to find a common origin of both ground and existence. This common origin was Schelling’s groundless un-ground.

For Heidegger, Schelling had now reached the summit of metaphysical exploration and had here encountered a void – a nothingness that did not allow for further investigation. Did Hegel’s short-circuit, namely the identity of *Being* and nothingness, just reappear in Heideggerian jargon? The contrary in fact applies as, according to Heidegger, the phenomenal encounter with the void of nothingness (which differs from a purely logical negation of essence) precisely brings us back towards a new beginning, a renewed sense of *Being*. Now, the new beginning arises from the perspective of human freedom which is also one of human limitation (the finitude of *Dasein*).

The nothingness between *Being* and beings “is” at once the unground between ground and existence, arising simultaneously in an onto-theological interplay. *God as himself* – the eternal expression of the ground into existence and return back into itself – is now understood by Heidegger from a phenomenological and existential perspective: The existential ecstatic openness of *Dasein* to the mutual “reaching out” and “passing around” of *Being* through the temporal modes of future, present, and past.

Heidegger's reorientation of thought away from the eternal and towards the finite and limited represents a turning point in ontology. The eternity of *Being* is now understood from within the finitude of *Dasein* and its encounter with the void instead of from the "already given" infinity of an unknowable ground of existence.

Heidegger points out that his reorientation in ontology marks a fundamental shift in the history of metaphysics which overcomes (*verwindet*) the metaphysical paradigm that has prevailed thus far; a paradigm that now threatens man's very existence. This existential threat expresses itself in the realm of technics (*das Wesen der Technik*) which Heidegger describes as the calculating and configuring totalisation of nature as a standing resource, at all times ready to be mobilised and processed.

Although, historically speaking, modern industrial technologies emerged after the discoveries of modern science, Heidegger understands modern science as being inherently technical and driven by technological optimisation (or the *perfection of technics*). Contrary to the assumption that modern science has emancipated itself from dogmatic belief, its entire inherent worldview today is predicated upon the total and unconditional reduction of the world to manipulable data and information.

Furthermore, this radical metaphysical position is neither recognised nor acknowledged by most scientists, making it ever-more pernicious.

In 1954, Heidegger decided to speak at a conference in Munich attended by leading scientists such as quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg about the inherent blindness of science to its own inherently technological foundations. In the lead up to the conference, Heidegger expressed in a letter to Heisenberg that modern science is incapable of giving an account of the foundation and truth of its own field of study, as long as it remains a study of beings who are understood and manipulated in a particular way. Heisenberg responded that mathematicians and theoretical physicists were already aware of the existence of inherent limits to all formal systems, as Kurt Gödel had proved the Incompleteness Theorems using formal logic.

However, a recognition of such a limitation derived by logic alone does not amount to an understanding of a field's foundations. Science appears to be floating in an empty void lacking firm ground to its metaphysical implications on the nature of reality (Karl Popper was also aware of this). Ironically, the very foundation of the producers of knowledge rests on insurmountable unknowability. It is fundamentally unknown.

Conclusion

Whenever the unknowable is in question, an investigation into the nature of its unknowability consequently arises. Exploring the nature or essence of something that we cannot know represents a *negative* ontology or epistemology. This means that by clarifying what the unknown *is not*, we can narrow down its implicit meaning. In the same way, it is possible to explore the crater a meteor leaves in order to understand the structure of that meteor. In the domain of negative ontology, it is not possible to directly express the sense of *Being*, but it is possible to explore the sense it (*silently*) “leaves”. Arguably, this engagement with the topic of unknowability is at the same time an attempt at attaining higher knowledge. It is exactly this encounter with the void that conveys “one cannot know” as a precondition for deeper understanding, a kind of knowledge that is not obtainable through the methods with which we pursue science today.

Philosophers, mystics, and religious scholars have always attempted to directly experience the absolute ground of knowledge, be it God, the Good, Truth, or Beauty. From the days of Parmenides, thinkers have sought to describe the mysterious underlying unity of *thinking* and *being* – a unity in which the knower is also known (knowledge of the absolute is at once absolute knowledge). Nonetheless, the ultimate source of knowledge evades us in the same way that you can neither see your eyes, hear your ears, smell your nose, or eat your mouth. Are we to accept this unknowability, this *unknown unknown*, in order to understand how we get to understand? At this point we have reached either insightfulness or absurdity: It seems that the meaningful world needs to reach its end so that something else may emerge. This end is encountered as an unknowable and perpetually looming abyss that reminds us of our finitude. Critics may struggle to cope with and may seethe at the prospect of such occult ramblings. They want to either know the unknown or ignore it completely. Speaking of it but cutting off our access to it arouses hopeless curiosity without ever feeling satisfied. Some consider talk of the unknown as pointless, or even perceive it as conveying a false sense of profoundness. Yet there it keeps looming – that which we know to be unknown.

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