

Chapter 2

Estrangement: A Beginner's Guide to the Strangeness of the World

Jonathan M. Smith

Abstract Geographers adopted the concept of Being-in-the-World from Martin Heidegger. However, most have wisely eschewed the philosopher's larger ontological and pantheistic project. Nevertheless, geographers can make use of basic phenomenological concepts and terms. The world of appearances can be reduced to the three basic phenomena of objects, subjects, and death, and each of these phenomena engenders in humans a feeling of estrangement, angst, or alienation. There are four responses to the world's appearance as an uncanny place: otherworldliness, existentialism, naturalism, and escapism. Because the events predicted in this volume will almost certainly make the world appear more and more uncanny, an important (but here unanswered) question is which of these responses will prevail.

This chapter is meant to serve as a basic guide to the experience of being in the world. I will explain the origin and meaning of the concept of being in the world, its place in geography, and its relevance to the themes of this volume. As will be seen, geographers took the phrase from the philosopher Martin Heidegger, but have generally (and I think wisely) used it without scrupulous attention to Heidegger's total philosophic system. All that most geographers really wanted from the concept, and the larger phenomenological discourse of which it is part, was a vocabulary to describe the experience of being in a place. Only a few geographers were concerned with Heidegger's deeper ontological project. Most have wished to know, with regard to any particular location, what it is like to be *there*.

Peering into the spectral shadowlands of coming years, we are all understandably gripped by a similar curiosity. We wish to know what it will be like to be *there*. But alas, because the future is so very taciturn, we must content ourselves with figments compounded of wishes, fears, and such extrapolations of selected data as seem necessary to lend the confection an air of plausibility. Many such essays in futurology will be found in this volume. Futurology is always semi-fiction, just like

J. M. Smith (✉)
Department of Geography, Texas A&M University,
College Station, Texas, USA
e-mail: jmsmith@neo.tamu.edu

history, but this does not mean it is sheer fantasy or idle speculation. Futurology and history are semi-fictional because their composition requires imagination as well as reason, imagination being the faculty by which one makes one's self the subject of a reality that is not present to one's senses. It is how we know what it is like to be where (or what) we are not; and it is the only means by which we can know this until we actually get there.

The outline of this chapter is simple. First I will discuss the concept of Being-in-the-World that we find in Heidegger, explaining some of its attractive and repellant aspects. I will then sketch a simple phenomenology of being in the world, arguing that one of the most interesting aspects of this phenomenology is a pervasive sense of alienation, or strangeness, and then describe four basic attitudes toward this existential angst. Finally, I offer some remarks on the significance of this phenomenology for thinking about being in the future envisioned by the authors collected in this volume.

2.1 Being-in-the-World

The phrase Being-in-the-World first crept into geographer's conversations from the work of Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher whom it is easier to admire than to comprehend (Heidegger 1962). It arrived on our doorstep adorned with hyphens that gave it a beguiling Teutonic ponderosity, but that also warned of shadowy philosophical entailments. If we admitted this stranger, it seemed that we might soon be opening our door to his relations, and the kin who followed him might be considerably less appealing than this forerunner.

This apprehension was not misplaced, for Heidegger's phrase is indeed part of Heidegger's philosophical system, and it is not possible, or at least not proper, to use it outside that system. This is why we will not be talking about Being-in-the-World in this chapter. Being-in-the-World is properly a pantheist concept, and I leave it to the pantheists for whom everything is, in a sense, hyphenated. I will, however, talk about being *in the world*, removing the stress on *being* to disown Heidegger's ontological project, and deleting the hyphens as prophylaxis against Heidegger's pantheist theology.

It is not easy to explain the precise difference between Being-in-the-World and being *in the world*, but we may begin to see the difference if we think of it in this way. If I said, "I was writing on the porch, and Mrs. Wilson came up the walk to speak with me," the information respecting what I was doing and where I was while doing it is incidental to the entire reported event. It is relevant, but it is not essential. However, if I said, more plaintively, "I was *writing on the porch* and Mrs. Wilson came up the walk to speak with me," you would understand that the fact that I was writing, and more especially doing so *on the porch*, was (so far as I was concerned at least) the gravamen of my story. It is a story about me, and my writing on the porch, not about Mrs. Wilson.

Now the meaning conveyed by stressing the phrase “writing on the porch” with italics is roughly the same as the meaning conveyed by linking the phrase “being in the world” with hyphens. Both make it clear that the *action* denoted by the verb (whether “being” or “writing”) is profoundly important to the story I am telling, and that the *circumstances* of the action (“in the world” or “on the porch”) are profoundly important qualifiers of the verb. In other words, it indicates what I have called the gravamen of the story.

The phrase Being-in-the-World is, at first, difficult to see in this light, for apart from Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, we do not generally think much about the verb to be. If I tell you, “This morning I *exercised*,” there is some chance you will be interested, even impressed. But if I tell you, “This morning I *was*,” you will probably think that I need to go back to bed. The act of *being* that we Anglophones express with words, such as “is,” “are,” “am,” “was,” and “will be,” seems to us very unremarkable unless connected to some less common action. “I am *eating a potato chip*” seems, at least on its surface, a more interesting remark than “I *am*.”

But of course, when one thinks about it, it really isn’t, and a basic purpose of Heidegger’s ontological project and of his portentous phrase is to make us think about it. His aim is to destroy this blasé attitude towards being and foster a sense of wonder over the simple but startling fact of existence. He would like me to spring from my bed each morning rejoicing that “I *am*” and “things *are*.” And when one considers the alternatives, it’s hard to say he is wrong.

The other basic purpose of Heidegger’s portentous phrase is to imply that the being of every human is altogether and inescapably *in* the world. He is telling me that I am not, for instance, a sojourner in the world, as a Christian would claim, or an exile in the world, as we are told by the Gnostics. I am rather a product and possession of the world. It is entirely *in the world* that I live and move and have my being. I am, in fact, both a child of the world and its slave. This is why environmentalists are attracted to Heidegger, and why Heidegger was attracted to Fascism. If being is altogether sunk in the world, then the world is a prison and there can be no objections against its rules.

The hyphens in Being-in-the-World are, for me, symbols of the bars of this pantheistic prison, and this is why I strip them away. For although I am most certainly in the world, shaped by it, and in some small ways, shaping it in return. My being is not, as on pantheism, constituted by the world. Its ground, I believe, lies elsewhere.

2.2 The World is an Uncanny Place

We have all heard it said that appearances can be deceiving, and can no doubt recall more than a few embarrassing and disastrous blunders that we have committed after failing to heed this profitable warning. The distinction between appearance and reality is indeed fundamental to our understanding of the world, and the better part of philosophy has sought to dispel the fog of appearance and gaze with unclouded eyes on things as they really are. Plato’s parable of the cave is the paradigmatic

illustration of the basic idea. Phenomenology, in a sense, reverses this philosophic attitude because it seeks to gaze with unclouded eyes *on the shadows*, its aim being to understand the reality of *appearances*.

Now it should be clear that appearances have many layers. Indeed they are often likened to onions. A red patch appearing in my field of vision may, for instance, upon closer inspection appear to be my Uncle Henry dressed in a Santa Clause suit, and upon closer inspection still, to be an impersonator of my Uncle Henry attempting to crash my Christmas party. Among philosophers, phenomenology is an investigation of the first layer of appearance, of primitive experience prior to all human judgment, conceptualization, or interpretation. In the example just given, a phenomenological philosopher would most likely be interested in my being “appeared to redly.” Phenomenological geographers, meanwhile, work on a different layer of the onion, investigating appearances that are shaped—many would say “constructed”—by human judgment, by concepts such as uncle, impostor, and Santa Clause suit.

The earliest phenomenological geographers had no direct connection to philosophical phenomenology but drew from the work of historians, anthropologists, and sociologists the general lesson that any explanation of human behavior must take into account the world that those humans believe themselves to be acting in. A geographer must, in other words, be able to see the world as it appears to the humans that geographer is attempting to understand. As geographers, they were particularly interested in what Carl Sauer called “environmental evaluation.” An important early example of this phenomenological geography is Ralph Brown’s *Mirror for Americans: Likeness of the Eastern Seaboard, 1810* (1943), and in 1946, John Kirtland Wright proposed “geosophy” as a general title for inquiries into “geographical ideas, both true and false, of all manner of people” (Wright 1966).

Most studies in geosophy have attempted to understand the “world” of a particular people, period, or place. They investigate worlds that appear under the judgments of particular cultures and ideologies. Such judgments are often called worldviews. In this chapter, our purpose is to imagine the world that will appear to people in the near future, people whose judgment, we suppose, will be deeply affected by traumatic changes in the physical and cultural environment. Before attempting this imaginative geosophy, however, I must lay out a simple phenomenological schema of appearances in which it is maintained that our world appears to contain three basic phenomena—objects, subjects, and death, and that all three of these phenomena strike us, to one degree or another, as uncanny, alien, and strange.

One of the first discoveries I make upon entering the world is that I am a body among bodies, an object among objects, a thing among things. Some of these objects afford me pleasure, and one in particular makes all the difference between misery and bliss. Some of them get in my way and make me angry; some of them hurt me and teach me the meaning of fear. I find that these objects are arranged in what I will someday call space, and that in some cases, there are means to make them move. I push them and I pull them, and sometimes they push back. The bliss-maker usually comes to me when I cry.

As the years go by, my understanding of objects improves. I learn their types, their properties, and where they may be found. I discover that there is more than one bliss-maker in the world, and that misery-makers are many and cruel. I bark my shin, break my arm, crack my head, and know the carnal pleasure of a warm fire after a long hike through snowy woods. I move things, make things, and break things. I learn to master things and bend them to my will. I also find that they are impossible to befriend. Over the ages, many have wished that this were not so and have fancied a world in which men lived with things on terms of friendship; but this is a dream. Things are incapable of friendship.

Things are incapable of friendship because they have *their* being—all of it—in a world devoid of compassion, or malice for that matter, a world governed by nothing but stupid, brutal, pitiless laws. And we humans can understand this world because part of us exists in that world too. I have a body that has volume, mass, and momentum that occupies space, exerts and responds to force, and exchanges energy and material with its environment. It is because I partly exist in this world of things that I can appreciate this harrowing description.

In the enormous machine of the universe, amid the incessant whirl and hiss of its jagged iron wheels—amid the deafening crash of its ponderous stamps and hammers—in the midst of this terrific commotion, man, a helpless and defenseless creature, finds himself placed—not secure for a moment, that on some unguarded motion, a wheel may not seize and rend him, or a hammer crush him to powder. This sense of abandonment is at first very awful. (Strauss 1873)

The abandonment Strauss sensed was abandonment by God, which is to say abandonment by a being that related to him as a subject rather than as an object, and its awfulness is what later existentialists would describe as the “nausea” or “vertigo” that one feels when the illusion of meaning evaporates. Existentialists refer to the void that remains after the disappearance of meaning as “the abyss.” Everyone over the age of 16 has caught at least a glimpse of this ghastly cavity. However, there is no agreement as to what it means, or even as to whether it means anything at all. The existentialists say it does, which I for one find puzzling.

Existentialists see the absence of meaning as meaningful because they are human, and being (partly) in a world of meaning is part of what it means to be human. We inhabit this world of meaning as *subjects*, not objects, and so it is properly called the subjective world. In the course of discovering *this* world, a child will, once again, learn many things, but among these lessons, perhaps the most startling and important is that a great many objects are not party to the subjective world. Sooner or later, he realizes that it is pointless to talk to his teddy bear. Everything the awakening child sees is a body in the world of bodies, but only some of the things he sees are also subjects who have part of their being the world of subjects.

Moreover, the child discovers that, even within this exclusive world of meaning, there are catacombs and crypts of subjectivity. He will recognize the existence of a great brotherhood of men (and women) and sense in the faces of strangers the presence of other minds, but most of these minds will be largely inaccessible because they are sequestered in undecipherable languages and inscrutable cultures. Even among those with whom he shares a common tongue and lifestyle, he will find great variability in

sympathy and mutual understanding. If he is fortunate, he may find a friend, which is to say a subject who inhabits a world of meaning similar to his own.

But a true friend is a rare gift, and the subjective world has its own special power to provoke the nausea of existential loneliness. As the geographer Yi-fu Tuan describes it: "Language isolates. The more an individual knows and the more subtly he is able to say what he knows, the fewer listeners he will have and the more isolated he will feel" (2002).

What Tuan should have written is that language isolates those who fail to find a friend who speaks the same "language," who recognizes and responds to the same meanings, who dwells in the same crypt or catacomb of the subjective world. But since most of us do, in fact, fail to find such a friend, most of us know what Tuan means.

The subjective world is fissiparous. It is generally agreed that friends are more easily found in childhood than in youth and more easily in youth than in maturity. This is because a boy of 10 has a good deal in common with most other boys of 10, and so he finds himself surrounded by potential friends; by the time he is 50, divergent experiences and the development of innate characteristics will have isolated him in some remote and recondite region of subjectivity. Likewise, it is generally agreed that, far from being isolated by language, members of a pre-modern culture were united in a state of (no doubt imperfect) subjective unanimity known as *homonoia*. Among them, consensus was the norm. Among us, it is different. Post-modern culture is the dominion of dissent. That everyone is now sequestered in his or her own crypt or catacomb of the subjective world can be seen in the fact that we now use the word subjective to indicate private meanings and peculiar opinions. We have forgotten that the subjective world was once a public place (Scruton 2002).

We have our being at least partly in the world of objects, and when this world is not, as Strauss put it, seizing us, rending us, or crushing us into powder, we may feel stirrings of affection for this world. But the feeling is never mutual. Love the world of objects as much as you will, it will never return your love, and in it, you will at least intermittently feel an outcast, an alien, a pariah. In the world of subjects, there is love to be found, but not so frequently and seldom so abundantly as might be hoped. It is, as we have seen, a fissiparous world disposed to produce existential loneliness. In either case, therefore, our experience of being *in the world* is an experience of being a stranger in *an alien world* (Lawler 2002).

This sense of alienation is greatly compounded by death, the third basic phenomenon that appears in the world. Death appears as neither object nor subject, but as the negation of both; and in our apprehension of death, we apprehend something *utterly alien*. I at least *resemble* other objects and subjects, and in the world of objects and subjects, it certainly appears that I *am*, but in the face of death, I discern no likeness because death appears as that which (presently) I *am not*.

These are assuredly deep and murky waters, but since phenomenology is a science of surfaces, there is no need for us to plumb their profundities or chart their currents. For our purpose, it is sufficient to say that death fiendishly amplifies the alien appearance of the world. This phenomenological fact is largely absent from the idylls of geographers who have rhapsodized over "earth as the home of man,"

but it is forcefully indicated (if dubiously interpreted) in Heidegger's notion of the *unheimlich* or "not-at-home." This is normally translated into English as "uncanny," meaning queer in a vaguely ominous way; and this, when one thinks about it, is just how the world appears.

2.3 Four Attitudes Toward this Uncanny World

The world appears queer in a vaguely ominous way. Surveying our surroundings, we apprehend an uncongenial place filled with pitiless objects, inaccessible subjects, and the appalling promise of annihilation known as death. It is a prospect from which we naturally recoil with a sense of estrangement, angst, or alienation (Jonas 1963).

Four general attitudes are taken to this feeling of estrangement, angst, or alienation. The first is to suppose that we feel alienated because we are, indeed, aliens who have fallen or been cast into a world that is not our true home (Lawler 2002). In Christianity, we are exiles suffering punishment for a primitive crime; in Gnosticism, we are victims of a malignant cosmic power. Each of these systems proposes a salvific mechanism by which some, at least, may be restored to their proper estate (and also a means by which the damned are removed to a place of perfect estrangement), but neither offers hope for resolution of the problem in this world.

Existentialism is the second attitude taken to this sense of estrangement, angst, or alienation. As we have seen, existentialism teaches us to gaze into the abyss and face the facts of vulnerability, isolation, and death; but it also goes on to urge a sort of joyous rage in the face of this cosmic cold shoulder. Because we are rebuffed by an alien world, existentialism enjoins us to *will* meanings and values into being, to *choose* commitments and objects of care, and to glory in the very whimsicality of these caprices as an assertion of our boundless freedom (Mitchell 1980). As Strauss noted above, the feeling of abandonment is *at first* very awful; but in time, taking in the implications of a universe that really *doesn't care*, some people will find nihilism liberating.

Naturalism is the third attitude taken to this sense of estrangement, angst, or alienation. Naturalism proposes that a sense of estrangement is a not a primitive fact of the human condition, but that it is rather a form of false consciousness under which we labor as a historical accident and from which we will be delivered by a revolution that institutes a "natural" form of human consciousness and social organization. Marxism, for instance, promised to cure alienation by abolition of private property. Contemporary environmentalist doctrines similarly promise to cure alienation through repudiation of anthropocentrism and acceptance of animalism. Notwithstanding its scientific embellishments, the philosophy is at heart a reprise of Diogenes' cynicism. Unsurprisingly, it makes special efforts to encourage blithe attitudes towards natural death (Feagan 2007).

Escapism is the fourth attitude to estrangement, angst, or alienation. Now often described as consumerism, this attitude was first identified by Pascal in the seventeenth century. Eric Voegelin summarizes Pascal's argument this way: "When passion subsides, the experience of a fundamental emptiness and metaphysical forlornness emerges unobscured, the anxiety of existence springs up crying to be

assuaged, and the ordinary method of assuaging anxiety is diversion by new activity” (Voegelin 1975). Escapism can be practiced in sensational or narcotic forms, but in every instance the aim is distraction from the anxiety of existence.

2.4 Whither the World of Appearances?

If the natural and social changes predicted in this volume should indeed come to pass, we must expect this sense of estrangement to increase. We already understand that we have no friends in the world of things, but we have grown accustomed to thinking that what we do have in that world are many docile slaves. Catastrophic anthropogenic climate change will undermine this confidence and complacency; in fact, it will appear as a slave revolt, the greatest nightmare of every comfortable ruling class. Romantic dreams of identification with nature are, after all, a luxury afforded to men who have dined well and are looking forward to a night of untroubled sleep in a comfortable bed. Men who miss meals and stand a good chance of becoming a meal for something else see nature as an enemy.

Meanwhile, there is every reason to expect that existential loneliness will increase in a postmodern culture of self-referential values and private meanings. As was noted above, the subjective world is fissiparous, and each of us is energetically squirming into a crypt or catacomb of private meanings in which we will, no doubt, complain (to no one) that we feel lonely and estranged. We are far advanced into a world in which Facebook defines the word “friend.” In some European countries, nearly half the population lives alone, and in the United States, we are doing our best to catch up to this standard of estrangement.

And death would seem to have become unbearable for growing numbers. Everywhere one looks, one sees fantasies of endless juvenescence, of undiminished fertility, virility, and desirability. The acceptance of euthanasia, which will probably accelerate, does not reflect growing comfort with death. It reflects a decision to finish the ghastly business of dying as quickly possible.

If these predictions are borne out by events, estrangement, angst, and alienation will almost certainly increase in the near future. The final question is which of the four attitudes towards estrangement will prevail in a world that appears to be growing more and more alienating and uncanny. Will there be a revival of otherworldly solutions, a resurgence of existentialism, a redoubling of naturalism, or a further retreat into escapism? I venture no prediction, but am sure that one of these vectors will set what we might call the style of being in the world in the near future. These are the attitudes to watch.

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