

11. Existence

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“Existence” refers, in common usage, to something *being*. When we say a certain rare species exists, we mean that it can be found living now and is not extinct. Existence is about really being present, and that is what this book is about. In its Latin origins, “to exist” included the meaning, “to step forth.” Similarly, we use the word here to emphasize *responsible* human presence coming into appearance—just as it may when we awaken. To exist in this sense is not just to be known and alive, but to be present in one’s biographical habitat in a state of full consciousness and alertness as an individual.

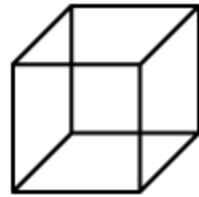
In reading a biography, we are prepared to understand various events as conditions that mold the person. If school teachers expected their pupils to copy their styles exactly in drawing and in written presentations, so that each and every exercise book looked identical, we would not be surprised to find the grown-up individuals having difficulty in following through on their own initiatives. In this sense the biographical habitat is taken to influence the human being, who passively suffers environmental influences.

But the appearances we meet can be much less compelling. One person may recognize that a particular situation calls for personal action, while others may hear no such call. In finding our individual challenges, we come into existence within our own biographical habitat.

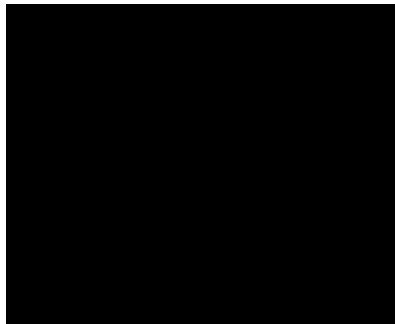
Encounters and Their Consequences

I got to know intentionality when I was told to look at the Necker cube and decide whether I was looking at it from above or below. This cube is one of the best known examples to demonstrate intentionality. The effect relies on a kind of inaccurate perspective. Thus, because the two faces represented as perfect squares are drawn the same size (despite their differing distances from the viewer)—the lines connecting these two faces being drawn parallel to each other—we can easily exchange the front for back and back for front. One day, my colleague Manfred v. Mackensen pointed out a much more profound and, what is more, unnecessary fault in the conventional figure: the two faces that are perfect squares imply that we are viewing the

cube from a point on a straight line perpendicular to their centers—which clearly is not the case. We are instead looking at the cube from a point off-center.



From then on, the Necker cube was changed for me. It still worked, but it was marred by imperfection that I could now appreciate. Moreover, I felt an urge to find a version of the cube without that defect. The seemingly daunting task is to draw a cube in correct perspective while preserving ambiguity. Fortunately, one rather simple solution presents itself:



The figure is just a hexagon with three diagonals. It does not so strongly “require” you to see it as a cube; you can easily take it as a simple plane figure. But if you intend to, you will find four different three-dimensional cubes at your disposal, and these do not suffer from the more serious fault of the Necker figure. You may achieve the effect of looking at a cube from above, taking one of the two parallelograms containing the upper triangle to be toward the top and front. And two further cubes will appear as one of the two parallelograms containing the bottom triangle is taken to be seen from below and in front.

We have just revisited and practiced intentionality as our active role in perception. However,

at this point the story of the Necker cube is meant only as an example to show how a rather modest question can be taken up and recognized as pertinent for an individual. Both my first encounter with the Necker cube and my colleague's critique reached me through the medium of sense perception. Having appeared, they became *my* concerns; I had recognized them—they had recognized me! This book would never have come about if Ron Brady had not recognized the understanding of intentionality as his personal task.

So now we have found our way back to the human self's biographic habitat.

Encounters in a Fairy Tale

In folk or fairy tales the following is typical:

The young hero leaves home, either on a quest, or just to go into the world. On his path, a rather insignificant being appears. In some way it is in need, giving the hero a chance of being of help, perhaps to a little old woman, or to an ant or mouse or bird. He either ignores the encounter or else takes it seriously, listening to what it is asking of him and *acting* accordingly. Moreover, in such tales we hear of three brothers or two sisters passing along the same route, one after the other. Each of them is asked for the same favor—but only one takes pains to help. In return this one receives advice or is given some special gift, which later turns out to be the essential preparation for a crucial task. The others who passed on without taking heed fail at the task.

Here is an example in abbreviated form from *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language* by Kathrine M. Briggs (1991, pp. 560–61). The original Scottish dialect has been slightly revised in favor of common English while retaining the non-standard grammar of the original.

The Waters of Life

Now this is the story of a gentleman, who was a very good gentleman, good to everybody, but he was dying. He sent for the doctor, and the doctor said that there was nothing that could cure him in the world—they must find the Waters of Life.

So the doctor told him that the Waters of Life was many—about hundreds of miles away, so they would have to get somebody to find the Waters of Life before he could be cured. So he sent his eldest son and told him that he'd to find the Waters of Life.

So he set on his journey, and after travelling many a mile he came to where there was a rabbit who had been hurt. So he kicked the rabbit out of his road, and walked on. He walked on a lot of

miles till he lost himself in a deep forest—and was never heard of again.

So time went on for a while and he sent for his second son, and he told him that he must find the Waters of Life to save his father. So he set on his journey. After he had traveled many a mile he came to the rabbit lying hurt, and he also kicked the rabbit out of his road.

So it came to the youngest son. He says, “Oh,” he says, “son, try and find me the Waters of Life.” So he set on his journey. So he traveled many a mile till he came to the rabbit. He lifted the poor rabbit up, tried to doctor it, and laid it down gently at the roadside. After he’d traveled a lot of miles, he was getting tired. When he looked around he saw the rabbit at his back. “Jack,” he says, “you’re very tired,” he says. “What are you looking for?”

“Oh,” he says, “I’m looking for the Waters of Life to save my father.”

“Well,” he says, “jump on my back. I’ll take you to the Waters of Life.”

“Oh,” Jack says, “I couldn’t jump on a little rabbit’s back.”

“Oh, yes,” he says, jump on my back, and I’ll take you to the Waters of Life.”

So he jumped on the rabbit’s back, and after he was on, they traveled a lot of miles, till they came to the Waters of Life. So after he got his flask full of water he returned on the return journey—the rabbit took him till a palace, where he got food, where there was a young princess who fell in love with him.

So he returned and he saved his father’s life, and went back and got his princess.

Young Jack participates in the situation he has entered. The injured rabbit does not seem to be related to his pursuit, but here and now Jack finds it *on his path*. He recognizes himself associated with the creature in need and does not “kick it out of his road.” He understands what the situation *requires of him*: “He lifted the poor rabbit up, tried to doctor it, and laid it down gently at the roadside.”

We might be tempted to think that Jack is just a good boy: he is adhering to general ethical principles learned from his good father. Therefore he will later be rewarded with the Waters of Life and the princess. But the story seems to be different. It is much more specific: the rabbit is not merely a moral test, but turns out to be instrumental in bringing him to the Waters of Life. Jack receives this gift only because he is fully present upon his own special path through the world. The story tells us that in tending to the rabbit he has brought the single event into the context of his whole life. He does not say, “This random encounter has nothing to do with my own important purpose, which is to help my father.” *Jack as a whole person is present in the present.*

Existence in Letting the Appearance Appear

The “fairy tale” approach to appearances relates them to our own existence. In the fairy tale the events of the narrative are necessary conditions for the development of the plot, and the plot is about whether the individuals involved understand what the events they meet—that meet them—imply. It can be formulated in philosophical terms. Heinrich Barth (1965) developed Baumgarten’s approach of aesthetics in this direction. Here are some of the philosophical points he makes:

- As an appearance appears, the natural scientist will habitually ask, “*What is this?*” The question “What?” calls for the recognition of the species, a genus, an explanation, a mechanism, a cause, a general law. It takes the event out of the immediate present. And this type of question, even if left unanswered, takes us away from the simple fact of the event’s being here now.
- *Being here now.* In the realm of “Here,” the plain actuality of immediate presence confronts me. In order to stay within this realm, I must give up trying to explain the appearance within a context that leads me away from my meeting it *now*.
- Obviously, it depends on me whether I choose to take up the challenge implied—whether I let it *coincide* with my own biography. Barth used the expression “wakening cry” to point out the way a key experience may arouse us.
- An appropriate cognition of “Here” discloses the bearing of this specific appearance upon me. I wake up into the present. Then the appearance will manifest future tasks; it is revealing a future cause, a calling with which I identify myself. The process as a whole, including suitable action, amounts to the individual really Being on Earth. Then the individual “exists” and is not absent. Barth refrains from alluding to a given “self” that experiences appearances. Instead, he sees existence as being *produced* through cognition of the appearance.
- In the process of cognition—which includes appropriate action—we *step into existence*. We could also say that we *wake up* to existence. The process manifests the authentic role of the individual. Here the chasm between subject and object becomes meaningless.

- Obviously, such cognition occurs in compliance with criteria such as truth, wholeness, and goodness that were traditionally addressed as the “transcendentals.” Perhaps we today would prefer “solidarity” to “goodness.”
- In sum, “letting the appearance appear”—a favorite term in Barth’s philosophy—is a matter of bestowing future significance upon the appearance, which is thereby transformed into an integral part of the existence of the individual. Not letting the appearance appear in this existential sense means isolation from the source of intuition. In letting the appearance appear we become aware of an individual task, an awareness that is the making of the free human being.

After all this, it is perhaps unnecessary to point out how the existential approach is complementary to the detached one, in which the individual remains unaffected by the knowledge gained. Scientific cognition, as it is generally understood, is expected to be “intersubjective”—that is, of equal meaning to all who take interest. The individual is supposed to be detached from knowledge, just as the subject is supposed to be detached from the object. The realm of “What” contains contents that do not touch individual existence.

Contingent Events

The event of appearance in the state of “Here” is severed from necessity. It is unforeseen and unique, with a meaning yet to unfold. The event of two people meeting for the first time is often of such a “Here” character. Perhaps it’s the best-known example. As a relationship develops, the first impression may remain in memory, but it is clearly futile to try to “imprison” the other person within this memory or within any generalization. Attempting this would be detrimental to the potentials of the relationship. In coming to know each other, each learns how to deal with the other’s ways. Not that a set of rules will be specified, but a mutual manner of behaving arises. Looking back, one sees how one’s own development has been influenced, supported, and given new directions, but at no time can the biographical scope of the relationship be judged once for all—or it will slip over into the realm of “What.”

Existence grows from a seed of wonder and amazement. A project begins that needs to be kept in connection with its origin. To grow, it needs a large measure of devotion and loyalty. In faithfully adhering to experience, we begin to enter a new realm, finding ourselves connected with a whole new sphere of life. As long as we remain in the state of “Here,” we will refrain from letting expectations mar that seed’s possible development. Appearances begin to acquire

the dignity of dawn, or of the moment before the first tone of a symphony. Tasks that are taken on tend to develop into more or less long-term projects, in the course of which appearances continue to be the source of advice.

On the Artistic Nature of Tasks

What we are doing in our productive encounter with appearances is *practicing aesthetics*. We are relating to the world like an artist, and by this means we overcome our alienation from the world.

Looking back at “The Waters of Life,” we remember that the story begins with a father who needs help. It is Jack’s mission to find and bring some Water of Life to heal his father. On his path he meets the rabbit that had been kicked away by the previous wayfarers. Jack tries to doctor the rabbit, then gently lays it down. When the rabbit reappears, it takes over, guiding and even carrying Jack to the Waters of Life. As Jack begins to mind the rabbit, the rabbit reciprocally minds Jack’s mission. It is generally true in fairy tales that realms of activity open up for the protagonist when he discovers that it’s *his business* to better a situation that he has recognized to be faulty, inadequate, in need of his help. In the example of the Necker cube, a fault is recognized, and it can drive us toward a more thorough understanding of the geometry involved. A task evoked by an appearance always calls for an insight into the possibilities of transformation. As Ron put it in his discussion of Brancusi (chapter eight):

How often do we find in nature an image that is, in all details, so unified that it is as lucid as his sculptures? In any reality more is expressed than the simple nature of the thing, for the rest of the world impinges upon it. Brancusi got around the nexus of causes potentially appearing in every natural image by either refining away everything that was not the intended gesture or by taking a subject whose gesture showed a total surrender to the mood it expressed.

The artist’s cognition of the appearance is the source for his or her aim. The work of art can be in more perfect harmony with the artist’s insight than can the original appearance, and so it can facilitate our recognition of what the artist intuited in the appearance. That is, we can recognize in the work of art both a present reality and future potentials. We have seen that aesthetic cognition requires, in the first place, a *sense* for facts, a *sense* for the way a being

participates in the whole world, and a *sense* for the interests and needs of another being. These senses will indeed open the world to the individual, giving him or her the means to embark on projects of essentially *artistic* character. Of course, all professions that help us to “be on earth” are *artistic* in this sense. So, for example, we can speak of an art of healing, an art of teaching, a social art, even the art of appropriate technology. But a discipline in which the aims and methods are already given cannot possess the artistic quality we have been speaking of. Rather, artists must *find* their aims *in* a problem which they have encountered and recognized as belonging to their individual selves. The senses for facts, for the way a being is situated in the whole world, and for the interests and needs of another being are ways through which such identification can be effected. What had seemed alien turns into an integral part of ourselves. A transformation occurs which turns our relation to the world “inside out.” Rudolf Steiner gave many of his contemporaries mottoes that seemed paradoxical and were variations on the following lines:

Search inside yourself
And you will find the world.
Search in the world outside
And you will find yourself.

Turning the Inside Out and the Outside In

How does it come about that intentionality surprises us again and again? It seems a wonder that our inner intuition will reveal and display what had stayed hidden to us as long we remained passive onlookers. Many examples have been given of the power of individual attention to take part in letting appearances appear. What strikes *us* is the experience of our coming into existence as active agents who may harvest what we can decide to keep, to maintain, to nurture, and to ponder on in future. This is exactly what works in active appreciation—being the only way for us to have a world at all. In other words we find the key to conscious appreciation of the world *outside* us *right* inside ourselves. That is the way knowledge of the world is to be acquired.

At the same time, the “normal” understanding of self-cognition implies seclusion from the world. Close your eyes, become deaf to any sounds, isolate yourself from the world. It is presumed that in attending to a voice within, you will recognize who you are. But in this chapter we have been suggesting the very opposite of this: the world bestows upon us the meaning of our lives as we attend to the unforeseen appearance that is presenting itself now. We find self-

cognition turned inside-out. We really exist in achieving full recognition of what the world is telling us.