

## THE DANGER OF OVER-RATIONALIZATION IN CLINICAL PRAXIS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL-HERMENEUTIC VIEW

Maíra Mendes Clini<sup>1 2</sup>, Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7627-1657>

## O PERIGO DO EXCESSO DE RACIONALIZAÇÃO NA PRÁTICA CLÍNICA: UM OLHAR FENOMENOLÓGICO-HERMENÊUTICO

## EL PELIGRO DEL EXCESO DE RACIONALIZACIÓN EN LA PRAXIS CLÍNICA: UNA MIRADA FENOMENOLÓGICO-HERMENÉUTICA

This paper aims to discuss the predominance of over-rationalization in current times and debate its impact on clinical psychology. Through an approximation with the thought of Martin Heidegger, called here hermeneutic phenomenology, it is intended to explain how we are exposed, as professionals in the psychology field, to the infiltration of the predominance of rationality in our practice and, based on this view, to think about alternative paths that might open up.

The predominance of rationalization, which grows precipitously in technical times, has, in our view, profound implications for clinical practice. The predominant way of arranging the world, based on calculus, impacts how we understand ourselves and face life's events. Heidegger names our time as the "Age of Technique" (Heidegger, 1954/2008b, p. 24) and characterizes it as times in which gestures of domination and control on the part of the human being concerning things and nature predominate, in an attempt to eliminate everything that is retraction or mystery. There is an unbridled search for control, prediction and manipulation of everything around. The exploration of what surrounds us is the fundamental keynote of the Age of Technique. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing (Heidegger, 1954/2008b). Human beings, in this tonic, become the lords of the universe. What is not immediately noticed is that, by forging himself as a controller, the human being is instantly controlled by the same technique, a state in which he participates without deciding on its beginning or end.

The clinic is permeated by the atmosphere of technique, and our challenge is to sustain an open, through clinical action, a different, dissonant space. Words with a technical aura, such as productivity, assertiveness, performance, verifiability, should be excluded from the clinical scope. How can we do this since we are also sons and daughters of technique and immersed in the same historical horizon?

It is prevalent, in the clinic, to receive patients who arrive ridden in their reasoning, armed to the teeth with logical arguments about themselves and about the situations in which they live. How to defuse this bomb? How to understand them

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Municipal de São Caetano do Sul, São Caetano do Sul-SP, Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> E-mail: [mairamc@yahoo.com](mailto:mairamc@yahoo.com)



beyond what is possible to access at the first moment, what will I provisionally name as self-rationalization? Many patients arrive telling complex stories about themselves, already full of explanations, justifications, theorizations, and lucubrations. They are taken for strictly intellectual knowledge. A careful reading of Heidegger's thought inspires in us another way of conceiving knowledge, which is not strictly based on logic, abstraction, generalization and intellect.

Let us think about a hypothetical case: Carlos arrives at the clinic speaking very clearly and with great certainty about himself. Carlos is an amalgamation of several patients that all of us could have seen (and we certainly have seen). He will accompany us throughout this paper to help us think about dealing with him and ourselves before this juncture.

Carlos arrives at therapy reporting relationship problems at work. He complains of being wronged by his boss, who does not give so much visibility to what he does, prioritizing the deliveries of other colleagues. Carlos knows how to justify in detail in exhaustively reasoned arguments that his boss is wrong and that Carlos has all the concrete requirements to be the best employee on his team. He spends the early days of therapy complaining (on argumentative grounds) about his boss, coworkers, and the institution where he works. A coworker of Carlos excels in the team, which seems to provoke tumultuous feelings in Carlos, who identifies them but immediately justifies them logically. He seems to belittle his colleague's work and argues that, being a woman, she is not that competent; she seduces the boss and only gets recognition for this. Carlos claims that he would never be sexist, but in this specific case, his colleague only does well at work because of her seductive attributes. Carlos looks pretty convinced that everything around him is inadequate, wrong, unreasonable and illogical. His point of view, defended by him as the only valid vision, ends up having the character of absolute and insurmountable truth. Carlos easily points out the others' faults and failures, logically justifying how inappropriate those behaviors are. When Carlos talks about himself, he readily acknowledges feelings of anger and irritability, which, for him, are entirely justified. Carlos is always terribly convinced. Carlos talks to me using conceptual, explanatory forms and logic to persuade himself and me that he is always right.

To continue thinking about Carlos' care, we need to remember, using Heidegger in his book "Being and Time" (Heidegger, 2012), that initially understanding things is never conceptually putting them at a distance. Understanding (*Verstehen*), for Heidegger, is a fundamental connection with everything around us: it is to move in the world from a basic familiarity. Disposition or Attunement (*Befindlichkeit*) is being in tune with what surrounds us. It is the constant opening of affective atmospheres. Our presence in the world is never neutral: we are always disposed in one way or another. This prior openness is what allows this or that way of being there each time. For those ways of being in the world specifically present in each situation, Heidegger coined the expression *stimmung*, 'mood', also translated as 'affective tones'. Experientially and pre-reflectively, Dasein<sup>3</sup> lives his world disposed in affective tones, tuned this or that way.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Dasein* is a term used by Heidegger to designate the human being, which means literally being *there*. This term marks a criticism of the current ways of naming human beings deriving from the tradition of Western thought,

As Borges-Duarte (2015, p. 50) reminds us, the affects scope reaches a central dimension in Heidegger. However, the affective tones are not found within *Dasein*, as the tradition says concerning feelings; that is, it always refers, originally, to "being-with-others"<sup>4</sup>(Heidegger, 2012). We affect and are affected incessantly. The affective tones color the atmosphere and are also impregnated by it. There is no longer the concept of "interiority" in Heidegger. But we continually try to ignore how we are situated by keeping our thoughts in the hypothetical domain of private interiority. The so-called feelings and emotions also live in the supposed private world. Inscribed in these terms, they would be the other side of the same coin of rationalization. The internalized feeling of emotions is also a way of establishing some control over how we are disposed. If being affected makes us aware of the vulnerability of always being "outside" – in the world, transforming this affectation into a private feeling tries to circumscribe such exposure into something that comes from "inside" and that, in this way, becomes controllable. Attempts to control unpredictability come from our impersonal way of existing, as we will elucidate hereafter. Over-rationalization can be a sharp tool in this sense: by invading the affects scopes, the reason names, frames, explains, theorizes, and thus tries to soften the impact of being irremediably affectable. So did Carlos to feel secure in his self-control. In the speculative world of Carlos' ideas, everything is as he wishes. He imposes on the world what he lucubrates "inside his head" and ends up becoming, thus, an imposter<sup>5</sup>.

Let us reflect on some conceptual figures that inhabit Carlos' convicted mind. Is Carlos gripped and permeated by implicit and explicit arguments that support his machismo? When he talks about the coworker we mentioned above, he talks at length about theories that explain how bosses tend to protect their female employees, how "natural" it is for men to treat women well to get close to them sexually, and how much this hinders the progress of the work. Thus, he even defended, supported by "scientific studies", that the work teams should be composed only of men. Oppression-generating concepts can be reproduced and sustained through intellectually justified convictions. Was he from an intellectual elite who learned and was taught to feel powerful from the size of his gray matter? It is remarkable how much Carlos resorts to logical arguments and established studies whenever he feels threatened. The arbitrariness of the statements makes Carlos detach himself from the lived life that is his and, thus, can feel strengthened and protected in a mental place of supposed power and control. From this place, much violence becomes possible, as there is no kind of commitment to what surrounds him. To conceptualize is to split, to separate, to focus only on what is already conjectured.

However, the way we are disposed is always in the world, with others. "Affective tone is not an entity, which comes from the soul as an experience, but as of our common-being-there" (Heidegger, 1929-1939/2006, p. 80, free translation). Affective tones are not strictly private, as they involve *Dasein* and everything surrounding him in

---

terms that are marked by dichotomies. Thus, by using a different term, Heidegger intends to question the way we conceive of ourselves, the world, and the knowledge.

<sup>4</sup>Heidegger, in his work "Being and Time", refers to the human existence as being-in-the-world. The fact that the words in the term are linked by a hyphen designates their total relationship and interdependence. It designates that we refer to a single word, to a unitary phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> Term inspired by Borges-Duarte (2014, p. 219).

shades that show *Dasein's* immersion in his *there* and their inseparability. The way these fine-tunings take place does not depend on the will of each *Dasein*, as there is a grassroots appeal that is already open in the background, a historically binding measure. Carlos lives this conjectural connection, let us call it that, in a distant and frayed way. He is trapped in his conceptual schemes for now.

The discourse consistently articulates the way *Dasein* is disposed and understands. The discourse (*German: Rede*) is as original as understanding and disposition, but it happens to articulate both. In the metaphysical tradition in which we are immersed, the word discourse can strictly refer to logical and formal argumentation, to convincing, to the explanation of rationally linked ideas. However, for Heidegger, discourse does not refer only to the verbal or exclusively linguistic plane, as the whole way we feel, act, and think is constantly permeated by discourse. We think of discourse as a great articulator of communications on different planes: ways of tackling, organizing and elaborating what we experience each time. Thus, these three existential – understanding, disposition and discourse – are co-originating; that is, one exists without the other, neither before nor after the other.

Linked with the three existential we have presented above; there are three others of equal importance: existence, facticity, and fall. Briefly introducing them: Existence points to how *Dasein* is released into the world, *ek-sisting*, outward: he is his world. Facticity is the world that actually exists, which welcomes and guides him, goes around him, which offers a network of meanings that *Dasein* can use and thus create some familiarity. Fall is precisely the immersion in the meanings of the world, mixing with the sedimented references and being based on them (Clini, 2018, p. 49).

*Dasein* is, fundamentally, *power-to be*, but he surrenders, in everyday life, to the solid and secure ground of the impersonal so that he can "simply" be, without having to deal directly with his indeterminacy. Regarding Carlos, it would be no different. The ground of rationality, one of the thousand figures of the impersonal, offers itself to him as a firm ground to step on, which distances him from the risk of being touched at any moment by his surroundings and his condition. In the clinical sphere, abstractly resorting to over-rationalization seems to reduce suffering at first, as it makes life asepsis. It makes everything refractory. But it ends up increasing the suffering, as it takes the patient away from what concerns him and makes him live in a kind of panoramic flight over his own life, without ever landing, without ever meeting any situation affectively mobilized. If indeterminacy threatens us from the depths of its nothingness, some threats plague us from within the continuous filling of the impersonal. The indeterminate exudes the obscure, the strange, the imponderable. There is nothing guaranteed for us. On the other hand, the impersonal submits us to its over-determination - what surrounds us, restricts us, circumvents us, constrains us, shames us, and demeans us. We cannot be everything. Escaping into abstraction may seem like a tempting antidote to both. According to Toso(2017), "The contemporary clinical patient, who lives in a world in which the metaphysical sense has exhausted itself, affectively senses the lack of references that envision a new thinking still without a face" (p. 351, free translation).

This leads us to think that the impersonal that we currently live in is not just any impersonal. The colors that dye it make up the Age of Technique's palette, which accentuates the immersion's drama and brings condensed consequences. If the

impersonal, as existential, always invites to distraction and offers a constant sensation of comfort and predictability – threads that, as a whole, weave the familiarity we need to exist –, the impersonal of the age of technique arrives even more loaded with predictability and control. Calculus spreads daily, and counting on others becomes peremptorily, depending on others and disposing of their uses. The others become a set of handy utilities that I can use for this or that. What I do not realize at first, but what is inevitable in instituting this gesture, is that I myself become one more service item among so many other technical servants. The predominance of rationalization contributes for us to occupy this supposed place of control because, mentally, it is possible to experience situations forged by our thoughts, which, as much as they always start from the world we are, can end up ungluing themselves and hovering ethereally in our reasoning, away from what we feel, what we perceive and the situations in which we are, at each time, thrown. Thus, disjointed, we end up perceiving ourselves as subjects of reasoning, something that the Western tradition of thought vehemently reiterates. How do we position ourselves in the world we live in if we perceive ourselves that way?

There is an important caveat here, which points to an inevitable epochal mark and, at the same time, a subtlety. Talking about positioning - using that term - is already an indication of our inevitable immersion in the Age of Technique. Duarte (2010) highlights that: "In modernity, for the first time, the man assumes a position and takes such a position as the safe point for the development of humanity." (p. 29, free translation). Only when man becomes a subject, it becomes possible to speak of positioning, with consequences now presented in a summarized form: "From the moment that man assumes a determined position concerning being, instituted by himself, he also assumes himself as lord of all entities and begins to exercise calculated scientific control over everything". (Duarte, 2010, p. 29, free translation). However, we are since always engaged in the world and involved in ways of being. At each time, we experience forms of *being-together-with* and directing ourselves, taking the route, even if in an unreflective and "automatic" way (Clini, 2018, p. 98).

Even if our possible modes are versatile, performative and changeable, we are still, at each time, situated in a juncture. Taylor (1993) coins the term "engaged agency" to refer to this conception of the incarnated human being, which cannot be reduced to an abstract or theoretical concept, but exists, linked and embodied, built along with his surroundings. He resorts to engagement as opposed to what he calls the "ontologization of rational procedure", a process carried out throughout the entire Western philosophical tradition. According to the author: "That is, what were seen as the proper procedures of rational thought were read into the very constitution of the mind and made part of its very structure. This resulted in a picture of the thinking human actor as a detached actor." (Taylor, 1993, pp. 317-318). An agency who hovers nowhere, individualized, encapsulated in himself, alien to his world. Thus, Carlos arrives in his therapy. He hovers over his own life, detached from what happens to him, oblivious to himself and his surroundings. He talks very easily about everything because he does not feel involved in anything. By ignoring how much he is affected by everything surrounding him, Carlos tries to free himself from his fundamental vulnerability and the contours that facticity imposes. He protects himself from the events of life by resorting to abstract mental schemas. We can say that Carlos is disengaged from his existence. Saying that one is always in the

engagement mode means that "the world of the agent is shaped by his or her form of life, or history, or bodily existence. [...] This is a relation subtly different from the ordinary causal link it is sometimes confused with" (Taylor, 1993, p. 318). Carlos's existential focus lacks body: the body that roots us, that weakens us, that surrounds us, that makes us affective and affectable, that makes us mortal and puts us in the relationship.

Then, engagement means, for us, "to be our own facticity and historicity, to be affectively situated in the world and to be responsible for our transit and our points of view" (Clini, 2018, p. 99). However, most of the time, what is closest to us turns out to be the most distant. More often than not, the reasoning is intertwined with the notion of representation. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* shifted to "inside" the subject the ability to postulate about what is and what is not. Carlos does this. He talks about various issues, justifying in theoretical and argumentative terms that he is always right. Based on the ability to cogitate, Carlos seeks to assure himself of the real ability to apprehend everything surrounding him, including his feelings, in a controlled way.

Representing here means to put before oneself something from oneself and to assure which is positioned as such. This assurance has to be a calculation because only calculability guarantees, from the start and constantly, being sure of what is being represented. (Heidegger, 1969/2007, p. 133, free translation)

How does this affect clinical work? When the patient tells something about himself, with a lot of conviction and logical structure, we can easily be tempted to be convinced by him. Carlos is very eloquent. It is very easy to enter the patient's logic and start building, from then on, together with him, theoretical lucubrations about him and his life. What is the danger of that? If we look a little more modestly and cautiously, we will notice that the patient's existence is often hidden behind this well-constructed discourse about himself, which at first even impresses us: "How he knows about himself!", "How well he structures the ideas about what he lived!", "How he manages to articulate interesting conclusions about his fears and traumas". Anyway, it is necessary to take a step back to make room for some strangeness before such a well-planned speech. Silence can be a good guideline for not simply adhering to the discourse presented to us so that we can detach a little from the impersonal discourse (which, in this case and many other ones, has a lot of rational, as we explained above when talking about calculus).

To put ourselves on the path to another possibility of languages, such as remembrance and resistance, we need to open up to another way of thinking, which is no longer science or philosophy. To reach this contact with what we have always been, to influence our clinical presence and color the atmosphere with the patient, it is necessary to relearn how to think. We need to dislodge from the comfort we inhabit in our rational environment to invite Carlos to do the same. To relearn how to think, we need to regain what Taylor called engagement in our world. We will only be able to think, beyond the rational, if we are situated and involved in our existence. If we are beings in the world, we need to relearn how to think from this basic integration in a less solipsistic and encapsulated way. Heidegger names this particular thought, which is opposed to calculative thinking, thought of meaning" or "meditative". The term meditative, in Heidegger, is used to designate this thought that turns toward sense.

Thinking about sense is not about what we could call "becoming aware". "We still do not think the sense when we're just in consciousness. Thinking the sense is much more. It is the serenity in the face of what is worthy of being questioned." (Heidegger, 1954/2008a, p. 58, free translation). Thinking about meaning is to dwell on what proclaims our questioning: questioning our clinical action and Carlos' absolute certainties. Thinking about meaning escapes from any attempt at rationalization or metaphysical representation. Here, understanding knowledge as involvement stands out to us, respecting and welcoming the mystery. This thought is rarer, as the path to what is close is often the most difficult.

"What would be the ground and soil for a future groundedness? Perhaps we are looking for this question very close, so close that we do not see it very easily because the path to what is close is for us, men [and women], always the longest and, therefore, the most difficult. This path is a path of reflection. Meditating thought demands us not to be one-sidedly stuck in a representation, not run in one direction toward a representation. Meditating thought demands that we deal with what, at first sight, seems irreconcilable". (Heidegger, 1969/2007, p. 23, free translation)

What seems irreconcilable also needs to find space in the clinic, and the only way to accommodate this is to make ourselves available for this other kind of thinking. If we board Carlos' rational flight, we will certainly miss the opportunity to contact him. We will be talking about different things but leaving no room for something to happen to us. The thought of meaning is an event. He puts us on our way to our abode, and that abode is always historical, whether we like it or not. The sense thought occurs in the Age of Technique, but it always goes above and beyond it.

There is a common criticism of the sense thought, which claims that it has nothing to offer *to praxis* and that concrete life has nothing to receive. We realize that this criticism is rooted in the dichotomous ground that opposes action and reflection. "The distinction between theory and *praxis*, from metaphysical provenance, and the representation of a transmission between them destroy the path that leads to what I understand as to think." (Heidegger, 2009, p. 37, free translation). For Heidegger, this opposing distinction ceases to exist when it comes to sense thought. This dichotomy, among others, is one of the facets of the predominance of calculating thinking, which imprisons us in a cloister. In the gesture of meditation, there is no way to make theory and practice watertight. Heidegger warns that we never stop at what is the essence of acting. Acting is not just producing an effect, which is evaluated according to the utility it offers. "(...) The essence of acting, however, is to consummate. Consummate means: to bring something to completion, to the fullness of its essence. Bring it to that fullness *producere*." (Heidegger, 1967/1991, p. 01). We could even consider that any action that is not grounded in the sense thought becomes empty and mechanical, *entified*, emptied of its ontological density, a mere spectrum of action. Pragmatism is a facet of technique. Just as any reasoning that departs from affective rooting becomes a mere ethereal abstraction. Speculation is another facet of the technique.

The clinic is composed of actions, gestures, words, thoughts, affections and also silences. The thought of meaning is always there, waiting for an opportunity, a gap that interrupts the over-rationalization to make itself present. It is up to us, psychotherapists, to sustain an open space for it to happen, involving us. I close this

paper without formulating any answers but looking for inspiration to continue meditating, with these words from Heidegger:

In the thought of being there is the man's liberation into ek-sistencia, the liberation that founds history, reaches his word. The word is not primarily the "expression" of an opinion but is constantly already the protective articulation of the being's truth in his entirety. The number of those who understand this word matters little. The quality of those who can pay attention to it decides the position of man [and woman] in history. (Heidegger, 1970/1999, p. 168, freetranslation)

## References

- Borges-Duarte, I. (2014). *Arte e técnica em Heidegger*. Lisboa, Portugal: Documenta.
- Borges-Duarte, I. (2015). A afetividade no caminho ontológico heideggeriano. *Phainomenon: Revista de Fenomenologia*, (Vol. 24, p. 43-62). Recuperado de <http://www.phainomenon-journal.pt/index.php/phainomenon/article/view/308> .
- Clini, M. M. (2018). *Contemplações fenomenológicas entre arte e clínica*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Via Verita.
- Duarte, A. (2010). *Vidas em risco: crítica do presente em Heidegger, Arendt e Foucault*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Forense Universitária.
- Heidegger, M. (1991). *Carta sobre o humanismo* (R. E. Frias, trad.). São Paulo, SP: Moraes. Trabalho original publicado em 1967.
- Heidegger, M. (1999). Sobre a essência da verdade. In M. M. Heidegger, *Os pensadores* (E. Stein, trad., pp. 149-170). São Paulo, SP: Ed. Nova Cultural. Trabalho original publicado em 1970.
- Heidegger, M. (2006). *Os conceitos fundamentais da metafísica: Mundo – Finitude – Solidão* (M. A. Casanova, trad.). Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Forense Universitária. Trabalho original publicado em 1929-1939.
- Heidegger, M. (2007). *Serenidade* (M. M. Andrade, O. Santos, trads.). Lisboa, Portugal: Instituto Piaget. Trabalho original publicado em 1969.
- Heidegger, M. (2008a). Ciência e pensamento do sentido. In M. Heidegger, *Ensaio e Conferências* (E. C. Leão, G. Fogel, M. S. C. Schuback, trads., pp. 39-60). Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes. Trabalho original publicado em 1954.
- Heidegger, M. (2008b). A questão da técnica. In M. Heidegger, *Ensaio e Conferências* (E. C. Leão, G. Fogel, M. S. C. Schuback, trads., pp. 11-38). Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes. Trabalho original publicado em 1954.
- Heidegger, M. (2009). *Já só um Deus pode ainda nos salvar* (I. Borges-Duarte, trad.). Covilhã, Portugal: LusoSofia:press. Recuperado de



[http://www.lusosofia.net/textos/heidegger\\_ja\\_so\\_um\\_deus\\_nos\\_pode\\_ainda\\_salvar\\_der\\_spiegel.pdf](http://www.lusosofia.net/textos/heidegger_ja_so_um_deus_nos_pode_ainda_salvar_der_spiegel.pdf) .

Heidegger, M. (2012). *Ser e tempo*. Trad. Fausto Castilho. Campinas, SP: Editora Unicamp.

Taylor, C. (1993). Engaged agency and background. In C. B. Guignon (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (pp. 317-336). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Toso, A. (2017). Angústia, cuidado e rearticulação de sentido na psicoterapia fenomenológico-hermenêutica. In B. Sylla & I. Borges-Duarte (Orgs.), *Intencionalidade e cuidado. Herança e repercussão da fenomenologia* (pp. 339-352). Braga, Portugal: Edições Húmus.

*Received: Apr. 24, 2019*  
*Approved: Jan. 28, 2021*