

Heidegger and the Hermeneutic Turn of Philosophy

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Hermeneutic philosophy has come to be a major philosophical trend of the 20th century philosophy. It has transformed the traditional ways of approaching philosophical problems, of looking upon and dealing with them indeed, it modified to a great extent our understanding of philosophy itself.: “To speak of a revolution in the history of thought is perhaps too grand,” an interpreter wrote recently, “but certainly there has been a general movement that can be called the ‘hermeneutic turn’.”¹

The emergence of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy, which may also be called the hermeneutic turn of philosophy, is largely due to the philosophical work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger on his part performed a kind of hermeneutic turn himself on his path of thinking. It is this twofold theme, contemporary hermeneutics or the hermeneutic turn of contemporary philosophy on the one hand, and Heidegger’s hermeneutic turn at the other, that I wish to discuss in what follows.

In the first part of my paper I will sum up some of the major claims of contemporary hermeneutics, then I will proceed to present in some detail what I call specifically Heidegger’s hermeneutic turn. The presentation of Heidegger’s hermeneutic turn

¹ David C. Hoy: “Heidegger and the Hermeneutic Turn,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Ch. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), p. 170.

will not be confined to something such as his contribution to XXth century or contemporary hermeneutics, but will be treated on its own. I propose to show some of the reasons why Heidegger is often claimed to have given hermeneutics an ontological dimension or ontological interpretation – and, in particular, how in Heidegger's ontological radicalization of hermeneutics the influence of Dilthey and Husserl played a fundamental role.

1. The Emergence of Contemporary Hermeneutics

The problem of the interpretation of texts handed down by the tradition is about as old as philosophy itself. In its traditional sense, hermeneutics has been understood as the theory of rules which govern the interpretation of texts, and which should permit us to establish their possibly objective meaning. Due to a number of circumstances, such as the cultural crisis of our century, the expansion of technology and world civilization, the loss of sense of classical humanistic tradition, etc., the problems of interpretation have come to assume an ever more important role in recent philosophy. The hermeneutic problematic has emerged as a central topic, and has been given autonomous philosophical elaboration, in the thought of at least two of the most influential philosophers of our century: Heidegger and Gadamer. The hermeneutic turn of philosophy which they carried out implies that interpretation is no more seen as an auxiliary discipline of human sciences as the rules of interpretation of classical texts. Rather, it emerges as an autonomous philosophical stance insofar as man is viewed in all kinds of his everyday activities not only in handling classical texts pertaining to the compartment of human sciences as an interpreting animal. In assessing the full import and the radicality of this turn, we have reason to speak about an overall *hermeneutic reconception of philosophy*. The radicality of this change would however be wholly misunderstood and to a considerable extent underestimated if we conceived of it in terms of a change whereby our description of just one being among many others had been changed, while that of the others had remained basically the same. Rather what this change implies is that all our habitual conceptual strategies and linguistic devices together with the underlying comportment and worldview, are to undergo an overall reconsideration and reconception one often called destruction or deconstruction.

The hermeneutic turn of philosophy implies further far more than the mere fact that philosophical thinking has now come to center its reflection upon the hermeneutic tradition – the texts of authors who have exposed, in various ages and places, various doctrines and conceptions of interpretation. What it implies is, rather that the problem of interpretation is looked upon as a philosophical problem *sui generis*, whereby philosophy itself gains a kind of hermeneutical self-awareness and undergoes a deep transformation. Philosophy, thus transformed hermeneutically, re-defines its relation to the classical (hermeneutical) tradition, no less than to the other disciplines. The hermeneutical reflection has nowadays become, in a very broad sense, a kind of *medium*, or element, of philosophy – an analytical device, as it were – which has a diffuse presence permeating the most various branches and fields of philosophical activity.

The general philosophical significance of hermeneutics lies in the fact that philosophy has been handed down in texts; be it ontology, epistemology, ethics, etc., wherever we look we have to do with texts which require interpreting, appropriating, and handing over. But even refutation and criticism are not productive unless based upon preliminary understanding of what the texts to be refuted or criticized have to say. The relevance hermeneutics has for the sciences is given, second, by the fact that hermeneutical thinking illuminates some wider horizon of life into which the sciences themselves as particular forms of socio-historical human activity are embedded. Last but not least, hermeneutics has also some considerable political relevance: hermeneutic openness, as an attitude essential to this thinking, may help educate and bring up young people to be critical and self-critical citizens, able to understand and respect alien conceptions and cultures. In a pluralistic universe, a “logic of questioning and answering” (Gadamer) becomes particularly important in helping us work out a mutual understanding (*Verständigung*). Understanding a text is on a hermeneutical view, understanding it together with its truth claims, on the one hand, and letting the text challenge our own criteria of judging it on the other. The main hermeneutic deficiency in interpreting philosophical texts lies, on a Gadamerian view, not so much in applying false or bizarre criteria, but, rather, in making the criteria of our confrontation with the text inaccessible to critical scrutiny.

In order to assess the full import and the radicality of this turn, which amounts to an overall reconception of philosophy, we are

to go back to its sources, i.e. to reconstruct the problem situation of German philosophy at the turn of the century.

2. Heidegger's Hermeneutic Turn: Hermeneutics and the Being-question

In its attempt to challenge the positivistic idea of unified science as well as to defend the autonomy of the human studies, epistemologically oriented German philosophy had come to distinguish between two autonomous kinds of scientific knowledge or cognition: the one providing knowledge of general laws and characteristic of the natural sciences, the other making us acquainted with singular events and proper to the kind of knowledge we have in human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*]. These two forms of knowledge were sometimes also distinguished terminologically as explanation [*Erklärung*] and understanding [*Verstehen*]. Dilthey defined understanding as “the process by which we know some inner content from signs received by the senses from outside”,² interpretation was for him “the artistic [arts-like] understanding of life manifestations objectified in written form.”³ He conceived hermeneutics as “the methodology of the understanding of recorded expressions”.⁴

Implicit in the epistemological dualism of explanation and understanding is a latent ontological distinction between nature and spirit. With regard to nature our knowledge is explanation, concerning consciousness it is understanding. „We explain nature, and we understand spirit,” says Dilthey.⁵ That is the reason also why Dilthey finds something like the „understanding of nature” an improper or just approximate or „metaphorical” expression.⁶

For Heidegger hermeneutics is no more *wissenschaftstheoretisch*-oriented (or validity-oriented). This follows from his

² „Vorgang, in welchem wir aus Zeichen, die von außen sinnlich gegeben sind, ein Inneres erkennen.” (W. Dilthey, „Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik,” in: Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, p. 318).

³ „Das kunstmäßige Verstehen von schriftlich fixierten Lebensäußerungen” (*ibid.*, p. 332).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁵ „Die Natur erklären wir, das Seelenleben verstehen wir” (Dilthey, „Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, p. 144).

⁶ „Verstehen der Natur – interpretatio naturae – [...] ein bildlicher Ausdruck.” („Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik,” p. 318).

basic tendency to challenge the priority of epistemology and theory of science in philosophy, and to reaffirm the primacy of ontology. One of his main arguments is that scientific cognition is preceded by and derived from, man's Being-in-the-world. In the elaboration of his philosophical stance, Heidegger transformed phenomenology in an ontological way which is very much the case with what he did with regard to hermeneutics itself. Like phenomenology, hermeneutics was also given an ontological dimension that it formerly did not have.

In accordance with this reconception of philosophy, Heidegger no longer views understanding and interpretation as just regional concepts confined to particular domains to the methodology of the human sciences. Rather he views man in all the modes of his everyday activities as an interpreting animal. This holds also with regard to the kind of activity we call philosophical research, i.e., questioning. Insofar as the human being is an interpreting animal it interprets being as well, and Heidegger formulates his being-question specifically in terms of a question concerning the *meaning* (*Sinn*) of being. As Ricoeur puts it: "The usage of interpretation in the historico-hermeneutic sciences is only the anchoring point for a universal concept of interpretation."⁷

Understanding is on this view no more a way of knowing proper to the human studies, in contradistinction to explanation as the way of knowledge characteristic of the natural sciences. It is rather a way of being of the being called human. Humans are understanding, so to speak all along. What they understand are not matters of fact out there in the world but the way they find themselves in the world involved in it and coping with it.

With regard to hermeneutics this reconception of philosophy implies furthermore that interpretation does not presuppose "recorded expressions," as with Dilthey,⁸ but *vice versa*: making

⁷ P. Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 107. See also Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics. Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 130: "Hermeneutics as methodology of interpretation for the humanities is a derivative form resting on and growing out of the primary ontological function of interpreting. It is a regional ontology which must be based on the more fundamental ontology."

⁸ Dilthey construed hermeneutics as being "the methodology of the understanding of recorded expressions" („Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," p. 332). For a more detailed reconstruction, see Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University

assertions whatsoever presupposes preliminary interpretation.⁹ Assertion is for Heidegger a derivative mode of understanding.⁹ A hammer e.g. is for all above encountered *as* a tool for pounding nails into the wall; and in this encounter it has always already been preliminarily understood or interpreted as such. If the hammer proves to be too heavy “[i]nterpretation is carried out primordially not in a theoretical statement but in an action [...] – laying aside the unsuitable tool, or exchanging it, ‘without wasting a word’”¹⁰ To put it bluntly: for Heidegger, in order to do interpreting one need not speak or make assertions, but in order to speak one must have done interpreting.

Brought up in the scholastic tradition but extremely responsive to contemporary logical-epistemological ways of philosophizing represented by neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, Heidegger had as early as his doctoral dissertation and his habilitation work hoped to pose the Being question. Studying modern logical or epistemological theories in order to use them for metaphysical purposes meant for Heidegger recognizing the fact that such theories are not exempt from metaphysical presuppositions. Nor, inversely can metaphysical or ontological theories be exempt from logical or epistemological presuppositions; that is, from more or less explicit assumptions concerning human thinking or knowing – in short from a theory of man as a rational animal. If you pose the question of Being you already set a certain logic and conceptuality into motion every time; and these repose upon a certain attitude of the knowing subject. One of Heidegger’s early insights is that the tradition from Aristotle onward had gained its access to Being from within the conceptual horizon

Press, 1992), pp. 258f., and, for Dilthey’s revisiting his standpoint with regard to the distinction of natural and human sciences reconstructed from recently edited manuscripts, the Afterword to the Second Edition (pp. 423ff.). On the difference between Dilthey’s and Heidegger’s understanding of hermeneutics, see Rudolf A. Makkreel, “The Genesis of Heidegger’s Phenomenological Hermeneutics and the Rediscovered ‘Aristotle Introduction’ of 1922,” in *Man and World* 23 (1990), pp. 310ff.

⁹ See Heidegger BT, § 33. (*Bibliographical Remark*: Heidegger’s works will be cited with abbreviations. The abbreviations for the *Gesamtausgabe* volumes take the form of the letters GA followed by volume number, colon, and page numbers. Full bibliographical data are provided at the end of the paper. If there are references to both the original German text and the corresponding English translation the German pagination and the English pagination are separated by a slash. For example: “SZ 10/30,” “GA 20: 417/301f.”, the number before the slash indicating the German edition, the one after the slash the English edition. Other abbreviations: WS = Wintersemester; SS = Sommersemester.)

¹⁰ Heidegger SZ, 157/200.

provided by the theoretical attitude, giving thereby rise to theories of Being in terms of objective presence. That this comportment was far from being *the* original mode of being of human existence was, however, an insight which required the prior unification of the Husserlian perspective of philosophy as a strict science with the tradition of existential and life philosophy. It was in the course of this unification that Heidegger's basic hermeneutic perspective was born.

Indeed what we call hermeneutic philosophy or the hermeneutic turn of 20th century philosophy today, relies for its emergence upon the work of Martin Heidegger and more specifically upon the turn which Heidegger himself carried out after World War I. when he came to adopt the specific philosophical perspective which was to remain characteristically or distinctively his own for the whole path of his thinking.

Although Heidegger's student and academic writings bear witness to a solid familiarity with the major philosophical trends of the day and they display well-argued preferences, in no case can they be considered to be the works of an autonomous thinker. It was only after the war that Heidegger was to find his own voice and to begin going his own way towards *Being and Time*. Heidegger's turn following World War One is *the* turn through which Heidegger, a talented student of Husserl, Rickert, Dilthey or others, became Heidegger himself, i.e., the thinker we know and appreciate today, using a distinct language and conceptuality, one all his own. Thus it is important to outline briefly the main lines of Heidegger's rethinking and development of his position into a new and original outlook.

We should bear in mind that it is somehow the prerogative or perhaps the fate of every great and original philosopher, if he is really such, to rethink and redefine the concept of philosophy itself. Small wonder then that Heidegger, when he set out on his own, repeatedly reflected upon philosophy itself, re-examining its very concept and meaning.¹¹ Rethinking and redefining the concept of philosophy itself, what philosophy really is, if it is to be radical enough, means undertaking an intense confrontation with the leading philosophical tendencies of the day, no less than with

¹¹ In his transcript of the WS 1919–20 course „Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie,” F. J. Brecht noted on the „Ursprungsgebiet” of philosophy the following: „Das Schicksal der Philosophie! Tendenz in der Geschichte der Philosophie: immer neu anfangen, um es zu erreichen” (Oct. 14, 1919).

the philosophical tradition in general. This is exactly what Heidegger did.

Heidegger's devastating critique of contemporary trends of philosophizing employed the strategy of taking them seriously, taking them at their word, as it were, and then uncovering the extent to which they fail to do justice to their own claims. His critique had basically the following directions. Epistemologically oriented scientific philosophy was criticized for not being scientific enough, life philosophy was accused of failing to grasp life itself, existential philosophy was charged with not seizing upon existence, historicism was called to account for losing sight of nothing less than history itself, and, last but not least, phenomenology was challenged for not being phenomenological enough—indeed, for being “unphenomenological.”

An overall attempt at appropriation and reappropriation, an effort to come to terms with the significant tendencies of contemporary philosophy – inclusive of the philosophical tradition in general – should however sooner or later display obvious preferences which somehow constitute the basis and criteria for the confrontation, the reappropriation and the development of a new perspective. Schematically speaking, Heidegger's preferences lay clearly with Dilthey's life-philosophy, i.e., the perspective centering around the conviction that philosophy's ownmost object is life or historical life, on the one hand, and with Husserl's phenomenology that called for a return to the things themselves, on the other. His main operation consisted in reciprocally mediating between the two, or fusing the one with the other, and that is how his basic hermeneutic perspective was developed.

Husserl's password sounded: Back to the things themselves, but the thing properly so-called was for him consciousness with its intentional acts. The thing, by contrast, came to assume an entirely different character for Heidegger. Given his sense for Dilthey, the thing was to be for him life itself in its originality, that is, as it is lived in everyday, pre-scientific life, and as it expresses itself in its own language. Husserl insisted on presuppositionless assumption as well as description of the given over against all kinds of theoretical construction, and Heidegger enthusiastically took over this insight from Husserl and turned it against him as well as Dilthey, who was claimed to describe life from a theoretically falsified perspective.

Heidegger's appropriation of the problematic of factual-historical life was to serve as a starting point for the renewal of the Being question, that is, a renewal of systematic or scientific

philosophy—not just as a turning away from it, as has been the case with so many anti-metaphysical thinkers in the history of philosophy. The posing and working out of the Being question pertains to what Heidegger calls fundamental ontology. The latter becomes embedded in, and begins with, a thematization of the *being* of the subject – a discipline named existential analytic, which becomes rooted in the hermeneutics of human being.

One of Heidegger's earliest insights is that contemporary philosophy's descriptions of everyday life, the environing world, etc. stem from, and are rooted in, theoretical comportment and conceptuality. They therefore fail to do justice to factual life – its comportment and the language it speaks – precisely insofar as the theoretical attitude is a derivative mode of factual life. In 1921–22 Heidegger urges that the meaning of Descartes' "I am" should be investigated more deeply, and warns against allowing traditional views of the "I" to infiltrate surreptitiously. If life is to be brought to self-showing, then it is the "am" rather than the "I" which must be stressed.¹² In the third part of the course Heidegger provides the first detailed analysis of what will be called "hermeneutics of facticity" in 1923, and "existential analytic" in *Being and Time* – a description put under the heading of "factual life."

As part of the rethinking of the methodological devices of phenomenology and contemporary philosophy, we find sketches and outlines of a theory of understanding with its characteristic pre-structure.¹³ A result of this reconsideration is the exposition of what Heidegger calls "formal indication," which is taken to be the method proper of philosophy or phenomenology.¹⁴ Generally speaking, it is due to Heidegger's search for proper methodological devices for an adequate conceptual expression of "factual life" that the hermeneutic problematic emerges in the post-war lecture courses. Theoretically (and ahistorically) neutral knowledge is opposed to, and gives way to, existentially (and historically) involved understanding (or pre-understanding) and interpreting – whereby knowledge becomes at best a subdivision of understanding. All these efforts are in the service of seizing "life."

¹² GA 61: 173ff.; for later, see, e.g., SZ 46/71, 211/254.

¹³ See GA 56/57: 116f.; GA 61: 41ff., 59; GA 9: 9, 32, 38f.; GA 63: 79f.; for later, see GA 20: 416/300.

¹⁴ GA 9: 9f., 29; GA 61: 20, 32ff., 60, 66f., 113, 116, 134, 141, 175; GA 21: 410; GA 29/30: 425ff.

The main character of the latter is concern (*Sorge*) rather than knowledge.¹⁵

It is in his effort to gain a new access to life, as well as to reject the theoretical conceptuality and comportment proper to transcendental philosophy, that Heidegger formulates his hermeneutic concepts and formal indication, and so comes to the elaboration of a hermeneutics of facticity. “Facticity” is a term adopted to substitute for the vague and ambiguous concept of life employed by life-philosophy, as well as for that of “existence” employed by Jaspers and Kierkegaard. “Hermeneutics,” “hermeneutical,” have the meaning of rival concepts to “theory”, “theoretical,” understood in terms of “theoretically neutral.” The description of life, or “facticity”, obtains an overall hermeneutic character precisely in virtue of the insight that interpretation cannot be regarded as something added, as a kind of extension or annex, as it were, to some theoretically neutral (and allegedly “objective”) description of a state of affairs: rather, preliminary “interpretedness” is inherent in all kinds of description, in all kinds of seeing, saying, and experiencing.¹⁶ If there is no “pure” theory (for “theory” is a derivative mode of being or comportment of one particular being called human), there is no pure description. What this insight implies for an adequate description of life or facticity is that theoretical concepts, as well as the language theory speaks, should be abandoned in favor of a language growing out of everyday life and able to let things be seen in their interpretedness, that is, in exactly the way we encounter and have to do with them; a hammer, as has been said, is primarily encountered *as* a tool for pounding nails into the wall, rather than as a neutral thing out there having the property of weight.¹⁷

This re-evaluation of interpretation implies that hermeneutics cannot remain a subordinate discipline of the human sciences, but becomes, as Heidegger explicitly states, “the self-interpretation of facticity.”¹⁸ It is important to see that this “self-interpretation of facticity” is not a kind of anthropology, simply a matter of our having to do with ourselves, implying that other beings of the world are left untouched. Insofar as humans are precisely the beings who describe the world in its entirety, her-

¹⁵ GA 61: 89ff.; PIA 240.

¹⁶ See GA 61: 86f.; PIA 241, 264; for later, see GA 20: 75/56, 190/140, 416/300; SZ 169/213, 383/435.

¹⁷ SZ 154ff./195ff.

¹⁸ GA 63: 14.

meneutics gets linked to ontology – a major reason why in the title of the 1923 course “hermeneutics of facticity” and “ontology” occur together, clearly anticipating the correlation of fundamental ontology and existential analytic in *Being and Time*.

Man’s fundamental mode of being, Heidegger claims in BT, is Being-in-the-world. One’s original relation to things emerging in his environment is one of using, handling, employing, arranging rather than “knowing” them. His practical way of having to do with things presupposes preliminary understanding of them, in particular, of what they are for. Understanding is not something to be attained first in science – be it natural or human – but rather vice versa: the knowing relation to the world is a derivative one. Heidegger shows in a series of analyses how, in virtue of what modifications of Being-in-the-world man’s knowing relation to the world springs – how, in order for a thing to become an object of knowledge or scientific research, our preliminary access to it, that is our way of having to do with it, must have undergone a specific modification. With regard to our hermeneutic problematic and the re-evaluation of the concept of understanding we may say: knowledge derives from understanding and not vice versa.

2.1. The Relevance of Husserl’s Phenomenology

Heidegger’s use of hermeneutics for ontological purposes is hardly conceivable without his appropriation of phenomenology. In its turn, Husserlian phenomenology was open to a hermeneutic reinterpretation or radicalization from the very beginning. Let me sum up some of the basic characters that show this tendency:

- 1) The proclamation of returning to “the things themselves” (e.g. in Husserl’s programmatic Logos-essay).¹⁹
- 2) The reconception of philosophy in terms of a “science of true beginnings, or origins,” a science that is “concerned with what is radical,” and therefore is “radical itself in its procedure.”²⁰
- 3) The ideal of a scientificity *sui generis* for philosophy; the insistence on a specifically philosophical, i.e. phenomenological

¹⁹ „Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” in Husserl, *Shorter Works*, eds. P. McCormick, F. A. Elliston (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 176, 196.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

method; the preference of *description* over *construction*; the emphasis laid on “experience”, “essence”, and “meaning”.

4) The dismissal of the authorities, the quest for an “unprejudiced”, “presuppositionless” research, and the urge to return to the original sources of intuition as the only legitimizing source for concepts in philosophy.²¹

Heidegger’s radicalization of the innermost claims of phenomenology in his postwar lectures made phenomenology turn against Husserl. *Against phenomenology in the name of phenomenology itself*.²² Insights deriving from his intense confrontation and hermeneutic reconception of phenomenology:

1) The “thing itself,” if viewed “presuppositionless” enough, is not transcendental consciousness, but life or later being.

2) Similarly, the “origin” or “source” in Husserl’s claim of philosophy as “science of true beginnings, or origins”, is not transcendental consciousness and its reflective acts. Rather, the origin is historical. The historical ego precedes the transcendental. The transcendental ego emerges by virtue of a dehistoricization [*Entgeschichtlichung*] of the historical ego, suppressing its primordial, i.e. “original”, historicity.

3) Husserl’s delimitation of the specific research field of phenomenology itself (transcendental consciousness) is “unphenomenological”, i.e. dogmatic, affected with metaphysical bias. It is carried out not so much by returning to “the things themselves”, to the true “origins” – as the maxim of phenomenology would require – as under the influence of a pre-conceived idea of what should constitute the business of philosophy. The Cartesian–Kantian orientation is traditionally and thus dogmatically assumed rather than phenomenologically discussed and delimited. While prohibiting the making of assertions about being, Husserl tacitly commits himself to certain ontological positions without thematizing the access to those positions phenomenologically.²³

4) Husserl’s allegedly “pure” description is “theoretically” biased. His “natural attitude” is not natural enough; it is indeed

²¹ See, e.g., Husserl’s “principle of all principles” (Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Husserliana III/1, ed. K. Schuhmann [The Hague: Nijhoff, 1976], § 24).

²² See GA 58: 6, 145, 237.

²³ See *Ideen*, I, § 76; GA 20: 155ff., 178.

“artificial” or “theoretical”. The “experience” he conceptualizes is affected with “naturalism” – a view against which Husserl conceives himself as fighting as firmly as possible. In the “natural” attitude, Husserl tends to “experience” the reality in a naturalistic way. What is needed is an attempt to experience the intentional being more originally, i.e., in a more unprejudiced way, in its “natural” setting – something that precisely *Being and Time* will provide with the title of “existential analytic”.

2.2. The coupling of Husserl and Dilthey

Heidegger frequently spoke of Dilthey’s appreciation of Husserl; this may have prompted him to assume the task of uniting the impulses of both thinkers. His strategic move is, in this regard, a double one. His hermeneutic reshaping of phenomenology draws on Dilthey precisely by shifting the accent from “consciousness” to “life”, and, while in approaching Dilthey’s theme, “life”, he employs phenomenological descriptive strategies, transforming it into a “hermeneutics of facticity”. (Roughly, the theme is provided by Dilthey, the method by Husserl.) By doing this, he thinks he is doing justice not only to Husserl’s innermost efforts in a more original and “unprejudiced” way than Husserl himself ever did, but, incidentally, also to Dilthey’s own. Heidegger interpreted Dilthey as having striven to get access to historical *reality*, historical *life*, rather than historical *knowledge*. Dilthey wanted to interpret life out of itself, but this tendency-deviated and indeed distorted by the *wissenschaftstheoretisch* climate of the age – ended up in an attempt at an epistemological foundation of the human studies. The suggestion is that Dilthey interpreted life not from itself, but from an epistemological, i.e. distanced, perspective – one major reason why Dilthey’s whole conceptuality was to undergo a hermeneutic purification. What mattered to Heidegger was access to historical *being*, rather than to historical *knowledge* with its alleged objectivity (and the difference between transforming our historical knowledge and transforming our historical being is all too apparent). But Heidegger thinks this was also Dilthey’s original impulse before it became obscured and misunderstood by himself, undergoing as it did a considerable limitation. In any case, it was Dilthey’s program, as Heidegger understood it, that Heidegger brought to bear on Husserl’s phenomenology, that let him perceive its inadequacies, and, finally, transform it hermeneutically. He gave finally an

ontological reconception to both transcendental phenomenology and methodological (*geisteswissenschaftlich*) hermeneutics in his existential analytic.

The hermeneutic transformation of Husserl's phenomenology is inspired to a considerable extent by Heidegger's effort to develop an original, "unprejudiced" approach to life. In the course of various devastating criticisms, Heidegger more often than not takes great pains to note that there is a positive and original impulse inherent in life-philosophy, that he indeed appreciates the impulse very much, while what he rejects is just its insufficient (because parasitic) realization.²⁴ We should note that, when Heidegger, for all his criticism, emphasizes the positive tendencies of life-philosophy the philosopher he most frequently has in mind is Dilthey.²⁵ And we can hardly conceive of Heidegger's historicist opposition to Husserl's transcendental ego, the stress upon „*das Historische*” without Dilthey's influence. Heidegger seems to suggest that the basic effort of life-philosophy is correct. He seems even to share the view of contemporary philosophy that the object primarily to be approached and investigated is "life". But rather than developing conceptual means adequate to its ownmost object, "life", life-philosophy relies upon the tools of the adversary for its own concepts, tends to borrow them from there. That is also the reason why, having realized that their tools are not equal to the task, life-philosophers tend to come inevitably to the conclusion that life, history, and existence are irrational.

The point Heidegger makes could be put as follows: irrationalist philosophy is really too rational, for in claiming its objects to be irrational it uncritically borrows the measure or concept of rationality from the adversary rather than developing or elaborating a rationality or conceptuality of its own that conforms to its object.

A good example of Heidegger's modified outlook is that, by adopting a hermeneutic way of seeing, traditional empiricism can be shown to be insufficiently "empirical" – indeed, laden with dogmatic "theoretical" presuppositions. Understandably enough, if Heidegger turns back to "factual life", he might be expected to heartily embrace empiricism – but the "experience" Heidegger has in mind is something entirely different from the concept of experience applied in empirical philosophy. "Experience" is a key

²⁴ See GA 61: 82, 117; GA 9: 13f.; GA 63: 69, 108.

²⁵ See GA 63: 42; further GA 9: 13f.; GA 61: 7.

word of the young Heidegger, but, as he elucidates it at the very beginning, “experience is not understood here in a theoretical sense, as empiricist perceiving in contradistinction to something like rational thinking.”²⁶ What we perceive in the first place are, hermeneutically seen, by no means “sense data.” “What we »first« hear”, writes Heidegger in *Being and Time*, “is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the wood-pecker tapping, the fire crackling.” And he adds significantly: “It requires a very artificial and complicated comportment [*Einstellung*] to ‘hear’ a ‘pure noise’.”²⁷ In other words: to claim we first perceive a “pure noise” requires having changed comportment, having assumed a theoretical attitude. In like manner, what we *do* see in the first place is not something like colored surfaces, or, still less, „sense data”, but e.g. the professor’s chair, a ready-to-hand object in our surrounding world. What is immediately given is not acts of consciousness; an immediate, unprejudiced experiencing knows of no acts of consciousness, sense data, pure sounds or noises, complexes of colors and surfaces, and the like. “Heidegger’s strikingly different conception of hermeneutics” may legitimately be seen to lie in the fact that “Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world *changes our understanding of understanding* from a derivative phenomenon to the central feature, the keystone of human experience”.²⁸ The case is not such that there is, first, something such as experience pure and simple, which gets interpreted in a second step. Every experience is always already interpreted – it is interpreted experience. Experience is always already meaningful or meaning-laden. If there is a problem to be explained it is not how things come to assume meaning, but rather the other way round: how, by what modification of man’s being-in-the-world things become devoid of meaning. For humans are, as has been said, interpreting animals, and that through and through.

²⁶ GA 61: 91.

²⁷ SZ 164/207; see GA 20: 367/266.

²⁸ D. C. Hoy, “Heidegger and the Hermeneutic Turn,” p. 171

Abbreviations of Heidegger's Works Cited

- SZ *Sein und Zeit*. Fünfzehnte, an Hand der Gesamtausgabe durchgesehene Auflage. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1979. / English translation by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.
- PIA „Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles (Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation),” ed by H.-U. Lessing, *Dilthey-Jahrbuch für Philosophic und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften* 6 (1989), pp. 237–269.
- GA 9 *Wegmarken*. Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 9, ed. by F.-W. von Herrmann. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1976.
- GA 20 *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*, SS 1925, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 20, ed. by P. Jaeger. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1979. / English translation by T. Kisiel, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- GA 21 *Logik. Die Frage nach der Wahrheit*, WS 1925/26, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 21, ed. by W. Biemel. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1976.
- GA 29/30 *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit*, WS 1929/30, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 29/30, ed. by F.-W. von Herrmann. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1983.
- GA 56/57 *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, Kriegsnotsemester 1919 und SS 1919, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 56/57, ed. by Heimbuchel. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1987.
- GA 58 *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (1919/20)*, WS 1919/20, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 58, ed. by H.-H. Gander. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1993.
- GA 61 *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*, WS 1921/22, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 61, ed. by W. Bröcker and K. Bröcker-Oltmanns. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1985.
- GA 63 *Ontologie (Hermeneuti der Faktizität)*, SS 1923, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 63, ed. by K. Brocker-Oltmanns. Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1988.

Notes

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