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## MEANING AND BEING IN HEIDEGGER'S HERMENEUTICAL ONTOLOGY

**Abstract:** My paper explores Heidegger's early phenomenological ground in order to investigate the ontological problematic which is concerned with the conditions of the possibility of being's showing itself. In this respect, the first objective is to examine the relation between ontology, phenomenology and hermeneutics, and then, to argue that the space of meaning cannot be approached with the resources of a traditional metaphysics or within the epistemological or modern framework. My paper takes interest in both in the manner in which the meaning of being can be investigated, as well as in analyzing Dasein's relations to the things in the world.

**Key words:** meaning, being, phenomenon, interpretation, Dasein

## 1. Introduction: the context

Through his question of the meaning of the being, Heidegger not only stimulates our reflection and understanding, but also provides a detailed and powerful critique of the history of metaphysics. This presupposes tracing the question of being within the history of metaphysics, which is paradoxically characterized by the forgetting of this being and its sedimented tradition of interpreting being as presence, substance, subject, absolute and other forms under which metaphysics has appeared in its long history. In fact, this task of thinking requires understanding the necessity of overcoming (as *Destraktion*) the ontologies that favor identity or that think of being in terms of presence, in the sense of fixed, static or ahistorical essences. Engaging with Heidegger's thinking concerning this issue will not only show, as Gavin Rae noted, "that philosophy itself entails a reflexivity that enables it to examine and criticize its history, but will also reveal a powerful line of critique against the thinking of being that has traditionally been employed by philosophy"<sup>1</sup>. In his most famous and significant work, *Being and Time* (see especially "The phenomenological method of investigation")<sup>2</sup>, Heidegger presents his understanding of philosophy as *transcendental, hermeneutical, phenomenological ontology*. I will show later in my paper that Heidegger appropriated the phenomenological method to address the questions that Husserl thought he had eliminated, i.e. questions of metaphysics and ontology.

Heidegger spent his first years at Freiburg University studying theology as preparation for the priesthood, and then, during his third and fourth years at Freiburg, he studied mathematics with the aim to becoming a secondary school mathematics teacher. During this time, Heidegger was initiated in the study of philosophy, and four years after entering the University he submitted a doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of logic and was awarded a PhD. In his doctoral thesis and in his *Habilitation (The Theory of Categories and Meaning in Duns Scotus - 1916)*, Heidegger investigated problems concerning the foundations of meaning, logic and intentionality by means of a phenomenological account. Already in 1907 he appears to be familiar with Husserl's thinking and especially with his *Logical Investigations*. Yet, soon Heidegger became alienated from Husserl's conception on phenomenology, and that fact became clear, as Kockelmans noted, with Husserl's *Ideen*, where he had turned from some form of realism to a kind of transcendental idealism: "Heidegger must have realized even then that although the phenomenological method developed by Husserl might have helped him articulate the whole domain of being, Husserl's turn toward transcendental subjectivity nonetheless would have stood in the way of his ever achieving that goal"<sup>3</sup>. Later, in his

*History of the Concept of Time*, Heidegger detailed his understanding of Husserl's phenomenology and why he preferred to develop his method in a completely different direction<sup>4</sup>.

Let us now look more closely into Husserl's phenomenology in order to understand Heidegger's critique and his description of the ontological structure of human life and its selfrelation and worldliness.

## **2. Transcendental phenomenology**

Disturbed by what he saw as an increasing relativism and historicism in the Western culture, Husserl provides a new approach in philosophy, one that he defines as a fundamental philosophical discipline, a *prima philosophia* as he noted, by using the idea of *epoché*, i.e. the phenomenological reduction<sup>5</sup> or suspension. That is why Husserl also calls it transcendental phenomenology, which means that, from a primitive way of dealing with experience, from understanding objects as objectively given, it transcends to the manner in which these objects are given. This new movement in philosophy has been initiated by the demand "Back to the things themselves!" and Husserl's thesis sounds like this: "The ideal of scientificity, which phenomenology claims is not in continuity with the sciences, with their axioms, with their fundamental enterprise: the *ultimate justification* which constitutes phenomenology is of another order"<sup>6</sup>. Schematically put, phenomenology reveals, primarily, a way of investigating intentionality by liberating the mind's representation from both the objects it represents and from the psychological states that produce the representing. The main purpose is to free philosophy both from insecure foundations of people's thinking and from distracting metaphysical questions about the "true" nature of the world. Because phenomenology suspends any beliefs in all metaphysical constructs in order to focus solely on what shows up as it presents itself in our experience, its results are supposed to be *apodictic* and beyond any possible doubt.

The idea of reduction must be understood in the sense that we have to set aside any suppositions, prejudices or preconceived notions concerning the object of our experience. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is a theory that is no longer naive, in terms of Scheler's ontological phenomenology<sup>7</sup>, as Jan Patočka remarks: naive, that is "preoccupied with objects as they present themselves without attending to the mode of experience which opens the way to them. Husserl also deals with objects but specifically from the viewpoint of experiential access to them"<sup>8</sup>. Hence, the experience is understood in its primordial, original meaning, without any theorizing or interpretation. Only in this way we can have a

chance of grasping experience as it is, in its inner meaning and development.

In the attempt to clarify the being of entities in general, Husserl establishes the basis for a phenomenological ontology. Thus, he will provide a formal ontology connected with material ontologies of the various regions of entities – therefore, he will use the expression of “regional ontology” which is similar to material ontology. The purpose of a formal ontology is represented by the basic “forms” or structures of being in general, while a “material” ontology examines in what manner these more general forms are filled materially in the various main types of entities. In his work, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Husserl notes that the task of a formal ontology is to “state what holds good for any objects whatever, with formal universality, in what forms they exist or merely can exist”<sup>9</sup>. In some cases Husserl refers to formal ontology in order to analyze the basic concepts or categories of objectivity.

### 3. Hermeneutic phenomenology

Starting with his “phenomenological decade” as Theodore Kiesel named Heidegger’s evolution from 1915 to 1927<sup>10</sup>, the German philosopher began to raise questions about the viability of Husserl’s phenomenology, by adopting an interpretative turn. Even though there are some critics that advocate the idea that Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics succeeds by weakening Husserl’s phenomenology, in my opinion, this idea is overstated. Philosophers such Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, who build on Heideggerian hermeneutics, clearly expressed that their own thinking presupposes phenomenology<sup>11</sup>. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims that “only as phenomenology is ontology possible”<sup>12</sup>, therefore ontology must deal with its subject by employing the phenomenological method. But this approach entails a first complication, that is, if phenomenology is the study of objects *as they present themselves*, than how it could be used in ontology, since ontology is the study of objects *as they really are*. And as we shall see, part of the purpose of §7 of *Being and Time* is to decline this objection.

Even though phenomenology studies the objects as they present themselves, it would be misleading to characterize these objects as *appearances*: “Thus we must *keep* in mind that the expression *phenomenon* signifies that *which shows itself in itself*, the manifest”<sup>13</sup>. It’s very interesting to observe that the conception on phenomenology is explained here not with reference to Husserl or Hegel, but merely with the help of a laborious etymological route. But Heidegger’s new way of doing phenomenology, sharply opposed to Husserl’s theory of reflection is not easily noticeable at first glance, because Heidegger points to Husserl’s maxim for a

preliminary specification on phenomenology – *Zu den Sachen selbst*. In Heidegger's interpretation on Husserl's maxim: *to the things themselves* implies that ontology avoid all free-floating constructions and accidental findings, all conceptions which only seem to have been demonstrated, and all those *pseudo-questions* which have been mistakenly considered problems. In this manner, the dualism between the way that things show themselves and the way things really are themselves, i.e. the opposition between appearance and reality, is surpassed: "The expression *phenomenology* signifies primarily a *methodological conception*. This expression does not characterize the *what* of the objects of philosophical research as subject-matter, but rather the *how* of that research"<sup>14</sup>. Hence, for Heidegger the primordial signification on *phainomenon* is not a deceptive or pure appearance, but the genuine self-display of a thing.

Heidegger offers an explanation of what is to be understood as phenomenology, writing that the expression itself has two basic components: "phenomenon" and "logos". In his perspective, a preliminary conception of phenomenology can be developed by characterizing what one means considering the term's two components and, then, by establishing the meaning of the name in which these two components are put together. He claims that a being can show itself in many ways, depending in each case on the kind of access one has to it. On the other hand, a being can show itself as something which in itself it is not, and then, it may look like something else. This way of showing itself is called *semblance*. In this case, "the primordial signification (the phenomenon as the manifest) is already included as that upon which the second signification is founded"<sup>15</sup>. Both the phenomenon and the semblance must be distinguished from the appearance, because an appearance is something that is indicated by way of something else that shows itself in its place. In this respect, Heidegger provides the example of the symptoms of a disease, signs, symbols and so forth: "thus appearance, as appearance 'of something', does not mean showing-itself; it means rather the announcing-itself by [von] something which does not show itself, but which announces itself through something which does show itself"<sup>16</sup>. So, appearance is, in this understanding, a special kind of phenomenon, one that indicates something beyond itself, something that does not show itself, and the worry that phenomena are appearance and hence unsuited for use in ontology is rejected. Heidegger clearly argues that phenomenology is our way of access to what is to be the theme of ontology and represents our way of giving it demonstrative precision.

Up until now he have discussed about a purely formal meaning of the concept of phenomenon, and we have not specified which entities are considered to be phenomena, so the question of whether what shows itself is a being, or some characteristic which a being has, remains open. In

order to answer this question, Heidegger operates a distinction between the ordinary and the phenomenological conception on phenomenon. These perspectives on the phenomenon are made with an explicit reference to Kant's philosophy. Heidegger defines *the phenomenon in the ordinary sense*, that which shows itself to our senses, i.e. objects of perception, which are accessible to us through the "empirical intuition". *The formal conception of the phenomenon* is in fact, the concept of a phenomenon, but in which we do not specify anything about what shows itself. At last, *the phenomenological conception of the phenomenon* refers to what it shows itself and thereby enables what shows itself to show itself. Otherwise put, the phenomenon in the phenomenological manner implies the conditions of the possibility of the objects' experience. Heidegger insists on the idea that phenomenology is fundamentally descriptive and not explanatory, thus he describes how Dasein and the world show themselves, rather than explaining that they are this way or another. Why? Because in his conception, being is not an entity, therefore it cannot make the object of one of the positive sciences, such as biology, for example<sup>17</sup>. Since each of these disciplines studies empirically these entities, Heidegger argues that being does not constitute such a domain, but rather a structure of anything that exists or, more precisely, a meaning-structure that is latent in any experience of anything, even in experience of imaginary things. This is why we have to study being as we study the meaning of the phenomena, and this is why we say that Heidegger's ontological phenomenology is hermeneutical in the sense that it interprets the being and it analyzes the process of interpretation itself. As he put it, the meaning of the phenomenological method lies in its interpretation.

#### 4. In the search of being

Heidegger asks what must be taken into account if the formal conception of phenomenon is deformed into the phenomenological one, and in which manner is the latter delimited from the ordinary conception. Therefore, what is it that phenomenology allows us to 'see'? These questions and the relation between appearance and reality raise the problem of illusion, falsehood and concealment. This because we are usually absorbed in entities, which display themselves obviously to us, in such a way that it takes a great effort to bring being into the focus, so that we tend to fall back into superficial and misguided interpretations.

Furthermore, things get complicated if we take into account Heidegger's somehow paradoxical definition of the phenomenon:

Manifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all: it is something that lies *hidden*, in contrast to that

which proximally and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground.<sup>18</sup>

In his letter to Richardson (1962), Heidegger provides some additional information concerning phenomenology. He then wrote that the concept of phenomenology described in the section 7 of *Being and Time* was prepared by the immediate experience of the phenomenological method on which he came through his conversation with Husserl. In this point, Heidegger admits Aristotle's influence in the sense that the concept of *aletheuein* is understood as a process of revealment, thus the Heideggerian concept of truth is viewed as non-concealment to which all the self-manifestation of beings pertains. In the next step, the question regarding being is developed in terms of its time-character. Since truth and being are understood in this manner, the meaning of phenomenology becomes obvious. One can understand now, why Husserl's maxim "back to the things themselves" does not refer, in Heidegger's understanding, to the intentional consciousness or to the transcendental ego.

The way in which being and its structures are encountered in the mode of the phenomena suggests that the being of a phenomenon is latent in experience and it must be 'wrested' out. In this respect, phenomenology is the science of the being of entities, namely ontology. Heidegger argues that, in explaining the tasks of ontology, it is necessary that there should be a fundamental ontology, which has as theme that entity which is ontologico-ontically distinctive - Dasein. This is why phenomenological ontology is hermeneutical: "Our investigation itself will show that the meaning of the phenomenological description as a method lies in *interpretation*"<sup>19</sup>. We do not just describe phenomena exactly as we experienced them, but rather we extract from them something that is not apparent, that is a latent structure, something that, as Heidegger noted, for the most part, does not show itself at all, something that lies *hidden*. But if phenomenology designates Dasein's way of accessing the theme of ontology, it is obvious that the phenomenological conception of the phenomenon as that which shows itself must make reference to the being of beings and to its meaning. Hence, for the phenomenological conception, something must be manifest and something else, inherently connected with the manifest must be hidden. Considering that each being can show itself in different ways according to Dasein's manner of approach, the fact of showing itself entails some kind of approach to the things that appears to be constitutive of what will show itself as the manifest. Therefore, we can conclude that, from a phenomenological point of view, a phenomenon does not represent being, but the showing itself of being in the light of the truth of being.

## 5. Conclusion

The relationship and the differences between Heidegger and Husserl are significant and complex, and if we want to understand Heidegger's project in *Being and Time*, then we have to see in which way Husserl's phenomenology provides a framework for Heidegger's inquiry. This is because many of the philosophical problems have been formulated and developed with the help of the phenomenological method, which, despite the fact that it is derived from Husserl's philosophical conception, was nonetheless also completely different from it. While Husserl was concerned with theoretical issues, Heidegger instead, focused on the area of the "everyday life". He also rejected the transcendental reduction and renounced the idea of a transcendental subject. What stands out in Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology is his recognition of the significance of the finitude, worldliness, and human's historicity. In other words, our access to things is always envisaged by the sense of things in our historical culture.

Since Heidegger's phenomenology is ontology, it goes without saying that he is not concerned only with phenomena, but mainly with being. The history of philosophy gives us several ways of conceiving it, but in a specific sense, being remains hidden, as Heidegger stated. And even though the main purpose of § 7 was to deliver to us some indications about where to look for being, the work *Being and Time* failed to answer the question 'what is being'. Instead, Heidegger asks what our approach to our own being is<sup>20</sup>. Is it a view of being, a look turned to myself? Of course that an inward look represents a part of what we are, but in Heidegger's conception, our being has a more direct access to itself. This is the reason why Heidegger conceives phenomenology as a way of Dasein to access what is to be the theme of ontology. We are not in the world like a stone to which the fact that it is means nothing, or like an animal for which its own being does matter in some sense, but which does not explicitly relate to it. Humans are in the world in such a way that they are not indifferent to their own being, that in their present, they always already anticipate, project something that they are not yet. Therefore the question of how our life relates to itself is in fact, the question of experience, the question of our relation to ourselves as beings, the question of how such a self-constituting being is structured.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Gavin Rae, *Ontology in Heidegger and Deleuze* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: Blackwell, 2003), §7

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Kockelmans, *Heidegger's "Being and Time"* (Washington: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology & University Press of America, 1989), 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *The History of the Concept of Time* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 27 -131.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* (The Hague: Nijhof Publishers, 1960), see especially §§ 2-11.

<sup>6</sup> See “Postscript” (*Nachwort*) Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Drittes Buch: Die Phänomenologie und die Fundamente der Wissenschaften. (Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy, third book: phenomenology and the foundations of the sciences) edited by Marly Biemel. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> See also the “Munich School” and a number of philosophers associated with Theodor Lipps, that included Adolf Reinach and Moritz Geiger, both of whom collaborated with Husserl.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1998), 82.

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), 120. On this matter see also “Region and Category” in Vol. 2 of *Edmund Husserl: Collected Works*. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993), 59.

<sup>11</sup> “By hermeneutical presupposition I essentially intend the necessity for phenomenology to conceive its method as an *Auslegung*, an exegesis, an application, an interpretation” in Paul Ricoeur “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics” in *Noûs*, vol. 9, No.1 Symposium Papers to be Read at the Meeting of the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association in Chicago, Illinois, April 24-26, 1975, pp. 85-102. See also H-G Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: Blackwell, 2003), 60/35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 51/28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*. 50/27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*. 51/29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*. 52/29.

<sup>17</sup> See also on this matter, Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 95-112.

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 59/35.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*. 61/37.

<sup>20</sup> See especially §§ 9-11 in Heidegger, *Being and Time* op. cit.