

Christian Lotz, Commentary, SPEP 2009

Formal Indication and the Problem of Radical Philosophy in Heidegger

Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking Leslie MacAvoy for her attempt to revitalize the debate surrounding Heidegger's phenomenological method and his exchange with Husserl on methodological issues. My comments will be divided into three parts: first, I will briefly recount the main claims advanced by MacAvoy ; second, I will try to shed more light on what Heidegger calls "formal indication," especially as I am not convinced that MacAvoy's reconstruction is satisfactory; third and finally, I will ask MacAvoy for a brief clarification of her main claims.

MacAvoy's claims

Step one: a brief recounting of MacAvoy's claims. As far as I can see, Leslie tries to show in her paper that Heidegger's concept of formal indication is indebted to Husserl's philosophy, especially his 6th LI. Two sub-theses provide support for her major claim: first, she agrees with a group of scholars who claim that formal indication is a method for a hermeneutical phenomenology (p.5); but second, she disagrees with another group of scholars who claim that formal indication allows Heidegger to transform Husserl's phenomenology into a hermeneutic phenomenology, insofar as she disagrees with the latter claim since she does not believe that formal indication is different from Husserl's concept of empty intentions. Husserl's concept of empty intentions is no more hermeneutical, she concludes, than Heidegger's concept of formal indication is an empty intention (p.8).

First of all, it seems to me that Leslie is selling Heidegger's inventions too "cheaply," inasmuch as she seems to reduce Heidegger's sense of "hermeneutic" to the simple claims [1] that epistemology

cannot operate presuppositionless and [2] that hermeneutics can be reduced to the attempt to overcome the epistemological core of modern philosophy, which, as she points out, is already achieved with Husserl's concept of intentionality (p.7). Though I am sympathetic to Leslie's claim that formal indication in Heidegger might be taken as an analogue to Husserl's concept of empty intentions and the central impact of categorical intuition, I disagree with her that this analogy is able to clarify the real issues involved in Husserl's and Heidegger's competing ideas of phenomenology, nor that it does justice to Heidegger's concept of formal indication. In addition, I do not believe that her paper accomplishes what it claims, for despite very general references to Husserl's LI, at no point of her paper does Leslie go into detail and clarify her claim about the nature of formal indication. Finally, I also do not think that the 6th LI – despite a general analogy – is the correct reference point in Husserl for what Heidegger has in mind with what he calls "formal indication." In opposition to MacAvoy, I would like to suggest that Heidegger's introduction of the formal indication, especially in his Freiburg Lectures, is (to a certain extent) a result of his attempt to reform Husserl's idea of the epoche. As such, I do not think that it is ultimately important that "formal indication is analogous to the empty intention" (p.4), as Leslie claims; rather, I would claim that "formal indication" is introduced by Heidegger at a specific point of his inquiry so that he may re-conceptualize a *radical* starting point of philosophy, the main ideas of which can be characterized as follows: [1] the idea of an *original situation* in life is necessary for the emergence of a radical philosophy, [2] the idea of a *historical – or "right" – time* for radical philosophy is needed, and [3] the idea of an alternative to Neo-Kantianism (philosophy as a principle) and world-view philosophy (philosophy as an *Erlebnis*) is also called for. Of course, this context should remind us of Husserl's attempt to find a beginning of philosophy that is *radical*; however, the difference is crucial: whereas Husserl's epoche tries to establish *phenomenology as (first) philosophy*; Heidegger's "epoche" tries to establish *philosophy as phenomenology*. As Heidegger puts it, phenomenology is not "an individual

discipline in philosophy, not a special self-contained philosophy, but it is to see research in a fundamentally different way" (PIA 141).

Formal Indication and Life Tendencies

Step second: formal indication and the decision to philosophize. The context in which Heidegger introduces his concept of formal indication is not only determined by the question of what definitions are, but also by the question of what philosophy itself is. It is, for Heidegger, the very definition of philosophy that is at stake! In *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, for example, Heidegger claims that the only way to know and to define philosophy is based on the attempt to go back to the point where philosophy originates, which does not require us to go back in time to the pre-Socratics or, in the case of religion, to early Christianity. Instead, finding a definition of philosophy is a *unique* task, insofar as it cannot be answered through a meta-discourse. Unlike the definition of sociology or the definition of physics, which cannot be found through sociology and physics, and thus require a meta-reflection, the definition of philosophy can *only* be found through doing philosophy. Consequently, philosophy is the *only* discipline that has to determine what it is and what it does *through itself*. The problem, hence, is threefold: [1] we want to know what it means to define something, [2] we want to know what it means to define philosophy, and [3] we have *to do* philosophy in order to find out what it means to define philosophy. If we don't want to simply reiterate Meno's paradox, then we must indeed claim, with Heidegger, that philosophy is the inquiry that is tied to and originates in life itself; for this is the only way – beside a Fichtean deduction – that could overcome the problem of the meta-reflection. What philosophy *is* must become clear in the situation or the act of decision itself. Only in this situation does philosophy show itself as what it is from out of itself. Consequently, the decision to philosophize cannot come out of nowhere; rather, it must come out of life itself. The hermeneutical circle (at this point of Heidegger's development), accordingly, is primarily not a problem of overcoming epistemology,

as Leslie seems to suggest; instead, it is a problem of philosophizing: *how can we do philosophy without (already) knowing how to do it*. Response: we or *existence/life* already do(es) it, is philosophizing itself constantly, but not radically *taken up* [=Evidenzsituation]. This “already” is to be found in existence and *therefore it* can indicate and point to itself. Unfortunately, philosophies, such as Neo-Kantianism or world view philosophies hide and cover up this indication because they are not *radical* enough, given that they are based on certain assumptions that guide their decisions to philosophize.

It seems to me that Heidegger also argues against Husserl in the same way. In this connection, Heidegger writes: “The authentic foundation of philosophy is a radical, existentiell grasp of and maturation¹ of questionableness; to pose in questionableness oneself and life and the decisive actualizations is the basic stance of – including the most radical – clarification” (PIA, 28).² What Heidegger has in mind here is comparable to Husserl’s idea of a radical decision to begin “anew” as a philosopher. As Heidegger in his late Freiburg Lecture courses and in his early Marburg lecture courses stresses again and again, the difference should be seen in the fact that Husserl presupposes a specific goal *before* and as the fundamental ground of the epoche, namely, the Cartesian project of the certainty of knowledge. In contrast, what Heidegger proposes is – at least according to the Freiburg Lectures – not guided by such a principle and goal of cognitions; since the fulfillment of what philosophy is *comes about and clarifies itself* in the very situation within which it is performed or “actualized” [*gezeitigt*].³ Since philosophy emerges out of and leads back to where it originates, namely life/existence, it can only grasp life itself in such an attempt. *There is nothing else that it could grasp, if it is really radical*. The circle, accordingly, within which phenomenology as radical philosophizing finds itself is not simply a hermeneutical circle, as outlined by Leslie (and some of the quoted scholars); rather, the circle is much more radical: [1] phenomenology emerges out of life; [2] in order to grasp and understand

¹ Zeitigung

² “Das eigentliche Fundament der Philosophie ist das radikale existentielle Ergreifen und die *Zeitigung der Fraglichkeit*; sich und das Leben und die entscheidenden Vollzuege in die Fraglichkeit zu stellen ist der Grundbegriff aller und der radikalsten Erhellung” (GA61, 35)

³ „To grasp philosophy authentically,” as Heidegger puts it, „means to encounter absolute questionableness and to possess this questionability in full awareness“ (PIA 29)³

life/existence, phenomenology must *be* in its original situation; [3] this evidence situation cannot simply be grasped, but instead it must be “lived” or actualized [*gezeitigt*]. The evidence situation, accordingly, is not simply the fulfillment of empty intentions; rather it *is* the very situation in which the act itself originates. As such, Phenomenology is the real origin of all philosophy, since philosophy really *is* what it means *to be* in the originary situation.

What is more, this originary situation to which all philosophical investigation leads back, is *historically* constituted; for it cannot be the case that we simply repeat an abstract beginning of philosophy when we decide to philosophize (which presupposes that we somehow ‘know’ what “to philosophize” means); rather, each radical decision has its own *historical moment*, within which the evidence situation is grasped as a *situation*. „Beginning has its time. To begin for another time is senseless“ (PIA 140).⁴ The latter claim is the reason, in fact, for Heidegger’s attempt in *PIA* to determine the original situation *as a situation*, in which philosophy can only be done in a context characterized by “semi-scientific” and “university-philosophy” (PIA 145), i.e. in the conflict between principle philosophy (Neo-Kantianism) and world view philosophy (Spengler).⁵

We should see immediately that this attempt to deal with the originary situation differs from Husserl. Though Husserl follows a similar setup in advancing an idea of a radical decision to do philosophy, he does not claim that this decision is itself only *genuine* or authentic when it grasps itself as a moment of life in the moment actualized; rather, he presupposes from the beginning that being radical means to begin at a point *without historical time*. Indeed, according to Husserl, the meaning of phenomenology would not change over time, whereas according to Heidegger, it can change; this is the reason why Heidegger always considers his philosophy within the context of modernity and within the context of his time. In sum, then, since Husserl presupposes a Cartesian ideal of knowledge, he fails to be radical in the Heideggerian sense.

⁴ “Fuer eine andere Zeit anfangen, is sinnlos” (GA61, 186)

⁵ This also includes the “perversity” of “empty mental labor” (PIA 141), such as cowardice, docility, anthologizing, and second hand interpretations (PIA 143). What we are doing here at SPEP is by no means philosophy (=phenomenology)

So, we are finally prepared to make more sense of what Heidegger more concretely says about formal indication, particularly, his claim that since what is indicated in a definition should be taken as a task of actualization (PIA 26) it is therefore “formal.” Philosophy, for Heidegger, is simply supposed to follow the tendencies of life itself. It is precisely for this reason that I do not agree with Leslie: it is not the relation between empty and fulfilling intentions that is hermeneutical; rather, it is this going back to the historical moment that deserves to be called hermeneutical. As Heidegger states in *Ontology – Hermeneutics of Facticity*: “Philosophy is a mode of knowing which is in factual life itself and in which factual Dasein is ruthlessly dragged back to itself and relentlessly thrown back upon itself. As this mode of knowing, philosophy has no mission to take care of universal humanity and culture [...] Philosophy is what it can be only as a philosophy of ‘its time.’” (O 14)

Request for clarification

Step three: request for clarification. As could be seen from the foregoing, I think that stressing the differences between Husserl and Heidegger is more fruitful than stating the similarities, since it is my belief that differences do more to clarify the conceptual underpinnings of each thinker. Though I agree with Leslie that Heidegger’s way of philosophizing should be brought nearer to Husserl’s 6th LI, I do not see how the author justifies her claim beyond a very general level. I do not think that there is any scholar working in this field who would reject Leslie’s claim that “the groundwork is to some extent laid in Husserl’s phenomenology” (p.9), but the question remains regarding what this *precisely* means. So, let me ask Leslie to flesh this claim out a bit more by asking: is formal indication *identical* with the structure of empty and fulfilled intuitions? And if not, what is *exactly* the difference?