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# Fredrik Westerlund, "Heidegger and the Problem of Phenomena"

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**Fredrik Westerlund.** *Heidegger and the Problem of Phenomena*. Bloomsbury 2020. 288 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350086470); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350262331).

One of the central aspects of German philosopher Martin Heidegger's thought is phenomenological problematics. Heidegger, since his Freiburg period, had been confronted with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, but his distance from the master became evident even in Heidegger's early Freiburg courses. In the volume *Heidegger and the Problem of Phenomena*, Frederick Westerlund comprehensively addresses the problem of phenomena in Heidegger, especially in light of the two paradigms with which the phenomenological approach of the author of *Sein und Zeit* has been interpreted. According to Westerlund, the debate concerning Heidegger's phenomenology can be condensed into two interpretive standpoints: the transcendental phenomenological one and the hermeneutic-deconstructive one. The first interpretation has been defended by authors such as Steven Cromwell, Daniel Dahlstrom, Burt Hopkins and so on, according to whom Heidegger - while criticizing Husserl for neglecting the pre-theoretical dimension - nevertheless remains bound to Husserl's teaching and the spirit of Husserlian phenomenology according to which one must go 'to the thing itself' (*zur Sache selbst*) on the basis of the suspension of judgment (*epoché*). It must be made clear, however, that while appreciating the approach present in the *Logical Investigations*, the Meßkirch philosopher intercepts within it the key flaw of subjectivism traceable to Descartes' *cogito*. Although the main intent of Husserlian phenomenology was to go to the things themselves through phenomenological reduction - since logical laws (ideality) are indeed timeless but employed and realized [*Realisierung*] in the *Erlebnis* - the relation between act and content is constituted by a definite leading motif: intentionality. This attitude emphasizes the importance of analyzing the way our cognitive experience is given and focusing on the point of reference of our thinking activity. In Husserl's case it is the relations between things or states of affairs [*Sachverhalt*], whereby reality is innervated by logical laws, that we must recognize. The problem of intentionality and the way in which Husserl analyzes the structures of our experience will catch the young Heidegger's attention, but this being directed toward something pushes Husserl to emphasize the dimension of consciousness [*Bewusstsein*] and thus on the self. It is this aspect that perplexes Heidegger, since the consciousness of which Husserl speaks is considered by Heidegger to be much more nuanced and subject rather than temporality.

On the other hand, the second approach - defended by scholars such as Gadamer, Charles Guignon, Günter Figal, and so on - still more emphatically point out Heidegger's distance from Husserl's phenomenology, especially for providing 'a groundbreaking analysis of the radical historicity of all experience of meaning: it is only on account of our thrownness into groundless and finite historical contexts of meaning that we are able to experience objects as meaningful' (5). Heidegger emphasizes the need to rid intuition of the theoretical dross of the Husserlian approach. Heidegger considers Husserlian phenomenology still vitiated by Cartesian dualism, with its distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, in which the *ordo idearum* reflects the *ordo rerum*. This split is deemed unacceptable by Heidegger, which is why he shifts the transcendental ego to the



experiential ground [*Erfahrungsboden*]. The basic lineaments of Husserl's phenomenology are outlined by Westerlund in the first part of his volume, entitled 'A Phenomenology of Factual Life,' and in this first part Westerlund presents the content of Heidegger's Freiburg courses as a simple critical appropriation of Husserl's phenomenology. As Westerlund writes, 'In this part, I am going to argue that Heidegger in his earliest Freiburg lectures remains committed to Husserl's idea of phenomenology as intuitive reflection on the essential structures of our first-person experiences' (15). In reality, even in the Freiburg courses, Heidegger considered Husserlian phenomenology to be too short a blanket to cover a much richer reality, the originality of which could only be grasped through access to the pre-theoretical dimension. Even before the constructions of  $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$  man is already in relation to things and others: he is being-in-the-world [*in-der-Welt-sein*].

In the second part of the volume, entitled 'The Historical Structure of Phenomena,' Westerlund first examines the contents of a seminar Heidegger gave in Freiburg in 1921 as a *Privatdozent* on Aristotle's *De anima*. As is well known, the study of Aristotle turned out to be fundamental for Heidegger, especially since it was from Aristotle's works that Heidegger drew the most important categories that later flowed into the 1927 masterpiece *Sein und Zeit*. Heidegger calls for a different translation of the very title of the Aristotelian treatise on  $\psi\upsilon\chi\acute{\eta}$ , precisely to free it from possible psychological interpretations. The defining ontological trait of human life, according to the *De anima*, is traced by Heidegger to the  $\pi\omicron\rho\epsilon\nu\tau\iota\kappa\acute{\eta}$   $\kappa\acute{\iota}\nu\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ , which Heidegger translates as 'moving in the direction of' [*sich zubewegen auf*], 'bringing oneself near' [*sich hinbringen zu*], and 'having to do with' [*Umgang mit*]. That is, it is a matter of moving in the direction of something that may also be of some interest to life, but always through the capacity for differentiation ( $\kappa\rho\acute{\iota}\nu\epsilon\iota\nu$ ), where the latter - in humans - rests on both the  $\alpha\acute{\iota}\sigma\theta\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  and the  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ . Therefore, man - because he is endowed with  $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  and  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  - is able to understand the reason for his action and thus his decision. It follows that man (*Dasein*) does not merely find himself immersed among entities, for he is already given a well-determined tradition and language of which he is the repository, and which in turn guide his understanding. For these reasons, understanding is thus conditioned by pre-judgment or, to put it better, is already pre-understanding. But this is not to say that one must remain caged within this pre-understanding, as when one indulges in the impersonal 'They', that is, *man sagt*. It is also possible to open up and thus authentically appropriate the meaning of the thing, which is given to us not in the terms of a simple subject-object relationship, but rather in 'experiencing.' This 'experiencing,' according to Heidegger, will go on to modify the pre-understanding of *Dasein*, and this is how what Wilhelm Dilthey will call the 'hermeneutic circle' is constituted. Nonetheless, as Westerlund says, 'Heidegger's radical historicization of our understanding of the world is nothing that he can comfortably settle with. It immediately raises the question of how it is possible to distinguish between the historical prejudices in which we normally tend to live and the possibility of a genuine understanding of the matters at stake. Given Heidegger's historicism, this is the question of how historical being can be given and experienced as in some sense binding and primordial beyond the prejudices of the They... Heidegger fails to address this question in *Being and Time*' (101). For these reasons, the task of a destruction of the history of ontology [*Die Aufgabe einer Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie*] turns out to be fundamental in Heidegger. The only way to accomplish

this task is to remove everything that has prevented access to the original sources from which the tradition has been nourished. Heidegger also insists on the difference between being and entity, so being is not an entity. Precisely because the metaphysical tradition - which began with Plato - has reduced being to an entity, it has flattened itself to the simple dimension of presence, reducing all that is to a mere present entity. This is the reason for the so-called oblivion of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*), traces of which can be found throughout the metaphysical tradition. In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger tried to re-propose the question of the meaning of being, but he did not finish the work because he was unable to adequately answer the question of the meaning of being due to the language of metaphysics.

For these reasons Heidegger, during the 1930s, will initiate the so-called 'turn' [*Kehre*], which Westerlund addresses in the third part of his volume. In *Sein und Zeit* there had certainly been an experience of *Seinsvergessenheit*, but not of that dimension to which it appeared to be bound by a relation of necessity. If Heidegger had sought to address the problem of the meaning of being from that entity (the *Dasein*) that poses the *Seinsfrage*, with the so-called *Kehre* - almost with a sudden 'swerve' - he now turns his gaze to the structure of happening. The 'turn' that from the fundamental ontology of *Sein und Zeit* arrives at the conception of being understood as *Ereignis* (Event), therefore, is by no means a merely human enterprise; rather, it refers back to the way in which being itself gives itself, which is why Heidegger disengages his own reflection from simple historiography, and this on account of the fact that the very term *Geschichte* (history) is linked to that of *Geschehen*, i.e., happening.

In Chapter 10 of Part 3, Westerlund also considers the relationship between Heidegger and Nazism, especially in light of the character of history as an event. It is well known that Heidegger was a rector during Nazism, but this political 'experience' of his was very brief, not even lasting a year. From then on Heidegger has always been considered a Nazi, and Westerlund himself states that 'Heidegger was never able to respond morally and philosophically to National Socialism and the Holocaust' (150). Unfortunately, Westerlund also falls victim to the prejudice that makes Heidegger an anti-Semite. On the other hand, there are not only letters to Jaspers in which Heidegger speaks of 'shame,' but there are also many passages in the *Black Notebooks* in which he considers Nazism a 'barbaric principle,' also speaks of 'the horror of the gas chambers,' 'Hitler's criminal madness,' and so on. In the following chapters, Westerlund addresses Heidegger's late historical thought, Levinas' criticism, Cristina Lafont's criticism, and in the last chapter of the volume, Chapter 15, the relationship between phenomenology and historical reflection.

Westerlund's work is undoubtedly rigorous on the level of historiographical and theoretical reconstruction, but he should have approached the problem of the phenomenon in Heidegger from a more theoretical point of view, rather than illustrating it through the various stages of Heideggerian thought and thus through a merely chronological approach.

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