



## “Higher than Actuality” - The Possibility of Phenomenology in Heidegger

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### Abstract

*This paper proceeds from a schematic analysis of Heidegger's notion of 'possibility' to consider the methodological significance of Heidegger's conception of what is essential in phenomenology as inhering not "in its actuality as a philosophical 'movement'", but in the understanding of phenomenology "as a possibility". In conclusion, the paper points to the efficacy of possibility and its mode of fulfilment as radically different from the actualization of latent potentiality.*

### Introduction

In Paragraph 7 of *Sein und Zeit*,<sup>1</sup> Heidegger famously states:

Our comments on the preliminary conception of phenomenology have shown that what is essential in it does not lie in its actuality as a philosophical 'movement' ['Richtung': tendency, direction]. Higher than actuality stands possibility. We can understand phenomenology only by seizing it as a possibility [im Ergreifen ihrer als Möglichkeit]" (SZ, p. 38).

But what does phenomenology owe its possibility to? And does the act of “seizing” phenomenology and possibility, phenomenology *as* a possibility, come under the provenance of phenomenological research? To assess the impact of Heidegger’s statement and to answer these questions, I refer to an earlier text, *History of the Concept of Time*,<sup>2</sup> where possibility forms a nodal point between the “radicalized” phenomenology and the existential analytic of *Dasein*. After outlining Heidegger’s notion of possibility as it appears in both texts, I will turn to its methodological significance in resisting the actuality of phenomenology as “a philosophical ‘movement’”.

Finally, focusing on the efficacy of possibility, I will consider its mode of fulfilment as drastically different from the actualization of latent potentiality.

### I

As though it were possible, I demarcate, in a preliminary and panoramic way, the domain Heidegger enters when he thinks the “possible”. He argues that “[a]s a modal category of presence-at-hand, possibility signifies what is *not yet* actual and what is *not at any time* necessary. It characterizes the *merely* possible [*das nur Mögliche*]” (SZ, p. 143). Doesn’t this passage outline the domain in question simply and unequivocally? The merely possible characterizes presence-at-hand and signifies the “not yet” of actuality coupled with sheer contingency (“what is *not at any time* necessary”). With this, the commonsensical take on possibility is reaffirmed, but along with such reaffirmation, we immediately register a contradiction dispensed as a sort of bonus for the facile reading. The argument that possibility “signifies what is *not yet* actual” subordinates it to actuality in a move that bluntly opposes the earlier assertion made in Paragraph 7.

But, upon a more careful analysis, these sentences equip the reader only with a negative outline,

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specifying what a possibility *is not* or, more precisely, what it should not be reduced to. One helpful indication of the greater underlying complexity is the qualification of the remark by “a modal category of presence-at-hand” which is, certainly, not the only category in *Sein und Zeit*. That said, what preoccupies Heidegger for the most part is not the categorial analytic, but the existential analytic of *Dasein*. Regarding the latter, it is absurd to talk of “what is *not yet* actual”, and it is even more absurd to invoke “the *merely* possible”. The existential possibilities of *Dasein* and of phenomenological research are never distilled in a pure form from the impossible; only in and as the impossible does something like the (always impure) possibility of possibility arise and open up the dimension of futurity. Given that, in Heidegger, the impossible often alludes to death (cf. SZ, pp. 255, 262, 265, *passim*), authentic futurity coincides, strangely enough, with *Dasein*'s finite existence that “does not have an end at which it just stops” (SZ, p. 329). Were it to have an end, finite existence would be actualized, would become what it was always already supposed to be in the moment of death. The irresolvable non-dialectical tension of possibility and impossibility that breaks free from the actual in the shadow of death is best encapsulated in the closing lines of Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1958, p. 414): “...I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on”.

At this point, a brief detour/disclaimer is required in order to appreciate the ramifications of this initial step. For this step opens another small chapter in the saga of the complicated and ambiguous intellectual inheritance which Derrida received from Heidegger. It is worth noting that “possibility” occupies a prominent place in the writings of the former philosopher as well. For example, much of *Politics of Friendship* is devoted to the role of possibility in temporalization, fashioning the niche for time and for the future. Derrida (1997, p. 29) goes to great lengths to differentiate this niche from the “futureless possible” - “life-assured” and guaranteed - that is not, at least partly, impossible. In this way, he approximates the Heideggerian critique of the “merely possible”. Even in the recently published *Rogues* (2005, p. 33), Derrida's claim that “democracy to come has always been suicidal” (read: not “life-assured”) positions this syntagma as an avatar of the self-mutilating existential possibility. The point and the stakes of the connection borne out by these representative examples (and by many more that have not been cited) are to tease out something of deconstruction in phenomenology and something of phenomenology in deconstruction. And my reading of Heidegger cannot but be mindful of the possibilities inherent in the alignment of the two around the notion

of possibility.

To return to Heidegger: far from being merely contingent - or, in William Blattner's terms, “occurrent” (1999, p. 38) - *Dasein*'s possibilities of being, together with a whole range of “possible impossibilities” (such as falling, inauthenticity, and formalization, to mention just a few), are existentially necessary. This does not imply that existential possibility is antithetical to contingent-occurrent possibility. The former is, indeed, necessary for the latter to occur, to “come to pass [*passieren*]” (ibid.), because, without *Dasein*, there can be no “world” (SZ, p. 64). But the “founding” necessity of existential possibility is not synonymous with the guarantee of a stable foundation. It is possible *because* it may be not possible, *because* the lack of guarantees opens up and simultaneously closes off the futurity of the future, i.e., both precludes anything like the actualization of existence *in the last instance* of death and subsumes possibility under the still incomplete actuality. This is why existential possibilities (are any other types of possibility deserving of the name even thinkable?) are essentially self-mutilating.

That which is not “merely possible”, that which is other than actuality-in-waiting, is, at the same time, possible and impossible. Heidegger wishes to distance himself from the sense of “empty logical possibility” (SZ, p. 143) that falls under the principle of non-contradiction and obeys the law of the excluded middle. Although this kind of possibility is sufficiently detached from actuality, it is still too formal (empty) and it still disavows futurity in the name of logical virtuality. Comprising the indispensable stratum of philosophical traditionalism, formal logic “is grounded in a very definite answer to the question about beings” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 27) and, therefore, it intrinsically averts the possibility of the question.

Throughout *History of the Concept of Time*, Heidegger tirelessly rearticulates and recycles the content of his anti-traditionalism. He chastises those philosophers who, like Kant, have subjectivized the categories, uncritically privileging consciousness in its relation to the object (HCT, p. 70). Methodologically, however, Heidegger's attack on tradition is driven by deeper interrelated concerns. First, the external character of tradition that insists, somewhat paradoxically, on a certain irreducible interiority at the core of the subject through which the outside world is filtered, creates major roadblocks on the path of philosophical investigations. In contrast to “phenomenology radicalized in its ownmost possibility”, the “persistently pressing, latently

operative and spurious bonds [of the tradition]" hinder the tendency to move to the matters themselves (HCT, p. 136). At the risk of diluting the resolute, uncompromising anti-traditionalism expressed here, I suggest that what worries Heidegger is the spuriousness of these bonds, as opposed to the existence of tradition to which the bonds are attributed. To be sure, it behooves us to distinguish traditionalism understood as the formal imposition of external, spurious constraints on thought from tradition conceived as the "living history" of philosophy. Taking this distinction into account, one can imagine such a thing as tradition divested of its external character, "radicalized in its very possibility", and brought into a greater affinity with radical phenomenology. In other words, when thought is no longer external to the exteriority of the matters themselves, when it dwells ecstatically alongside the matters themselves, the false subject-object and inside-outside dichotomies will be overcome.

Second, Heidegger points out a pair of prejudgments plaguing philosophy in its traditional form: "A question is a prejudgment when it...already contains a definite answer to the issue under question, or when it is a blind question aimed at something which cannot be so questioned" (HCT, p. 137). Thus formulated, prejudgment paves the way for the inauthentic temporality insofar as it comes to manipulate the futurity of the future and to foreclose various possibilities listed in Paragraph 32 of *Sein und Zeit*, namely, "a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception" (SZ, p. 150). It chokes off possibility not only via the direct imposition of past, spurious bonds onto it, but also via collapsing the difference between the question and the answer and, as a result, ensuring that the "correct", the expected, or the preordained answer will be given.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, prejudgment should serve as a reminder of the "mere possibility" proper to the present-at-hand and devoid of any elements of the impossible. The question does not survive as such when it functions as a present-at-hand container for the very answer it seeks. Nor does the question persevere in the movement that aims blindly "at something which cannot be so questioned". In the first case, the question is grounded outside of itself in the answer it seeks, while, in the second case, it is absolutely ungrounded and unhinged in the manner of "free-floating [*freischwebendem*] thought" (HCT, p. 76). Thus, prejudgment thwarts philosophy's movement "to the matters themselves" whence possibility may be, possibly, derived.

Jean-François Courtine (1990, p. 390) complicates this source-point of possibility in the movement to the

matters themselves with the conclusion that radicalized phenomenology attains its ground from the future orientation of *Dasein*-analysis. The originality of Courtine's conclusion consists in rethinking the relation between phenomenological and existential analyses in a way that no longer depends on a derivation of analogously aligned structures. There is but a single, though far-reaching, analysis capitalizing on the same possibility, portrayed in *Sein und Zeit* as a "thrown possibility", or else, a "thrown projection". Heidegger adds: "*Dasein* is the possibility of Being-free for its ownmost potentiality-for-Being [*Das Dasein ist die Möglichkeit des Freiseins für das eigenste Seinkönnen*]" (SZ, pp. 144, 145). This structure of possibility conditions two intertwined, symbiotic implications:

[A] As thrown, *Dasein* finds itself always already there in the world, but it may also take on this thrownness freely, as something that is "its ownmost". *Dasein* is "the possibility ... for ... potentiality", a thrown projection that is, in Levinas's words, "able to be able", even if the two "abilities", corresponding to possibility and potentiality, do not amount to the same thing. (For instance, in the assertion, "I speak French", the potential ability has to do with speaking the language, while the possible ability has to do with the being who, before all determinations, utters this phrase and may lay claim to other abilities. In general, then, potentiality stands for the assured unfolding of already determined actuality, as opposed to the fragile, possibly impossible, possibility of a finite being.) Rather than exert a sort of paralyzing influence on *Dasein*, this immemorial, unchosen thrownness is appropriated in its ownmost potentiality and projected into the future. In spatial terms, reaching back, *Dasein* stretches forward (SZ, p. 371); it transforms its heritage into something chosen, something handed down from oneself to oneself (SZ, p. 383). The future orientation of possibility is not and cannot be absolutely divorced from the past.

[B] As "thrown", as a way of philosophizing that cannot be built "in mid-air" (HCT, p. 138), phenomenology is always already there in the midst of tradition, but radical phenomenology is there in such a way that it can take on this thrownness freely, as its ownmost possibility. In other words, phenomenology has all the necessary resources to overcome the externality, the spuriousness, and the prejudicial attitudes of tradition within tradition itself by re-claiming its "fore-conceived" but blocked possibilities. Rather than exert a sort of paralyzing influence on phenomenology, tradition comes back to itself and is freed for "its ownmost potentiality-for-

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Being". Its unique potentiality-for being (ultimately: being-free, *Freiseins*) is to go directly to the matters themselves and away from the diversions of "free-floating [*freischwebendem*] thought".

If Heidegger conceptualizes possibility in terms of thrown projection, of the re-turn to or repetition of tradition,<sup>4</sup> whose past promises and possibilities have not materialized, leaving open the very futurity of the past, then a strenuous redemptive effort of "saving" tradition tacitly underpins his overt anti-traditionalism. But before making this assertion, I propose to examine his approach to enacting the repetition of philosophy's history in "a certain historical conversion" (de Beistegui, 2003, p. 58). In the remainder of this section, I undertake such an examination with respect to the scope and the intensity of repetition.

It is possible to ascribe either a narrow or a broad scope to Heidegger's repetition of tradition. At the narrow end, repetition is intended to salvage the "beginning of scientific philosophy" exemplified by Plato and Aristotle: "Phenomenology radicalized in its ownmost possibility is nothing but the questioning of Plato and Aristotle brought back to life: *the repetition, the retaking of the beginning of our scientific philosophy* [*das Wiederergreifen des Anfangs unserer wissenschaftlichen Philosophie*]" (HCT, p. 136). But is this, verily, the repetition of tradition?

Ostensibly, Plato and Aristotle represent the promise-keepers, the guardians of possibility who are exonerated from the charges of dogmatism levelled against post-Aristotelian philosophy. At the same time, their ownmost possibility cannot be discharged to them before radicalized phenomenology repeats their breakthrough. The Aristotelian discovery of the categories and the Platonic vision of the *eidōs* are finally substantiated in the articulation of the copula with categorial intuition (HCT, pp. 66-68). Heidegger's retort to Kant, abetted by the Greeks who do not require the fiction of the subject, emphasizes the objectivity of the categories non-sensuously apprehended in the matters themselves, seen in the broadest sense of the word, and not deposited in the subject *a priori*. Like any other intuition, the categorial intuition has its specific objects correlative to certain acts. This special kind of objectivity includes the category "being" that is linguistically expressed in the copula (HCT, p. 59) - the category that is not vacuous ("nothing but vapour", as Nietzsche might say), but already as "real" as it has been for Plato and Aristotle.

Interrogating the copula, asking "What is the 'is'?",

phenomenology repeats the initial question of philosophy in order to hear<sup>5</sup> it for the first time. This means that Plato and Aristotle begin to live only in *their* afterlife (alternatively, "*our* scientific philosophy") marked by the immanent critique of radicalized phenomenology, by "the questioning of Plato and Aristotle" which repeats the question they posed, but also questions these foundational texts themselves and their ability to live up to the openness of the question/possibility. The act of "seizing" (*Ergreifen*) phenomenology as a possibility (SZ, p. 38) is feasible only in terms of a perpetual "retaking", "re-seizing" (*Wiederergreifen*) of its - our - post-metaphysical, already-actual beginning (HCT, p. 136) without claiming it once and for all.

At the broader end of the spectrum of repetition, tradition in its entirety is set in motion. "The *genuine repetition* of a traditional question [*Die echte Wiederholung einer traditionellen Frage*] lets its external character as a tradition fade away and pulls back from the prejudices" (HCT, p. 138). Already, the question of being has been raised and has even persisted, to a certain extent, within tradition as a "traditional question", but it has almost irretrievably lost itself in the external character of repetition and in the anticipatory preemption of the answer it seeks. Whereas the question has traditionalized itself, has delivered (*trāditiō*) itself over to traditional positing, phenomenology requires that tradition - the principle of surrender - surrender to the renewed possibility of the question. A repetitive inversion, known in rhetoric as *antistasis*, determines the genuineness of repetition in contrast to the sham repetitions that allow the question to fade into prejudicial externality. Henceforth, *antistasis* will mark the highest degree of fidelity to the philosophical heritage.

Repetition grows in intensity as soon as the reiteration of tradition is superimposed onto the incessant rehearsals of phenomenology in a self-critical attempt to avoid the formalization and ossification of its findings. For Heidegger, "[i]t is of the essence of phenomenological investigations that they cannot be reviewed summarily but must in each case be rehearsed and *repeated anew*" (HCT, p. 26). The non-logical, non-transcendental condition of possibility of phenomenology is its condition of - eventual - impossibility and self-interruption. If phenomenology yields any knowledge, this knowledge is, in any case, neither positive, nor cumulative. The re-discovery of the matters themselves is made possible only in a volatile totality, not in piecing together, summing up, or summarizing bits of information. The difference between summarization and totalization measures the distance between external and internal ways of raising the question of being.

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The non-apparent founded form of traditional inquiry becomes apparent and undergoes a process of deformalization in “the possibility of assuming history” through repetition. Using the terminology that will play a crucial role in the subsequent treatment of historicity, Heidegger observes: “This possibility of assuming history [*Möglichkeit Geschichte aufzunehmen* (also incorporating, or receiving)] can then also show that the assumption of the question of the sense of being is not merely an external repetition [*nicht einfach eine äußerliche Wiederholung*] of the question which the Greeks already raised” (HCT, p. 138). This possibility is not one possibility among others; it is the very possibility of possibility. What I call “the futurity of the past”, the historical (or the de-transcendental) a priori condition of possibility of possibility, clarifying the temporal and temporalizing dimensions of thrown projection, cannot emanate from external repetitions. Instead, Heidegger proposes a different kind of repetition: the internal reiteration of history in a *secular redemptive praxis* that warrants history and possibility, historical possibility and the possibility of history. When we assume history beyond externally repeating it, we exceed the occurrent possibilities of what came to pass and, by the same token, release or unleash the unfulfilled existential possibilities buried deep within it. Ultimately, the slogan of such praxis proclaims: No futurity of the future without a reiteration of the futurity of the past!

Given this “secular redemptive praxis”, the otherwise opaque sentence from Division II of *Sein und Zeit* lends itself to interpretation: “Repeating is handing over explicitly [*ausdrückliche Überlieferung*—that is to say, going back into the possibilities of the *Dasein* that has-been-there [*dagewesenen Daseins*]]” (SZ, p. 385). Besides staging a confrontation between the implicitness of the exterior relation to tradition and the explicitation of interiority, this sentence highlights another meaning of “handing over” (*Überlieferung*) or inheritance. Avoiding the imposition of external form on the matters themselves, rejecting the blind procedure of handing down “occurrent” possibilities, explicit inheritance delivers phenomenology and *Dasein* over to themselves and entrusts existential possibility to the future anterior. Accordingly, phenomenology is what tradition will have been.

## II

Following the schematic analysis of possibility, it is only fitting to ask what we can do with this notion in the practice of phenomenology and, more interestingly still, what it does to such a practice. Near the beginning of the “Main Division” in *History of the*

*Concept of Time*, Heidegger isolates a counter-phenomenological thrust that circuitously brings phenomenology back to itself:

At the very least, it became evident that the development of the phenomenological theme can proceed in a counter-phenomenological direction. This insight does not serve to drive phenomenology outside of itself but really first brings phenomenology right back to itself, to its ownmost and purest possibility [*in ihre eigenste und reinste Möglichkeit zurückgebracht*]. (HCT, p. 135)

This observation is consistent with the tenets that (1) the phenomenological condition of possibility is its condition of impossibility and self-interruption, and (2) the absolute radicality of phenomenology “does not lie in its *actuality* as a philosophical ‘movement’ [*‘Richtung’*]” (SZ, p. 38). The “purest possibility [*reinste Möglichkeit*]” of phenomenology does not refer to what is “merely possible [*das nur Mögliche*]” in the thematic purview of entities that are present-at-hand. Radically and immanently self-critical,<sup>6</sup> phenomenology is purely possible only when it suspends its own conditions of possibility, that is, when it thematizes the results of its “actual” investigations (intentionality, the transcendental ego, and so forth) and does not neglect to de-thematize them, trimming a speculative thread that undermines apodictic analyses from within.<sup>7</sup>

On the one hand, thinking with Levinas that thematization is “inevitable, so that signification itself show itself”,<sup>8</sup> we could say that it is virtually indistinguishable from what phenomenology does in “letting the manifest in itself be seen from itself”, or in elaborating “the work of laying open and letting be seen” (HCT, pp. 85, 86). On the other hand, the trace of subjectivity that lingers in signification is all but effaced from the Heideggerian definition of phenomenology. A thematized sign is bound to show itself to the subject who will exchange it with others or who, at the extreme, will give itself as a sign to the other (*pace* Levinas). Conversely, bypassing all references to subjectivity, that which is seen “in itself ... from itself” in phenomenology determines the very possibilities of “the how” proper to the intentional act of seeing. In brief, de-thematization involves de-subjectivization, and vice versa.

The original sense of the *a priori* is de-subjectivized to the extent that it denotes the trans-subjective givenness of categorial forms and not, say, the subject’s transcendental *aesthesis* of space and time. But one does not arrive at the trans-subjective (read:

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trans-transcendental, i.e., immanent in the matters themselves) givenness of being without first dissociating it from “the ordered sequence of knowledge” and from “the sequential order of entities” (HCT, p. 74). The priority of the *a priori* becomes a nominal and, simultaneously, the most concrete feature of the trans-transcendental condition of possibility. This proviso is the critical moment of de-thematization.

Note that the possibilities of “the how” do not determine the content of what is seen, even though the seen is the background from which these possibilities are procured. In other words, phenomenological possibility is not a disguised transcendental condition of possibility for the appearing of what appears to us. Heidegger repeatedly accentuates the fact that “phenomenology ... says *nothing about the material content* of the thematic object of this science, but speaks really only - and this emphatically - of the *how*, the way in which something is and has to be thematic in this research” (HCT, p. 85). The seeing of the seen is also not equivalent to the abstracted form of the seen. Rather, it designates intentionality directing-itself-toward the seen and *a priori* pre-destined - neither in the order of knowledge, nor in the order of entities - for the seen, insofar as it is “*letting the manifest in itself be seen from itself*”.

Supplemented with Heidegger’s insistence on a de-formalized (*entformalisiert*) concept of phenomenology (SZ, p. 35), the preponderance of the pure “how” establishes phenomenological praxis as a practice that doesn’t make perfect, but makes more practice. What shows itself from itself, what appears phenomenologically, when phenomenology appears? Not this or that theory neatly contained in a treatise, but an exercise, a performance that refuses to stabilize the results of its investigations. Like the never-ending routines of tidying up one’s room or one’s writing desk, phenomenology cannot do away with the subjectivist biases (the “messiness” in my tidying-up analogy) once and for all. The crux of the matter is that phenomenology does not chase after a better, more accurate interpretation that would prove to be the closest approximation of reality hitherto. At its most rigorous, phenomenology decisively eschews interpretation altogether.

As *Sein und Zeit* attests, the “achieving of phenomenological access to entities which we encounter, consists rather in thrusting aside our interpretative tendencies, which keep thrusting themselves upon us and running along with us” (SZ, p. 67). The intricate terminological web of Heidegger’s *magnum opus* reveals that the technical

meaning of “thrusting aside our interpretative tendencies” lies in the urgent requirement of moving beyond everything that is intimately bound with interpretation - especially, beyond understanding and the ready-to-hand: “To say that ‘circumspection discovers’ means that the ‘world’ which has already been understood comes to be interpreted. The ready-to-hand comes *explicitly* into the sight which understands” (SZ, p. 148). But rather than hinder the phenomenological endeavour, the persistence of the interpretative counter-thrust aiming at the ready-to-hand commissions its continuation and, thus, supplies one of its conditions of possibility.

The call for de-formalization implies that one cannot gain formulaic access either to phenomenology as such, or to its subject matter. Both “actual” phenomenology and counter-phenomenological movements are in need of the same palliative of immanent critique proceeding under the heading of the thematization (“the *way* in which”) of thematization (“something is and has to be *thematic*”).<sup>9</sup> The “difference” between the two lies in the possibilities consummated in destabilization: intrinsically destabilized, phenomenology is brought “right back to itself, to its ownmost and purest possibility”, whilst counter-phenomenology is also brought right back to the same possibility ... of phenomenology. But are all counter-phenomenological movements equally productive, promising, germinal? And is there a significant incongruence, unacknowledged by Heidegger, between counter- and non-phenomenological tendencies?

The extension of phenomenological possibility to its other, to what initiates a counter-thrust to phenomenology, rivals the plasticity of Hegelian dialectics. In Heidegger as in Hegel, the energy of the “movement” [*Richtung*] is, to a certain degree, indebted to what opposes it: first and foremost, the philosophical tradition. Scanning phenomenology in its historical “actuality” through the Heideggerian lens, it is not difficult to recognize a staged rehearsal of Husserl’s critique of Brentano, who is satisfied with “a rough and ready acquaintance [with] and application” of the structure of intentionality (HCT, p. 28), in Heidegger’s critique of Husserl, who takes the being of intentionality for granted (HCT, p. 113). The dual obstinacy that is in play here - the refusal to relinquish the authoritativeness of tradition together with the resistance to formalizing phenomenological investigations - tends to invigorate the possibility of phenomenology by suspending, from opposite directions, its conditions of possibility. This suspension is expressed, first, in the hold that the externality of tradition has on the question of being

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and, second, in the suspension of suspension, in the undoing of conclusions reached by phenomenology.

Despite this allegedly unlimited plasticity, Heidegger warns his readers against two equally undesirable outcomes of the phenomenological endeavour. We have glimpsed one of these warnings: Avoid “free-floating thought” and refrain from building your philosophical castles in “mid-air” (HCT, pp. 76, 138)! Possibilities sink and fall in watery insipidness and in airy indetermination respectively. But if the possibility of possibility is to find its ground, we will have to look in a direction other than the construction of a system. The key criterion of sound philosophising, Heidegger notes, “is not the possibility of constructing a system, a construction which is based purely on an arbitrary adaptation of the conceptual material transmitted by history [*der Geschichte überlieferten begrifflichen Materials gründet*]” (HCT, p. 18).

In light of the correlation between the free assumption of history and the interior relation to tradition expounded in Section I of this paper, I take it that Heidegger is directing his criticism against the “conceptual material transmitted by history” in a way that is not freely assumed in the internal repetition of tradition, but is externally imposed, “arbitrary”. By arbitrarily adapting this material and, therefore, by remaining blind to the form in which it comes pre-packaged, we squander the possibilities of inheriting tradition in a mode of internal repetition. The arbitrariness of free-floating thought itself does not fall far from the arbitrary adaptation of this material. Forgetting, or even repressing tradition, free-floating thought unwittingly utilizes the content of what it wishes to repress.

For Heidegger, the grounding possibility of phenomenology is “received” (*gewinnen*: note the specific sense of reception as a “gain” that is “won over”) from its “meaning in the human *Dasein*” (HCT, p. 4). Possibility must be literally won over, salvaged from the equally destructive and sometimes conflicting demands of systematization, free-floating thought, and the external pressure of tradition. At the same time, it must be released from this unhealthy torsion into the matters themselves, into the world in which *Dasein* is situated and with which it is ineluctably concerned.

Yet, by definition, possibility cannot be definitively and finally won over from the counter-force that blocks it. Heidegger’s bellicose rhetoric notwithstanding, simply to fight the fight is to lose it before the final announcement of the results. The release of possibility into its ownmost element is not

active, is not an act (either in the colloquial, or in phenomenological-intentional sense of the word) carried out by a subject, but the practical attitude of letting the matters “revert to themselves” (HCT, p. 136). Still, this in-action should not be mistaken for passivity, since it does not diminish the infinite task that phenomenology gives itself - the task of preserving possibility *qua* possibility in “keep[ing] open the tendency toward the matters themselves” (ibid.). To preserve possibility *qua* possibility is not to cut its ties to the impossible and, by not cutting these ties, to risk not gaining the ground it promises.

### III

By way of concluding, I turn (albeit, briefly) to the efficacy of possibility that no longer entails actualization. Jean-Luc Marion (1998, p. 76) touches on the difficulties associated with phenomenological efficacy and writes: “That Being should appear - this ultimate accomplishment befalls phenomenology only in the mode of possibility. But can this possibility be accomplished in fact?”. Pursuing this line of inquiry, we cannot avoid a certain “orbital” approach to the phenomenological notion of the accomplishment of possibility, launching initially into the higher orbit of accomplishment in general and, only subsequently, descending to the lower orbits of the fulfilment of intentionality. The latter, then, will fashion a miniature mould for the phenomenological universe with its possibilities and fulfilments clearly in sight.

In “Letter on Humanism” Heidegger (1993, p. 217) meditates on the essence of action and hurries to brush aside any attempts at judging the action’s effectiveness based on the actuality of its effect “valued according to its utility”. He adds: “But the essence of an action is accomplishment. To accomplish means to unfold something into the fullness of its essence, to lead it forth into this fullness - *producere*” (ibid). It’s true that the discussion of possibility has led us beyond action, that is, beyond a rigid opposition between activity and passivity localized in the subject. Nonetheless, the accomplishment that constitutes the essence of action already comes a step closer to the structure of Heideggerian possibility.<sup>10</sup> While the essence of action is accomplishment, the essence of accomplishment is “to unfold something into the fullness of its essence”, to support the essence of essence, or the very possibility of essence. To be at all possible, essence will forego actualization. Rather, the unfolding of “something into the fullness of its essence” will depend on fulfilment, *Erfüllung*.

Fulfilment operates on every “orbital” level of phenomenology from intentionality, to the incessant

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self-rehearsal of phenomenological investigations, to the appropriative repetition of tradition in “our scientific philosophy”. Re-reading Husserl, Heidegger writes a propos of the transition from intention to intuition: “Every intention has within it a tendency toward fulfilment ... There are specific laws which govern the connections among the possibilities of fulfilling [*Erfüllungsmöglichkeit*] an already given empty intention” (HCT, p. 44). In fact, it is not quite right to speak of a transition from one to the other *per se*; once fulfilled, intention, referring to the structure of all psychic acts partaking in the movement of “directing-itself-toward”, is nothing but an intuition, namely, the simple apprehension of that toward which this movement has directed itself. The intention is not actualized in the intuition but is only rendered more concrete in the sense of concretion that further illuminates the self-giveness of being. The elementary structure of intentionality in its intuitional concretion is approached from a different angle, now focusing on that *toward which* it is directed, but its “already given” possibility and, coextensively, the possible impossibility of reaching “that-toward-which” remain intact. The directedness of the psychic act is never fully exhausted in its possibility; even if it fulfilled in the object of intuition, it can always strive toward a deeper, more concrete apprehension of being.

Shifting perspectives and telescoping this structure beyond its narrow confines, we may detect in it a highly condensed form of the drama that unfolds between phenomenology and the tradition. The appropriative repetition of tradition in radical phenomenology brings to fulfilment the tendency that was already inherent in past philosophising in the mode of “an already given empty intention”. Tradition, narrowly and broadly conceived, is directing-itself-toward the question of being, but only phenomenology is capable of pointing out that toward which tradition is directed. Stated otherwise, phenomenology fulfils the empty and formal intention of traditional philosophy and, thereby, redeems its possibilities. All talk of a transition from one to the other is non-sense, because only in phenomenology can tradition obtain its true concretion. The oft-

misconstrued Heideggerian *Destruction* destroys the external and authoritative imposition of tradition and of the subject’s “privilege” on thought and, at the same time, cultivates the promise and the possibilities held and thwarted by the destroyed form.

Phenomenology, in turn, finds fulfilment only in the matters themselves, which amounts to saying that it is never *actually* fulfilled. The definition of phenomenology in terms of the analytic description of intentionality in its *a priori* has “to be understood from its task [*Aufgabe*], from the positive possibility which it implies, from what guides its efforts and not from what is said about it” (HCT, p. 79). The specific intentionality of phenomenology consists in directing-itself-toward the matters themselves, hence, the slogan: “To the matters themselves!” But we will not grasp the subtlety of this “battle cry” if we do not bring it in stark contrast with the insistence in *Sein und Zeit* that what is essential to phenomenology, what permits it to accomplish (or to fail in) its task, “does not lie in its *actuality* as a philosophical ‘movement’ [*Richtung*]” (SZ, p. 38). The course of its actual historical directedness diverges from the task of directing-itself-toward the matters themselves. And Heidegger’s immanent critique occupies, precisely, the space uncovered by this divergence.

The “positive possibility”, the guiding compass of phenomenology’s efforts, is the possibility of “the how” that does not determine the “what” toward which it strives. What the in-determination of “the how” heralds is the precariousness of possibility, a possible failure inseparable from the task (*Aufgabe*) that phenomenology gives itself. It is in this spirit that Paul de Man’s remark on Walter Benjamin’s essay “The task of the translator” may be read: “... the translator, per definition, fails. The translator can never do what the original text did ... If [Benjamin’s] text is called “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”, we have to read this title more or less as a tautology: *Aufgabe*, task, can also mean the one who has to give up” (de Man, 1986, p. 80).

### About the author



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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, (Tübingen: Verlag, 1993). Translated as *Being and Time*, by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962). All further references to this text will be made parenthetically using the title abbreviation "SZ" and the pagination of the original German work.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1985). All further references to this text will be made parenthetically using the title abbreviation “HCT”.

<sup>3</sup> In *Of Spirit* [trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989)], Derrida contends that “*the experience of the question*, the possibility of the *Fragen*” stands “at the beginning of the existential analytic” (p. 17).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bernasconi’s comprehensive essay “Repetition and tradition: Heidegger’s deconstructing of the distinction between essence and existence in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*” [in *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought*, Eds. Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 123-136] treats this very topic in the aftermath of deconstructing. My focus here is the knot in which repetition and tradition are tied to possibility.

<sup>5</sup> “...hearing constitutes the primary and authentic way in which *Dasein* is open for its ownmost potentiality-for-being...” (SZ, p. 163).

<sup>6</sup> Paragraph 10 of *History of the Concept of Time*, titled “Elaboration of the thematic field”, is followed immediately by a Paragraph that bears the title, “Immanent critique of phenomenological research”.

<sup>7</sup> It seems to me that Heidegger agrees with Kant on the need to place “reason” within certain limits. Neither thinks that these limits are to be deduced from tradition, but while the latter stipulates that they are internal to reason itself, the former insists on the limits that coincide with the matters themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 151. In Levinasian terms, de-thematization unsays the said to “reduce” it to the saying it harbours.

<sup>9</sup> This will be crucial to Heidegger’s treatment of the question of being. Since the being of an entity is not another entity (another being), one cannot approach thematically, without instantaneously losing from sight, that which is approached in this way.

<sup>10</sup> I am bracketing and putting aside the issues related to the priority of existence over essence in Heidegger. On the conjunction of action, accomplishment, and the “‘fundamental’ possibility” of being, see Jean-Luc Nancy, “Originary ethics”, in *A Finite Thinking*, Ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 177.