

# The Event of the World in Martin Heidegger's Early Hermeneutical Phenomenology

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**Abstract**—The paper focuses on Heidegger's 1919-1920 early research in order to point out his hermeneutical phenomenology of the life-world, arguing that the concept of world (*Welt*) is the main philosophical trigger for the phenomenology of factual life. Accordingly, the argument of the paper is twofold: First, the phenomenological hermeneutics of facticity is preceded both chronologically and philosophically by an original phenomenological investigation of life-world, in which the world is construed as the context of the givenness of life. Second, the phenomenology of life-world anticipates the question of being (*Seinsfrage*), but it also follows it, once this latter is shattered, the question of world as event remaining at the very core of Heidegger's last meditations on the dominion of technology and the post-metaphysical abode of human beings on earth.

**Keywords**—Life-world, Heidegger, phenomenology, hermeneutics.

## I. INTRODUCTION: FROM A FOOTNOTE OF *BEING AND TIME*

IN his unfinished 1936 masterpiece devoted to the *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Edmund Husserl noted that in the crisis of philosophy that culminated in the modern age, the world-problem comes to light as an “actual theme of inquiry” [1]. One can ascribe two basic meanings to Husserl's take on the world-problem. On the one hand, this problem traces back to the history of metaphysics. Indeed, as Karl Löwith has noted, in modern philosophy, the idea of the ‘World’ is subordinated twice to the other two main ideas of the metaphysical ‘Trinity’, namely, ‘God’ and ‘Human,’ with the world being construed both as *ens creatum* and as an object for human scientific consideration [2]. Thus, when the world-problem becomes an ‘actual theme of inquiry,’ philosophy may attempt to dispense with that metaphysical hierarchy, something for which phenomenology is renowned. On the other hand, Husserl's statement concerns phenomenology itself. As Hans-Helmuth Gander puts it, the transcendental investigations that Husserl devoted to the *Lebenswelt* (life-world) aim at bringing to light the conditions of possibility for pure scientific knowledge that precedes and grounds both the theoretical and the natural attitude, paving the way for a new ‘episteme,’ namely, for phenomenological philosophy construed as rigorous science [3], [4]. The ontology of the life-world stemming from these investigations is part and parcel of that ‘new phenomenology’ presented in 1929 during the *Pariser Vorträge* [5], [6]. A number of insightful fragments on *Lebenswelt* can be found in Husserl's manuscripts dating back to the period of the First World War (or just earlier). However, despite Manfred Sommer's claims that *Ideas II* [7]

presents an early phenomenology of the life-world, those writings, as Christian Bermes has noted, contain only a partial project for a theme that would be fully developed in the late 1920s-early 1930s, when Husserl conceived *Lebenswelt*, as a leading concept for the phenomenological method, a crucial problem for the theory of knowledge, and a specific theme, which he investigates with the aim of opposing the scientific use of the term *Lebenswelt* [8].

Still, what we do not find in Husserl, that is to say, a full-blown phenomenology of the life-world, we do find in the early lecture-courses given immediately after the First World War by his assistant Martin Heidegger, who Husserl considered his ‘one true student’ [9], [10]. Heidegger's 1919-1923 early lecture-courses held in Freiburg, in fact, showcase the entire development and inner transformation of his early phenomenology, from the hermeneutic phenomenology of the life-world, as Gander calls it [11], mostly illustrated in the winter semester 1919/20, up to the first seeds of fundamental ontology, which was triggered by the ontologically oriented *Hermeneutik der Faktizität des Daseins* (hermeneutics of factual *Dasein*) in 1923. The focus of the present paper will be the first lecture-course held in 1919. The main thesis is that the concept of the world represents the philosophical trigger for Heidegger's phenomenology of factual life (*faktisches Leben*), a peculiar phenomenology, which, in the following 1919/20 lectures, will take the *Lebenswelt* as privileged field of inquiry [12], [13]. The argument of this paper is twofold [14]. First, Heidegger's early Freiburg lecture-courses confirms *avant la lettre* Husserl's position in the *Crisis*, as he states that the world-problem becomes the actual theme of inquiry. Indeed, Heidegger's renowned hermeneutics of facticity is preceded both chronologically and philosophically by a peculiar phenomenological investigation devoted to the *Lebenswelt*, in which the world is also intended as the context of the givenness of life [15], [16]. Second, it is important to stress that Heidegger's phenomenology of life-world paves the way for the question of Being (*Seinsfrage*). In fact, his early phenomenological investigations present, on the one hand, the world as the event of meaningfulness for the subject, and, on the other hand, *Dasein* is already grasped as the distinctive being, which can retrieve the question of Being. As it is well known, this path of the early phenomenology of life-world will be abandoned in the Marburg period (1924-1928). However, the question of world still remains at the very core of Heidegger's thinking, not only in *Being and Time*, but, as we shall see, even after he recognizes that the *Seinsfrage* as it were

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configured in *Sein und Zeit* was shattered [17].

Heidegger's initial phenomenological notion of world, based on the idea of *Lebenswelt*, is rather different from the Being-in-the-World that supports the existential analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*. Nonetheless, his 1927 *Hauptwerk* includes a valuable clue to help us approach Heidegger's idea of *Lebenswelt*. A footnote placed at the end of § 15 (*The Being of Beings Encountered in the Surrounding World*) warns the reader that the analysis of the surrounding world (*Umwelt*) and the 'hermeneutic of the facticity of Da-sein in general' have been 'repeatedly communicated' by the author in his lecture-courses 'ever since the winter semester of 1919-20' [18]. The clue is helpful, but we should amend the information provided in this footnote regarding both its dating and its content. In fact, as Theodore Kisiel has already noted [19], about six months before the 1919/20 winter semester entitled *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (Basic Problems of Phenomenology)*, which is mentioned in the footnote, Heidegger had resumed teaching during the *Kriegsnotsemester* by giving a lecture-course in which the analysis of the *Umwelterlebnis* (the lived experience of the environment, or surrounding world) was at stake, with crucial consequences for his phenomenological method. Moreover, in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, the hermeneutics of facticity did not revolve around *Dasein*; rather, it addressed life and its *Weltcharakter* (world-character). Nevertheless, the reference that Heidegger himself provides in *Being and Time* to his early lecture-courses in Freiburg allows us to return to the first half of what Kisiel [19, p.59] and Greisch [20] have called the 'phenomenological decade,' in order to follow the birth of a new theme of inquiry, a theme that would bring about a complete renewal of phenomenology, both in its subject matter and method, the former becoming the world-framed factual life and the latter hermeneutics [21].

## II. THE PERSONAL-NONPERSONAL EVENT OF THE WORLD

During the war emergency semester (*Kriegsnotsemester*) in 1919, Heidegger resumed his *Privatdozentur* by giving a course devoted to the radical distinction between philosophy and worldview. Heidegger stated that one purpose of these lectures was to enable phenomenology to become the originary pre-theoretical science against what he calls the 'unjustified supremacy of the theoretical,' referring to neo-Kantianism, as well as, indirectly, to Husserl's transcendental method [12, p. 75], [22]. Heidegger argues that the 'primacy of the theoretical must be broken,' but not so as to proclaim the primacy of the practical, or to merely modify the psychological approach; rather, it must be broken because the theoretical as such goes back to something pre-theoretical, that is to say, the sphere into which phenomenology intends to move in order to become an *Ur-wissenschaft*, an originary science.

From the very outset of the lectures, the young teacher makes it clear that the task he has assigned to his lecture-course is in no way simple, insofar as the idea of science means a 'transforming intervention' in the immediate consciousness of life, and 'it involves a transition to a new attitude of consciousness, and thus its own form of the movement of spiritual life' [12, p.3]. Accordingly, science becomes 'the

habitus of a personal existence' (*persönliches Dasein*). Heidegger continues by considering science similarly to religion, art and politics, as a 'genuine form of accomplishment and life-form,' which can pervade the living relations with the world that every existing personal life (*Dasein persönlichen Leben*) has at all moments within 'its particular predominant life-world,' be it the environment, or the things of the life-horizon, or society [12, p.4]. While concluding his preliminary remarks, the young teacher warns his audience as follows: 'The awakening and heightening of the life-context of scientific consciousness is not the object of theoretical representation, but of exemplary pre-living – not the object of practical provision of rules, but the effect of primordially motivated personal and nonpersonal *Being*. Only in this way are the lifeworld and life-type of science built up. Within this there is formed: science as genuine archontic life-form [...] and science as co-ruling habitual element in non-scientific life-worlds' [12, p.5].

By quoting Angelus Silesius and Matthew's Gospel, Heidegger here also speaks of scientific activity in terms of *Berufung*, calling or vocation. "*Berufung*" is the term by which Martin Luther renders Saint Paul's notion of *klesis, vocatio* [23] that would later be crucial in Heidegger's phenomenological interpretation of *Urchristentum* [24]. In passing, it might be stressed that this is precisely the idea of science as a 'universal critique of all life and all life-goals, all cultural products and systems' that Husserl pursued his entire life. Husserl strongly reaffirms this very idea of science, as opposed to the theoretical attitude, in the Vienna lecture of 1935, except that he calls it "*Beruf*," instead of "*Berufung*," presumably having Max Weber's thesis in mind [1, pp.282–282]. However, it is worth to pinpoint that both Husserl and Heidegger accord an 'archontic' role to philosophy, since Husserl also argues in the Vienna lecture that '[w]ithin European civilization, philosophy has constantly to exercise its function as one which is archontic [*archontische*] for the civilization as a whole' [1, p.289].

In the Introduction to his first course after the war, Heidegger states, in a very Husserlian fashion, that 'the efforts of the great philosophers are directed towards what is in every sense ultimate, universal, and of universal validity. The inner struggle with the puzzles [*Rätseln/enigmas*] of life and the world seeks to come to rest by establishing the ultimate nature of these' [12, p.7]. This is precisely the philosophical content of Heidegger's early Freiburg lecture-courses. So, it is not by chance that the lecture-course is articulated along two thought experiments that invite the audience to plunge directly into the radical philosophical transformation of *Dasein*. The 'destruction' of both the interrogative experience (*Frageerlebnis*) and the environmental experience (*Umwelterlebnis*) performed in the *Kriegsnotsemester* is perfectly coherent with the premises he made clear in his Preliminary Remarks. The first experiment addresses the theoretical attitude by calling all of supposed reality into question (*fragen*), reducing it to a formal 'something' that is there, asking: *gibt es etwas?* Is there something? Heidegger investigates the 'questioner,' rather than the question, arguing that to ask: is there something? means to be far from the I, to be 'so absolutely I-remote' (*Ich-fern*), 'precisely because the question relates in general to an "I,"

and, therefore, 'it is without relation to my "I"' [12, pp.57–58].

It is also worth briefly mentioning that the 'aridity of the desert' that Heidegger pinpoints as the only result of the psychological approach to *Erlebnis*, eloquently summarizes the outcome of this first experiment on the *Frageerlebnis*. Against this approach, Heidegger evokes the two trees of life and knowledge from the book of *Genesis* (2:9). He aims to demonstrate how theoretical comportment (*Verhalten*) is rooted in environmental experience, by addressing the devivification (*Entlebung*) of *Erlebnis* construed as a psychological process.

From this first experiment, one can gain an understanding of two crucial features of Heidegger's early phenomenology: (i) the 'historical I,' and, therefore, temporality emerges in contrast to theoretical comportment, namely, the comportment through which I am directed towards something 'but I do not live [...] towards this or that worldly element' [12, p.62]; (ii) the critique of *Erlebnis* as a psychological process brings to light the living connections, or *Lebenswelt* of the 'historical I,' so that the teacher announces that 'we manage for the first time to make the leap [*Sprung*] into the world as such' [12, p.53]. Accordingly, the second experiment is a phenomenological exercise of the deconstruction of the de-vivified 'thing experience' through the analysis of the environmental experience [12, p.75]. Such an experiment performs the *Sprung*, or leap, into the life-world, taking its cue from a rather more trivial example, that is to say, the lectern that the teacher sees as he enters the classroom.

### III. THE EVENT OF THE WORLD

Heidegger admits that the second experience 'stands in a certain contrast to the first' [12, p.59] and this is true for two reasons, which can be used to sum up the *Erlebnis* of the lectern in the classroom. First, the idea of a psychological process, in which different layers of reality (such as shape, measures, colours, spatial position, etc.) are put together in order to bring to consciousness a thing labelled as lectern, simply does not make sense in this case. Heidegger argues that '[i]n the experience of seeing the lectern something is given to me from out of an immediate environment [*Umwelt*],' in which what is meaningful for me (where is my notebook, where did I park the car, where is my passport?), 'is primary and immediately given to me without any mental detours across thing-oriented apprehension.' He then explains that '[l]iving in an environment, it [*scil.* the environment] signifies to me everywhere and always, everything has the character of world. It is everywhere the case that "it worlds" [*es weltet*], which is something different from "it values" [*es wertet*]' [12, p.61].

It is important here to point out the emergence of a new question within the horizon of Heidegger's early phenomenology, namely, this *Es* or *It* that arises behind the world and its meaningfulness. Upon closer inspection, this impersonal event of the world of meaningfulness had been announced by the teacher at the outset of the course, when he spoke of the 'primordially motivated personal and nonpersonal *Being*' (*ursprünglich motivierten persönlich-unpersönlichen Seins*) with respect to the *Lebenswelt* of the scientific consciousness. Second, during his conclusion of the analysis of

the *Frageerlebnis*, Heidegger pointed out that *Erlebnis* is freed from reification as soon as we understand its character of meaningfulness, as soon as we understand it as *Er-eignis*, an 'event,' rather than a process [12, p.58]. He further expands on this argument by noting that 'In seeing the lectern I am fully present in my "I" [...] It is an experience proper to me and so do I see it. However, it is not a process but rather an *event of appropriation* [*Ereignis*] [...] Lived experience does not pass in front of me like a thing, but I appropriate [*er-eigne*] it to myself, and it appropriates itself according to its essence. If I understand it in this way, then I understand it not as process, as thing, as object, but in a quite new way, as an event of appropriation [*Ereignis*]' [12, p.63]. This, therefore, is the content of *Erlebnis*: an event of the world that is personal and nonpersonal at one and the same time, an event of the world in which "it worlds" for someone [25]. Meaningfulness is not something one is able to create herself or himself. Meaningfulness is not a process by which the subject lends meaning to mute things in a one-way sense. The meaning of things we experience arises from the things themselves, rather than something we have invested them with; in other words, it is precisely their own meaning that allows them to appear, or come, to us.

### IV. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A POST-METAPHYSICAL WORLD

During the *Kriegsnotsemester*, Heidegger warns that 'the event-like essence of appropriation is still not fully determined' with these early analyses [12, p.64]. Nonetheless, his phenomenological take on the *Umwelterlebnis* during this *Kriegsnotsemester* brings to light two phenomenological findings: on the one hand, (i) the impersonal event of the world as meaningfulness, the *es weltet*, and, on the other hand, (ii) the historical I, to which the event of the world appropriates itself.

As regards the former, (i) the notion of *Lebenswelt*, which was later further employed by Heidegger in his lectures on the hermeneutics of facticity (esp. in 1919/20 *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*), would be progressively replaced by the *Dasein*, in which the temporality of a historical existence resonates, and which is construed as being-in-the-world, as argued in the 1923 summer semester [26]. In the cases of both *Erlebnis* and *Lebenswelt*, Heidegger found the very notion of life, *Leben*, problematic. In fact, the ambiguity of the notion of life would be addressed during the 1920 summer semester, orienting the young phenomenologist towards the 'destruction' of the problem of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) [27].

The latter finding, (ii) the historical I, in turn, does not lead to a phenomenology of perception, that is, it does not linger on the flesh, on *Leib* (as Maurice Merleau-Ponty would later do in the wake of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology) [28], since Heidegger argues that sensation is an outcome of the theoretical attitude and undergoes the related destruction of the environmental experience [12, p.72]. The historical I was to receive further attention thanks to what Stefano Bancalari has called the 'methodological privilege of the Selbst' [29], since Heidegger would progressively focus on the *Selbstwelt* and 'the specific phenomenology of the self' [13, p.195] relying, as it is well known, on the factual life of 'primordial Christianity'

[24].

These two phenomenological findings (world as event and the historical I) piece together the early notion of *Ereignis*, namely, the event construed as appropriation. Heidegger's confrontation with the impersonality of Being is pinpointed after World War I in the *es weltet*, in the event of the world, which can be considered Heidegger's bases for his own original reappropriation of the history of ontology [18, p.17–23]. The connection between the historical I and the event clearly appears to him in the frame of his investigations on facticity and *Lebenswelt*. As he puts it during the 1920 summer semester, history should be considered 'as occurring [*Geschehen*],' and *Geschehen* as the 'event character [*Ereignischarakter*] of factual life related to factual self-world, with-world and enviring world' [28, p.46].

As it is well known, the question of world as event still plays a pivotal role in Heidegger's much later meditations on both the dominion of technology and the post-metaphysical abode of mortals on earth [30], where mortals live in the knowledge of the absence of gods, who have flown [31]. In this context, we can still hear the echo of the impersonal *Es/It* that we encountered in the *Ereignis*/Event in the early Freiburg lecture-courses, although we have to assume a paramount indication, namely, we have to assume the essence of human being not as 'living being' (*Lebenswesen*), rather, as *Todes-wesen*, as a 'mortal being', so that the essence of human 'dissolves' in the 'dispossession' (*Enteignis*) that occurs as the 'event of appropriation' (*Ereignis*) of the world [32].

In this world, in the frame of the destiny of the 'erring star' that hosts us, as a few lines from the essay entitled *Overcoming Metaphysics* state, mortals appear as those 'shepherds,' who 'live invisibly and outside of the desert of the desolated earth, which is only supposed to be of use for the guarantee of the dominance of man whose effects are limited to judging whether something is important or unimportant for life' [33].

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