

Heidegger and Habermas on Criticism and Totality

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Many of the criticisms Jürgen Habermas makes of Heidegger depend on questionable interpretations of the latter's texts. However, it would be wrong to read Habermas's criticism as simply misinterpretation, as if once the scholars straightened him out, Habermas would come to agree with Heidegger. Much of what Habermas says stems from philosophical differences that are independent of and partly responsible for his wayward readings of Heidegger's text.

While Habermas pictures Heidegger as going beyond views that see the origin of meaning and validity in the operations of a transcendental ego, he argues that Heidegger does not go far enough. Heidegger modified the neo-Kantian and Husserlian constituting ego into the being-in-the-world of *Dasein* (cf. WW 434).¹ Habermas regards this as a decisive achievement, but one that is marred by Heidegger's refusal to take the next step into an intersubjective notion of validity. He sees Heidegger holding too closely to an approach where projected totalities of meaning make it possible to have individual meaningful propositions. As Heidegger talks variously about a world, an understanding of being, and a sending (*Geschick*) of being, he is speaking, according to Habermas, of such totalities; what changes as Heidegger's thought develops is their origin, not their function. In the early thought the understandings of being, and in the later thought the sendings of being overwhelm (because they set the conditions for) any intersubjective process of validation aimed at individual propositions. This priority of the totality over the individual proposition remains, early and late, while the locus shifts from *Dasein* to Being as Heidegger moves from an early decisionistic to a latter submissive attitude towards totalities of meaning (cf. DM, chapter VI).²

Here is what Habermas says about Heidegger on this issue:

The world-project disclosive of meaning . . . is raised above any and every critical forum [where potentially critical instances might be brought against it]. The luminous force of world-disclosing language is hypostatized. It no longer has to prove itself by its capacity to throw light on beings in the world. Heidegger supposes that beings can be opened up in their being with equal ease by any given approach [*vom beliebigen Zugriff*]. He fails to see that the horizon of the understanding of meaning brought to bear on beings is not prior to, but rather subordinate to, the question of truth. (DM 183/154)

Habermas argues that since Heidegger fails to distinguish meaning and validity (*Sinn* and *Geltung*), he can offer no account of a possible learning process that can explode (*sprengen*) a totality of meaning. Since therefore we cannot take a critical attitude towards our horizons of meaning, there can be no learning process that extends across worlds. For Habermas such a

¹ Published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LII, no. 2, 1992, 683-693. References in the text use abbreviations keyed to the list located at the end of the essay.

² My interpretation will stay with Heidegger's discussions of "understandings of being" and "the history of being," since those are the terms in which he is discussed by Habermas. Heidegger's latest discussions of the "place of being" further distance him from subjective or intersubjective terminology.

learning process is central to his account of the essence and the distortions of modern life.

I agree with the spirit of this criticism of Heidegger, although not with Habermas's particular formulation. In what follows, I offer an example that supports Habermas's objection, then a defense of Heidegger against Habermas, and then a reworking of Habermas's objection that highlights what I take to be the issues between the two thinkers.

An Example That Supports Habermas's Objection

Heidegger's comments on the physics of Aristotle seem to indicate that he believes that the Greek understanding of being dominates any individual propositions in Aristotle. Discussing Newton's law of inertia and comparing Aristotle's understanding of natural motion and rest, Heidegger says:

During the preceding fifteen hundred years [Newton's law] was not only unknown, but nature and being in general were experienced in such a way that [the law] would have been *senseless (keinen Sinn gehabt hätte)*. (FD 61/79, my emphasis)

The basic position of Aristotle is essentially different from that of Newton. For *what* is actually apprehended as appearing and *how* it is interpreted are not the same. (FD 63/82)

Every sort of thought . . . is *always only* the fulfillment and consequence of the current mode of historical Dasein, of the current fundamental position taken toward being in general, and toward the way in which a being as such is made manifest, that is, toward truth. (FD 74/96, my emphasis)³

However, this picture of Aristotle's ideas about motion as flowing smoothly from his epoch's understanding of being in general is surely mistaken. Aristotle did not find his theory of motion simply coming to him from the phenomena themselves. There was too much dispute within Greek physics. For example, while it involved no notion of inertia, the Atomist theory of motion did demand that the atoms continue to move or rest until collisions changed their state, and this occurred within an infinite neutral space rather than an Aristotelian finite directional space. This view was not senseless for Aristotle; he could not have opposed it if it were truly meaningless in his world.

He disagreed with the Atomists and argued for his own views on the basis of his presumed fuller understanding of the nature of potentiality. But he knew that others did not necessarily share that understanding, so he argued for his notions of potentiality in the *Metaphysics*; his ideas about motion did not flow directly from an unquestioned understanding of being. Aristotle's claims about natural motion and a space with absolute directions and locations (examples cited by Heidegger in FD) were opinions Aristotle defended against opposition, not expressions of some unquestionable prior understanding that determined what was to be revealed.

Second, while Aristotle's ideas about motion fit the way many things were revealed in Greek (and modern) everyday experience, there were some ordinary experiences which they did not fit.

³ "Jede Denkart ist aber immer nur der Vollzug und die Folge einer jeweiligen Art des geschichtlichen Daseins, der jeweiligen Grundstellung zum Sein überhaupt und zu der Weise, wie das Seiende als ein solches offenbar ist, d.h. zur Wahrheit." (FD 74/96)

Consider thrown objects such as stones or spears. It would seem from Aristotle's physics that a stone ought to resume its natural motion downward as soon as it leaves the hand which has been compelling it to move unnaturally upward. Since he needed some external cause to keep the stone moving, Aristotle offered awkward explanations that cited the air around the stone.⁴ This leads to the opposite problem: once the presumed interaction between the moving stone and the air around it has been set up, why does the stone eventually cease rising and resume its fall (and why does it do so in a curve)? No one was happy with Aristotle's explanation, and his Greek commentators sought to modify it.⁵

Projectile motion remained a problem for Aristotelians through the centuries.⁶ Medieval theories of impetus were devised to deal with this and other problems within the broad framework of Aristotle's physics. They did not prove satisfactory, and around the time when the details of projectile motion became an important military issue, Galileo and others worked at challenging the basis of Aristotle's theory. Of course military developments were not the only stimulus for change, but it is significant that Galileo was employed at an arsenal.

It is true that difficulties with projectile motion did not by themselves cause the downfall of Aristotle's physics. Yet the other factors that historians of science cite have the same stubbornly ontic and social character, and show a gradual growth that does not follow Heidegger's stages of the history of being.

Aristotle's theory on this point was strained and unacceptable even in his time; he cannot keep his notion of natural motions and still account for the everyday experience of projectile motion, an experience which is not, *pace* Heidegger, itself a result of "the mathematical approach to nature."

At least in this one respect, then, Aristotle's theory of motion was not a different revelation of the nature of things; it was inadequate. If that theory is considered a direct consequence of the revelation of nature to the Greeks, then that revelation was in some sense wrong. There is no doubt that our current theory of projectile motion is better pragmatically; our warriors succeed too well in aiming their projectiles. Our theory also gives more linkage with other phenomena, such as planetary motion. Current theories may not be the last word, but they are an

⁴ "Objects which are thrown continue to move, even though the thing which started them off is no longer in contact with them. They keep moving either, as some say, because of mutual replacement [the air displaced from the front of the moving body rushes around and fills the space left behind it, pushing it onward], or because the air which they themselves drive forward forces them to move faster than they would if they were simply moving naturally" (Aristotle, quoted in FH 102).

⁵ In the sixth century Philoponos discusses the problem, and his ideas are presumed to stem from Hipparchos in the second century B.C.E. "When one projects a stone forcibly, does one compel it to move contrary to its natural motion by disturbing the air behind it? Or does the thrower also impart some motive power to the stone?" (quoted, FH 118). The second suggestion is suspiciously close to a view Heidegger says must be senseless within the Greek world.

⁶ Buridan uses a different example to criticize Aristotle: "A ship being pulled along a river, even against the current, cannot be quickly stopped after the pulling has ceased, but continues to move for a long time. Yet a sailor on deck does not feel any air pushing him from behind. He feels only the air from the front resisting" (quoted, FH 222).

improvement. This is an example of what Habermas means by a learning process.

I have given this example in some detail since presumably it is one Habermas would accept, and Heidegger does seem to mystify the issue with claims implying a seamless understanding of nature which cannot be challenged by whatever is revealed within it.⁷ The example supports Habermas's view; attempts to validate or invalidate individual propositions in Aristotle's account could indeed help overturn its whole scheme of meaning. Historically, they contributed to just that effect.

A Partial Defense of Heidegger

Now I want to defend Heidegger as far as I can, in order to isolate some key issues. In response to Habermas, Heidegger could argue that no understanding of being is a totality of meaning in the sense that Habermas intends, and that any understanding that could be exploded or discredited in the way Habermas describes is not what Heidegger means by an understanding of being. As to the Aristotle example, Heidegger could change his presentation so that Aristotle's theory of motion was just that, Aristotle's theory, rather than a transcription of the Greek understanding of being.

Habermas's misunderstanding of Heidegger could be explained by the similarities and differences between their respective notions of "world." Habermas himself holds that our cognitive and other activities take place within what he calls the "lifeworld," which is a network of undoubted background beliefs that act as a fund of meaning and a horizon for explicit beliefs and practices. Every explicit act presupposes the lifeworld, though modern cognitive endeavors do so in a particularly self-conscious way. The lifeworld is composed of linguistically structured units, implicit propositions, but it does not form a structured whole that can be seen or reviewed as a totality. Any particular belief in the lifeworld may, however, be raised into explicit consciousness and have its validity claims tested. This may be difficult, since it involves locating and testing deep presuppositions. Still, the lifeworld may be changed piece by piece, though not as a whole. In this sense Habermas's lifeworld has a unity more like a collection than a system. The lifeworld does not contain overarching unifiers that function as a condition of the possibility of individual beliefs and so protect the lifeworld's current configuration. While the lifeworld as a whole makes possible our explicit beliefs and actions, it does not do so in virtue of any special unity.

Although for Habermas our belonging to the lifeworld we do is not something at our arbitrary disposal, it is available for communal reflection and correction. Modernity means being able to understand our networks of meaning as cultural constructs rather than as revelations of unchanging nature; this brings the modern realization that those constructs can be tested and improved. Thus the process of establishing the validity of propositions can be distinguished, at least in modern societies, from the processes of socialization that reproduce the lifeworld and pass it on to a new generation. Part of what it means to be modern is to make that distinction.

That Habermas will talk about the social process of reproducing the lifeworld shows that the lifeworld plays no transcendental role; it is not prior in the way Heidegger's understandings or

⁷ Actually, FD, with its reliance on the ideas of Alexandre Koyré, is more flexible in this regard than most of the Heidegger's later writings.

sendings of being are prior. Heidegger could not speak about some social process that reproduces understandings of being; for him such understandings are prior to and make possible any process we might engage in.

When Habermas reads Heidegger's views on "world" or on the understanding of being, he seems to interpret them using the alternatives provided by his own theory. So world in the early Heidegger (and its successors in the later Heidegger) are read as somewhat like Habermas's lifeworld, except that Heidegger considers them too unified and restrictive. Either that unity is simply hypostatized beyond its due, or else Heidegger's world involves some illegitimate unifying realm of meanings prior to propositions and their truth conditions. This latter view Habermas contests, both through his general attack on "monological" views of the self, and through his arguments that propositional truth determines conceptual meaning.⁸

Habermas's lifeworld is learned and reproduced through various community practices and causal processes. It is an intersubjective cultural possession, a set of implicit beliefs. Heidegger's world, on the other hand, is the matrix of meaningful relations among things in the world that reveals those things. Being in a given world can lead to holding various implicit beliefs, but the world is not those beliefs. Nor is there any particular set of beliefs which equates with being in a certain world.

Habermas's lifeworld is already propositional, and so he tends to think Heidegger has to be offering either a set of propositions or a set of concepts to be woven into propositions. But, in Heidegger's early idiom, the relation between the hermeneutical "as" and the apophantic "as" is not the same as the relation between a set of general meanings (concepts, senses) and a set of propositions that apply them. In his later idiom, the naming done by the poet may open a space for sets of propositions, but that event is not by itself the inauguration of a set of concepts or propositions. When the Greek temple reveals the solidity of earth or expansiveness of the sky, it does not do so by anchoring a set of propositions, although this is not to deny that the behavior associated with the temple allows propositions to be attributed to its worshipers.

In addition, Heidegger's world arises not through any causal or cultural process but in the movement of temporality. Whatever the obscurities of Heidegger's discussions of temporality (and later, of *Ereignis*), they are not primarily about conceptual schemes or sets of propositions. To talk about implicit concepts or propositions is to stay within the picture of a subject or a community that uses conceptual tools to organize its experience. Heidegger wants to undercut that picture by showing how beings are revealed as meaningful in the happening of lived time. That happening is not the secure appearance of something mobile before a stable self-present subject or community. Temporality is not a structure made available for a subject to use or reflect on; it is an event in which Dasein finds itself already stretched out in a particular coming together and going apart in a skein of presences made possible by absences. Heidegger would say that Habermas's propositional lifeworld stays within the perspective of the everyday understanding of

⁸ For the latter, cf. the essay "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1979)

time.⁹

The relation of temporality to sets of propositions is somewhat like the relation between Husserl's various reductions and his "natural attitude." Temporality is not so much a prior content that controls propositions as it is the event of their occurrence, now perceived in its shaky coming together and apart. Heidegger's temporality is more appropriately discussed in Derrida's "différance" and "trace" than in discussions of conceptual frameworks.

The unity of a Heideggerian understanding of being need not be so tight that it will not allow any learning to take place. A world is not a seamless whole; indeed it is through sharing a common understanding of being that normal conflicts can occur at all. In other places than his Aristotle discussion, Heidegger does not deny that the Greeks had room for many competing traditions.

At first glance Heidegger seems to have become more rigid on this matter. The texture of worlds in the early Heidegger looks more varied than in the later writings. Whereas in SZ Heidegger talks about what seem to be different contemporary understandings of being (being ready-to-hand and being present-at-hand, and perhaps others), in the later writing each epoch is characterized by its own single understanding of being (actuality, the will to power, and so on).

But, in the unfinished part of SZ the various ontological understandings were to be derived from the horizon of temporality. The different epochal understandings of being in the later Heidegger are analogous to that further horizon, not to the discussion of presence-at-hand or readiness-to-hand.¹⁰

If the epochal meanings of being in the later Heidegger are more akin to the horizontal structure that was to have been analyzed in the unwritten part of SZ, then there is, in principle, room in the later Heidegger for variegated worlds that could contain different regional understandings of being. What flattens out our world is not something inherent in the relation between understandings of being and individual propositions but rather something in the specific character Heidegger attributes to the modern understanding of being in our technological age.¹¹

So, if the epochal understandings of being could allow local conflicts and varied regional understandings, it is hard to see how they would be quite as dominant over the truth claims made by individual propositions as Habermas accuses Heidegger of believing.

Still, Habermas is right that for Heidegger an understanding of being does not allow just any meaning to be revealed. The movement of temporality is not purely formal. The epochal understandings of being make any revelations of entities possible, and so bound what can be revealed, and so influence what can be propositionally expressed under their sway. The

⁹ Habermas also attempts to undermine the subject-object picture, by inserting concepts and propositions into the process of communal self-formation and practical coordination. Both Heidegger and Habermas in effect accuse each other of not being radical enough in their opposition to the standard picture.

¹⁰ There is a sense in which presence-at-hand is not a "regional" understanding of being since apparently any entity can be experienced either as present-at-hand or as ready-to-hand. In the later writings there are other more properly regional understandings, such as the being of art works. But there still are no straightforward "regions" in Husserl's sense.

¹¹ On the other hand, insofar as the epoch of *Gestell* culminates the withdrawal of being, the leveled-out character of the modern world is implicit in any metaphysical understanding of being.

apophantic "as" depends on the hermeneutic "as" in order to have something to point out; propositional truth depends on the prior truth of language's self-giving. But in neither case do propositions depend on some prior realm of conceptual meanings, as Habermas alleges.

But it is true that for Heidegger nothing happening within a world can challenge its basic understanding of being. Differences between worlds are not the same as conflicts within a world, and for Heidegger the history of being is not a cumulative learning process.

Nonetheless, a proposition can still be making a truth claim which extends beyond its world, even though the conditions for validating the claim are only available in its world. If a proposition points out what is revealed in our world, and if such pointing out is contingent on a prior disclosure, and if such disclosure depends on comportments and understandings active only in our world, then there may be nothing similar to point out in another world. But the pointing out here is still rightly performed. It is still true, across worlds, of what is said, that it was revealed *so, here*.

That someone else has a different practice does not invalidate the claim that we have the practices we do.¹² This is not the sense of "truth" that Heidegger prefers to discuss, but he does not deny it; his effort is rather to give the conditions which make it possible.

To hold that there are limits to what I can say is not necessarily to hold that the truth claims I make are of limited extent. Habermas is right that a claim to truth must transcend local spatial and temporal limits. But a Heideggerian world contains an understanding of beings as a whole; it is qualitatively, not spatially, limited.

Heidegger's distinctive point is not that validity claims are world-bound, but that the limited revelation of being within a world is what makes possible any cognitive or practical claims at all. The limited revelation does not restrict some already constituted cognitive process that would be more extensive if it could escape those limits. Habermas, on the other hand, views the current limited shape of our cognitive and practical life as functioning within an unlimited process of adaptation and formation.

The Objection Revisited

In the course of exploring Habermas's attack, we have accumulated five layers of varying generality. Heidegger deals with individual propositions (for example, "The arrow will miss the target"), reflective constructs (Aristotle's theory of projectile motion), regional understandings of the being of various kinds of beings (art works), the overall horizontal understanding of being that gives unity to an epoch (*das Gestell*), and whatever formal conditions there may be for having any epoch or understanding of being at all (*das Ereignis* and perhaps the fourfold).

None of these are the "totalities of meaning" Habermas attributes to Heidegger, and they do not restrict truth claims to local places and times.

However, Habermas is correct that there remains in Heidegger a one-way dependence of propositions on the prior revelation which makes them possible. As something like a transcendental condition, that revelation is not to be interfered with by any ontic activity.

¹² Cf. Mark Okrent, "Relativism, Context, and Truth," (*The Monist* 67 [July 1984], 23-49).

Understandings of being are not "transcendental" in the precise subjectivist sense in which Heidegger employs the word, but they fit the more general sense of the word derived from the neo-Kantians; they are conditions of the possibility, rather than conditions of the actuality, of individual propositions. They are distinct from and prior to both the logical analysis of presuppositions and the conditions studied by natural or social science.

I pointed out earlier that Heidegger would deny that there could be a social process by which an understanding of being would be reproduced and passed on. Yet for him the epochal understandings of being are sufficiently different from one another that they can provide insight into the cultural specifics of a given era. His discussions of the Greek understanding of being are used to illuminate Greek literature and religion, and *das Gestell* is to help define modernity.

Heidegger inserts a level more pervasive than any philosophical school or scientific theory, but still determinate vis à vis other epochs in the history of being, and this determinate level functions as the condition of the possibility of individual propositions.

While this may not limit the validity claims made in a given epoch, it does mean that there is no criticism possible of the understanding of being. Individual propositions cannot dispute the prior "saying" of language. Poetic propositions can bring new understandings, but this is not a learning process in the sense Habermas intends.

In so far as he has anything parallel to Heidegger here, Habermas discusses the relation between the formally universal conditions of discourse and our particular beliefs and practices. These correspond to the first and fifth layer mentioned above. But there are no intermediate levels; there is a set of universally valid conditions, and all the rest is cultural and cognitive construction that can be revised.¹³ There is of course the lifeworld, but while that cannot be escaped, it does not impose limits the way Heidegger's intermediate levels do. Habermas's lifeworlds have factual limits, but they can be transformed piece by piece, and they develop into one another through ordinary historical changes.

Habermas maintains that the intermediate level of determination that Heidegger introduces is due to Heidegger's failure to escape the transcendental problematic, which leads Heidegger to postulate as a kind of transcendental condition descriptions taken from bad social analysis, descriptions which are in fact "a repertoire of opinions typical of a certain generation of German mandarins" (DM 167/140).

I agree that the problem is due to Heidegger remaining too nostalgic for transcendental unities. Unlike Kant, for whom the conditions of the possibility of propositions are too general for epochal variation, and unlike Hegel, whose historically varying conditions fit into a larger universal pattern, Heidegger wants both the priority coming from transcendental conditions and the diagnostic power coming from epochal variation. If he is unwilling to pay the price of Hegelian unity, he should give up the simple priority of the epochal understandings of being.

Still, this problem stems from Heidegger's pursuit of a key insight. For him, all revelations of being are limited, but they are not parts of a potential total revelation. This is the fundamental

¹³ It is true that Habermas's universal conditions are differentiated into spheres of validity. But these form an integrated whole of formal conditions.

disagreement between Heidegger and Habermas, for whom the ideal of total availability and presence maintains its force at least as a regulative ideal.

I want to claim that while Heidegger is correct on this basic issue, Habermas is correct about the possibility that current local understandings of being may be exploded through attempts to validate individual claims. Heidegger overstates the unity of any epoch and gives his determinate conditions too exalted a status. Habermas is correct that this stems at least in part from the elitist wish to say something privileged and deeper than what is said by ordinary people and social scientists.

But we need not follow Heidegger into that pulpit. In defending Heidegger against the Aristotle example it was necessary to speak of the Greek understanding of being as more general and allowing more room for disagreement than Heidegger does in that particular text. If this were carried further, the understanding of being would become still more formal (and so less culturally diagnostic). There would be room for movement among multiple intermediate understandings which would be criticizable in more ordinary ways, much as Habermas describes. But this would not put us completely on the side of Habermas. A Heideggerian notion of temporality and world would remain distinct from a lifeworld composed of implicit propositions. Complexes of meaning and practice would not be reduced to cultural tools to be wielded by a modern self-conscious community. Heidegger's notion of "thrown projects" could be developed in ways that question Habermas without necessarily embracing the deceptive unities in Heidegger's history of being.¹⁴

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List of Works Cited: References are given in the text according to the following abbreviations, with a slash separating German from English pagination. Some translations have been modified:

DM: Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985); *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.:MIT, 1988).

FD: Martin Heidegger, *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (Tbingen: Niemeyer, 1962); *What is a Thing?* (Chicago: Regnery, 1962).

FH: Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Fabric of the Heavens: The Development of Astronomy and Dynamics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

SZ: Martin, Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1963); *Being and Time* (Oxford: Harper and Row, 1962).

WW: Jürgen Habermas, "Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective," translated by John McCumber (*Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1989, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 431-456).

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¹⁴ I have made some tentative steps in this direction in *Postmodern Sophistications* (University of Chicago Press, 1990).

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