

Hermeneutic Violence and Interpretive Conflict: Heidegger vs. Cassirer on Kant

Mihai Ometiță
University of Bucharest

Abstract: The paper aims to rectify the reception of Heidegger's so-called "hermeneutic violence," by addressing the under-investigated issue of its actual target and rationale. Since the publication of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, some of Heidegger's contemporary readers, such as Cassirer, as well as more recent commentators, accused Heidegger of doing violence to Kant's and other philosophers' texts. I show how the rationale of Heidegger's self-acknowledged violence becomes tenable in light of his personal notes on his Kant book, and of several hermeneutic tenets from *Being and Time*. The violence at stake turns out to be a genuine method, involving the appropriation (*Zueignen*) and the elaboration (*Ausarbeiten*) of an interpreted text. Its target, I argue, is not the text itself, as it was often assumed, but its reception by a community or tradition. Thus, that violence may well instill interpretive conflict, yet its purpose is to salvage a text from a conventional and ossified reception, namely, from what Heidegger regards as the authoritarianism of idle talk (*Gerede*) in a philosophical milieu.

Keywords: hermeneutic realism, hermeneutic relativism, impersonal authoritarianism, textual meaning, authorial intent.

Since the publication of his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* in 1929, Heidegger's interpretations of the history of philosophy have increasingly received charges of violence. One charge was already formulated in a 1931 review of that book, by his Neo-Kantian opponent Ernst Cassirer:

But does not interpretation become arbitrary when it forces the author to say something that he left unsaid only because he could not *think* it? [...] I must, therefore, decidedly dispute the justification, the *quid juris*, of the violence that Heidegger exercises upon Kant. Here Heidegger no longer speaks as a commentator but as an usurper, who penetrates, as it were, by violence of arms

into the Kantian system in order to subdue it and make it serviceable for his problem.¹

Meantime, such accusations towards Heidegger's manner of interpreting Kant's and other philosophers' texts have become widespread. They can be found even in recent receptions of his Kant book, such as the one articulated by Christopher Macann:

Hence, the "violence" which Heidegger does to the text tends to increase with each succeeding section as his interpretation comes ever closer to that conception of metaphysics which is his own rather than Kant's.²

Heidegger did not do much to conceal a certain violence employed by his Kant book. He was rather the first to highlight that aspect of his interpretation: "They take constant offence at the violence of my interpretations. The allegation of violence can indeed be supported by this text." And further: "Certainly, in order to wring from what the words say, what it is they want to say, every interpretation must necessarily use violence. Such violence, however, cannot be roving arbitrariness."³

This conflict of interpretations looks as follows. Heidegger and his accusers seem to agree that his readings of the history of philosophy involve some kind of violence. But the accusers take that violence to further involve some kind of arbitrary interpretation, which fails to do justice to the interpreted text. We just saw Heidegger anticipating and denying that further charge, while the scrutiny of his motives for doing so remains one task of the present text. A further task is to address more thoroughly the rationale of Heidegger's hermeneutic violence, and particularly the issue of its actual target. The accusers take it for granted that the Heideggerian interpretation does violence to the interpreted text itself, or to the intent of the interpreted author. By contrast, I will argue that the actual target of that violence is rather the reception of the interpreted text within a community or tradition. While such a violence may indeed trigger and sustain a conflict of interpretations, its point is to salvage the interpreted text from the latter's conventional and ossified reception.

¹ Cassirer 1931: 17 / Cassirer 1967: 148–149, tr. mod. Cassirer's review of Heidegger's reading of Kant is, in fact, a defense of the former's reading of Kant, exposed at length a few years before Heidegger's, in the 1918 *Kant's Life and Thought*. In its turn, Heidegger's publication of his Kant book was a reaction to his famous dispute with Cassirer at Davos in 1929. For informative accounts of this background, see Friedman 2000 and 2002, Leask 2005, Coskun 2007, Gordon 2008.

² Macann 1996: 104.

³ GA 3 / Heidegger 1997a: preface to the 2nd ed. and 202 respectively, tr. mod. For quotes from Heidegger, I give the standard German pagination, also available in the English translations.

To the purpose of addressing the two tasks, the paper proceeds in three steps. The first section will discuss the Cassirer-inspired accusation of interpretive arbitrariness and Heidegger's response to it in his personal notes on his Kant book. The second section will show that Heidegger's response finds some tenable justification in the conceptions of "hermeneutic situation" and "idle talk" (*Gerede*) from *Being and Time*. Against this background, the third section will argue that Heidegger's commentators have time and again misjudged the self-acknowledged violence of his interpretations of the history of philosophy. What commentators take to be a self-acknowledged idiosyncrasy, and thus an easy target, in Heidegger's interpretations, turns out to be a genuine interpretive method. That method involves the appropriation (*Zueignen*) and the elaboration (*Ausarbeiten*) of the interpreted text. Thus, instead of involving complacency about interpretive arbitrariness, the method is meant to rescue the interpreted text from the impersonal authoritarianism of idle talk, that is, from the aforementioned conventional and ossified receptions that occur in a philosophical milieu.⁴

1. Interpretive Arbitrariness and "Kant in Itself"

1.1. Cassirer's accusation and hermeneutic realism

As seen, Cassirer charges Heidegger's interpretation of Kant with arbitrariness, on basis that the interpretation would force Kant to say something he left unsaid only because he could not think it. The accuser has more to say about the way in which a non-arbitrary, presumably legitimate, interpretation should look like:

Here only the issue itself should speak. And one cannot do justice to an author in a better way than to seek to hear only the voice of the issue. It would be a false and bad "subjectivity" that which would not inspire us to *such* an objectivity and pledge us to it. In this sense I should like to have the preceding remarks considered and judged.⁵

⁴ This paper thus assesses Heidegger's reading of Kant from the angle of its interpretive commitments. For assessments of Heidegger's reading by comparison with Kant's actual texts, see e.g. Sherover 1971, Schalow 1992, Lotz 2005. Heidegger's commitments are intertwined with his wider agenda of destructing the history of philosophy, as well as with his emphasis on human finitude and his inheritance of tragic thought, while Cassirer's are intertwined with his wider agenda of rejoining that history, as well as with his emphasis on the human potential for transcendence and his inheritance of humanist thought. Here, however, in order to assess the opposition between Heidegger's and Cassirer's interpretive commitments in terms of their hermeneutic merits and limitations, those commitments are addressed in what their methodological aspects are concerned.

⁵ Cassirer 1931: 25 / Cassirer 1967: 157, tr. mod.

This addition lies on several assumptions. Firstly, the proposal that “only the issue itself should speak” assumes that the interpreted issue *can* speak, somehow by itself, in the first place. Namely, that the interpreted issue has a pre-determined meaning, which is attached or inherent to it. In virtue of that meaning, the interpreted issue would have a voice of its own. The voice could be heard by interpreters, whose task would be to capture and amplify it. Secondly, the view that “one cannot do justice to an author in a better way than to seek to hear only the voice of the issue” assumes that the voice of the interpreted issue makes accessible an authorial intent of the interpreted author. Thirdly, the meaning of the interpreted text and the intent of the interpreted author would be not only both pre-determined, but also co-extensive and mutually consistent. In short, the text would say nothing more and nothing less than what its author wanted to say.⁶

Interpreters who did not adhere to these views would lapse, according to Cassirer, into a false and bad subjectivity. Their interpretations would fall short from achieving a true and good objectivity, which could honour the interpreted text and its author. We may regard this as *the agenda of hermeneutic realism*. Accordingly, the conflict of interpretations triggered by one and the same text could—in principle—be brought to an end once and for all.

Now, the criteria Cassirer proposes for a non-arbitrary interpretation might already seem quite difficult to meet. The task he further ascribes to interpreters looks even more burdensome. Towards the end of his review, he grants to Heidegger the cogency and decisiveness of the latter’s conception of human finitude, at least insofar as the human at stake is an interpreting philosopher:

On one point I do not intend to contradict Heidegger: that such a limitation and finitude are perhaps the fate of every kind of philosophical thought and philosophico-historical interpretation and that none of us can delude himself that he has escaped this fate.⁷

Cassirer seems to be unaware of the implications of this concession. His last word on the matter is that every interpretation is fated to limitation and finitude. But this last word renders his criteria for a non-arbitrary interpretation further difficult, if not impossible, to meet. Interpreters may well seek to hear a voice of the interpreted issue. But could they—as limited and finite beings—be sure that the voice which they allegedly hear is the actual voice of the interpreted issue? There would be no guarantee that the meaning put forward by a limited and finite interpretation is the very pre-determined meaning of

⁶ Variations of these assumptions are embraced even by some who defend Heidegger’s hermeneutic violence. *Cf.*: “the task of the interpreter is to conform his own hypothesis about the work’s meaning objectively to the author’s intent.” (Alexander 1981: 288.)

⁷ Cassirer 1931: 25–26 / Cassirer 1967: 157, tr. mod.

the interpreted issue. Indeed, nothing could guarantee that the authorial intent articulated by interpreters is the actual intent of the interpreted author.

More generally, Cassirer's concession regarding the limitation and finitude of every interpretation dismisses any criteria for establishing in the first place a pre-determined meaning of the text and a pre-determined intent of its author. The concession dismisses also criteria for establishing that this meaning and this intent are mutually consistent and also co-extensive. In brief, conceptions like "pre-determined meaning," "pre-determined intent," their alleged "mutual consistency" and their purported "co-extensiveness" remain mere hypothetical factors presupposed by an ideal standard of interpretation. Such factors cannot function as validity criteria for a non-arbitrary interpretation, given that they themselves cannot be either validated or invalidated in the first place.

That is how Heidegger could have responded to Cassirer. But it is not how he exactly did it. His response implies that Cassirer's accusation is indeed incoherent, but also that it involves an untenable conception of a "Kant in itself".

1.2. "Kant in itself" and hermeneutic relativism

In his personal notes on his Kant book, published in the appendix to the fifth edition, Heidegger responds to charges, like the one made by Cassirer, against his interpretation. He finds such charges to lie on a curious assumption of a "Kant in itself":

[The Kant book] was taken 1) as a one-sided interpretation of Kant, 2) as a forerunner for *Being and Time*—both were *confused ways of thinking*. Disclosing "Kant in itself" is to be left to Kant philology. Even [if] it should emerge that it has actually learned something from the violent Heideggerian interpretation.⁸

This note might make it seem as if Heidegger *does not want to share* a certain interpretive agenda, and that he relegates it to philological readings of Kant. The agenda is driven by the idea of a "Kant in itself," which is to be disclosed in the process of interpretation. In virtue of this yardstick, one may think, an interpretation can be somehow measured and defended against arbitrariness or one-sidedness. That is, to follow Cassirer, what the interpretation discloses as the pre-determined meaning and the pre-determined authorial intent, as well as their interrelation, could be justified through a comparison with the yardstick of a "Kant in itself," somehow inherent to Kant's text.

A further note of Heidegger, however, makes it clearer that he *cannot share* the agenda of Kantian philologists. For the idea of a "Kant in itself" is actually an inadvertent postulate. It is not even a hypothesis that could be confirmed

⁸ Heidegger 1991a in GA 3 / Heidegger 1997b: 249, entry no. 1, tr. mod.

or disconfirmed. That is precisely why the charge that the Heideggerian interpretation is one-sided (coming from the camp of Kantian philology more generally) or arbitrary (coming from Cassirer in particular) turned out to involve a “confused way of thinking”. The second note reads:

Instead: objections from random sides that have the fallacious aspect that are all *in part* correct. Cassirer completely misunderstands that what is decisive for interpretation is the elaboration of a problem, and indeed that this problem must first be made visible, and that this comes about through a recollection of Kant. *In this way* an interpretation was demanded. This determines the historical objectivity. A *Kant in-itself*—which presumably “does not concern” us, or is indeterminate in all respects (Ebbinghaus)—is a fundamental misunderstanding.

But Cassirer also works with the hidden idea of a correct interpretation of this sort.⁹

The pretence of objections brought to Heidegger that are “all in part correct” is merely an instance of the assumption that interpretations in general are all in part correct. The assumption feeds variations of what we may regard as *the agenda of hermeneutic relativism*. Its gist is that there is some grain of truth in pretty much any interpretation. Accordingly, the conflict of interpretations triggered by one and the same text could—in principle—never be brought to an end. If that was so, however, then Heidegger’s own interpretation could be defended on just that basis.¹⁰

Yet, Heidegger is not content with this option. Instead, he continues to question the idea of a “Kant in itself,” by scrutinizing its potential employment as a justification precisely of hermeneutic relativism. One might indeed work with that idea, not only as Cassirer does, as a purported yardstick against which an interpretation is to be judged to be arbitrary or not. One may also bite the bullet of the notion of a “Kant in itself,” endorsing it as a provisional postulate to work with. But then a pre-determined meaning, a pre-determined authorial intent, and their interrelation would become something that “does not concern us,” or, what comes to the same thing, they would be matters “indeterminate in all respects”.

This second use, the one that hermeneutic relativism makes, of the idea of a “Kant in itself” is found to amount to a *fundamental misunderstanding*.

⁹ Heidegger 1991b in GA 3 / Heidegger 1997c: 301, entry no. 6.

¹⁰ A defense of Heidegger is actually advanced along these lines, in the name of a so-called “perspectival hermeneutics,” by Edwin Alexander, who writes: “Thus Heideggerian interpretation is justified in doing violence to a text in order to get behind the statements and behind the factual limitations and delusions of authorial intent [...]” (Alexander 1981: 295) Accordingly, the core of perspectival hermeneutics would be that every interpretation is “partial” and “incomplete”.

By the same token, the first use, the one that Cassirer's hermeneutic realism makes, of the same idea was found to involve a *confused way of thinking*.

Heidegger's dismissal of the two agendas—that of hermeneutic realism and that of hermeneutic relativism—might seem at the same time to do away with the standard of historical objectivity altogether. However, he does not shy away from invoking precisely that standard. He does not consider historical objectivity as a chimera, or as an impossible task on interpreters' part. Nonetheless, he suggests that achieving such a standard is not as easy as Cassirer suggested, namely, by simply opposing it to a false and bad subjectivity. Since decisive for the interpretation, according to Heidegger, would rather be “the elaboration of a problem” from the interpreted text and making the problem visible by interpreting the text. That procedure, so Heidegger's proposal goes, would provide the historical objectivity of the interpretation.

Now the question remains: What does Heidegger mean by “historical objectivity” more exactly? And also: What does the “elaboration” of an interpreted problem amount to? His personal notes explored above become clearer in light of his hermeneutic doctrine exposed by *Being and Time*. In order to address these questions, a discussion of some central tenets of that doctrine is called for.

2. The Background of Heidegger's Self-Defence

This section reconstructs the background of Heidegger's response to charges brought to his interpretative approach. Firstly, his conception of “hermeneutic situation” from *Being and Time* turns out to substantiate his aforementioned replies to accusations of arbitrariness coming from the camp of hermeneutic realism. Secondly, the other agenda we saw him dismissing—that of hermeneutic relativism—turns out to reflect a state of affairs which *Being and Time* actually denounces: the impersonal authoritarianism of “idle talk” in a philosophical milieu.

2.1. The hermeneutic situation and the naivety of hermeneutic realism

Section §31 from *Being and Time*, which addresses the interpreting situation, is informed by two structures brought forth by the analytic of Da-sein: thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) and projection (*Entwerfen*). This should be natural enough, if the interpreter was but an instance of the Da-sein. Just as the Da-sein is thrown into a manner of existence, the interpreter is thrown into a culture, a philosophical tradition, a language. As Da-sein, the interpreter cannot choose “where” to be thrown, but can and is to choose what to make out of the possibilities thereby arising for interpretation. The Da-sein-interpreter is thrown into a spectrum of possibilities to be, and to interpret, in such and such a way. Just as the “Da-sein is in the way that it has actually understood

or not understood to be in this or that way”¹¹, the interpreter interprets a text according to the manner in which he or she understands, or not, his or her possibilities of interpreting it. However, irrespective of how the interpreter understands those possibilities, understanding is an already oriented enterprise: “understanding in itself has the [...] structure which we call *project*”.¹²

In this light, section §32 of *Being and Time* advances an account of what is called initially “the hermeneutic circle” and then “the hermeneutic situation”. Accordingly, understanding articulated as interpretation has a threefold structure. It involves a *fore-having* (*Vor-habe*) or a preliminary appropriation, a *fore-sight* (*Vor-sicht*) or a preliminary insight, and a *fore-conception* (*Vor-griff*) or a preliminary comprehension—of the issue that is being understood and interpreted. Interpreting X involves a fore-having of X, a fore-sight into X, and a fore-conception upon X. Since no interpretation can be carried out from without this situation, later in the book Heidegger will call the three moments presuppositions (*Voraussetzungen*).¹³ They amount to something that inescapably lies “in front of” (*voraussetzen*) every interpretation and any interpreter.

How does this relate to Cassirer’s accusation of interpretive arbitrariness and to his agenda of hermeneutic realism? Cassirer insinuated that in Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant it was not, or not only, the interpreted issue that spoke. Now the question that was not raised by Cassirer returns: Can the interpreted issue speak at all by itself? The above hermeneutic tenets cast doubt on such a scenario. According to Heidegger, every interpretation oscillates, so to speak, between the two poles that mark its possibilities, and at the same time, its limitations: projection and thrownness. The interpretation involves the interpreter’s acknowledging the possibilities to interpret available to him or her, and the enactment of some of them by way of the interpreting enterprise. Both that acknowledgment and that enactment involve a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception of the possibilities to interpret the text.

Of course, Heidegger does not deny, but in fact emphasizes that any issue which comes to be interpreted already has some meaning: “The *concept of meaning* encompasses the formal framework of what necessarily belongs to what understanding interpretation articulates.”¹⁴ Yet, this is not to say that the meaning of the interpreted issue is pre-determined. Meaning is not attached or inherent to the issue, only waiting to be received by the interpreter, as Cassirer assumes in conformity with the agenda of hermeneutic realism. The meaning of the interpreted issue is rather marked by the three hermeneutic moments mentioned above. In Heidegger’s words: “Meaning, structured by

¹¹ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 144, tr. mod.

¹² GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 145.

¹³ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 231–232.

¹⁴ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 151, tr. mod.

fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception, is the upon which of the project in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something.”¹⁵

Cassirer also charged Heidegger’s interpretation with failing to do justice to the intent of the interpreted author, namely, to Kant’s intent. Cassirer conceives of authorial intent as pre-determined, as something which “is there,” along with a pre-determined meaning of the text. Again, Heidegger does not deny, but emphasizes, that in the interpretation something “is there” indeed. However, that is not quite a pre-determined intent of the interpreted author, but rather the undisputed prejudice of the interpreter:

Interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something previously given. When the particular concretion of the interpretation in the sense of exact text interpretation likes to appeal to what “is there,” what is initially “there” is nothing else than the self-evident, undisputed prejudice of the interpreter, which is necessarily there in each point of departure of the interpretation as what is already “posited” with interpretation as such, that is, pre-given with fore-having, fore-sight, fore-conception.¹⁶

In short, Heidegger would regard Cassirer’s commitment to hermeneutic realism as naïve. That is presumably also why he suggested that the accusation of interpretive arbitrariness amounts to a confused way of thinking. Cassirer would fail to recognize that what he invokes as a pre-determined meaning of the interpreted text and a pre-determined intent of the interpreted author was something already tainted by his own stance towards Kant’s text. What he regards as *arbitrariness* in the Heideggerian interpretation would boil down, in fact, to the *contrariness* between his and Heidegger’s stances towards one and the same text.

Now it may seem that Heidegger makes too big a concession to the opposite of hermeneutic realism, that is, to relativism. It may seem that, within the above framework, pretty much anything goes as an interpretation of a text. And that the conflict of interpretations triggered by one and the same text is really just the blind opposition between different prejudices of different interpreters. In order to dispel this appearance, a look at a further notion of his—namely, idle talk—is in order.

2.2. Idle talk and the self-indulgence of hermeneutic relativism

Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant equally faced objections coming from the camp of hermeneutic relativism, in his words, objections which have the appearance to be all in part correct. By dismissing the postulates of a pre-determined meaning of the interpreted text and of a pre-determined intent

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 150.

of the interpreted author, that camp dismisses at the same time any standard of historical objectivity in virtue of which an interpretation may be assessed. Indeed, the invocation of a “Kant in itself,” which would be wholly indeterminate and thus would not concern us, can be regarded as a dispirited verdict upon the fate of any interpretive endeavour.¹⁷

Heidegger regards the hermeneutic situation not as a dispiriting conclusion, but as a promising premise of the interpretive enterprise. To take the circle of understanding as an inherent shortcoming, he argues, amounts to *misunderstand understanding* itself. The real challenge is neither to simply put up with, nor to seek to escape, that circle, but rather to enter it adequately:

But to see a vitiosum in this circle [of understanding] and to look for ways to avoid it, even to “feel” that it is an inevitable imperfection, is to misunderstand understanding from the ground up. [...] What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get in it in the right way. [...] A positive possibility of the most primordial knowledge is hidden in it which, however, is only grasped in a genuine way when interpretation has understood that its first, constant, and last task is not to let fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception be given to it by chance ideas and popular conceptions [Einfälle und Volksbegriffe] but to guarantee the scientific theme by developing these in terms of the things themselves.¹⁸

This suggestion, from the end of section §32, that the tripartite hermeneutic situation is prone to fall under the influence of “chance ideas and popular conceptions” anticipates the theme of “idle talk” from section §35 of *Being and Time*.

Interpretive idle talk involves the interpreter’s relating improperly to the interpreted issue, or amounts to his or her lacking a proper relation to the issue. The hermeneutic situation is all the more exposed to the authoritarianism of chance ideas and popular conceptions when the interpreter does not engage in the appropriation (*Zueignung*) of the interpreted issue:

*And since this discoursing has lost the primary relation of being to the being talked about, or else never achieved it, it does not communicate in the mode of a primordial appropriating of this being, but communicates by *gossiping* and *passing the word along* [Weiter- und Nachredens].¹⁹*

¹⁷ Such a verdict is actually advanced by Edwin Alexander’s so-called “perspectival hermeneutics,” in his attempt to defend Heidegger’s hermeneutic violence: “More and more complete validity can be achieved through the accumulation of perspectival, valid interpretations by the community of philosophers, though no one thinker can claim definitiveness. And yet we cannot even think of approaching a finally comprehensive communal interpretation as a theoretical limit-point, because interpretation itself generates meaning in the text.” (Alexander 1981: 304.)

¹⁸ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 153.

¹⁹ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 168.

The lack of appropriation is just another facet of the impersonal character of communication by way of gossiping and passing the word along. For the very word that is passed from one to another in an interpretive milieu belongs to nobody in particular, or to everybody generically.

In addition, the more interpretive gossiping and passing the word along flourish in an interpretive milieu, the less is communication rooted in the actual ground (*Boden*) of the interpreted issue. The issue is interpreted while not being anchored; it flails around, from “here” to “there,” in the interpretive milieu. In Heidegger’s words: “In this gossiping and passing the word along, a process by which its initial lack of grounds to stand on increases to complete groundlessness, idle talk is constituted.”²⁰

It should be clearer by now that Heidegger is far from being sympathetic to the interpretive agenda of hermeneutic relativism. The emergence and self-conservation of an interpretive milieu involves a less and less questioned cohesion and coherence in the understanding of the interpreted issue. It is on this basis that hermeneutic relativism, in the final analysis, states that each says, in his or her own way, something upon the same thing. Whereas Heidegger denounces precisely that, in an interpretive milieu, one can simply take it for granted that everyone means pretty much the same thing, if only in a different manner:

This is understood, what is talked about is understood, only approximately and superficially; one means *the same thing* because it is in the *same* averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said.²¹

The assumption that, in an interpretive milieu, everyone means approximately the same thing is just another way of saying that interpretations and interpretive objections are all in part correct. Heidegger opposes this self-indulgence of hermeneutic relativism, just as he mistrusts the naivety of hermeneutic realism.

Both hermeneutic relativism and hermeneutic realism fail to capture what Heidegger takes to be the “positive possibility of the most primordial knowledge which is hidden” in the hermeneutic situation. The question remains: How is the interpreter to achieve that knowledge? The next section argues that the answer lies precisely in his conception of hermeneutic violence.

3. *The Rationale of Hermeneutic Violence*

Cassirer’s charge of interpretive arbitrariness against Heidegger is particularly inspired by one of the latter’s own passages in the Kant book. As seen,

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Heidegger acknowledges the following: “Certainly, in order to wring from what the words say, what it is they want to say, every interpretation must necessarily use violence.” Cassirer takes this to mean that Heidegger recognizes that he “forces the author to say something that he left unsaid only because he could not think it”. This part of Cassirer’s accusation lies on the following assumptions. Firstly, that Heidegger would acknowledge his being guilty of hermeneutic violence towards the Kantian text itself, since his Kant book would force Kant to say what Kant left unsaid. Secondly, that what Kant left unsaid is something which Kant himself could not have thought in the first place.²²

This section will address the rationale of the Heideggerian hermeneutic violence by first questioning the reception of its target. I will then argue that Heidegger’s accusers time and again failed to get what he was really after while invoking that which Kant’s “words want to say”.

3.1. The target and the moments of hermeneutic violence

Let us note that Heidegger does not use the notion of “violence” for the first time in his Kant book. At several points in *Being and Time* he characterizes either his approach or his terminology as violent:

Thus the existential analytic constantly has the character of *doing violence*, whether for the claims of the everyday interpretation or for its complacency and its tranquillized obviousness.²³

The terminological definition of the corresponding primordial and authentic phenomena battles with the same difficulty in which all ontological terminology is stuck. In this field of inquiry, acts of violence are not an arbitrary matter, but a necessity rooted in facts.²⁴

[N]ot to speak of the act of violence which they might discern in the exclusion of the traditional and cherished definition of the human being [...].²⁵

We witness Heidegger not only acknowledging the violent character of his approach and of his terminology, but also pointing to the actual target of that violence: everyday interpretations or their self-indulgence, well established and widely accepted ontological notions, or long and much praised conceptions of the human being. In short, the target of hermeneutic violence can now be more narrowly circumscribed in terms of the impersonal, yet far-reaching, authoritarianism of what Heidegger investigates as idle talk and “the

²² In their turn, commentators like Macann, who reinforce Cassirer’s charges, and others like Alexander, who defend Heidegger from those charges, seem to share these assumptions as well.

²³ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 311.

²⁴ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 327, tr. mod.

²⁵ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 183, tr. mod.

they” (*das Man*). A detailed discussion of the latter notion falls outside the scope of this paper. However, we cannot fail to notice that Heidegger targets “the they” in the last quote above. He mentions “the act of violence which *they (man)* might discern” in his approach, a violence oriented towards the traditional and cherished definition of the human being.

Heidegger’s acknowledgement of the violence of his Kant book, the acknowledgment introduced at the beginning of this paper, can now be read in a new light: “They (*Man*) take constant offence at the violence of my interpretations.” It is thus doubtful that Heidegger would orient his hermeneutic violence towards the interpreted text itself, namely, to Kant’s own text—as commentators have repeatedly assumed since Cassirer. The target of hermeneutic violence is rather the *reception* of the interpreted text. That is, its conventional and ossified reception within an interpretive community or an interpretive tradition. Such a community or tradition, just like a philosophical milieu more generally, is prone to fall under the impersonal authoritarianism of what was first explored as “idle talk,” and what is now explored as “the they”.²⁶

Once the target of Heideggerian hermeneutic violence is placed within the scope of idle talk, the former turns out to amount to a twofold interpretive approach. As seen, what is symptomatic for idle talk is a deficiency in the appropriation and in the grounding of the interpreted issue. It should not be surprising that, as an antidote to the impersonal authoritarianism of idle talk upon the hermeneutic situation, hermeneutic violence is meant to involve two moments: the appropriation (*Zueignen*) and the elaboration (*Ausarbeiten*) of the interpreted issue. In this respect, Heidegger writes more generally: “Ontological inquiry is a possible way of interpretation which we characterized as the elaboration and the appropriation of an understanding.”²⁷

Appropriation, as one moment of hermeneutic violence, calls for the interpreter’s acknowledging the ineluctability of the hermeneutic situation: “If such an interpretation [involving elaboration and appropriation] becomes an explicit task of an inquiry, the totality of these ‘presuppositions’ (which we call the *hermeneutic situation*) needs to be clarified and made secure beforehand

²⁶ The kinship between the themes of “idle talk” and “the they” is made explicit in GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 169–170. Heidegger might be taken to acknowledge, in his later work *Contributions to Philosophy*, that the hermeneutic violence employed by his Kant book was, after all, directed, if not to Kant’s text, at least to Kant himself. However, while seeming to acknowledge that, he immediately characterizes as merely “historiological” the position from which such an accusation might be formulated. That position, according to his notes on his Kant book, only pertains to Kant philology. Cf. “[What was] attempted in the ‘Kant book’ [...] was possible only by doing violence to Kant in the sense of working out a more original version of precisely the *transcendental* project in its unity, through an *exposition of the transcendental imagination*. This interpretation of Kant is, of course, incorrect ‘*historiologically*’ [*historisch*] but it is essential *historically* [*geschichtlich*], as related to the preparation for future thinking and only as so related.” (GA 65 / Heidegger 2012: 199)

²⁷ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 231–232, tr. mod.

both in a fundamental experience of the ‘object’ to be disclosed, and in terms of that experience.”²⁸ In the final analysis, the appropriation of the interpreted issue is meant to salvage it from the impersonal authoritarianism of idle talk precisely by confronting the impersonal and arbitrary character of the latter.

But then would it not follow that the text will be interpreted in a personal, all too personal, manner? Hermeneutic violence may well be meant to salvage the hermeneutic situation from the arbitrariness of idle talk. Yet would it not, at the same time, expose the interpreted text to some kind of idiosyncratic appropriation, according to the very whims of interpreters?

If hermeneutic violence is a twofold interpretive approach, its two moments are rather to be understood in mutual interaction, as balancing one another. Elaboration, as a further moment of hermeneutic violence, is to remedy a further symptom of the dominance of idle talk upon the hermeneutic situation: the deficiency in grounding the interpreted issue. Elaboration involves the interpreter’s surveying the field of the interpreted issue, and his or her carrying out the interpretation in light of the whole of the text. By surveying the whole interpreted text or, to paraphrase Heidegger, by anchoring the interpretation in a primordial ground, elaboration is meant to diminish the very possibility of an idiosyncratic appropriation of the interpreted issue.

Heidegger’s response in his personal notes to Cassirer’s accusation can now be read in a new light:

Cassirer completely misunderstands that what is decisive for interpretation is the elaboration of a problem, and indeed that this problem must first be made visible, and that this comes about through a recollection of Kant. *In this way* an interpretation was demanded. This determines the historical objectivity.²⁹

This passage already alluded to the two moments of hermeneutic violence. What is decisive for the interpretation is the elaboration of the interpreted issue. The issue is made visible by way of its appropriation, or one’s *own* recollection of Kant. This brings us to our last point, namely, the interpretive conflict between Heidegger and his accusers over the matter of what the interpreted author “wants to say”.

3.2. What Kant “wants to say”

An assumption of the charges against Heidegger explored above was that what he takes Kant’s words to want to say is something that those words left unsaid, because Kant himself could not have thought it.

Heidegger could have simply replied to Cassirer that what Kant could or could not have thought is, after all, a matter of interpretation. An interpretation

²⁸ GA 2 / Heidegger 1996: 232.

²⁹ Heidegger 1991b in GA 3 / Heidegger 1997c: 301, entry no. 6.

of words, that is, the words of Kant and his successors'. Then there would have been less or indeed little to reproach to Heidegger's proceeding in the way he does. But he did not aim at merely repeating and rearranging the words of the interpreted author:

Now, if an interpretation (*Interpretation*) merely gives back what Kant has expressly said, then from the outset it is not a laying out (*Auslegung*), insofar as the task of such a laying-out remains framed as the making visible in its own right of what Kant had brought to light in his ground-laying over and above the explicit formulation.³⁰

Cassirer presumes that what Heidegger takes Kant's words to want to say is, *stricto sensu*, something left unsaid. The exact motive why those words left something unsaid according to Cassirer (namely, because Kant could not have thought it) becomes quite insignificant then. It is, however, significant that the motive is taken to be a historico-biographical limitation.

By contrast, for Heidegger, if Kant's words do not say what they want to say, that is not due to such limitations. We might say: *Anything which Kant's words had said would have left something else unsaid*. This is because what Kant's words do not say, but they arguably want to, is something which first emerges in the process of interpretation. Cassirer is thus right in a sense: what Kant's words want to say is something which Kant could not have thought. Yet, that does not have to do with a historico-biographical limitation, but rather to the hermeneutic possibilities in the interpretation of Kant's text. In this respect, Heidegger writes at one point in his Kant book:

Kant himself, however, was unable to say more about this. But with any philosophical knowledge in general, what is said in uttered propositions must not be decisive. Instead, what must be decisive is what it sets before our eyes as still unsaid, in and through what has been said.³¹

What Heidegger takes Kant's words to have left unsaid is not something unrelated to what those words say. It is "in" and "through" the latter that the former should be articulated in the first place. What Kant's words want to say, in the pertinent usage of the phrase, should be what we saw Heidegger regarding as a "positive possibility of the most primordial knowledge," latent in the hermeneutic situation. And it is by way of his method of hermeneutic violence—which, for motives discussed above, cannot be taken to simply harm Kant's text or his intent—that Heidegger proposes to unveil that possibility of knowledge.

³⁰ GA 3 / Heidegger 1997: 201.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Heidegger's hermeneutic violence has long been taken as an easy target by his readers, especially as he himself acknowledges, in a way, that manner of interpretation. Since his publication of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, commentators starting with his Neo-Kantian opponent Cassirer, accused Heidegger of interpreting the history of philosophy arbitrarily, or at least idiosyncratically, by way of forcing his interpretations to accord with his own philosophy.

Cassirer's allegation of arbitrariness was shown to involve a series of questionable interpretive commitments, discussed above under the heading of *hermeneutic realism*. According to that agenda, the interpreted text would have a pre-determined meaning, which would be consistent and co-extensive with a pre-determined intent of the text's author. However, an attempt at establishing an interpretive arbitrariness or non-arbitrariness by way of those criteria turned out to be inconclusive, insofar as they cannot be in their turn verified. Textual meaning and authorial intent, taken to be both pre-determined, are fallible interpretive postulates. Heidegger himself opposes the further charges brought against him, this time from the camp explored above under the heading of *hermeneutic relativism*. Those charges turned out to assume an equally questionable notion of an author "in itself," in this case a "Kant in itself," which would be completely indeterminate, and thus of no concern.

It was further shown that Heidegger's responses in his personal notes to the accusations of violence brought against him draw, in fact, heavily on the hermeneutic tenets from *Being and Time*. Against that background, hermeneutic realism reveals its naivety, insofar as it overlooks the intricacies and complexities of interpretation, which are explored by Heidegger in terms of the hermeneutic situation. At the same time, hermeneutic relativism reveals its self-indulgence in precisely what Heidegger is at pains to denounce, namely, idle talk.

In the final analysis, Heidegger's accusers have time and again missed the actual target and rationale of his self-acknowledged hermeneutic violence. The target of that violence is not the interpreted text, but its reception by an interpretive milieu. The rationale of that violence is to salvage the text from the impersonal authoritarianism of idle talk that pervades an interpretive milieu. Hermeneutic violence, instead of being a wild and idiosyncratic approach to a text, is rather a method to interpret it, meant to bypass the extreme positions of realism and relativism in interpretation.

From the overall discussion there emerges a certain view on the eventuality of the end of the conflict between interpretations triggered by one and the same text. According to hermeneutic realism, the end of such a conflict is *foreseeable*, insofar as it would be established by way of a generalized agreement within an interpretive milieu. According to hermeneutic relativism, the

end of such a conflict is *unforeseeable*, insofar as such a generalized agreement would be impossible. The Heideggerian hermeneutic violence may well instill and maintain interpretive conflict, and we saw it actually does. Yet its moral is that the end of such a conflict is to be neither naively welcomed, nor self-indulgently rejected, on some *a priori* grounds of an interpretive agenda.³²

Mihai Ometiță

Research Institute of the University of Bucharest
1 Dimitrie Brândză St.,
RO-060102, Bucharest, Romania
mihai.ometita@icub.unibuc.ro

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