Was Heidegger a Relativist?

Sacha Golob (King's College London)

for

The Emergence of Modern Relativism: The German Debates from the 1770s to the 1930s
Edited by Katherina Kinzel, Martin Kusch, Johannes Steizinger, and Niels Wildschut

(§1) Introduction: The Systematic Importance of Heidegger On Relativism

At first glance, it might seem that relativism was not a central issue for Heidegger. He was, of course, extremely familiar with the Husserlian and post-Kantian debates which linked relativism, logic and psychologism: these had been the focus of his 1914 dissertation, *Die Lehre vom Urteil im Psychologismus*. There he attacks psychologism in part by linking it to relativism as Husserl had done before him: the challenge, Heidegger suggests, is to move beyond this negative point and to articulate a positive story about judgmental content, one that respects the phenomenology of the act of judging in a way that Husserl's own theory allegedly does not (Ga21:107,111).[i] But whilst Heidegger presses the issues of judgment and content closely in his mature work, by the time we reach *Sein und Zeit*, there is little explicit treatment of relativism. At points, Heidegger uses it there simply as a byword for philosophical error: he is quick to insist that his views have nothing to do with "a crude relativizing" [*schlechte Relativierung*], he warns against readings of Dilthey as offering a "relativistic" *Lebensphilosophie* and he praises Yorck for seeing through "all 'groundless' relativisms" (SZ:22,399,401). Admittedly, he does state that "all truth is relative to Dasein's being", but, having clarified that this does not mean that truth is 'left to the subject's discretion', he promptly drops the term and does not take it up again (SZ:227). Similarly, in other works, both before and after SZ, relativism is directly treated only in marginal contexts. The 1921 lectures *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles*, for example, warn against the "atrophy of relativism" when discussing the link between philosophy and the university (Ga61:69), whilst 1935's *Die Frage nach dem Ding* , perhaps the clearest treatment of the Galilean paradigm shift, uses "*Relativismus*" only once, in a dismissive survey of standard views on indexicals. As elsewhere, it is clear that Heidegger regards both the term, this "cheap label", and the typical reactions to it, as problematic (Ga41:28).

Appearances can be misleading, however. Relativism is in fact fundamental to understanding Heidegger's philosophy and its place in the canon. There are four reasons for this.

First, Heidegger's refusal to rehash the standard debates around relativism is motivated by the belief that these are symptoms of a series of underlying errors (see, for example, Ga21:21-2 on the textbook self-reference arguments). By mapping his stance on relativism, we can get a better feeling for what those errors were, and how he sought to move beyond them. Second, whilst Heidegger avoids the usual terminology and framing, many of the issues raised by relativism reoccur in his work on truth and in his epistemology, and need to be addressed if that work is to be articulated and defended. Third, Heidegger's relation to relativism is particularly important for understanding how his philosophy relates to some of the central tensions in the post-Kantian tradition. For example, to what degree can one really combine the transcendental language which SZ borrows from the first *Critique* with Heidegger's post-Hegelian emphasis on history and his existentialist interest in facticity? Does the existential analytic yield anything like a universal transcendental framework or is there at best a series of 'historical a prioris'? How stable is the divide between ontological and ontic knowledge? All of these questions are illuminated by approaching them from the relativism angle. Fourth, the question of relativism decisively colours the early reception of Heidegger's work. Husserl's 1931 lecture *Phänomenologie und Anthropologie* warns explicitly against a philosophy based on the "essence of human being's concrete worldly Dasein": this approach can only lead to "anthropologism", the pejorative term used for species-relativism in the *Prolegomena* (Husserl 1997:485). Husserl's charge, roughly, is that a philosophy founded on a study of human beings will relativize logic to facts about such beings and their mental capacities. Whilst Heidegger is not mentioned by name, it is clear that he is the target here: Husserl positions him as combining a rhetoric of authenticity and historicity with the kind of psychologism the *Prolegomena* had attacked in Erdman thirty years earlier (Husserl 1975:§§38-41). Such 'Dasein anthropology' "constitutes a complete reversal of phenomenology's fundamental standpoint" (Husserl 1997:486). To assess the accuracy of this charge, and Heidegger's place in the phenomenological tradition, we need to know where he stands on relativism.

The structure of this chapter will be very simple. In the first half, I will introduce a sophisticated way of reading Heidegger as a relativist; I draw here on the work of Kusch and Lafont. In the second half, I present the counter-argument. As I see it, Heidegger is not a

relativist; but understanding the relations between his approach and a relativistic one is crucial for an evaluation of both his own work and the broader trajectory of post-Kantian thought.

Before proceeding, a brief caveat. Heidegger was a prolific writer: the *Gesamtausgabe* edition runs to over one hundred volumes. Furthermore, during the course of his lifetime, his work undergoes a series of complex stylistic and philosophical shifts – for example, during the early 1930s and then again in the aftermath of the war. There is no scholarly consensus on the exact nature of these developments or on the degree of continuity or change that they imply. Given these facts, it would be impossible to address Heidegger's views on "relativism" or indeed any other topic in a single article without radically restricting the chronological range of the discussion. I will therefore focus on Heidegger's best-known work, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), and on the account developed there and refined in subsequent texts. In this sense, what follows is largely, although by no means exclusively, a study of 'early Heidegger'; for stylistic reasons, I will speak simply of 'Heidegger', taking the qualification as understood.

(§2) Heidegger as Relativist: Lafont's Reading

Explicitly relativist readings of Heidegger have been advanced by both Kusch and Lafont (Kusch 1989; Lafont 2000, 2007). In what follows, I will focus on Lafont's account, both because of its large influence on the recent secondary literature and because it explicitly brings out the connections to Kant that I think are crucial.[ii]

Lafont's basic claim is that Heidegger is a "conceptual scheme" relativist who holds that "truth is relative to a prior understanding of being" (Lafont 2002:187). There are in fact two important issues here. The first is the assumption that one can equate "world-disclosures, understandings of being, conceptual schemes" (Lafont 2002:187). For Lafont Heideggerian understanding is tacitly propositional and closely related to the predicative structure found in language (Lafont 2000:181n1); Kusch likewise describes Heidegger as a "linguistic relativist" (Kusch 1989: 21, see also 196-7). In this Lafont and Kusch differ markedly from the standard view on which Heidegger's achievement was precisely to break with what Carman called the "assertoric paradigm", the tacit modelling of meaning on language (Carman 2003:216). This debate, whilst vital for a broader understanding of Heidegger, would take us too far afield here, and so I set it aside.[iii] Instead, I want to focus on the second

aspect of Lafont's approach, the relativisation claim. To understand that, we need to begin by looking at Lafont's treatment of the a priori.

On Lafont's model, Heidegger's relativism is primarily a function of his attempt to combine a quasi-Kantian story about the a priori with an increased emphasis on history. The basic idea is as follows. On Kant's picture, there is a single, universal a priori structure shared at least by all human agents.[iv] For Heidegger, in contrast, there are supposedly multiple a priori structures, each tied to a particular historical period. As Lafont puts it:

> [U]nderstanding of being is not the (eternal) endowment of a transcendental ego…but is merely contingent, changes historically and cannot be put under control at will. It is thus a fate into which human beings are thrown. (Lafont 2002:186).

These structures – "world-disclosures, understandings of being, conceptual schemes" – determine how we experience entities, just as for Kant the a priori conditions of human understanding and sensibility condition appearances. By extension, all truths about the objects of experience are relative to those structures (Lafont 2007:105).

Heidegger is thus a relativist in a double sense. First, "truth is relative to a prior understanding of being": this is his appropriation of transcendental idealism (Lafont 2007:105). Second, his work is defined by the multiplication or "relativization of the Kantian conception of apriority", that is his willingness to historicise the a priori, recognising different epochs, each with its own understandings of being (Lafont 2007:118). The result is a relativism driven by a basically Kantian framework, within which Heidegger simply "substitutes the ontological difference for the empirical/transcendental distinction" (Lafont 2000: xii).

The question of how the a priori interacts with historical change is, of course, central to post-Kantian thought from Hegel onwards: as Foucault observed talk of a "historical a priori" produces "a rather startling effect" (Foucault 1971:127). Heidegger was extremely familiar with such issues from his work on Dilthey, whose ambition was nothing less than a "critique of historical reason": indeed, Kisiel labels the 1924 draft of SZ the "Dilthey Draft" such is the extent of the influence (Dilthey 1988:141; Kisiel 1993:315). The idea of some kind of historical a priori, and the complexities that brings with it, is very clearly present in the key texts cited by Lafont. For example, when discussing the shift to modern mathematical physics, Heidegger describes the Galilean revolution in terms close to a Kuhnian 'paradigm-shift': Galileo's achievement was not in any sense straightforwardly empirical, rather he set

up a new model or "projected plan" in terms of which entities could be then interpreted, calculated and predicted (Ga41:89-91). This type of framework:

> [D]etermines in advance the constitution of the being of entities…This prior plan of the being of entities is inscribed within the basic concepts and principles of the science of nature. (Ga3:11)

Underlying this move is an equation of such 'paradigms' with synthetic a priori judgments, themselves understood as transcendental principles in terms of which and through which we encounter entities (Ga41:183-4).[v]

What is distinctive about Lafont's Heidegger is the rigorous and systematic way in which she elaborates these initial moves. I want to highlight three dimensions of her approach in particular.

First, each instance of the a priori retains the full determinative force of its Kantian predecessor. So, for example, both the Aristotelian and Galilean ontologies retain "the absolute authority…that a priori knowledge is supposed to have" (Lafont 2007:107). It is vital to see that for Lafont this is not simply an epistemic claim: it is not the claim that people find it hard or perhaps even impossible to escape from the assumptions that define our period or its best science. Rather, it is a *constitutive* claim, one which commits Heidegger to what is effectively a historicised transcendental idealism in which one set of appearances, those of the Greek world, is suddenly replaced by another, those of the modern one.

> [T]he way in which entities are understood must determine in advance which entities we are referring to or, in general terms, meaning must determine reference….Given that the prior understanding of the being of entities is what makes our experience an experience of some specific entities (rather than others), it determines what these entities are (for us), that is, it determines what they are accessible to us as….[T]he understanding of the being of entities determines all experience of those entities.
> (Lafont 2007:108. I have inverted the order of the final two sentences)

The ontological difference is thus:

> A dichotomy in which one pole (the meaning pre-given in an understanding of being) necessarily assumes constitutive powers over the other (i.e. over our access to the referents, to the intraworldy entities). (Lafont 2000:180)

Second, it follows that there exists an extreme incommensurability between the various frameworks. Since each understanding of being is "responsible for the constitution of objects…an alternative projection is (by definition) a projection of different objects and thus

incommensurable with it" (Lafont 2000: 171). This, Lafont argues, is the point which Heidegger is making in texts such as this:

> It is simply useless to measure the Aristotelian doctrine of motion against that of Galileo with respect to results, judging the former as backward and the latter as advanced. For in each case, nature means something completely different. (Ga45:52-3; cited by Lafont in her 2007:111)

In other words, each of the various a prioris constitute a genuinely distinct set of entities: claims about entities can only be true or false relative to that framework.

> Given that, according to Heidegger, entities are only accessible through a prior projection of their being, it is clear that entities made accessible by genuinely different projections are, by definition, not the same entities. (Lafont 2007:112)

Kusch's Heidegger, although motivated more by reflections on language and less by direct links to Kant, similarly sees us as "trapped in our project" (Kusch 1989:238).

> Third, since the understanding of being determines the nature of the entities we can encounter, there is no possibility of that encounter forcing any revision in that understanding. For Lafont's Heidegger, there is therefore a substantive class of claims, including the basics of both Aristotelian and Galilean physics, which are immune to empirical correction. In line with the incommensurability just discussed, these same principles cannot be criticised from any external perspective since the reference of any theory is determined entirely by the beliefs which constitute that theory: those who disagree are thus necessarily not talking about the same thing (Lafont 2007:112,117). This, unsurprisingly, has far reaching epistemic implications. For example, Lafont sees Heidegger as unable to make sense of the standard idea of scientific progress, insofar as that entails the gradual revision of our principles based on their empirical testing:

> Thus, the attempt to conceive the historical changes in our understanding of being as a learning process is based on an illusion…They are unrevisable from within and inaccessible (meaningless) from without. (Lafont 2007:112)

> We now have a fairly detailed account of Lafont's views in place: what should we make of them? There are, as ever in the history of philosophy, two questions: is this an intellectually viable position and was it Heidegger's position? What is striking is that both Lafont and her opponents agree on a negative answer to the first question. For Lafont, the significance of Heidegger is ultimately as a cautionary tale, warning against the "indirect theory of reference" which supposedly lay behind his approach; he should, instead, have

opted for some kind of direct reference story, perhaps of a broadly Kripkean type (Lafont 2000: xvii, 184). Other commentators, who typically agree with Lafont on little else, concur in this philosophically negative verdict. Wrathall, for example, describes the theory's underlying assumptions regarding both reference and scientific progress "as patently absurd" (Wrathall 2011:121). I do not, however, want to approach the issue in terms either of reference or scientific progress: Heidegger's views on both are changeable and hang on myriad subsidiary questions such as whether philosophy is a science.

Instead, I want to make a more direct move. I think that the picture Lafont paints of Heidegger, whilst highly sophisticated, is also deeply mistaken. My aim in the second half of this chapter will be to advance an alternative reading, one which has at least as much textual support and which avoids the philosophical dangers of Lafont's model. In line with the principle of charity, we should attribute this second view to Heidegger – as we will see, it is one on which he stands fundamentally opposed to relativism.

(§3) Heidegger as Anti-Relativist: The Hermeneutic Reading

I will now argue that Heidegger is not a relativist. Instead, his position is that relativism is an understandable, but ultimately misguided response to the errors of its dialectical opponents. As he put it himself:

> The theories of relativism and scepticism originate in a partly justified opposition
> against a distorted absolutism and dogmatism with respect to the concept of truth.
> (Ga24:316)

Heidegger's own preferred tactic will be to put in to question the underlying assumptions which have left us oscillating between the two poles of relativism and absolutism.

Before I can address Heidegger's position directly, however, I need to clear some other issues out of the way. The basic problem is that his views on relativism are interwoven with his stance on some of the most contested and complex topics in his thought: truth, idealism and being. Clearly, I cannot treat these all here; my aim instead is to get to a point where the key questions for current purposes can be isolated and focussed in on.

Truth

Heidegger clearly defends a view of truth that is in some important sense relational: as he puts it in a famous passage, in the absence of Dasein, Newton's laws would not be true (SZ: 226–7). They would not be false either: rather it is simply inappropriate to talk about truth or falsity under that condition (SZ: 226–7). As Kusch perceptively notes, this type of

relationality falls short of relativism; given his own relativistic reading of Heidegger, Kusch puts this down to a reluctance to state the doctrine openly:

> It seems that Heidegger should have gone further here by saying that Newton's laws are true only for those Daseins that share the same universal medium of meaning with Newton; yet the Heidegger of *Being and Time* does not seem to be ready to state the relativism of his notion of truth so bluntly. (Kusch 1989:191).

As I see it, however, the key is that the dependence of truth on Dasein won't entail relativism in any significant sense if all relevant *properties* of entities remain independent of Dasein. Suppose, for example, that the properties and behaviours identified by Newton's laws would remain exactly as they are even if Dasein had never existed or if Dasein had always endorsed an Aristotelian view, and it is simply that one can only declare the laws "true" insofar as someone believes them. What we would then have is a proposal to modify the use of the truth predicate rather than any substantive relativism. Indeed, this is precisely what I have argued elsewhere: Heidegger's remarks on truth are primarily motivated by the phenomenological assumption that "being true is a comportmental relation between the presumed and intuited, namely identity" (Ga20:70).[vi] We do not need to settle this here; what matters is simply that there is a non-relativistic way of reading Heidegger's remarks on Newton.

Idealism and Being

The relativist might concede that this is correct, but argue that the problem is with the realist assumptions in the antecedent of my conditional: after all, for someone like Lafont, the properties of entities do *indeed* change along with Dasein's views. In this way, the focus shifts from truth to idealism. My own view is that Heidegger was a realist, and I think the exegetical situation is much more complex than Lafont recognises, partly because Heidegger, perhaps uniquely, also viewed *Kant* as a realist (Golob 2013). But again, this is not the place to debate those issues: one fundamental issue, as Blattner has stressed, is that the ambiguity between realism and idealism is present in the very definition of "being" used by Heidegger. On the one hand, as "being" is traditionally used to mean something like "that in virtue of which an entity is an entity and an entity of the sort it is" (Blattner 1999): thus, Heidegger himself introduces "being" as "that which determines entities as entities" (SZ:6). On the other, Heidegger immediately moves to a definition of "being" as "that in terms of which entities are already understood" (SZ: 6). Carman thus identifies "being" as "the condition of the intelligibility of entities as entities", whilst Frede similarly glosses "to be" as "to be understood as" (Carman 2003:15; Frede 1993:57). The result is that to draw the balance

between the realist and idealist strands of Heidegger's project one would need first to get clear on his conception of being, and indeed on his understanding of Kant. But again, all we need for current purposes, is to note that a realist reading is by no means impossible: there are, for example, plenty of passages which accord with a straightforward realism on which all the plausibly mind-independent properties of entities are indeed mind-independent. Consider these:

> World is only, if, and as long as Dasein exists. Nature can also be when
> no Dasein exists. (Ga24: 241)

> Entities are in themselves the kind of entities they are, and in the way
> they are, even if, for example, Dasein does not exist. (Ga26: 194)

As with truth, I cannot settle this debate here: my point is simply to show that they are indeed *debates*, and thus that there is space for something other than a relativistic reading. The task now is to return back to relativism itself and to sketch out how such a reading might look.

Back to Relativism

The place to start is with a basic point made by Wrathall against Lafont:

> [I]f Heidegger were simply advancing the weaker hypothesis that whenever we experience anything, 'we have always already understood entities in one way or other', his claim would be unobjectionable. But [Lafont] sees him as advancing the much stronger thesis that 'the way in which we in fact have always already understood everything is constitutive of what things are or of what things we can refer to' (Lafont 2000: 139, n31)…No one would deny that Heidegger believes our experience of things is *guided* by a meaningfully structured understanding of the world. (Wrathall 2002:219-20; original emphasis).

Heidegger certainly thinks that an understanding of being must proceed any encounter with entities: indeed, this is how he defines the Copernican Turn (Ga3:13). But, as Wrathall observes, that need not imply that this understanding *constitutes* entities in the very strong sense which Lafont relies upon. Instead, it might simply shape our encounter in some much weaker sense.

How should we develop this basic point? Heidegger himself provides a detailed answer: given the importance of the following passage, I quote in full.

> It was an error of phenomenology to believe that phenomena could be correctly seen merely through unprejudiced looking. But it is just as great an error to believe that, since perspectives are always necessary, the phenomena themselves can *never* be seen and that everything amounts to contingent, subjective anthropological standpoints. From these two impossibilities, we obtain the necessary insight that our central task and methodological problem is to arrive at the *right* perspective. We need to take a preliminary view of the phenomenon but precisely for this reason it is of decisive importance whether the guiding perspective is adequate to the phenomenon, i.e. whether it is derived from its substantial content or not (or only constructed). It is not because we must view it from some perspective or other that the phenomenon gets blocked off to us, but because the perspective adopted most often does not have a genuine origin in the phenomenon itself. (Ga34:286; original emphasis)

Heidegger here rejects the fantasy of a view from nowhere. We always approach entities in terms of some understanding of being; we always operate out of some specific hermeneutic situation. But those assumptions do *not* blankly determine the entity as on Lafont's picture. Rather, "our central task" is to engage in a continuous process of adjusting and recalibrating our standpoint in order "to arrive at the right perspective".[vii] The "mode of discovery" must be "as it were, regulated and prescribed by the entity to be discovered and by its mode of being" (Ga24:99). Thus, the key task is to "secure the right access" to the entities we are interrogating (SZ:15), the right starting point for the inquiry, the right methods (SZ:36). All the while we need to be conscious that many familiar principles or concepts or tools will be unsuitable because they are not sufficiently attentive to the dynamics of the domains in question (SZ:36); for example, one cannot simply appeal to modal logic without recognising that the notions of modality appropriate to different entities are not even coextensive (SZ:143–4). In order to establish a "stable way of coining the appropriate concepts" (SZ:55) we therefore need, in classic hermeneutic fashion, to first become aware of the baggage, the imbalances and prejudices, which the tradition has bequeathed us (SZ:22). To do this, SZ seeks to identify certain systematic sources of error, such as *Das Man*, and certain systematic devices for escaping such error, such as anxiety. The result is not a relativistic picture, but one that is both deeply phenomenological and deeply hermeneutic: the key "methodological problem" is precisely how to *develop* our understanding of being so that it allows the phenomenon to "show itself from itself".

One reason this result has been missed, I would suggest, is a tendency by commentators to conflate regional and fundamental ontology: the contrast is not mentioned, for example, in the Lafont article which sets out her view in most detail (Lafont 2007). As I see it, Heideggerian fundamental ontology, for example the claim that Dasein encounters entities by locating them within a teleologically structured world, has a classically a priori, universal and transcendental status: it holds for all Dasein. By extension, there is no question of adjusting it to the entity in question: it is unchangeable. But this is unproblematic. Not only is it universal, thus preventing the proliferation of frameworks which so troubled Lafont, but it concerns only properties that are obviously relational: not even the most ardent realist would have a problem with the fact that something's being "equipment" depends on the existence of Dasein. But when it comes to regional ontologies such as Aristotelian or Galilean science, ontological truth is, to borrow a phrase from Haugeland, "beholden to entities" (Haugeland 2013:201): it is and must be open to adjustment and revision as we seek to "arrive at the *right* perspective" (Ga34:286; original emphasis).

To develop this approach further, I want to address two issue in particular. The first concerns empirical correction in the natural sciences. As you will recall on Lafont's account Heidegger is committed to a near complete rejection of empirical inquiry: all such a process amounts to is the 'playing out' of the "axioms" which pre-define that understanding of being (Lafont 2000:286). On my reading, in contrast, things are much more fluid. Heidegger certainly doubts that first order scientific study will be enough to shift dominant but mistaken paradigms. But this is not because our understandings of being are inherently "unrevisable from within and inaccessible (meaningless) from without" (Lafont 2007, 112). It is rather because a *mixture* of methods is needed to adjust our perspectives in the right ways. For example, Heidegger criticises the natural sciences, in particular modern mathematical physics, by arguing that their key concepts are drawn from historically questionable sources (SZ:362; Ga41:33,92-3). For Heidegger, these methodological failings imply that such sciences are in an important sense not genuinely attending to the phenomena themselves: for all their stress on experimentation, they are not truly engaging with the data, but rather are driven by antecedent assumptions to "skip over the facts" (Ga41:93).[viii] This is how we should read passages such as the following:

> The Greek doctrine of natural processes does not rest upon insufficient observation, but rather upon a different (and perhaps even deeper) concept of nature that is prior to all particular observations. (Ga45:52)

This passage was cited by Lafont in favour of her approach (Lafont 2000:271-2), but one can now see it that it is perfectly compatible with the hermeneutic alternative which I have defended: the point is not that we are just dealing with two different worlds, but that Greek investigative methods had at least some substantial advantages. One may, of course deny this – in line with Heidegger's own practice it gives a significance to philosophy and its history which few natural scientists would accept – but it is not a relativist view. Similarly consider this, again cited by Lafont:

> [T]he advanced modern science of nature is not a whit more true than the Greek; on the contrary, at most it is more untrue since it is completely caught up in the web of its own methodology, and for all its discoveries, it lets that which is actually the object of these discoveries slip away: namely, the nature of the relation of human beings to it and their place within it. (Ga45:53; cited by Lafont 2000:272)

The point here is precisely to criticise modern natural science for "letting the object…slip away", and the explanation is exactly what my reading predicts: methodological shortcomings which prevent it from being sufficiently attentive to that object.

The second issue I want to highlight concerns Heidegger's lifelong commitment to what one might call 'rampant property pluralism'. By this I mean that he is extremely hostile to programmes which reduce certain properties in order to avoid including them in a final ontology. For example, he opposes the standard projectivist stories on which properties such as 'toolhood' are reduced to "merely a way of taking" those entities:

> The kind of Being which belongs to these entities is readiness-to-hand. But this characteristic is not to be understood as merely a way of taking them, as if we were talking such 'aspects' into the 'entities' which we proximally encounter, or as if some world-stuff which is proximally present-at-hand in itself were 'given subjective colouring' in this way…*Readiness-to-hand is the way in which entities as they are 'in themselves' are defined ontologico-categorially.* (SZ:71; original emphasis)

Similarly, he holds both that individual Dasein have causal properties, for example being a certain mass, and other properties, such as freedom, which must be explained in terms of an entirely different framework (SZ:135; Ga31: 210). Whilst not as important as the preceding issue regarding empiricism and methodology, it is important to bear this in mind when reading Heidegger on the clash between Aristotelian and modern science: there is a sense for him in which both are true, not because of relativism, but because both capture different aspects of the very wide range of properties that entities do in fact possess.

Bringing these remarks together, one can now see how Lafont's view actually conflicts with the basic spirit of texts such as SZ, one of whose central concerns is precisely to highlight and critique cases in which a thinker refuses to revise some initial method, concept, approach or assumption in the face of the phenomena. For example, Descartes is extensively criticised for imposing a pre-given framework on entities (SZ: 96). Indeed, this is Cartesianism's original sin:

> The kind of being which belongs to entities within the world is something which they themselves might have been permitted to present; but Descartes does not let them do so. (SZ: 96)

If Lafont's approach were right, this would not be a criticism but an unavoidable statement of fact.

(§4) Conclusion – Relativism as Symptom Not Solution

On the interpretation I have defended Heidegger was never a relativist. Instead, his position fuses phenomenology, hermeneutics and Kantianism in a distinctive way, one that gives priority to the process of adjusting our ontology to map the entities and objects we encounter. This process has an inherently circular structure: as we recognise ways in which our understanding is not calibrated to the phenomena, we continually revise that understanding, thus throwing up new 'feedback' which in turn forces further revisions (SZ: 153). In line with the caveat offered in the introduction, my focus here has been on early Heidegger, but it is very natural to see the shifts in his later work as motivated by a growing fear that the framework of SZ itself failed this test, preventing him from accommodating, from doing justice to phenomena and events from artworks to *physis* itself.

I want to end with one final piece of evidence, and one that might seem to have a particular clarity and directness. As Kusch notes, there is a letter to Löwith in which Heidegger openly identifies as a "dogmatic subjective relativist" (Kusch 1989:191). How can my reading handle this?

This is the same document in which Heidegger famously identifies as a "Christian theo*logian*" (original emphasis) rather than a philosopher, and it is a complex text. The immediate context is the question of facticity and philosophical method: Heidegger is arguing against a university which he sees as plagued by "fossilized 'intellecutualism'" (Heidegger 2007:101). Philosophically, he defends a position on which "with respect to the things in

themselves we are 'absolutely' *objectively rigorous*", but where this rigour arises not from some "fictious non-personality", a view from nowhere, but from an intense personal engagement (Heidegger 2007:101 – original emphasis). We should be wary about trying to reconstruct too precise a view on the basis of an informal letter, but one can see that the contours of Heidegger's position here match those defended above: there is no tension at all between a historical, concrete starting point and an ambition to accuracy with respect to the things themselves. On the contrary, as in §3, the two go hand in hand. It is also clear that the relativist label is not one Heidegger himself is happy with: he introduces it only on the penultimate page and only to frame the contrast with Löwith, who is identified as an "objective relativist". Heidegger immediately states the resultant taxonomy is of "no interest to me at all" (Heidegger 2007:101).

In short what we see here, exactly as in his published work, is a willingness to recognize some merit in relativism as a crude way of articulating a deeper truth, combined with an insistence on distancing his own philosophy from the term. Ultimately, for Heidegger, relativism is not so much a solution as a symptom, a symptom of the mix of epistemological confusions, tensions and insights which he takes the tradition to have bequeathed, and which his own hermeneutic model of truth attempts to move beyond.

Abbreviations

References are to the Gesamtausgabe edition (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975–; abbreviated as Ga), with the exception of SZ, where I use the standard text (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1957). With respect to translations, I have endeavoured to stay close to the Macquarrie and Robinson version of SZ on the grounds that it is by far the best known. Where other translations exist, I have typically consulted these but often modified them: the relevant translations are listed below.

SZ   *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1957); *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and
       E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962)

Ga3   *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (1998)

Ga24   *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (1997); *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*,
       trans. A. Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982)

Ga31   *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit. Einleitung in die Philosophie* (1982); *The*
       Essence of Human Freedom, trans. T. Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002)

Ga41   *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (1984)

Ga45   *Grundfragen der Philosophie* (1984)

Ga61   *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles* (1985)

References

Blattner, W. (1999), *Heidegger's Temporal Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carman, T. (2002), "Was Heidegger a Linguistic Idealist?" *Inquiry* 45 (2): 205–15.

———. (2003), *Heidegger's Analytic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dilthey, W. (1998), *Introduction to the human sciences*. Trans. R.Betanzos. Princeton N.J.:Princeton University Press.

Dreyfus, H. (1991), *Being-in-the-World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

———. (2005), "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental", *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79: 47-65.

Foucault, M. (1971), *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Trans. A.M.Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971.

Frede, D. (1993), "The Question of Being: Heidegger's Project". In Guignon (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press:42-70.

Golob, S. (2013), "Heidegger on Kant, Time, and the 'Form' of Intentionality". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21: 345–67.

———. (2014), *Heidegger on Concepts, Freedom and Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haugeland, J. (2013), *Dasein Disclosed*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Heidegger, M. (2007), *Becoming Heidegger: On the Trail of His Early Occasional Writings, 1910-1927*. Kisiel, T. and Sheehan, T. (eds). Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press.

Husserl, E., 1975. *Logische Untersuchungen. Erster Band: Prolegomena zur reinen Logik*. Holenstein, E. (ed). The Hague: Nijhoff.

———. 1997. 'Phenomenology and Anthropology' in Palmer, R. and Sheehan,T. (eds) *Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927-1931)*. London: Kluwer.

Kisiel, T. (1993), *The Genesis of Being and Time*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kusch, M. (1989), *Language as Calculus vs. Language as Universal Medium: A Study in Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Dordrecht; London: Kluwer.

Lafont, C. (2000), *Heidegger, Language, and World-Disclosure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. (2002), "Precis of Heidegger, Language and World-Disclosure". *Inquiry* 45 (2): 185–89.

———. (2007), "Heidegger and the Synthetic A Priori". In Malpas and Crowell (eds) *Transcendental Heidegger*. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 105-118.

Tugendhat, E. (1994), "Heidegger's Idea of Truth". In Wachterhauser (ed) *Hermeneutics and Truth*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press: 83–97.

Wrathall, M. (2002). "Heidegger, Truth and Reference". *Inquiry* 45 (2):217–28.

———. (2011), *Heidegger and Unconcealment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

[i] For a penetrating analysis of the dissertation and its links to the broader debates around judgement in the period, see Martin 2006.

[ii] For the key existing responses to Lafont, see Carman 2002 and Wrathall 2002.

[iii] The *locus classicus* for the standard reading is Dreyfus 1991; Dreyfus 2005 gives a particularly clear exposition of the consequences for language. My own view is that Heidegger defends a unique and highly innovative position which is conceptualist and yet not tacitly propositionalist. To put it another way, his aim is to cash conceptuality without appeal to language (for details, see Golob 2014).

[iv] There are complicated exegetical questions as to what divergence Kant allows for non-rational animals or creatures such as angels but for current purposes we can simply bracket that and work with a simpler, universalist Kant.

[v] This reflects Heidegger's basic understanding of the synthetic a priori as equivalent to ontological knowledge. He summarises the Copernican turn by stating that:

> What Kant wants to say is this: 'Not all cognition is ontic and where there is such cognition it is made possible only through ontological cognition.' (Ga3: 13)

[vi] The debate here is closely connected to Tugendhat's influential claim that Heidegger robs truth of any normative force (the key text is Tugendhat 1994). Unsurprisingly, Lafont is highly sympathetic to such a reading (Lafont 2000:148). For detailed arguments against both Tugendhat and Lafont see Golob 2014:180-191.

[vii] I draw here on arguments developed in greater detail in Golob 2014.

[viii] By extension, Heidegger is positive towards scientists, such as Bohr and Heisenberg, who he thinks combine empirical research with this kind of broader methodological and conceptual reflection (Ga41:67).