

# Towards a Phenomenology of Development

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## Introduction

This paper has two parts. The first part examines Heidegger's concept of philosophy and his understanding of philosophical concepts as formal indications. The second part examines Heidegger's formal indication of the social, and how this is significant for understanding what it means to be a self. Heidegger's approach suggests that, just as the self cannot be conceived as a substance, neither can society or the social. I conclude by suggesting that this non-substantialist conception of the social has implications for international development.

## The concept of philosophy

Heidegger's concept of philosophy is that it is the inquiry into how beings are encountered. Against the Neo-Kantians of his day, he argued that philosophy is not about knowledge of objects. The Neo-Kantian concept presupposed that objects are objects for consciousness, and that the philosophical question is about how such objects are constituted by and for consciousness, a view which Heidegger characterized as the "theoretical attitude". In contrast, he argued that philosophy is about *experience*. What is characteristic of experience is not that it *presupposes* some experiencer to which it belongs as a property, but rather that it is *experiencing*, i.e., a happening in which there is an experience of what is experienced. Phenomenology approaches experience as it constitutes itself in itself. The method of phenomenology is to describe experience just as it shows itself, without presupposing that there is an experiencer to whom what is experienced appears.

However, this raises the question of whether phenomenology, too, is a theoretical activity. For isn't description a form of conceptualization? And isn't conceptualization always generalizing or universalizing? If the theoretical attitude is unable to grasp objects purely as objects, because it has to describe them, isn't the phenomenological attitude unable to grasp experience purely as experience precisely *because* it has to describe? Heidegger presented this objection as follows:

All description is a 'grasping-in-words'—'verbal expression' is generalizing. This objection rests on the opinion that all language is itself already objectifying, i.e. that living in meaning implies a theoretical grasping of what is meant, that the fulfilment of meaning is without further ado *only* object-giving.  
(GA56/57:111/93)

The claim that language is objectifying because its meaning depends on objects also holds for concepts:

the opinion is advanced that the generalization of the meaning function, its character of universality, is identical with the theoretical and conceptual universality of the genus concept, i.e. that there is only the theoretical universality of a genus and that all verbal meaning consists in nothing but this...  
(GA56/57:111/94).

Thus, if phenomenology describes experience as it is in itself, isn't it conceptualizing and thus describing in general or universal terms? And therefore phenomenology cannot do what it claims, i.e., to grasp experience in its full immediacy and situationality.

### Philosophical concepts

Heidegger argued that this objection failed to recognize that philosophical concepts are unlike other concepts. He argued that philosophical concepts are not tied to objects that they are concepts about, either in a generalizing sense or in a formalizing sense. Whereas the concepts of positive disciplines are determined by the objects that they investigate (for instance, species and genus in taxonomy), and thus remain bound to those objects, philosophical concepts function in a different way. By referring us to the happening of experience, they ward off any dependence on or relation to specific, fixed meanings or contents. Rather than being bound to contents, they refer us to how the relation to such content *comes about* in experience.

Heidegger called such concepts *formal indications*. The notion of formal indication was a radicalization of Husserl's analysis of essentially occasional expressions such as "here", "now", "this" and, most importantly, "I". Husserl argued that such expressions do not immediately present an object. In the abstract, devoid of context, "here" does not present some place, nor does "I" present some speaker. Yet this does not mean that such expressions are universal in the sense of applying equally to every possible place or every possible speaker. The general sense of such expressions, which Husserl called the "indicating meaning", is *directive*. They direct the hearer or reader towards the specific context in which the expression has its particular meaning, which Husserl called the "meaning indicated".<sup>1</sup> Thus, such expressions are not subsumptive, but are indicative.

Heidegger radicalized this sense of indication by arguing that there was a sense of experience that Husserl had overlooked, namely its *enactment* sense. Husserl's analysis of intentional acts had discerned the relational sense and the content sense in intentionality, i.e., that in every such act there is a correlation between intending and what is intended. The phenomenon of intentionality, then, cannot be articulated as constituted by consciousness, its object, and the relation between the two, because neither consciousness nor the object are found within experience. Instead, what is found is the content, i.e., the experienced as it is "had" *in* the experience, and the relation, i.e., the experiencing as the "having" of the experienced. Husserl argued that these two always go together, because this is what constitutes any experience *as* an experience.

Heidegger argued, however, that Husserl had overlooked the "going together" of intending and what is intended, i.e., of experience and experienced. Husserl's analysis focussed on intentional acts as static, rather than as enactments. In this way, there was a latent theoreticism in Husserl's approach. Intentional acts can easily become objectified if we do not pay attention to their enactment. Formal indication, then, is Heidegger's method for grasping experience just as it is in itself. The immediacy and situationality of experience means that it can never be directly grasped. All such direct grasping involves generalizing or universalizing, whereas experience is always individual or as Heidegger would say later, it is in each case mine. Furthermore, experience is not an object, but rather a happening, an enactment in which we enact ourselves. every theoretical conceptualization destroys this enactment-sense, or "stills the stream", of experience, as Natorp put it.

Formal indications are therefore non-objectifying, because they are not bound either to determinate contents of experience, nor to the relation to those contents. Instead, these concepts *direct* us to the very enactment of experience. But they can only do so by warding off the sense

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations I*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 217-221.

of experience as a content, i.e., as *what* is experienced. This is the first of the functions of formal indications, the “prohibitive-referring function”:<sup>2</sup>

The formal indication...possesses, along with its referential character, a prohibiting (detering, preventing) one at the same time...the formal indication functions both...to guide as well as to deter in various ways. (GA61 pg. 105)

In discussing how philosophy itself can only be defined in a formally indicative way, Heidegger argues,

It is characteristic of an indicative definition that it precisely does not present fully and properly the object which is to be determined. Indeed, it merely indicates, but, as genuinely indicative, it does give in advance the principle of the object. An indicative definition includes the sense that concretion is not to be possessed there without further ado but that the concrete instead presents a task of its own kind and a peculiarly constituted task of actualization. (GA61 pg. 26)

This does not mean that formal indications are completely indeterminate, however. Just as the indicating meaning of one occasional expression differs from that of another (“here” compared to “now” or “I”, say), and thus each one gives some direction to how the meaning is to be fulfilled (by looking for some location, by noting the time, or by regarding the speaker, *in the specific context*), formal indications also have a reference.

The term, “formally indicated”, does not mean merely represented, meant, or intimated in some way or other, such that it would remain completely open how and where we are to gain possession of the object itself..

There resides in the formal indication a very definite bond; this bond says that I stand in a quite definite direction of approach, and it points out the only way of arriving at what is proper, namely, by exhausting and fulfilling what is improperly indicated, by following the indication. (GA61 pg. 26).

Thus every philosophical concept, according to Heidegger, points out how to arrive at its fulfilment, at “what is proper” to it, by following in the direction that the concept itself points. In such following, however, we reverse the usual way in which we grasp objects through concepts. Instead of being presented with a determinate content or meaning by the concept, we have to actively enact the relation that the concept points towards. In doing so, however, we transform our way of understanding. This is the second function of formal indication, the “reversing-transforming” function:

The second function of a philosophical concept as a formal indication is to reverse the customary way of objectifying whatever is entertained, a reversal that transforms the individual who philosophizes. Accordingly, this second function is referred to as the “reversing-transforming” function.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Formal indication has been discussed in English by a number of scholars. I have found the following to be particularly useful, and draw on them here: Daniel O. Dahlstrom, “Heidegger’s Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications”, *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 47, June 1994, pp. 775-795; Ryan Streeter, “Heidegger’s formal indication: A question of method in *Being and Time*”, *Man and World*, vol. 30, 1997, pp. 413-430; James Risser, “From concept to word: On the radicality of philosophical hermeneutics”, *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 33, 2000, pp. 309-325. Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s “Being and Time”*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, contains useful discussions of this notion, and helpful paraphrases of a number of Heidegger’s early lecture-courses.

3 Dahlstrom, *supra* note 1, pg. 783.

Formal indications, then, are characterized by both completeness and incompleteness, or by determinateness and indeterminateness. They determinately refer us to the way in which they can be enacted or brought to fulfilment of meaning, but they are indeterminate with regard to the contents of such enactment. That is, they do not prescribe *what* is experienced, but only *how* we can approach the having of experience.

Of course, there is always the risk that we fail to pay attention to the formally indicative character of the concept altogether, and instead take it to be presenting us with a determinate meaning. In such cases, we think we are dealing with a philosophical system, or a finished work, and miss the way that the text or lecture is supposed to engage us.

### **Being-a-self and being-with-one-another**

Once we understand that Heidegger's concept of philosophy is formally indicative, and the concepts that he employs are formal indications, we begin to see what the descriptions of being-a-self [*Selbstsein*] and being-with [*Mitsein*] in *Being and Time* are all about.

First, we should note that Heidegger refers to the entity that is being investigated here as *Da-sein* (which I will translate as "openedness") and not "human being" [*Mensch*] or "subject" [*Subjekt*]. As a formal indication, this prohibits the immediate identification of this entity as that with which we are already familiar as the human being or the subject. What it refers us to is the way in which we have access to this entity (which we ourselves in each case *are*). We have access to this entity by *being* it, but this is not immediately familiar to us, either. Thus, Heidegger designates *being* this entity as "existence" [*Existenz*], which, as a formal indication, is not to be immediately identified with what is familiar to us in the philosophical tradition as *existentia* (SZ 42). Rather, it indicates that the characteristics of this being are "in each case possible ways for it to be" (SZ 42). Openedness is not a thing with determinate properties, like the human being or the subject, but "*is* in each case its possibility" (SZ 42).

One of the fundamental structural features of openedness is that it *appears*, otherwise we could not say anything about it. However, this doesn't mean that we are immediately familiar with *how* this being appears. This feature is co-original with the "world" in which this being appears, and its being "in" the world. But all of these are formal indications, and thus really have to be put as questions, as Heidegger does in an early lecture-course:

What is meant by "world"? What does "in" a world mean? And what does "being" in a world look like? (GA63 pg. 65)

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger puts the third question as "*who* is it who is openedness in everydayness?" and formally indicates the answer as "being-with and co-openedness" (SZ 114). Together, these constitute being-with-one-another.<sup>4</sup> This structure is the ground for everyday being-a-self.

Thus, in our day-to-day way of being, we are ourselves in a kind of social anonymity or impersonality, which Heidegger calls Everyman [*das Man*], and which he indicates is an existential, or a fundamental character of being that constitutes openedness. Everyman formally

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<sup>4</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger does not make this entirely clear. In a lecture-course from the previous year, however, Heidegger indicates that "[b]eing-with-one-another...combines the structure of being of my own temporally particular Dasein as being-with and the mode of being of others as co-Dasein" (HCT pg. 241). For purposes of brevity I will use the former expression.

indicates the social source of possibilities. Our possibilities, Heidegger argues, have two, related sources. One is the things that we deal with day-to-day, such as the computer I am writing on, the cup I am drinking from, and so on. Insofar as I have to deal with such things, and therefore have to learn how to use them, they are a source of my possibilities.

However, such things always refer to others as well, in the form of those who made them, others who use them, and so on. Thus, the second source of possibilities comes from the social. The different social roles that I can occupy (Ph.D. candidate, husband, son, musician, and so on) and the different social functions I can perform (shopping, cooking, etc.) *are* my possibilities. Nevertheless, they are possibilities for me in what Heidegger indicates is an *unowned* [*uneigentlich*] way. This does not mean that they are not genuine possibilities, or that I am somehow being someone else or being socially dominated by others. Rather, what he is indicating is that these possibilities are not *unique* to me. Others can, and do, occupy the same social roles and functions. They are not possibilities that I somehow generate, but rather ones that I take up from my everyday social context. The self that I am being in this way is an *unowned* self, the Everyman-self [*Man-selbst*].

This analysis seems to suggest that there is an *owned* [*eigentlich*] way to be a self that does not involve these everyday, impersonal social possibilities. However, this is to misunderstand Heidegger's formally indicative approach. If there were such a way to be a self, then it would have to get its possibilities from another source, and that source would have to be *internal*, i.e., the self *itself*. This idea of the self is what we are familiar with as the subject, and how we usually unphilosophically take ourselves to be. But the formally indicative approach prohibits this straightforward identification of ownedness with subjectivity.

By *ownedness* [*Eigentlichkeit*], Heidegger means a way of being-a-self that involves exactly the same possibilities as unownedness. It involves the same world of handy things and the same "circle of others" (SZ 297). What does ownedness change, then? Ownedness really has to do with how all the different characteristics of openedness are unified into a whole. For example, the possibilities that I take up from my social context do not constitute me as a unified being. Their very impersonality mitigates this. And if I just go along with being these possibilities of myself, then my very unity remains hidden to me. The modification of being-a-self from the unowned Everyman-self to owned self is a way in which my unity becomes transparent to me. I "see" myself not as a bundle of disparate possibilities, but as unified in that they *are* my possibilities, and I *can be* them. *What* these possibilities are is determined by my social context, i.e., the others I am with and the things I deal with. *How* they are *my* possibilities can be shown (to me) by the formal indication of being-a-self.

The point I want to stress here is that being-a-self is a formal indication, which refers us to how it is enacted, and prohibits the fixation on particular determinate contents that would provide the meaning of "self". The aim of the existential analytic is not to tell us what the self *is*, but to indicate that *being-a-self* is in fact a formally indicative way to be. *Being-a-self* really indicates *being* my possibilities. This in turn indicates that the way of being of this entity, formally indicated as openedness, is being-possible. Thus, *Being and Time* is in a sense the formal indication of possibility as that which constitutes our way of being. Arguably, the formal indication *for Being and Time* is

Higher than actuality stands possibility. (SZ 38)

In his analysis of being-in, which I cannot examine in detail here, Heidegger indicates that the fundamental way that we are in the world is in disclosing. We discover things in the world by

encountering them in dealing with them. We disclose ourselves as always already disclosed in one way or another. That is, in every case we find ourselves to already be in the world. And in so finding ourselves, we understand our being as the possibilities that are so disclosed to us. Thus, being-in indicates that we are disclosing disclosedness. However, because openedness is not self-containment, such disclosing disclosedness is always also co-disclosedness. I am only disclosed to myself as who I am in being-with with others.

Heidegger indicates this co-disclosedness as *discourse* [*Rede*]. Discourse, which is the ontological basis for language, is how being-in-the-world is made *explicitly* intelligible. Yet discourse refers fundamentally to being-with-one-another:

Discoursing is the “signifying” articulating of the intelligibility of being-in-the-world, to which being-with belongs, and that maintains itself in each case in a determinate way of caretaking being- with-one-another. (SZ 161)

This is further demonstrated in the phenomenon of communication or imparting [*Mitteilung*]:

The phenomenon of *imparting* must...be understood in an ontologically broad sense...It enacts the “partition” of the co-disposedness and the understoodness of being-with. Imparting is never something like a transport of lived-through experiences [*Erlebnissen*], for example, opinions and wishes, out of the interior of one subject into the interior of another. (SZ 162)

Thus, being-with-one-another is articulated in imparting or communication. Communication is not the conveyance of internal experiences, but rather the co-establishment and co-articulation of the meaning of our ways of being-in-the-world as being-with-one-another.

As a fundamental moment of the structure of openedness, then, being-with-one-another formally indicates that this being is constituted by co-openedness. Openedness is not a self-contained way of being, i.e., a substance, for the self is not a *thing* that can have contents. Rather, it is a way of being. And this way of being only happens in being-with-one-another, as articulated in communication.

Just as the formal indication of our way of being as co-openedness involves a different way of understanding the self, it also involves a different understanding of the social. Being-a-self is about being my social possibilities. The social, however, is not thereby substantialized. Although the social is a predominant source of possibilities, in enacting possibilities of myself, I also co-disclose new possibilities for others.

The way of being an owned self is to have a relation of being-possible towards the possibilities that are taken up from our social context. In his section on “The basic constitution of historicity” (§74), Heidegger indicates that being historical means being free for inherited possibilities, e.g., traditions and customs. But such inherited possibilities are never just there, in their full intelligibility for me to know. Rather, they are disclosed in “communication and contest” about them (SZ 385). The communication and contest about the meaning of our inherited traditions depends on our co-openedness. Without this, we cannot possibly *be* our traditions, for we cannot disclose them *as* traditions.

In summary, Heidegger’s formal indications refer us to our way of being possible as co-disclosed co-openedness. Without such co-disclosure and co-openedness, we could not be our possibilities. Yet to understand this, i.e., to disclose *this* aspect, it is necessary to prohibit the fixation of content about what those possibilities are. This, I think, is suggestive for how

development needs to be understood.

### **Formally indications of development?**

What is the purpose of a phenomenological inquiry into development? What might such an inquiry add to our understanding of this contested domain of representation and transcultural interaction? I argue here that such an approach allows us to analyse development from the “inside”, as it were, in a way which brings to light how development thinking tends towards the totalization not only of international relations, but also the self-relation of individual nations. Such self-relation is what constitutes a nation as the being that it is, as a pre-ceptive going along with itself. Rather than constituted by founding documents and/or the principles they contain (such as constitutions and declarations of independence, or abstract principles such as the rights of man), a nation is what and how it is only in the constant re-appropriation of how it has already become, i.e., in becoming what it already is. The effective nexus that holds a nation together or gathers it to itself is not to be found either in a set of principles that demand allegiance or in the continuity of a particular history.

In development thinking over the last fifty years, there has been a debate between those who argue that development’s possibilities are already available to us, and those who argue that any such determination of those possibilities merely reflects a hegemonic cultural understanding. In many respects, this debate echoes that of the late 19th century in Germany, between the “scientific” philosophers and the worldview philosophers (or historicists). Are there universal characteristics of social development, or is it culturally and historically specific? Both positions turn around the same kind of objectification that Heidegger identified in the theoretical attitude and historicism. The debate cannot be resolved simply in terms of what is taken to be objective, because this is precisely what is at issue. Heidegger’s method of formal indication, and his formally indicative concept of philosophy, suggests that the debate misses a fundamental aspect of our way of being. Because we are not self-contained beings, but are co-disclosed in being-with- one-another, we only come to be *who* we are in the communication and contest over the meaning of our inherited traditions. Such traditions do not have meaning outside of our co-openedness, for there is no outside. As possibilities, we disclose them for one another, but as so disclosed, they can only represent formal indications to one another as to our possible ways to be. It is in the enactment of these formally indicated possibilities of our being that we can come to understand *how* development is.

### **Abbreviations used for Heidegger’s works**

GA 56/57 *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, trans. Ted Sadler, Athlone Press, London, 2000. (German pagination/English pagination)

GA61 *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001.

GA63 *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1999.

SZ *Sein und Zeit*, 18th ed., Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 2001.