PHENOMENOLOGY AND ITS HISTORY: A CASE STUDY ON HEIDEGGER’S EARLY RELATION TO HUSSERL—AND A PLEA FOR THE HISTORICAL METHOD IN PHENOMENOLOGY

ABSTRACT

In order to better understand the notion of history proper to phenomenology, I undertake a brief case study. Namely, I investigate Martin Heidegger’s relation to Edmund Husserl in the years preceding Husserl’s appointment to Freiburg, with a special focus on an occasional writing by Heidegger from 1912. The application of historical method not only dismantles the ideological constructions which mark Heidegger’s own account of his early discovery of Husserl’s phenomenology, but also present a young thinker eager to absorb cutting edge, though not necessarily consistent, developments from contemporaneous philosophy. Heidegger’s early approach could also be conceived as a window onto an elusive brief period of phenomenology before its transformation into a Movement, thereby illustrating the positive contributions of the historical approach to the history phenomenology.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, early Heidegger, historiography of phenomenology, counterfactuals.

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INTRODUCTION

Does the history of phenomenology really amount to a history of "heresies issuing from" Edmund Husserl’s philosophy, as Paul Ricoeur has famously formulated it? It seems to me that the tricky part of Ricoeur's claim lies in the notion of history implied by it. Phenomenology once meant an iconoclastic revolution against past philosophies. "No amount of learning in [...] historical philosophies," Husserl has once famously declared, "is able to ease the efforts of penetrating in phenomenology." On the other hand, phenomenology itself has meanwhile grown to a philosophical tradition that is more than one hundred years old, and historical references, even intense historical engagement with its Founding Fathers, now belong to the mainstream of contemporary phenomenological research, up to the point that many call for a renewed "back to the things themselves."

In order to better understand the notion of history that is proper to phenomenology, in the first part of my paper, I undertake a brief case study by investigating Martin Heidegger’s early relation to Husserl. My reason for pinpointing this section of the phenomenological lineage is that the relation between the two earliest Founding Fathers is often regarded as one of the key junctures in the history of phenomenology. In the second part, I formulate consequences based on both the lessons of my historical case study and some recent discussions in historiography.

A CASE STUDY ON HEIDEGGER’S EARLY RELATION TO HUSSERL

The biographical circumstances of Heidegger’s life had long been in the shadow; except for few details concerning which Heidegger broke his self-imposed silence on biographical matters. One of these details, first mentioned by Heidegger in 1963 and published in a widely available form six years later, is an almost accidental circumstance, namely the title of a book lying on his writing desk during his early university years: "[... ] both volumes of Husserl’s Logical Investigations lay on my desk in the theological seminary ever since my first semester there." I think it is worth dwelling upon this detail surprisingly revealed to us by Heidegger, especially since he himself appears to have assigned a deeper meaning to it, as a subsequent rhetorical question demonstrates: “These volumes belonged to the university library. The work was obviously of little interest to the students. But how did it get into this environment so foreign to it?” (Ibid.)

For the purpose of recalling the received view of the first juncture of the phenomenological lineage, even at the risk of being faux-naïf, let me further pursue the question as to why a voluminous though neglected philosophical book was lying on the writing desk in one of the rooms of the archdiocesan study house, in a side street behind the Gothic cathedral of Freiburg, a provincial town in South Germany. Heidegger, of course, has a direct answer at hand. He first stumbled upon the doctoral dissertation of Franz Brentano, On the Manifest Meaning of Being according to Aristotle, which was submitted by Brentano in absentia in Tübingen but dedicated to Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, his “revered teacher” in Berlin. At that time Brentano was also training to be a priest, and his book was published by Herder, a renowned catholic publishing houses headquartered precisely in Freiburg, so it is understandable that it got in the hands of Heidegger in 1907, who was then a secondary school pupil in Konstanz in South Germany. Ever since then, Heidegger confesses, Brentano’s dissertation “had been the chief help and guide of my first awkward attempts to penetrate into philosophy. If being is predicated in manifold meanings, then what is its leading fundamental meaning?” The English translation by Joan Stambaugh conceals the fact that in this passage Heidegger employed a biblical allusion, which is clearly indicative of the profound significance Heidegger attached to Brentano’s dissertation. Brentano, in turn, led Heidegger to Husserl’s Logical Investigations, because, as he writes, “I had learned from many


3 In one his university lectures, Heidegger famously glossed over Aristotle’s biography claiming: “our only interest is that he was born at a certain time, that he worked and that he died [er arbeitete und starb]. The character (Gesamtl) of the philosopher, and issues of that sort will not be addressed here.” (Heidegger, M. 2002. Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie. Gesamtausgabe, 18, Michaelis, M. (Ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 5; ET: 2009. Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy. Studies in Continental Thought. Metcalf, R. D., M. B. Tanzer (Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 4.). It was impossible to overlook that Heidegger conceived the signification of his biography along the same lines. This proclamation by Heidegger had been widely publicized by Hannah Arendt’s anniversary address delivered in 1969, which was broadcast in radio and published both in Germany and the US (cf. Arendt, H., M. Heidegger. 1999. Briefe 1925 bis 1975 und andere Zeitgenossen. Ludz, U. (Ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 184). Already Arendt interpreted this anecdote as a sign of Heidegger’s exclusive dedication to the thinking, which set him apart from the academic philosophy.


5 Brentano, F. 1862. Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles. Herder: Freiburg dedication on an unnumbered page after the title page.


7 “Stucken und Stab” from Psalm 23 (according to the widespread translation of the so-called Luther Bible).
references [...] that Husserl’s thought was determined by Franz Brentano."
(Ibid.)

Let me pause here for a moment in order to probe the historical plausibility of the above autobiographical claims. Husserl’s doctoral dissertation, Contributions to the Theory of the Calculus of Variations from 1882, was dedicated to a strictly mathematical topic and remained unpublished until it was discovered by a Husserl scholar in the early 1930s, and the printed part of Husserl’s habilitation thesis from 1887, entitled On the Concept of Number, was never sold in bookshops, so Heidegger apparently had to content himself with Husserl’s first major published work, the Logical Investigations. It also does not seem probable that Husserl’s habilitation thesis on the psychology of presentations of multitudes and numbers, or the version published in 1891 under the title of Philosophy of Arithmetics, would have satisfied Heidegger’s quest for the "leading fundamental meaning" of Being.

But the Logical Investigations apparently did, at least in a certain sense:

"From Husserl’s Logical Investigations, I expected a decisive aid in the questions stimulated by Brentano’s dissertation. Yet my efforts were in vain because I was not searching in the right way. I realized this only very much later. Still, I remained so fascinated by Husserl’s work that I read in it again and again in the years to follow without gaining sufficient insight into what fascinated me. The spell emanating from the work extended to the outer appearance of the sentence structure and the title page."11

It is also here, on title page of the second volume, where Heidegger first encountered the word “phenomenology.”

Heidegger is honest enough not to say that he read through the 975 pages of Husserl’s book, but only to “read in” it ("darin las"). This is probably close to the reality, since even Husserl himself was surprised to hear that somebody, namely Edith Stein, has read through the whole second volume (which itself comprises more than 700 pages).12 But the other aspects of Heidegger’s report are worth further questioning. I do not intend to doubt the factual validity of his claims, i.e. that he stumbled upon Brentano’s work before commencing his university studies or that Husserl’s Logical Investigations belonged to the books he struggled to digest during the first university years. What I intend to skeptically pinpoint is rather the teleological structure of Heidegger’s report according to which he was essentially retracing the development of the Phenomenological Movement. The structure that gradually emerges from Heidegger’s register of his lectures closely resembles the lineage of phenomenology itself: from Brentano’s very first book via Husserl’s first groundbreaking book to presumably Heidegger itself. Such a resemblance is implied by Heidegger’s other scattered remarks on his intellectual development as well: Brentano’s dissertation was “the first philosophical text through which I worked by way, again and again from 1907 on,” as he wrote to Father Richardson in 1962. Three years earlier, in an inaugural address later adopted as the Preface of his early writings, he repeated the claim of how he encountered Brentano’s dissertation in 1907 through Conrad Grober and had been attempting to penetrate into Husserl’s Logical Investigations since 1909.13

Given that, until recently, such lacunae autobiographical reports served as the only source of Heidegger intellectual biography, the effect of the above teleological structure should not be underestimated. What makes it even more influential is, of course, its projected ending: Heidegger not only belongs to a teleologically conceived lineage, but his relation to the preceding stage of this lineage assumes the figure of overcoming. Such characterization is, furthermore, consistent with Heidegger’s own lecturing activity before his succession to Husserl’s chair. He aimed at an “immanent critique of the of the natural trend [Zug] of phenomenological research itself” (as he formulated it a lecture course in Marburg in the summer term of 1925), and one year later, after the first round of proofreading for the Being and Time, Heidegger already told that “if the treatise is written against anyone, it is against Husserl, who saw it immediately.”16

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The latter part of Heidegger's claim was doubted by many, including Stein who believed that, on the contrary, Husserl was the only one in Freiburg not aware of the discrepancy between him and Heidegger.17 Even Heidegger himself was inclined to add a restrictive clause to his aforementioned report: "but [Husserl] stayed positive [zum Positiven hielt] from the very beginning" (ibid.). But this adjustment does not affect the former part of Heidegger's claim: even a delayed recognition on Husserl's part fits well into the teleological picture sketched above (even though it implies a partial overlap of the two stages).18

What undermines this teleological scheme are newly released biographical documents which testify that Heidegger did not linearly move from a Husserlian stage to a stage of overcoming Husserl, but, already from the very beginning, his relation to Husserl was rather marked by a distance from Husserl. Let me quote just some letters from the recently published edition of Heidegger's correspondence with his wife. Heidegger, already in a letter written in Spring 1917, i.e. at a time when his personal relationship to Husserl was still at a very early stage, claimed that the fact "that I got to see Husserl is just one episode in a process that comes to me largely out of darkness [and] leads on into the darkness."19 He even compared Husserl to "a logician […] standing on the insulating stool [Isolierschemel]."20 The same tone remains, as Heidegger's personal relationship to Husserl gets warmer and warmer, and even enthusiastic on Husserl's part. In 1919 he wrote:


As if this were not unambiguous enough, two years later Heidegger explicitly wrote that, even though he is "poles apart" from Husserl, he must find a modus vivendi with Husserl in order to "survive materially":

"Wir sind doch auf dem Wege zu einer echten, einfachen u. elementareren Ergreifung des Lebens […] Das ist es auch - was mich heute so hittelweit von Husserl trennt u. ich muß jetzt die Möglichkeiten finden - lediglich um uns materiell zu erhalten - mit ihm ohne heftigen Widerstreit u. Betonung des selben zusammen zu gehen."22

Thus it seems that Heidegger's rejection of Husserl, which is manifest in Heidegger's later writings,23 is not a result of a multi-stage development, but there was rather continuity in this respect between Heidegger's early and later stance on Husserl.

This picture, however, is still not entirely true. It was the irony of scholarly history that Heidegger's proverbial silence on autobiographical matters and, in particular, his controversial political engagement24 in the Nazi Germany led to an extremely intensive biographical research which resulted in Heidegger's biography being one of the most completely reconstructed philosophical biographies of the 20th century. One of the discoveries made during this process in

17 Stein's letter to Roman Ingarden at October 15, 1921 (Stein, E. 2006. Selbstbildnis in Briefen II (1933-1942). In: Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe, op. cit., 3. It is worth noting that Stein's letter is dated 1921, i.e. already before Heidegger's commencement of his more independent lecturing activity under the protection of distance in Marburg.


20 Ibid., 57.

21 Ibid., 96.

22 Ibid., 103.


the mid-1980s by Hugo Ott and Thomas Sheehan25 consisted in the recognition that Heidegger apparently had an early relation to Husserl, which predated Husserl’s appointment to Freiburg in 1916 and Heidegger’s “youthful phenomenological apprenticeship between the years 1919 and 1926,”26 and thus cannot be framed in the terms of the teleological scheme sketched above.

This different narrative also originates from Heidegger’s earliest university years. Heidegger indeed started his studies at the Faculty of Theology in 1909, but he remained there only until 1911. At the beginning of the semester in 1911 Heidegger was already discussing his plans to change the course of his studies. His friend, Ernst Laslowski (1889–1961), however, warned Heidegger against doing so, not only because abandoning theology would involve financial worries for Heidegger, who could not count on the financial support of his family, but also because Heidegger is too apologetic (in the Christian sense of the word) to become a “professional philosopher” (Fachphilosoph).27 Heidegger, however, did not obey this brotherly advice and transferred to the Faculty of Natural Sciences in the next semester (WS 1911/12). Besides courses on mathematics and physics, Heidegger also registered for a lecture course and a seminar held by Art(h)ur Schneider (1876–1945), who later became Heidegger’s doctoral advisor.

What makes Heidegger’s connection to Schneider intriguing is that Schneider himself had studied at Husserl in Halle before the turn of the century.28 This lateral connection between Husserl and Heidegger already exhibits a certain level of contingency, since Schneider had only arrived from Munich to Freiburg in this very year (1911) and left to Strasbourg already in 1913.29 In the year 1911, Heidegger, according to his recollection quoted above, must already had been struggling with Husserl’s Logical Investigations for two years, so it is reasonable to think that he have sought advice from his teacher Schneider, who attended both lectures and seminars of Husserl.

Unfortunately, nothing but a vague anecdote is known from this very early period of Heidegger’s interest in Husserl. According to this anecdote, Heidegger intended to move to Göttingen in order to study personally at

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33 Ott, H. 2005. “Martin Heidegger und seine Beziehung zur Götter-Gesellschaft.” Historisches Jahrbuch, 125, 167–173, 171; this fact was apparently unknown to Ott at the time of writing his biography of Heidegger, cf. (ibid.), 76.
But Husserl’s name comes to the fore in a series of articles Heidegger published under the title “Recent Research in Logic” (Neuere Forschungen über Logik). According to a letter written by Heidegger in early 1912, the article series was intended by him as the groundwork for an ambitious project that is supposed to explicitly address the developments on contemporary mathematical logic and physics, which Heidegger curiously planned to combine with the “general theory of objects” — the latter probably referring to Alexius Meinong’s Gegenstandstheorie. Even though this plan might only reflect the initial enthusiasm of his studies in the natural sciences, in the second part of his tripartite series he indeed gave ample room to the volume on Gegenstandstheorie published by the Meinong38 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the pioneering Austrian psychological laboratory in Graz (besides mentioning Bertrand Russell at the end of the third part). But Husserl’s name already appears at the beginning of the first installment,39 the manuscript of which was delivered by Heidegger already in August of the same year.40

Heidegger begins his discussion by summarizing the contemporary psychologism debate on the question as to whether the philosophy of Kant should be conceived as a “transcendental logic” or as a “psychology.”41 In the German philosophy after the turn of the century, Husserl was regarded as the protagonist of the psychologism debate, although for the Marburg Neo-Kantians Husserl’s attack on psychologism was, as Natorp formulated in a private letter on the occasion of the publication of Husserl’s Logical Investigations, already “an already obsolete thing [...] which still necessary for the actual situation in Germany.”42 Heidegger quotes a similar formulation from a lecture by Natorp published just few months before Heidegger’s own article.43 Heidegger, however, did not adopt the Neo-Kantian stance: “we ourselves are inclined to attribute a far-reaching significance to Husserl’s penetratingly profound and very propitiously formulated [tiefbohrenden und äußerst glücklich formulierten] Investigations, for they have [...] brought the above-mentioned clarification of principles into play.”44 This appreciative remark sounds very promising, and the fact that Heidegger did not share the Neo-Kantian rejection of Husserl’s significance makes it compelling to interpret his article series as a document of his proximity to Husserl. Since these articles were not unknown — after all, they appeared in print in 1912, although they were omitted from the first edition of Heidegger’s early writings published during his lifetime in 192745 — the view that his earliest writings attest his proximity to Husserl gained a certain currency. In the following I am going to briefly reckon those aspects of Heidegger’s text that support such an interpretation and those which speak against it.

Heidegger indeed claims that the argument against psychologism “has been thoroughly substantiated and widely applied by Husserl.”46 Moreover, Heidegger takes sides with Husserl against “extreme Neo-Kantians” (ibid.). However, Heidegger also offers a positive solution: he draws a distinction between the “psychic act,” which is a “real occurrence of thought in the course of time,” and the “logical content,” which is an “ideal, extratemporal, identical sense [Sinn]; in short, the distinction between what is and what holds with binding validity” [‘was ist’ versus ‘was gilt’] (ibid.). Commentators have pointed out that this binary structure “[has] the character of a Platonic two-world theory, which Heidegger would sharply criticize throughout the twenties.”47 Heidegger’s “early adherence to the anti-psychologistic perspective” thus marks “the zero point” of his philosophical development (ibid.). Furthermore, it has been also pointed out that the first step of this development is already manifested in the article series itself, insofar as Heidegger wrote that “the sharp separation of logic from psychology perhaps cannot be maintained.”48 Psychologism in the sense of founding the validity of logical principles on psychology — the so-called foundational psychologism — must indeed be rejected, Heidegger acknowledged, but it should not lead us to overlook the fact “that the logical is embedded in the psychical.”49 According to the commentators, “it is at this point that Heidegger announces his first tentative doubt about the sharply dualistic perspective proper to anti-psychologism. This critical stance will be developed in the twenties and will underlie both his criticism of the transcendental outlook and his own autonomous perspective growing out of such criticism.”50

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36 Ibid., 17–43. It is also worth looking at the originals (Heidegger, M. 1912. “Neuere Forschungen über Logik.” Literarische Rundschau für das katholische Deutschland, 38 (10–12), 465–472, 517–524, 565–570), since the edition in Heidegger’s writings failed to reproduce Heidegger’s changes in font sizes, which were presumably intended to differentiate between main and subordinated portions of the text.
It might be perfectly true that Heidegger's rejection of the "Platonic twoworld theory" constitutes his first move from the "zero point". The only problem is, however, that this step was already taken by Husserl, who had written to Paul Natorp in 1897: the psychologists "distort the meaning of the logical principles. [...] The pure logic advances a correct thesis, but fails in its proof,\textsuperscript{51} precisely because it fails to explain how processes of thought are regulated by psychology without being founded upon it. In other words, logic also has to account for the fact that, as Husserl has formulated in a lecture course in the previous semester, "the logical principles [...] are not unrelated to the phenomena or the psychical."\textsuperscript{52} Thus Husserl's aim is not merely to refute psychology—which was already pronounced dead by the Neo-Kantians—but also to account for precisely the embeddedness of the psychological into the logical (without falling back into psychology). The fact that Heidegger overlooked this apparent similarity of aims raises serious concerns about the depth of his three-year-long reading of Husserl's \textit{Logical Investigations}.

These concerns also have a philological side. If one looks at the textual basis of Heidegger's presentation of Husserl in the article series, it turns out that Heidegger's references are confined to the first volume of Husserl's \textit{Logical Investigations}, which contained Husserl's refutation of psychology, but he never refers to the second, more extensive volume, which presented Husserl's phenomenology understood as descriptive psychology. Even when Heidegger shortly cites Husserl's critique of evidence as an "accessory feeling", he refers to a section of the first volume, rather than to the more appropriate \textit{Fifth or Sixth Investigation}. Heidegger mentions the term phenomenology,\textsuperscript{53} but he conceives it as a theory of meanings (\textit{Bedeutungslehre}), rather than as a theory the pure consciousness and its correlates, and he refers the term to Husserl's 1911 manifesto \textit{Philosophy as a Rigorous Science},\textsuperscript{54} rather than to its proper place, the second volume of the \textit{Logical Investigation}.

In short, I fail to perceive any serious proximity of Heidegger to Husserl in the article series of 1912. It must be also taken into account that Heidegger's knowledge of Husserl in this article series is mediated by two obscure sources: First, by a book of the eclectic Catholic philosopher Joseph Geyser (1869–1948).\textsuperscript{55} Geyser was at that time already a professor in Münster and he was going to be appointed in Freiburg in 1917 (a position to which Heidegger was also aspiring) before ascending to the highly renowned chair of the Munich University in 1924.\textsuperscript{56} Even though Geyser was firmly committed to the official teaching of the Catholic Church, he tried to absorb as many modern philosophical and psychological developments as possible, including elements from Husserl's phenomenology. Husserl himself had read this book as well, but he was disappointed to find Geyser's book be just "like the other systematic-alphilosophical writings by German Catholics: [...] enormous scholarship, without any trace of serious scientific research."\textsuperscript{57}

The other source of Heidegger's knowledge about Husserl was apparently an article written by the barely known Hans Schmidkunz (1863–1934),\textsuperscript{58} who had been a disciple of Brentano and personal friend of Husserl around the mid-1880s. By the first decade of the 20th century, however, his relation to Brentano and Husserl has considerably deteriorated, so it comes as no surprise that Schmidkunz's article makes only a very superficial use of Husserl's works. Interestingly, precisely this textual basis is what recurs in Heidegger's article.\textsuperscript{59}

All these traces speak against the hypothesis of Heidegger's non-trivial engagement with Husserl's phenomenology in 1912 that would warrant placing him among the early phenomenologists of Göttingen and Munich. In the terms of the counterfactual possibility highlighted above, had Heidegger moved to Göttingen to study at Husserl in the early 1910s, he would have had serious difficulties accommodating Husserl's phenomenology.

It is still possible, however, to establish a more proper characterization of this piece of Heidegger's \textit{juvenalia}. In this respect it is very illuminating to see how Heidegger described his article vis-à-vis Heinrich Rickert one year later. At that time, Heidegger was still far from pledging loyalty to a non-denominational professor of philosophy professor and he remarked at the beginning of his letter


\textsuperscript{58} Geyser, J. 1909. \textit{Grundlagen der Logik und Erkenntnislehre}. Münster: Schönning, 23, 51; the latter passage was quoted by Heidegger in \textit{Frühe Schriften}, op. cit., 34.


\textsuperscript{56} Husserl, E. 1994. \textit{Briefwechsel, V. op. cit., 175.}

\textsuperscript{57} Schmidkunz, H. 1912. "Grundzüge einer Lehre von der logischen Evidenz." \textit{Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik}, 146 (1), 1–64; quoted by Heidegger. 1978. \textit{Frühe Schriften}, op. cit., 39. The cover date of the issue carrying Schmidkunz's article was May 21, 1912, so Schmidkunz's piece belonged to the cutting edge of research at the time when Heidegger was composing his work (cf. above).

\textsuperscript{59} It is remarkable that Schmidkunz presents Husserl's theory of evidence based on the \textit{Prolegomena} (see Schmidkunz, H. 1912, op. cit., 2.), equates Husserl and Bolzano (p. 6) and also refers to Geyser (p. 10). It comes as no surprise that exactly the sections around these bibliographical references—which contain a vague and eclectic summary of "the classification of the psychological," a usual topic in the School of Brentano—are those which receive Heidegger's extraordinary praise: Heidegger, M. 1978. \textit{Frühe Schriften}, op. cit., 39, n. 9; missing from ET: cf. idem. 2007. \textit{Becoming Heidegger}, op. cit., 43.
that “his basic philosophical convictions are different;” but he went great lengths to clarify the intentions of his article series.

“Ich versuchte letztes Jahr in der ‘Literarischen Rundschau für das katholische Deutschland’ […] eine Übersicht über neuere Forschungen in der Logik zu geben. Den ’Philosophen‘ war das meiste eine terrae incognitae. […] Ich weiß zu gut, daß man auf der anderen Seite sehr wohl die von Katholiken geleistete wissenschaftliche Arbeit beachtet — aber erst dann, wenn sie sich sehen lassen kann.”

Heidegger’s claim of the ignorance among traditional philosophers towards the modern developments in mathematics and natural sciences is probably an overstatement best understood as a manifestation of Heidegger’s own ambitious aims, which he declared in a letter in early 1912, studied above. What makes this passage interesting is the second part where Heidegger portrays himself as a catholic philosopher seeking contact to the cutting edge of contemporaneous philosophy and recognition by non-denominational thinkers. The name that immediately comes to one’s mind here is Geyser, and it is compelling to say that, given Heidegger’s undeniable philosophical talent, he would have been made into a more successful incarnation of the same type, had he executed his plan.

The point is that this scenario remained counterfactual, because Heidegger was forced to abandon plans and reorient himself towards medieval philosophy in order to comply with the wishes of his ecclesiastical benefactors. This constraint is particularly clearly chronicled in a diary that recorded a conversation that took place between Heidegger’s friend and Heidegger’s doctoral advisor already before Heidegger’s aforementioned letter to Rickert:


Heidegger’s behavior during the subsequent months has been controversially discussed, mainly because he delayed his reorientation as long as possible.

61 Ibid., 12.

Phenomenology and Its History: A Case Study on Heidegger’s Early Relation to Husserl… thereby diverting the ecclesiastical funds he received for research on scholastic philosophy from their intended use. This proved to be only the first of the many episodes of Heidegger’s controversial relation to the Catholic Church (including his mixed-denomination marriage,63 and his subsequent secession from the Catholic Church). What I intend to highlight here is rather a less known episode, namely that Heidegger tried to maintain his relation to Husserl as late as 1913—1914. More specifically, he was working on a treatise on Husserl,64 and he even corresponded with Husserl himself. These letters are, unfortunately, not preserved, but Heidegger mentioned this fact in a letter written to Rickert in July 1914: “Herr Professor Husserl hat mir geschrieben, der II. Teil des II. Bandes des Logischen Untersuchungen verzögere sich bis Ostern, weil er sich entschlossen habe, einen ganzen III. Band zu schreiben.” If we combine Heidegger’s remark with the recent results of the scholarship on Husserl’s re-working of the Logical Investigations,65 it turns out that Heidegger must have written to Husserl between December 1913 and middle-April 1914: In the Preface to the second edition of the Logical Investigations, dated October 1913, Husserl claimed that the third volume was already “in print [im Druck].”66 This remark of Husserl is what must have prompted Heidegger to query about the forthcoming third volume. Husserl, however, had grossly overestimated the level of completion of his manuscript (maybe by a conscious decision in order to “put himself under pressure”). At the latest from December 1913,67 Husserl decided to compose an entirely new text, rather than amend the old one by means of piecemeal changes. It is not only that Husserl’s work ended inconclusively in the summer of 1914, but, as the recent edition of his drafts demon-

67 Ibid., xvi.
strates, he must have been aware of being in a blind alley, so the promise made in his lost letter to Heidegger constitutes a palliating overstatement vis-à-vis an unknown young doctor. Thus this episode constitutes a reverse counterfactual situation, in which it was Husserl who jeopardized an opportunity for an interaction between his phenomenology and Heidegger at a time when Heidegger was apparently actively looking for and he was presumably also susceptible to such encounters. When the two thinkers actually met in person two years later, Husserl was initially hostile towards Heidegger precisely because Heidegger had meanwhile successfully reoriented himself towards the Mediaeval Philosophy following the wishes of his ecclesiastic benefactors and thus looked like a denominational philosopher. This irony of this lost earlier chance might help explaining the intensity of Heidegger's subsequent siege to capture Husserl's benevolence—even at the price of not being entirely honest.

CONCLUSIONS

A closer look, thus, reveals that the notion of history employed in phenomenology more closely resembles the Ancient doxographical tradition (as practised e.g. by Diogenes Laertius) than the modern methods of writing the history of philosophy. The history of phenomenology, as it is usually told, is marked by phenomenologists overcoming their predecessors, in virtue of concepts deployed by them to characterize the necessary insufficiencies of previous stages (e.g. Heidegger’s way of interpreting Kant or his notion of das Ungedachtes, Eugen Fink’s operative Begriffe, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s l’ombre etc.). What is overlooked here is, I think, the essential difference between reconfiguring elements of a philosophical tradition for the purposes of an own philosophical agenda—a legitimate part of any philosophical endeavour in continental philosophy—and directly ascribing these constructions to the past phenomenologists themselves.

The historical method is definitely not the only viable way of doing contemporary phenomenology, especially when it comes to actual collaboration with the natural sciences. However, if phenomenology is to unlock its rich heritage, it must resist the temptation of historical naiveté, and it shall embrace the modern historiography of philosophy as it is practised in other sub-disciplines of modern European philosophy. What it implies is not only the use of the toolbox of modern historical methods, but also the requirement to account for the constitutive role of historical contingency. Regarding the latter aspect it is worth highlighting the counterfactual question, delineated above, on how Heidegger’s position in the Phenomenological Movement would have looked like, had he not performed the re-orientation towards Catholic mediaeval philosophy he was forced to do before Husserl’s arrival. I have identified two such counterfactual situations: (1) Heidegger’s intention to move to Göttingen to study at Husserl; (2) Heidegger’s intention to seriously engage with phenomenology from the point of view of a denominational thinker. While former episode is nothing more than an occasion for daydreaming, the latter one could be regarded as a relevant counterfactual hypothesis, namely of Heidegger becoming a “better Geyser.” This scenario not only satisfies the criteria recently proposed to identify fertile counterfactual approaches, but it could also help envisage the situation not realized by the subsequent course of history. One might wonder, on the one hand, how a Catholic modernism of an exceptionally gifted thinker might have looked like, On the other hand, Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology in 1912 could, in contrast to his subsequent writings, be conceived as a possible window on an elusive brief period of phenomenology before it became a Movement through the so-called Munich invasion of Göttingen.

It is precisely the possibility of such questions what shows that the contribution of the historical approach to phenomenology is not merely negative (i.e. the destruction of common myths), but it could also help to recover the paths of thinking subsequently not taken or obscured.


72 “We should consider as plausible or probable only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered.” (Ferguson, “Virtual History,” 86.) This was precisely the case regarding Heidegger, as a contemporary letter demonstrates: “Im Sommer 1913 promovierte hier bei Schneider ein junger Mathematiker und Philosoph Martin Heidegger, ein sehr tüchtiger Mensch Er arbeitet zur Zeit an einer Habitabilitatschrift über die Logik des Zahlbegriffs Finke […] hat ihn nun aufgefordert, eine philosophihistorische Arbeit ausgesprochen zum Zwecke der Habilitation zu machen […] Unklar ist zur Zeit 1. Ob Heidegger vor Sommer 1913 überhaupt sich habilitieren kann, 2. ob er mit der historischen oder der logischen Arbeit sich habilitiert, die letztere gedacht vorzüglich, an die erstere will er nicht recht heran […]” (quoted by: Ott in “Der Habilitand Heidegger,” 147.)