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A TYPOLOGY OF EVENTS*

Abstract: The following article first examines the origins of event thinking in continental philosophy. It is a relatively new topic and is essentially connected to the critique of the subject in postmodernity. The subject has lost its unity, transparency, rationality, and power of cognition and action. It has become a passive receiver. This transformation of the world and the image of the subject is also expressed in event philosophy and is continued by it. Event philosophy confronts the subject, which has become passive, with the Other, which comes unpredictably and uncontrollably and changes everything.

Nevertheless, the concept of an event is ambiguous. There is no unified continental philosophy of the event. This article attempts to present some essential approaches. It focuses primarily on the phenomenological-hermeneutic, structuralist-poststructuralist, and metaphysical or negative-ontological approaches to the study of events.

Finally, the article presents the typology of events developed by the author. It is an attempt to classify various events according to their structures. The goal of this project is, on the one hand, to preserve the diversity of the event. A typology consciously works against a totalitarian and uniform philosophy of events. On the other hand, it works structurally, not limiting itself to specific events but grouping individual events into types. Within this theoretical framework, the events of life become more organized and visible. Life is illuminated.

Keywords: *postmodernity, the Other, passivity of the subject, event, typology*

1. The Event as a Philosophical Topic

For the understanding (however one should understand it) something is already understood. The understanding does not ask questions about it, it builds knowledge on it. Some of this prior knowledge, which is the conditions of the possibility of further knowledge, can be grasped by the understanding, some never.

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I would argue that the event has already become prior knowledge in (continental) philosophy. First simply as a topic. The topic is well known. Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Marion, Claude Romano are well-known thinkers of event philosophy. In addition, there are countless authors who didn't develop a theory of the event, but who nevertheless described it. And by now, the findings about the event have also become well known and accepted. It is said that an event is a singular exception, a break-in of the new, unpredictable, sudden, changing the world, truth, people, and time. Isn't it paradoxical that something that is by definition extraordinary can become ordinary and — I say — has become ordinary?

But originally, nothing is ordinary. Originally, everything is new and astonishing. The event, too, emerged in philosophy at some point as an extraordinary, new topic. The arrival of the event in philosophy is often linked to Heidegger's late philosophy — the philosophy of the event. It is equally common to say that the event has only become a central theme of philosophy in contemporary French philosophy — under a significant influence of Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's philosophy of being.

But like most cultural innovations, philosophical interest does not stand alone alongside other areas and changes. The interest in the event is a phenomenon of postmodernity — the era of European culture since the mid-20th century, which is characterized by the loss of faith in the constant and eternal, the necessary and inevitable, the rational and objective, the absolute and unambiguous. From now on, change, the possible and the random, the subjective and the relative, the singular and the ambiguous are important. What counts is the place of origin of creation, the uniqueness and the infinite horizon of the possible. Postmodernity no longer places the human being at the center of the world; the human being is no longer free, rational, and omnipotent; it can no longer fully understand the processes of the world, and even less itself. The human being becomes part of the world; it must give up control over everything, including itself; the human being is characterized by a fundamental passivity. Seen in this light, postmodernity is not an age of loss — it is gaining a completely different perspective on the world and humanity.

On the one hand, the postmodern human being is free. It is the locus of creative activity. It recognizes and transforms the world. And it bears responsibility for this. This is the human being as we have known it since modernity, i.e., the 17th century. On the other hand, the postmodern human being is thrown into the world; it is not free in relation to it. In *Sein und Zeit* from 1927, Heidegger defines the human being as *Dasein* (there-being) and 'being-in-the-world' as the 'basic state of *Dasein*'. He writes:

> Dasein is never 'proximally' an entity which is, so to speak, free from Being-in, but which sometimes has the inclination to take up a 'relationship' towards the world. Taking up relationships towards the world is possible only *because* Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is.[1]

The world has the human being, not the human being the world. The world approaches it, the human being becomes the recipient, and all it can do is to respond somehow. In *Étant donné* from 1997, Marion calls this recipient *adonné* (the gifted) and fundamentally distinguishes it from the modern subject:

> The gifted can therefore be understood by definition only insofar as and as long as it receives and thus receives itself. Better, it must receive in order to receive itself. Everything that contradicts the reception of the given not only would render it unintelligible, but would make it disappear. Without reception of the given, nothing more — no gifted — comes after the 'subject'.[2]

The world is free, but the human being is less so. And that which is free — that which is free from the subject — is the Other. This Other, which freely approaches the human being, is the event. The event is the confrontation with this Other. The human being becomes that with whom the event occurs and who is constituted by the event — not the other way around. In Romano's terminology from 1998 in the book *L'Événement et le Monde*, the human being becomes the *advenant* (the term is difficult to translate):

> *Advenant* is the term for the human being as constitutively open to events, insofar as humanity is the 'capacity' to undergo unsubstituably what happens to us. The humanity of the human being means being open to events in a way that allows one to understand them and to understand oneself starting from them as *advenant*.[3]

The topic of events is a postmodern phenomenon, but in my opinion, it would be inconceivable without the idea of a free subject. Only when a subject is placed at the center of the world, behaves freely toward it, bears sole responsibility for its actions,

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1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, UK / Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 2001), 84. Originally published as *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006), 57.

2 Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, transl. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 308. Originally published as *Étant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: PUF, 2005), 424.

3 Claude Romano, *Event and World*, transl. Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 54. Originally published as *L'événement et le monde*, 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 1999), 75.

and is aware of this, can something like an event become visible. Only the over-empowerment of the human being makes its powerlessness visible. Yes, postmodern thought is critical of modernity, but without the latter, it would not be possible.

If thinking does not proceed from a free and self-conscious subject, but instead from a world order, that is, a system in which individuals are merely parts of this whole, that is, if thinking does not focus on a subject but rather on the functioning of a system, this experience of the encounter between the subject and its other does not exist. For example: Globally — i.e., from a systemic perspective — the death of a soldier is merely a number. The meaning of his death is exhausted by what it means for the respective political, social, religious, or economic situation. Only from the perspective of a free, self-reflective subject is death a tragedy, the intrusion of a terrible thing into a person's world — thus, an event. For systemic thinking, the death of this soldier is explainable, perhaps even justified. For a subject, it is never explainable or understandable, but rather an expression of the world's freedom — thus, an event.

Freedom is the condition for thinking about the unpredictable, the singular, the different — indeed, even for the fascination with it. Where freedom is not practiced, this fascination doesn't exist. There, the different is either ignored or considered dangerous, even fought against. There, people are afraid of free decisions and change. There, the system is lived.

The events become visible and only have meaning for a free individual, responsible for his or her own life or for a democratic community. From a systemically totalitarian perspective, the singular and random are not only meaningless, a marginal remark, but also something that should be fundamentally eradicated.

2. THE METHODOLOGICAL QUESTION

To say that the event is unique, unpredictable, and shocking, that it is an encounter with the Other, that it is a new beginning, is an appreciation. It doesn't mean simply saying that there are coincidences and exceptions. It is an expression of a fascination. This fascination comes from a free and powerless, passive self. It receives something that is also free, something beyond its control.

How can one talk about this other — which eludes the subject? How can this encounter be addressed? I could roughly distinguish three approaches in event philosophy. The first is the phenomenological-hermeneutic, the second is the structuralist-poststructuralist, and the third is the metaphysical or negative-ontological. The phenomenological-hermeneutic approach assumes that the event shows itself. Therefore, it should be described as the recipient sees it. This is the

purpose of the phenomenological method. However, in event philosophy, it does not mean reducing what shows itself to a phenomenon. The event is never merely an appearance of an I — because it comes from the Other. This raises the question: What does the Other tell us when it shows itself in some way? And this is where hermeneutics comes in. One attempts to understand what is happening, starting from a phenomenologically tangible experience. Marion and Romano are important representatives of this approach because, on the one hand, they remain within the phenomenological tradition, but they also expand it to give the Other a place in phenomenality, without reducing it to the phenomenon of the I. And both of them develop a hermeneutics as the interpretative response of the I to the inquiry of the Other. Romano speaks of an "evential hermeneutics",[4] and Marion of an "endless hermeneutic".[5]

The structuralists and poststructuralists attempt to do without a subject altogether, and for a valid reason: For them, the subject is merely a product (not even an equal, albeit passive, recipient) of various physical, psychological, ontological, transcendental, historical, cultural, linguistic, etc., processes; consciousness and all its contents, self-consciousness — are merely epiphenomena. Accordingly, it is important to see and understand these processes, their structures, and their transformations; it is important to understand that these processes are the Others of the subject, that the subject cannot catch up with them because it is the result of these events.

Deleuze is a thinker of the event who observes events from the perspective of processes and their structures, and not from the perspective of an I. Instead of speaking of a subject and its world of experience, in one of his most important books — *Logique du sens* from 1969 — he speaks of an "impersonal transcendental field".[6] What kind of field is this? Firstly, it is not the environment of an I, not its horizon of experience. But neither is it something that would belong to a transcendental subject in Kant's sense. Secondly, it is not the external, physical world in the sense of the natural sciences. The transcendental field is detached from the subject-object dualism and simply exists in itself. What happens there is the distribution, branching, movement, and transformation of 'singularities'.

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4 Romano, *Event and World*, 49; *L'événement et le monde*, 69; and Claude Romano, *Event and Time*, transl. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 7. Originally published as *L'événement et le temps* (Paris: PUF, 1999), 8.

5 Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena,* transl. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 104. Originally published as *De surcroît: Études sur les phénomènes saturés*, 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 2010), 131.

6 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, transl. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 98. Originally published as *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 120.

Singularities are simply something — one could say: unities of sense — that do not belong to a subject (as in the phenomenological tradition), but to language. The singularity is a sense in the same sense that a sentence has a sense, merely detached from the subject that understands this sense. To understand this structuralist-poststructuralist approach, it is important to be able to consider that the self, the subject, or the object are not substantial entities, but merely units of sense — emerging in this transcendental field. The emergence, distribution, and redistribution of singularities are what Deleuze calls events, and all events of the transcendental field — "the Event", "the Unique event":

> The metamorphoses or redistributions of singularities form a history; each combination and each distribution is an event. But the paradoxical instance is the Event in which all events communicate and are distributed. It is the Unique event, and all other events are its bits and pieces.[7]

A similar approach to the other of the subject, that is, to the event as that which constitutes and transforms consciousness and its contents, cognition, and knowledge, has been adopted by such event philosophers as Michel Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*,[8] or Jacques Derrida in his early philosophy, in *Grammatology*.[9] And I would argue that even Thomas S. Kuhn works similarly in his project of *Scientific Revolutions*.[10]

I would like to include those thinkers who, in this Other, with which the self is confronted, also consider the transcending of the world (partly in a religious sense) within a metaphysical approach. They assert not only the non-phenomenal Other, but the Absolute Other. For them, the event not only means the encounter with something extraordinary, but always also has religious connotations. A prime example in this context is, of course, Levinas. For him, the event is the encounter with the Other in the form of the 'face', which in turn is the manifestation of the 'Infinite'. In his 1974 work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Levinas denies the phenomenality of the Other:

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7 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 56; *Logique du sens*, 72.

8 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, transl. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London / New York: Routledge, 2002). Originally published as *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969).

9 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore / London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Originally published as *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

10 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

> It [the face – L.P.] escapes representation; it is the very collapse of phenomenality. Not because it is too brutal to appear, but because in a sense too weak, non-phenomenon because less than a phenomenon.[11]

But he not only excludes the face from the horizon of conscious experience, but reads it as a 'trace' of 'the Invisible':

> That trace lights up as the face of a neighbor […].[12]

I call this approach metaphysical because Levinas himself called his philosophy 'metaphysics'. Particularly in his earlier work, *Totalité et Infini* from 1961, he distances himself from ontology — the philosophy of being — in order to speak about what is beyond being, namely, the Infinite.[13] Michel Henry works somewhat similarly, seeing in bodily experience, which is simultaneously self-affectation, the self-revelation of Life, whereby Life is equated with God. This self-affectation would be the event of the encounter with God as Life.[14]

I would classify event thinkers as belonging to the negative-ontological approach, who deny not only phenomenality to the event, but also fundamentally the being. The event is not a being; it doesn't even exist. It happens. It is a pure event. Heidegger is a thinker of this kind. In a short essay from 1962 — "Zeit und Sein" — he sums this up:

> We say of beings: they are. With regard to the matter of 'Being' and with regard to the matter of 'time', we remain cautious. We do not say: Being is, time is, but rather: there is [*es gibt*] Being and there is [*es gibt*] time.[15]

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11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 88. Originally published as *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Dordrecht / Boston / London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 112.

12 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 12; *Autrement qu'être*, 14.

13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague / Boston / London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 42–46. Originally published as *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, 4th ed. (The Hague / Boston / London: Martinus Nijhoff,1980), 12–18.

14 Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, transl. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). Originally published as *C'est moi la vérité: Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

15 Martin Heidegger, "Time and Being," in *On Time and Being*, ed. J. Glenn Gray and Joan Stambaugh; transl. Joan Stambaugh (New York / Hagerstown / San Francisco / London: Harper & Row, 1972), 5. Originally published as "Zeit und Sein," in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, Gesamtausgabe vol. 14, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007), 29. The problem with the English translation, of course, is that it has to render the German expression *'es gibt'* as 'there is', even though it actually means 'it gives'. However, most of the text's argument is based on *'es gibt'*, making it difficult to follow in English.

But what about the event? The following:

> However: The event neither is, nor there is the event. To say one or the other is to reverse the situation, just as if we wanted to derive the source from the stream. What remains to be said? Only this: The event occurs [*ereignet*].[16]

If one wanted to define more precisely what — or rather, how — the event is, one could say that the event is the very emergence of something. The event gives. It is not What It Gives:

> Accordingly, the It that gives attests itself in the 'There is [*es gibt*] Being', 'There is [*es gibt*] Time', as the event.[17]

In other words: The event is the 'beginning'. In the unpublished texts of his late philosophy, Heidegger speaks enormously about the event as beginning. The event is nothing; there is no event. Event begins. Only when It begins there is Being and do beings exist. In the unpublished manuscripts from 1941, he states succinctly:

> The event is the beginning.[18]

Alain Badiou also addresses the purely event-like character of the event, which excludes it from ontology. In his 1988 work *L'être et l'événement*, he defines the event as "that-which-is-not-being-qua-being".[19] What is the event if it has nothing to do with being, if it is the radically Other? It is the break-in itself that changes everything.

I would also like to include Derrida's philosophy of the pure gift, or event, in the negative ontological approach, although he doesn't quite claim that the event doesn't exist. His radical exclusion of the event from phenomenality (i.e., experience) is so extreme, however, that it almost makes the event disappear for us. In a well-known sentence in *La fausse monnaie: Donner le temps I.* from 1991, he states:

> [I]n any case the gift does not *exist* and does not *present* itself. If it presents itself, it no longer presents itself.[20]

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[16] I choose my own translation for once, since in Joan Stambaugh's English translation, the word '*Ereignis*' is translated as "appropriation": Heidegger, "Time and Being," 24; "Zeit und Sein," 29.

[17] Heidegger, "Zeit und Sein," 24. (Translation is mine – L.P.)

[18] Martin Heidegger, *Über den Anfang*. Gesamtausgabe, vol. 70 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2005), 47. (Translation is mine – L.P.)

[19] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, transl. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), 13. Originally published as *L'être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 20.

[20] Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, transl. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 15. Originally published as *La fausse monnaie: Donner le temps I*. (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 28.

Derrida advocates a very radical conception of the Other — its mere appearance to us destroys it as the Other. An event that appears is no longer an event; it no longer exists. But only for consciousness. In a discussion with Marion in 1997, Derrida explains his position:

> I said, to be very schematic and brief, that it is impossible for the gift to appear as such. So the gift does not exist as such, if by existence we understand being present and intuitively identified as such. So the gift does not exist and appear as such; it is impossible for the gift to exist and appear as such. But I never concluded that there is no gift.[21]

In my book on a possible typology of events,[22] I argue that even if our experiences are constituted by some initial processes beyond our grasp, our experiences are nevertheless the only source on which we can base our knowledge. Even that which we say is beyond grasp, that it does not belong to us, is given to us only through our experience. The experience of being beyond grasp is also an experience. Therefore, when considering events, I advocate the phenomenological method as the primary one. The Other of the self is not merely a phenomenon, but it is only given phenomenologically.

However, since the event is not just a phenomenon, but — as we experience it — also existent in itself, it can also be examined 'objectively'. This means asking what it is like in itself, how it happens in itself, how it happens to the I. This approach is similar to the structuralist approach, because it involves asking which structural processes characterize the event — excluding the conscious experiences but nevertheless based on them.

3. The Events in Life and a Possible Typology

Is the event merely a philosophical topic that requires the right method so that the philosophy of events can arrive at true insights? Not at all. And that is very important. Events exist everywhere — in the media, science, literature, art, history. Birth, love, revelation, death are all events in our lives. Events happen everywhere, every day, to each of us. The events in philosophy are only a part of all of this. This means: If one wants to understand events, it would not be enough to study existing philosophical theories. One would have to study life, in which the most diverse events — including philosophical ones — occur.

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21 Jacques Derrida, "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 59.

22 Lasma Pirktina, *Zur Philosophie des Ereignisses: Eine Typologie* (Dresden: Text & Dialog, 2023).

Furthermore: Events are not simply a part of life. They are what is different in our lives, what strikes us, fascinates us, takes on meaning for us, and is ultimately the most important thing in life. The beautiful, but also tragic, things in life, extraordinary situations, special encounters, unexplained secrets, upheavals, and new beginnings — these are our events. They are what makes life truly worth living for us and perhaps even gives life meaning. And as such, events are what we remember, what we continually revisit, and what we talk about in our lives.

Events are what makes life worth living and worth narrating. This is the starting point of my philosophy of events as a typology. I begin with narratives — representations of events in the broad sense that recount the event-like experiences that have occurred. Such accounts of events can be found everywhere — in everyday conversations, in literary texts, in historical documents. I also view philosophical texts about events as descriptions of specific experiences.

It strikes me, however, that these countless depictions address a wide variety of events, but on the other hand, that some of them are also similar. This gives me the idea of investigating the similarities between life events, specifically structurally. There are events that are structurally similar. If one takes a structural approach, one can discover similar events — events that belong to the same type. Structure here means the general manner in which they occur.

In my typology, I have distinguished a total of nine types of events: The event of the world, of truth, of a self, of vitality, of trauma, of stepping outside oneself, of the in-between, of entanglement, of beginning, and of the end. This sounds very abstract at first. But behind all these types lie very concrete event-like experiences that are familiar to many of us.

A world event occurs when something extraordinary happens in the external world. The media reports on it, people talk about it, and it is passed on. A snowstorm cuts off an entire village from the world, a mass murderer is caught after ten years, the first space tourists fly into space — these are events of this kind. Major events such as revolutions, wars, or important political decisions that change the world find their place in history books. However, a world event remains worldly only insofar as the self that experiences it is not involved. If the self itself is affected, this external event becomes an event of the self.

The events of truth are situations where the world suddenly appears different than before. Suddenly, one sees everything with completely different eyes. The world itself doesn't have to change — what changes is the truth about it. Such events are leaps in thought, experience, and perception. Scientific revolutions, as defined by Thomas S. Kuhn, belong to this type of event.

Both the events of the world and of truth are, in a sense, external to the self. It experiences them from outside. The events of the self, on the other hand, are

extraordinary phenomena and inner states of the self that distinguish it from the ordinary course of inner life. These are private events, such as unexpected beauty, stillness, liberation, etc. I also include transformations of the self in this type of event. It's about the self becoming something else — it is transformed, it itself becomes different, and it notices this. Many literary and cinematic works of art deal with this theme.

A special type of events involving the self are events of vitality. Following Michel Henry, I claim that in the experience of its own vitality, the self transcends the objective, material world and is able to perceive life everywhere and recognize it as something primordial and all-unifying.

The shocks to this inner life are events of the self. If they have a positive effect on it, they are events of the self in the strict sense of the word. If they destroy it, they are called traumatic events. Traumatic events inhibit the self from being itself, from living at all. It is no surprise that, in this context, there is a deep connection between philosophy and psychoanalysis, psychology and psychopathology in general.

Events of stepping outside oneself are encounters with the Other in the strict sense. Through the Other — this can be another person, but also revelations — the self is ejected from its world. It is no longer just about itself. It is given a task; it must assume responsibility. Famine in Africa can be this Other that causes the self to step outside itself. The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas focuses on these kinds of events.

When individual selves enter into a relationship that breaks with superficial contact in the ordinary world and instead touches, supports, and transforms the inner lives of those involved, the event of the in-between occurs. It is not an encounter with the absolute Other, but rather a relationship of equals based on the individual experience of belonging. The individual selves feel destined for one another. Friendship, love, and family can be structurally described in this way.

Events of entanglement can be spoken of when certain worldly and/or interpersonal constellations exceed the capacities of the self. The self no longer knows what is happening, what it should do, what is right and what is wrong. The coronavirus pandemic was such an event for all of us.

Finally, I distinguish the events of the beginning and the end. These are encounters with facts that can never actually be experienced and yet — as conceivable — can shock us profoundly. One such event is, for example, the thought of one's own death. But Heidegger's event of the beginning would also belong to this type. Essentially, it is about the emergence of something from nothing.

Of course, one might ask why a typology of events is necessary at all, and whether there aren't fewer or more types of events? A typology seems important to me in order to demonstrate that events vary greatly in their concreteness. There

can be no single, comprehensive philosophy of events. A typology works against a totalitarian and uniform philosophy of events. On the other hand, it works structurally, not limiting itself to concrete events, but grouping individual ones into a type. This makes life's events more visible. It's about life that is illuminated. Whether the nine types of events will remain will be revealed by future research on this topic.

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