

Symposium: Cristina Lafont, *Heidegger, Language, and World-disclosure*\*

## Précis of *Heidegger, Language, and World-disclosure*

Cristina Lafont

Northwestern University

The book is a critical discussion of the conception of language as world-disclosure that Heidegger develops explicitly in his writings after the *Kehre*, but that has its roots in *Being and Time*. According to this view, our access to the world, and to anything that might show up within the world, is structured by language. This view of language allows Heidegger to criticize the mentalism characteristic of modern philosophy and to articulate his new, hermeneutic approach. It lends plausibility to his contention that our primary access to the world is not due to an allegedly neutral perception of entities but to our prior understanding of everything that can show up within the world as something or other. Thus, the priority of understanding and interpretation over perception requires a *hermeneutic* transformation of philosophy. While Heidegger's criticism of the subject–object model so characteristic of modern philosophy is certainly plausible, his view of the role that language plays in our experience of the world leads to counterintuitive consequences. The most notorious of them can be found in Heidegger's writings on language after the *Kehre*, when he provocatively claims that 'there is no thing when the word is lacking' or that 'language speaks' and thus is 'the master of man'. It is in view of these claims that the charges of linguistic idealism and of a reification of language are a commonplace among many interpreters of Heidegger's later works. Less common, however, seems to be the urge to transform this charge into an explicit analysis and criticism of the premise that underlies Heidegger's linguistic idealism, namely, his claim that our experience with entities is determined by our prior understanding of their being (1). But if this claim is right, along with the claim that our understanding of the being of entities is contained in our language (2), it is less than clear that Heidegger's idealism, in spite of its counterintuitiveness, is actually wrong. In light of this

---

\*Cristina Lafont, *Heidegger, Language, and World-disclosure*, trans. Graham Harman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xxii + 298 pp., ISBN 0-521-66247-8, originally published as *Sprache und Welterschliessung: Zur linguistischen Wende der Hermeneutik Heideggers* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).

situation, the general hypothesis of the book is that Heidegger's linguistic idealism is problematic not so much by dint of being linguistic (claim [2]), but by dint of the strong a priori status that linguistic world-disclosure is supposed to have over and above any possible experience (claim [1]). In fact, if it were not for claim (1), claim (2) would be uncontroversial and as such insufficient to support the charge of idealism. Thus, a crucial task of the book is to show how Heidegger's idealism is anchored in claim (1), which is the core of one of the central premises of his philosophy as a whole, namely, the *ontological difference*. It is for this reason that the analysis of Heidegger's conception of language in the first part of the book is not limited to his writings on language after the *Kehre*, in which claim (2) becomes explicit, but starts with Heidegger's establishment of claim (1) in *Being and Time*.

In keeping with this task, chapter 1 offers an analysis of Heidegger's attempt to bring about a hermeneutic transformation of philosophy in *Being and Time* by substituting the ontological difference for the empirical/transcendental distinction. Heidegger interprets the ontological difference (the distinction between being and beings) such that it follows that there can be no *access* to entities without a prior understanding of their being. It is for this reason that entities appear to us as always already understood in one way or other – or, as Heidegger puts it, why we always already conduct our activities in an understanding of being. This is the *fact* from which *Being and Time* starts, and which lies at the basis of Heidegger's philosophy as a whole.

However, remaining under the influence of the empirical/transcendental distinction, Heidegger invests this fact with a *normative* significance: given that our understanding of the being of entities is *constitutive* for what these entities are *for us*, it determines how we understand, perceive, and experience the world. It provides the ontological framework for everything that can show up within the world. Such an understanding of being or world-disclosure thus acquires a quasi-transcendental status. On the one hand, it is valid a priori, although only in the sense that it cannot be called into question from within, that is, by those who share it. There is no way to step outside of our understanding of being in order to check its validity, to test whether our understanding of being coincides with the being of the things themselves. For there is no being without an *understanding* of being. On the other hand, such understanding of being is not the (eternal) endowment of a transcendental ego (which would guarantee the objectivity of experience, and thereby the possibility of valid knowledge for all human beings), but is merely contingent, changes historically and cannot be put under control at will. It is thus a *fate* into which human beings are *thrown*. The crucial challenge to transcendental philosophy in *Being and Time*, therefore, is to be found in Heidegger's thesis that our disclosedness is essentially factual (*BT*, p. 264).

From this brief characterization of Heidegger's hermeneutic turn in *Being*

and Time, it is possible to see the specific features of his hermeneutic idealism. On the one hand, with his interpretation of the ontological difference, Heidegger is taking for granted the transcendental idealism expressed in Kant's highest principle of synthetic judgments (namely, that the conditions of possibility of experience are at the same time the conditions of possibility of the objects of experience). After his hermeneutic turn, this principle is interpreted in the sense that entities can only be discovered 'by a prior projection of their being' (BT, p. 414) and it is justified, in turn, by the assumption that *meaning determines reference*, that is, the way in which entities are understood determines what these entities are (for us), determines which entities we can refer to. On the other hand, through this interpretation, that which constitutes the objects of experience (the totality of a priori synthetic judgments) is de-transcendentalized. It can no longer be understood as a unique synthesis of apperception, valid for all rational beings, but rather only as the plurality of linguistic world-disclosures resulting from the contingent, historical process of projecting meaning for interpreting the world. Given that *meaning is holistic*, plural, and just as contingent as the languages in which it is articulated, the resulting world-disclosures (understandings of being, conceptual schemes) are not universally valid but rather essentially factual.

Once the central premises of Heidegger's hermeneutic idealism are brought to light, the conception of language as world-disclosure explicitly developed by the later Heidegger does not come as a surprise. Chapter 2 offers an analysis of Heidegger's view of language in the writings after the *Kehre* in order to show how the basic conception of meaning and reference inherent in the ontological difference leads to the reification of language and the linguistic idealism characteristic of this period.

In chapter 3 the problematic consequences of Heidegger's conception of meaning and reference are made explicit through an analysis of his conception of truth. Heidegger's development of the notion of truth as *unconcealment* can be traced back to the following consideration. To the same extent that meaning determines reference, truth depends on meaning. After all, only meaningful statements can be true or false. Thus, what allows us to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless statements (our understanding of being or conceptual scheme) determines in advance what the possible truths are for those who share it, determining *which* truths are accessible to them. In this sense, truth is relative to a prior understanding of being. For this reason, Heidegger calls such an historical understanding of being 'primordial truth' or 'a happening of truth'. Now, if truth depends on meaning, and if meaning is holistic, historically alterable, and as variable as human languages are, truth also cannot be universally valid. For there is no way to assume that what is meaningful here and now within our understanding of being has to be meaningful once this understanding of

being changes. We cannot judge whether statements proceeding from a different understanding of being are true or false, because they are more likely to be simply meaningless. Consequently, the attempt to conceive the historical changes in our understanding of being as a learning process is just an illusion. There is no absolute truth across incommensurable understandings of being or world-disclosures. They are unrevisable from within and inaccessible (meaningless) from without.

But at this point in the argument the view of our experience as absolutely determined by a priori structures characteristic of transcendental philosophy becomes clearly problematic. Precisely to the extent that we realize with Heidegger's help that our disclosedness is merely factual and thus that no given disclosedness is absolute, universally valid, etc., we must realize that unfortunately it is not a happening *of truth*. Thus, such a happening cannot borrow the normative feature of absolute authority from the notion of truth, for nothing 'essentially factual' should have an absolute authority over us. In this context the attribution of absolute authority to our given world-disclosure implicit in Heidegger's linguistic idealism becomes doubtful. The credentials for Heidegger's interpretation of the ontological difference seem to require closer scrutiny, for it is no longer clear that Heidegger can maintain the strong apriorism inherent in Kant's transcendental idealism on the meagre basis of purely hermeneutic reasons (such as the circle of understanding, meaning holism, etc.).

With this problematic in view, the second part of the book focuses on a critical analysis of the main assumption behind Heidegger's interpretation of the ontological difference, namely, that meaning is both holistic *and* determines reference. Its main task is to show that these two premises are, in fact, incompatible: meaning holism undermines the assumption that meaning determines reference. This last assumption represents a remnant of transcendental philosophy that should have been undermined by the very insights brought about by Heidegger's hermeneutic turn. To presuppose that our linguistic knowledge of meaning is constitutive of our knowledge of the world and, in this sense, has a strictly a priori status, requires that we postulate a sharp separation between these two kinds of knowledge. But this separation is incompatible with Heidegger's own theses concerning meaning holism – the very theses on which his hermeneutic transformation of transcendental philosophy relies. And precisely to the extent that meaning is indeed holistic, contingent, and plural, it cannot determine reference. Put differently, the referents of our expressions cannot be identified with the contingent and plural ways in which we conceive them. On the basis of arguments developed by recent theories of direct reference (in particular those offered by Donnellan and Putnam), chapter 4 articulates a detailed critique of the assumption that meaning determines reference. Once this assumption is called into question, the next step of the argument can be taken, namely, to show that meaning

holism alone grants neither the unrevisability nor the incommensurability of different linguistic world-disclosures. In chapter 5 this claim is substantiated through a critical analysis of Heidegger's interpretation of science. In accordance with his view of linguistic world-disclosures as determinative of all experience made possible through them, Heidegger conceives the history of science as a fateful development of metaphysical projections or paradigms which are unrevisable from within as well as mutually incommensurable. Although Heidegger's arguments in support of this view seem to depend exclusively on meaning holism and its main consequence, namely, the underdetermination of theory choice by evidence, it is only under the additional assumption that meaning determines reference that Heidegger's conclusions actually follow. With the help of a short analysis of Putnam's approach, the conclusion is drawn that, in light of the possibility of direct reference, meaning holism does not lead to relativism or incommensurability, but just to fallibilism.

Received 11 April 2002

Cristina Lafont, Department of Philosophy, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208, USA. E-mail: [clafont@northwestern.edu](mailto:clafont@northwestern.edu)