

The essence of human freedom between Heidegger and Kant: *Seinlassen* and *freie Gunst* in the contemplative experience of the Being of beings

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to provide a new reading of some crucial stages of Heidegger's inquiry into human freedom. Moving from Heidegger's critical interpretation of Kant's concepts of transcendental and practical freedom in the 1930 lecture course *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit. Einleitung in die Philosophie*, I address some of the most relevant questions this lecture raises. The lecture indeed seems to intriguingly open up a further hermeneutic perspective, which Heidegger only slightly touches upon but which nonetheless lays the premises for developing the peculiar sense that the notion of *Freiheit* assumes in Kant's third *Critique*. Building on such an assumption, my guiding hypothesis is that the main outcomes of the 1930 lecture course should be integrated with Heidegger's ontological radicalization of Kant's notion of *freie Gunst* in terms of *Seinlassen*, as presented in the lectures on Nietzsche (1936-1939) *qua* the supreme mode of accomplishment of the essence of human freedom.

Keywords: Heidegger; Kant; freedom; unconstrained favoring; letting be.

1. Introduction

Heidegger's treatment of the question concerning human freedom, whose enduring significance can be traced through his entire *Denkweg*, reveals its full relevance in light of his critique of modern subjectivism and his emphasis on *Dasein*'s structural disclosedness [*Erschlossenheit*] and transcendence [*Transzendenz*]. Heidegger's valorization of these characters of *Dasein*'s ecstatic mode of being is indeed tightly connected to his insistence on the need to abandon the usual way of understanding freedom from a merely anthropological perspective (namely, freedom as distinctive feature of the human being), and rather conceive it from a strictly ontological point of view, as suggested by the reciprocal belonging-together [*Zusammengehören*] of *Dasein* and *Sein*, to which the human existence is disclosed according to its very essence.

In order to clarify Heidegger's ontological concept of human freedom, in Section 1 I will focus on his engagement with Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy in the Freiburg lecture course of 1930 titled *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit. Einleitung in die Philosophie*¹. Here, Heidegger's phenomenological reading of Kant's first and second *Critique* leads him to emphasize the ontological limits of Kant's concept of *Freiheit*, inasmuch as it still rests upon metaphysical presuppositions and, in particular, is derived, from a theoretical point of view, from the intellectual category of *Kausalität*. Starting from the closing considerations of the Freiburg lectures, in Section 2 I shall then aim to show how the very fact that the course comes to an aporetic ending opens up the possibility of fulfilling Heidegger's theoretical demand for an inversion of thinking in the direction of an authentic metaphysics, which can be attempted by integrating the most significant results of the above-quoted *Vorlesung* with Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's conception of aesthetic experience, as presented in the first series of Nietzsche lectures titled *Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst* (1936-37)². In such a perspective, it is indeed possible to draw close, and at least to some extent equate, the peculiar kind of human attitude defined by Kant as unconstrained favoring [*freie Gunst*], which basically concerns the disinterested pleasure that is typical of aesthetic contemplation, and the Heideggerian notion of letting be [*Seinlassen*]. By *Seinlassen* Heidegger means a peculiar kind of affective and practical disposition that represents for him the supreme mode of accomplishment of ontological freedom, inasmuch as it enables both *Sein* to happen [*ereignen*] and turn *Dasein* into the site of its *free* revelation, and *Dasein* to transcend beings toward Being itself. In order to elucidate how the object bestows itself as a gift in its irreducible singularity and contingency to the faculty of judgment, in Section 3 I will finally dwell on the relationship between the Heideggerian concepts of *Freiheit* and *Unverborgenheit*, arguing for the identification of the contemplative experience, as it emerges from Heidegger's reading of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, with the supreme mode of manifestation of the essence of freedom – the latter being understood, with Heidegger, in terms of the ontological value it acquires in relation to the gratuitous and thus free bestowing of Being.

¹ For extended treatments of the concept of freedom in Heidegger, see especially Figal 1988; Sorial 2006; Guignon 2011: 79-105; Golob 2014: 192-212. With specific regard to Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's conception of freedom in the lecture course of 1930, see Webb 2004; Vigo 2010; Pietropaoli 2016; La Bella 2017.

² Heidegger's engagement with Kant's aesthetics in these lectures has received little attention from scholars. Amongst the few exceptions are Birault 1978: 217-219; Crowther 1985: 58-60; Kockelmans 1985: 31-32; Faas 2002: 215-218; Carbone 2004: 42-44; Torsen 2016.

2. *Causality as the common ground of transcendental and practical freedom*

In *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, the theoretical need for a renewed formulation of the *Freiheitsfrage* guides Heidegger's engagement with what he defines as "Kant's two ways to freedom" (WF 203; transl. 141)³. In particular, with "first way to freedom" (WF 139; 101) Heidegger refers to the unsuccessful outcome of Kant's attempt to overcome traditional ontology, onto which the conception of transcendental or cosmological freedom – assumed in the first *Critique* as pure transcendental idea in terms of "absolute self-activity [absolute Selbsttätigkeit]" (KrV A 418, B 446; transl. 465)⁴ – is in fact still grounded, since it is founded on the category of causality. The latter is linked, in turn, to the Principle of permanence of substance that is presented in the "First Analogy of Experience" of the "Transcendental Analytic", where, to quote Heidegger, "the problem of causality is connected with the problem of substantiality in the broader sense of permanence" (WF 173; 122). Remarking on the essential connection between the Kantian notions of *Freiheit* and *Kausalität*, Heidegger goes on to point out that it is in relation to the purely regulative idea of world – understood as "the totality of present beings as accessible to finite human knowledge" (WF 209; 144)⁵ – that, in the "Transcendental Dialectic" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the problem of freedom becomes the specific subject of examination within the "Third Antinomy" of "Rational Cosmology". As it is well-known, such an antinomy is constituted by the conflict between two theses that are equally demonstrable and mutually exclusive, and can ultimately be solved only by recognizing that the two antithetic propositions, one admitting of causality according to freedom, the other admitting of causality according to nature, belong to two heterogeneous spheres, namely that of noumena and of phenomena respectively. These two types of causality can simultaneously and non-contradictorily co-exist, as Heidegger stresses recalling Kant's argument, only in the case of man, the one entity that is both subject to the laws of nature's necessity and capable of self-determining qua moral agent. But, as Heidegger notes, if "the problem of man is drawn into the universal cosmological problem [...] [and] the possibility of the unification of both causalities is thus proven in principle [...], the appeal to human beings still remains invalidated" (WF 246-252; 167-170).

³ Cited works of Heidegger and Kant are listed at the end of this essay. The first figure points to the reference edition, the second one, after the semicolon, points to the English translation cited in the final references.

⁴ This reference is given by Heidegger in WF: 21n1; Eng. transl. 27n1.

⁵ On Heidegger's treatment of Kant's conception of the world, see Heidegger WG 146-155; 115-120.

On the other hand, by retracing the main steps of Kant's "second way to freedom" (WF 260; 181), which the *Critique of Practical Reason* defines as "lawgiving of its own on the part of pure and, as such, practical reason" (KpV 33; 166), Heidegger claims that it is pure reason, rather than practical reason, what grounds the very possibility of freedom in transcendental terms – an argument that is in stark contrast with the priority that Kant seems to assign to practical reason over pure reason (see WF 264; 184; cfr. KpV 4; 139). Practical freedom, indeed, appears to be founded on the broader notion of transcendental freedom and thus on the underlying notion of causality. Since Kant's notion of human freedom derives from, and is a specific mode of manifestation of, the cause-effect relation that involves all natural phenomena, it follows, in Heidegger's view, that such a conception falls back into the ontic perspective marked by the category of *Vorhandenheit* and this is the very ground of the charge of insufficient ontological radicalism he brings against Kant's notion of practical freedom:

Kant's orientation of causation to being-present, which he equates with actuality and existence as such, means that *he sees freedom and being-free within the horizon of being-present*. Since he fails to pose the question concerning the particular way of being of beings which are free, he does not unfold the metaphysical problem of freedom in a primordial manner. (WF 193; 166)

In the final analysis, in Kant's view, *Freiheit*, both in its cosmological and practical sense, is understood as a species of causation [*Ursachesein*], and, according to Heidegger, understanding beings in terms of cause/effect relationships means understanding them as something present-at-hand [*Vorhandenes*]. But this conceptualization of the notion of freedom, as Heidegger observes, implies an inauthentic [*uneigentlich*] way of understanding the essence of the human being, inasmuch as it equates natural entities to human beings, whose *phenomenal* and *noumenal* essence makes it possible for both types of causality (intelligible and natural) to co-exist. In Heidegger's terms, "we remain within the *limits of a purely cosmological consideration of beings* wherein man [...] is just one being among others and [...] does not [...] provide the primary [...] motive for the problem of freedom" (WF 129; 175).

3. *The correspondence of freie Gunst and Seinlassen*

By arguing that "*causality is grounded in freedom [...] and not vice versa*" (WF 303; 207), Heidegger invokes in the last pages of his *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* a philosophical torsion which amounts to the reversal of the relationship that makes the concept of *Freiheit* derive from the notion of *Kau-*

salität, so that one may assume causality as the determined mode in which freedom, understood in properly ontological terms, expresses itself. Such a reversal moreover implies the necessity to cease interpreting freedom in an anthropological perspective – that is, as a property of man understood, *à la* Kant, as a rational agent liable of imputability – and start instead identifying the essence of *Dasein* with the place in which the freedom of Being manifests itself. Heidegger describes his reformulation of freedom as follows:

freedom must itself, in its essence, be more primordial than man. Man is only an administrator of freedom [...]. Human freedom now no longer means freedom as a property of man, but man as a possibility of freedom. Human freedom is the freedom that breaks through in man [...], thus making man possible. If freedom is the ground of the possibility of existence [...], then man as grounded in his existence upon and in this freedom, is the site where beings in the whole become revealed [...]. Man is that being in whose ownmost being and essential ground there occurs the understanding of being. (WF 134-135; 94-95)⁶

In light of these considerations, it appears that Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's conception of practical freedom is rooted in his broader criticism of the rationalism inherited from modern philosophy, in which the priority of the *cogito* – from Descartes reaching through to Kant, Hegel and finally Husserl – irrevocably overshadows the relevance of the *sum*⁷. In restating his distance from the dogmas of self-evidence and metaphysical self-subsistence, and especially through his position on the fundamental issue of human freedom, Heidegger stresses the need for a phenomenological inquiry that is not satisfied with giving an account of man as a subject, endowed with the rational faculty and thus suited to obtain knowledge of, and domain over, present-at-hand entities as his objects.

Building on such premises, my working hypothesis is that it is possible to investigate what is left unexamined in the course of 1930, namely Kant's conception of aesthetic freedom, but emerges from the lectures on Nietzsche, focusing on Kant's doctrine of the beautiful⁸. Here, Heidegger shows how both Schopenhauer's account of the aesthetic state in terms of suspension of the will [*Ausbängen des Willens*] and Nietzsche's contrasting account of it in terms of rapture [*Rausch*] fundamentally misinterpret Kant's conception of the beautiful as the object of disinterested pleasure [*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*] (see *NI* 107-108; 108). In Heidegger's view, the disinterestedness [*Interesselosigkeit*]

⁶ Cfr. *WW* 190; 145-146.

⁷ See, for instance, *PIA* (172-174; 130-131) and *N2* (124-129; 96-119).

⁸ See *NI* 106-114; 107-114.

that, according to Kant, characterizes the aesthetic experience, is not an expression of indifference [*Gleichgültigkeit*] towards its object; rather, it is *the* mode of relating to what is, to being, which allows a genuine, insofar as not instrumental, reception of it:

“interest” comes from the Latin *mibi interest*, something is of importance to me [...]. Whatever we take an interest in is always already [...] represented, with a view to something else. Kant [...] asks by what means our behavior, in the situation where we find something we encounter to be beautiful, must let itself be determined in such a way that we encounter the beautiful *as* beautiful. What is the determining ground for our finding something beautiful? [...] Kant [...] first says by way of refutation what never can and never may propose itself as such a ground, namely, an interest [...]. That is to say, in order to find something beautiful, we must let what encounters us, purely as it is in itself, come before us in its own stature and worth. We may not take it into account in advance with a view to something else, our goals and intentions [...]. Comportment toward the beautiful as such, says Kant, is *unconstrained favoring*. (N1 108-109; 109)

The consequent identification of Kant’s *freie Gunst* with the attitude of *Seinlassen* – which, far from appearing as mere ecstatic passivity, entails “the supreme effort of our essential nature” (N1 109; 109), i.e., the ever unsolved tension of *Dasein* towards its own Self – leads Heidegger to individuate in such a disposition “the liberation of our selves for the release of what has proper worth in itself, only in order that we may have it purely” (N1 109; 109). The unconstrained favoring, understood as letting be, thus grounds the possibility of a two-fold emancipation. On the one hand, it indeed implies a liberation of the subject, who, throughout the aesthetic contemplation, suspends every theoretical or practical-poietical activity; on the other, it liberates the object, which, freed from its merely instrumental status of thingness, can come “to the fore as pure object” (N1 110; 110) and thus shine in its own proper dignity⁹. In fact, in Heidegger’s view, letting be appears as the only attitude by virtue of which human beings can relate to the coming to presence of the Being of beings, as it allows the latter to unfold in its purity and not in its usefulness, as it normally appears in the intra-mundane context in which, “firstly and mostly”, it performs its function. Such an interpretation, therefore, stresses the *gratuity* of the aesthetic relationship, which entails the necessity to “release what encounters us as such to its way to be [...] and grant it what belongs to it and what it brings to us” (N1 109; 109); disinterestedness hence finds that “essential relation to the object itself” (N1 110; 110) by means of which the subject’s will ceases to frame the phenomenon within the perceptual conditions that determine its knowabil-

⁹ On this topic, see Birault 1978: 218; Lories 1981: 489-490.

ity (and that the *Critique of Pure Reason* conceptualizes as prior, due to their grounding scientific knowledge); and the object of judgment, correspondingly, is freed of its *Wirklichkeit* and bestows itself alethically, beyond any intellectual mediation, so that only its form [*Form*], to say it with Kant, emerges.

4. *Ontological freedom: letting be as the condition of possibility of the unconcealing of Being*

If we pursue an ontological reading of Kant's aesthetics, it seems that the relationship between Heidegger's notions of *Freiheit* and *Unverborgenheit* finds a peculiar form of manifestation in the free appearing of the *Erscheinung*, as it is presented in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: here, the phenomenon is indeed subtracted from the process of subjectivation that is operated by sensibility's a-priori forms of space and time and unconceals itself in favor of the subject and the free play [*freies Spiel*] of his cognitive faculties (see *KU* 217-218; 48-49), so as to be received in its original essence. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to consider the notion of free beauty [*pulchritudo vaga*]. While in the case of merely adherent beauty [*pulchritudo adhaerens*], the judgment of taste cannot disregard the object's intrinsic normativity, wandering beauty does not presuppose any correspondence between the object of contemplation and the concept it should embody (see *KU* 229; 60); thus it is a good candidate as the original form in which truth (understood as unconcealment rather than as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*) manifests itself¹⁰. For what concerns aesthetic pleasure, moreover, let us now briefly take into account the Kantian distinction between the agreeable [*das Angenehme*], the beautiful [*das Schöne*] and the good [*das Gute*], according to which

both the agreeable and the good involve a reference to the faculty of desire, and are thus attended [...] with a delight [...] [which] is determined not merely by the representation of the object, but also by the represented bond of connexion between the subject and the existence of the object [...]. On the other hand the judgement of taste is simply *contemplative* [...]. But not even is this contemplation itself directed to concepts; for the judgement of taste is not a cognitive judgement (neither a theoretical one nor a practical), and hence, also, is not *grounded* on concepts, nor yet *intentionally directed* to them. (*KU* 209; 41)

Given such a distinction, it appears that, as Kant concludes, only the pleasure resulting from a beautiful representation is disinterested and thus *free* (*KU* 210; 41), as it recognizes, in Heidegger's terms, the ontological autonomy

¹⁰ On this issue, see Lebrun 1970: 351-353; Lories 1981: 499-502.

of the object that is contemplated. Aesthetic contemplation, therefore, grounds the experience of a two-fold freedom. For what emerges is a *correspondence* fashioned by a relationship of mutual bestowing: on the one hand, we have the objective bestowing that pertains to the unconcealment of the phenomenon, which, emancipated from the ends of practical and theoretical reason, bestows itself as a gift *in favor of* the free play of the contemplator's intellect and imagination; on the other hand, we have the subjective bestowing of he who, refraining from reducing the object to his own consciousness, discloses himself *in favor of* an a-theoretical and thus disinterested reception of the beautiful. In the judgment of taste, therefore, the dualism of subject and object is overcome, as the contemplated thing is not assumed as something present-at-hand [*vorhanden*] in the first place and only subsequently judged as beautiful; rather, it is grasped in its proper and autonomous essence, released as it is from any usefulness it might have in relation to the subject's instrumental ends.

In the final analysis, within a phenomenological reading of Kant's aesthetics, the contemplative stance appears as what allows the Being of beings to be experienced, not with the purpose of fastening it to oneself, so to speak, but merely in order to hearken [*horchen*] to its vibration [*Erzitterung*], receive the spontaneous release of its essence and listen, therefore, to the distant voice [*Stimme*] of Being that resonates in that ontic singularity. As the disinterestedness underlying the aesthetic experience presupposes the subject's enfranchisement from his own will of domain, the attitude of *Seinlassen* emerges as the very condition of possibility for the free *phyein* of Being into the ontic forms in which it shines phenomenally¹¹. Indeed, it is only in the waking [*wecken*] of such a disposition that *Dasein*, hearkening to the voice of Being, can co-respond [*entsprechen*] to its appeal [*Zuspruch*]¹², so that Being itself may *freely* unconceal itself in the clearing of its *Da*.

5. Conclusion

We have shown that, under Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's conception of aesthetic stance, only the a-theoretical and a-practical nature of the judgment of taste, which is indifferent to the existence of the object and is exclusively interested in its form, and the unconstrained favoring as expression of the openness of *Dasein*, may disclose the essence of freedom. Correspondingly, the latter, once authentically understood, can no longer be conceived as a merely anthro-

¹¹ On the unconcealing of Being as *phyein* see, for instance, *EM* (108-110; 106-107) and *WB* (300-301; 229-230).

¹² See *WP* 21; 77.

pological quality, i.e. a possibility belonging to human being; in fact, quite the opposite is true: it is man that emerges as the very possibility for the freedom of Being to manifest itself. In such a perspective, *Seinlassen*, especially in the ethical sense it starts acquiring in the 1928-29 winter semester *Vorlesung* titled *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, appears as that original and free action [*Tun*]¹³ that, on the level of concrete acting, manifests itself into the resoluteness [*Entschlossenheit*] of *Dasein* to expose itself to the unhiddenness of both being and of other *Dasein*, and to refrain from submitting either of these to its own instrumental ends. In this sense, the discovering relationship that ties human beings to the Being of beings would reside not so much in the theoretical act of correspondence between intellect and its object, but in the capacity to recognize and receive the intrinsic truth and freedom of that which man relates to whenever he holds back from any attempt of appropriation or reification. In *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* Heidegger writes: “To let be [...] means to engage oneself with the open region [...] [which] Western thinking in its beginning conceived [...] as τὰ ἀληθέα, the unconcealed [...]. Letting-be, i.e., freedom [...] manifests itself as exposure to the disclosedness of beings” (*WW* 188-189; 144-145)¹⁴.

Considering Heidegger’s conceptualization of the relationship of mutual co-belonging of freedom and truth, the need for a radical rethinking of the relationship between *Dasein* and *Sein* emerges stronger than ever. Being, indeed, can be understood only by virtue of *Dasein*’s predisposition to leave it to the entity to encounter us, to come forth to us, and then guard [*wahren*] it in its *aletheia*. Such rethinking, understood as

essential thinking [...], expends itself in being for the truth of being [...] [and] responds to the claim of being, through the human being letting his historical essence be responsible to the simplicity of a singular necessity, one that does not necessitate by way of compulsion, but creates the need that fulfills itself in the freedom of sacrifice [...]. In sacrifice there occurs the concealed thanks that alone pays homage to the grace that being has bestowed upon the human essence in thinking, so that human beings may [...] assume the guardianship of being. (*NWM* 309-310; 236)

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¹³ See *EP* 102-103 (a translation of this text, *Introduction to Philosophy*, is forthcoming from Indiana University Press).

¹⁴ Cfr. *WF* 303; 207: “The letting-be-encountered of beings, comportment to beings in each and every mode of manifestness, is only possible where freedom *exists*”.

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