

## **Ethics, Practical Philosophy, and the Transformation of the World: The Dialogue between Heidegger and Marcuse**

Anna Pia Ruoppo  
Università di Napoli “Federico II”

### **Abstract**

The article displays the reciprocal influence between Heidegger and Marcuse concerning the idea of practical philosophy. It first proceeds by evaluating the possibility of an ethical interpretation of *Being and Time* and following Marcuse’s reception of it, and then by delineating the basic elements of Heidegger’s interpretations of Marx, his answer to Hegelian Marxism, and his understanding of the concept of Praxis.

**Keywords:** ethics, praxis, phenomenology, Heidegger, Marcuse

### **Introduction**

It is well-established that Heidegger was generally opposed to a division of thinking into disciplines and, consequently, to the explicit formulation of an ethics. Nevertheless, the discussion about the ethical implications of Heidegger’s philosophy has started even since the first publication of *Being and Time* in 1927. Heidegger himself reports that, immediately after its publication, “a young friend” came to ask him when he was going to write an ethics, a question he refers to explicitly in the *Letter on “Humanism”*. In this context, the general topic of ethics is given a twofold articulation: on the one hand, in a discussion of the relationship of ethics and ontology; on the other hand, in an analysis of the characteristics of a thinking understood as an acting. Following both directions, I will first

consider the relationship between ontology and ethics with regard to existential analytics, and then try to highlight the characteristics of thinking understood as the highest form of Praxis.

It is the particular purpose of this contribution to evaluate the ethical implications of Heidegger's thinking with respect to the reception of *Being and Time* by Herbert Marcuse. The early thinking of the latter, who found support for his philosophy of critical revolution in Heidegger's existential analytics and, while attempting a synthesis of Hegelian Marxism and existential ontology, created a hybrid existential Marxist conceptuality, offers a particularly instructive example of how individual philosophers have formed key concepts of their own work in response to Heidegger's philosophy. During the twenties, while taking the (at least partial) identification of the concepts of "inauthentic life" and "alienated life" as a point of reference, Marcuse saw Heidegger's thinking as a platform for the creation of a concrete philosophy.

After having come to know Marcuse's reception of *Being and Time*, Heidegger seized the opportunity to answer to what he took for an overlap of different directions of thought when giving his interpretation of Marxism, first in his *Letter on "Humanism"* (Heidegger 1947) and later in the *Seminars* (Heidegger 2005 b). In order to display this reciprocal influence, we will first proceed by evaluating the possibility of an ethical interpretation of *Being and Time* and follow Marcuse's reception of it, and then by delineating the basic elements of Heidegger's interpretations of Marx, his answer to Hegelian Marxism, and his understanding of the concept of Praxis.

## 1. Ethics and Ontology

Heidegger's philosophy is rooted in his intellectual opposition to Positivism and sets its aim in understanding life in its entirety (Heidegger 1992; Heidegger 1993). In his philosophical program, the determination of the idea of philosophy runs in parallel to the comprehension of the categories of life. One of the most important aspects of the determination of life lies in the acquisition of its historical dimension (Heidegger 2006).

From his very first lectures on, Heidegger takes the historical dimension of life into consideration, starting from a phenomenological interpretation of religion (Heidegger 1995) and deriving the idea of a cairological temporality from an analysis of the New Testament. In search of philosophical concepts suited to understand life, Heidegger turns to Aristotle (Figal 1996<sup>2</sup>; Figal 2000<sup>3</sup>; Volpi 1984; Denker & Zaborowski 2007) and identifies a central point of the latter's thinking in an ontology oriented towards production from where a concept of Being derives as simple presence and the consequent primacy of the form of theoretical life.

In opposition to Aristotle, Heidegger assumes *phronesis* as the model of philosophical knowledge. Pointing out an ambivalence in Aristotle's thinking, he contrasts the ontology of production (for which the texts of the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* are the relevant reference) to his own ontology of life (the foundations of which he sees in *De Anima*, the *Rhetoric* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*).

According to his own testimony, Heidegger gains essential insight into the understanding of existence from his analysis of *De Anima*, “a doctrine of living Being” offering “an ontology of Being characterized as life” (Heidegger 2005 a, 101). Then, employing a method to which he will come back later in *Being and Time*, he turns to the *Rhetoric*, seen by him as an interpretation of *Dasein* in its “everydayness” (*Alltäglichkeit*) (Heidegger 2005 a, 111). In this context, Heidegger's attention focuses on the Aristotelian interpretation of *pathe* where he finds a thematic basis for the understanding of the “attunement” (*Befindlichkeit*). Furthermore, by an integration of conceptual elements from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the concept of *pathe* is interpreted in terms of a disposition or propensity (*exis*) to act, thereby opening a wide horizon with respect to the problem of an ethical dimension of existential analytics.

Even though these moments of the Aristotelian thinking – the doctrine of *pathe* from the *Rhetoric*, the analyses of life from *De Anima*, and of the cairological instant from book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* – offer the basis for an understanding of the fundamental categories of life, it is Heidegger's view that Aristotle did not integrate these important intuitions into a

doctrine of the entire human life. To achieve this integration is the task Heidegger sets himself in the existential analytics. In doing so, he does not acquire the fundamental categories of the Aristotelian comprehension of life in their original context of Being as production, but in the horizon of Being as “Being-toward-death”.

In addition to presenting an ontology of life as opposed to an ontology of production, the existential analytics explore the possibilities of coming to or losing what Heidegger calls the “authentic existence”, whereby the horizon of authenticity is met by adoption of the historical dimension of existence. And it is this opposition between authentic and inauthentic existence where most interpretations of *Being and Time* as practical philosophy are based upon.

Taking this opposition together with the presumed vicinity of Heidegger’s concept of inauthenticity to Marx’s concept of alienation as a basis, Marcuse understood existential analytics as “a radical attempt to put philosophy on a really concrete foundation” (Marcuse 2005, 166) suitable to provide support for his own philosophy of critical revolution attempting a synthesis of Hegelian Marxism and existential ontology.

It is well-known that, after having finished his dissertation in 1922, Marcuse moved from Freiburg to Berlin where he worked as an antiquary and started to study the writings of Karl Marx. Only in 1927, under the impression of the meanwhile published *Being and Time*, he decided to return to Freiburg in order to work with Heidegger, and it was particularly the emphasis the latter gave to historicity as human dimension, the young Marcuse found himself susceptible to.

Consequently, the text of Marcuse where Heidegger’s influence is most evident – as well as stated explicitly in the author’s introduction – is *Hegels Ontologie und die Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit*, a study on Hegel’s theory of historicity performed under Heidegger’s supervision and intended to give rise to Marcuse’s habilitation. But apart from this, there are a number of earlier writings having only recently been made available to the American public (Marcuse 2005), that are instructive for an evaluation of the traces Heidegger’s influence

has left in the very first formulations of Marcuse's thinking. In what follows, one of these, entitled *Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism* (1928), will be considered in more detail.

Marcuse here represents Marxism as a theory of social action and of historical act, whereby action is based on the comprehension of the historicity of human existence. Heidegger's philosophy is interpreted as a genuinely practical science, the science of the possibilities of authentic Being and its fulfilment in the authentic act. Radical action is, in Marcuse's view, a historical act and proceeds from the discovery of historicity as the fundamental category of human existence. Radical action is necessary, and the sphere of its necessity is history. It is this conviction of a historical determination of existence that is at the very root of Marcuse's particular interest in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Following Heidegger's footsteps, Marcuse identifies the authentic dimension of existence with its historical determination. In Heidegger's identification of historicity as a component of *Dasein*, he sees the most advanced point bourgeois philosophy has by then reached, but at the same time recognizes the limits of Heidegger's thinking in its incapacity to understand the material content of historicity.

“Recognizing the historical thrownness of *Dasein* and its historical determinateness and rootedness in the ‘destiny’ of the community, Heidegger has driven his radical investigation to the most advanced point that bourgeois philosophy has yet achieved – and can achieve. He has revealed man's theoretical modes of behaviour to be ‘derivate’, to be founded in practical ‘making-provision’, and has thereby shown praxis to be field of decision. He has determined the moment of decision – resoluteness – to be a historical situation and resoluteness itself to a tacking-up of historical fate. Against the bourgeois concepts of freedom and determination, he has posed a new definition of being free as the ability to choose necessity, as the genuine ability to grasp the possibilities that have been prescribed and pre-given; moreover, he has established history as the sole authority in relation to this ‘fidelity to one's existence’. Here, however, the radical impulse reaches its end.” (Marcuse 2005, 15)

Consequently, Marcuse's effort is to combine Hegelian Marxism and existential ontology, intended to “correct” each other reciprocally. His task is to stress the material content of historicity and to reveal the dialectical method as adequate to

this objective. Establishing a parallel between Existentialism and Marxism, and emphasizing the subjective moment in the last one, Marcuse finds an element of novelty with respect to the historical necessity in human action. This action is a negation of what is the case, in the same sense as in Heidegger's view, the decision towards authentic existence is understood as a "disavowal" of the past:

"Rooted in the fundamental character of historicity, this immanent necessity of history finds its clearest expression in the fact that causes of historical movement from the status quo that which is to come are already fully present in the world as it exists in the present and that they develop only out of it. It is only by this principle that transcendent, metahistorical, or ahistorical impulses or intervention are included. However, insofar as this development is realized only through the (historical) action of man, that which is to come will always take the form of a 'negation of the status quo'. We will recall that – as Heidegger made clear – a resoluteness toward authentic existence that is conscious of its fate is only possible as a 'disavowal' of the past, a past whose domination always stands in the way in the form of fallenness. This is, when taken in conjunction with the Marxian breakthrough to practical concretion, the theory of revolution." (Marcuse 2005, 18-19)

Marcuse agrees with Heidegger that, if *Dasein* is historical in its very being, it stands at every moment in a concrete, historical situation. Before its basic structure can be exhibited, this situation must be destroyed. Marcuse's method of destroying history is not hermeneutic, but dialectical, a method of action in accordance with knowledge, that on the basis of comprehension of the concrete historical situation can draw correct conclusions for the relevant sphere of praxis. On the basis of this analysis, in his early writings Marcuse attempts a synthesis of existential ontology and Marxism:

"If we therefore demand, on the one hand, that phenomenology of human *Dasein* initiated by Heidegger forge onward, coming to completion in a phenomenology of concrete *Dasein* and the concrete historical action demanded by history in each historical situation, we must, on the other hand, demand that dialectical method of knowing become phenomenological, that is push itself in the opposite direction and thereby learn to incorporate concretion in the full comprehension of the object." (Marcuse 2005, 20)

## 2. Thinking as Praxis

Although Heidegger acknowledges in his *Letter on "Humanism"* that he himself sees a common point of his own thinking and Marxism in the latter's capacity to penetrate into the historical dimension of human Being and of reality, he strongly rejects Marcuse's above-outlined view of existential analytics and feels urged to keep his distance in the *Seminars* (Heidegger 2005 b) – particularly the Le Thor seminar of 1969 – and in a televised interview with Richard Wisser (Heidegger 2000) by pointing out the difference between alienation (*Entfremdung*) and inauthenticity (*Uneigentlichkeit*).

Because of its humanistic way to determine the essence of human Being, its overthrow of Hegel's absolute metaphysics and its materialism in which consists the essence of modern technique, Marxist thinking is – in Heidegger's view – firmly located within the history of metaphysics. Consequently, Marxism cannot simply be considered a political phenomenon or a *Weltanschauung*, but rather has to be understood starting from the essence of technique as one manner of development of metaphysics. Therefore, a productive confrontation with Marxism is impossible at the political level, but can possibly be established at the level of a thought able to think its relation to Being (*Bezug zum Sein*).

When in the above-mentioned interview explicitly asked after the possibility of a social task for philosophy, Heidegger identifies such a task uniquely in the comprehension of the essence of what is to be transformed, whereby the envisaged transformation is thought to be brought about through a new interpretation of the world in contrast to the revolutionary action called for by Marx, e.g. in his *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach*. Heidegger notices a contradiction in this Marxist position that clearly bases the intended transformation on a determinate interpretation of the world. The affirmation according to which the world has been sufficiently and exhaustively interpreted and asks for passing on towards transformation, on the one hand implies a primacy of action over simple interpretation. On the other hand, it is unavoidably based upon a preliminary interpretation that recognizes the

importance of human action and determines its characteristics. Heidegger rejects this Marxist separation and contraposition of action and interpretation and, instead, tries to reconcile both in the development of an understanding of interpretation which is itself already transformation. In the context of the seminar at Le Thor, Heidegger refers to Marxism as the kind of thought having been able to identify “the only two realities of our age: the economic *development* and the *equipment* required by it” (Heidegger 2005 b). But calling for the transformation of the world, Marxism has right away gone beyond. Here too, Heidegger cites the *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach* and proposes its critical interpretation, pointing out that there is no antithesis of *interpretation* and *transformation* of the world, as each transformation relies on a preliminary theoretical understanding that in itself is already a transformation.

Without knowing about these later developments of Heidegger’s thinking, Marcuse – while following the lines of thought emerging from *Being and Time* in his early essay, *On Concrete Philosophy* – understands philosophy as a moment of existence, as a practical science having the purpose of an appropriation of truth through action. Thereby, the unity of theory and praxis is achieved by taking theory as a cognitive instrument expedient for the liberation of praxis through a knowledge of the necessity of the historical situation. Despite meritorious in itself, this Marcusean approach does not represent a conceptual framework suitable to get to grips with Heidegger’s idea of the unity of theory and praxis as unity of “interpretation” and “transformation”. The missing link, in my opinion inalienable to an appropriate understanding of Heidegger’s view, is taking into account the latter’s original orientation towards Aristotelian philosophy. In quest of a model for a not objectifying philosophy, Heidegger criticizes what he calls the “primacy of theory” in the attempt to understand life in its vitality. His analysis of book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* leads him to assume two of Aristotle’s dianoetic virtues, the *sophia* and the *phronesis* (Heidegger 2005 a), as a model of theory and praxis. Heidegger highlights that for Aristotle theory is still able to understand life, although preserving in itself a tendency to fall, i.e. a tendency to miss the life in which it takes root. Nevertheless, a

fundamental opposition between theory and life is only created by confining theory to the sphere of hypothesis and demonstration, as – in Heidegger’s opinion – was typically done by neo-kantianism. And it is in opposition to the predominance of this theory that Heidegger from the earliest formulation of his thinking in the lectures of the first Freiburg period (1919-1923) on, aims to orient philosophy towards *phronesis*. The motive of this orientation is merely “methodological”. If *phronesis* – as Heidegger puts it – is the capacity to mediate the universal and the particular, i.e. intuition within the horizon of understanding, it offers the basis for an understanding of life as a whole. But despite of its purely methodological function, this orientation of philosophy towards *phronesis* has a far-reaching non-methodological consequence: the introduction of a practical moment into philosophy. Philosophy as interpretation does not contemplate the world leaving it unchanged, but instead transforms while understanding it. We can better understand this view of transformation through a further confrontation with Aristotle and his concept of praxis. For Aristotle, praxis is the movement that includes its end, the fulfillment that does not dissolve itself in the creation of an external product. Thinking and understanding do not “produce effects”, but act by fulfilling thought and understanding itself. The meaning of Heidegger’s orientation of philosophy towards *phronesis* can be better understood, if we take into consideration that, in his very first attempts to find a firm basis of his thinking, in particular of the relationship of intuition and understanding, Heidegger turns to Hegel and his conception of dialectics (Heidegger 2002) and only later moves on towards Aristotle. In the same measure as he gives up the dialectical moment in favour of *phronesis*, he loses the possibility to think transformation in a strong sense. That is why he speaks of lingering (*weilen*) in the openness and of releasement (*Gelassenheit*) when describing the attitude of man in the age of technique, and why this attitude of *Gelassenheit* is characterized as dwelling (*verweilen*) in the openness, i.e. as both a Yes and a No to technique understood in the perspective of the history of metaphysics.

Aware of these later developments in Heidegger’s thinking, in his turn, Marcuse kept distance from it in an interview with

Frederick Olafson, underlining precisely its false concreteness in spite of its stress on historicity. In Marcuse's view, Heidegger neglects history and while transforming it into an existential category, neutralizes it. In this context Marcuse also observes that from an *ex post* perspective Heidegger's view of human existence and of Being-in-the-world in *Being and Time* was highly repressive and oppressive and "gives a picture which plays well on the fears and frustration of men and women in a repressive society – a joyless existence: overshadowed by death and anxiety; human material for the authoritarian personality" (Marcuse 2005, 170). Only as a consequence of "Heidegger's association with Nazism", Marcuse found himself able to see in Heidegger's thinking a "very powerful devaluation of life, a derogation of joy, of sensuousness, fulfilment" that nobody might have discovered in it earlier. Even the positive sense of Authenticity is overshadowed by death, by the entire interpretation of existence as a Being-towards-death, and the incorporation of death into every hour and every minute of life. Consequently, Marcuse perceives existential analysis *à la* Heidegger as deeply rooted in a very different social and intellectual context, as an answer to the question on "how social institutions reproduce themselves in the individuals, and how the individuals, by virtue of their reproducing their own society, act on it". Marcuse concludes the interview stressing that "there is room for what may be called an existential analysis, but only within this framework".

Thus, after having lost his initial interest in Heidegger's thinking together with the hope to find in it the basis for a concrete philosophy, Marcuse's political worldview developed into an opposite direction identifying praxis with political action, whereas Heidegger – in opposition to each kind of social action or revolution – continued during his entire life to stress the role played by thought in "changing the world". For him, Thought always remained the highest form of Praxis. Nevertheless, it is this different meaning of Praxis that opens the horizon within which each dialogue between Heidegger and Marcuse will most likely locate itself. And if it is true that while interpreting Marx and thereby also Marcusean Marxism as a

moment of the history of metaphysics, Heidegger proves unable to grasp the *proprium* of Marxism, i.e. the scientific possibility of a revolutionary overthrow of the present status of (social) reality, it is similarly true that moving from Marx's point of view, we can not request from Heidegger – for whom the only chance to “transform” the real world lies in poetry, in the reminding thinking, i.e. in a domain that is for sure not the one intended by Marx and Marxism – answers to how to bring about political changes in the world.

### REFERENCES

- Denker, Alfred, and Holger Zaborowski, eds. 2007. *Heidegger Jahrbuch*, Vol. 3: “Heidegger und Aristoteles”. Freiburg i. Br: Verlag Karl Alber.
- Figal, Günter. 1996. *Heidegger zur Einführung*, 2. Auflage. Hamburg: Junius Verlag.
- Figal, Günter. 2000. *Martin Heidegger. Phänomenologie der Freiheit*, 3. Auflage. Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1947. *Über den Humanismus*. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1992. “Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (Wintersemester 1919/20).” In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 58, hrsg. von Hans-Helmuth Gander. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1993. “Phänomenologie der Anschauung und des Ausdrucks. Theorie des philosophischen Begriffsbildung (Sommersemester 1920).” In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 59, hrsg. von Claudius Strube. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1995. “Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens.” In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 60, hrsg. von Matthias Jung, Thomas Regehly und Claudius Strube. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1999. *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, 2. Auflage. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.

Heidegger, Martin. 2000. "Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges (1910-1976)." In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 16, hrsg. von Hermann Heidegger. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.

Heidegger, Martin. 2002. "Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie (Sommersemester 1924)." In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 18, hrsg. von Mark Michalski. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.

Heidegger, Martin. 2004. "Der Begriff der Zeit (1924)." In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 62, hrsg. von Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.

Heidegger, Martin. 2005 a. "Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Ausarbeitung für die Marburger und die Göttinger Philosophische Fakultät (1922), (Natorp-Bericht)." In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 62, hrsg. von Günther Neumann. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.

Heidegger, Martin. 2005 b. "Seminare (1951-1973)." In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 15, 2., durchgesehene Auflage, hrsg. von Curd Ochwad. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann.

Marcuse, Hebert. 2005. *Heideggerian Marxism*. Edited by Richard Wolin and John Abromeit. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Volpi, Franco. 1984. *Heidegger e Aristotele*. Padova: Daphne.

**Anna Pia Ruoppo** is PhD researcher at the University of Naples „Federico II“. Her research interests are the phenomenology, the ethics, and the practical philosophy. She has published the book *Vita e metodo nelle prime lezioni friburghesi di Martin Heidegger 1919-1923* (2008).

Address:

Anna Pia Ruoppo

Università degli Studi „Federico II“

Dipartimento di Filosofia

Via Porta di Massa, 1

80133 Napoli

E-mail: annapiaruoppo@yahoo.com