Heideggerian Perfectionism and the Phenomenology of the Pedagogical Truth Event

Iain Thomson

"Paideia does not consist in merely pouring knowledge into the unprepared soul as if it were some container held out empty and waiting. On the contrary, real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it."

Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Teaching on Truth"[1]

As I have shown elsewhere, *Heidegger's philosophy of education is a philosophy of transformation*, one profoundly concerned with both personal and historical transformation.[2] Here I would like to say more about the crucial moment in which these two dimensions intersect, such that personal and historical transformation come together to illuminate, motivate, and facilitate one another. I call this doubly transformative moment *the pedagogical truth event*. In such events, we achieve a revolutionary return to the self that shows us how to step beyond our nihilistic late-modernity into a genuinely meaningful postmodern understanding of being. To begin to explain this doubly transformative event, I shall briefly unpack its personal and historical dimensions and then address their intersection.

On the level of personal transformation, Heidegger's ontological understanding of education is centrally concerned with that paradoxical question at the heart of the "perfectionist" tradition (from and alongside which Western virtue theory developed): *How do we become what we are*? "Becoming what we are" means discovering the ground on which we *already* stand, without having realized it.

What we are, ontologically, is a world-disclosing being (a *Dasein* or "being-here"), that is, a being who implicitly participates in the making-intelligible of its world (by "unconcealing the concealed," or "worlding the earth," in Heidegger's language). To *realize* such world-disclosure means both (1) to recognize the implicit role we already play in constituting our intelligible worlds and also (2) to cultivate and develop these implicit skills for "poietic" world-disclosure, that is, for discerning and creatively developing the possibilities that continually emerge at the dynamic intersection between self and world, human being and being itself. In Heidegger's early work, to realize what we already are is to be transformed by coming full circle back to ourselves, an existential odyssey of departure and return I have called the *revolutionary return to ourselves*. In his later work the emphasis shifts, and Heidegger suggests a more complex account of how this transformative return to the self takes place. It is this later vision that I shall reconstruct here, since it is more carefully attuned to the historical dimension of historical intelligibility.[3]

For Heidegger, that we each play a role in constituting our intelligible worlds never meant that we can freely determine how things show up for us, making cruelty look kind, ugliness beautiful, or frenzy relaxing by force of will or rational argument (*pace* widespread caricatures of "existential voluntarism"). He begins by acknowledging *discursivity*, the fact that the subconscious processes through which we render reality intelligible to ourselves dictates that even our sensory uptake of that reality is selective (as we can see by comparing our sense of smell with a dog's, or our comparatively impoverished visual acuity with a hawk's) and that the subconscious processes of attention to and conceptualization of this selectively gathered perceptual information work to filter and organize it yet further (as we can see by comparing our sensitivity to shades of color with those of a skilled artist, or our taste of wine with that of an expert oenophile, or even our experience of the same film while viewing it in different moods or life-stages). As this suggests, our intelligible world, even in its greatest richness, is ordinarily a slice of a slice of reality at best.[4] Yes, this helps explain why the text does not mean the same thing for the expert teacher as it does for the novice student, but that is only an important instance of the more general truth that the way the world shows up for one expert teacher is not simply the way it shows up for another, let alone the way it has always shown up or will always show up for all human or other world-disclosing beings.

When Heidegger contrasts the different historical worlds of the ancient Greeks, medieval Christians, and modern Westerners, his primary concern

is not with gender, class, or cultural differences but, instead, with a pervasive phenomenological difference in the way the world shows up that is even more fundamental (since all meaningful gender, class, and culture differences *are*, but not *all* being is shaped by gender, class, or cultural difference). Heidegger's focus is on the way Western humanity's *understanding of being*—our most basic sense of what it means to be—gets constituted, focused, transmitted, and transformed. In his view, this "history of being" changes drastically over time and yet is neither a constantly shifting medium we can alter at will nor an unchanging monolith over which human beings have no influence. Heidegger's understanding of *ontological historicity*—of the way in which our basic sense of reality changes with time—occupies a middle ground between the poles of voluntaristic constructivism and quietistic fatalism. Historical intelligibility is neither a formless Heraclitean flux (*pace* Derrida) nor an unbroken Parmenidean unity (*pace* Rorty). Instead, according to Heidegger's punctuated equilibrium view of historicity (a view I call *ontological epochality*), our changing understanding of being takes shape as a series of three drastically different but internally unified and relatively coherent historical "epochs," the ancient, medieval, and modern. (The ancient and modern epochs further divide into the Presocratic and the Platonic as well as the modern and late modern ages, for a total of five ages in the Western "history of being," five overlapping yet distinguishable historical constellations of intelligibility.)[5] In each of these "epochs," the overwhelming floodwaters of being are temporarily dammed so that an island of historical intelligibility can arise out of the river of time. Ontotheologies are what build, undermine, and rebuild these dams. How, then, do ontotheologies accomplish this important role?

Put simply, ontotheologies focus and disseminate our basic sense of what it means to be. Our fundamental understanding of the being of entities—that is, of what and how all entities *are*—gets shaped historically by the ontotheological tradition running from Plato to Nietzsche. Grasping the entire intelligible order by uncovering both its innermost "ontological" core and its outermost "theological" expression, ontotheologies link these antipodal perspectives together so as to ground an historical age's sense of reality from the inside-out and the outside-in simultaneously. Ontotheologies doubly anchor an epoch's historical understanding of being when they succeed in grasping reality from both extremes at once, temporarily establishing both its microscopic depths and ultimate telescopic expression. Thus, to take only the most important example, the sense of reality unifying our own late-modern age is rooted in the ontotheology first articulated by Nietzsche. Universalizing insights already

discovered by Adam Smith and Charles Darwin in the domains of economics and biology, Nietzsche recognized that for us reality is ultimately nothing but competing forces coming-together and breaking-apart with no end beyond the maximal growth that perpetuates these underlying forces themselves. This is precisely what Heidegger discerns as Nietzsche's "unthought" ontotheology, his understanding of the being of entities as "eternally recurring will-to-power."

As long as we cannot think beneath or beyond such ontotheologies, they come to function like self-fulfilling prophecies, thanks to what I have called *ontological holism*. Everything intelligible *is* in some way, so when ontotheologies reshape our sense of "is-ness" itself, they thereby catalyze a transformation in our sense of what it means for *anything* to be, including ourselves. These ontotheologies implicitly reshape our sense of what and how all things are, functioning like lenses we do not usually see but, instead, see *through*. The problem is that Nietzsche's ontotheology of eternally recurring will-to-power inaugurates what Heidegger famously calls the "technological" understanding of being, or "enframing" (*Gestell*). As we late-moderns come to understand the being of all entities as nothing but forces seeking their own self-perpetuating growth, we increasingly tend to treat all things—even ourselves and each other—as intrinsically meaningless "resources" (*Bestand*) standing by merely to be optimized, enhanced, and ordered for maximally flexible use.

As I argued in *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*, the ongoing reduction of education to the empty optimization imperative—"Get the most for the least!"—has to be understood not simply as a result of capitalist corporatization or bureaucratic routinization but, even more deeply, in terms of the nihilistic technological ontotheology underlying all of these phenomena. When all entities are implicitly understood and so treated as nothing but intrinsically meaningless resources to be optimized, it is not surprising that education becomes increasingly corporatized, instrumentalized, and technologized. Nor is it surprising that students come to see education merely as a way to "Get the most out of their potentials" (where that typically means maximizing their financial prospects). Nor that indolence and dishonesty become rampant (since the optimization imperative makes cutting-corners and even cheating seem rational if students can get away with it; for, they mistakenly conclude, what better way to optimize—to get more for less—than to "earn" a diploma while doing as little work as possible?). When seen in the light of our technological ontotheology, it is also not surprising that plagiarism becomes a growing problem (along with a whole burgeoning culture of theft). For, that techno-utopian mantra, "information wants to be free," while literally false

(since information does not actually desire anything) is nevertheless not a bad *diagnosis* of the basic problem with our technological understanding of being, which increasingly reduces reality to nothing but "information" (dichotomous binaries) seeking ever more efficient means of circulation (and so naturally shorn of such purportedly obsolete rituals as authorship). Nor is it surprising, finally, that the administrative bureaucracy becomes a self-regulating system pursuing its own self-optimizing growth in the name of increasing "efficiency," that is, of regulating and maximizing the input/output ratios of the university as a system (often under the alibi of the pursuit of an excoriated "excellence").

These serious problems afflicting education are deeply entrenched in the metaphysical substructure of our historical self-understanding and so need to be diagnosed and treated at that level. This means we need to become aware of the subtle and often unnoticed impact of our late-modern, technological ontotheology so that we can learn to resist and transcend it. The larger question, then, is how we might transcend our late-modern, technological ontotheology and so inaugurate a postmodern understanding of being, and how Heidegger's perfectionist understanding of education can help us make that historical transition. The educational key to making this transformative transition from our nihilistic late-modern understanding of being to a genuinely meaningful postmodernity, Heidegger suggests, is to learn to practice the phenomenological comportment he calls "dwelling" (or "releasement to things"). To put it much too briefly, to learn to *dwell* is to become attuned to the phenomenological "presencing" (*Anwesen*) whereby "being as such" manifests itself. "Being as such" is one of the later Heidegger's names for that conceptually inexhaustible dimension of intelligibility which all metaphysics' different ontotheological ways of understanding the being of entities *partly capture* but never *exhaust*, the recognition of which can help lead us beyond our current ontotheology. For, if we can learn from the great poets and artists to become comportmentally attuned to the dynamic phenomenological presencing that both precedes and exceeds all conceptualization, then we too can come to understand and experience entities as being richer in meaning than we are capable of doing justice to conceptually, rather than taking them as intrinsically meaningless resources awaiting optimization. Such experiences can become microcosms of, as well as inspiration for, the revolution beyond our underlying ontotheology that we need in order to transcend the nihilism of late-modern enframing and set our world on a different, more meaningful path.

In order to understand the drastically different ways of comporting ourselves toward things that Heidegger contrasts phenomenologically—namely, the active

receptivity of poetic dwelling, on the one hand, and the obtuse domination of technological enframing, on the other—it helps to think about the difference between these poetic and technological modes of revealing in terms of the ancient Greek distinction between *poiesis* and *technê*. Just think, on the one hand, of a poetic shepherding into being which respects the natural potentialities of the matters with which it works, just as Michelangelo (who, let us recall, worked in a marble quarry) legendarily claimed he simply set his "David" free from a particularly rich piece of marble (after studying it carefully for a month). Or, for a less hyperbolic example, think of the way a skillful woodworker notices the inherent qualities of particular pieces of wood—attending to subtleties of shape and grain, different shades of color, weight, and hardness—while deciding what might be built from that wood (or whether to build from it at all). Then contrast, on the other hand, a technological making which imposes a predetermined form on matter without paying heed to any intrinsic potentialities, the way an industrial factory indiscriminately grinds wood into woodchips in order to paste them back together into straight particle board, which can then be used flexibly and efficiently to construct a maximal variety of useful objects. Now, using this same contrast, think about the difference between an educational approach that helps students identify and cultivate their own unique talents and intrinsic skills and capacities so as to help them meet their generation's emerging needs (and thereby encourages teachers to come into their own as teachers), as opposed to an approach that treats students merely as raw materials, "human resources," and seeks to remake them so that they can pursue whatever society currently deems to be the most "valuable" career path.[6]

In each case, it helps to think about how one responds to the resistances one encounters: Does one seek to flatten out and overcome them or, instead, to cultivate that which resists one's will and so help bring it to its own fruition? While many late-moderns continue to believe (with Nietzsche) that all meaning comes from us (as the result of our various "value positings"), Heidegger is committed to the more phenomenologically accurate view that, at least with respect to that which most matters to us—the paradigm case being *love*—what we most care about is in fact not entirely up to us, not simply within our power to control, and this is a crucial part of what makes it so important. Indeed, the primary phenomenological lesson Heidegger drew from art is that when things are approached with openness and respect, they push back against us, making subtle but undeniable claims on us, and we need to learn to acknowledge and respond creatively to these claims if we do not want to deny the source of genuine meaning in the world. For, only meanings which are at least partly independent

of us and so not entirely within our control—not simply up to us to bestow and rescind at will—can provide us with the kind of touchstones around which we can build meaningful lives and loves. Heidegger drew this lesson from poetry, but it is profoundly applicable to education, where it helps us understand what I call *the pedagogical truth event.*

Heidegger referred to the phenomenon of such an enduringly meaningful encounter as an "event of enowning" (*Ereignis*). In such momentous events, we find ourselves coming into our own (as world-disclosers) precisely by creatively enabling other entities to come into their own, just as Michelangelo came into his own as a sculptor by creatively responding to the veins and fissures in that particular block of marble so as to bring forth his "David"; or as a woodworker comes into her own as a woodworker by responding creatively to the subtle weight, color, and grain of an individual piece of wood in order to make something out of it (or to leave it be); or as, in *the pedagogical truth event*, a teacher comes into his or her own as a teacher by learning to recognize and cultivate the particular talents and capacities of each individual student, thereby enabling these students to come into their own. In all such cases, a poetic openness to what pushes back against our preexisting plans and designs helps disclose a texture of inherent meanings, affordances, significations, and solicitations, a texture Heidegger teaches us to discover "all around us"—not only in nature, our workshops, and classrooms but even in our lives as a whole.[7] For, we truly learn to "make something" out of our lives not when we try to impose an artificial shape on them but, rather, when we learn to discern and develop creatively that which "pushes back" in all the examples mentioned, and many more. Fidelity to such truth events requires us to persevere in this struggle to help unfold the ontological riches they can disclose over time.

It is here that we can glimpse the importance of "the pedagogical truth event" for understanding the phenomena of *mentoring.* We can use "mentoring" to name a crucial aspect of ontological education, namely, the teacher's helping the student to identify and develop his or her distinctive talents and capacities, ideally so as to help students respond to their sense of the most pressing issues of their time and generation. To some that might sound like a task burdened with duties, but in fact it is amazing how little it can take. Just "as an inconspicuous tap of the sculptor's chisel imparts a different form to the figure" (as Heidegger put it in *What Is Called Thinking?*), so a few simple but true words that recognize and respond to something inchoate but meaningful in a student's work can have a profound impact. Such mentoring helps encourage students to continue to develop the skills and abilities that make them distinctive, since it is such

development that leads to a fulfilling life, as the perfectionist tradition teaches us. Still, this is not some wholly altruistic or other-directed action, either. On the contrary, teachers come into their own as teachers by helping students recognize and cultivate their distinctive skills and abilities in a meaningful way. In so doing, moreover, teachers and students help being itself come into its own as well, as that dynamic phenomenon that always informs and yet is never exhausted by our poetic discernment and creative development of its possibilities.[8]

Heidegger's perfectionist understanding of education suggests that the teacher is only the foremost learner, dedicated to learning in public in order to show by example that learning means discerning and developing ontological possibilities, thereby helping students develop their own sensitivities to the texture of the texts in which they live as well as their own abilities for creative world-disclosure. This means being ready to let go of one's lesson plan when the opportunity to nurture potentially important discussions arise. This also helps us see why it is advantageous not just to teach new figures and emerging movements, but to do so while also teaching the same great texts repeatedly, since the dedicated rereading of such texts allows one to discover something new in them every time. That experience of learning to see something where previously one saw nothing is the phenomenological heart of the perfectionist philosophy of the pedagogical truth event. For, all genuine meaning derives from and requires this skill of learning to discern and disclose the inchoate and often inconspicuous possibilities of things.[9]

If intelligibility can be thought of as composed of "texts" that we continually read and interpret (as Derrida's famous *aperçu*, "there is nothing outside the text," suggests), then we can hear Heidegger as reminding us that we need to learn to recognize and respond to the *texture* of these ubiquitous texts. This texture of meanings independent of our wills can be more or less subtle, but by dissolving all being into becoming, the current of late-modern technologization tends to sweep right past it and can even threaten to wash it away, as in the case of particle board or, much more "dangerously," Heidegger suggests, in the technological reengineering of human beings, even in its seemingly milder form of educational enframing, in which a shared commitment to the poetic discernment of genuine possibilities get eclipsed and overwritten by empty technological optimization, getting the most for the least. Nonetheless, Heidegger remains hopeful that once we learn to discern this technological current (both its ontotheological foundations and its phenomenological effects), we can also learn to cultivate a "free relation to technology" in which it becomes possible to use even technological devices themselves to resist *technologization*,

that nihilistic obviation of any meaning independent of the will. In fact, we are already using technology against technologization, I would suggest, when we use a camera, microscope, telescope, or even glasses to help bring out something meaningful that we might not otherwise have seen, when we use a synthesizer or computer to compose a new kind of music that helps us develop and share our sense of what is most significant to us, when we use a word processor to help bring out what is really there in the texts that matter to us and the philosophical issues that most deeply concern us, or even when we use a highly technologized university to teach the art of slow and careful reading that is dedicated to helping teacher and students learn to discern and develop such will-independent meanings together.

To put the larger point that emerges here in philosophical terms, what the later Heidegger suggests is a fundamental *ontological pluralism* (or *plural realism*). We need to be phenomenologically sensitive enough to meanings independent of the will to be able to "cut reality at the joints," but because those joints provide us with more of a suggestive outline than a final design, there will in most cases be more than one way of disclosing the genuine hints we are offered.[10] This means, for example, that, just as a talented artisan can make more than one thing from a single piece of wood, so there was also more than one form slumbering in the veins of the marble from which Michelangelo "released" his David. And, for the same reasons, there will usually be more than one right answer to the existential question of what we should each do with our lives. That helps explain the persistent recurrence of the question in education, since it can never be settled once and for all, and why those looking for the one right answer never seem finally to find it.[11] Like the neo-Aristotelian view of "open resoluteness" (*Ent-schlossenheit*) that Heidegger developed in *Being and Time*, his later view of the active receptivity of "releasement" (*Gelassenheit*) suggests a phenomenological development of ethical and aesthetic *phronêsis* or practical wisdom. The guiding idea here is that, rather than getting hung up looking for the one right answer—and then, when we finally despair of finding it, rebounding back to the relativistic view that no answer is better than any other (or concluding nihilistically that intrinsic meanings are an obsolete myth, thereby ignoring the multiple suggestions nature offers us or overwriting these hints with our own preconceived ideas rather than seeking to develop them creatively)—we phenomenological educators should instead cultivate the recognition that in most situations there will be more than one right answer to questions of what to do or how best to go on.

The guiding hermeneutic principle to follow—pedagogically, phenomenologically, and existentially—is that there is more than one inherent meaning to

be found in things. For, if being is conceptually inexhaustible, capable of yielding meaning again and again, then the intrinsic meanings of things must be plural (or essentially polysemic), however paradoxical such a doctrine of ontological pluralism might now seem, given our current obsession with formal systems capable of securing monosemic exactitude. Indeed, to understand the being of the entities we encounter in a *postmodern* way is to no longer preconceive everything we experience either as *modern* objects to be controlled or as *late-modern* resources to be optimized but, instead, to learn phenomenologically to discern and creatively develop the independent meanings, solicitations, and affordances of things, becoming vigilantly open to the multiple suggestions things offer us, to the point of dedicating ourselves—as teachers, as students, and as human beings—to creatively bringing forth such hints responsively and responsibly into the world.[12]

Notes

1 See Heidegger 1998, 167. I explain and discuss this crucial passage in detail in Thomson 2005, Ch. 4, esp. 155–81.

2 For some of the hermeneutical evidence and philosophical arguments establishing that Heidegger's ontological thinking about education forms one of the deepest undercurrents running through his philosophy, both early and late, see Thomson (2004) and Thomson (2005).

3 For a presentation of his earlier, *Being and Time*, view and its main differences from his later understanding, see Thomson (2004) and Thomson 2005, Chs. 3–4.

4 I discuss Heidegger's heroic embrace of the tragic truth that the known floats atop the unknown like the tip of an iceberg above a deep dark sea in Thomson 2011, ch. 3.

5 I explain these views in detail in Thomson 2005, Ch. 1, and Thomson 2011, Ch. 1.

6 I develop these suggestions in detail elsewhere; a genuinely *vocational* education would be perfectionist, cultivating and developing essential capacities, not empty and instrumentalizing (Thomson 2005, esp. Chs. 2 and 4).

7 Heidegger seeks to teach us "to listen out into the undetermined" for a "coming [which] essentially occurs all around us and at all times" (Heidegger 2010, 147). Kenneth Maly describes the tripartite "enowning" at the heart of the phenomenon of *Ereignis* in terms that cleave closely to Heidegger's own: "Things emerge into their own, into what is own to them; humans come into their own as they respond to the owning dynamic in being as emergence; being as emergence enowns Dasein—all these dynamics belong to the matter said in 'enowning'" (Maly 2008, 174). As Maly suggests, there is a third dimension of enowning in which being

too comes into its own; that happens, I show in Thomson (2011), when Dasein and the being of entities come into their own together in such a way that being itself is disclosed in its essential plenitude or polysemy—and this is the crucial *postmodern* moment.

8 That such crucial pedagogical "events" are what most deeply matters educationally (rather than the mere transmission of information) helps explain why teachers are more important than topics. Different teachers have different styles and interests, and different styles and interests disclose some students' distinctive skills and capacities better than others, so students should be encouraged to find the teachers whose teaching styles and interests speak to them, calling them to put their most into a class rather than just trying to get a good grade.

9 This is one of the central theses of Thomson (2011).

10 Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" suggests that intelligibility contains a complex texture of edges, lines, and breaks, a "rift-structure" that forms an open-ended "basic design" or "outline sketch" to which we need to learn to be creatively receptive in order to bring at least one of the potentially inexhaustible forms slumbering in the earth into the light of the world.

11 I develop this view in Thomson (2004).

12 The present chapter grew out of a keynote address I gave to the conference on "The Future of Philosophy" at the University of North Texas, Denton on 12 November 2010. Thanks to Keith Brown, Trish Glazebrook, Carl Sachs, Dale Wilkerson, and several others for helpful discussion on that occasion.