



## Husserl and Heidegger on Human Experience

In this book, Pierre Keller examines the distinctive contributions, and the respective limitations, of Husserl's and Heidegger's approach to fundamental elements of human experience. In a clear, detailed, and non-partisan analysis, he shows how their accounts of time, meaning, and personal identity are embedded in important alternative conceptions of how experience may be significant for us, and discusses both how these conceptions are related to each other and how they fit into a wider philosophical context. His sophisticated and accessible account of the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl and the existential phenomenology of Heidegger will be of wide interest to students and specialists in these areas, while analytic philosophers of mind will be interested by the detailed parallels which he draws with a number of concerns of the analytic philosophical tradition.

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**Contents**

Introduction	page 1
1 Experience and Intentionality	15
2 Husserl's Methodologically Solipsistic Perspective	39
3 Husserl's Theory of Time-Consciousness	59
4 Between Husserl, Kierkegaard, and Aristotle	84
5 Heidegger's Critique of Husserl's Methodological Solipsism	111
6 Heidegger on the Nature of Significance	132
7 Temporality as the Source of Intelligibility	156
8 Heidegger's Theory of Time	184
9 Spatiality and Human Identity	207
10 "Dasein" and the Forensic Notion of a Person	227
Select Bibliography	242
Index	258

## Introduction

In this book, I explore the account of experience developed by Edmund Husserl and critically modified and transformed by Martin Heidegger. I develop the nature of the relation between our awareness of the world and the temporal structure of our experience as it is articulated by Husserl in his phenomenology and then transformed by Heidegger in his own existential conception of phenomenology. The connection between our capacity to come to terms with our environment, the directedness of our consciousness and behavior at items in our environment, and the temporal character of our experience is an intimate one. It is the merit of both Husserl and Heidegger to have explored this connection to a degree not easy to find elsewhere in the history of philosophy, and at the same time to have developed fundamentally different accounts of how the connection in question is to be understood.

## General Remarks

The concept of a private experience ("Erlebnis") provides the methodological starting-point for Husserl's investigation of the different kinds of objects that populate our shared, public and objective world and the structures that allow us to understand that world. Heidegger rejects the notion of a private experience, indeed the very notion of *Erlebnis*, that has its heyday at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> However, Heidegger continues to give central importance to the other

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<sup>1</sup> There is an interesting philosophical history of the term "Erlebnis" in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1989), pp. 60–70. Gadamer follows his former teacher Heidegger in connecting the later nineteenth-century subjectivization of experience in general, and aesthetic experience in particular, to the rise of the notion of "Erlebnis."

German term for experience, *Erfahrung*. This notion of experience lacks the connotation of private, subjective experience that is characteristic of the notion of *Erlebnis*.

Husserl introduces the term "intentionality" to describe the capacity that human beings have to direct themselves at objects. Intentionality consists in our awareness of objects and of the contextual features of our environment involved in any awareness on our part of objects. For Husserl, intentionality is a basic, irreducible, and constitutive feature of consciousness that can never be exhaustively understood in terms of any structural features that are characteristic of natural events. As such, intentionality is for him the key to understanding human experience.

Husserl insists that there are various levels to intentionality. These levels of intentionality make up the different levels of human experience. Intentionality reaches down into the most basic forms of perception. At first, however, Husserl excludes immediate sensory awareness, sensation, from intentionality. Unlike perception, sensation does not involve the experience of objects distinct from the having of a certain experience. However, he eventually argues that intentionality is a feature of all consciousness of time. Since he reasonably assumes that all consciousness involves some consciousness of time, this leads him to maintain that even our most basic sensory awareness, such as our awareness of pleasure and pain, involves a kind of intentionality. Unlike perceptions, these sensations do not even have objects that are logically distinguishable from the having of the sensory experiences themselves. Thus, intentionality is involved in a certain way in what seem to be logically private experiences that cannot be shared by different individuals. But intentionality also extends upwards to the most sophisticated forms of human experience and cultural involvement. For it is because we have the capacity for intentionality that we are able to reason about objects in the world and to communicate with other persons.

While Husserl thinks that one can analyze experience in abstraction from the actual environment in which an individual might find him- or herself, he also emphasizes the importance of the environmental aspect of experience. He maintains that experience is always based on some awareness of an individual's perceptual environment. However, in principle, this perceptual environment is something that is, and can be, privately experienced by each individual. The public, shared environment of a common world is a construct from private

individually experienced environments. Thoughts endowed with abstract meaning are required in order to underwrite the possibility of communication between different private worlds of experience.

Such meanings are themselves independent of individual experience, indeed they are quasi-Platonic objects. They are really abstract types of functional roles, where such functional roles consist in the differential contribution that bearers of meaning such as words and sentences make to the truth or falsity of judgment and inferences. These meanings cannot be understood in isolation from each other, but they are accessible to the individual in a way that involves no recourse to the actual environment in which the individual finds him- or herself. The environment of the individual as it is meant by the individual is the notional environment of the individual. This notional environment, in principle, can be quite different from the individual's actual environment. What the actual environment is, is a matter of the extent to which the world as it is meant by the individual corresponds to the world as it is independently of how it is meant by the individual. This, in turn, depends on the extent to which an individual's beliefs are true.

Husserl treats intentionality as a person's intention to refer to objects that may be either inside or outside of consciousness. For Husserl, it is therefore always an open question as to whether an individual is referring to objects that are outside of his consciousness. It is even possible that all of our beliefs about the external world and about the existence of other minds might turn out to be false. Heidegger claims that thinking of intentionality as allowing even the possibility of a completely private experience is based on a misunderstanding of the self-transcendent nature of intentionality. The mistake arises from failing to see that there cannot be a private experience that is not itself parasitic on public experience of the external world. To avoid this mistake, Heidegger suggests that the notion of intentionality be interpreted in terms of the notion of transcendence. It is then no longer a question of whether our beliefs are about anything in the world at all, but rather a question of whether they are true of what is in the world.

Heidegger argues that we have no intelligible conception of an individual human being who experiences a completely private environment. For the very notion of private experience is logically dependent on the existence of a publicly accessible domain of entities. He maintains that, once one gives up on a conception of

mind that is based on occurrent, in principle private, mental episodes, one will not need to appeal to abstract structures to underwrite communication. To think of communication as something that is underwritten by abstract structures is to misunderstand the very nature of human existence and intentionality. We are able to understand ourselves because to be a human being is to already be in relation to other human beings and other things in a shared world. The possibility of communication is to be understood in terms of the fact that what we initially take to be an independent private sphere of experience is, in fact, parasitic on the social and natural environment in which we form the conception of our own distinctive self.

In exploring the nature of human existence, Heidegger, like Husserl, is centrally concerned with very general structures of human experience. Heidegger argues, as does Husserl, that individual experience is unintelligible when taken in abstraction from such general structures of experience. However, this means something quite different for Heidegger than it does for Husserl. For Husserl, the general structures of experience are a priori, that is, necessary and universal, features of consciousness. For Heidegger, by contrast, general structures of experiences are not universal forms to be instanced in different individual experiences, but rather particular concrete aspects of the manner in which concrete, historical human existence expresses itself. This leads Heidegger to argue, again against Husserl, that general structures of experience are unintelligible when taken in abstraction from the particular experience of an individual human being. Heidegger maintains that the very notion of consciousness with which Husserl works is ultimately an unintelligible abstraction from a human being's interaction with his or her actual environment.

Now Heidegger agrees with Husserl that the most basic and pervasive feature of our intentional relation to the world and entities within the world is the temporal structure of intentionality. Indeed, Heidegger argues that the a priori should be understood in terms of the originating temporal structure of intentionality. However, Heidegger argues that Husserl's idea that all experience has a foundation in private perceptual experience ("Erlebnisse") prevents Husserl from fully understanding and hence from properly explicating and exploiting the temporal structure of experience.

Husserl has an extremely sophisticated model of how past,

present, and future episodes of consciousness might be linked together in a "stream of consciousness." However, from Heidegger's point of view, this analysis has serious flaws to it. First of all, it works with the assumption that the basic stratum of human experience consists of private sensations. And even if one waives worries about the existence of sensations, Heidegger insists that thinking of experience in terms of a series of successively occurrent episodes of experience is a mistake.

In the course of thinking about the nature of time and of our experience of time, Husserl becomes aware of the limitations of any attempt to understand experience in terms of a "stream of consciousness." This leads him to embed our experience of past, present, and future in a tenseless, but nevertheless still, in some sense, temporal account of mental episodes. Husserl also comes to question the primacy of sensation in an understanding of temporal experience, but never succeeds in developing an alternative account.

In some respects, Husserl also begins to see the limitations of the occurrent state conception of human experience. In the course of his work, another conception of mental and physical events begins to emerge. According to this conception of the mental and the physical, mental and physical states are different in that mental states are not subject to strict causal laws, while physical states are subject to such laws. However, mental and physical states have something important in common. They are inherently dispositional. That is, they can only be understood in terms of the way in which persons and physical objects would react to certain circumstances in their environment. For Husserl, this dispositional account of states and properties applies to all "real" things, and thus to minds as well as bodies. However, Husserl stops short of conceiving the basic level of all experience, which for him, is also the basic level of all being, in terms of entities whose nature is defined in terms of a complex of dispositions to interact with the environment. At the most basic level of experience, Husserl sustains a commitment to the idea of a sequence of successively occurrent mental episodes. It is from the vantage-point of this "living present" that Husserl wishes ultimately to reconstruct all of experience.

Heidegger appropriates the complex analysis of the interdependence of past, present, and future developed by Husserl on the basis of our experience of tense, while rejecting Husserl's tendency to think of our experience as a stream of successively occurrent