

What Is Thinking *Like*?: Understanding and Evaluating Husserl and Heidegger's Debate

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This paper enters a philosophical debate that centers on the question “What is thinking?” and considers its implications for education. In response to trends in contemporary education that stress the acquisition of knowledge and skills, numerous scholars have argued that *thinking* is central to what education is and is for.¹ What, however, is *thinking*? Richard Rorty, in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, cites Martin Heidegger as initiating a paradigm shift in philosophy by changing the definition of thinking. As opposed to “systemic philosophers,” who conceive of thinking as aiming to say something true about the way the world actually is, Heidegger exemplifies the emergence of “edifying philosophy” as a critique of this conception of thinking.² According to Rorty, edifying philosophy replaces thinking as an *inquiry* directed toward truth with thinking as an ongoing *conversation* from which meaning emerges and that is careful to avoid making claims about the way things are.³ Rorty cites John Dewey as an example of an edifying philosopher of education, who defines *thinking* as ongoing engagement with the world and the aim of education as facilitating this kind of engagement and the resulting emergence of meaning. A contrasting educational model of thinking that fits with the *systemic* philosophical tradition would be one that defines thinking as moving toward discreet learning targets, set in advance and reflective of truth that exists independently of the action of learning itself. These views of thinking seem diametrically opposed, and, indeed, Rorty paints them as such. My aim in this paper is to challenge the strong dichotomy between these two views of thinking. I will do this by returning to what Rorty identifies as the source of the split: the rupture between the ideas of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. By closely attending to their respective ideas about thinking, I argue that their definitions are not as opposed as Rorty makes them out to be. More importantly, I conclude from this inquiry that educators need not choose between defining thinking as *systemic*

(aimed at truth that exists independently of the particular educational context) and *edifying* (committed to truth emerging from the ongoing action of learning). While I do not claim to solve the debate about what thinking is, my hope is to open philosophers and educators alike to the possibility that thinking can be both meaningfully situated in a particular context and have a meaning that transcends that context.

RORTY'S PROPOSED PARADIGM SHIFT IN THINKING

Rorty draws a forceful split between Husserl and Heidegger's definitions of thinking. Heidegger does, indeed, declare a break between his conception of thinking and that of his predecessor Husserl; however, examining their respective views also reveals many commonalities in their thoughts about thinking. Both emphasize the intentional nature of thought and relate the phenomenological insight that thought is a response called forth *in* the experience of an object, person, or state of affairs, and is thus importantly embedded in the world. The distinction between their two views boils down, in my reading, to *what* calls forth the response of thought and *where* that call comes from.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ABOUT THINKING

Both Husserl and Heidegger's insights about thinking emerge through phenomenological reflection, which focuses specifically on the way the world presents itself to us in experience. In order to take up a phenomenological perspective, other perspectives must be "bracketed" through what Husserl calls the phenomenological reduction.⁴ Specifically, questions of existence—of truth and falsehood—are set aside in such reflection.⁵ This bracketing differs from Cartesian doubt, for, as Husserl explains, "we do not in any respect alter our conviction which remains in itself." However, while our belief in the object's existence remains intact, "we, so to speak, 'put it out of action,' we 'exclude it,' we 'parenthesize it.'"⁶ Heidegger describes bracketing as a "reversal of perspective" in which "the perceived is not directly presumed as such, but in the how of its being." He seconds Husserl's affirmation that "(t)his bracketing of the entity takes nothing away from the entity itself, nor does it purport to assume that the entity is not." Rather, "(t)his phenomenological suspension of

the transcendent thesis has but the sole function of making the entity present in regard to its being.”⁷ The phenomenological reduction is like a change of focus: we turn our attention away from *what* the object before us *is* in order to attend to *how* it *presents* itself to us.

It is important to emphasize that, in seeking to articulate what an experience is like for me, a subject, phenomenology does not take up a subjectivist or relativist approach. As Dermot Moran explains in his *Introduction to Phenomenology*, phenomenology aims at truth, seeking to accurately describe the role of subjectivity “in the achievement of knowledge.” A central question of phenomenology, he aptly articulates, is: *how does objectivity get constituted in and for consciousness?*⁸

The phenomenological reduction corrects what Husserl calls “a fundamental error” about thinking.⁹ Phenomenology reveals that thinking is always thinking about something.¹⁰ It is always intentional, involving “directedness-to” an object.¹¹ It is an error to conceive of thought as mediated by appearances; when I think my thought reaches the *thing itself*. When I recognize an animal that I pass on the street as a dog, I am not engaging with an abstraction that compares the appearance of ‘dog’ in front of me with the image of “real dog-ness” that I have in my mind. Rather, the “dog-ness” of the dog is given to me *in* my perception of the dog itself. There is no such thing, for either Husserl or Heidegger, as a thing’s essence that “floats before us” independently of its appearance to us in the thing itself.¹²

The phenomenological insight revealing the intentional nature of thought goes hand in hand with the understanding, shared by Husserl and Heidegger, of thought as response. The intentionality of thinking means that thought is always a response called forth by its object. Heidegger, in his lecture series *What Is Called Thinking?*, illustrates thinking as response by describing thinking as “handicraft” and offering the example of a cabinetmaking apprenticeship as learning to think:

A cabinetmaker’s apprentice, someone who is learning to build cabinets and the like, will serve as an example. His learning is

not mere practice, to gain facility in the use of tools. Nor does he merely gather knowledge about the customary forms of the things he is to build. If he is to become a true cabinetmaker, he makes himself answer and respond above all to the different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within wood—to wood as it enters man's dwelling with all the hidden riches of its nature. In fact, this relatedness to wood is what maintains the whole craft. Without that relatedness, the craft will never be anything but empty busywork, any occupation with it will be determined exclusively by business concerns.¹³

Through this example and subsequent discussion, Heidegger describes the inexorable link between thinking and the object of thought. Handiwork becomes “empty busywork” (and is thus rendered thoughtless) when it loses a particular kind of responsive relatedness to what is being worked on. There is no such thing as making a cabinet in the abstract; each cabinet is crafted from a particular piece of wood. Part of the expertise of the artisan lies in his ability to respond to the nuances of different kinds and particular pieces of wood. Cabinetmaking morphs from craft to busywork when it loses its relatedness to wood and becomes “determined exclusively by business concerns.”¹⁴ Production is expedited, scaled, and streamlined to meet demand, and the thoughtful craft of responding to a particular piece of wood is replaced by following a checklist of instructions on an IKEA assembly card. The actions of assembly, in this case, are rendered thoughtless, because they are not called forth by the material itself.

WHAT CALLS FORTH THINKING?

In the inherently intentional relationship between person and world that both Husserl and Heidegger describe, *what* calls on us to offer a response and what qualities does that response possess? These questions mark the point where Husserl and Heidegger diverge. However, even in their divergence a degree of similarity remains that cautions us to resist separating them, as Rorty does, by an abyss of difference.

HUSSERL: THOUGHT MOTIVATED BY VALUE

To consider what the experience of thinking is like, Husserl performs what he calls the eidetic reduction. His aim, in this move, is to shift focus from how an object of experience shows up for me to describing what my experience of thinking is like. The concrete object of thought does not disappear, but is bracketed: put in parentheses.

When I put my concrete instance of thought “out of action,” there remains, according to Husserl, a “*phenomenological residuum*” that he calls “the region of pure consciousness.”¹⁵ How do I experience this *residuum*? What is it like? Husserl considers that, while in our experience, an object is always given to consciousness through profiles and partially, we experience it in our consciousness as a harmonious whole.¹⁶ Examining this peculiar phenomenon of thinking, Husserl reflects that the object appears to me as a whole only in thought, never in experience. “Consequently,” he concludes, “no real being, no being which is presented and legitimated in consciousness by appearances, is necessary to the being of consciousness itself.”¹⁷ The *being* of a thoughtful human being, therefore, is not causally dependent on the world, although we always find ourselves in relation to the world.

Furthermore, when Husserl describes what our experience of thinking is like, he considers that when I encounter an object, it does not present itself to me as a “mere thing,” but as a thing that has value.¹⁸ When I recognize a friend I haven’t seen in a long time, I give her an embrace. What calls forth this joy-filled act of affection? Husserl can locate no necessary cause that brings about this response. It is motivated, to be sure, by my recognition of my recognition of my friend as lovable. Where is that lovability located? In my friend, of course. However, Husserl is hard-pressed to identify a spatiotemporal locus of her lovability. Furthermore, while I always love someone or something, it is intelligible for me to think about the quality “lovable” on its own in a way in which it is not at all possible for me to think about qualities such as “red” or “square.” Those later examples are, for Husserl, contingently tied to their objects and thus their existence depends on space and time; lovability, on the other hand, is not seemingly tied to space and time in the same way.¹⁹ Qualities of value persist as *residuum* that I can, to some extent, intelligibly consider independently of

their objects, although I only ever encounter these qualities in spatiotemporal things. It is, then, these values that call forth the kind of thought I perceive as not having a necessary dependence on its object.

HEIDEGGER: THOUGHT CALLED FORTH BY BEING

In Heidegger's description of what thinking is like, he positions himself in opposition to his predecessor's understanding of thinking as involving a region of pure consciousness, or consciousness not causally linked to a particular space and time. He rejects Husserl's eidetic reduction, seeing in it an indication of his teacher's *a priori* commitment to the Cartesian ideal of the mind as the region of an absolute science.²⁰ According to Heidegger, no phenomenological *residuum* exists when the object of thought is bracketed and one considers his own experience of thinking. What Husserl sees as phenomenological residue, Heidegger alleges, is really epistemological residue left-over and imported from the old (and, in Rorty's terms, systemic) way of doing philosophy. Thought is, according to Heidegger, always and only experienced in the world, as intrinsically connected to its object in the particular way it appears to us. The being of human consciousness, in other words, is being-in-the-world. When the particular object disappears from view, so does the thought and the thinker.

Heidegger's rejection of Husserl's eidetic reduction does not, however, indicate his lack of interest in considering what the experience of thinking is like. First in *Being and Time*, and later in his lecture series *What Is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger addresses this very question.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes thoughtful response as a relationship of care. There, Heidegger describes the *being* of a human being as always and only *being-in-the-world*. By looking at how objects of our experience appear to us, we see that they call forth in us a response of care. "Being-in" for Heidegger means being "absorbed in," and, when our response to the world is not deficient (that is, when it is thoughtful) it appears as a "*taking care of*" the world.²¹ What is it like for me to think? I, according to Heidegger, experience thinking as a kind of caring-for the object that calls forth thought.

In his lecture series *What Is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger revisits the

question of what thinking is like. Citing Parmenides, Heidegger claims that thinking is simultaneously “letting-lie-before-us” and “taking-to-heart.”²² Again, Heidegger cites Parmenides in order to name that to which the letting-lie-before-us and taking-to-heart refer: *ἔδν *εμμεναί*, or “being to be.”²³ Thought *exists*, for Heidegger, in and only in the conjunction between letting-lie-before-us and taking-to-heart. The object’s *being*, which calls forth thought, is its *presence to the thinker*, a presence which exists in and only in particular relation: “Presence itself is precisely the presence of what is present.”²⁴ This means, for Heidegger, that we experience thinking as something inexorably linked to the particular object of thought; there is no *residuum* of pure consciousness left over.

Heidegger’s description of thought as called forth by the presence of being offers what can be seen as an alternate perspective of the account of intentionality that he gives in *Being and Time*. The caring response of the person who is being-in-the-world is called forth by the presence of being that appears in the object of intentional relation. Thus, for Heidegger, the person’s being as being-in-the-world is given by, or called forth by, the being she encounters in the world.

THINKING FOR OURSELVES

How can we, as readers, choose sides in the debate between Husserl and Heidegger? In Heidegger’s rejection of the eidetic reduction, he accuses Husserl of inappropriately focusing on the structure of thinking and contends that his predecessor no longer adequately considers the way thinking happens.²⁵ This is a valid criticism. Husserl does, in fact, in his account of pure consciousness, seem to make ontological declarations. His dual claims that the natural world is a correlate of consciousness²⁶ and that consciousness would persist after the annihilation of the world²⁷ both seem to make definitive statements about the way things are, which renders them claims outside the realm of phenomenology as Husserl defines it. Heidegger rightly points out that, within the reduction, I can only describe *the way* things appear to me in my experience, even though, to reiterate an important point explained above, to define phenomenology as purely descriptive is not to say that it does not aim at truth or solipsistically subjective. Phenomenology is not subjectivist, but, rather, it seeks to describe

how objectivity is constituted in subjectivity, for subjects.²⁸ In a sympathetic reading of Husserl, we might take him to assume that his reader understands that he is writing from within the reduction and that all his statements are purely descriptive. This is a generous concession to make for what certainly appear to be ontological claims. However, since we are sincerely interested in exploring what thinking is like, we can consider how the two Husserlian claims made above would appear if they remained descriptive and not ontological.

The first claim, when rendered within the phenomenological reduction, becomes: In my experience, the world appears *as if it were* a correlative of consciousness. This seems true, but banal. Of course, I experience intentional objects as if they were correlatives of my own thought. How could it be otherwise? Husserl's second claim has more weight. When phrased phenomenologically, it becomes: I experience my own thinking *as if it were* not contingent upon the world. This question appears as the crux of the debate between Husserl and Heidegger. To consider its truth, we must take the question into our own hands and consider, from a phenomenological perspective, what our experience of thinking is really like.



Consider this image. What does the photograph present to me and how? What is it that calls forth thought?

This photograph first presents itself to me as a photograph of people—a man, a boy, and three girls—picking berries in a field on a hot summer day. The group appears youthful and relaxed, although the man's sturdy build and the boy's suntanned chest tell me that they are not unaccustomed to manual work. Likely they till the earth of this very plot, and perhaps the other fields that surround this one and delineate its place in the larger rural countryside. The joy on the girls' faces speaks of their close relationship and their happy appreciation of this summer treat. I respond to the image with interest: it is an intriguing photograph that makes me wonder who these people are.

How is it that I learn these things from looking at the photograph? How is it that the scene shows up for me in this way? What is communicated to me, what I understand about the picture, is more than what meets the eye. At the same time, the meaning that I see does not come to me from anywhere save from the photograph itself. All that meaning, even what exceeds the captured moment, is communicated to me *in* my viewing of the photograph itself.

Both Husserl and Heidegger, I wager, would not dismiss my analysis thus far. Now I attempt to consider specifically what my experience of thinking is like when this photograph presents itself to me. The photograph remains an essential part of the experience, but I turn my focus away from it to consider how I experience thinking itself, and specifically, whether or not I experience some aspect of my thought as if it were not contingent upon the spatiotemporal world.

When I temporarily set aside, or at least turn my focus away from, the particulars of the picture in order to fully attend to the qualitative experience of thinking, I understand the thought called forth in me by the image to be narrative, expansive, and value-laden. I understand the picture to capture a snapshot located within a greater flow of space and time. Finally, my response to the image is not neutral; it is imbued first with interest and then with affection. What is it in the photograph that calls forth these responses, and what kind of responses are they? The interest and affection I experience are responses of care directed toward the people I see in the photograph.

I appreciate the people I see in the photograph both as persons with narratives extending in space and time before and beyond the captured moment, as well as persons with dispositions. I understand them to be (or to have once been) alive, and I see each of them as their full person, even though their personal history and character traits remain undefined. Were I to learn that the young boy had died just a few years after this photograph was taken fighting in the Second World War, I would be saddened by the tragic loss of this vibrant young life. That is how I understand these frozen, photographed persons: as unique human beings with robust and irreplaceable lives. Even if I do not know them or am uncertain about their particular identities, I see them as themselves, as persons worthy of being shown care.

From where does the call for a caring response originate? The only answer seems to be that the call to care issues forth from the persons themselves, who appear in the photograph but whose living realities extend beyond the frame. I experience my response of care as likewise transcending space and time, although it is also called forth by my experience interacting with photograph itself. It is as if, from within my experience, I touch something that inexhaustibly and infinitely transcends it. That touch seems to me to be a hallmark of what thinking, at least in some instances, is like.

THINKING IN THE CLASSROOM

As the preceding discussion attests, my experience of what thinking about this photograph is like resonates with Husserl's insistence that there is something about thinking that, while difficult to describe, I perceive as if it were not contingent upon the spatiotemporal world. I admit that this positions me on a certain side of a debate. My intention in this paper, though, has not been to take sides, but rather to draw out connections that I hope can help bridge the yawning gap Rorty tries to establish between Husserl and Heidegger. In this spirit, I conclude with a comment on care, a quality both Husserl and Heidegger identify as integral to our experience of thinking, and which, I contend, has important educational implications.

For Husserl and Heidegger alike, thinking is a value-laden response that

is importantly embedded in the world. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world means dwelling with and caring for the world. Caring, seen in this way, exemplifies the kind of value response that Husserl likewise affirms as called forth by the world in which we find ourselves. This shared insight has several educational implications.

First, to think is to think about something. Thinking does not occur in an abstract realm, but rather is called forth by a concrete object of engagement. John Dewey aptly describes the active, responsive character of thinking with the term “how knowledge.”²⁹ Hubert Dreyfus seconds this account by describing learning, in whatever guise it takes, as growth in “skillful coping.”³⁰ The process of advancing beyond competence to proficiency and expertise can only be achieved through interactions whereby the learner gets a *feel* for how to adopt an appropriate posture in response to the needs of a given situation. Thus, for Dreyfus, learning that promotes the development of thinking must be embodied and active; online learning, he argues, is incapable of promoting students’ expertise in any area, because the thinking involved remains purely conceptual; it does not allow for the kind of embodied engagement which teaches the learner to perceive, in each situation, what kind of response is called for.³¹ Furthermore, more than requiring that students be physically present, the understanding of thinking as called forth by the object of thought implies that thinking occurs through engagement with material: students learn to think mathematically by engaging with math problems, to read thoughtfully by engaging with literature.

Second, to think is to care. Thinking, understood as a response called forth by engagement with an object, inherently involves appreciating the object as having value. The skillful response of thought is more than mere manipulation of the tools at hand. What does this mean for the classroom? It means that *thinking* can, and perhaps ought to, involve more than information recall. According to Husserl and Heidegger, a litmus test for whether students are thinking is whether they come to see the object of study as something worth caring about, as possessing value that extends beyond being the means to a good grade. Taking this view of thinking distinguishes it from learning, for it is possible to learn something, at least enough to pass a test, without seeing it as an object

of value. Such learning, though, if we take Husserl and Heidegger seriously, cannot be called thinking in the robust sense described here. Understanding thinking as a response to an appreciation of value invites the consideration of how space for such thinking might be made in classrooms.

The thoughts presented in this paper can be described as experiential. While drawing on both Husserl and Heidegger's notions of thinking, I have attempted to experience for myself—and to share with readers—what thinking is like. I have concluded, based on this experience, that thinking emerges as a care-filled response to perceived value. It is firmly situated in a particular context, yet also appears as somehow irreducible to that context. Thus, thinking is, indeed, edifying, in the sense that it proceeds as an ongoing embedded and embodied conversation. At the same time, however, at least some kinds of thinking appear to touch values that appears within a particular spatiotemporal realm, yet at the same time extend beyond it. My hope is that this insight can animate educators to consider how classrooms can be places, not just of learning, but of thinking.

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