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The event of space: geographic allusions in the phenomenological tradition

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Abstract. In this essay I analyse the role of space in key texts belonging to the tradition of phenomenology. Starting from the assumption that phenomenology is uniquely positioned to answer the epistemological challenges posed by today's theoretical discourses, works by Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer are examined in light of their respective treatments of space. I assert that much of what passes as phenomenological knowledge is constructed around an unfounded idealisation of the written text and the spatial stability it embodies. In the subsequent development of a spatially open alternative I draw on Heidegger's elaboration of the 'event' and attempt to place such thinking within contemporary debates in the human sciences.

In the currently prevailing age of postideological discourse, in which neither political nor theoretical positions seem quite as intuitive as they did some twenty years ago, surprisingly few professional and nonprofessional geographers appear to have had difficulties adjusting to life without the certainties of bygone days. In fact, the 1990s could easily be described as a period of both unprecedented freedom and fruitful expansion within all of the human sciences. Social theory, whilst having lost much of its formerly monumental (indeed monolithic) character, flourishes in new, exciting, and more often than not hybrid forms. In geography in particular, ever since Nigel Thrift's (1983) seminal disturbance of the construction of both subject and object in the pages of this journal, few ideological stones have been left unturned. When Michael Dear (1988) summarised many of these new theoretical strands under the banner of a consciously designed 'postmodernism', the variety of positions legitimised within the discipline was already astonishing and matters did not cease to develop further from there. Suffice it to mention the explicit spatialisation of theory in the work of Edward Soja (1989), the nonhegemonic reconceptualisation of concrete existing spaces advanced by Doreen Massey (1995) and many 'Regulationists' within economic geography (Goodwin and Painter, 1996), the powerful reorientation of geographical theory and praxis that resulted from feminist critiques throughout the last decade (Bondi, 1990; Rose, 1993) or more psychoanalytically nuanced voices (Pile, 1996). Add to these some less strategically orientated insertions within the theoretical literature (Castree, 1995; Doel, 1992; 1994; Gibson-Graham, 1996) and the work of those creative in the pursuit of new forms of expression in a host of different contexts (Olsson, 1991; Pred, 1995) and the picture emerging is indeed one of a thriving and stimulating intellectual environment. What is more, theoretical labour today is simultaneously relaxed by and encumbered through an emerging 'shopping basket' mentality: whatever helps to illuminate a particular problem at hand is legitimated by its capacity to deliver just that—illumination. This latter trend was largely facilitated by the overdue recognition that any form of representation is both materially and ideally constructed and remains hence ubiquitously open both to employment and to critique. In fact, the 'constructedness' of representations could well be the bond unifying most of the work currently undertaken within geography and related areas of interest; constructedness
thus forms a kind of 'pragmatic' response to the 'crisis of representation' so ubiquitous some years ago. And because any construction of representations is intimately bound by the place in which they are produced, small wonder that 'space' itself was to become the engendering category of the 1990s—so much so that today no theoretically informed construction of identity seems acceptable that does not refer to the spatiality of its existence and which hence includes the possibility of difference (Natter and Jones, 1997; Strohmayer, 1997a).

However and despite the now widespread reference to space as engendering multiple forms of identity—from the subject to the nation—space itself remains a curiously underexplored topic of geographic curiosity. Assumed to be both centrally implicated within society and accessible at once, space prevails as a largely taken-for-granted concept. In other words, a genealogy of the connection between space and identity is still largely absent from geography. In this paper, I shall try to further our understanding of 'space' as a concept. In this, I shall be looking not primarily at what we—as academics or citizens—mean when we invoke space but shall focus instead on what we can mean whenever we refer to space in one form or another. Not only are the two modes of inquiry different in nature, arguably the neglect of the latter question within the human sciences has been one of the root causes for the persistence of a largely instrumental view of space. Facilitated by a relegation of questions concerned with the conditions of possibility of analytic discourse to a realm called 'philosophy', the human sciences began to build the edifices of their knowledge on uncertain grounds indeed. In the present essay I hope to illuminate some of the costs involved in neglecting properly to investigate the space that we dwell upon. I hope to achieve this goal by a series of immanent critiques of positions largely at home with the phenomenological tradition, namely those of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. These were chosen chiefly for their refusal to privilege both space and time in an a priori manner and for centrally implicating both concepts in the construction of forms of identity—much like the majority of our theoretical positions today. (1)

Reference to both space and time in this context is by no means accidental. In a striking departure from other, spatiotemporally fixed and hence 'grounded' modes of reference, the hope is that phenomenology might provide for a genuinely new possibility of reconciling a Kantian sense of rigour with a highly spatialised epistemology. Central to this hope is the phenomenological shift of focus towards a consideration of 'sense', which is neither 'true' nor 'false' but embedded in an existing tradition in which 'world' means something, rather than nothing to us. Hence the phenomenological focus on 'meaning' and 'life-world' and the resulting spatiality of the knowledges it creates. In contrast to other forms of knowledge, the phenomenological tradition does thus not depend on the possibility of 'grounding' its claims in a manner envisioned by older, ideologically rooted theoretical edifices, because it does not assert to a metaphysical overcoming of its spatial and historical nature. Rather, the knowledges it occasions are part and parcel, are embedded in the space and the time that it seeks to illuminate. In what follows, I will pursue questions that arise out of this 'embeddedness'.

**Space as lived experience**

The initial impulse behind much of phenomenological reasoning will be familiar to most readers. Faced with the recognition that to externalise both space and time in the Kantian manner of a priori and hence nonchangeable categories does little justice to

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(1) For an overview and a critique of phenomenological positions within geography, see Pickles (1985). In contrast to this superb account, my aim in this essay is not the geographical tradition with regard to the construction of phenomenological knowledge but the importance of space within key phenomenological texts.
the complexities of human and social interactions but refusing to yield to a nominalist conceptualisation of the world, in which every time and every space is unique and hence unknowable—in other words, refusing to succumb to what some commentators saw fit to label 'nihilist' conclusions to the 'crisis of representation' in one of its many guises—phenomenology starts from the recognition that in an everyday context we do manage to communicate even if the subject of a conversation is far from unequivocal. In other words, for something to be meaningful in everyday life, it need not occupy an identifiable 'presence' or point in space and time that we could point to. Rather, it suffices that this something is meaningful within some context or another. What this thought suggests is that, even though an act of identification or referentiality in the broadest sense remains a necessary condition for shared meaning and hence for any confirmed act of communication (scientific or otherwise), this very convergence of space and time is in fact perceived differently, thus allowing for a form of knowledge that is not affected by any crisis of representation at all, but genuinely presents anew a perception every time it appears in reading, writing, or in a conversation. Because phenomena are all we can discern, and because the idea of knowledge about phenomena as such only amounts to further unwarrantable idealisations of both space and time, phenomena for us, or the experience of world must be the original condition of possibility of knowledge.

Such radical modesty was the implicit courage of Husserl, contrasting his own "phenomenological reduction" (Husserl, IPH, pages 5/4) to Immanuel Kant's much earlier transcendental one.\(^2\) We cannot, as Husserl asserted, but bracket the famed Ding-an-sich every time that we seek knowledge about the world. Thoroughly temporalised, Kant is thus turned from his head onto his feet: within the frame of a phenomenological view of world, meaning turns relative with regard to its own human conditionedness in space and in time. "Necessarily", Husserl concluded, "we believe in the world whose things only appear differently but are the same" (Krisis 20/23).\(^3\) In other, decisive words: the very idea of a referential convergence of space and time (in the form of a representation or Abbild) is necessarily conditioned by a prior imagination (Einbildung) which is inseparable from its coming-into-being as an historical convergence of place and period. To subtract this fundamental spatiality from our attempts at seeking knowledge of the world, in fact to act as if such a generalisation would be possible, is thus tantamount to sheer idealism, if not hubris. 'World' is always a lived world (Lebenswelt) or the 'excluding epoche' of temporalised conditions of possibility which Husserl was known to lecture about.

There is little doubt that Husserl's summary construction of the foundations of phenomenology will be recognised by readers as heralding radically new conceptualisations of both time and space. After all, the implicit reduction of space to place embedded in phenomenology (Casey, 1996)—the existential fact that experience preceeds knowledge and that experience is always located somewhere—was what rendered a phenomenological position attractive to many spatial human scientists.

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\(^2\) My use of abbreviations is motivated by the fact that most of the material presented here was originally written in German and I wanted to preserve the possibility for any reader to access both the translated and the original version. Hence the page references in the text refer first to the original pagination and subsequently list the page numbers—where applicable—of the most widely used English translation.

\(^3\) This necessary point of departure leaves us with knowledge itself as a mode of being-in-the-world, rather than seeking an external bird's eye view. To quote Husserl once more: "If we inquire into the essence of cognition [Erkenntnis], then whatever status it and our doubts about its reaching the object may have one thing is clear: that cognition itself is a name for a manifold sphere of being which can be given to us absolutely and which can be given absolutely each time in the particular case" (IPH, page 30/24).
But can we truly know this world of lived experiences? In other words: can there be a phenomenology? On the surface, the phenomenological reduction does indeed break with a time-honoured metaphysical tradition we still find in Kant and his followers—here space and time are recognised as necessary conditions of possibility of any access to ‘world’ in general by existentialising knowledge into a science dealing with the multitude of potential elements of a concrete epoch. The price, however, must have seemed considerable in the days of Husserl: after “a reduction to absolute unconditionality” (Ideen, page 160, my translation), knowledge lost its aura of being capable of providing a universal, timeless explanation of ‘world’. If today such a claim seems preposterous to most human scientists, to abandon the search for such universals left Husserl’s contemporaries in a state of outright disbelief—how could he?

Today, the pertinent question should rather be: how could he? In Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, we meet the recognition of knowledge as befindlich (or ‘finding itself within a world’), as Heidegger would later paraphrase this existential constitution of knowledge (SZ, page 134/172). The individual subject, no matter how unfit its spatiotemporal ‘situatedness’ may make it seem to fulfil the task, becomes the purveyor of truth. Knowledge, in other words, does not present us with the long-awaited crown to honour king metaphysics, but is rendered as a project for a human relation to phenomena instead. Whatever this knowledge is about is thus not ‘simply there’ but becomes an object of a subject’s prior experiences and intentions and cannot be otherwise: ‘givenness’ (Gegebenheit) is necessarily “Selbstgegebenheit” (Husserl, IPH, page 9/7) and thus a function of an individual’s intentional approach to phenomena:

“Cognitive mental processes [Erkenntnisprozesse] (and this belongs to their essence) have an intentio, they refer to something, they are related in this or that way to an object [Gegenständlichkeit]. This activity of relating itself to an object belongs to them even if the object itself does not” (IPH, page 55/43).

‘Self-evidence’ is thus the smallest common element of phenomenal presence in space and in time (Husserl, Ursprung, page 369/356).

The problem, however, with this highly spatialised form of presence is that it no longer provides us with any sense of direction: as such, it may still speak for both the individual self and the object in question. Acceptance of the phenomenological reduction, in other words, would still leave us on our way to a solipsism that would in turn submit any differentiation between subject and object to a series of psychological investigations. Can knowledge bear a signature—and if so, how can we tell the signature from the work? Within history, as Husserl and indeed most academics today acknowledge, such a mark of relativity was inevitable. We are all children living at a specific time and in particular spaces, and the insights we seek and create are

(4) Macquarrie and Robertson translated this as ‘having a state of mind’, which (as they acknowledge) does fall short of the German Befindlichkeit in more than one respect. My own rendering above in no way avoids this problem, leaving the ‘moody’ facets of the German term largely untranslated, but has the tactical advantage of being more literal.

(5) “Successful realization of a project is”, Husserl writes here, “for the acting subject, self-evidence; in this self-evidence, what has been realized is there, originaliter, as itself” (Ursprung, page 369/356).

(6) Husserl was well aware of this danger. Throughout his oeuvre we find him fighting with the crude psychological fact that Wahrnehmung or perception is inseparable from experience and thus potentially as much about the perceiving person as it is about the world (compare IPH, pages 44–45/34-35; Ideen, page 24). Husserl’s efforts at saving a phenomenal ‘aboutness’, as we will see, have everything to do with the well-worn problem of compatibility between spaces and times. If, as he would have it, “psychology is not interested in things but in the perception of things” (Ideen, page 90, my translation), we may be well advised to ask (pace Kant) how any such differentiation between a ‘thing’ and ‘the perception of a thing’ could be justified.
conditioned by this. But what about any \textit{given} historical moment—does not the construction of a phenomenological presence become a vital threat to any science? For, in order to differentiate (in fact, whenever one \textit{does} differentiate) between subject and object, time would again have to be stopped in its tracks and space would have to be fixed to avoid threatening ambiguities. In other words, an almost 'natural' order of things would have to be imputed into a phenomenological manner of thinking. As Heidegger wrote pointedly:

"We heard earlier that every intentional relation has within itself a specific understanding of the being of being [Seinsverständnis des Seienden] to which the intentional comportment as such relates. In order for something to be a possible about-which for an assertion, it must \textit{already} be somehow given for the assertion as unveiled and accessible. Assertion does not as such primarily unveil; instead, it is always, in its sense, already related to something antecedently given as unveiled. This implies that assertion as such is not knowledge in the strict sense" (Heidegger, GP, page 296/208).

Any differentiation between subject and object is thus dependent upon a prior 'positing' of an independent object-space and object-time or an objective presence. And yet, the dilemma remains: whatever 'is' cannot but be, for us, a \textit{here} and a \textit{now}; even if this linking presence, this convergence of space and time appears to escape our desire to know. And still we communicate, still 'something', rather than 'nothing', appears to be present to us. If this is the case, if this is what we experience, why not then accept an undifferentiated 'spatial presence' as the logical 'zero ground' of any investigation? 'Undifferentiated' here means primarily the absence of attempts to differentiate between 'subject' and 'object', between 'true' and 'false', not even between 'the perception of something' and 'something', but to recognise (1) that we cannot speak of the one without the other and (2) that the differentiation itself is contingent upon the existence of, again, 'something' rather than 'nothing'.

The above thoughts trace Heidegger’s critique of the Husserlian reduction. Fully accepting a conditioning being-in-the-world (Befindlichkeit), Heidegger went on to acknowledge the 'facticity' of any knowledge as 'thrown' (geworfen) into a present, into a \textit{Dasein}, thereby collapsing any subsequent differentiations into the space and the time of a most fundamental \textit{Lichtung} or clearing.

"Truth as accuracy of a statement is impossible [ist gar nicht möglich] without truth as unconcealedness of being [des Seienden]. Whatever a statement should conform to in order to become right, must be unconcealed beforehand" (Heidegger, WWlect, page 34, my translation).

'Unconcealedness', \textit{Unverborgenheit}, or \textit{aletheia} is thus the necessary point of departure for every inquiry, its most basic condition of possibility (compare Heidegger, SZ, page 33/56–57). In strict contrast to Husserl, ‘unconcealedness’ for Heidegger became the sine qua non for any thought, destroying inter alia the stability of an ontological difference between 'object' and 'subject'—in Heidegger’s words “the most questionable [difference] which has fooled philosophy for a long time" (WWlect, page 72, my translation)—in that both become 'present' \textit{as such} only \textit{insofar as} they are unconcealed. In other, potentially more familiar, words: before we can map something, in

(7) Jacques Derrida, in his numerous critiques of Husserl, arrives at the same conclusion by explicitly linking Husserl’s \textit{intention} with the Saussurian discourse on signs. In this analysis, Husserl's reduction is shown squarely to depend on a 'derivative' character of the signifying apparatus, thus forcing \textit{phenomena} to originate elsewhere (compare Derrida, 1973, page 51). It is this 'borrowed' status of directionality which renders any phenomenological reduction Kantian at bottom. The intentional 'as', in other words, has to act 'as if' it was 'somehow' \textit{more} 'about', closer to a \textit{Ding}, than its nonintentional predecessor within the everyday sphere of experience.
fact, before the thought of ‘mapping’ something becomes meaningful, the experience of ‘something’ must first be possible. And while this may seem to be a banal realisation, it nonetheless touches one of the core elements of any ‘spatialised’ theory: the simultaneity of space, time, and existence. Crucially, and in contrast to what later became known as ‘existentialism’, the existence of ‘something’ can be separated neither from time nor from space, cannot be idealised rationally, because aletheia as thrownness into a world is already and always spatial and temporal. (8)

The difference between this realisation and Husserl’s initial ‘reduction’ to what he called *phenomena* is minute and yet ever so important: in no longer designating our contact with ‘something’—be it a concrete existing human being, class or gender relations, or global dependencies—an ‘experience o/something’, we effectively deframe space. In recognising the primary, indeed fundamental, importance of space as the condition of possibility of existence, we thus refuse to essentialise secondary differentiations between spaces. What is more, while we cannot acknowledge the former (unconcealedness), the latter (subject-object; true–false) constitute statements which are subject to our human limits, some of which we can work on (expertise), and some of which we cannot control (finitude). Knowledge about aletheia, Husserl’s phenomenological turn to the constitution of something as something within my own perception, is thus impossible.

**Space as language**

But impossible or not, knowledge about the world exists and persists all the same. What I have called ‘secondary spatial’ distinctions—and beside the fundamental one between object and subject suffice it to mention other, no less crucial, ones between different genders, classes, or races—are meaningful distinctions after all, if only because the language we use makes these distinctions contextually meaningful. Whatever it is that is unconcealed, as language it is meaningful to us. As language it has a tradition which constitutes the space of experience for us and from which we cannot disassociate ourselves. To speak of spaces and ‘unconcealedness’ without recognising that we would not speak of either without both already being meaningful in language is hence once again tantamount to an idealisation of the human condition.

Not to fall into the trap of idealism once again would thus imply the task of thinking the time and the space of a word, its very presence as a word, as (the place of) aletheia. Within language and only within language, can Being (*Sein*) become unconcealed, or what Heidegger called “illuminating existence” ("Lichtendes Seiendes"). Only the spaciousness of language, or the impossibility of a one-to-one match between word and object, is what allows for meaning in the first place, not in the Husserlian sense of a phenomenal appearance, but in the form of an ‘understanding’ (Verstehen) of what meaning is attributed to a word, a concept, a sentence.

“Every being with which we have any dealings can be addressed and spoken of by saying ‘it is’ thus and so, regardless of its specific mode of being. We meet with a being’s being in the understanding of being. It is understanding that first of all opens up or, as we say discloses or reveals [erschliesst] something like being. Being ‘is given’ only in the specific disclosedness that characterises the understanding of being. But we call the disclosedness of something truth. That is the proper concept of truth, as it already begins to dawn in antiquity. Being is given only if there is disclosure, that is to say, if there is truth. But there is truth only if a being exists which opens up, which discloses, and indeed in such a way that disclosing belongs itself to the mode of being of this being. We ourselves are such a being” (Heidegger, GP, page 24-25/18).

(8) I owe this last and important insight to an astute comment made by one of the anonymous reviewers of this essay.
The event of space

Without space, Heidegger asserts in this passage, the very notion of ‘truth’—as that to which knowledge aspires—would be meaningless. It is hence within that uncharted space we call language that we know, even if we do not have control over, the spaces that are created in this manner, let alone over the about-which of the resulting knowledges. Which is to say that

“[k]nowing one’s way about [sich-auskennen] is to have at one’s disposal the unconcealment of an entity. Knowledge and understanding [sich-verstehen-auf-etwas] is: to hold out in the unconcealment of an understood entity, to possess its truth” (Heidegger, WWlect, page 161, my translation and emphasis).

Which is but one more way of saying that “The meaning of a word is its use in language”, as Ludwig Wittgenstein once pointed out (PI, page 43). The space of presence of unconcealment, the space of language is consequently what constitutes ‘world’:

“Language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all” (Gadamer, WM, page 446/443).

This insight will be a familiar one to many readers. After all, has not most of the work that originated in the spatial human sciences in the course of the last decade paid homage to the ‘textuality’ of the world in which we find ourselves? From ‘the body’ to ‘landscapes’ and on to ‘nation-states’, we interrogate the objects of our curiosities as texts and we do not stop there: even the analysis of ‘the subject’ or ‘the self’ presently acknowledges its textual base.

But talk of ‘texts’ can be misleading here. In translating what is at bottom a phenomenological insight—the truth that we cannot disassociate ‘space’ or ‘world’ in general from ‘language’—into the language of ‘textual’ analyses, we reintroduced the actuality of spatial differentiations into our efforts. In other words, just as a text conveniently has a beginning, an end, and an author, we treated ‘texts’ as readable. In this context, the absence of the word ‘text’ in the above quotes is indicative. Short of such instrumental devices, what space is this language in which alone ‘world’ means something to us?

It is first of all a space in which language genuinely becomes its own referent, its own space of ‘experience’. It is moreover a space in which the kinetic motion by which ‘world’ is achieved—the weaving of sentences—is, in the words of Heidegger, never “free-floating, but always goes with some state-of-mind” (“ist immer befindliches”) (SZ, page 339/389). Rather than being an additional component of academic existence, understanding is thus the original form of the realisation of Dasein, which is being-in-the-world” as Gadamer reminded us (WM, page 264/259, emphasis in the original). Knowledge is hence an everyday activity in which we have to participate: we cannot not know. But what exactly is this realisation Gadamer speaks about? Where does it take place? The answer to this question seems obvious: understanding happens whenever someone realises it in time and space. But here

“Time is no longer primarily a gulf [Abgrund] to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. ... [T]emporal distance ... is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us” (Gadamer, WM, page 302/297).

(9) See also Heidegger (GP, 17b, pages 296-297/208). Walter Benjamin, writing some eleven years before Heidegger, phrased this insight as follows: “‘What does language communicate?’ ... ‘All language communicates itself’... For in language the situation is this: the linguistic being of all things is their language. The understanding of linguistic theory depends on giving this proposition a clarity that annihilates even the appearance of tautology. This proposition is untautological for it means: that which in an entity is communicable is its language. On this ‘is’ (equivalent to ‘is immediately’) everything depends” (US, page 142/316).
As a particular realisation of space in time, understanding is thus embedded in and indistinguishable from the tradition that renders it meaningful. The space of language, in other words, is the space of particular traditions which render certain 'secondary' spatial distinctions significant. Hence the persistence of modes of thinking and hence the slowness with which they change.

**Traditional spaces**

My reading of the spatiality embedded in the phenomenological tradition has led me straight into a paradox of sorts. Acknowledgment of the ‘embedded’ nature of knowledge in space and, by logical implication, in language, seems to lead our thinking straight into the arms of tradition as the final arbiter of what does and what does not pass as ‘knowledge’. Yet ‘tradition’ is not at all what we—as academics—invoke whenever we are called upon to justify the fruits of our respective labours. In fact, many of us take pride from breaking with traditions and from departing towards new and uncharted theoretical territory. But how do we then do we convince others? How do we know that we are heading in the right direction? True to the discussion above, we would first of all have to note that directions are not for us to ‘know’; in bringing out of concealment, in shaping aletheia, all that we do is to create in language. And even that bedrock of confident knowledge, tautology, first has to come out of concealment in order ‘to be’; *pseudos* truly is a posterior “contortion” ("Verdrehung") of aletheia (Heidegger, WWlect, page 136, my translation).(10)

With this, of course, what finally we deem worthy of being called scientific ‘understanding’ appears to be caught in a hermeneutic circle, in which any form of knowledge is dependent upon a prior presupposition and is thus always potentially arbitrary. “But what”, to quote Heidegger once again, “does ‘presupposition’ signify?” (SZ, page 314/362). Is this a circle we could possibly avoid, as most of us in the social sciences continue to believe, or is not rather the fact that we cannot not have ‘presuppositions’ a condition of possibility of understanding in the first place? What this implies is that what earlier I have called primary and secondary spaces cannot be disentangled—however potentially arbitrary our encounters are, space is always meaningful in a particular way. What is important here is to note that while we do not have control over where exactly we enter into this ‘circle’, we cannot not enter into it. And we do not enter into it just once but continue to do so for as long as we live: ‘understanding’ is thus not an act but an activity, a movement in space and time. A movement, let me add, in which any meaning or *Sinn* harbours the possibility of becoming meaningless or *Unsinn*, and vice versa. We cannot know, in other words, whether or not we have indeed come into the circle at the right place and time, but we can choose to participate in the movement we call meaning and actively interpret contingent spaces by realising other spaces.

“...interpretation is not an additional or appended procedure of knowing but constitutes the original structure of ‘Being-in-the-world’” (Gadamer, TI, page 339-340/30).

It was Heidegger’s pupil Gadamer who first analysed the implications of this ‘ubiquity’ of interpretation(s) for the human sciences. Keenly aware that, if ‘interpretation’ was no longer deemed to be a distinguished feature of academic existence but an everyday activity instead, relativism was looming large indeed. Worse, the ever dreaded ghost of

(10) Heidegger continues: “Contortion means to twist a thing in such a manner that one side is turned towards us whilst simultaneously disarranging and concealing what lies behind. This turning and twisting could even be of a manner of not concealing anything but concealing that it conceals nothing instead, thereby giving the appearance as if it would conceal something” (WWlect, page 136, my translation).
an 'anything goes' mentality was now even harder to banish. Gadamer continues the above quote:

“But does this mean that interpretation is an insertion [Einlegen] of meaning and not a discovery [Finden] of meaning? This question ... is obviously a question that decides the rank and extent of [phenomenology]”.

Gadamer’s solution I take to have become the implicit norm of scientific praxis within the humanities ever since: he went on to emphasise the ‘conversational’ character of any science: “Language is conversation” (DD, page 364/106). The creation of unconcealment and any subsequent spatial differentiation does not happen in vacuum but takes place within a host of political, social, and cultural arenas, which despite their differences share an element of continuity and of dialogue. The recent popularity of the word ‘discourse’, for instance, testifies to the crucial fact that each individual act of interpretation is part and parcel of an ongoing sequence of interpretations. As such, the number of competing interpretations to which a new explanation can be relative at each and every point in time and space is limited by definition.

Gadamer’s pragmatic answer to the problems born of the phenomenological desire not to idealise time and space— I said as much above— will be a familiar answer to many readers. Whether we adhere to a phenomenological view or not, most of us (I assume) see ourselves as working within a context set through the continuation of some discourse of another. Even those who rebel would not be happy at the thought of a rebellion without an audience. Note, too, how within a conversation the oft-invoked impossibility of truthful modes of representation ceases to be problematic—for what is a conversation but a constant negotiation of different forms of representation in the first place?

“Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another [worüber sie sich miteinander austauschen]. ... To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (Gadamer, WM, page 384/378-379).

With this, we have indeed arrived at quite a different conceptualisation of space. The democratisation of knowledge in the open embrace of space as difference, and the subsequent contextualisation—not elimination—of difference within the space of an ongoing conversation does indeed hold the promise of a genuinely spatial human science. Translating this insight into ethics, Jürgen Habermas (1984; 1987) was later to insist upon another element which everyone participating in science ought to share: the responsibility for keeping conversations going—which by all accounts is a widely shared responsibility indeed.

I could have decided to leave matters here and to adopt a more celebratory tone. As outlined above, Gadamer’s position surely is an eminently sensible one. Furthermore, is not the hunch that most human scientists implicitly share this position, if not in theory, then at least in praxis, proof enough of some ground common to us all which would allow us finally to abandon sterile theoretical debates and move on towards some illumination within concrete existing research agendas? Perhaps. But perhaps, too, matters are not so easily settled as reference to something common would suggest. In what follows, I will suggest that far from ‘settling’ the spatial question once and for all, the phenomenological tradition amounts to little less than an elimination of space through the privileging of time. By implication, the same applies to those who accept a ‘conversational’ or ‘communicative’ solution to perceived impasses within the human sciences.
To render this argument rational, we need to return to an earlier quote. Above, I quoted at some length from Gadamer's chief oeuvre *Truth and Method*, a quote which has rather direct spatial connotations: “Something”, we read there “is placed *in the center*, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue *both share* ...” (WM, page 384/378, my emphasis). But where, I will now ask, is this ‘center’ located? Today’s accepted wisdom would locate any such center in language—and leave it there. Yet to do so disregards the fact that language is at home in at least two places: in the written text and in the spoken utterance. Indeed, customarily few ever differentiate between the two: we speak of ‘giving papers’ and of ‘giving talks’ at conferences without too much by way of differentiation being involved. In Gadamer, less spatial ambiguity is called for. We read before that aletheia or unconcealedness—*not Ding an sich, not phenomena, not intentions*—was “the most basic condition” of inquiry; we will now ask how it is the aletheia conditions. We touched on Gadamer’s answer in *Truth and Method*: unconcealedness conditions by its intrinsic relationship across space to other forms of unconcealedness—traditions or, quite simply, the ‘world’ we are thrown into.

“[W]e are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind of cognizance that our later historical judgement would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenious affinity [unbefangenste Anverwandlung] with tradition” (Gadamer, WM, page 286-287/282).

But where in language do we encounter the traditions that make our being-in-the-world meaningful? Gadamer’s answer is straightforward: we encounter traditions only if understanding “[t] let’s... itself be addressed [angesprochen] by tradition” (WM, page 287/282). But this idea of an ‘address’, which was later to be ridiculed as the “postal principle” by Derrida (1987, page 191), only begs the question whether anyone should trust the deliveries dropped at his or her doorstep, especially since access to directional posts in any postal service is severely limited indeed.

And which ‘delivery’ is in question here, given the coexistence of written and spoken language? In other words, *where in language does understanding take place?* Gadamer’s transformation of the phenomenological tradition into a dialogical conceptualisation of understanding requires of language the capacity for change. Which is what speech stands for: the holding open of language towards the future. Yet in order to be recognisably open (and thus become part of a dialogical performance), any speech has to be relatable to the above-quoted “something” “which is placed in the center”, as Gadamer insisted. And note again that within the phenomenological tradition, this something need not be a transcendent convergence of space and time; all that would be needed is some material we can share *from the beginning*—a written text. “Writing” is thus

“the abstract ideality of language. Hence the meaning of something written is fundamentally identifiable and repeatable. What is identical in the repetition is what alone is actually deposited in the written record. This indicates that ‘repetition’ cannot be meant *here* in its strict sense. It does not mean referring back to the original source where something is said or written as such. The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning” (WM, page 396/392, my emphasis, translation modified).

This is decisive. The written text alone—not meaning or representational accuracy—here becomes the quoted “something ... which is placed in the center”—or, the bedrock of identity. A written text simply is, it can be reproduced and hence serve as an archival point of reference common to whoever wants to participate in and contribute to a (primarily oral) act of understanding (Curry, 1996). In other words: it is in the written
text that space ceases to exist—even if only temporarily, for it is in the actuality of a subsequent interpretation that the mere existence of a written text becomes meaningful.

“All writing is a kind of alienated speech, and its signs need to be transformed back into speech and meaning” (Gadamer, WM, page 397/393).

In answer to the question above, we can thus conclude that alethia can condition through initially being written in one form or another. However, this conditioning capacity has to be made relevant, it has to be acknowledged within the opening move to a conversation. Which, more likely than not, will be a question.

“We cannot have experience without asking questions... [T]he openness essential to experience is precisely the openness of being either one way or another. It has the structure of a question” (Gadamer, WM, page 368/362, translation modified).\(^{(1)}\)

And where could we find answers but in the dialogical space of a spoken interpretation, in the space of a conversation?

In this solution, Gadamer presents us with an extremely useful division of labour designed to circumvent relativism: written and spoken text occupy fundamentally different spaces and only when we confuse their distinct spatialities will we be caught in existential circles. The link between written and spoken text, so Gadamer says, is the space of the question which activates a written text as a condition of possibility for subsequent answers. Again, I trust that this is eminently sensible indeed and a common enough experience: while most of us would not want to dispute the sharing of say certain documents, it is the kinds of questions we direct at these shared texts which will lead us to different and often competing answers or forms of knowledge.

But what, then, is the link between a question and its answers? Does every answer count? In other words: how does a written text ‘condition’? Or, what amounts to the same, what could possibly confine the status of a (dialogical) answer to that of a misreading of a question or a written text? To this point, the initial answer with regard to alethia was a reference to ‘tradition’, that is, we only ever ‘answer’ a question when we “participate in an event of tradition” (Gadamer, WM, page 295/291). But this is weak at best because tradition in turn is but an archive which needs to be made relevant in questioning. Hence remaining true to the spirit of Husserl’s initial phenomenological reduction implies that we cannot reasonably claim to recognise whether someone misreads a text or whether the same person reads a different text altogether—nothing in the reading itself invites such a gesture. In the words of Derrida, there is no “authentic destination” (1987, page 84) of any text, written or otherwise. As a consequence, there is thus no con-text which will ever demarcate a “limit of the incidental”, which Wittgenstein once famously invoked (PI, page 79): “[T]here is nothing outside context” (Derrida, 1988, page 136) because “it is contexts all the way down” (Rorty, 1991, page 100): “No meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation” (Derrida, 1979, page 81).

“Or again: the ‘hermeneutic circle’ fundamentally lacks the hermeneutical anticipation of meaning in being-there” (Nancy, 1990, page 222).

But then, who or what do we trust when we trust that an answer is acceptable, better than its alternatives, or simply correct? In Heidegger’s terminology, we trust that whenever something is unconcealed in alethia, something about the world is disclosed. But how, but where? Is it in the well-mannered delivery that we learn? Is it the trustworthy style of an author that makes us think so? Is it, as Gadamer insisted, “kind of tact” (“eine Art Taktgefühl”) (WM, page 11/5). Do we trust ourselves or

\(^{(1)}\) Gadamer continues: “The essence of the question is to have sense. Now sense involves a sense of direction. Hence the sense of the question is the only direction from which the answer can be given if it is to make sense” (WM, page 368/362).
should we trust the competence of experts? The point is, of course, that neither the written text nor any interpretation will ever provide us with an answer: the effects of space and time haunt even the most often repeated of written texts or, rather, we cannot disassociate their effects from written texts without idealising the latter. Even the fact, so often brought to our critical attention, that we still 'do get by' cannot serve to legitimise it in the form of answers. Which is to remind us that “every interpretation, together with what is being interpreted, hangs in the air; the former cannot give the latter any support” (Wittgenstein, PI, page 198), because “[t]o each word will have to be added ‘a little’, ‘more or less’, ‘up to a certain point’, ‘rather’, and despite all this, the literal will not cease being somewhat metaphorical, ‘mention’ will not stop being tainted by ‘use’, the ‘intentional’ no less slightly ‘unintentional’, etc” (Derrida, 1988, page 124).

What use is it to resolve the threat of relativity in theory if the praxis of any conversation cannot but resurrect its threatening properties?

**Spaces of ‘being-in-the-world’**

My argumentation above appears to have brought us to an impasse. While on the one hand Gadamer’s development of the phenomenological tradition seems to embody the most rationally promising concepts of space to sidestep problems that have plagued older geographies, this very position does not help one iota when it comes to settling disputes within conversations. In his conception, claims to knowledge simply become part of an ongoing conversation but are not challenged—indeed challengeable—as such. Unless, that is, they invoke traditions—arrested spaces and time—for hegemonic purposes, in which case a claim to knowledge would forfeit its phenomenological status. Which practically may well be necessary short of one’s claim simply to ‘keep a conversation going’ becoming a sufficient justification for no matter which comment within debates. The point is that what is practical may not be rational after all.

Retracting our steps we could nonetheless pronounce that encounters with ‘world’, as well as the creation of ‘world’ do happen in language. And what alternative is there to the creation of aletheia? Evidently, we have yet to understand what is meant by this most elusive of Heideggerian concepts. Hitherto, I offered a rendering of aletheia as unconcealedness or Unverborgenheit, a term Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* treated as convertible with disclosedness or Erschlossenheit (SZ, page 220/105). But how and where does this happen? What is disclosed in being unconcealed?

“If unconcealedness takes place, concealment is removed and eliminated [Geschicht Unverborgenheit, dann wird Verborgenheit und das Verbergen behoben und beseitigt]” (Heidegger, WWlect, page 72, my translation), because “the uncoveredness of entities within-the-word is grounded in the world’s disclosedness. But disclosedness is that basic character [Grundart] of Dasein according to which it is its ‘there’” (Heidegger, SZ, page 220/263).

But would not this grounding translation of ‘unconcealedness’ with ‘disclosedness’, the ‘taking place’ or space of unconcealment, require some kind of referentiality of the sort criticised in Husserl? What being, in other words, is disclosed in the ‘being-in-the-world’, in the Da of Dasein? From the above quoted passage we would have to conclude that disclosedness is being-in-the-world itself, is, in fact, what grants Dasein a Da in the first place. But if that were true, we could no longer meaningfully speak of ‘the world’s disclosedness’, for nothing in the disclosedness itself would invite attributing ‘it’ to ‘a world’ or to specific spaces thereby disclosed. It simply or painfully—as the case may be—is.
This is no less important for appearing to verge on the pedantic. If ‘space’ for us is ultimately and primarily the space of continuation and tradition, it matters crucially what we accept as contributions to the ongoing renegotiation of traditions. How can we tell whether or not some comment is constructive or not? Implicitly, or so I argue here, it is taken-for-granted claims to disclosure—rather than ‘mere’ unconcealment—that allow us to make these distinctions without rationally being in a position to do so. In fact, ‘rationally’ we never recognisably occupy a position at all. It is this condition of possibility of disclosedness that is radically put into question by the spatiality of aletheia. Being-in-the-world can only ever encompass a ‘there’ in the form of a ubiquitous extension or Erstreckung—never a place or a locality (Heidegger, SZ, page 373, my translation; compare Derrida, 1983, page 77). In other words:

“Since being means emerging appearing [aufgehendes Erscheinen], to issue forth from concealment—concealment, its origin in concealment, belongs to it essentially. ... Being inclines back towards it, both in great silence and mystery and in banal distortion and occultation” (Heidegger, M, page 87/114).

This recognition is at the root of the famous ‘turn’ Heidegger took in the late 1930s—which we could attribute to the uncontrollable spatiality of aletheia. (12) It is this spatiality, which potentially resides in each and every ‘thing’ brought out of concealment, that renders being-in-the-world such an elusive category for knowledge. In other words, even being-in-the-world or Dasein is an event, is ‘thrown’ into the space and the time of a kinetic conditionality between concealment and unconcealment we may well call ‘freedom’ (Heidegger, WW, page 13/125). A freedom we shall never possess or ‘enact’ or be able to prove because we are that freedom: the spatiality of possibility or, to use a more fashionable terminology, the possibility of difference. The event or Ereignis thus differs from an alethoric disclosedness in that it acknowledges the conditionality of its own being-in-the-world as aletheia without in turn rendering this necessity as a condition of its possibility: in being, any event simultaneously conceals the possibility of being differently. The event is radically possible and thus nonconditional.

Conclusions

An entirely rational pursuit of the phenomenological tradition as the one practice most likely to answer the challenges brought forth by a once ubiquitous crisis of representation thus sees a host of immanent critiques converge upon an unlikely event. One is tempted to say that the ‘reassertion of space’ invoked by Soja (1989), if taken seriously, truly can go ‘all the way’ until it can be recognised to be at work in each and every shared condition of possibility of meaning. If this poses a challenge to many of our mental and practical habits as academics, scholars, or citizens, we should remember that it is a challenge not born of malice (‘postmodern’ or otherwise) towards the idea of an Enlightenment but is, on the contrary, one of the very consequences of an Enlightenment not taken lightly. Another response to this challenge—which I have explored in Strohmayer (1997b)—contextualizes our habit of thinking space and time as ‘presence’ within the ever-increasing centrality accorded to ‘vision’ and visual forms of conceptualising ‘world’ in the course of the last two centuries. (13) In contrast to these habits

(12) In Heidegger’s Vom Wesen der Wahrheit this Kehre or ‘turn’ in the philosophy of aletheia is even more accentuated. Here ‘concealment’ conceals what ‘disclosedness’ aspired to disclose—the ‘secret’ of something as such: “Concealment deprives aletheia of disclosure yet does not render it steresis (privation); rather, concealment preserves what is most proper to aletheia as its own” (WW, page 21/132). In other words: “Truth is unveiling concealment [Wahrheit ist lichtende Verbergung]” (Heidegger, B, page 70, my translation; also see H, especially page 18/206).

(13) A concise analysis of the role of ‘ocular’ metaphors, especially in Heidegger’s texts, can be found in Levin (1993).
but entirely rational no less, we now would have to think the hitherto unassailable
ground of connection, the a priori linearity of time and space, as Abgrund ('abyss')
(Heidegger, B, page 371, my translation) or as 'play' (SZ, page 369/420, translation
modified)(14); rather than as 'place' (WWlect, page 43, my translation).(15)

"Proximity and distance, emptiness and gift, play [Schwung] and delay, all of this
ought not to be conceived in a spatiotemporal sense derived from ordinary notions
of time and space, but on the contrary, in them lies the disguising nature of
time-space [das verhüllende Wesen des Zeit-Raumes]" (Heidegger, B, page 372, my
translation).(16)

This radical spatialisation of conditions of possibility in general renders any act of
'placing something in the center' potentially (and uncontrollably) unsuccessful. We
trust that what we bring out of concealment will remain where we thought we placed
it, in short (as Wittgenstein knew):

"And here we do what we do in a host of similar cases: because we cannot specify
any one bodily action which we call pointing to the shape ..., we say that a spiritual
activity corresponds to these words. Where our language suggests a body and there
is none: there, we would like to say is a spirit" (Wittgenstein, PI, page 36; on the
same theme compare Derrida, 1989).(17)

Undifferentiated, as space, as time, and in language, events thus encompass being-in
the-world as both potentiality and actuality while acknowledging the elusiveness of
either. Once brought out of concealment, events remain substantive (and thus material)
testimonies to the existence of worlds. Although we have barely begun to conceptualise
Heidegger's event of aletheia in any detail, its proximity to a materialism stripped
naked is already rather obvious. It should hence not come as surprise that at least
three of the more abstract papers recently published in geography (Castree, 1995; Doel,
1994; Hannah and Strohmayer, 1995) converge upon a highly contested but novel
notion of materiality. Why such thinking is needed needs to be spelled out in con
clusion. For one, and most obviously, with aletheia collapsing the time-honoured
distinction between idealism and materialism into the event of space, the obvious
material character of the latter needs to be thought anew. This is all the more urgent
because the entanglement of especially 19th-century materialist thought with ocular
centrist notions of 'presence' and implied idealist concepts of time and space is
accepted wisdom today.

Furthermore, in being what I have called 'undifferentiated' in these pages, the
space of each and every event denies us an uncomplicated 'outside' and thus the
possibility of critique as we know it. In fact, there are plenty of reasons for lamenting
the totalising character of events, as one reviewer of this essay astutely pointed out.
Yet with idealism remaining the only option through which to restore or maintain a
demonstrably fixed 'outside' to any of the concepts we employ—in other words: through which to singularise the many outsides we cannot but create in the process of

(14) The German word is Spielraum. In Beiträge zur Philosophie Heidegger explicitly speaks of a
Zeit-Spiel-Raum (page 5).
(15) The German term is Standort.
(16) Thus I concur with Jean-Luc Nancy where he renders 'abyss' as "Ungrund rather than
Abgrund, but no less vertiginous" (1991, page 27).
(17) A spirit, which might prompt us, along with the later Heidegger, to posit language as the
"house of Being" (H, page 5/193) and thereby frame or despatialise an event in such a manner as
to make it fit to answer the call of Being (compare Ronell, 1989, especially pages 37 and 66–68).
The once more eminently spatial metaphor of the 'house' as the boundary condition of meaning
would grant us a condition of possibility for the 'placeness' of events but would do so at the price
of turning idealist where a resolute materialism would be needed most.
creating knowledges—critique now needs to acknowledge no less than its irrevocably political character. It remains a choice—and an inherently risky strategy, what with the temptation to ground the sum of our choices in stabilising concepts such as 'experience' or 'expertise' being ever present.

Closely related to this point is the question of how, if and once space is granted its conceptual ubiquity, we reconstruct a new notion of 'publicness' which does not rely on inherently idealistic notions of what it means to bring 'something' to a wider audience. How do we argue in the absence of authority? How do we value and treasure 'work' in general, knowing full well "that the unconcealment of being is not simply given. Unconcealment occurs only when it is achieved by work: the work of the word in poetry, the work of stone in temple and statue, the work of the word in thought, the work of the polis as the historical place in which all this is grounded and preserved" (Heidegger, M, page 146/160, emphasis added).

On the way towards this yet to be thought polis, it was reassuring to see Society and Space embark upon a journey into the political implications of the reassertion of space in the social and human sciences (compare Mouffe, 1995 and other papers in that particular issue). The questions are: what do and can we bring to public debates in general? How do we convince one another of our various positions? Once we acknowledge the event that 'space' is, our debates can finally begin to be as candid as they are intricate.

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