



September 7, 2023

Dear Members of the Habilitation Evaluation Committee,

Daniele De Santis's Habilitation *Transcendental Idealism and the Sea of Suffering: An Investigation of Husserl and Heidegger* is an impressive piece of philosophical writing that combines a peerless understanding of early phenomenology, rigorous textual interpretation, and original thinking into a masterful attempt to re-think what is undoubtedly one of the most significant events in 20<sup>th</sup>-century European thought: the confrontation between Husserl and Heidegger over the meaning and future of phenomenological philosophy. Surprisingly, although this confrontation between these towering figures has arguably shaped, and continues to shape, the development of philosophical thinking, assessing and adjudicating this *gigantomachia* has received – relatively speaking – sparse scholarly treatment. Most of these studies are comparative in nature, with a final judgement resting squarely in favour of one or the other, with partisanship allegiances clearly in play – Husserl *or* Heidegger. Another dominant vein in studies of Husserl and Heidegger takes the opposite tack in endorsing Heidegger's claim to have decisively “over-come” the prejudices of Husserlian phenomenology, thus emancipating Western thought from the last vestiges of “metaphysics.” Tacitly, such a line of interpretation acknowledges the centrality of metaphysics for both thinkers, albeit often in complete disregard of Husserl's own effort to re-establish metaphysics through his phenomenological reformation of thinking.

What distinguishes De Santis' approach is his argument that Heidegger's lectures and writings during the 1920s, culminating with *Sein und Zeit*, need to be situated, and hence understood, as a significant intervention, and hence contribution, to unfolding debates and directions within the phenomenological movement. Rather than view this movement narrowly through the lens of Husserl's thinking, De Santis expands the optic of critical assessment to include figures among different phenomenological circles, thus attesting to the diversity and vibrancy of the movement. In this manner, De Santis is able to demonstrate

how Heidegger's recasting of phenomenology into "fundamental ontology" draws from an array of lesser-known authors. All the same, De Santis nonetheless conceives of his interpretation of the Husserl-Heidegger confrontation from the vantagepoint of Husserl's thinking, thus retaining the centrality of Husserl's phenomenology as the primary terrain of contestation. But here again, De Santis convincingly challenges the conventional wisdom that Husserl's indirect response to Heidegger's so-called "anthropology" is to be found in *The Crisis of the European Sciences*. Instead, De Santis argues that the *Cartesian Meditations* should be read as Husserl's muted response to Heidegger's gambit. Through-out De Santis' discussion of how the *Cartesian Meditations* marks the Husserlian line of defence against his former protégé, what is most striking is the innovative argument that one of Husserl's strongest contentions is that Heidegger conflates phenomenology as "first philosophy" and "metaphysics" in Husserl's albeit still to be developed, and, in fact, never fully articulated sense. What is important about this line of argumentation is that it recognizes the question of philosophy itself as central to the confrontation between Husserl and Heidegger, and thus places the more acknowledged debate regarding transcendental subjectivity and *Dasein* in a broader context of significance.

This over-view of De Santis' approach sets the stage for the organization of his Habilitation in its three divisions: "first philosophy," "ontology," and "metaphysics" (in Husserl's conception). Based on the significance accorded to *Cartesian Meditations*, De Santis demonstrates how Husserl here re-casts his phenomenological idealism in tandem with re-casting his conception of transcendental subjectivity. If Heidegger's critique of Husserlian subjectivity and phenomenology targeted *Logical Investigations* and *Ideen I*, this shift in focus on De Santis' part reveals how Husserl re-calibrated his thinking in the *Cartesian Meditations*. In this reformed statement, transcendental Idealism offers an alternative to Heidegger's reform of philosophy by means of a fundamental ontology in *Sein und Zeit*. With this understanding of Husserl's transcendental Idealism in hand, De Santis proceeds in the second division of his Habilitation to consider Husserl's handling of the problem of being, or ontology. Distinctive about De Santis' astute discussion of the sense of being (parsed out in terms of regions of being and the sense of being as such) in Chapters 7 – 9 is the illuminating proposal that Roman Ingarden and Jean Héring's respective ontologies must be taken into consideration. At the centre of this debate about ontology among this array of thinkers –

Heidegger, Husserl, Ingarden, Héring – is the status of essences in its varied senses. This run of chapters on their own represents an exceptional and compelling contribution, for indeed, most if not all assessments of Heidegger’s ontological thinking, in its ostensible rejection of “metaphysics,” systematically fails to acknowledge, let alone understand the centrality of the problem of essences for these authors – Heidegger included. The question of ontology cannot meaningfully be divorced from the question of essences, as De Santis masterfully demonstrates. The third division in *Transcendental Idealism and the Sea of Suffering: An Investigation of Husserl and Heidegger* turns to reconstructing and evaluating Husserl’s conception of metaphysics, which, as programmatically stated at the end of the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl envisioned as the *terminus ad quem* of his phenomenological reformation in its “infinite task” to redeem humanity. In this final division of De Santis’ Habilitation, Husserl emerges on his own, as it were, stepping outside Heidegger’s shadow. The importance of metaphysics for Husserl is almost entirely neglected with few exceptions in; as with other stretches in De Santis’ work, this discussion on its own stands out as a significant contribution to enhancing our understanding of Husserl’s philosophical project, and does well to remind us that the trite definition of “phenomenology as first person point of view” represents in fact a myopic view, if not an outright falsification, of Husserl’s project. Here, De Santis aspires to show how Husserl develops a “new” meaning to metaphysics centered, in part, on the increased salience of the “irrational” dimension of human existence in its exposure to contingencies and misfortunes that threaten to upturn the pursuit of a rational – ethically and epistemologically – form of life.

Overlaid on this already impressive novel treatment of the confrontation between Husserl and Heidegger, De Santis weaves into his Habilitation a series of methodological reflections on the historiography of phenomenology and established “hegemonic” narratives of the phenomenological movement. Rather than merely an appendix or ornament to the substance of De Santis’ philosophical thinking in his Habilitation, these reflections attest to De Santis’ sophistication as a thinker who recognizes – and challenges – inherited historical prejudices (in the hermeneutical sense) affecting how we think we should think, thus forcing us to un-read what has been read, so as to think again by reading anew.

Overall, *Transcendental Idealism and the Sea of Suffering: An Investigation of Husserl and Heidegger* is an impressive work that will surely receive the attention it deserves; it is meant to be a provocative work that, given its meticulous readings of texts and range of textual references, will motivate further and future thinking. De Santis demonstrates in his work a thorough (and enviable) knowledge of phenomenological authors and texts, an astute understanding of the complexities of at times extremely technical concepts and debates, and a commitment to Husserlian phenomenology as an *unfinished* – and hence still viable – philosophical project. There is much in this work that has been instructive and illuminating for my own thinking. The ambition of this work nonetheless invites a number of critical – in the generous sense of this term – observations, for the purpose of continuing the debate here so masterfully advanced in *Transcendental Idealism and the Sea of Suffering: An Investigation of Husserl and Heidegger*. Although I find De Santis’ claim that much of Heidegger’s thinking leading up to *Sein und Zeit* should be read within the broader context of “early phenomenology,” this methodological decision comes at the cost of omitting the significance of Heidegger’s theological interests and, most importantly, his engagement with the writings of Saint Paul, Luther, and Augustine during the early 1920s, not to mention other “non-phenomenological” authors who contributed to Heidegger’s formation: Simmel’s *Lebensanschauung: Vier metaphysische Kapitel*, for example. In my view, Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and attempt re-ignite the question of being cannot be separated during the 1920s from his cross-fertilization between phenomenology and theology (indeed, his earliest lecture course deal with the phenomenology of religion). In other words, to state this pointedly, the question of metaphysics cannot be understood in a “pure” philosophical sense, and this, I would argue, extends as well to other phenomenological thinkers, Husserl included. A further suggestion, in the spirit of sympathetically challenging De Santis’ thinking, is that the confrontation between Husserl and Heidegger in part centers on a contestation of how to conceive of human subjectivity in ethical terms, whereby each strives to re-think the meaning “ethics,” no longer understood in terms of “normativity” or “morality.” Arguably, the thrust of Heidegger’s critique of Husserlian transcendental subjectivity – his so-called Cartesianism and “intellectualism” – can be parsed out as an implicit critique of Husserl’s ethical ideal of *Seligkeit*, while, in turn, Husserl’s attentiveness to “the sea of suffering” in his writings during the 1920s can be seen as responding to Heidegger’s argument for the finitude and contingency of *Dasein*, of the human condition as

necessarily incomplete and “thrown into the world.” And finally, as further evidence of how De Santis provokes readers to think anew the confrontation between Husserl and Heidegger, although I find compelling De Santis’ proposal that the *Cartesian Meditations* should be read as anchoring and expressing Husserl’s response to Heidegger (rather than the *Crisis of the European Sciences*), the cost of this decision is to omit the importance of the problem of history for both thinkers, and thus, as essential for their confrontation. The teleological optimism that seems to be integral to Husserl’s conception of history – European history – contrasts sharply with Heidegger’s eschatological narrative of endings in search of other beginnings; one cannot divorce, in other words, what is at stake with metaphysics without recognizing the problem of history? The pathos of both Husserl and Heidegger, in their respective albeit contrasting Promethean endeavors to think philosophy to the end to begin anew would, to my mind, appear inseparable from what each seeks to think under the noble title of metaphysics.

These critical observations notwithstanding, *Transcendental Idealism and the Sea of Suffering: An Investigation of Husserl and Heidegger* is a thought-provoking and exceptional work of philosophy, the publication of which will undoubtedly invigorate re-thinking this epochal confrontation between Husserl and Heidegger, not as a *gigantomachia* between two isolated figures, but as figures embedded within a culture and collective of thinkers, without which there would be no shoulders to stand on, then as now. I therefore recommend highly and without reservation the acceptance of Daniele De Santis’ Habilitation.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



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Professor of Philosophy and Jewish Studies