

BOOK REVIEW

Erik Kuravsky's
*Transcendence in Heidegger's Early Thought:
Toward Being as Event*

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Erik Kuravsky. *Transcendence in Heidegger's Early Thought: Toward Being as Event*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. 330 pages.

The epigraph of the present volume is a quotation from lectures on ancient philosophy by Merab Mamardashvili (1930–1990), a little known Georgian philosopher for whom the author has a strong affinity: “What acts in us is that which does not depend on us, and the positing of something in the world by us is, in fact, the manifestation of the actions of this ‘something’ in us: transcendence.”¹ Impetus for the volume is found in an interview with William J. Richardson from May 2015, in Messkirch, in which the much revered scholar expressed concern (in the author’s paraphrase) about “a lack of transcendence and an understanding of Dasein as transcending,” which Richardson took to be a flaw in the so-called “new paradigm” of Heidegger scholarship in Europe and the States that has led to the need to remedy what he perceived to be an absence in the “contemporary discourse” on Heidegger. The reference to Richardson is contained in the opening lines of Kuravsky’s study. The author makes plain that “this book is a conscious effort to address Richardson’s identified need comprehensively. It aims to demonstrate that by interpreting Heidegger’s early thinking through the lens of transcendence, we can access his later thought, particularly

the notion of Beyng [*Seyn*] as Event.² ... the primary focus is on interpreting Heidegger's early and middle thought through the lens of transcendence ... In essence, this book challenges the prevailing trend in Heidegger scholarship, which tends to downplay the radical differences between Heidegger's early thinking and the transcendental philosophy of his predecessors by emphasizing their similarities" (xi–xii). Judging the success of Kuravsky's venture will likely be based on the extent to which his echo of Richardson's challenge evokes a response from mainstream Heidegger scholars and clarifies the extent to which Richardson's concern was justified.

Following a conference in Messkirch which he attended, Richardson had expressed an interest in saying something about transcendence (*Transzendenz*) (and other matters) in Heidegger's thought, and this led to the interview referenced. The first topic he spoke about was *transcending* in Heidegger and the centrality of understanding the notion to understanding Heidegger. It is to this that Kuravsky's study responds.

What has happened to *Dasein* as *transcending* and to therefore even being itself being described in *Sein und Zeit* already as a *Transzendenz*? You know, that is really unspeakable. And that becomes a task. How does one avoid that kind of language and at the same time retain what to me is the initial phenomenon of a *transcending*, an *Übersteigen* as he calls it in *Vom Wesen des Grundes*, as I recall, and *Dasein* as simply open to the open. And that includes the entire problem, it seems to me, of not only the so-called being question but the relationship between *Dasein* as *Lichtung* and *Sein* itself as *Lichtung*. And that's where the hard problem is, as I am familiar with it, as it is posed actually at the moment in the question about what does the *Lichtung* mean and what is the relationship of the human aspect of or the human dimension of the *Lichtung* and the *Lichtung* as such. That seems

to me to be fogged up by a disregard of the notion of transcending, of *Dasein* as transcending, as the *sein*, the *to be*, *sein*, of *das Dasein zu sein*.³

The volume consists of three parts. Part I, “Problematizing Transcendental Subjectivity: The Genesis of Heidegger’s ‘Transcendence,’” consists of the revision of an article originally published by the author in this journal in 2022, on “The Early Neo-Kantian Origins and the Problem of Encounter,” which “delves in Heidegger’s critical assimilation of Neo-Kantian concepts,” and a chapter on “The Transcendence of Life as an Event of Experience,” which “illustrates the outcomes of Heidegger’s evolution beyond Neo-Kantianism” (xv). In this part, the author explains, he has “outlined the foundational elements of Heidegger’s decentering of subjectivity as they are articulated in the initial stages of his exploration towards an explicit embrace of a new understanding of transcendence” (47). Part II, on “Heidegger’s Transcendental Phenomenology as the Philosophy of Transcendence,” considers “The Transcendental Logic of *Dasein*” (that is, the “transcendental framework” of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*), “Transcendence as Being-in-the-World” (which works out the “logic of enactment” of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology), “The Transcendental Performativity of Existence” (in which “*Dasein*’s existence is interpreted as a model of Being itself, necessitating a de-anthropomorphizing of human essence”), and “The Temporal Structure of Transcendence” (in which the author examines “the role of temporality in facilitating the circular and performative nature of transcendence”) (xvii). Although it begins Part II, on “Transcendental Freedom and Being as Event,” Chapter 7, “The Metontological Side of Transcendence,” may also be considered as concluding the first two parts which, in Chapters 2–7, consider Heidegger’s early texts in chronological order. In the chapter, metontology “is shown as the key to Heidegger’s overcoming of ontotheology” and transcendence “is explored in its new subtle senses as holding onto the Nothing, as the grounding nature of Being, and as freedom.” Chapter 8, “Authenticity as Explicit Transcendence,” begins the author’s examination of the “later

Heidegger” and consists of chapters on “Transcendence as the Quasi-Agency of Beyng” and “Transcendence as the Task of Philosophy.” The author tells us that this section of the volume (i.e., chapters 8–10) “will place the idea of becoming authentic in the interpretational context I have been developing so far. That is, the current and the following chapters will not follow the chronological development of Heidegger’s notion of transcendence in the way it was done hitherto but will suggest that Heidegger’s central philosophical motivation (i.e., human transformation) becomes clearer if viewed through the prism of transcendence as anticipating the idea of Beyng as Event. . . . Accordingly, in the current and following chapters I will move between *Being and Time* and the later works and gather some of the things Heidegger says regarding human transformation and its relation to transcendence” (214). More specifically, Chapter 8 “elucidates the transformation of Dasein from inauthenticity to authenticity as a shift of transcendence into its explicit mode.” Here we are reminded that the middle Heidegger defined “transcendence as ‘standing in the truth of Beyng.’” The final two chapters of *Transcendence in Heidegger’s Early Thought* “present the trajectory by which transcendence, particularly its performatively active nature leading to the transformation of Dasein, establishes the significance of Beyng as Event.” The final chapter also “investigates the specific role of philosophy in the transformative process of Being and existence” (xviii). It is in these pages that the promise of the title of the volume is to be fulfilled, and here we find what is perhaps of most interest in the volume.

This is an ambitious work, directing its searchlight over the entire corpus of Heidegger’s *oeuvre*. For Kuravsky, an authentic and full-blooded engagement with Heidegger’s thought from its beginnings must lead above all to “human transformation.” We are therefore led in the final section of the concluding chapter to the need for “examining the performative function of Heidegger’s early thought in its capacity to initiate transcendence through its articulation” (295–296). Kuravsky argues that this function set its course toward the radical call to a personal involvement on the part of the reader of Heidegger’s texts and not

merely to accompanying Heidegger in a rehashing of ancient, medieval and modern philosophy.

In the concluding three chapters of *Transcendence in Heidegger's Early Thought*, Kuravsky reprises in part many of the basic investigations and conclusions presented earlier in his book. The final few pages again remind the reader of the influence on the author of Mamardashvili, who asserted that “to human phenomenology pertains an essential element of experiencing the world as if it began with my existence and will end with it” (297).⁴ Philosophizing as phenomenology is thus seen to be, as it was for Heidegger, a deeply personal matter and not primarily a “field” or “profession” in academe. Harkening back to “On the Essence of Ground” (*Vom Wesen des Grundes*) (to which Richardson had referred), this leads Kuravsky to observe that, for Heidegger, “there is a difference – an ontological one – between what we take to be the present-at-hand objective human self and the origin of the absolute sense of selfhood, common to all human beings and surpassing . . . the manifold of factual existences” (298). Thus, “to understand Heidegger is not just to be able to speak of his ideas but to become mortal . . .” (299).

An appreciation of this study requires a thorough familiarity with Heidegger's works (and ways) and will be valued most by Heidegger scholars already working at an advanced level. On the other hand, its theme should be of interest to a wider audience of philosophers and theologians, in particular those who continue to try to understand the meaning of the spiritual life in our time, which Heidegger had early on identified as one from which “the gods” have “fled,” whose sojourners increasingly experience something missing at the heart of everyday life. It is, of course, important to recall that, for Heidegger, what was missing was not the Christian God, although he believed that much could be learned from medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart. And yet the reader will not easily forget that the impulse to write this book was explicitly traced back to the words of a Jesuit priest (and Lacanian psychoanalyst) who effectively introduced Heidegger to the English-speaking world in a comprehensive way in his *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, first published in 1963. Apart from its other

accomplishments, then, the publication sixty years later of Kuravsky's book is a tribute to Richardson, but more important, it is a call to contemporary Heideggerians to respond to his expressed concern about the direction contemporary Heidegger scholarship has taken.

By way of conclusion, it bears repeating Richardson's caution that, with respect to our understanding of *Dasein*, the usage of the word "transcendence [*Transzendenz*]" is "unspeakable," and what Heidegger actually pointed to as what is at stake was a surmounting, an exceeding – literally, a hauling up and over (*Übersteigen*) – accomplished by *Dasein*. In Chapter 8, Kuravsky refers to the critical passage from "On the Essence of Ground" (*Vom Wesen des Grundes*) Richardson references: "Only in this surpassing [*Überstieg*], Heidegger says, *Dasein* comes towards 'that being that it *is*' as itself; transcendence constitutes selfhood" (217). Rendered somewhat differently, Heidegger's text runs: "*In* having surmounted, *Dasein* first comes toward that very being that *it is*, toward it *as* it 'itself.' Transcendence constitutes selfhood."⁵ Richardson had understood the surmounting (*Übersteigen*) as an effort to be carried out and Kuravsky has set out to trace the lineage of this calling in the early Heidegger. In the passage cited, we note, Heidegger speaks of both the effort (*Übersteigen*) and the act itself as accomplished, that is, the having surmounted (*Überstieg*) *Dasein* has accomplished in coming into its own. This allows Kuravsky to conclude: "Transcendental freedom and *Dasein*'s selfhood are essentially the same – *to be a self is to be bound by the unconcealed and open for the unconcealed*" (217). Reference to "the unconcealed" also resonates with what Richardson says in the interview about the open and about *Dasein*'s access to other, human and non-human, things that come to light. For Kuravsky, what the new paradigm misses is, in Richardson's words, an "insistence on *Dasein* as a transcending to what became for [Heidegger] simply the open and therefore an understanding of what is encountered in the open, namely, other things lit up, so to speak, from the inside by the very openness in terms of which they were encountered, which openness then became more formalized in what we can understand now as the later Heidegger."⁶

The volume would have benefitted from consistent reference to citations from the original German texts of Heidegger that are quoted, that is, to volumes of Heidegger's Collected Edition (*Gesamtausgabe*), and to corresponding page references in available English translations. This would make it more readily possible to decide, for example, on the aptness of translations of key terms. In some cases, available translations have not been named. Finally, some citations are incomplete in the References sections of respective chapters.

NOTES

- 1 A full citation is not given but the text seems to be a reference to a volume in Russian containing Mamardashvili's "Lectures on Ancient Philosophy." The lecture does not appear in Alisa Slaughter and Julia Sushytska (eds.), *A Spy from an Unknown. Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2020), the only collection of his works currently in English. On the relation between Heidegger and Mamardashvili, see Andrew Padgett, "Dasein and the Philosopher: Responsibility in Heidegger and Mamardashvili," in *Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology* 6.1 (2007): 1–21.
- 2 The subtitle of the book under review, however, is "Toward Being [*Sein*] as Event."
- 3 William J. Richardson, "An Interview with William J. Richardson part 1/3," The European Centre for Heidegger Studies, YouTube video, 22:16, June 11, 2022, 22:16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpeE-A1CMKA&t=750s>. The second and third parts of the interview can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnTbsBS21HM>.
- 4 The reference is to Mamardashvili's 1981–1982 lectures on Proust, *Psychologisheskaya Totologuya Puti* [*Psychological Topology of the Path*], published first in 1997.
- 5 "Im Überstieg kommt das Dasein allererst auf solches Seiendes zu, das *es* ist, auf es *als* es 'selbst.' Die Transzendenz konstituiert die Selbstheit" (GA 9: 138/108).
- 6 Richardson, "An Interview with William J. Richardson."