Is the Present Ever Present? Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Presence

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In Heidegger's appropriation, by way of a retrieval [Wiederholung], of the tradition of philosophical thought, the question as to what time is and how it is given occupies a key position. The question regarding the relationship between Being and time shows itself to be the concealed vanishing point of the works of Aristotle, Augustine, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Bergson and so forth. The traditional treatment of logical problems (e.g., the principle of contradiction, the copula in a predicative sentence), psychological problems (the relationship between the res cogitans and the res extensa), metaphysical problems (the distinction between essentia and existentia) and theological problems (the concept of creation), presupposes a particular conception of time. Heidegger's endeavor to come to terms with the tradition thus implies, on the one hand, a particular way of reading the texts of the philosophical tradition with respect to their (concealed, unthought) presuppositions and, on the other hand, an attempt to explore the encompassing ground of all these texts with reference to a determinate (restricted) understanding of time. Heidegger calls the method of this procedure a destruction\(^1\) of the philosophical tradition and designates the understanding of Being and time, presupposed by this tradition, as a metaphysics of presence\(^2\).

The most general framework of the discussion before us will be determined by the question regarding the essence of the destruction as a particular way of appropriating traditional philosophical texts and by the question regarding a metaphysics of presence [Anwesenheit] understood as the now-existing present [jetzige Gegenwart]. In what follows, this
general framework, this heuristic principle of thoughtful reading will be put to the test by means of an interpretation of the concept of the present presence \([\textit{gegenwärtige Gegenwart}]\) in Husserl's phenomenological analyses of time. The choice of this starting point for a destructive retrieval of the metaphysical presuppositions of Husserl's phenomenology can finally be justified only by the result of the endeavor before us. Nonetheless, we may fairly anticipate from the outset that the metaphysical concept of presence \([\textit{Anwesenheit}]\), in a philosophy which determines Being as the (possible) being-given for a subject of cognition, must have undergone an unusually pregnant crystallization. Furthermore, it is the stated aim of the phenomenological reduction to reconstruct the sense and validity of all Being with respect to the present presence of an object for an absolutely present and presencing transcendental spectator.

To be sure, the carrying out of this destructive analysis of the Husserlian concept of the present presence would bear little fruit philosophically were it merely to serve the purpose of convicting Husserl of an error characteristic for the entire pre-Heideggerian philosophical tradition. If destructive philosophy is necessarily critical, then we may not become so absorbed in the critique of Husserl as to forget the critique of Heidegger. In what follows, I should like to show that a critical interpretation of Husserl's analyses of time, an interpretation inspired by Heidegger, will at the same time make problematical Heidegger's concept of a metaphysics of presence as well as his procedure of retrieving the traditional philosophical texts by giving thought to the unthought. Husserl's analysis of the present presence can be interpreted at once (and ultimately indeterminably), on the one hand, as the zenith of the metaphysics of presence and, on the other hand, as an attempt to derive the presence of the now-existing present from the absence of the not-now. Thus, for example, Husserl's determination of the relationship between primordial impression and retention is by no means unambiguous. On the one hand, retention may be interpreted in the sense of the metaphysics of presence as a derivative modification of the consciousness of the now. On the other hand, however, it may be interpreted as a differential repetition \([\textit{Wiederholung}]\) of the primordial impression, a repetition in which, for the first time and after the fact \([\textit{nachträglich}]\), the consciousness of the now becomes conscious of itself. The latter interpretation finds additional confirmation in the circular definition of the primordial-impressional consciousness of the now, that is, in the impossibility of defining the now by means of the now. Also, Husserl's vacillation as to whether retention should be conceived as a perceptive or a re-presenting \([\textit{vergegenwärtigendes}]\) consciousness is an expression of