Heidegger's Value-Criticism and its Bearing on the Phenomenology of Values.*

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I. Introduction

Throughout his work Heidegger criticizes value as an idea, which, its pretensions notwithstanding, is completely unfit to guide us through the present world-historical crisis. He upholds this judgment despite the fact that phenomenology of values purports to have initiated a whole new approach to value and to have formulated a novel conception of the same.

A brief preview of the treatment of value by Heidegger is likely to bring into sharper focus his actual stance on the phenomenology of values. Already in Being and Time (B&T) Heidegger regards value as a notion whose ontological status is quite unclear. Several years later in Nietzsche (N, I & II) he subjects value to a scrupulous scrutiny, revealing its “metaphysical” nature. It is only later, in the Letter on Humanism (LH), when referring to such Schelerian theses as; “God is the highest value”, and “values are either positive or negative” that he flatly rejects thinking in terms of values as “the greatest blasphemy that can be thought of in the face of Being.”1 However, nowhere does

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Heidegger make any effort to substantiate this rejection by critically coming to terms with the phenomenology of values.

The absence of a persuasive criticism of the phenomenological conception of value, together with its rejection by Heidegger requires an explanation. Isn't it reasonable to assume that an explicit criticism is rendered superfluous due to the peculiar affinity of the phenomenological with the "metaphysical", i.e., Nietzschean, conception of value? One passage in NII considerably strengthens this assumption:

Under the influence of Nietzsche the learned philosophy of the terminating 19th and beginning 20th century turns into a "philosophy" and "phenomenology" of values. Values appear now as things-in-themselves to be arranged in "systems." Despite a tacit rejection of Nietzsche's philosophy, his writings, especially Zarathustra, are now examined closely. . . in order to set up an ethics of value "more scientifically" than the "unscientific philosopher-poet Nietzsche" ever could.²

By casting doubt on the originality of a phenomenology of values, Heidegger seems to make the assumption plausible that, in a general way, his designation of value as "metaphysical" is broad enough to include the phenomenological conception of value. Can the phenomenological conception of value be designated metaphysical in the Heideggerian sense of the term? Is the phenomenology of values vulnerable to Heidegger's criticism?

It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to answer these questions. To work our way toward the answer two steps should be taken. First, we should determine what exactly constitutes Heidegger's value-criticism. Second, we should make clear the distinctive feature of the phenomenological theory of experience which gives rise to, and supports a phenomenology of values. The first step requires that we outline the course of Heidegger's thought on value from its inception to its culmination. The second step demands that Scheler's phenomenology of values be examined in order to see whether it is immune to Heidegger's criticism.