

Eric S. Nelson

Heidegger, Formal Indication, and Sexual Difference

Theodore J. Kiesel in Memoriam

Abstract: This contribution unfolds an existential-ontological response to the question of sexual difference in the context of Heidegger's formally indicative concept of "Dasein." The question of Dasein's "neutrality" concerns how formal indication formalizes, empties, and neutralizes the givenness of factual human existence. Ostensibly "given" biological and anthropological facts, such as sexual difference, are interpreted from an emptied and neutralized perspective that appears abstract and fictional to Heidegger's critics. How, then, is the "neutrality" of formalizing emptying related to the "facticity" of in each case factually existing as a sexual and gendered being? The answer lies in Heidegger's elucidation of the existential-ontological structure of Dasein: Dasein is always relationally instituted in its factual entangled life through "being-with." The sexual difference of human existence is not merely biologically or anthropologically given, but disclosed and enacted according to one's relations with others, the environment, and oneself. The formally indicating concept "Dasein" indicates, accordingly, the concrete diversity and plurality of individuated sexual and gendered ways of being.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag entfaltet eine existentiell-ontologische Antwort auf die Frage der sexuellen Differenz im Kontext von Heideggers formal anzeigendem Begriff des „Daseins“. Die Frage nach der „Neutralität“ des Daseins betrifft die Frage, ob und wie die formale Anzeige die Gegebenheit der faktischen menschlichen Existenz formalisiert, entleert und neutralisiert. Scheinbar „gegebene“ biologische und anthropologische Tatsachen, wie etwa die sexuelle Differenz, werden vermeintlich aus einer entleerten und neutralisierten Perspektive betrachtet, die Heideggers Kritikern als abstrakt und fiktiv erscheint. Wie verhält sich die „Neutralität“ der formalisierenden Verallgemeinerung zur „Faktizität“ des jeweils faktisch vorhandenen geschlechtlichen Seienden? Die Antwort liegt in Heideggers Interpretation der existentiell-ontologischen Struktur des Daseins: Das Dasein ist in seinem faktischen Leben durch das „Mit-Sein“ immer in Beziehungen verortet. Die geschlechtliche Differenz der menschlichen Existenz ist nicht nur einfach biologisch oder anthropologisch gegeben, sondern erscheint und inszeniert

sich in den Beziehungen zu anderen, zur Umwelt und zu sich selbst. Der formal anzeigende Begriff „Dasein“ verweist dementsprechend auf die konkrete Vielfalt und Pluralität individuierter geschlechtlicher Seinsweisen.

摘要： 本文是在海德格尔“此在”的形式指引概念的背景下，开启一个对于性别差异问题的生存论的-存在论的回答。此在的“中立性”问题涉及的是，形式指引如何形式化、空洞化和中立化实际人类生存的那种既定给予状态。表面上“既成给予”的那些生物学和人类学的事实，比如性别差异，是从一种空洞化的、中立化的视角——这种视角对于海德格尔的批评者来说显得抽象和虚构——来阐释的。那么，形式化的清空所具有的“中立性”如何关联于在每个具体案例中都实际性地以一种性的和性别化方式而存在的“实际性”呢？答案在于海德格尔对于此在的生存论的-存在论的结构阐明中：此在总是藉由“共在”而关系性地设立在其实际性交缠的生活中。人类实存的性别差异并不仅仅是从生物学上或人类学上既成给予的，而是根据人们与他人、与环境和与自身的关系而被揭示和规定的。相应的，此在这个形式指引概念表明了个体化的性的和性别化的存在方式具有具体的多样性和复数性。

Keywords: Martin Heidegger, Formal Indication, Sexual Difference, Neutrality, Methodology

1. Introduction

Formal indication (*formale Anzeige*) has been interpreted as the key to Martin Heidegger's early methodology and his logic of concept formation, as emphasized in the path-opening work of Theodore J. Kisiel.¹ The strategy of formal indication breaks and empties traditional reified concepts through a purely formal, empty, and hence initially virtually meaningless preliminary “hermeneutical concept.” Although this strategy of formalization is originally adopted from the mathematical language of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Edmund Husserl, in which it operates as a rule over a series and is differentiated from generalization and universalization,² this emptying must radically disrupt the sedimented presupposi-

1 Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

2 Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, GA 60, ed. by Matthias

tions of logic and the logical-mathematical paradigm itself that inhibits Husserlian phenomenology.³

Formalization empties until rupturing the “dialectical illusions” of forms of conventional understanding and their confusion of names, concepts, and things.⁴ This transformed method of bracketing as placing into questionability seeks to undo the hypostatization of language and experience. Yet this emptying is not only destructive since it can point toward a renewed encounter. Elsewhere, in notes concerning logic from the early 1930s, Heidegger noted how indication as projective (*entwerfende Anzeige*) initiates a direction into the region of an essence, even while the essence itself is not given.⁵ There is, of course, no essence in the traditional metaphysical sense, only presencing-absencing that is verbally described as “essencing.” As Heidegger’s early identification of formal indication with “way”⁶ continues to resonate in the priority of “way” throughout his later works, it undoubtedly remains a key to both his early and later thought as well.

The following short translation and reflection will examine the relationship between formal indication and difference, specifically bodily and sexual differences. It will delve into two questions in outline: How can “formalization” prepare a way for setting free the diversity of “individual and concrete ways of understanding” in deformalization?⁷ Can the empty neutral formality of formal indication be construed as a way of preparing for encountering

Jung und Thomas Regehly, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2011, 57. (The *Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe* is quoted in the following way: GA).

- 3 Eric S. Nelson, “Die formale Anzeige der Faktizität als Frage der Logik”, in: Alfred Denker and Holger Zaborowski (eds.), *Heidegger und die Logik*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2006, 31–48.
- 4 Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, GA 29/30, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2004, 422.
- 5 Martin Heidegger, *Ergänzungen und Denksplitter*, GA 91, ed. by Mark Michalski, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2022, 138.
- 6 Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, GA 9, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2004, 9.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 24.

and disclosing differences in their very difference such as diverse ways of being gendered?

Before engaging these questions, let's begin with a brief translation of a provocative yet neglected passage concerning *Geschlecht*. This ambiguous word can signify sex and gender, as well as nationality and race.⁸ The ambiguity between sex and gender is left open in this translation; yet it seems evident that Heidegger disassembles the anthropological category of fixed sexual identity in favor of multiple gendered ways of being-with oneself and others. This passage is from § 20 of Heidegger's Introduction to Philosophy (*Einleitung in die Philosophie*), a section titled "Community on the basis of the with-one-another" in which he maintains the priority of the I-thou relation of being-with (*Mitsein*) in addressing bodily and sexed gendered existence.⁹

2. A Translation of Heidegger on Neutrality and Difference

The being that we in each case are, the human (*Mensch*), is in its essence neutral. We call this being Dasein. Yet it belongs to the essence of neutral Dasein that it has a necessarily broken neutrality, insofar as it in each case factually exists. That is, Dasein is in each case factually male or female, it is a sexual [gendered] being (*Geschlechtswesen*). This involves a very particular [way of being]-with and -to one another. The limit and extent of the effect of this character are factually different in each case. The possibilities of human existence that are not determined by sexual [gendered] relations (*Geschlechtsverhältnis*) can only be pointed at. However, the sexual relation is only possible, because Dasein is already determined in its metaphysical neutrality through the with-one-another. If each Dasein, which is factually in each case male or female, were not essentially with-one-another, then the sexual relation as something human would be impossible.

8 Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference", in: *Research in Phenomenology*, 13.1, 1993, 65–83.

9 Martin Heidegger, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, GA 27, ed. by Otto Saame and Ina Saame-Speidel, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2001, 146–147.

Hence, the thought is simply nonsense that one can attempt to explain the “with-one-another” as an essential determination of Dasein through the sexual relation. Ludwig Feuerbach made this mistake in a myopic and inadequate opposition to German Idealism. There is an attempt today to renew this mistake, which does not, therefore, become truer, where one makes the vulgar materialism of Feuerbach more tasteful with the assistance of contemporary phenomenology. The fundamental thesis of Feuerbach’s anthropology, his theory of the human, is: man is what he eats. There is something correct about this thesis, but confusion always results from a half-truth being made into a universal principle.

The broken neutrality of its essence belongs to the essence of the human. That is, this essence can only primarily be made into a problem from its neutrality, and only with reference to this neutrality is the rupture of neutrality itself possible. Sexuality [gender] (*Geschlechtlichkeit*) is only a moment of this problem and not the primary one (thrownness). Since Dasein lived-bodily (*leiblich*) exists, particular conditions underlie the factual grasping of the other by the self and the self by the other, but the bodily co-determining relations of the grasping between Dasein and Dasein do not constitute the “with-one-another” but rather presuppose it and are determined by it.

3. Between Neutrality and Facticity: Formal Indication and Difference in Heidegger

“Dasein” (being-there) is among Heidegger’s most familiar formally indicative concepts. It does not signify the biological-anthropological human being; it expresses the ways in which humans spatially-temporally and existentially-interpretively exist in the “here”.¹⁰ Heidegger delineated Dasein in this translated passage from GA 27 as an emptied neutral designation that indicates factically existing being. Formal indication proceeds from the fixated sedimented to facticity through loosening and releasing. This facticity,

10 Martin Heidegger, GA 27, 71; Martin Heidegger, *Die Metaphysik des deutschen Idealismus*, GA 49, ed. by Günter Seibold, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2006, 37.

which encompasses questions of sex, gender, and other biological and anthropological differences, is bracketed in Heidegger's shift from absorbed ontic concreteness to a neutrality that can disclose genuine concretion. Thus, the neutrality and facticity of Dasein are bound together as Heidegger turns from the pseudo-concreteness of the hardened hypostatized concrete to the hermeneutics of tangible existence through formalization.

Although Heidegger increasingly no longer stressed this terminology in the course of the 1920s, and it appears to subsequently disappear, this early project of a formally indicative "hermeneutics of facticity" continues to inform his formulation of the "neutrality" of Dasein in this lecture-course of the late 1920s and his statements about anthropology, the lived-body, and sexual and gendered being (*Geschlechtswesen*). *Geschlecht* is a notoriously ambiguous word.¹¹ It is anthropologically defined as having a sexed identity; yet, as not merely given but existentially constituted in relations between self and others, the expression operates more closely to gender, as Heidegger indicates the multiplicity of ways of enacting and living gendered existence.

What was this early hermeneutical project? In Heidegger's earliest lecture-courses, he endeavored to develop a logic of the singular or a form of reflection that would be able to articulate the facticity, immanence, and individuality of life and existence from out of itself. To do this, he developed an alternative to Husserl's conception of categorial intuition, by which the universal is intuited in the particular, in an approach called "formal indication." Formal indication is not a universalization to an overriding determinate concept that subsumes all relevant particulars. Rather, it "universalizes" to the point of reaching a virtually empty meaninglessness that allows the singular to show itself in its own singularity. Accordingly, in Heidegger's criticism of his teacher, Husserl's approach was simultaneously too general to allow the particular to show itself in its particularity and too bound to the fixity of the concrete in relying on "prejudices" concerning the hegemony of consciousness and the mathematical-scientific paradigm. These fixating

11 Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference", 65–83.

presuppositions needed to be emptied, dismantled, and formalized as they blocked access rather than release the living phenomena of phenomenological investigation and let what shows itself be seen from itself in its own way of showing itself.¹²

That is to say, Heidegger wanted reflection to open up the very questionability of the self and the world in their dynamic palpability, without being either unreflectively captured in the immanence of life with its illusions of direct immediate intuition and feeling (his difficulty with vulgar life-philosophies of Oswald Spengler and Ludwig Klages that are too absorbed in life to clarify it) or tied into an abstract rationalism (his problem with Husserl and Neo-Kantianism) that prevented philosophy from being responsive to the very life and existence that it always already is. Formal indication would consequently provide anticipatory concepts that open up and point toward facticity and singularity. Heidegger initially introduced the expression “Dasein” as a formal indication that would allow the facticity, multiplicity, and singularity of human existence to become visible to itself. As a formal indication, Dasein must be as abstract, empty, and neutral as possible precisely in order to disclose the richness and depth of human existence in its possibilities. Formal indication is consequently always the formal indication of facticity, such that the two are bound together in such ways that the researcher can never arrive at either complete determinate concepts, as envisioned by Leibniz, or the pure, conceptually unmediated, concrete “life itself” of intuitionism and life-philosophy.¹³

This logic of formal indication is still at work in *Being and Time*, where we can see Dasein as indicating—in Jean-Luc Nancy’s analysis—the dynamic singular-plural structuring of human existence.¹⁴ Dasein is in each case singular and yet the expression indicates the plurality and multiplic-

12 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, GA 2, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2. Auflage, 2018, 46.

13 Compare, for instance, Martin Heidegger, GA 60, 74.

14 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, Paris: Galilée, 1996.

ity of ways of being human. Insofar as race, gender, and class belong to human facticity, the hermeneutical concept of Dasein would also indicate these ways of existing. Even if Heidegger is notorious for not adequately exploring issues such as the body and gender, and their lived differences, he reflected on these questions in several lecture-courses from the late 1920s in response to philosophical anthropology. Based on his discussions in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*¹⁵ and *Introduction to Philosophy*,¹⁶ we can see how Heidegger began to confront these questions, even though these reflections appear to break off after 1930.

Heidegger addressed the question of gender in these paragraphs in two ways that seem to pull in contrary directions. First, being gendered is described as facticity. Facticity does not mean the empirical factuality of scientific inquiry but the thrownness and fallenness of Dasein. While Dasein is a neutral designation, it is not indifferent to the concrete facticity and possibilities of human existence. It formally indicates a being that is never neutral since this neutrality is always in each case differentiated, broken, and shattered in one way or another. Dasein, as a formal indication, does not exist; there is only Dasein in the individuating “each case my own” of existing. Why then speak of neutrality? The difference and singularity of human existence, according to Heidegger, can only be broached by approaching the empty perspective of a neutrality that cannot exist as such. Dasein is neutral as formal indication; yet, as what is being indicated, Dasein’s neutrality is existentially broken and dispersed. This suggests that Dasein is each time factually embodied and entangled with others in the world in one way or another: “Dasein is as factual in each case male or female, it is a sexual [gendered] being (*Geschlechtswesen*)”¹⁷. Heidegger revealingly did not identify women with being sexed and men with objective neutrality, marking

15 Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz*, GA 26, ed. by Klaus Held, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 3. Auflage, 2007, 172–175.

16 Martin Heidegger, GA 27, 146–147.

17 *Ibid.*, 146.

a difference from the conservative discourses of his era. Indicative neutrality does not determine an essence and prescribe how one should act as female or male; it points to the very questionability of what it means to be sexed and gendered in different ways.

The facticity of sex and gender might seem to mean that it is an invariable anthropological structure. After all, facticity signifies that which determines us in the first instance without our choice. Still, being born and thrownness do not constitute an underlying, essential, and definitive nature without variability and possibility. Thus, gender—like the lived-body itself—is described as being only comprehensible from out of its own being-there in its being-with. Dasein encompasses being-amidst environing things (*Umwelt*), being-toward oneself (*Selbstwelt*), and being-with-others (*Mitwelt*). Given this dispersion in factual entangled life, gender and bodily life are ways of enacting being-with-another. This bodily being-with-others is not a secondary quality “added on” to a purely biological and physical body. On the contrary, Heidegger concludes that it is only from Dasein’s being-with that its lived body and gendered life can be appropriately articulated. Gender and, more broadly, lived body life are formed and experienced through the self’s relations with others.

Interpretively understanding lived bodily existence requires then an understanding of how that body exists in relation with its others. Being-with is not an accidental derived addition to the life of the embodied individual. Basic human differences, such as sex and gender, are not merely biologically given; they are relationally instituted through being-with. What it signifies to be gendered, as male and female, is individuated according to one’s relations with others, the environment, and oneself. This entails that, according to Heidegger’s analysis, the ordinary ways of grasping sexual and gender differences are too anthropologically fixating and insufficiently formal to disclose the concrete plurality and singularity of ways of existing, including the multiplicity of ways of gendered existing. These pathways cannot be limited to one ideal or form of what it is to be human, female, or male.

This anti-essentialism concerning human ways of existing reappears in the critique of restrictive definitions of the human in Heidegger's 1946 "Letter on 'Humanism'"'.¹⁸

Heidegger accordingly rejects in these passages Ludwig Feuerbach's explanation of being-with through sexual and gendered relations (*Geschlechtsverhältnis*) that had become prominent again in the philosophical discourses of the Weimar Republic. Sexuality and gender, as elements of essentializing anthropology in Heidegger's critique, close off more than they can unlock possibilities of tangible existence. Heidegger's strategy, in the passage translated above and related ones in GA 26 and GA 29/30, dismantles fixed determinate ontic difference of any kind in difference as disclosed through formally indicative emptying. This strategy of dereification informed his assessment of the philosophical anthropology movement of the Weimar Republic era which is addressed in lectures from 1929 and 1930.¹⁹ This influential tendency included Georg Misch, Helmuth Plessner, and especially—Heidegger's primary referent—Max Scheler. Interestingly, related issues are also operative in Martin Buber's 1929/30 work *Zwiesprache*. In contrast to Heidegger's criticism of anthropological reductionism, Buber praised Feuerbach's anthropological introduction of the priority of the I-thou relationship.²⁰

This frequently ignored generational context of Heidegger's argumentation is revealed in other ways. In the same *Introduction to Philosophy* lecture-course, Heidegger targeted another inspiration for philosophical anthropology.²¹ He criticized Wilhelm Dilthey (whose thought offered a crucial source for this new anthropological movement) for being absorbed in a con-

18 Martin Heidegger, GA 9, 313–364.

19 Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge*, Teil 1: 1915–1932, GA 80.1, ed. by Günther Neumann, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2016, 213–279.

20 Martin Buber, *Schriften über das dialogische Prinzip*, Martin Buber-Werkausgabe (MBW), Band 4, ed. by Andreas Losch and Paul Mendes-Flohr, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2019, 137, see also: 229–230.

21 Martin Heidegger, GA 27.

fusion of myriad ontic differences and, as a result, being unable to articulate radical existential differences and the ontological difference itself.²² Existential differences concern the multiplicity and individuality of ways and possibilities of existing and ontological difference the abyssal non-identity between being and beings that allows beings in their difference to be disclosed. This last sustained confrontation with Dilthey in GA 27 suggests the possibility that ontological difference is the formal indication of all ontic differences, such that—despite or perhaps because of its apparent unity—it alone indicates the infinite depth of difference itself. To introduce a further example, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (GA 26) offers a glimpse into this dynamic with its critical analysis of conceptual logical-mathematical formalism and monadic individuation in Leibniz’s metaphysics.

Formalization prepares the way for de formalization and individuation regarding the being in question. If the present interpretation is true, and it makes sense given the priority of the question of Dasein’s radical individuation in his thinking of the late 1920s,²³ then Heidegger’s strategy does not disrupt reified ontic differences for the sake of asserting a reductive monistic identity of being as several contemporary and subsequent critics feared: notably, Ernst Cassirer, Georg Misch, Günther Anders, among others. Formal indication does not aim at an absolute unitary perspective; it allows beings to come to their own self-presentation and word.

More recent interpreters, such as Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray, have more specifically interrogated Dasein’s ostensive neutrality and the primacy of ontological difference over sexual difference in Heidegger.²⁴ Although their argumentation cannot be analyzed in detail here, it is revealing that

22 Eric S. Nelson, “Heidegger and Dilthey: Language, History, and Hermeneutics”, in: Hans Pedersen and Megan Altman (eds.), *Horizons of Authenticity in Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Moral Psychology*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2015, 109–128.

23 Martin Heidegger, GA 2, 51; Martin Heidegger, GA 29/30, 8–9.

24 Jacques Derrida, “Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference”; Luce Irigaray (ed.), *Challenging a Fictitious Neutrality: Heidegger in Question*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

formal indication, which is decisive for Heidegger's deployment of neutrality to explicate facticity from itself, plays no significant role. It is critical to keep in view in this context that the neutrality of formal indication radically differs from the "objectivity" of universalization and generalization,¹ as it would allow difference qua difference to show itself. Likewise, as witnessed in this paper, the openness of ontological difference is more appropriately interpreted as a condition of difference rather than its abstract monistic negation. The present short discussion has revealed that Heidegger's strategy of formal indication need not neuter gendered beings. It empties and interrupts the sedimented givenness of essentializing definitions of gender and thereby sets free myriad ways of enacting gender or being engendered in relation to oneself and others.

In conclusion, Heidegger's critique of Feuerbach's sexual anthropology and Dilthey's historically-oriented life-philosophy in GA 27, and philosophical anthropology more generally, break factual Dasein from being simply biologically given as male or female in one defining pre-determined way or as existing according to one determinate natural, anthropological, or social nature that invariably defines what it is to be female or male. Instead, perhaps ironically given other considerations and Heidegger's typical disinterest in questions of gender, this practice of dismantling and emptying—through formal indication—interrupts absorbed contents and fixed ontic differences. It thereby allows for the disclosure and enactment of a diversity and plurality of individuated sexual and gendered ways of worldly existing-with-others.

4. Coda

Heidegger disappointingly did not pursue the radical implications of his analysis of existential difference and gendered ways of being. He failed to realize the radical critical potential of the strategy of formal indication. His thinking of difference and individuation in the 1920s, in which Dasein can leap-ahead (*vorausspringen*) instead of leap-in (*einspringen*) for others, no

1 Cf. Martin Heidegger, GA 60, 57.

doubt appears forgotten in his political turn of the early National Socialist era in which fixating notions of a collective German spirit (*Geist*) undermines its formally indicative character and the will of the “the people” (*Volk*) disregards the lessons of myriad ways of enacting and living one’s own existence.

Nonetheless, it is intriguing that these same issues regarding being and multiplicity reappear in the 1940s. In an evocative passage from 1941, for instance, Heidegger described how the movement from the dispersion of ontic multiplicity—through ontological difference—discloses beings in their own multiplicity: “As the same and the unique, being is, of course, forever different in and from itself . . . Being in its uniqueness—and in addition to this, beings in their multiplicity”².

To speak with the language of his later thinking that echoes Hölderlin and Zhuangzi, the way does not conclude, but the thinker lingers with that which is encountered underway in its own self-occurrence. There are very good reasons to think with Kisiel that formal indication remains—throughout all its transformations—the key strategy in Heidegger’s thinking.³

Eric S. Nelson

Hongkong University of Science and Technology (HKUST)

2 Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe*, GA 51, ed. by Petra Jaeger, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 52.

3 Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.