



“Being tied to experience”: towards a subjective account of the phenomenology of the event

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Abstract

In this text, Heidegger’s notion of the event is understood as a rupture on an ontological level. From this follows the aporia of whether the event concerns the coming about of being itself, or of beings. To address the ontological as well as the ontic aspect of the event, the article suggests to understand the event in a subjective framework, in line with transcendental conditions of experience, specifically as a “receptivity” to the event. The main part of the article considers existing phenomenological approaches to the event and the possibility or impossibility of a receptivity to the event expressed therein. In conclusion, the article suggests that the subjective event can be conceived as a rupture within subjective experience, as being tied to the necessary coming about of experience.

Keywords Heidegger · Event · Phenomenology · Maldiney · Subjectivity

In everyday language, an “event” signifies a happening of something ordinary or extraordinary, for instance an unexpected change in the course of things that draws our attention. In phenomenology, specifically inspired by Heidegger, an event concerns a more basic level of experience. Here, it is not merely an occurrence *in* my world, but the point from which my world is constituted. Thus, I am not surprised by an event, e.g. of suddenly seeing a deer, as some unexpected facet appearing in an otherwise familiar world. Instead, the fact of the sudden emergence of the animal, appearing “like a breath, like a nothing, like a dream,” is what reorders and centers my world anew.¹ The event does not concern any ontic reality, but the coming about of reality, the presence and presencing of being itself.

¹ Maldiney (2007, p. 295), translation by the author.

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This understanding of the event turns the trivial “there is” of the world into a constant presencing and withdrawal of being which requires someone to whom (and for whom) the event happens. Thus, the world as “experienced event” is in a constant flux, but not because of mundane things moving and changing over time, but because *the event itself opens space and makes time pass*. It is as if the Heideggerian notion of the event relocates the transcendental conditions of experience of Kant (and Neo-Kantian phenomenology) to an outside. Instead of being the subject’s own modalities of experience, the conditions of experience are now encountered as an external happening and the subject is constituted by the event.² As a consequence, the event does not concern any specific phenomena, but the appearance of phenomena in general, to the point where the notion of the event risks being effaced by its ubiquity. This presents us with a seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy: Either the event concerns the coming about of the world, i.e. its phenomenological appearance as such, or the event signifies a change *in* this world. My idea in this paper is to think about ways to realign this phenomenological notion of the event with subjectivity, more specifically, I want to consider how the event can be explained from a *receptivity* towards it, thus finding a way to ground both aspects of the event in subjective experience.

Marlène Zaderer suggests a similar problem in the phenomenological approach to the event:

The event is given in the modes of excess, rupture and discontinuity, i.e. as an exception. Such is its proper phenomenality. But if we universalize this rule of exception, we will no longer have any means of distinguishing the specific phenomenon of the event from other phenomena. We believe that we are multiplying the event ad infinitum, but in reality we are annulling it, by effacing the very place where it could have existed.³

In recent literature, attention has been brought to the fact that Heidegger himself acknowledged this by way of alluding to the tautological character of the event as the “‘originary meaning’ of phenomenology, for phenomenology is not so much a method as a way leading to what is at first inapparent, i.e. the coming into presence as such.”⁴ The theory of the event then simply makes explicit what is happening all along, the groundless and ceaseless coming into presence of the world as we experience it. Because of its “inconspicuous” character, this has been dubbed “phenomenology of the inapparent,” which is not concerned with “the appearance but the appearing of the appearance, an appearing that therefore *does not appear*.”⁵ Similarly, an “imageless saying of the event has nothing to say but the inceptuality of

² Thus, according to a recent account, the “event undoes the power of the subject, as the event happens of *itself*,

placing us, as it were, no longer in the position of actors, but ... of *witnesses*.” Raffoul (2020, p. 11).

³ Zaderer (2005, p. 34f.).

⁴ Quoted in Dastur (2014, p. 420).

⁵ Raffoul (2017, p. 116).

inception.”⁶ Accordingly, while the event could be considered nonexistent insofar as there is no tangible effect brought about by it, it is what makes everything (including myself) appear in the first place. The question posed by Zaderer, and one of the guiding questions of this paper, is: Can we think the event other than as a coming about of being itself, or does this phenomenological approach restrict us to the tautology of the appearing of appearance?

Already in this short overview, a tension within the concept of the event becomes evident. On the one hand, the event is inapparent, changing nothing about *what* we experience. On the other hand, the event is a disruption of experience because it is what brings experience about. Instead of the contents of experience changing for me, this “experiential me” is revealed through the constant coming about of being in which my experience of the event consists. To put it in Heidegger’s own terminology, experience is not characterized by the presence of being (*die Anwesenheit des Seins*) in a nominal sense, but in a verbal sense (*das Sein west an*).⁷ This notion of the event introduces an irrevocable split between what could be termed the ontological and the ontic dimension of the event. The ontic dimension, presuming a subject having intentional experiences of objects, precludes the ontological dimension in which being, in its fundamental presencing and withdrawal, requires a constant renewal of the subject itself. As a consequence, the phenomenology of the event is torn between the *quid* and the *quod* of the subject’s experiencing.

One solution to this problem would be to simply consider two different notions of the event, one being compatible with the immanence of intentional consciousness, i.e. the event concerns something that can be accounted for by the modalities of its being consciously experienced. The other notion would concern the event as it makes experience possible in the first place, the opening of the *time-space* (*Zeit-Raum*) in which experience can take place.⁸ I find this solution unsatisfactory for two reasons. Firstly, an event in the ontological sense begs the question of what is actually experienced. What am I conscious of when experiencing the presencing of being itself? Granted that I am always necessarily exposed to being in its ontic sense, to things, persons or my own thoughts, even the most disruptive event has to be *of* something, other than being itself coming about. Secondly, when the event just concerns the ontological dimension of experience, resulting in the above mentioned “phenomenology of the inapparent,” the invisibility of the event still has to be gleaned from ontic things, otherwise the idea of a tautology would not make sense. But how could the event be such a basic, disruptive force to my experience and yet change nothing about it whatsoever? How can the phenomenology of the event be not just about the presencing of being, but also about the coming to presence of a *certain* being?

To offer a way of addressing both aspects of the event at once, I propose reconsidering the idea of a *receptivity to the event*. I prefer the term “receptivity” over “passivity,” because the latter implies an idea of the event as agent and the subject

⁶ Vallega-Neu (2014, p. 330).

⁷ Cf. Heidegger (2007, p. 9ff).

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 18ff.

as patient. My idea is instead to think the event neither as simply conditioned by subjectivity, nor as some kind of exterior force. Rather, I want to argue that the event basically presents me with an *involuntary aspect* of my experience. While the appearance of things is grasped by me as a subject, consciously experiencing them and being able to reflect on them, at the same time the appearing of that appearance confronts me with the fact of having experiences.⁹ The event “ties me to my experiencing,” showcasing how my receptivity is active and passive at the same time. Receptivity comprises both of these aspects of experience. While I am receptive to having experiences and to freely considering them, on a more basic level, receptivity does not put me in a position where I “possess” the contents of my experience, but where I experience them necessarily.¹⁰

Before going into the discussions of receptivity, it is useful to specify the nature of necessary experience. It is not a blind necessity, as if I am faced with the contents of my experience as a *factum brutum*. What necessarily appears does so in virtue of *what* appears and in virtue of *whom* it appears to. Describing the nature of experience fundamentally as givenness, Jean-Luc Marion succinctly puts this point by noting that “nothing appears except by giving itself to and in the conscious I, but only what can give itself absolutely to consciousness also succeeds in giving nothing less than what appears in person.”¹¹ In other words, for the thing to give itself, for it to necessarily appear from itself, it is required that I take on a certain attitude. I am not merely passive, but actively receptive, which Marion discusses in connection with Husserl’s reductive method. Similar to the disruptive character of Heidegger’s event, Marion’s givenness requires a certain attunement to the fact of appearance itself.

An even more radical take on the necessity of appearance can be found in Michel Henry. His basic claim could be construed thusly: That which makes appearance possible does not appear itself, remaining invisible behind the transcendence of the world. The challenge to phenomenology then is not to follow the phenomenization as it unfolds in experience, but to contemplate the life that announces itself through our ability to make any transcendental experiences at all. Contrary to Marion, experience for Henry is fundamentally a self-givenness, but the difficulty lies exactly in understanding what this self is: “For objectification is not possible unless the essence which objectifies itself originally arrives in itself in this very objectification in such a way as to be this objectification and to accomplish what it accomplishes, i.e. the becoming of exteriority and its phenomenological arising.”¹²

In terms of a receptivity to the event, Marion and Henry may caution us not to think of the necessity of appearance in reductive terms. To be “tied to one’s experiencing” may, with the right phenomenological attitude, elucidate how receptivity is required to explain the constitution of experience. Importantly, and this is where

⁹ My minimal definition of a philosophical subject here means that experience is constituted by a priori conditions and that the subject can reflect on the contents of experience and on itself, having experiences.

¹⁰ Thus, I agree with Gert-Jan van der Heiden that the event is based on contingency, but not as “potentially-of-being-otherwise,” but as senseless appearing, cf. Heiden (2014, p. 18).

¹¹ Marion (2002, p. 16).

¹² Henry (1973, p. 278).

both Marion and Henry seem indebted to Heidegger, to be receptive to one's experiencing cannot be accomplished in the "natural attitude" of transcendent objects. Rather, one has to problematize the appearance of the world as such and radically re-conceive it from one's own capacity, while still being attuned to how it appears from itself and how it does not cease appearing. It is this fundamental two-sidedness of experience which I see as the salient point in Heidegger's philosophy of the event, and which the following sections will address from different perspectives.

The notion of receptivity has been discussed in conjunction with the phenomenology of the event in the past. I want to consider two central objections against a subjective receptivity to the event, as well as two approaches that may be compatible with it. First, I want to examine Jocelyn Benoist's idea that receptivity presupposes a transcendental structure, thereby preventing a notion of the event in the radical sense, as it can only ever be an "event for" someone (1). Secondly, I want to consider a specific aspect in Heidegger's notion of the event, an "insistence" which is deemed necessary for the experience of the event. This cannot be subjectivity in the traditional sense because to grasp the event requires a form of self-denial. (2). On the other hand, Henri Maldiney's concept of "transpassibility" does allow for a subjective experience of the event, albeit for the price of a complete transformation of the subject (3). Finally, Richard Polt's reading of Heidegger multiplies the event, suggesting a more personal and possibly subjective notion of it (4). These four approaches will allow me to consider in detail how the event can concern the above described voluntary and involuntary aspect of experience.

1 Event or subject

In his text *Qu'est-ce qui est donné ? La pensée et l'événement*, Jocelyn Benoist argues against the possibility of reconciling event and subjectivity. Subjectivity, as interiority, necessarily turns the event into something exterior. The event, being given from the outside, requires in turn a subject that has to absorb the strangeness of the event. But according to Benoist, this effaces the possibility for there to be an event at all. It is the very receptivity of the subject which makes the experience of an event, as given from the outside, impossible:

En effet, si l'on accepte de raisonner en termes de moi auquel les choses seraient données, force est de le constater, en lieu et place de donné, on ne trouvera jamais que du moi. Que l'on pense à Kant: comment se voit-il contraint d'envisager la réceptivité, lorsque précisément il essaie de comprendre cette énigme de la donation? Comme une réceptivité de l'esprit à ses propres représentations. C'est assez paradoxal mais, eu égard à la notion de donné, très clair. Le donné vient s'ajouter, c'est ce qui le constitue. Il est donné au sens où il n'était pas déjà compris dans l'ensemble. Quel ensemble? Ce moi, auquel il est donné. Mais en ce qu'il est donné il se met à en faire partie, il y est approprié. Il n'est donc rien d'extérieur au moi: la réceptivité ne peut être réceptivité qu'à une représentation, et non à la chose même.¹³

¹³ Benoist (1996, p. 643).

I take Benoist's central argument to be that the transcendental structure, which explains the modalities of experience, functions like a *petitio principii*, meaning that everything that is experienced could only be experienced because it was structurally conditioned by "me." The experience can never be of something that is not already premised on "myself." Now, according to Benoist, this leaves us in the paradoxical situation that the mind is receptive to itself, or to its own representations. That means that these representations, even though they may be of quite different things, are familiar to me because of the fact that they are conditioned a priori. But is it really self-evident that the transcendental structure of experience creates this immediate certainty which subordinates everything I experience to "me"? In the following I will argue that since these conditions of experience are not, strictly speaking, a part of this experience, they still allow for an aspect of experience that is "not me." In other words, what I experience is not exhausted by the fact that it is conditioned a priori in a certain way.

This opens the question of what the term "receptivity" in Benoist's usage actually refers to. Is receptivity the structural ability of the subject to have experiences at all? In this case, receptivity strikes me as an inappropriate term as whatever shapes my experience does so before "I" receive it. The other option is to understand receptivity as immanent to experience. This way, the unpredictability of what I see, hear and feel is in no way diminished by being conditioned by me as a subject. A third option, and this seems to me to best describe Benoist's usage, is to understand receptivity to operate on both these levels simultaneously. I receive the experience "premade," and, conceived as such, it is purged of any surprise, of anything unforeseeable. This way, Benoist forces the paradox of an experience that is at once exterior and interior, devoid of the disruptive quality of the event. A phrase in Benoist's text seems to me to betray his reductive reading of subjective receptivity, which he describes as an act of "appropriation." Yet the idea of the subject appropriating what is foreign to it in experience may be an unnecessary reification of experience. Instead of thinking of receptivity as literally receiving the contents of experience and turning them into representations, I suggest thinking about being receptive to how contents become what they are *as we experience them*.

This phrasing may seem strange, especially when considering the problem as Benoist does, namely as experience receiving and appropriating something given from outside. This leads him to the claim later on in the text that the subject is a secondary effect of the givenness of the event, which is first passively felt before it can be rationalized.¹⁴ The simple givenness of experience is initially an *anonymous* event.¹⁵ Subjectivity is a construction after the fact: "La découverte de la passivité et donc de la subjectivité commence lorsqu'on se laisse porter par les choses, lorsqu'on réapprend à voir le donné comme donné, lorsqu'on libère son sens de 'donné', et non lorsqu'on commence par le moi..."¹⁶ To put it in other words, the givenness of experience can only be grasped by the contents that make up experience, rather than by

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 653.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 652.

an experiencing entity. That there is something I experience, before there is a "me" is what makes up the givenness, or the event, of experience.

But then we find a second, conflicting notion of the givenness of experience in the text, namely the surplus character of givenness. This means, in short, that the experience is given not as a specific experience for me, but as the neutral fact that everything simply appears. Whatever I experience is not exhausted by the meaning it has for me. The fact that *there is* experience, that appearance appears, is a dimension over and above its significance for me, which is in itself meaningless.¹⁷ Why do "givenness to an anonymous passivity" and the "surplus of givenness" conflict with each other? Because in the former, givenness constitutes experience and in the latter, givenness is gleaned from constituted experience. I would argue that this discrepancy is due to Benoist's avoidance of subjectivity. Positing a subject to think the notion of givenness would force a decision: Either givenness constitutes the experience of the subject, or it is constituted by the experience of the subject.

Putting it like this reveals a more basic reason why the concept of receptivity is deemed unfit by Benoist. In his critique of the subject of experience as the "me" (*moi*), Benoist conflates the a priori conditions of experience with the actual experiencing. Receptivity then, instead of referring *either* to the conditions of experience *or* the contents of experience, means that I "know" my experiences simply by virtue of them being conditioned by my subjectivity. But I see no reason why the transcendental conditions of experience should be incompatible with the givenness of experience. Just because what I experience is conditioned in a certain way does not make me automatically familiar with any facet of the contingent world encountered in experience. If anything, it makes me familiar with how experience is given in the general sense of being conditioned in a certain way. One could even make the point that this familiarity with the transcendental conditions of experience is necessary to be receptive to the surplus character of givenness. Taking up Benoist's own distinction between the meaning experience has for me and its neutral appearance, how would I even be able to have a sense for this overabundant givenness if it did not stand in such a stark contrast to the meaning conditioned by my subjectivity?

As a counterproposal to the "unconditioned" givenness of experience, I would argue that one could just as well conceive the given not as something which comes from outside but as an aspect of subjective experience, as something that is conditioned by me, even though I can only experience it by being receptive to it. In this way, the two different aspects of givenness, "givenness to an anonymous passivity" (the ontological aspect) and the "surplus of givenness" (the ontic aspect) could be reconciled. Experience is given to me, which simply means that it would not be without my subjectivity constituting it. And yet, this "me" is not automatically a "proprietor" of its experience, because the experiences are still contingent and necessarily unpredictable. But the "me" is not a totally anonymous instance either, simply letting itself be carried away by what it experiences, because it is familiar with having experiences and thus with being situated in a world. However, this familiarity can only come about through the contingency of experience, the constant presencing

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 653.

and withdrawal of the contents of experience. Thus, experience remains strange, even if nothing perceptibly changes about it. It remains given and to be given, which is why I am said to receive it, instead of just having it. The point is thus to locate the disruptive quality of the event *within* experience.

In the next section, I want to explore further why phenomenology has not considered this receptivity to the event as that of a subject, by looking at Heidegger's seminal account of the event.

2 To resist (in) experience

Heidegger's engagement with the concept of event (*Ereignis*) spans several decades, beginning after the publication of *Sein and Zeit* until the end of his life. Here, I cannot engage this body of work in a cohesive way. Rather, I want to consider the question of why Heidegger's philosophy of the event is incompatible with the notion of subjective receptivity. The question then is: What plays the role of the receptivity of a subject in Heidegger's philosophy of the event? What instance is deemed capable of experiencing the event? And how is subjectivity, in the sense of intentional consciousness, excluded by this?

To approach these questions, I want to consider the concept of *Inständigkeit* ("insistence" or "inabiding"), found in the *Beiträge zur Philosophie*. This insistence is a requirement for the experience of the event. *Who* has to be insistent to experience the event as the presencing and withdrawal of being itself? This is just the crux of the question. For Heidegger's contention is that whatever insists and persists cannot itself "be" prior to this happening because the event is what grounds being. Conversely, the way that beings "are," makes them blind to the nature of the event. Thus, a subject having conscious experiences of mundane objects has no access to how it is that these objects of consciousness come about in the first place (or so Heidegger says). To become aware of this more fundamental aspect of reality, it is necessary to leap into an attitude in which the ongoing event and advent of being can be grasped.

But this is just the problem for "I," as conscious subject, cannot make this leap by myself. It is necessary that being itself (or "beyng," as it is spelled in the *Beiträge*) guides me in this endeavor. Of course, this would sound totally obtuse if we were to understand this as an agent-patient relationship, which is not the case. Rather, Heidegger envisions this as a reciprocal process, in which being only has meaning if there is someone who understands and grasps how fundamental this constant presencing of being really is. In the following, I do not want to question the consistency of this mutual coming about of being and man in the event. My aim is rather to ask what acts in this process *in the place of a subject*. And if this philosophy of the event cannot be approached using the notion of a subject, then how are we to understand the receptivity to the event?

We find a candidate for this receptivity in Heidegger's notion of "intimation of beyng" (*Ahnung des Seyns*). To intimate being itself is not like the intimation of the side of the object invisible to us. Intimation, in Heidegger's sense, does not just depend on the one intimating, but also on what is intimated. Already, we can see the reciprocity of being and man at work:

Der Mensch ahnt das Seyn, ist der Ahnende des Seyns, weil das Seyn ihn sich ereignet," und zwar so, dass die Er-eignung erst ein Sich-eigenes braucht, ein *Selbst*, welche Selbstheit der Mensch zu bestehen hat in *der* Inständigkeit, die innestehend im Da-sein den Menschen zu *jenem* Seienden werden lässt, das nur erst in der Werfrage getroffen wird.¹⁸

To make sense of this reciprocity between being and man, we may focus on the term "self" which features prominently in the above quote. Determining what the self is in the experience of the event might help us to consider how and why this is incompatible with the notion of subjective receptivity, which equally presupposes a self which is able to consciously reflect on its experiences and on itself, having experiences.

Following Heidegger's phrasing closely, being is first said to appropriate (or "en-own") man in order to come about. In other words, being "needs" man to be being, i.e. presence. But this appropriation requires a self, an instance *for which* being is presence. The event comes about as the appropriation of being and man. But what is appropriated by whom? Is it that man becomes his or herself in the event of being? Or does being itself come to be? The above passage suggests that neither option is true. A close reading reveals a (likely intentional) equivocality. Heidegger writes: „Der Mensch ahnt das Seyn, ist der Ahnende des Seyns weil das Seyn ihn sich ereignet." The first way to read this (also chosen by the translators), would be that being appropriates man to itself, meaning the "sich" refers to "Seyn." This suggests an active role of being, "using" man, as it were, to come about. But the passage could also be read in the sense that the "sich" refers to "Mensch." This way, being plays a supplemental role in man appropriating being for himself. That this ambiguity is intentional is also suggested by the position of "sich" after "Seyn," which creates the equivocality and makes the phrase seem more awkward than if it had been put before "das Seyn," in clear reference to it.

The upshot seems to me that Heidegger wants to remain unclear about the dynamics of the event coming about, which fits with the next part of the sentence, which states "dass die Er-eignung erst ein Sich-eigenes braucht." Here the "sich" of "Sich-eigenes" is just as much the self of man as that of being. This seems confusing because when thinking of a "self," we think of an identity, a selfsame instance or a subject. But the self required for the event to come about is a *selfhood* which is shared by being and man. Importantly, this self(hood) of the event has to be "sustained" (*bestanden*). In stark opposition to a transcendental subject, whose sense of self hinges on a priori conditions of experience, what conditions the experience here is a mutual appropriation of being and man. While the exact modalities of appropriation remain elusive, it is helpful to consider the notion of "insistence" (*Inständigkeit*) that is required to sustain the event. This insistence does not just mean persistence, but also signifies the locality of standing *in* something. Man stands "in"

¹⁸ Heidegger (1989, p. 245). „Man intimates be-ing—is the intimater of be-ing—because be-ing en-owns man to itself—and indeed in such a way that en-ownment first needs something that is its own, a *self* whose selfhood man has to sustain in the *inabiding*, which lets man, standing in Da-sein, become *that* being which is encountered only in the who-question." Heidegger (1999, p. 173).

Dasein, in the “there” (*da*) of Seyn. In a sense, *Dasein* acts as a medium between being and man, because it is the opening from where the presence of being itself can be experienced. It is also that in which man has to stand and insist to experience this presence as presencing. In doing so, the self (*das Eigene*) of the event (*Das Ereignis*) comes about.

Up to this point, we have seen that instead of receptivity to the event, Heidegger presents us with a somewhat unclear reciprocity between man and event. Instead of a subject, there is a selfhood contemporaneous with the event and instead of intentional experience, we find the need for an insistence. The insistence is what creates and sustains the self that experiences the event. Thus, a subjective mode of experience, whether as intentional consciousness or as an appropriation of an exteriority by an interiority as in the case of Benoist, are incompatible with Heidegger’s notion as it requires there to be no instance *preceding* the experience of the event. In short, the event requires reciprocity, not receptivity. Yet one may insist: What does the selfhood that is sustained in the event refer to? In order to further question why Heidegger’s notion of the event is incompatible with subjective receptivity, I suggest focusing not just on the structural aspects, but also on the semantic undertones used to describe the coming about of the event. Specifically, it is a *subdued heroism* in Heidegger’s phrasing that seems to me to carry some of the explanatory load of the aforementioned ambiguities.

According to Heidegger, an insistence is necessary for the event to come about. But if the self or selfhood is a consequence of the event, then *who* has to bravely insist in this way? The *who*-question refers not simply to being or to man, but to *Dasein*. I cannot go into a detailed discussion on this key concept and the complex relationship it denotes between Heidegger’s existential and later philosophy.¹⁹ Here, I want to consider specifically that *Dasein* is an opening, a place where man and being meet through stern insistence. It is this function as locality which one may keep in mind when considering the next passage:

Im bisherigen und noch üblichen Gebrauch meint *Dasein* soviel wie hier und dort vorhanden sein, in einem Wo und Wann *vorkommen*.

In der anderen künftigen Bedeutung meint das »sein« nicht vorkommen, sondern inständige *Ertragsamkeit* als Gründung des Da. Das Da bedeutet nicht ein irgendwie jeweils bestimmtes Hier und Dort, sondern meint die *Lichtung* des Seyns selbst, deren Offenheit erst den Raum einräumt für jedes mögliche Hier und Dort und die Einrichtung des Seienden in geschichtliches Werk und Tat und Opfer.²⁰

At first glance, Heidegger’s comparison of the two different meanings of *Dasein* seems to facilitate the understanding. *Dasein*, as the space of the event, is not a being

¹⁹ For a discussion of *Dasein*’s continuous importance in Heidegger’s works see Beistegui (2004, p. 109ff.).

²⁰ Heidegger (1989, p. 298). “In the hitherto and still customary usage *Dasein* means the same as being extant here and there, *occurring* in a where and a when. In the other and future meaning “being” does not mean occurring but inabiding *carriability* as grounding the *t*/here. The *t*/here does not mean a here and yonder that is somehow each time determinable but rather means the *clearing* of be-ing itself, whose openness first of all opens up the space for every possible here and yonder and for arranging beings in historical work and deed and sacrifice.” Heidegger (1999, p. 210).

(*Seiendes*) among others, but comes to be. It has to be grounded in order to become the clearing for the presence of being. *Dasein* is the space of a *Da-werden* of event and man. *Dasein* is not an ontic place, but rather demarcates the possibility for the event to come about. Thus, the *Da* of *Dasein* does not indicate an empirical or even topological place in which a subject stands, but only becomes *Dasein* through the mutual coming about of being and man.

As it becomes part of the reciprocal coming about of being, the question of who experiences the event is again displaced by *Dasein*. But when considering the rhetoric of this process, the grounding of *Dasein* does implicate an actor, whose insistence and "inabiding carriability" opens the clearing of the *Da*. This actor cannot be an instance having an "I-consciousness," because this would mean its experience is that of beings (*Vorstellungen*), but never that of being itself. In other words, it cannot be a subject. But what is it then? This seems to me where the rhetoric of heroism is put to work. From the perspective of a subject (which Heidegger shows to originate within the beginnings of Greek philosophy and which is unable to "think the event"), the enduring determination to bring about the event seems like a self-abandonment. The self has to cease in order for the selfhood of the event to come about. As mentioned above, it is not my aim to discuss what exactly this instance is, whose identity (*Eigenes*) depends on the event (*Ereignis*). Instead, I want to stress the structural and rhetoric reasons for the anti-subjective character of the event. From this perspective, it is essential to note that while Heidegger opposes the possibility of a subjective experience of the event on ontological grounds, there is a heroic *non-subject* in its place, whose insistence implies a self-denial because the self only comes about with the event.²¹

From my discussion, three structural reasons can be inferred as to why the phenomenology of the event in the Heideggerian sense is incompatible with subjective receptivity. Firstly, since event and man come about *reciprocally*, it is impossible to even consider the event as something indifferent and exterior to me, as is "the given" discussed in Benoist. Secondly, the implicit self-denial necessary for the event, along with the requirement to insist in *Dasein*, cannot be thought in the form of a subject as this would (literally) imply a self-contradiction. Thirdly, taking an active part in creating the conditions for the openness grounding the "here and now" of experience is incompatible with a subject whose conditions of experience are not themselves accessible by consciousness. While a subject may reflect on these conditions, according to Heidegger they are experienced as the coming about of the presencing of being. And this presencing may never be reflected in a subjective manner, lest it become a representation (*Vorstellung*), castigated by Heidegger. Thus, even though man and being presuppose each other, being itself is never there "for me," compelling me instead to consider my ontic experience as abandoned by being.

²¹ Much more could be said about this "non-subject," which may feasibly be equated with Heidegger's own position as the philosopher who recognizes the need for the event in a time of destitution. This position, which is at different times described as the "guardian" or "shepherd" of being, is also inextricably linked to the question of Heidegger's self-image as a philosopher during and after the Third Reich, cf. Precht (2020, p. 220ff.).

A fourth reason is tied to the rhetoric used by Heidegger. A subjective receptivity to the event presumes that I am able to calmly reflect on my experiences. Even though my experience may surprise me, this is not due to an exteriority with which I stand in a reciprocal relation. There is no urgency in the coming about of experience, which I would have to answer with enduring insistence. My experience may seem strange insofar as it simply and necessarily appears. Yet this appearance does not imply a self-effacement, but rather demands reflecting on the voluntary and involuntary aspects of conscious experience. This precludes the idea of “a phenomenology of the inapparent,” because the appearing of appearance can be observed and reflected on by a subsisting subject. Considering the event in terms of subjective receptivity eliminates the need for the pathos of its silent and necessary coming about. The key difference here is not whether the event concerns an ontological or an ontic realm, but whether or not the experiencing entity subsists. While Heidegger’s terminology of “insistence” suggests a continuity, I have discussed how, on the contrary, it is tantamount to a self-denial which bars the possibility to reflect on one’s *own* experience of the event.

The preceding discussion has shown two ways in which the concept of the event is incompatible with subjective receptivity as well as reflexivity. In the next two sections, I want to consider how an event can be disruptive without effacing the subject.

3 Receptivity to event or self?

During the discussion of two anti-subjective accounts of the event, one of the main problems has turned out to be whether the experience of the event is one’s own experience, an anonymous happening, or that of a shared selfhood of being and man. Having to share the experience, or lending oneself over to that which creates the experience, are options to think the disruptiveness of the event. The dangers of this way of thinking are an obfuscation of the concept of self, as well as a reification of the event as some exterior happening.

Both of these pitfalls are addressed in the phenomenology of the event of Henri Maldiney. Drawing not just on Heidegger but also on the phenomenological psychology of Viktor von Weizsäcker, Maldiney offers an account of the event which vacillates between an annihilation and a transformation of the self. My interest here lies specifically in this ambivalence. How can the event be a complete transformation of the subject without effacing it? What exactly does the event then consist in?

According to Maldiney, the first condition for speaking of an event is that it is absolutely unforeseeable. At first glance, this might seem self-evident. How could we speak of an event if we had already anticipated it in some way? The event has to take us by surprise. For instance, the sudden appearance of a car racing towards us would qualify as surprise in this sense. But then the unpredictability of the event would hinge on some ontic thing interacting with us. Supposing that, as mindful pedestrians, we always anticipate other road users to some degree, the appearance of the car would not be absolutely unforeseeable, even if this specific car was not anticipated.

Thus, the unpredictability cannot depend solely on external factors, it has to be a capacity or incapacity of ourselves. Maldiney terms this capacity "transpassibilité," roughly, a sensibility to that which is beyond us. The basic contradiction at the bottom of the event is thus that it confronts us with something which, by its very nature, we cannot confront. The sentence in question could thus be construed to either apply to the experience of the event (which is in some way beyond us), or to the simple fact *that* this experience is beyond us. At first, it looks as if the notion of the subject would only fit the second option because here, *I* can still conceive the event to be beyond *me*, while the first option would require that whoever experiences the event is not the same as the one to whom the experience is out of reach. To put it another way, whether or not the experience of the event is subjective depends on whether we understand the "trans" in "transpassibilité" as transcendent (exceeding experience) or as transcendental (conditioning experience).

The following passage throws more light on the question of how the experience of the event is dependent on my own capacity or an exterior entity:

L'événement, toujours autre, a toujours un autre visage. La transpassibilité, dans laquelle je suis exposé, exclut toute tentative de le ramener à une expression déjantée – elle implique au contraire que je m'envisage à lui pour en recevoir mon propre visage. Cela veut dire qu'ici la réponse précède et ouvre l'appel. L'incapacité d'accueillir vient d'une fermeture à l'événement, au nouveau. Le nouveau n'est pas destinal. Ce rien d'où l'événement surgit, l'événement l'exprime lui-même par son originarité. L'ouverture à l'originaire (non à l'originel), la réceptivité accueillante à l'événement, incluse dans la transformation de l'existant, constitue sa transpassibilité.²²

This quote gives a better sense of the unpredictability of the event. At first, the fact that the event is unpredictable is understood in a purely negative sense: I cannot in any way relate it to something that I have already experienced. But this negative characterization has a positive consequence. The unpredictability of the event makes me regard or consider myself (*m'envisager*), more specifically, it provokes my own sense of receptivity. This does not simply mean that I reflect on the conditions of my experience in a general way. Because it is a unique experience that challenges me to be receptive, this receptivity itself cannot be identical each time, lest it would be understood as some form of expectation. In light of these basic requirements, the receptivity in question is neither shaped by a priori conditions of experience, nor by expectations we may have cultivated through lived experience. Instead, I am said to be receptive to something completely unexpected.

This does not necessarily mean that the event is conceived as an exterior force which overtakes and transforms me. Maldiney says the event emerges from nothing. But this "nothing" does not signify the absence of empirical antecedents, suggesting, e.g., a sudden occurrence. The "nothingness," expressed by the "originarity" of the event, means the event emerges *from nothing to nothing*. It means that there is no directionality to the event ("Le nouveau n'est pas destinal"). For this reason, the event is never identical to an empirical happening. One could certainly say that the

²² Maldiney (2007, p. 308).

illness of a friend, a traffic accident or the loss of one's job are events. But none of these examples constitute the event per se. Since what the event confronts me with is not preformed, the possibility it presents me with cannot depend on any empirical circumstances. I do not "react" to the event, because a reaction would be constrained by contingent factors that already imply certain solutions (I could immediately start looking for other jobs, for example).

But when I take a step back, realizing that a given situation does not simply confront me with a series of different solutions, but concerns my existence and my ability to direct my existence with certain decisions, the event starts to emerge as the ground from which this decisiveness originates.²³ What is important to note about this emergence is that Maldiney does not simply conceive it as a supplemental or essential trait of existence, acting on my experience. The emergence requires a complete transformation because whatever I will become through the decision cannot be determined or anticipated before the decision is made. It is not *me*, as rational subject, who is in question in the event, but my capability to transcend myself, my "transpassibilité." This is why the decision does not depend on a subject's balancing reasons or anticipating future outcomes. And yet, the crisis which the event puts me in concerns my "self":

Il est vrai que l'être en état de crise est une essence encore indécidée. Mais l'existant qui est aux prises avec un événement qui le désétablit de son assurance et menace sa foi originaire (*Urdoxa*) existe, en la subissant, et subit, en l'existant, une contradiction immanente à son pouvoir-être, de même qu'il existera la décision (κρίσις) qui y met fin. Son rapport à l'événement est, pour l'existant, son rapport à soi.²⁴

The event goes against the *Urdoxa*, which I understand here as the certainty that *I* will continuously exist no matter what I experience. This very "ability to be" is threatened by the event and will only be resolved through a decision. More specifically, what is threatened is the notion that I project myself into the future, that the decision being made concerns me, the one having to make it right now. The outcome of the decision is eminently unforeseeable, pertaining not just to different versions of the future tied to my current being in the world, but to a more radical notion of the future which is not a continuation, but a break with the present.

This radical notion can come about only through my receptivity. "Transpassibilité" means being receptive to that which is beyond me. Now we can more precisely say that this "beyond" is a future which is not determined by my present situation (or that, in Husserl's terminology, is not a protention). In other words, in the event, I am unconditionally open to the future, but since this openness hinges on my receptivity, the event ultimately concerns the relationship to myself. In a sense then, I create the

²³ Maldiney's use of ground refers to Weizsäcker's "Grund-Verhältnis," which states that each one of us depends on a ground which itself cannot be discerned, cf. Weizsäcker (1987, p. 48). This intransparency is also found in the idea of "intranspassibilité" in the sense that I cannot anticipate a future self on the basis of a ground which I do not know in itself.

²⁴ Maldiney (2007, p. 307).

event myself, by being open to the future. But as a consequence, this openness tears me away from my immanent ability to be, from my *Urdoxa*. The moment of crisis that the event *is*, comprises myself as nothing more than the radical receptivity, or "transpassibilité" between two mutually exclusive dimensions, past and future.²⁵ Thus, in opposition to Heidegger, the event is here not understood as a fateful call to an appropriation, but as a personal crisis which has to be resolved with an equally personal decision.

This analysis leaves us with the problem of how the ontic and the ontological are related here, whose integration in subjective experience the paper set out to explore. The fact that the decision concluding the event is not based on empirical circumstances, but on a receptivity to transcend myself, seems to preclude thinking this as a subjective process. The subject would have to remain a selfsame entity while the experiences change, which is not the case here. But the argument could be made that in Maldiney's concept of the event, the relationship between what changes and what remains constant is simply switched: While *I* become other during the event, the experience I have is actually of myself, of my receptivity to change in light of a given situation. The receptivity is what keeps this process of becoming-other from falling apart.²⁶ Receptivity is not simply passivity, operating without my knowledge, because it makes me aware of the possibility of radical transformation, putting me in a (negative) relation to what is beyond me.

Considering that the event in the phenomenological tradition of Heidegger concerns the appearing of appearance, it seems that Maldiney is occupied with something else, namely the productive role of non-appearance, with how appearance (as *Urdoxa*) is contested and barred by the subject's own receptivity. I have indicated above that subjective experience of the event would have to comprise a tension between voluntary and involuntary aspects of experience. In the case of Maldiney, the involuntary aspect of the event (its unpredictability) is not a simple and necessary appearing of appearance, but entails a personal struggle to remain open to the absolute possibilities of existence. In other words, the event is not characterized by the contingent character of what I experience, but by the experience of my own contingency. The event challenges me to transcend myself, which becomes possible because this self is not based on an unchanging ground, which only comes into play through "transpassibilité."

Thus, there are two difficulties in reading Maldiney's philosophy of the event as subjective receptivity. Firstly, as contingency is already inscribed in the concept of receptivity itself (as "transpassibilité"), it becomes difficult here to distinguish between the voluntary and involuntary aspects of experience. In other words, this form of receptivity precludes different attitudes to how appearance appears. Secondly, the subject (or, more generally the self) in Maldiney is not characterized by its self-sameness regarding its experiences, but by its ability to transcend itself in

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 304.

²⁶ An important aspect of Maldiney's writing, which I cannot go into here, are the different ways in which psychosis, neurosis and schizophrenia are explained as failures to be open to the event. Conversely artworks can be understood as the results of successful transformation through the event.

the face of an unforeseeable future. The moment where a subject would have to be receptive to its experiences is instead described as a transformation of the self. In Maldiney, I do not constitute the future, the future constitutes me. But this means that I cannot be receptive to it. Instead, I myself am nothing but receptivity.

4 The event of being and beings

After having discussed how subjective receptivity is incompatible with the event as exterior givenness (1), reciprocal appropriation (2) and self-transformation (3), I want to turn to Richard Polt's suggestion, elaborated in the context of Heidegger's *Beiträge*, of the emergency of the event as a becoming questionable of experience. According to this idea, the event of being emerges as a questioning of what we experience as self-evident: "... things are given to us in terms of a prior sense of givenness. But we can *receive* that givenness only in a moment when we experience it as problematic, as contingent."²⁷ To be able to "receive something as" seems to me to point into the direction of subjective receptivity, because it implies that there is an instance able to reflect on what and how it receives experience. In opposition to the distinction found in Heidegger between the experience of being (event) and beings (subjectivity), Polt's reading allows for an emergence of being *from* beings, thus opening the possibility to think this emergence from the perspective of a subject. Polt presents this as a moment of crisis:

Until we face a crisis, we take our own for granted—our own home, language, body, customs, beliefs. We simply inhabit our network of ownness, with all its patterns of the proper and improper, the appropriate and the inappropriate, the apt and the inept. But this primordial habitation and habituation is not true owning; owning comes only when the own comes into question. We are then given an opportunity to recognize that we have been appropriated by our own and that we need to appropriate it ourselves, whether by affirming it or by transforming it. Then we can truly come into our own.²⁸

It becomes evident at once that "own" and "ownness" here are used far more broadly than in Heidegger. The *eigen* does not only refer to the event of appropriation (*das Ereignis*), but also to the usual and habitual way we are accustomed to our world. The "own" is that which does not stand in question. It only becomes questionable in a moment of crisis. But this crisis is not identical to the crisis of a *Seinsgeschichte*, calling for the appropriation of and by the event. Rather, Polt construes the event as happening countless times in our lifetime, as a more or less profound uprooting and reconstitution of meaning.²⁹

As the above quote indicates, the uprooting is already part of the experience of the event and it seems to me of special importance to determine its dynamics. To be subjectively receptive to the event means being receptive to how (its) givenness

²⁷ Polt (2006, p. 222).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 249.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 248f.

appears to me. This is where I see Polt diverging from Heidegger, because what gives us "an opportunity to recognize that we have been appropriated by our own and that we need to appropriate it ourselves" is in fact our *own* event, not *the* event en-owning us. In other words, the givenness of the event is not an exterior fateful call that we have to accommodate, but depends on our receptivity. Of course, one could argue that the event in Heidegger does so as well, for instance in the form of intimation (*Ahnung*) discussed above. But the difference here is that receptivity, in Heidegger's sense, cannot be squared with our subjective experience. In Heidegger's philosophy, there is no event emerging *out of* our experience, but *against* it, requiring stern insistence.

Following Polt's suggestion, the uprooting effect of crisis is captured and thought *within* experience. The moment of crisis is reflected in my habitual experience becoming questionable, losing its familiar meaning. The event is not time-space (*Zeit-Raum*) coming about, but its coming about *in* my experience. At this point, the event cannot possibly be construed as something exterior anymore. When Polt says that we receive givenness "only in a moment when we experience it as problematic, as contingent," this seems to me to carry a subjective emphasis, because I have to conceive it *as* given, *as* contingent. The event is not a sudden occurrence, disrupting my experience, but a product of my receptivity. Even though it may seem to come about by itself, the event as crisis comes about through and for me. While Heidegger's concept of receptivity presupposes passivity in that it requires leaving behind subjective experience, Polt frames receptivity as active, showing how the event as crisis depends on our understanding it as such.

I agree with Polt's reading insofar as it demystifies the event and tries to square the simultaneous coming about of being and beings. Where I deviate is in the purported urgency. When conceiving the event not as something fateful or exterior, it does not necessarily need to take on the form of a crisis. I want to avoid thinking of the event as something that "makes us think it," requiring insistence or putting us in crisis mode. While these ideas may suggestively increase the severity of the event, they are also what hinders the active role of our own receptivity becoming visible.

5 The event as (in) voluntary experience

A key takeaway from the above discussions is that when the event comes about as "being itself," it is conceived as something asserting a force on us. We have to react to this force by leaving behind our reflexive ability as subjects. This may take the form of a crisis forcing us to transcend ourselves, or to be insistent against subjective experience. An implicit or explicit assumption is that the event cannot be conceived from a transcendental standpoint, because the subject in this sense cannot be surprised by experiences for which it is the a priori condition.

This is an important reason for phenomenology being inapparent. The fact that appearance itself does not appear also means that *we cannot observe ourselves experiencing the event coming about*. It remains invisibly linked to the appearance of beings, which itself cannot be addressed as dependent on our receptivity. Instead, we are receptive to its inapparent appearing. By contrast, to construe the event as

subjective experience entails questioning the idea that the appearing of appearance is *necessarily* inapparent. Of course, as subjects, we cannot see the contents of our experience “emerge in front of us” in some magical fashion. But we can question, as Polt indicated, the self-evidence with which appearance appears to us. A version of this idea has been famously described by Merleau-Ponty as the things looking at us instead of the other way around and our gaze losing its auctorial power, as it were.³⁰ But even more generally, the appearing of appearance can be observed as experience senselessly coming about, provided we are receptive to it.

One considerable objection to this idea is that it also effaces the event. This time not because it is equated with the constant presencing of being, but because the event loses its disruptive character. When the recognition of the event depends on our own receptivity and upon its reflection, is not an event in any traditional sense excluded by this? Would this not mean that we have to determine what an event is for it to “happen”? One way to counter this would be to speak, with Claude Romano, of a necessary delay of the meaning of an event, which is unfolded only a posteriori.³¹ In other words, I can only speak of events as what will have been. The requirement that the event is disruptive and immediate is relative to our comprehension of it. It takes time to grasp an accident that is suddenly happening and has happened, or continues to happen as trauma, as a disablement etc.

But maybe even more basic than this is the way *we disrupt ourselves by being receptive*. By this I do not mean the radical receptivity in Maldiney’s sense, but the point where the voluntary and the involuntary aspects of experience meet, where what appears to me is at the same time foreign, because it simply appears, and familiar, because in appearing, I already know myself in receptive relation to it. As subjective receptivity, the event is born out of the non-overlapping of these two aspects. Its most basic requirement then would be that the event does not force me to think it, *but that in thinking the event, I am never one and the same*. In other words, I am split between the simple appearance and its intentional grasping. I am “out there,” where the event happens, just as much as I am “here,” perceiving it. There is only *an event* to speak of when I try to consolidate both of these aspects in perception, understanding, memory. Reflecting on the event carries with it the twofold aspect, the fact that I was *there* where the event happened, but that it simply and senselessly appeared, its foreignness or exteriority depending on my receptivity. In short, the suggestion is that the very fact of appearance itself is necessarily conditioned by us *without* thereby already becoming familiar.

Can this be equated with the givenness (Marion) or self-givenness (Henry) described above? Based on the discussion, to characterize the receptivity to the event as a receptivity to a form of givenness seems to miss the mark. Ultimately, the fact that something is experienced as *given* or *self-given* qualifies it in a way that goes beyond necessary appearance. The event of being is not given and I cannot be given to myself through its coming about. On the contrary, I have discussed how a stern insistence or a critical self-effacement were the modalities which made thinking the

³⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 180f).

³¹ Cf. Romano (2016, p. 61f.).

event possible. Likewise, if I was to fundamentally give the event myself by being its invisible and secret condition, I would eradicate the factor of contingency and anticipation. As ceaselessly appearing and withdrawing, the event has the character of futurity which precedes any subjective immanence. To be attentive to this constant unforeseeability has proven to be one of the main aspects of the receptivity in question, but we cannot anticipate the event as something to be (self)given because to think it, we have to transcend ourselves *and thus transcend the instance it would be given to*. In this sense, the idea of givenness gives a shape to our anticipation which is incompatible with the event as a presencing of being. This means that *being cannot be given* and that it cannot give itself. Instead, I disrupt my experience by being receptive, not to something that gives itself to me, nor to myself as the sole origin of what I experience, but to the way that experience loses its semblance of naturalness once I try to grasp it as unforeseeable, ceaseless appearing. While "appearance as such" or "experience as such" may be construed as being given, the unceasing appearing of the event challenges us to let go of these general notions. What does not stop appearing is not one and the same flow of experience but an event that seemingly suspends the subjective conditions necessary for its experience.

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