



Heidegger and the lived experience of being a university educator

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BOOK REVIEW

Heidegger and the lived experience of being a university educator, by Joshua Spier, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Pivot Publishers, 2018, 136 pp., €49.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-319-71515-5

The serendipitous has a way of inviting us into a space that evokes sheer gratitude for, in my case, being invited to engage with, and comment on, others' work, in some way. It is only through such an originally unexpected invitation to write this review that I have had the opportunity to read, and revel in, this publication of Joshua Spier's doctoral dissertation. There is certainly much to commend in and about this book, though I also offer one or two comments based on my own interests that I would have liked to see elaborated or developed further whilst reading the book.

The central focus of the book is a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry into the meaning of being a university educator, whilst also drawing, to a significant extent, on the work of Heidegger's former student and later colleague, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Given his emphasis on attempting to understand experiences as a way of further illuminating meaning (p. 3), Spier makes most use of stories conveyed by interviewees or participants in his study about certain lived experiences that invite further and richer understanding. In this regard, the study approaches phenomenological enquiry in a way that is centrally based on the work of Max van Manen and the Utrecht School of phenomenology. To be clear, such lived experiences that the book focuses on are themselves grounded in a certain familiarity and everydayness, given that our activities and actions reflect an attitude of taking things for granted in our always already accustomed ways of encountering and dealing with situations. It is, therefore, the challenge of seeing and disclosing the extraordinary in the ordinary, or, we might say, illuminating, throwing light on, that which is hidden or concealed in the experience, that motivates such an approach to phenomenological enquiry. This also raises the important question of what actually *motivates* such concealment, which Heidegger himself was able to bring to our attention if we closely followed his own hermeneutic process known as 'formal indication' (*formale Anzeige*). It is here that the more challenging issue of moods, I think, emerges as pertinent to Spier's study, and the stories that he presents.

Spier sets out the structure of his book in six chapters, with key findings identified and articulated in terms of Heidegger's philosophy and overall philosophical project, as laid out in his major work, *Being and Time*, namely, the meaning of being (Heidegger, 1962/1927). In terms of this study, then, it undertakes a phenomenological exploration of the kind of being (Dasein, for Heidegger) whose being is an issue for it as a university educator. That its being is an issue – that educators care in ways that reflect their ways of comporting themselves in the world of university education in which they are immersed and embedded – is manifested through narratives and stories that, with Spier's especially close attention and sensitivity to the hermeneutic and phenomenological nuances that lie within them, reveal their more ontological dimensions of being-in-the-world as educators. These ontological meanings are presented in three key chapters that reflect the findings of the study: being as conversation, being as 'having-been', and being as possibility. The author brings to the fore the latter two aspects of our being that, in the most fundamentally ontological sense, reflect our temporality (p. 30), or, put otherwise, we are 'thrown possibility' (p. 90) (similarly expressed as 'thrown project', or 'thrown thrower').

Spier neatly acknowledges four main existential ideas in Heidegger's work (p. 27) that are relevant to, and inform, his own project, namely, caring, being-with, conversing and temporality, whilst making it clear at the outset that his own attempts at offering any summarised account of these terms is always outstripped by what they really, or ultimately, say. It is in reading such

passages that I was taken both with, and by, the text, in being reminded of the fact that limit, finitude and givenness already confront us in a plenitude of ways. There are various points at which Spier attends to such experiences, such as the moments and occasions in which we face limit situations, or boundaries, to the possibilities that we, ontologically speaking, *are* in our being (p. 92), or, more radically, in which we face a certain world-collapse, we might say, as I read in the account provided by one contributor, Jasmine, when she was forced to relinquish something that was of central importance to her in her world of being an educator (p. 96). Perhaps something more could have been explored here, in my view, in the light of our worlds having a more fragile, vulnerable character than we usually take to be the case. I also have in mind here Schear's (2013, p. 376) apposite description of our being 'sustainers of fragile intelligibility' in the light of limit-situations and the ontological character of our being-towards-death. This, in fact, further develops and transforms Spier's use of Aristotle's *phronesis*, from one of being in the mode of practical know-how, wisdom and mastery in *certain situations*, to one of now *also* being vulnerable to the ever-present 'possibility of impossibility' (p. 97).

The final chapter draws together pertinent conclusions from the stories and insights gathered, as well as a consideration of the various implications that follow from them. As a practising therapist, I was also heartened to see Spier propose the possibility of humanist-existential therapy for educators, as a way of exploring meanings that lie embedded in their activities and overall projects (p. 114). This links back well to the reflections offered in Chapter 3, entitled, 'Being as Conversation', where Spier explores the experience of genuine conversation and the manner in which meanings emerge in significant ways.

What I found so rewarding about Spier's approach is that he makes a concerted effort to render Heidegger's language relevant, meaningful and accessible to the world of practical enquiry, whilst posing searching questions for the reader at various points, inviting us to see that always more can be gleaned from any one story or account than has been presented or interpreted. In this way, the style adopted is one of openness, revealing a certain receptivity to his own interpretations themselves bearing the possibility of further interpretation. Overall, the approach taken is one that blends and balances a certain depth of understanding with its being readily graspable to readers who might not be so well-acquainted with Heidegger's ideas. I confess to learning much from this book, both in the way that Spier applies Heidegger's philosophy to the stories that he has collected and presented, and also in his approach to topics such as dialogue and conversation, which refreshes my own re-engagement with Gadamer and others. But it is the key contribution that this book makes to the question of what it means to be an educator that I think is of most significance to its readers.

References

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