

Symposium: Cristina Lafont, *Heidegger, Language, and World-disclosure**

Equipment, World, and Language

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Cristina Lafont's *Heidegger, Language, and World-disclosure* is an extremely valuable contribution to the growing body of literature that considers Heidegger's work from a perspective which is informed by recent work in analytic philosophy. As I agree with many of the aspects of her central thesis regarding the character and limitations of Heidegger's views concerning language, I focus on a point of disagreement which at first sight might seem peripheral to her overall thesis, but which in fact is nevertheless central to a correct understanding of Lafont's views, of *Being and Time*, and of the nature and role of human language.

Lafont's thesis is a complex one, comprising a series of interpretative claims regarding Heidegger as well as a series of criticisms, derived from analytic sources, of Heidegger's position concerning language. Regarding Heidegger, she holds, first, that Heidegger's understanding of language, which emphasizes the 'world disclosing' function of language, is rooted in a German tradition of reflection on language going back to Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt. For Lafont, both this tradition and Heidegger's development of it arise out of a criticism of a view, which she associates with the 'philosophy of consciousness', that treats language as "an instrument" for the designation of entities independent of it, or for the communication of pre-linguistic thoughts' (p. 2). In Lafont's view, the key premise which motivates this critique is an extreme descriptivism regarding reference, which 'confuses the obvious fact that our descriptions of the referents (via the meanings of the words we use) express our de facto beliefs about them with the purported fact that our descriptions thereby determine to what things they refer' (pp. 7–8). Lafont believes that the specifically Heideggerean contribution to this German tradition in the philosophy of language is twofold. First, in *Being and Time* Heidegger replaces the model of an observing subject confronting an

* Cristina Lafont, *Heidegger, Language, and World-disclosure*, trans. Graham Harman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), originally published as *Sprache und Welterschliessung: Zur linguistischen Wende der Hermeneutik Heideggers* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994). All unprefixated page references are to the English translation.

observed set of objects with the model of an understanding Dasein that is in a symbolically structured world. For Lafont, to say that Dasein is an understanding Dasein is to say that Dasein always intends entities *as* this or that. And to say that Dasein is always in a symbolically structured world is to say that the specific determinateness with which Dasein intends entities as this or that is structured by an already constituted linguistic articulation which specifies the range of possible ways in which one can intend entities. Second, for Lafont, Heidegger replaces the traditional a priori/a posteriori distinction with a distinction between an understanding of being and an understanding of beings, and then relativizes the understanding of being to particular historical communities and languages. In the context of the philosophy of language, these modifications in the a priori/a posteriori distinction lead to the theses that an historical understanding of being limits how things can be taken as by determining the structure of attribution, that this limitation of possible taking as is unrevisable on the basis of empirical discovery, and, given a radical descriptivism regarding reference, that Dasein that live in the light of different understandings of being encounter different ranges of entities. Taken together, these theses amount to an incommensurability thesis even more radical than Kuhn's, and, apparently, at one time Lafont herself thought that this thesis followed necessarily from the 'linguistic turn' embedded in Heidegger's writings.

Lafont now correctly rejects this inference. In the critical aspect of her thesis, she maintains that even if one holds that intentionality is in general linguistically structured, the various aspects of the incommensurability thesis not only do not follow, but in fact they are undermined. Lafont offers three lines of argument for this claim. First, she appeals to the meaning holism of Quine and Putnam to argue that the hard distinction embedded in Heidegger's ontological difference between being and beings is untenable. Second, following the direct reference views of Kripke, Donnellan, and (in another voice) Putnam, she argues both that descriptivism regarding reference is an error and that the referential use of definite descriptions and other designating expressions is essential for language and is unintelligible on a view of language which reduces reference to attribution. Finally, Lafont combines elements from both of these lines of argument to assert that the philosophy of science that arises out of Heidegger's views on language is both conceptually untenable and historically inaccurate.

There is much of value, insightful, etc., in this complex position. What strikes me as the serious limitations of the work have to do with Lafont's attempt to assimilate Heidegger's views regarding language in *Being and Time* to his later views concerning the nature and importance of language.

There is no question that after the Turn Heidegger fell into the type of linguistic idealism that Lafont correctly criticizes. This form of idealism can be summed up with the quote from Stefan George that Heidegger cites

approvingly and on which he extensively comments: 'there is no thing where the word is lacking', and it involves precisely that reduction of the pragmatically referential role of language to its attributive role that Lafont tries to show is untenable.

But it is anything but obvious that the Heidegger of *Being and Time* is liable to the same criticism. The *structure of Being and Time*, at any rate, suggests a different and far more interesting and plausible view of the role and nature of language than is contained in Heidegger's later linguistic idealism. For, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes the claims that all human cognition involves understanding entities 'as' something and that such 'understanding-as' presupposes a holistic understanding of 'world', prior to and apparently independently of his discussions of language and discourse. And, instead of arguing for these theses on the basis of an examination of the necessary presuppositions of linguistic understanding, as one would expect if the views propounded were correctly interpretable as a kind of linguistic idealism, Heidegger rather develops and argues for these claims through an examination of what is involved in understanding and using tools as tools. There are even prominent points in the text where Heidegger treats signs, and by implication linguistic signs, as kinds of equipment.

And this structural fact about *Being and Time* at least gives the appearance that Heidegger is here arguing for a very different understanding of language than is contained in his later thought. According to this alternative, pragmatist, reading of *Being and Time*, the early Heidegger is suggesting that the way in which the conceptual structure of language serves to organize how we understand the entities with which we interact itself must be understood as resting on the way in which our teleologically appropriate dealings with the world implicitly involve treating entities as this or that.

Lafont recognizes that the structure of *Being and Time* gives plausibility to a pragmatic reading of that text. But she argues on several grounds that this reading can't be right. These various considerations fall, I think, into three basic arguments. First, Lafont offers textual evidence from both *Being and Time* and other texts that Heidegger was consistently committed to the view that 'Language is not an instrument at our disposal' and that before and after *Being and Time* he was committed to the view that 'There is world only where there is language'. Second, Lafont offers an anti-pragmatic reading of the prominent distinction in *Being and Time* between language and 'discourse', or 'the articulation of the intelligibility of being-in-the-world', the structural feature of Dasein upon which language is supposedly grounded. She argues on both textual and thematic grounds that rather than seeing this distinction as an attempt to ground language in a pre-linguistic articulation of significance in culturally transmitted practices, the distinction is properly understood as a misguided attempt to distinguish radically between particular ontic natural languages and a supposed abstract, ontological capacity of Dasein to produce

articulated sign systems. Third, and most importantly, Lafont argues that a pragmatist reading of *Being and Time* is 'unsatisfactory', because such a reading necessarily fails to give an adequate account of the role and importance of the *world* in *Being and Time*.

For Heidegger, the most important point is that meaning is always already articulated, that it constitutes a totality of significance that is given to Dasein, and with respect to which Dasein comports itself 'understandingly.' This system of signs-relations (which Heidegger here calls 'world' and later will call "language") is not reducible to the subject-object schema of the teleological model of action. (pp. 42–43fn)

Of these three lines of criticism of the pragmatic reading of *Being and Time*, the third is clearly the most important. Lafont is surely right that Heidegger never thought of *language* as an 'instrument at our disposal', although he certainly at times recognizes that linguistic structures such as words and sentences can and are used as tools. But neither the claim that there is world only where there is language nor the rejection of the thesis that all language rests on an articulate but pre-linguistic structure of appropriate ways for interacting with the world follow from this. And the fact that the later Heidegger thoroughly rejected anything that smacked of a pragmatic interpretation of his early *magnum opus* at most shows that he couldn't accept such a reading of his work, not that that reading is wrong. While the second line of argument, that discourse is not to be understood in terms of the pre-linguistic articulation of significance in action, is both more interesting and potentially more significant, it ultimately rests, I believe, on a set of presuppositions that Lafont tries to support in her first line of argument. For that reason, I will focus on this most basic critical discussion.

As the quote I cited above makes clear, Lafont thinks that what Heidegger names 'world' in *Being and Time* he later names 'language'. That is, she identifies world and language. But why does she make this identification? The same quote indicates the proximate reason for this identification. For Lafont, world is a system of *signs-relations*, and only language, in particular a concrete, particular, natural language, can satisfy this description while at the same time satisfying Heidegger's other specifications on 'world'. But, as Lafont herself explicitly recognizes, in *Being and Time* Heidegger specifically rejects the identification of world and language by specifically rejecting the suggestion that the world is a system of signs-relations. Instead, in the crucial early sections of *Being and Time*, Heidegger analyzes signs as a determinate kind of equipment, and further suggests that what it is to be a sign must be understood in terms of 'significance' (*Bedeutsamkeit*), which in turn must be understood in terms of the relations which are constitutive of what it is to be equipment.¹ So why, then, does Lafont continue in her identification of world as a system of 'signs-relations'?

As I just mentioned, Lafont explicitly notes that in *Being and Time*

Heidegger denies that the relations constitutive of world can be elucidated in terms of relations among signs. Nevertheless, she feels that the *logic* of Heidegger's position *demand*s that this must be the appropriate way to understand the structure of the world. Her argument strategy here is complex, but at bottom it turns on the manner in which she understands the way in which the early Heidegger uses the term 'reference' to articulate the holistic context in which equipment, as 'in order to', necessarily must be understood. This holistic context, or 'referential contexture', is in turn used to elucidate the worldhood of the world.

Here is the crucial passage from *Being and Time*, together with Lafont's initial gloss on it:

Taken strictly, there 'is' no such thing as an equipment. To the being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is. Equipment is essentially 'something in-order-to . . .' A totality of equipment is constituted by various ways of the 'in-order-to' such as serviceability . . . usability . . . In the 'in-order-to' as a structure there lies an assignment or reference [*Verweisung*] of something to something.' In the passage cited here, Heidegger necessarily has recourse to a rather vague, everyday sense of 'referring to' (which means something like having to do with, being related to, and so forth). Only in this sense does a piece of equipment 'refer' to an equipmental totality. But later, Heidegger must (and does) have recourse to another use of the term, the specific semiotic use of the 'referring of a sign to something' in order to explain the worldhood of the world. (p. 31)²

With this quote combined with the one cited above, we are almost in position to reconstruct Lafont's core argument against a pragmatic reading of *Being and Time*. The missing piece of the argument is her contention that the dependence of Dasein on an already constituted world is unintelligible if that world is understood in terms of the teleological 'reference' relations among tools. Lafont suggests that if linguistic and teleological 'reference' were assimilated or identified, and, as Heidegger asserts, neither the hammering of the hammer nor the 'showing' of the sign are to be thought of as properties of entities, then, given what it is to be a tool, both the hammering and the showing would need to be understood as *activities*. But there are two facts that count against this identification and this understanding. First, while it is plausible to think of the hammering of the hammer as an activity of Dasein, it is wildly implausible to think of the showing of a sign in these terms. It is only because the agent confronts the sign as already having a significance that she can use the sign in her activity. Second, then, it is only the showing of the sign, and not the 'reference' of the hammer that displays the appropriate dependence of Dasein on its world (pp. 40–41). But, then, the assimilation of the showing of the sign to the 'reference' of the hammer makes this dependence unintelligible and the 'world' *must* be a system of sign relations which 'is not reducible to the subject-object schema of the teleological model of action'.

It strikes me that, whatever the merits of a pragmatic reading of *Being and Time*, this argument, at least, rests on a series of errors and misunderstand-

ings. The central problem with the argument is that it misunderstands the way in which in *Being and Time* Heidegger understands human teleological activity in general and the 'in-order-to' of equipment in particular. What is the 'in-order-to' of a piece of equipment, say a hammer? On Lafont's reading 'to-be-a-hammer' consists in 'hammering'. ('Other types of equipment, in the form of an 'in-order-to', ultimately refer to a "towards-which". This signifies that the specific character of equipment (its "kind of being") consists in this "towards-which" ("to-be-a-hammer" consists in hammering' [p. 33].) It is this identification of what it is to be a tool with the human activity in which the tool is used teleologically (what it is to be a hammer is its being used in hammering) which, in Lafont's eyes, disqualifies that way in which a hammer is referred to nails (hammering only occurs with the simultaneous use of nails as nails) as being the basic structure of the relations which constitute the world. After all, there is a hammering, and thus a hammer, only if some agent picks up a thing and hammers with it. And thus the being of the hammer is dependent on human activity, rather than that activity depending on the world.

Although she never gives a specific citation for this assimilation of the in-order-to to the 'towards which' (the 'to-be-a-hammer' with hammering), the passage which comes most readily to mind in this regard is the one in which Heidegger says that the hammer is involved in hammering, hammering with making fast, making fast with protection against bad weather, and this protection with some possibility of Dasein [BT, p. 116]. Summing up this passage, Heidegger says that this totality of involvements 'goes back ultimately to a towards-which in which there is no further involvements'. But *this* towards which, the *ultimate* towards which in terms of which the hammer can be a hammer, isn't the activity of hammering. It is that for the sake of which one engages in this sort of activity, some possible way for humans to be.

In introducing the discussion of the various kinds of involvement Heidegger says that the being of an intraworldly being is its 'involvement' (*Bewandtnis*). He then goes on to specify that a tool is involved by having the towards-which of a serviceability, and he does indeed go on to give the example of a hammer being involved in hammering. Lafont immediately infers from this that the being of the hammer (its 'in-order-to') is the activity of hammering. But this equation is far too quick. In what sense of 'hammering' is it at all plausible to identify the being of the hammer with hammering? Is it that it is actually being used as a hammer? If this is the case, then an idle hammer is not a hammer. Is it that it can be used as a hammer? That a thing is usable by someone, or that some agent intends to use some thing, as a hammer, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition on its being a hammer. Broken hammers are hammers; if they weren't there would be no norm against which to judge that they are *broken*. A hammer can be

used as a weapon but if it is it is a hammer used as weapon. Heidegger tells us that the relevant 'towards-which' here is the 'towards-which' of 'serviceability'. But what does this mean?

In a companion passage in *Basic Problems* to the one we have been discussing Heidegger makes it a bit more clear what he means when he says that the *Bewandtnis* that defines the being of a tool consists in its towards-which of serviceability.

The specific thiness of a piece of equipment, its individuation, if we take the word in a completely formal sense, is not determined primarily by space and time in the sense that it appears in a determinate space and time position. Instead, what determines a piece of equipment as an individual is in each instance its equipmental character and equipmental contexture. What then is it that constitutes the specific equipmental character of a piece of equipment? Equipmental character is constituted by what we call *Bewandtnis*, functionality. The being of something we use is characterized by a *specific way of being put to use, of functioning*. This entity is 'in order to hammer', 'in order to make leaving, entering, and closing possible. Equipment is 'in order to'. (BP, p. 292)³

This thing is being used as a paper-weight, but it *is* in order to hammer, so it is a hammer. This thing can be used as a weapon, but it *is* in order to hammer, so it is a hammer. What it is to be a hammer is fixed neither by what a thing *is* used for, nor by what a thing *can* be used for, nor by what some agent intends to use the thing for. Rather, the 'towards-which', the serviceability which for early Heidegger fixes the being of a tool, is a *specific way of being put to use*: the hammer is there in order to hammer with, it has the *function* of hammering. And to say this is to say that to be a hammer is fixed by how it, the hammer, *is to be used*.

Once one sees that the sense in which the being of a hammer is hammering is the sense in which hammering, as a *job classification*, specifies that which the thing is for, the structure of Lafont's argument against a pragmatic reading of *Being and Time* tends to disintegrate. First, hammering in this sense is not an activity of any actual Dasein. It is, rather, a way in which some Dasein *should* or *ought* to interact with a tool and its environment in certain situations. Second, the way in which a tool, such as a hammer, is 'referred' to another tool type, such as a nail, or to the carpenter's tool-chest, is neither vague nor ontically dependent on how a particular agent happens to use, or intends to use, these things. Instead, what it is to be a hammer is *defined* in terms of how things that are hammers are to be used with other types of equipment within a holistically integrated system of functional relations. Third, such holistically integrated functional systems of tool types are articulated independently of and prior to the activity of any given agent. One learns how to be one of us by moving into the system of assignments which define how we are supposed to act with what things in which situations. The hammer is to be circumspectively seen, used, and understood *as* a hammer, and this normatively central seeing-as is always already articulated prior to the human action, just as Heidegger says.

Finally, all of these results, taken together, allow for the possibility of the development of a strategy for understanding language that is in tune with the explicit structure of the argument in *Being and Time*, a possibility that Lafont wants to disallow as incoherent. Let us create a myth, Sellars fashion, about some of our non-linguistic ancestors. These ancestors live in communities with well-developed tool chests, but no symbolically structured signs for talking about or referring to. Children born into this community need to be educated into the way in which the various entities in the environment are to be used together in order to realize characteristic ways of life which are also typical of the group. That is, the children are taught to see both themselves and entities in their environment as this or that, and they only count as full members of the group when they satisfactorily learn to see and use things as they are to be seen and used. Until they master all of this it is unclear to the other members of the group that what the children do counts as *acting* at all, as what it is to act is defined in terms of the definite possibilities opened up by the articulated structure of the world of these ancestors. I submit that these mythical ancestors live and comport themselves 'understandingly' in a 'meaningful' world, in Heidegger's sense, which in each case has always already been articulated. But the world in which these ancestors live is *not* a 'system of signs-relations', even though it is also 'not reducible to the subject-object schema of the teleological model of action'.⁴

Heidegger's point, on a pragmatic reading, never was that the kind of reference which is definitive of linguistic signs was *reducible* to the kind of assignment or reference that is built in to any tool use as tool use. Hammers, on this reading, have one job to do, words have a quite different job. Rather, on this reading, Heidegger holds that it is profitable to see particular words as equipment types which are to be used with other equipment types in order to achieve already established types of ends such as communication of this or that. The entire *system* of such linguistic 'in-order-tos' or language, isn't a tool which is defined in terms of an in order to, any more than the set of relations constitutive of any equipmental contexture is itself a piece of equipment. Rather, any individual Dasein can formulate what it is that is to be said only in terms of such an already given holistic system, just as any such agent can formulate what is to be done more generally in terms of the equipmental contexture of tool types in which it lives. On this reading of Heidegger, the system of sign relations which constitute human language is an interesting, distinctive, and important species of equipmental contexture. At bottom, language is a kind or species of worldly contexture, and there could be a non-symbolic, non-linguistic world. But there could be no language, no system of sign-relations, unless there were world, a system of equipmental relations.

And for all Lafont has told us, such an interpretation *could* be right,

because the position outlined in this interpretation could be coherent. The problem with Lafont's core argument is not far to seek. She simply assumes a certain model for teleology, 'the subject-object schema of the teleological model of action', as self-evident. On this model, for an agent to act is for that individual agent to have a certain idiosyncratic representation of what is to be achieved and, in light of that representation, the act in which the agent uses something with the design of achieving that goal comes to have the sense of 'for that goal'. The thing gets to be a hammer, on this 'subject-object model of teleology', in and through the agent concretely using the thing with the goal of hammering. Of course, if this is what the act of hammering amounts to, no such system of acts could ever be identified with what Heidegger is trying to get at with the notion of 'world'. Such a teleology is neither always already there for an agent nor capable of constituting the holistic articulation in terms of which all understanding is understanding-as. But this model of teleology is neither the early Heidegger's nor is it plausible in itself. For Heidegger, the hammer is a hammer, that is, to be used for hammering, independently of and as a condition for any individual agent using it in the human act of hammering. And where there is no already articulate holistic structure which fixes how hammers are to be used along with nails and boards and . . . in order to hammer, there is no hammering. The first chimp that picked up the first stone and slammed away at a palm nut with it might or might not have opened it. But it is only when entire communities of West African chimps carefully prepare hammer and anvil stones and use them in prescribed and predetermined ways in order to open palm nuts that it is correct to say that the stone *is* a hammer, or that some expert chimp is hammering with it, or that some apprentice is attempting, unsuccessfully, to hammer with it.⁵

So it comes to this. Professor Lafont has given us no reason to think that the following set of claims is incoherent or to think that they could not have been the core of the position regarding the relations among equipment, world, and language that Heidegger developed in *Being and Time*, only unfortunately to jettison in favor of linguistic idealism later on. (1) There can be equipment where there is no language. But (2) there can be no equipment unless there 'is' the totality of involvement or referential contexture that constitutes the worldhood of the world. While (3) there can't be a linguistic system of sign-relations where there are no tools, and thus without world. (4) Such a world is not a product of Dasein, because there is Dasein only in terms of world. But for all that, being in such a world can be definitive for being Dasein. And, since there can be non-symbolic, non-linguistic worlds, what Heidegger calls 'world' in *Being and Time* is not identical with any recognizable sense of 'language', including Heidegger's own later use of that term.

NOTES

- 1 Cf. *Being and Time* (henceforth *BT*) (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927) (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1962), secs. 17–18. As Lafont points out, Heidegger's own later margin notes to *Being and Time* explicitly reject these claims regarding the relation between signs and equipment. But, of course, this is exactly what one would expect from someone who was then espousing the very linguistic idealism that Lafont correctly rejects.
- 2 Although I won't attempt to make anything of it here, it should be noted that the word Macquarrie and Robinson translate as 'assignment or reference', '*Verweisung*', is quite distinct in Heidegger from any of the words that he uses to articulate the 'showing' of a sign, or the way a sign can 'indicate' or 'refer to' or 'signify' something. So, whatever Heidegger's problems here he is not falling into ambiguity, as Lafont seems at points to suggest. The claim under discussion here, for better or worse, is that Heidegger takes the 'reference' of a sign to its referent to be a special case (not a paradigmatic or exemplary case, as Lafont would have it) of the supposedly vague, everyday sense in which a tool is 'referred to' something else. It is not that this everyday sense of 'reference', as such, is all that needs to be understood in order to understand linguistic reference. If that were the case, linguistic reference could not be a *species* of *Verweisung*, which seems to be Heidegger's suggestion.
- 3 *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Indianapolis/Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
- 4 It should be clear that there is good reason to think that this myth regarding our ancestors reflects reality. At this point it seems quite clear that chimps and bonobos, at least, live in cultural, non-linguistic worlds in which tool-types are indeed always already articulated and in which seeing is normatively specified 'seeing-as'.
- 5 Notice, there is nothing about this position that precludes the view that what is distinctive about *Dasein* is precisely that it lives in a linguistically structured world. Unfortunately this comes close to the view that humans are linguistic, or rational, animals, and it is obvious how much Heidegger, early and late, disliked that view. It should be clear that I am not arguing that the 'pragmatic' interpretation is consonant with all of Heidegger's expressed opinions. I am only arguing that such a view is interesting and coherent in itself, that Professor Lafont has given us no philosophical reason to think otherwise, and that it is consistent with most of the core material in *Being and Time*.

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