

Heidegger and the Political: Finitude, Thownness, and the Destiny of Being

Author : Richard Wolin

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A perennial barrier to interpreting Heidegger's thought has been the philosopher's impassioned commitment to National Socialism in 1933 – an allegiance that, even after the war, Heidegger never fully renounced.

As late as 1953, in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger could still praise the movement's "inner truth and greatness." What is so damning about these remarks is that they propose that Nazism's enduring historical merit lay in its status as a political form adequate to the challenge of modern technology, or, as Heidegger expresses it, "the encounter between global technology and modern man." Yet, despite the unsettling implications of this claim (what is it, precisely, that we should learn from Nazism in order to parry the advance of modern *techné*?), an academic cottage industry has arisen around the theme of Heidegger qua matchless critic of modernity's Promethean technological excesses. Again, in the 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, Heidegger insisted that National Socialism had proceeded in the right direction; however, ultimately, "those people [i.e., the Nazis] were far too limited in their thinking" to rise to the epochal challenges of technology qua fate.

One of the most troubling aspects of Heidegger's political engagement is that his pro-Nazi declarations, which suffuse his seminars and lecture courses from the 1930s, seem to flow seamlessly from the discourse of fundamental ontology he had contrived in *Being and Time* and other works of the 1920s. Heidegger's defenders seem convinced that the Master's theoretical vindications of Nazism – which we now know to be much more extensive than we first suspected – "debased" Heidegger's own peculiar brand of *Existenzphilosophie*. Here, the problem is that the lexical continuity between the two discourses, philosophical and political, is seamless and compelling. Attempts to build a firewall between the strictly philosophical and broader cultural resonances of Heidegger's thought have repeatedly come up short.

The real stumbling block to constructing such a firewall is that, as far back as *Being and Time*, Heidegger's thought was "always already" ideological. Conceived during the 1920s, *Being and Time* had thoroughly imbibed the discourse of Germany's leading "conservative revolutionaries": Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, and Oswald Spengler. Thus if one examines the key concepts of Heidegger's philosophy of existence – "fate," "decisiveness," "generation," "choosing one's hero," Volk, and *Gemeinschaft* – one finds that the idiom of Germany's right-wing conservatives

abounds. In other words, historical considerations predate and subtend his “fundamental ontology.” The criticisms of “everydayness,” “publicness,” and mass society that suffuse *Being and Time* are of a piece with the distinctive brand of cultural criticism, or *Zivilisationskritik*, for which the conservative revolutionaries were notorious.

If one is sincerely interested in the way that philosophical ideas ramify, their political ramifications must also be taken into account. In one of his last books, *The Myth of the State* (1946), the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer perceived Heidegger’s philosophy of existence much more critically than he had during the 1920s as a result of the use to which it had been put during the Nazi era. Now in American exile, Cassirer detected troubling cultural-political resonances that had earlier remained only dimly perceptible. Thus in the *Myth of the State* Cassirer seized on Heidegger’s notion of *Geworfenheit* or “thrownness,” which invokes the circumstantial contingencies endemic to the human condition, to arrive at a series of disparaging judgments about the “fatalism” of Heidegger’s philosophical standpoint. Cassirer perceived “thrownness” as a de facto submission to destiny (*das Geschick*) or nameless higher powers and, as such, a regression to *myth*. As Cassirer contends: a philosophy such as Heidegger’s “that sees in the *Geworfenheit* of man one of its principal characters has given up all hopes of an active share in the construction and reconstruction of man’s cultural life. Such a philosophy renounces its own fundamental theoretical and ethical ideals. It can be used . . . as a pliable instrument in the hands of the political leaders” (293). With Heidegger’s conception of *Geworfenheit*, the anti-humanist animus of counter-revolutionary thought had come home to roost.

Heidegger’s embrace of “finitude” (*Endlichkeit*) in *Being and Time* is of a piece with the “anti-humanism” that culminated in his 1947 “Letter on Humanism.” Heidegger’s later philosophy revolved around the notion of *Seinsgeschick*, the “destining of Being.” Although I can’t do justice to its nuances or ramifications in the context at hand, one thing should be transparently clear: Heidegger’s standpoint is not merely a *critique* of the humanist perspective embraced by Cassirer and other neo-Kantians; it represents a *rejection* of that perspective *tout court*. It embodies an explicit disavowal of the project of human autonomy in favor of the mysterious and fateful “sendings of Being” (*Schickungen des Seins*). In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Jürgen Habermas has justly criticized the fatalism inherent Heidegger’s philosophy of Being (*Seinsgedanke*) as follows: “Now it is Being that has withdrawn itself from beings and that announces its indeterminate arrival by an absence made palpable and by the mounting pain of deprival . . . Being can only come about as a fateful dispensation; those who are in need can at most hold themselves open and prepared for it. Heidegger’s critique of reason ends in the distancing radicality of a change in orientation that is all-pervasive but empty of content – away from autonomy and toward a self-surrender to Being, which supposedly leaves behind the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy.”

When dealing with Heidegger’s philosophical testament, one is forced to confront a unique combination of blindness and insight. “The nothing nothings,” Heidegger claimed in his Freiburg university inaugural lecture, “What is Metaphysics?” (1929). When the logical positivist Rudolf

Carnap read this statement in the early 1930s, he considered it to be beneath the threshold of “sense” or discursive intelligibility. And from this observation, he drew the radical conclusion that Heidegger’s philosophy was essentially meaningless, devoid of sense. Here, Carnap may have overreacted; but, when all is said and done, there remain too many obscurities in Heidegger’s thought that, among the faithful, pass for self-evident truths. Heidegger’s supporters do him no service by treating his more questionable and portentous insights and claims with reverence rather than subjecting them to the open-minded critical scrutiny that all thought (*Denken*) deserves.