



## THE HEIDEGGER CASE

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Just as philosophers generally look at Socrates as a kind of secular saint, Heidegger has, of late, become the family embarrassment, the scandal that will not quite go away. Since “the Heidegger Case”—his involvement with the Nazis—has been a hot topic in scholarly circles of late, it is important to address this issue, with both passionate honesty and hard-nosed lucidity.

The “official story” of Heidegger’s involvement—that is, the one endorsed by Heidegger himself and his apologists—goes something like this. In 1933, the rector of the university at Freiburg was forced to resign by the ascendant Nazis, and Heidegger was “tapped” as his replacement. Heidegger consented, so the story goes, as much because he did not want to compromise “the integrity of the university” as because he was, at the time, enthusiastic about the capacity of the Nazis to bring about a “cultural renewal” in Germany and reverse the national decline of the post-W.W.I, Weimar republic years. Yet a few years into the Nazi regime, after Hitler consolidated his power, the totalitarian nature of the third reich became evident, and Heidegger’s “enthusiasm for the regime declined”. He criticized the Nazis in a veiled way in his seminars, and he himself came under sharp attack by Nazi ideologues as “soft” and “non-aryan”. Toward the war’s end he was deemed “expendable” by the Nazi culture ministers and assigned to dig roadside ditches. After the war he “retired” to a “nonpolitical” life in his black forest cottage.

The “official story”, however, leaves a great deal out and gives a distorted picture of the nature and implications of Heidegger’s supposedly short-lived “political involvement”. Heidegger genuinely believed in “the crisis of Western Civilization”, as did many other intellectuals from the political right, left, and center. However he was also an extreme German nationalist who believed that if the west was going to be saved, Germany was the one to save it, and this inclined him, very early on, towards the political right-wing. The Nazis seemed to him, in 1933, to be the only political force capable of reviving Germany and setting it once again on its “historical destiny” as the cultural leader of the west, the land of Goethe and Kant and Holderlin. Yet it must be said that many Germans convinced of the “crisis of the West”, and even many right-wing Germans, saw the Nazis for what they were at a very early stage. If Heidegger could plead ignorance, in doing so he either pleads insincerity or stupidity as well.

Heidegger was also a determined and ruthless careerist, willing to intervene on behalf of dissident professors and students if it was politically opportune for him to do so, but just as willing to follow the party line and persecute them if it advanced his career. This petty ambitiousness, coupled with his right-wing nationalist leanings, made him a prime candidate to be “tapped” by the Nazis for the rectorship. During his tenure, Jewish and

“liberal humanist” scholars were summarily dismissed, and his mentor Husserl was all but abandoned by him.

He did their bidding happily and obediently for 10 months, hoping all the while that he could “lead the leader” (“*Den Fuhrer fuhren*”) just as Plato tried to do when he sought to educate Dionysius of Syracuse into a true “philosopher-king”. Like Plato, Heidegger concluded that this was not going to work: that the Nazis, far from charting a “third way” between capitalism and communism (yes, he was serious about Nazism as a “third way”!), were will-driven thugs, bent upon the “total mobilization” of Germany and Europe into “raw material” for the ends of power and aggrandizement (how Heidegger could have not seen this before 1933 is, to me at least, absolutely astonishing). Yet throughout the war, and his “soured” relationship with the Nazis, he persisted in his belief that the Nazis somehow “went wrong”, that the movement’s potential was “perverted” by hacks and gangsters, rather than concluding that there was something perverse and evil in the movement as such. (He never formally quit the party, and held on to his membership card until 1945. Granted, it would have taken courage for him to publically renounce the Nazis, but after all, “courage” names a virtue which one can be sternly criticized for lacking. Plenty of German-speaking scholar-patriots—Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edith Stein, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, among others—gave up their lives or livelihoods on account of such courage.) After the war, Heidegger included Nazism *with* American capitalism and Soviet communism as globe-threatening examples of “technological domination”, but throughout his “retirement” in the Black Forest he never said anything about the specific evils of Nazism—the destruction of Europe, the extinction of democracy and civil society, and worst of all, the holocaust—and Germany’s *specific* guilt in letting the Nazis rise to power, and to have turned a blind eye to the *Shoah*. Everything was “levelled down” to the tyranny of technological domination, which was itself “destined” by the trajectory of western metaphysical thought. More than one commentator has noted that this line of thought sounds quite evasive—as if Heidegger’s mildly guilty conscience collided with his stubborn pride, with the latter winning out in a kind of grandiose philosophical rationalization.

So I think it is safe to say that Heidegger has a lot to answer for, personally and politically: he was, as the philosopher Richard Rorty put it, “a nasty piece of work”. But the most important question that arises now is: what does all this say about his thought, his philosophy? Or: what is the relationship between the life and the work?

There are two reflexive reactions to consider. First, one can argue that there is a tight, logically *necessary* connection between the character of the author and the character of the work, and that if Heidegger was a morally dubious individual, his work as a whole will be inevitably “tainted” with his moral failings. Or second, one can deny *any* connection between person and work, and insist that they are necessarily separate: as Richard Rorty put it, “character” and “genius” are contingent traits that arise from different idiosyncratic, contingent “neural kinks” that have nothing to do with each other.

The problem with both of these approaches is, I think, well expressed by the philosopher Jurgen Habermas when he complains that they tend to “short circuit” any relationship between thought and life, or “work and world-view”, by making such a relationship, or non-relationship, *necessary* rather than contingent, universal rather than a mark of the particular case. For example, Frege was a virulent anti-Semite and anti-Catholic, and an ardent, fanatical German nationalist. Does this compromise his work on sense and refer-

ence? Perhaps: some have tried to argue this point (see Andrea Nye, *Words of Power: a Feminist Reading of the History of Logic* (Routledge)), and it would be foolish to rule this line-of-interpretation out of court *a priori*. But it's equally clear that the other tack is plausible too—that Frege's work as a logician swings free from his miserable personality. Similar observations might be made about the poets T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and Ezra Pound (all right-wingers, with Yeats flirting with the Irish Fascist Blueshirts and Pound making treasonous radio broadcasts for Mussolini) and their poetry: as W.H. Auden once said apropos of Yeats, we forgive him for having written well. Consider also the dramatist Bertolt Brecht, the critic Georg Lukacs, and the philosopher-essayist Jean-Paul Sartre, all of whom made an ignoble peace, at some time, with Stalinist tyranny (and, in Sartre's case, with the barbarities of Mao's cultural revolution), and their literary output. Picasso, Gauguin, Celine, Robert Frost, Richard Wagner—all of these individuals were incredibly awful as *persons*, or held repellent political opinions, or both; and while it is quite possible that the sordid personality traits or political convictions might find explicit or hidden expression in the work, it is equally possible that they might have little or no inherent or intrinsic connection to it. It depends on the individual case: the only way to determine this is to encounter the work with an open mind, and with *both* eyes open.

Here's a three-step "test" that I think works well in determining the nature of the contingent points-of-contact between the moral/political individual and the value of her/his literary, artistic, or philosophic work:

a) Forgetting what you know about the author's biography, can you deduce the foul beliefs or personality-traits from the work itself? Can you detect it in the text from behind a self-imposed "veil of ignorance"?

b) Remembering that biography in all its detail, when you reread the work, do certain passages which look innocent take on, as a whole or to a degree, a sinister aspect that they did not possess before?

c) Can you read the author against himself/herself? That is, can the "offensive" parts of the work be challenged and called to task by other, parts—presumably, those less distorted by the authors' personal sins and pathologies?

I think this three-step procedure will prove useful in coming to a full critical understanding of Heidegger—not to mention Sartre, Frege, Yeats, Pound, Wagner *et. al.*—without "short circuiting" either the work or whatever ties the work may have with the life.

For what it's worth, I offer my own estimate of the above. I think that Heidegger's philosophy is far better than he himself was. Heidegger's thought is admittedly not so clear-cut a case as Frege's. There is little in the way of shared subject-matter between mathematical logic and rabid anti-Semitism and nationalism; unlike Frege's, Heidegger's work was not limited to formal logic, but touched on metaphysics and epistemology. Furthermore, Heidegger always insisted that "authentic" thought cannot be separated from life and political engagement, and his ruminations on technology and metaphysics at least place him in the ballpark of moral and political philosophy. Still, I believe that much (not all) of his thought swings free from his reprehensible politics. Much of Heidegger and all of Frege pretty much pass test a), which is perhaps supported by the fact that just as Frege's philosophical "disciples" and colleagues (including Husserl, Russell, and Wittgenstein) hadn't a clue about his rabid bigotries, so too Heidegger's star students were nonplussed by his endorsement of the Nazi cause, and the vast majority of them were able, with ease, to adapt many of Heidegger's ideas and doctrines to a very different political agenda (e.g.,

Herbert Marcuse was a revisionist Marxist, Hannah Arendt a proto-communitarian, Paul Tillich a Christian Social Democrat, Hans-Georg Gadamer a liberal democrat, etc.).

Test b) yields more ambiguous results. For example, the second half of Division 1 and most of Division 2 of *Being and Time*, with its talk of avoiding the gravitational pull of “the they”, the need for “resolute” choice and engagement, and the exhortation to seize the potentialities that “historical destiny” throws before oneself and one’s “people” (*Volk*) does indeed sound like Nazi agitprop. Heidegger’s work occasionally gives some insight into the vile thoughts that Heidegger the man was probably thinking. But again—switching back to the stance of test a)—the text itself doesn’t quite go over the brink to say exactly what “destiny” requires one to do at a given moment—say, in Germany in 1933. The Heidegger scholar Charles Guignon puts it very well when he says, of Heidegger’s tale of “resolution” and “the workings out of historical destiny”,

This picture of historical unfolding . . . can be made to accommodate almost any political position. With its *mythos* of pristine beginnings, a time of “falling” and a final recovery of origins, it recapitulates the traditional Christian model of creation, sinfulness, and redemption. It is this model which also underlies the Marxist story-line of human species-beings currently deformed by capitalism but promised fulfillment in world communism. And it can be made to fit the liberal story of humans who are born free but now languish in the chains of ignorance and superstition, or the conservative story of a return to community after wandering in the wilderness of extreme individualism. (“History and Commitment in the Early Heidegger”, in *Heidegger: a Critical Reader*, ed., Hubert Dreyfus and Harrison Hall (Blackwell: 1992))

While this might get Heidegger’s philosophy off one hook, however, it securely impales it on another: Heidegger’s philosophy is *deficient* and *inadequate*, insofar as it fails to provide concrete guidance as to how a “resolute” political decision ought to be made, and as to *which ones* ought to be made. Like Kant’s ethics, it is open to the charge of an *empty formalism*, of providing a general structural account of historical, human being-in-the-world, but not a particularized, specific account of “what is to be done?” Heidegger’s disclaimer that he is interested not in the “ontic” dimension of human existence (human beings as beings, e.g., as New Yorkers in the 2000’s, or ancient Athenians, or Weimar Germans) but in the “ontological” (*Dasein* as the *being* of human beings, as the always-and-everywhere aspect of human existence) only compounds the inadequacy, since it is not too clear whether the ontological can be understood when the ontical is given short-shrift (One only understands Being through beings; beings disclose Being—an example of c), reading Heidegger against Heidegger). (Of course, it’s always possible that if Heidegger *did* give a detailed, ontic analysis of the demands of “resolute” political engagement, his philosophy might have turned out worse than it is. Or, conversely: that it might have made Heidegger the man wise up.)

There are some interesting analogies to be drawn between Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Marx. The names of Nietzsche and Marx have been used to legitimate two barbarous totalitarian regimes, yet it would be rash, I think, to label Nietzsche’s and Marx’s thought as *inherently* and *entirely* barbarous and totalitarian solely on the basis of that fact. In fact, there is much to suggest, in the thought of both Nietzsche and Marx, grounds for opposition to the terrors of Hitlerism and Stalinism. It is at least *plausible* to argue that their work does not entail tyranny, or clear a straight path to Auschwitz or the Gulag, any more than Locke’s *Two Treatises* entails exploitative, imperialistic capitalism or Rousseau’s

*Discourse* entailed Robespierre. The works of Nietzsche and Marx (Locke and Rousseau) can be read and used in different ways, and misread and misused by evil-minded power-brokers, who are blinded by their own ambitions and fanaticism to the “highest potential” of these thinkers’ work. Heidegger is a curious case, since he was both the thinker and the would-be power-broker who applied (and, citing Heidegger against Heidegger, I’d also say who *misapplied*) his thought in the service of an ignoble end. In a way, he played Lenin to his own Marx.

But still—it remains the case that Nietzsche and Marx left their thought open and vulnerable to this sort of misuse, and this points to some deep, perhaps fatal gaps and inadequacies within it. They are, to an extent, culpable for the ends to which their philosophies have been put, but in a mitigated way; they are in no way culpable in the sense that, say, Pol Pot or Reinhard Heydrich were. As with Nietzsche and Marx, I think that is equally true with Heidegger, whose “contempt for the ontic” shielded his thought from the particulars of “the real world of politics” and made the mess of “the Heidegger case” possible in the first place. Heidegger ought to continue to be read and his genuine insights appreciated—indeed, his philosophy ought to be used without hesitation whenever appropriate – but one ought to read Heidegger (Nietzsche, Marx, Locke, etc.) not merely critically but *cautiously*. History shows how “the ontic” often catches up with, and eventually haunts, “the ontological”.

Heidegger once said, in a marvelously evocative turn of phrase, that “Questioning is the piety of thought”. It was advice that he himself did not always heed. Heidegger’s questioning was, perhaps, *deep*: he focused-in almost exclusively on the issues of Being and truth, and refused to foreclose any possibility of further, deeper questioning. But his questioning was insufficiently *broad*, refusing to acknowledge that nitty-gritty issues (like who is running the military, how wealth and political power are distributed, and what demands our time and place makes on our moral and civic characters) might be at least as important as philosophical speculation about “the end of metaphysics in technology” and similar speculation. Unlike Dewey, Heidegger did not think philosophy was, even in part, a prelude to detailed social criticism; this failure to take social criticism seriously was, I think, a failure on Heidegger’s part to question his own way of “questioning”. Not to fail in the same way—to sacrifice breadth of philosophic vision for depth-- is, I think, the moral of “the Heidegger case”.

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