

## Heidegger's Wrong Turn

Daniel Bonevac

Published online: 29 July 2017

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2017

**Editor's Note:** The following essay is a sequel to “Heidegger’s Map” (Summer 2014), in which Daniel Bonevac discussed the central themes of *Being and Time* (1927), the early work that established Martin Heidegger as an important twentieth-century philosopher. Here, Bonevac examines how Heidegger developed those themes in the following years, leading him to embrace National Socialism and to discard not only objectivity but rationalism itself, thus inspiring some of the most damaging intellectual trends of recent decades.

In the Summer 2014 *Academic Questions* I sketched a map of concepts central to Martin Heidegger’s early masterpiece, *Being and Time*.<sup>1</sup> In that piece I argued that Heidegger’s thought offers deep philosophical insights while also creating dangers. Heidegger advances some controversial theses that most analytically oriented philosophers would reject: that the objects of the manifest image—ordinary objects such as tables and chairs, cabbages and kings—are prior in the order of being to the theoretical objects of the scientific image; that objects understood as ready-to-hand, as instruments, are similarly prior to objects considered apart from their relation to human beings and human action; that the world must be understood as what consciousness is consciousness *of*, thus giving consciousness priority over the world; and that living authentically requires that I accept wholesale all the

---

<sup>1</sup>Daniel Bonevac, “Heidegger’s Map,” *Academic Questions* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 165–84. Heidegger’s greatest work is *Sein und Zeit, Jahrbuch für Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Forschung*, VIII (Halle, Ger.: Max Niemeyer, 1927). Quotations from this work are taken from *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Tübingen, Ger.: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). All further references to this work are taken from the German edition.

---

**Daniel Bonevac** is professor of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78713-8926; bonevac@mail.utexas.edu. His latest books are *Ideas of the Twentieth Century* (University of Texas Press, 2014) and *Introduction to World Philosophy*, co-edited with Stephen Phillips (Oxford University Press, 2009).

contingent aspects of my existence, including death. Perhaps most important is Heidegger's use of the term *Dasein*<sup>2</sup> to speak of three quite different things—individual human beings, humanity as a whole, and the distinctively human way of being—a conflation that leads him to see individuals, societies, and humanity itself as having destinies in just the same sense. Still, Heidegger resists the subjectivism, social constructivism, relativism, and nihilism that have plagued much of the subsequent Continental tradition even as he provides much of their intellectual fuel.

*Being and Time*, however, is not the whole story. Heidegger himself speaks of a “turn” in his thought shortly after that work appeared in 1927. In 1930 he gave a talk on the essence of truth.<sup>3</sup> In 1933 he joined the Nazi Party, accepted a position of rector at the University of Freiburg, and gave his inaugural address.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger resigned that position less than a year later. In 1936 he began writing *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, generally known as *Contributions to Philosophy*, which he showed only to a handful of friends, and which was not published until 1989, thirteen years after his death.<sup>5</sup> These works give us important clues about the turn in Heidegger's thought—a turn manifested in a variety of writings after 1930 and inspiring some of the most problematic trends in postmodern thought.

Interpreting these works, however, is not easy. The essay on truth and the inaugural address suggest interpretations that Heidegger later rejects. If *Being and Time* is obscure, moreover, then *Contributions* is obscurity on steroids. It marks the beginning of a pervasive and destructive tendency toward obscurity among Continental thinkers. Unpublished for more than fifty years, its influence was indirect, by way of Heidegger's other writings, his lectures, and his private circulation of the manuscript.

If there is indeed a turn in Heidegger's thought—and it is probably better to think of a *series* of philosophical moves that amount to stages of the turn—it was, I believe, a wrong turn.<sup>6</sup> *Being and Time* lays out an existential vision that does not

<sup>2</sup>I have removed the hyphen from “*Da-sein*” to conform to the usual practice.

<sup>3</sup>This talk was not published until 1943. See “On the Essence of Truth,” trans. R.F.C. Hull and Alan Crick, in Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), 292–324. Here I cite, for greater clarity, “On the Essence of Truth,” trans. John Sallis, in Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 136–54. All further references to this work are taken from this translation.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University: Address, Delivered on the Solemn Assumption of the Rectorate of the University Freiburg the Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts,” trans. and intro. Karsten Harries, *Review of Metaphysics* 38, no. 3 (March 1985): 467–502.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012). For another translation, see Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Knowing)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>For one account of the stages of the turn, see Thomas Sheehan, “The Turn: All Three of Them,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, ed. François Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 31–38.

in itself corrupt philosophy or force a commitment to any particular ethical or political theory. It lays a foundation upon which thinkers as diverse as José Ortega y Gasset, Kitarō Nishida, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir construct divergent philosophical and specifically normative theories.<sup>7</sup> Heidegger's turn, however, leads him not only to Nazism but also to some destructive philosophical methods and positions, the effects of which we continue to encounter today.<sup>8</sup>

### The Essay on Truth

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's project is transcendental. A transcendental argument concerns the necessary conditions for the possibility of something, having the form

$p$  is possible  
 $p$  could be possible only if  $q$   
 Therefore,  $q$

René Descartes sought the ground of certainty—the necessary conditions under which we can be certain of anything, e.g., *I think, I am*—in the trustworthiness of clear and distinct perceptions. Immanuel Kant sought the ground of the possibility of experience—the necessary conditions under which experience is possible—in a priori concepts and laws of the understanding. Heidegger similarly seeks the ground of the possibility of being in the world with others.

Heidegger's 1930 essay, "On the Essence of Truth," makes a similarly transcendental argument, echoing his position in part 2 of *Being and Time*. He begins with the correspondence theory of truth—that a sentence is true if and

<sup>7</sup>See José Ortega y Gasset, *The Modern Theme*, trans. James Cleugh (New York: W.W. Norton, 1933); *Revolt of the Masses*, 25th anniversary ed. of authorized English translation (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1957); *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*, trans. Mildred Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969); Kitarō Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956); Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Hamish Hamilton (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. B. Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup>There is a vast literature on Heidegger's Nazism and its connection or lack thereof to his philosophy. For an argument that there is a strong connection based on Heidegger's views on higher education, see Iain Thomson, "Heidegger and National Socialism," in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 32–48. For a more comprehensive treatment, see Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger* (1990; New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). My take, which will emerge in due course, is that his views on truth and his vision of history, philosophy, politics, and consciousness all as expressions of the unfolding of being underlie his attraction to National Socialism.

only if it corresponds to a fact, or, in the medieval formulation on which Heidegger focuses, *veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad rem* (truth is the conformity of the intellect to the thing)—and asks about the grounds of its possibility. What are the necessary conditions of the possibility of a statement corresponding to a fact, or the intellect corresponding to a thing? He moreover gives a surprising answer: freedom. “*The essence of truth is freedom.*”<sup>9</sup>

The freedom he has in mind is distinctively human freedom. Human beings define themselves by making choices. We face a horizon, a field of possibilities that are live for us; we are beings who choose. Becoming, choosing, selecting a path through a field of possibilities—these are essential to us as humans, and in them consists our freedom. “‘Become what you are!’ But who are ‘you’? The one who lets go—and becomes,” Heidegger writes,<sup>10</sup> for our freedom requires letting go—letting go of who we have been, of defining ourselves in terms of who we are *now*, and letting ourselves become something new. But of course we are not merely what we have been up to now, or even what we will become after our next set of choices. We are essentially temporal beings, beings who choose, who define ourselves against a field of possibilities. Freedom lets us be who we essentially are. So, Heidegger concludes, freedom is letting beings *be*. This is not the ordinary sense of that phrase—“let it be” as “leave it alone”—but instead means that we must understand things in terms of fields of possibilities. In fact, it might be clearer to write, “let it become.” Heidegger refers to the ground of freedom as the “openness” of things, the “open region” of options that define them. He also calls it “the unconcealed.”<sup>11</sup>

The problem with the correspondence theory of truth, in his view, is that it ignores this openness. It ignores the dynamic aspects of what things are, and in so doing ignores the temporal and modal aspects of the world. The correspondence theory’s thesis that a sentence is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact leads naturally to the view of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, that the world consists of facts.<sup>12</sup> From Heidegger’s perspective, this is both static and narrow; the world is essentially dynamic and historical. A correspondence theory is a picture theory, a theory of true sentences as depicting how things are. The temporal aspects of the world would have to be understood in terms of a sequence of pictures, just as a movie consists of a sequence of still images. Heidegger’s complaint is that we would thereby lose our ability to understand dynamism, causation, dispositions,

<sup>9</sup>Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth,” trans. Sallis, 141.

<sup>10</sup>Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Stambaugh, 145.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 263–64.

<sup>12</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden, intro. Bertrand Russell (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1922), 10.

capacities, possibility, choice, freedom—and thereby ourselves. To put it in analytic philosopher terms, Heidegger does not see how a correspondence theory can account for such modal notions. What fact in the world would correspond to “I could have been a contender”?

Heidegger argues that our ordinary correspondence notion of truth rests on a more fundamental notion: truth as *unconcealment* or *disclosure*. The truth unfolds historically. Facts are disclosed; they reveal or unconceal themselves over time. Heidegger thus seeks a dynamic theory of truth, one that sees the essence of truth as consisting not in correspondence with the world at one time but in the actualization of possibilities. The truth about a hammer, a bottle opener, or a person is not exhausted by the facts about them, but must include, indeed, most centrally include, what they can and tend to do. This ties in nicely with Heidegger’s thought that the ready-to-hand enjoys primacy over the merely present; we encounter hammers and bottle openers primarily in terms of what we can do with them or they can do for us. Letting them *be* is being attuned to them in this sort of practical manner. But it also in a sense conceals their nature, for the object is more than its relation to us. This is why in part we move beyond viewing objects as ready-to-hand, thinking of them as *present*, as having a character independent of our relation to them.

So far, so good. At this point, however, Heidegger’s discussion veers into the mystical, in my view, and scholarly interpretations diverge. Consider statements such as these:

Considered with respect to truth as disclosedness, concealment is then undisclosedness and accordingly the untruth that is most proper to the essence of truth....What conserves letting-be in this relatedness to concealing? Nothing less than the concealing of what is concealed as a whole, of beings as such, i.e., the mystery; not a particular mystery regarding this or that, but rather the one mystery—that, in general, mystery (the concealing of what is concealed) as such holds sway throughout man’s *Dasein*....The proper non-essence of truth is the mystery.<sup>13</sup>

I confess I have no clear idea what Heidegger means here, if he means anything more than that our understanding is always only partial. Heidegger admits that this “looks like a dragging up of forcibly contrived paradoxes,” but he derives this conclusion: “The disclosure of beings as such is simultaneously and intrinsically the concealing of being as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> Truth as such, in other words, brings untruth with it.

<sup>13</sup>Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth,” trans. Sallis, 148.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 151.

We might see Heidegger's account of truth as expressing a kind of romanticism akin to that of Walt Whitman:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide,  
     and measure them,  
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with  
     much applause in the lecture-room,  
 How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
 Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.<sup>15</sup>

This poem contrasts what Heidegger would call the mere presence of the stars with something else, something better revealed through silent appreciation than by scientific investigation. That something else is more than the stars being ready-to-hand—what would that even mean?—and suggests, perhaps, what Heidegger has in mind in speaking of being as a whole.

One way of construing Heidegger's point, then, is this. Truth in the ordinary, correspondence sense presupposes that the world is structured in a manner that our thinking can capture at least in part. That structure is essentially modal, as concerned with possibility, necessity, capacities, tendencies, and so on. In analytic parlance, these involve not just this world but its relation to other possible worlds. Thinking of truth as correspondence to a structure *within* the world oversimplifies it. But even something more complex, such as a contemporary account of modal notions, sheds no light on being itself. What is it *to be*? What distinguishes the actual from the merely possible, the option chosen from the roads not taken? Thought seems incapable of answering such questions. The nature of being itself remains hidden. That, perhaps, is the mystery: "what being as such is as a whole."<sup>16</sup> A kind of modal structure grounds the possibility of correspondence, and being as a whole grounds the possibility of that structure and distinguishes the actual from the merely possible. What, however, is being? What could ground the possibility of being itself? What does being *mean*?

<sup>15</sup>Walt Whitman, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1900), 180.

<sup>16</sup>Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," trans. Sallis, 151.

Heidegger sees no way to answer these questions. He thus doubts the ability of language to express the fundamental truth of being.<sup>17</sup> This is a key part of the turn. He abandons his plan to write a third part of *Being and Time* and a sequel to “On the Essence of Truth,” and turns instead to Hölderlin’s poetry and to art more generally, seeing in them the possibility of communicating something that cannot be said.<sup>18</sup>

In his essay on truth, however, Heidegger does not end with that conclusion. Instead he insists that being somehow reveals itself in philosophical thinking about being. Being reveals itself in history, articulating its own truth. This has nothing to do with common sense or ordinary ways of thinking; it opens itself to the concealment of being. Heidegger considers Kant to have taken the final philosophical turn by rooting truth in subjectivity, in laws of the understanding itself. But he seems to see himself as beginning another turn, a turn beyond philosophy, in taking the essence of truth to be the truth of essence, of being itself.

That stance bequeaths us some intellectual problems. How could we evaluate philosophical claims or systems? How could we justify them? Common sense, intuitive judgments, and arguments—the philosophical touchstones of thinkers from Aristotle to Saul Kripke—cut no ice, for the unfolding of being in words proceeds independently of and to an extent in tension with them. It is hard to see how theories of being itself could make a practical or scientific difference, and thus how pragmatic or empirical considerations could be relevant to them. So, how is philosophical argument even possible?

The answer seems to be that it is not. Philosophers are to make pronouncements based on insights stemming from the unfolding of being itself. They require no justification, and permit no argument. Since the truth of being ultimately lies beyond any given articulation in language, moreover, clarity is no virtue; indeed, philosophy must become a form of literature, evoking in quasi-poetic form a vision that cannot be articulated. That seems to describe certain strands of contemporary philosophy quite well. Indeed, Jacques Derrida’s influential insistence that literature has primacy over philosophy has its roots in Heidegger.<sup>19</sup>

I have mentioned Heidegger’s use of *Dasein* for individual human beings, humanity as a whole, and the distinctively human way of being. That, together with

<sup>17</sup>See Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), chap. 1, “A Failure of Language.”

<sup>18</sup>I am reminded of the final proposition in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*—“What cannot be said must be passed over in silence”—as well as Arthur Prior’s fabled response to it: “What cannot be said cannot be hinted at either.”

<sup>19</sup>See Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,” *New Literary History* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 141–60.

his view of being's historical development, inclines him to think of humanity as well as individual people as having destinies. The parallel extends to being and to intellectual developments. Being unfolds, and philosophy unfolds with it. Call this Heidegger's *parallelism thesis*.

We see here the roots of several postmodern forms of argument (which I have described in the Winter 1998–99 *Academic Questions*):<sup>20</sup>

Argument from authority      *A* says that *p*; therefore, *p*

Since philosophy unfolds along with being, it advances as it goes, and certain figures mark such advances in the further unfolding of being. Heidegger himself, for example, thinks of his own work as a major new development in the history, not just of philosophy, but of being. So, this argument works, but only so long as the authority represents one of the approved figures in the history of being, and only insofar as their thought that *p* has not been overturned by subsequent developments of being. Since there can be no argument about the development of being, there can be no argument about the list of approved figures; it forms a key part of the vision.

Raising the question      *A* has called *p* into question; therefore, not *p*

Heidegger's transcendental question—What are the necessary conditions of the possibility of *p*?—does not undermine *p* any more than Descartes's appeal to clear and distinct ideas undermines certainty, at least until "On the Essence of Truth." In this essay, it is hard to see Heidegger's argument solely as giving an account of the grounds of the possibility of the correspondence theory. It seems to undermine that theory. Thus begins a pattern of Heidegger using transcendental arguments from the possibility of *p* to its necessary condition *q* not only to show that *q* is true but to undermine *p* by suggesting that *p* is in some sense limited, incomplete, misleading, inadequate, or at best ripe for replacement. Postmodernists take the raising of a transcendental question as itself undermining what is questioned, for they invariably find the necessary ground for *p* in unjustified metaphysical assumptions or unjust social conditions, no matter what *p* happens to be. So, raising the question of the necessary conditions of the possibility of *p* is enough to permit the conclusion *not p*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Daniel Bonevac, "Manifestations of Illiberalism in Philosophy," *Academic Questions* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1998–99): 14–22.

<sup>21</sup>What are the necessary conditions of the possibility of postmodernism, you ask? The existence of a certain intellectual tradition and those unjust social conditions, of course. But they do not undermine postmodernism; they justify it. (See the most recent approved authority figure.)





## The Inaugural Address

A major theme of *Being and Time* is thrownness (*Geworfenheit*): the sense that the most basic aspect of my life, my very being, is not under my control. My life is finite, ruled by the progression of time, and headed toward my own death. I can turn away from that fate, ignoring my own nature, but I can also embrace it, seeing myself as a being who chooses a path for myself, and thus develop an understanding of myself and my life. No matter what path I choose, of course, the path ends in my death. Authenticity requires me to recognize that destiny, to accept my thrownness, and to appropriate what is beyond my control into my identity. I must be rooted in the contingent features of my existence as well as in my own nature as a finite conscious being.

That nature, moreover, requires me to frame my identity in terms of membership in a group. My being in the world is being in the world *with others*. No one is an island; we are essentially members of a community of people for whom we naturally feel concern. This gives us a concept of home. It attaches us to the familiar. We are thrown into a community, but are also attached to it and need to be rooted in it in the sense that we embrace our attachment in order to live authentically.

This helps us to understand the beginning of Heidegger's inaugural address:

The assumption of the rectorate is the commitment to the *spiritual* leadership of this institution of higher learning. The following of teachers and students awakens and grows strong only from a true and joint rootedness in the essence of the German university. This essence, however, gains clarity, rank, and power only when first of all and at all times the leaders are themselves led—led by that unyielding spiritual mission that forces the fate of the German people to bear the stamp of its history.<sup>23</sup>

The call for teachers and students to be rooted in the essence of the university, to embrace their presence and roles at the university as part of their identity, reflects Heidegger's concepts of authenticity and thrownness in a strong form: "Who am I?" presupposes "Who are we?"<sup>24</sup> But several other thoughts in this introduction go beyond *Being and Time*:

<sup>23</sup>Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," 470.

<sup>24</sup>See Richard Polt, "Heidegger in the 1930s: Who Are We?" in Raffoul and Nelson, *Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, 39–45.

1. Leaders are to be *spiritual* leaders.
2. Spiritual leaders are led by unyielding spiritual missions.
3. Peoples have fates and missions as well as histories.
4. Spiritual missions force the fate of a people “to bear the stamp of its history.”

These assertions make commitments beyond anything in *Being and Time*. Peoples have fates and “unyielding spiritual missions” that their leaders inherit. How do we identify a people? The fate of a people? A spiritual mission? What would it mean for a people’s fate “to bear the stamp of its history”? Here we see the impact of his conception of thought as putting the gradual unfolding of being into words, and history putting it into action.

Heidegger extends his parallelism thesis beyond individual human beings, humanity as a whole, the distinctively human way of being, intellectual history, and history as a whole to peoples. Peoples have destinies. They have fates, which unfold along with being in history. Peoples and their leaders face a horizon of possibilities, just as individual people do. Just as authentic living for an individual is choosing consciously, intentionally, facing and embracing the contingency of one’s history, the responsibility for one’s choice, and the certainty of one’s ultimate fate, so fulfilling a spiritual mission is leading a people while facing and embracing the contingency of its history, one’s responsibility for one’s choice, and the people’s destiny. The parallel is only partial, for a people does not face death in the same way or on an analogous timescale. But, for Heidegger, a spiritual leader is an authentic leader. It is no accident that in the mid-1930s Heidegger turns his attention to Friedrich Nietzsche, who finds the basis for a revaluation of values in authenticity and that alone: “What does your conscience say?—You are to become the person you are.”<sup>25</sup> If authenticity is the central virtue of a leader, and we are to judge it according to the leader’s unyielding fidelity to an unaccountable vision of a people’s history and destiny, we are already primed for fascism. Indeed, Nietzsche called for a “great *Führer*”<sup>26</sup>—and Heidegger would later exclaim, “Nietzsche ruined me!”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1977), 3:270, 219.

<sup>26</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (1872), vol. 6 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1909), quoted in Thomson, “Heidegger and National Socialism,” 44.

<sup>27</sup>Heidegger’s comment is referenced in Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Heidegger und Nietzsche. Zu Nietzsche hat mich kaputtgemacht,” *Aletheia*, no. 9–10 (1996): 19.

Even the call for rootedness in the essence of the university turns out to have surprising implications. Self-governance, Heidegger says, is part of the university's essence. That sounds incompatible with fascism. But it requires "the most constant and unsparing self-examination," and that in turn requires self-assertion, "the primordial, shared will to its essence."<sup>28</sup> The university's essence is the scientific education of German leaders. So, the university's essence involves the mission of a people, in this case the German people. Heidegger's concept of the university is nationalist, or, more accurately, tied to the identity of a people.

### The Role of Science—and Fate of Objectivity

We must not neglect the scientific part of the university's essence, for Heidegger has surprising things to say about that, too.<sup>29</sup> He dismisses "the self-sufficiency and lack of presuppositions of an all too up-to-date science," calling for science to be "*for us and through us*" (472). This is not a demand that science become more practically oriented, but instead that it be grounded in a *metaphysical* conception of our being in the world. On Heidegger's conception, that places science beyond the bounds of evidence and argument. In science, too, raising the question is a legitimate form of inference. In fact, it is the primary mode of inference. "Science," Heidegger declares, "is the questioning holding of one's ground in the midst of the ever self-concealing totality of what is" (473). That totality is the mystery. So, science must become spiritual: "The completely unguarded exposure to the hidden and uncertain, i.e., the questionable"; "questioning becomes itself the highest form of knowing" (474). Science does not ask questions and provide answers; the questioning itself is the essence of science. We question for its own sake, not to get answers. Science in this sense is spiritual in that it is tied in its essence not only to the metaphysics but also to the mission of a people, preserving their strengths "tied to earth and blood" (475). So science, too, is nationalist. Willing the essence of science is dangerous, requiring courage, steadfast effort, and leadership.

Heidegger's conception of science in the inaugural address is that of a discipline directed at truth, he later insisted when his Nazism came under attack, but in his peculiar sense; science must return "to the essence of truth itself"

<sup>28</sup>Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," 470, 471. All further references to this work are cited parenthetically within the text.

<sup>29</sup>For a sympathetic treatment of Heidegger's philosophy of science, see Joseph Rouse, "Heidegger on Science and Naturalism," in Gary Gutting, ed., *Continental Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 123–41.

(482), “the letting be of what is, as it is” (487), rather than fracturing into specialties and subspecialties. Science has a unity, but that unity revolves around a mysterious metaphysical vision. A people has a “historical vocation” (483); science serves as a measure of that vocation.

Heidegger echoes Kant: “To give the law to oneself is the highest freedom” (475).<sup>30</sup> But he immediately moves in a direction that would shock Kant, using that as justification for eliminating academic freedom. Faculty and students alike are morally bound to work for the community, advancing its spiritual mission. That requires labor and preparation for military service. Academic pursuits have value only to the extent that they strengthen the German people by training those who are to be its guardians, in Plato’s sense: those who lead and protect the nation’s spiritual and material health, unifying it to fulfill its mission in shaping the world. Heidegger’s model of academic discourse is battle; his concept of science is *Mitwissenschaft*, literally “with-science,” translated as “engaged understanding” (479), questioning in a community of other questioners. He ends the inaugural address with a quotation from Plato: “All that is great stands in the storm.”<sup>31</sup>

Heidegger’s fellow Nazis understood this as a call for science to stop pretending to objectivity. Science rests on a spiritual vision and must promote the practical and spiritual health of a people. Science is tied to earth and blood; its goal is the strength of a people. This implies that the science pursued in German universities should be German science, science directed at enhancing the health and strength of the German people. On such a conception, science has not only philosophical presuppositions and goals but normative ones, serving the interests of a specific people—or, in the preferred Nazi terminology, a specific race.

In retrospect Heidegger denied that his view entails a politicized science, a “German mathematics,” “German physics,” and so on; the fate of the German people was tied, in his view, to the fate of Western civilization, and his idea was to return that civilization to its foundations to overcome the crisis encapsulated in Nietzsche’s pronouncement, “God is dead.” The crisis, as Heidegger later understood it, was a crisis resulting from a collapse of normativity, from ethical and religious norms yielding to the will to power. Battle, he said, he intended as Heraclitean strife, as something like open competition (489), not as preparation for war.

It is not clear, however, that Heidegger’s inaugural address admits of any positive interpretation. At the very least, to have given the address on May 27, 1933, was to invite the Nazi construal just outlined. Hitler had become chancellor on January 30. February witnessed the Storm Troopers’ terror campaign against opposing parties and

<sup>30</sup>Compare Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>31</sup>Plato, *Republic* 497d, 9.

the Reichstag fire. March brought the jailing of thousands of Communists, including their presidential candidate Ernst Thälmann, the opening of Goebbels' propaganda ministry as well as the concentration camp at Dachau, and the passage of the Enabling Act, transferring all legislative power to Hitler. In April, Jews were banned from all government jobs, including academic positions at public universities; the percentage of Jewish students at universities was capped at 1.5 percent. A census was ordered to identify all non-Aryans, and psychologist Wolfgang Köhler published an article criticizing the firing of Jewish professionals—the last article critical of the Nazi government that was allowed to appear in Germany until after the war. In May, the National Socialist German Students' League began book burnings on German campuses, and the German government began a sterilization program. That is the context in which Heidegger gave his address.

Even setting aside the historical context, Heidegger's critique of science's objectivity, specialization, and universality is hard to defend. We see the results of his critique in postmodern attacks on science and on objectivity in general, as well as in the subjugation of science to political goals. We also see the effects of Heidegger's analysis in assaults on academic freedom and on attempts to require students to perform volunteer work in the service of political goals. Infusing science with a nationalist mission inevitably subjugates both science and the university to politics.

For Heidegger himself, the result was disastrous. His thought that the modern crisis—the “emergency of being,” as he would style it—stems from the collapse of normativity embodied in “God is dead,” is profound. But his solution is to seek a substitute for God, a leader whose mission, unyielding and spiritual, could give meaning to a people desperately in need of it, even by defining and battling an enemy.<sup>32</sup> Hitler was just such a leader. He was unyielding; he saw his mission as spiritual; and he promised to lead the German people to fulfill the destiny fated for them by battling, in a literal sense, a series of enemies. By November 1933 Heidegger wrote in the student newspaper at Freiburg, “Our will to national self-responsibility desires that each people find and preserve the greatness and truth of its destiny.” This requires the subjugation of philosophy as well as science to political ends: “Let not propositions and ‘ideas’ be the rules of your Being. The *Führer* alone is the future German reality and its law....Heil Hitler!”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup>See Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 289–316.

<sup>33</sup>Martin Heidegger, “Deutsche Männer und Frauen!” (“German Men and Women!”), *Freiburger Studentenzeitung* 16 (8th semester), no. 2, November 10, 1933, quoted in Wolin ed., *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 48; Heidegger, “Deutsche Studenten” (“German Students”), *Freiburger Studentenzeitung* 16 (8th semester), no. 1, November 3, 1933, quoted in Wolin, *Politics of Being*, xi, and *Heidegger Controversy*, 47; in Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 65, 317n154, and in Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 8, 288n14.

## The Project of *Contributions*

After stepping down from his post as rector, Heidegger began work on *Contributions to Philosophy*. This is a difficult, even enigmatic work, to which I cannot do justice in a small space. But here it is enough to point out that it affirms the key moves Heidegger makes in “On the Essence of Truth” and the inaugural address.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger sought the ground of the possibility of being in the world with others—being and its disclosure in time:

The preliminary disclosure of being, although it is unconceptual, makes it possible for *Dasein* as existing being-in-the-world to be related to beings, to those it encounters in the world as well as to itself as existing.<sup>34</sup>

*Contributions* starts where *Being and Time* leaves off, continuing the pattern of transcendental questioning of the essay on truth. If the ground of our being in the world with others is being and its disclosure in time, what, in turn, is the ground of that? What are the necessary conditions of the possibility of being’s disclosure or, as he now puts it, unfolding through time? Framing that question leads Heidegger to focus his reflections not on *Dasein* but on its unfolding as a dynamic process. Heidegger’s account is complex and protean, cast in terms of echoes, inceptual thinking, leaps, and an idiosyncratic reading of the origins of Greek philosophy.

Heidegger’s title reveals the key to his answer: *Ereignis*, which might be translated as “event,” “appropriation,” or, as various scholars have rendered it, “enowning.”<sup>35</sup> Like the question itself, this answer grows out of his analysis in *Being and Time*. There, Heidegger sees human beings primarily as agents in the world, as active, as finding objects ready-to-hand and only thereafter theorizing and reflecting on the nature of the objects considered in themselves. Agency is primary; understanding is subsequent, and consists in interpreting a world already conceived as having meaning in terms of our relation to it. Our interpretation of the world consists in putting such prior meanings together.

In *Contributions*, Heidegger thinks of actions in the ordinary sense and acts of interpretation as falling under the same heading. Both are acts of *taking something to be something*—of making sense of it, of construing it as intelligible, of

<sup>34</sup>Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Stambaugh, 437.

<sup>35</sup>See Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy*, 41; and “Ereignis,” in Raffoul and Nelson, *Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, 283–89. I am not fond of the coinage “enowning”; “acquisition” would seem to be a familiar word conveying much the same meaning.

appropriating it. Someone might see a baseball and think of it as a baseball, or as a ball, or as a sphere. Those are acts of interpretation. That person might also pick up the baseball and throw it. All of these are appropriations or “enownings”—ways of making sense of the object. *Dasein* unfolds in a series of such appropriations. My being in the world, we might say, consists in a series of acts of making it my own, of making it intelligible to me in thought or in action by interpreting it.

What are the necessary conditions of the possibility of *Ereignis*, of making things my own in this way? We make sense of things by framing them, by finding a place for them in a network of meanings. We make things intelligible in terms of structures of intelligibility. Taking something to be a baseball, for example, presupposes a framework of meanings, a set of interrelated practices, a collection of patterns of thought and action that define “baseball.” This kind of presupposition is less obvious, but no less real, if I take the object to be a ball, or a sphere, or something to be thrown. We assign something meaning by relating it to a structure of meanings. *Contributions* thus offers a holistic theory of meaning, and thus of being-in-the-world.

Heidegger's holism is not a whole-ism; he does not think that appropriating something, assigning it a meaning, requires knowledge of the *entire* structure of meaning. To acquire the concept of *green*, for example, we do not have to acquire *all* color concepts, as American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars seems to think, but we must have some set of concepts to which *green* can relate.<sup>36</sup> We might call Heidegger's view *localism*: we make sense of things by locating a place for them in a framework, and our being-in-the-world develops as we develop and enriches those frameworks of meaning. Heidegger thus anticipates one of French philosopher, sociologist, and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard's key themes: “local determinism.”<sup>37</sup>

But how does this evolution start? How do we ever learn our first concept? I might get my first concept from my community—but where does the community get its first concept? What makes conceptual activity, or, more broadly, appropriation, “enowning,” making sense of things, possible? The rationalist tradition answers with a priori concepts. The empiricist tradition answers with higher-order conceptual abilities and experiences that human beings share. By now you should be able to guess Heidegger's novel but obscure answer: being. Being unfolds through us and our sense-making activity.

<sup>36</sup>Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 127–96.

<sup>37</sup>See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxiv.



We might, with Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, and other philosophers influenced by Heidegger, interpret this as a version of pragmatism.<sup>38</sup> But that omits what Heidegger sees, in *Contributions to Philosophy*, as a vital element (one first stressed in the inaugural address), “Philosophy as ‘philosophy of a people’”:<sup>39</sup>

How does a people become a people? Does a people become only that which it is? If so, then what is it? How can we know: (1) What a people in general is? (2) What this or that people is? (3) What we ourselves are? (*CP*, 15, 35).

This is “an essential passageway,” an “ethnic principle.” A group becomes a people in Heidegger’s sense “when its most unique members appear” and “experience a presentiment.” Their philosophy, “to be achieved through struggle,” “grounds them historically in their *Da-sein*, and destines them to stewardship of the truth of *beyng*” (*CP*, 15, 35).<sup>40</sup>

If consciousness, truth, humanity, philosophy, politics, and history all depend on the historical unfolding of being, it would appear we can make no progress on any of those fronts unless we somehow gain insight into being’s unfolding. How could we do that? Heidegger’s answer is hardly reassuring: *we leap*. We leave behind the ordinary, the conventional, the rational. We seemingly display “utter recklessness” (*CP*, 115, 179). We have no way of knowing when we are doing this correctly, but, to accomplish it, we must go back to the beginning of philosophy, see beings as existing “solely for the sake of being” (*CP*, 117, 181), which transforms us.

We make a decision, one that cannot be explained or justified. No transcendental argument can lead us to the conclusion we would need (*CP*, 122, 188). *Dasein* must become “the preserver of the thrown projection, *the grounded one that grounds the ground*” (*CP*, 122, 189; emphasis in the original). Heidegger here echoes Hegel’s understanding of the self as that which relates itself to itself, and seems to imply that *Dasein* is self-grounding. We cannot go beyond it, asking about the transcendental ground of the possibility of being

<sup>38</sup>See Charles Taylor, “Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger,” in Guignon, *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 317; Richard Rorty, “Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism,” in Dreyfus and Wrathall, *Companion to Heidegger*, 511–32; and *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>39</sup>Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu, 15, 34. All further references to this work, noted as *CP*, are cited parenthetically within the text.

<sup>40</sup>Here the translator uses “*beyng*” to indicate that Heidegger is using the archaic “*Seyn*” instead of “*Sein*” to refer to what he calls “the originary sense” of the term—something non-metaphysical (or perhaps pre-metaphysical).

itself. Heidegger returns to the event (*CP*, 130, 195), to the idea of making sense of things, and seems to suggest that we make sense of ourselves as making sense of things, especially ourselves. We are beings who interpret ourselves as self-interpreting.

But he leaves us with something other than existential freedom. The process of self-interpretation requires strife (*CP*, 229, 281–82). The unconcealment is also a concealment; being hides things as it unfolds and reveals others. We interpret ourselves, by means of strife, as members of a people, a people that defines itself through strife against a real or imagined enemy, and in so doing interpret philosophy and history. We strive to articulate a truth, the truth of being, that cannot be articulated. And we struggle to reach an understanding of the development of being, philosophy, history, peoples, and ourselves, in the end leaping to an interpretation we cannot justify, based on a vision we cannot put into words.

## Conclusion

The essay “On the Essence of Truth” remains at an abstract level, but the lecture course from which it draws shows how it relates to his inaugural address and gives Heidegger’s own understanding of his account’s political implications. It also places Heidegger’s theory of truth in a much more sinister light. The truth, as we have seen, is the unfolding of being, which in turn, by the parallelism thesis, underlies the historical development of a people. Our search for the truth is not only a search for being but a search for self-definition, an understanding of who we are as a people. How do we define ourselves as a people? In part by opposing ourselves to an enemy; we define who we are by defining who we are *not*. “The enemy,” Heidegger says in the lecture course, “poses an essential threat to the existence of the Volk and its members.” It may be outside the group or within. So, he says, we must “seek out the enemy as such,” “lead him to reveal himself,” “avoid nurturing illusions about him,” and “initiate the attack on a long-term basis, with the goal of total extermination.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Wahrheit: Gesamtausgabe, II* (Abteilung: Vorlesungen, 1919–1944), *Band 36/37*: 1., *Die Grundfrage der Philosophie* (Sommersemester, 1933); 2., *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* (Wintersemester, 1933–1934); (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2001), 90–91; quoted in Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933–1935*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 168; Gaëtan Pégny, “The Many Lives of Dasein,” in *The Future of Philology: Proceedings of the 11th Annual Columbia University German Graduate Student Conference*, ed. H. Bajohr, B.R. Dorvel, V. Hessling, and T. Weitz (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 194–218, 203–204; Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, xxvi.

Heidegger, and the world, had the great misfortune that an unyielding leader arose to assign a terrible set of meanings to Germany, its history, and its destiny, pursuing enemies with the goal of total extermination. But even if that had not happened, Heidegger's thought would have been deeply problematic, for it is incompatible with important values. It is incompatible with a conception of science as independent and universal, for it subjugates science to metaphysics and to politics. It is incompatible with a similar idea of the university and of inquiry as a whole, for both are likewise subjugated. It is incompatible with liberal democracy, individualism, and a respect for human rights, for it sees our being in the world as being-with-others in the strong sense of placing each person, along with science, in a particular community that defines meaning for them.<sup>42</sup> It thus inevitably sees politics in top-down terms of spiritual leadership, missions, and destinies rather than collective self-rule. Its emphasis on peoples, their histories, and their destinies leads to the divisiveness of identity politics, seeing conflict as essential to self-definition and pushing peoples to understand themselves in opposition to other peoples as enemies. Finally, its insistence on the parallelism of philosophy, history, politics, and consciousness, all of which reflect the ultimately ineffable historical development of being, places all of them, and the question of meaning itself, not only beyond good and evil, but beyond all rational deliberation.

---

<sup>42</sup>For an extended argument to this effect, see the final chapter of Richard Polt, *The Emergency of Being: On Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).