



Betraying the own-most: Heidegger and pitfalls of being-there

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1 Introduction

The kind invitation of Benedikt Korf to make a contribution to the Heidegger debate, which once again burst out after the publication of the “Black Notebooks”, was at the same time welcome and challenging. The debate had already ignited a discussion among us, the ones co-authoring this commentary, as most of the reactions to Heidegger’s scandalous politics seemed to follow quite familiar paths. Ever since the book of Victor Farias *Heidegger and Nazism* (1989) came out in the end of the 1980s, Heidegger’s political engagement, its relation to his philosophical corpus in particular, has been one of the long-running disputes in the fields of philosophy, social sciences and beyond. Heidegger’s engagement with National Socialism has been revealed to be much more profound than Heidegger himself had led us to believe, as evidenced by the posthumously published *Der Spiegel* interview (Heidegger, 1981). The amount of commentaries is overwhelming. On the one hand, are the scandalous readings poorly engaging with Heidegger’s philosophical thinking, while on the other, the philosophical commentaries separating “Heidegger the man” solely from the “Heidegger the philosopher”. It hardly comes as a surprise that this ambiguity can be found also in the reception of Heidegger in the geographical literature (See Harvey, 1996:299–302; Massey, 2004; cf. Elden, 2005; Paddock, 2004; Rose, 2012). The critiques in particular have presented confusing readings from time to time, that have framed Heidegger’s political engagement during the 1930s as an outcome of the concepts Heidegger actually developed much later on (Malpas, 2006:17–27; Joronen, 2013a:629).

More nuanced readings have thus been a welcome contribution that, by focusing on the contexts where Heidegger developed his philosophical thoughts, have been able, at least to some extent, to explain Heidegger’s philosophical turns as

reactions to the political climate of his time (and place). In particular, these writings have helped us to understand what was behind Heidegger’s engagement, but more importantly, what do Heidegger’s own views tell about National Socialism itself (See Elden, 2006; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1990)? An entirely different debate, concerned more with Heidegger’s omissions than his actions, has been formed around Heidegger’s profound silence about his political engagement (Derrida, 1991). Heidegger’s silence of course did bother thinkers already during Heidegger’s lifetime. Herbert Marcuse, a student of Heidegger, for instance insisted on a personal exchange of letters in 1947 that Heidegger should more clearly and categorically resign himself from National Socialism (Marcuse et al., 1991). In every way Heidegger’s response was unsatisfactory, seeking excuses such as how hard it was to live in Germany, or even worse (for Heidegger at least), making calculative references to the *amount* of suffering East Germans had experienced, as if there was some utilitarian measure we could use to make Nazi politics weigh less, to be “less evil” (Weizman, 2011).

Although the reaction to the recently published the Black Notebooks (*Schwarze Hefte* 2014–2015), which date back to the periods of 1931–1938 (*Überlegungen* II–VI), 1938/1939 (*Überlegungen* VII–XV), 1939–1941 (*Überlegungen* XII–XV) and 1942–1948 (*Gesamtausgabe* 97, *Anmerkungen* I–V), seems quite overblown in relation to the overall novelty of the content, their publication has without doubt brought to our attention disturbing material, which one cannot easily put aside when engaging with the works of Heidegger (see Babich, 2016; Di Cesare, 2015; Fried, 2014; Gordon, 2014; Korf, 2014; Polt, 2015; Strohmayr, 2015). Although the discussion of Heidegger’s anti-Semitism has been around for a long time, Heidegger’s claim that Jews, who according to him had become one of the central figures of the mod-

ern rootless and man-centred “machination” (*Machenschaft*), were collectively responsible for their own industrial genocide, is not only disturbing, but brings out elemental questions, some of which we want to grasp herein.

2 Heidegger, authenticity and the crisis of modernity

Firstly, Heidegger’s (2015) idea of “self destruction” does call us to re-evaluate some of the earlier interpretations, which underlined the gap between the National Socialism and Heidegger’s hopes about the cultural and intellectual change it should bring forth. Heidegger’s claim that National Socialism (its spoiled version at least) and “world Jewry” (Heidegger, 2014:243, 262) both share the same modern ethos may be critical towards the Nazi leaders in their inability to escape the technological logic of modern machination. Yet, the argument itself is too troubling to be seen as a mere critique of the way National Socialism had been taken in control by those who have “the least to do with the inner truth and greatness of this movement”, as Heidegger complained in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* – a lecture given in 1935, a year after Heidegger’s resignation from the rectorate in the University of Freiburg (Heidegger, 2000a:213). Heidegger may have been disappointed about the “movement”, as it did not develop into a cultural revolution with sophisticated Nazi leaders regaining the potentials that pre-Socratic philosophers carried against the malaise of modern nihilism. Yet, the collective blaming of Jews for their “self destruction”, although made quickly and vaguely in the notebooks, equals the blaming of every victim of modern power for their own killing, including Heidegger’s beloved East Germans, merely for the fact that they somehow were possessed of a modern “world view”. Such an argument is nothing new: inasmuch as Jews or East Germans have been argued to deserve their deaths, we have heard the argument numerous times after the “war on terror” was launched at the beginning of the millennia, most recently in Gaza (Joronen, 2015). Heidegger may be right on the circumstance that there is no authentic death in modernity, only a pile of corpses, a biomass perishing into its machineries. But this alone serves as nothing more than a bad excuse for the way Heidegger makes, in his “private National Socialism” so to speak, certain bodies and populations, whether Jews, Romanies, homosexuals or others victims of the Nazi violence, responsible for their own murders (See Di Cesare, 2015).

Surely, there is much to debate regarding the message Heidegger wanted to send (or send unwantedly) when planning to publish the Black Notebooks in the mid 1970s and eventually ordering a culminating point for the notebooks in his plan for the publication of his collected works (Di Cesare, 2015; Babich, 2016). What we seek to do here, however, is to take a step back from the whole setup that focuses on the acts and omissions of “Heidegger the man” as they are

now revealed in the light of the Black Notebooks. Yes, the Black Notebooks are Heidegger’s own writings that combine his philosophy directly to the historical events; yes, there are Heidegger’s contemporaries who testify Heidegger was a Nazi; and yes, Heidegger banned the access of his teacher of Jewish background, Edmund Husserl, to the university library, but still had a love affair with one of his Jewish students, Hannah Arendt, who supported Heidegger all the way to the end (Arendt, 1971). But it is not our aim here to collect an updated indictment list of Heidegger’s crimes and bad taste and decisions, and we are even less interested in apologizing on behalf of him. What we want to do herein is rather to problematize the way Heidegger used, and most importantly did not use, his own philosophical views to explain phenomena and central events of his time. Thus, we want to argue that possibilities remain to grasp Heidegger’s thought in a way, which Heidegger himself did not carry out “properly”. This brings us to the second question we want to spend some time with; namely, did Heidegger’s politics, in fact, betray his own thinking or can we think of it as an understandable outcome of his philosophy?

Heidegger’s work stands almost unparalleled among modern philosophers. He is clearly among the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, whether we look at the development of post-structuralism (i.e. Foucault, Derrida), phenomenology (i.e. Merleau-Ponty), existentialism (i.e. Sartre), hermeneutics (i.e. Gadamer), political theory (i.e. Arendt), critical theory (i.e. Lefebvre, Marcuse) or pragmatism (i.e. Rorty, Dreyfus). And yet his work is imbued with National Socialism, and now we know, metaphysical anti-Semitism. This should in no way surprise us, since there is so much that is also profoundly anti-Jewish in Europe and European thinking both at the time of Heidegger’s writing as well as just prior to his completing of some of his major works. Yet, the failure, or the “error” as Heidegger later called his political journey (2000b:413, 430), is not only due to the change of circumstances (ie. that National Socialism turned out to be what Heidegger did not expect), but is also his own failure to face the openness to being and so to properly reply to the “dangers” of his own time and “being-there” (*Dasein*) (see also Habermas, 1990).

Sometimes we may assume life, or a life of a thinker, is a coherent body, where a comparison between author’s acts, sayings and writings go together seamlessly. We may even take contextual reading as our guideline for understandings (and rationalizing) author’s choices, but simultaneously deny the cracks, ruptures, contradictions and incoherence in them. Surely, Heidegger’s philosophy aims to be a watertight package, but for a life of a thinker who puts his hope on a divine waiting of coming events, we shouldn’t assume such coherence (Heidegger, 1981). In fact, we shouldn’t do that to anyone: it may be possible to coherently formulate the assertion that life, like being, has an unpredictable element of “happening”, which “comes to us without coming from us” (Dastur, 2000:183), but it is precisely this element which makes

the living of that life completely different. Though careful in his dodges regarding the traps of biological racism and straightforward cultural essentialism, Heidegger simply became enchanted by the very powers his thinking, especially towards the end, tried to escape. It would be as if an avowed communist would consciously support a system that enriches itself at the expense of the workers, or similarly, support a version of communist nationalism that eschewed the global solidarity of the workers. Heidegger's inability to live up to the standards he set in his philosophical thought is, we think, precisely the act of "bad faith" and "inauthenticity" that the existentialist movement in general saw as a crucial part of the crisis of modernity (see Imre, 2010).

3 Heidegger's "event"

Heidegger's betrayal should not be taken as a purely individual choice. With this we do not want to release Heidegger of responsibility, but rather to underline that no author forms a flawless totality, where his/her political acts and everyday life go smoothly together with their own philosophical argumentation. The relation between Heidegger's politics and philosophy is simply much more complicated than this. What we want to argue here is that this relation reflects the ambiguity that is based on the twin structure Heidegger himself rightly recognized within the heart of the question of being. Without going into details, this ambiguity can be presented as follows. Firstly, being takes place by revealing us a world through the site one dwells in. We do not create existence, but are thrown to its revealing, to the site where things are opened to us *as somethings*, rather than *nothings*. In what consists of encounters between being and human beings, the former is what grants the revealing and the latter whom participate in the process by receiving and making a stand in it (Heidegger, 1972). This participation is not a free-will decision, but a question concerning what is given for us to think for. Accordingly, the revealing of being gives us a world, and so positions us ontologically, which is why the options regarding how to receive this "revealing of being" are also grounded in the way being operates.

How then does being operate, or as Heidegger would put it, "take place"? By giving itself as a form of revealing, as one could say by referring to the above-mentioned, but also by simultaneously doing the opposite: by concealing the possibility for the other modes of revealing to take place. All modes of revealing hence contain in themselves a concealment of the originary openness of being, and so a veiled possibility for the other modes of revealing to come forth. This brings us back to the point about ambiguity. In the relation between human beings and being, the role of the human beings is to receive *and* guard of what being originally, in its own-most, denotes an openness for things to emerge. Heidegger's discussion of inauthenticity and common man (*Das Man*) in *Being and Time*, but also his later views about the

way moderns not knowing how to dwell, all underscore the very ambiguity of being: the possibility to become either entangled, fixed and rooted to some modality of being and so take the revealing of being for granted, or the possibility to preserve the openness of being in all of its plenitude and unpredictable eventuality.

The former discussion, we admit, does not do justice to the complex, decades-long project of Heidegger. Yet, it does show how human action (or dwelling) is always ontologically positioned by the ways the world is already opened for us, while at the same time acknowledging how we have the capability to face the openness of being (the concealed) in a way that makes it a meaningful part of the dwelling. Heidegger's betrayal of the potentialities his own thinking is grounded on upholding this dual relation. Heidegger's claim that Judaism, like "Americanism", "positivism", "Bolshevism", "liberalism" and "capitalism" (Heidegger, 1977:135–153), is one of the guises through which modern machination has gained a foothold in our time, surely aims to paint us a picture of thinking that takes the question of "being" seriously (ie. the way it takes place and happens to Heidegger). But Heidegger's continuous support of National Socialism does precisely the opposite: forgets, and thus discards, being and its openness for revealing.

It is precisely this act of forgetting, we suggest, that makes Heidegger political. The question of "how we are related to the ways the world takes place for us" is the fundamental possibility for the political response to the ontological questions of our time, which Heidegger did not properly confront (See Joronen, 2013a, b). Or to put it another way, Heidegger's discussions at the end of 1930s, although critical towards the calculative direction that National Socialism was heading in, are loaded with references to "other beginning", which would bring us a thinking and dwelling that remains open for being and its event. Texts like *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)* may thus give us a revolutionary angle of what the politics of being could look like, when human beings are not put at the centre of process. But the fact that Heidegger's hopes were grounded on National Socialism makes Heidegger lose what is "own-most" to being and *Dasein*: the openness of being that *Dasein* receives, guards and makes a question of (see Imre, 2010; Joronen, 2012; Owen and Imre, 2013). Heidegger not only falls to the robust ethnic characterization, but also establishes a collective portrayal of a metaphysical foundation upon which he bases his thinking of "world Jewry". What is worse, he does not properly question the violent machination of modernity, where it most evidently does exist: in the world view(s) of Nazis. Thinking (*Andenken*), which Heidegger suggested could take the place of philosophy (that he claimed was ruined by the tradition of western thought), was to face up to Nietzsche's nihilism and calculative gigantism of modernity; philosophically it could, but Heidegger as a man, could not. And the Black Notebooks reaffirm just this.

4 After “Black Notebooks”

So what does this mean for the geographical thought, or human sciences in general? First of all, we cannot simply abandon Heidegger’s thinking, especially since modernity has not surpassed or superseded a situation where there is no longer mass murder, the exploitation of people for politically expedient purposes, or indeed the existence of what amounts to “disposable humans”. In fact, today we have more means for surveillance, control of populations, manipulation of biological premises of life, “efficient” abuse of the earth, global-scale economic oppression, and for mass destruction, than Heidegger would have ever imagined in his lifetime. Without asking how these changes position us ontologically, we may well become nothing but thoughtless beings blindly following the calculative premises of speed, massiveness, growth and practical efficiency, whether presented in a form of neo-liberal positioning of self-governing subjects or in form of conservative politics based on ethno-national and cultural divisions. The very existence of extreme politics that rejects any version of sharing the same space with “the other”, however that “other” is defined, means that Heidegger’s call to examine existence is more than an esoteric question meant to support the violent project of Nazis. Thus, we are not claiming some kind of ultra-liberalism, or a macro-acceptance of all opinions, as so many “free speech” advocates do, but at least we can start with the idea that our own positions bear scrutiny, as do all of the others. As such we need to go back to Arendt’s assessment of the problem with Eichmann in Jerusalem, that if there are those who refuse to share the earth with us, then we may need to do something drastic about this problem. Is this Heideggerian or not?

Clarifying the position of a thinker may or may not be a valuable thing. We are of course dealing with Heidegger and “Heidegger” here, and in the one case it might be useful. Yet, we would like to consider the importance of Heidegger, and “Heidegger”, in relation to the broader philosophical positions, such as existentialism, phenomenology, post-structuralism and the movements that sought to examine the post-industrial revolution of “modernity”. Maybe we should hence do to Heidegger what Foucault said he was doing to Nietzsche: to tribute him by using and deforming him (Foucault, 1980:53–54). Or to use Heidegger’s own idioms: as being happens to us in such a way that we are called to make a rupture and overcome all that tastes bad in Heidegger’s thinking, it indeed is a call we should not reject.

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