

Heidegger and National Socialism

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I. Introduction

It is unfortunate but in retrospect undeniable that Heidegger's brief but very public tenure as the first Nazi Rector of Freiburg University in 1933-34 helped cast an early sheen of intellectual legitimacy over the brutal regime which, less than a decade later, earned everlasting historical infamy for Auschwitz and the other horrors of the Shoah. The question for many of us, then, is this: How do we come to terms with the fact that the man who was probably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century threw the considerable weight of his thought behind what was certainly its most execrable political movement? This profoundly troubling juxtaposition has haunted intellectuals for nearly seventy years (Marcuse 1988), generating a secondary literature of singular immensity. Although the debates carried on in this literature are multifaceted and complex, an historical examination of this "Heidegger controversy" (Thomson 1999) shows that it has long had the character of a trial, both before it actually became one and after Heidegger himself was no longer alive to stand trial. Indeed, an "accuse or excuse" dichotomy still structures the field of competing interpretations, obliging scholars to take sides, as though with either the prosecution or the defense. Unfortunately, this adversarial logic increasingly dominates the public sphere in the West, its common spectacle of talking heads talking past one another working to obscure the fact that in complex matters the truth is usually located between the opposing extremes, unfit for the polemical purposes of demagogues on either side. Such a binary polarization has long diminished the signal-to-noise ratio of the so-called "Heidegger case" by putting the juridical imperative to either condemn or exonerate before the hermeneutic necessity first to understand.

The primary goal here, accordingly, is just to understand something of the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics. (Throughout, "politics" is a convenient

shorthand for what Wolin characterizes less euphemistically as Heidegger's "short-lived, though concerted, partisanship for Hitler's regime" (in Löwith 1995: 7).) Recently scholars have done invaluable work situating Heidegger within the broader context of the many German intellectuals who implicitly contributed to or actively collaborated with the rise of the National Socialist Workers' Party (Zimmerman 1990; Sluga 1993; Losurdo 2001), but such approaches tend not to focus on what was philosophically unique about Heidegger's politics, which is what readers of this volume are likely to be most interested in. I will thus take a narrower approach, addressing the following two questions. Q1, *Did Heidegger's politics stem directly from his philosophy?* Q2, *Did Heidegger learn anything philosophically from his terrible political "mistake"?* In this limited space, we cannot investigate many of the proposed connections between Heidegger's philosophy and politics, nor the lessons he might have learned subsequently from those connections (see Derrida 1989; Dallmayr 1993; Young 1997; Thomson 1999; Rickey 2002; Bambach 2003). Nevertheless, I believe I can still say enough to answer "yes" to both questions. To whittle the topic down to a more manageable size, I will devote most of this chapter to setting out what I take to be the most convincing affirmative answer to Q1, to establishing, in other words, the most direct connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics.¹ This will then allow us to address Q2 within the purview of Q1, thereby showing as precisely as possible at least one lesson that Heidegger learned from this connection between his thought and National Socialism.

Because I seek to establish a direct relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics, my interpretation is likely to run afoul of the aforementioned controversy—despite the fact that Heidegger himself affirmed just such a connection in no uncertain terms (Löwith 1994, discussed below). For, in order to deflect precipitous attempts to use Heidegger's politics simply to dismiss his thought outright (a move no serious critic makes today), Heideggerians have become accustomed to rigidly separating Heidegger's philosophy from his politics. Even such thinkers as Rorty (1999), Schürmann

(1990), Lyotard (1990), Pöggeler (in Neske and Kettering 1990), and Olafson (2000) employ this strategy, seeking to insulate Heidegger's important philosophical achievements from what he later called his life's "greatest stupidity." Gadamer, however, rightly observes of the claim that Heidegger's "political errors have nothing to do with his philosophy," that: "[w]holly unnoticed was how damaging such a 'defense' of so important a thinker really is" (Gadamer 1989: 428). As a defensive strategy, moreover, such a move is fatally flawed, for it accepts the major premise of the most devastating political criticisms of Heidegger. This idea that Heidegger's politics are unrelated to his thought forms the basis of the accusations that his politics represent arbitrary *decisionism* (Wolin 1990: 52), careerist *opportunism* (Bourdieu 1991: 70-73), and even the fundamental *betrayal* of his philosophy (Marcuse 1988: 41).² Here, however, both prosecution and defense fail to do justice to the philosophical integrity of Heidegger's work. The ongoing publication of his *Complete Works* makes it increasingly clear that Heidegger regularly invoked his own philosophical views as justifications for his political decisions. As a result, even long-embattled Heideggerians are beginning to realize that a firm separation of Heidegger's politics from his philosophy is no longer tenable. Thus Rorty recently supplemented his well-known counter-factual argument that Heidegger's politics are philosophically irrelevant.³ Tellingly, Rorty now judges that "Heidegger's books will be read for centuries to come, but the smell of smoke from the crematories—'the grave in the air'—will linger on these pages" (Rorty 1998: 2).

As Rorty's quote from Celan suggests, another question haunts the two we will focus on in this chapter, and it is perhaps the most vexed. What was Heidegger's relationship to Nazi anti-Semitism? My first sentence expresses the general view I take on this disturbing issue. Many edifying details from the exculpatory narrative disseminated by Heidegger and his most loyal followers—for example, that Heidegger became Rector of Freiburg reluctantly, and did so only in order to use his fame to protect his Jewish colleagues, students, and the academic freedom of the university (Neske and Kettering 1990: 15-

22)—have been seriously compromised by the facts (Ott 1993; Safranski 1998). We now know, for instance, that Heidegger occasionally resorted to strategic uses of anti-Semitism in the service of his academic political goals, and that this led (after a letter from Heidegger containing a derogatory reference to “the Jew Fraenkel” was leaked to Jaspers) to Heidegger’s indefinite loss of his teaching license and his subsequent hospitalization for depression (Ott 1993; 190; Lang 1996; Safranski 1998). At the same time, however, even Heidegger’s critics acknowledge that he publicly condemned the “biologistic” racial metaphysics behind the Nazi “final solution” to Marx’s “Jewish question” (Wolin 1990), and that he did help some Jewish colleagues and students (see Safranski 1998, which also shows the notorious rumor that Heidegger barred Husserl from Freiberg’s library to be completely false). Moreover, although Heidegger never made the kind of public apology for which Marcuse and others long called (Thomson 2000b), he did not in fact remain “silent” on the Shoah. A 1949 lecture proclaimed “the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and the death camps” to be “essentially the same” as mechanized agribusiness (Heidegger 1994: 56), that is, symptomatic of our nihilistic, “technological” ontotheology (for the philosophical context of Heidegger’s deliberately provocative remark, see Agamben 1999; Thomson 2000c).⁴ Until the long-sealed archives all come to light, it is only reasonable to expect this troubling issue to continue to animate and inform the Heidegger controversy. For the current range of views, compare the important (but diametrically opposed) works by Wolin (1990) and Young (1997). Neither critic nor defender, however, maintain that Heidegger’s decision to join the Nazis can be explained in terms of anti-Semitism.

To find such an explanation, we need to turn to what I take to be the most immediate connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and politics, namely, his long-developed philosophical vision for a radical reformation of the university. Put simply, Heidegger’s philosophical views on higher education were largely responsible for his decision to become the first Nazi Rector of Freiburg University. In 1933, Heidegger seized upon the National

Socialist “revolution” as an opportunity to enact the philosophical vision for a radical reformation of the university he had been developing since 1911 (Crowell 1997; Milchman and Rosenberg 1997; Thomson 2001; 2003). The full depth and significance of this fact only begins to become clear, however, when we understand the complexities of Heidegger’s politically crucial view of the relationship between philosophy and the other academic disciplines or fields of science. (“Science” is the standard but notoriously misleading translation of the German *Wissenschaft*, which refers more broadly to the “knowledge” embodied in the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences.) That task will occupy most of this short essay.

II. From Historicality to Heidegger’s University Politics: Restoring Philosophy to Her Throne

In 1936, at a time when Heidegger had no reason to try to cover his political tracks, he told Löwith that the conception of “historicality” presented in *Being and Time* (1927) provided the philosophical “basis” for his political “engagement” (Löwith 1994: 60). Still, scholars disagree about whether this formal framework did (Löwith 1994; Wolin 1990) or did not (Guignon 1983; Olafson 2000) give Heidegger reason to join the Nazis. Although there is certainly no necessary connection between the concept of historicality and Nazism (as Guignon and Olafson show), Heidegger’s understanding of authentic historicality clearly did play a crucial role “bridging” the divide between philosophy and politics (Wolin 1990; Sluga 1993; Thomson 1999) and so encouraging Heidegger’s attempt to “seize the moment.”⁵ This is not primarily because *Being and Time*’s discussion of authentic historicality already philosophically appropriates concepts that would soon become highly-charged National Socialist *philosophemes*—such as “struggle” (*Kampf*), “people” (*Volk*), “community,” “fate,” and “destiny” (Heidegger 1962: 436). Such rhetorical and historical affinities, while striking in retrospect, are also potentially quite misleading (as in Fritzsche 1999). More important here is the philosophical content such

concepts helped give to the notion of authentic historicity *as Heidegger himself understood it*. Put simply, but in the terms of authentic historicity, Heidegger chose Nietzsche as his “hero” and so sought an historically appropriate way to carry on Nietzsche’s struggle against nihilism (Fynsk 1993; Thomson 1999). The eagerness with which Heidegger answered Spengler’s Nietzschean call for radical university reform in 1933 followed from his sense that it was his philosophical “fate”—and so his role in focusing the “destiny” of his generation—to combat the growing problem of historical meaninglessness “by way of the university” (Heidegger 1991: 103).⁶

There can be little doubt that the concept of historicity presented in §§72-77 of *Being and Time* provides the general philosophical framework in terms of which Heidegger understood his decision to join the National Socialist “revolution” in 1933. I submit, nonetheless, that if one is interested in the specific philosophical motives that justified, in Heidegger’s mind at least, the actual political initiatives he attempted to enact in 1933 as the Rector of Freiburg University, then the philosophical rubber really hits the political road much earlier in *Being and Time*, in §3. For it is here, without naming Kant, that Heidegger rejects Kant’s advice that philosophy’s relation to the other sciences should be that of a “train bearer” (who follows behind, straightening out the tangles), rather than a “torch bearer” (who goes first, lighting the way). Reversing Kant’s humble view, Heidegger instead maintains that philosophy “must run ahead of the positive sciences, and it *can* do so” (Heidegger 1962: 30).

Despite its great political importance, Heidegger’s attempt to fulfill Husserl’s grand ambition to restore philosophy to her throne as the queen of the sciences has not received the attention it deserves in the context of the “Heidegger controversy.” For, Husserl, in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” (1910), presented phenomenology as a “revolution in philosophy” that will “prepare the ground for a future philosophical system.” As Heidegger became Husserl’s heir apparent during the 1920s, he increasingly saw it as his appointed task to develop—atop the ground cleared by Husserl’s phenomenological

revolution—that “systematic fundamental science of philosophy, the port of entry to a genuine metaphysics of nature, of spirit, of ideas” for which Husserl called. Unfortunately, in Heidegger’s very fidelity to this incredibly ambitious Husserlian project, he would fail to take to heart Husserl’s prophetic warning of a “great danger.” Because the “spiritual need of our time has, in fact, become unbearable,” Husserl cautioned, “even a theoretical nature will be capable of giving in to the force of the motive to influence practice more thoroughly than his theoretical vocation would permit” (Husserl 1965: 75, 116-17, 173). To understand how Heidegger fell prey to the danger Husserl discerned, and what Heidegger learned from this, let us examine the details of his view of the relationship between philosophy and the other sciences. (Understanding this view will also enable us to discern a further, heretofore unnoticed connection between “authentic historicity” and Heidegger’s politics.)

For Heidegger, every scientific discipline with a discrete subject matter is a “positive science.” The term “positive science” conveys Heidegger’s claim that the scientific disciplines each rest on an ontological “posit,” a presupposition about what the class of entities it studies *is*. Biology, for example, seeks to understand how living beings function. As biologists successfully accomplish this important task, they allow us to understand in ever greater detail the *logos* of the *bios*, the order and structure of living beings. Nevertheless, Heidegger asserts, biology proper cannot tell us what life *is*. Of course, the biologist must have some understanding of what “life” is, simply in order to be able to pick out the appropriate entities to study. Heidegger maintains, however, that this ontological understanding of “the kind of being which belongs to the living as such” is a presupposition rather than a result of the biologist’s empirical investigations (Heidegger 1962: 30). Heidegger makes the same point with respect to the social and human sciences. Psychology, for example, can tell us a great deal about the functioning of consciousness, the *psyche*, but, notoriously, it cannot tell us what consciousness *is*. Analogously, history

greatly increases our understanding of historical events, yet historians cannot tell us what history *is*.

Heidegger is not claiming that biologists cannot distinguish organic from inorganic entities, that psychologists are unable to differentiate between conscious and non-conscious states, or that historians cannot tell historical from non-historical events. His point, rather, is that in making just such fundamental conceptual differentiations, biologists, psychologists, and historians are always already employing an ontological understanding of what the entities whose domain they study *are*. Indeed, no science could get along without at least an implicit ontological understanding of the beings it studies. Simply to *do* historiography, historians must be able to focus on the appropriate objects of study, which means they must already have some understanding of what makes an historical event “historical.” To distinguish the entities from the past destined for museums from those headed for junk heaps, for example, historians rely on an ontological understanding of what makes an entity historical, a sense of what Heidegger calls the “historicality” of the historical (Heidegger 1962: 31). Likewise, botany relies on an ontological understanding of “the vegetable character of plants,” physics on “the corporeality of bodies,” zoology on “the animality of animals,” and anthropology on “the humanness of human beings” (Heidegger 2002: 59). Heidegger’s list could be expanded indefinitely because he believes that *every* positive science presupposes such an ontological posit, a background understanding of the *being* of the class of entities it studies.

By thus extending Husserl’s claim about the “naïveté” or “inadequacy” of the *natural* sciences to the *positive* sciences in general, Heidegger thinks he has found a way to fulfill Husserl’s grand ambition to deliver “the systematic fundamental science of philosophy.” How exactly does Heidegger propose to restore philosophy to her throne as the queen of the sciences? The core of his argument can be broken down into three steps, the first of which we have just reconstructed. Building on this first claim that all the positive sciences

presuppose an ontological posit, Heidegger declares, second, that there is a basic difference between these positive sciences and the “science” of philosophy:

Ontic sciences in each case thematize a given entity that in a certain manner is always already disclosed *prior* to scientific disclosure. We call the sciences of entities as given—of a *positum*—positive sciences. ...Ontology, or the science of being, on the other hand, demands a fundamental shift of view: from entities to being. (Heidegger 1998: 41)

The positive sciences all study classes of entities, so Heidegger also refers to the positive sciences as “ontic sciences.” Philosophy, on the other hand, studies the being of those classes of entities, making philosophy an “ontological science” or, more grandly, a “science of being.” Heidegger’s second claim, in other words, is that philosophy studies precisely that which the positive sciences take for granted: their ontological posits. The subject matters of the positive sciences and of philosophy are thus distinguished by what Heidegger famously calls “the ontological difference”: the difference between “entities” (*Seienden*) and the “being of entities” (*Sein des Seienden*). Positive sciences study entities of various kinds, while philosophy studies the being of those kinds of entities (Heidegger 1996: 223). Here, then, we have the first two steps in Heidegger’s argument: first, each positive science presupposes an understanding of the being of the class of entities it studies, and second, the science of philosophy concerns itself with precisely these ontological posits.

The crucial third step in Heidegger’s argument is his claim that the positive sciences’ ontological posits *guide* the scientists’ actual investigations. As he writes in 1927: “Philosophy...does of its essence have the task of directing all...the positive sciences with respect to their ontological foundations.” These ontological “basic concepts determine the way in which we get an understanding beforehand of the area of subject-matter underlying all the objects a science takes as its theme, and all positive science is guided by this understanding” (Heidegger 1998: 53). Heidegger’s point, I take it, is that a scientist’s

ontological understanding of what the class of entities she studies *is* impacts not only *what* she studies (which is fairly obvious) but also *how* she studies it (which is perhaps less so). When, for example, contemporary biologists proceed on the basis of an ontological understanding of life as a “self-replicating system,” then the entities whose functioning they seek to understand will include not only those self-replicating beings now thought to populate the plant and animal kingdoms, but also such entities as computer viruses, nanotechnology, “electric fish,” and other forms of so-called “artificial life” (Boden 1996). To study such artificial life will require, in turn, new modes and models of investigation, such as the observation of “living systems” entirely confined to complex computer simulations.

While this is not a fanciful example, it may seem slightly atypical in that here biology’s guiding ontological “posit” (namely, that “life *is* a self-replicating system”) has been rendered explicit, whereas Heidegger holds that normally such posits function only as presuppositions in the background of a science’s investigations. Anticipating Thomas Kuhn, however, Heidegger recognizes that such ontological posits often enter into the foreground of scientific discussion during a crisis in the normal functioning of that science. Indeed, *Being and Time* contends that the “real movement of the sciences” occurs when such crises lead the sciences to subject their guiding ontological understandings to “a revision which is more or less radical and lucid with regard to itself” (Heidegger 1962: 29). During such a crisis, a science often throws its guiding ontological understanding of the being of the class of entities it studies into question, usually settling the crisis only by revising its previous ontological understanding. Those who explicitly recognize and take part in such ontological questioning and revision are doing *philosophy*, Heidegger says, whether or not they happen to be employed by a philosophy department. This, moreover, allows us to understand Heidegger’s provocative but widely misunderstood (and so highly controversial) claim that science as such “does not think,” a view he espoused throughout his life.

For Heidegger, philosophy is essentially an activity of ontological questioning (later he will usually call this activity “thinking” in order to distinguish it from the metaphysical tradition). In his 1928-29 lectures, *Introduction to Philosophy*, he says that “philosophy is not knowledge of wisdom. ...Philosophy is philosophizing [*Philosophieren*].” In a twist on the standard etymology of the word “philosophy,” Heidegger unpacks *philia* as “a genuine friendship which, in its essence, struggles [*kämpf*] for that which it loves” and *sophos* as “an instinct for the essential,” and so defines *philosophizing*, the active practice of philosophy, as the struggle to employ one’s sense for the essential (Heidegger 1996: 21-22). By “essence” Heidegger means the ontological presupposition or “posit” that guides a positive science. Heidegger can thus say that: “When we speak of the sciences, we shall be speaking not against them but for them, for clarity concerning their essence” (Heidegger 1968: 49). One is “philosophizing” whenever one explicitly examines and seeks to clarify the ontological understanding that normally guides a science implicitly but which can come into question during a period of scientific crisis. Thus biologists as well as philosophers of biology were philosophizing in so far as they explicitly questioned the ontological understanding of what life *is* during the recent debate over “artificial life.” To say that the positive sciences, as such, do not “think” simply means that they do not, as positive sciences, question their guiding ontological presuppositions. As Heidegger puts it: “The researcher always operates on the foundation of what has already been decided: the fact that there are such things as nature, history, art, and that these things can be made the subject of consideration” (Heidegger 1962: 29).

Of course, scientists do occasionally engage in such potentially revolutionary ontological questioning, but when they do, they are (by Heidegger’s definition) doing philosophy, not research. Because quantum mechanics engaged in such revolutionary questioning, Heidegger recognized that “the present leaders of atomic physics, Niels Bohr and [Werner] Heisenberg, think in a thoroughly philosophical way” (Heidegger 1969: 67). Philosophy, conversely, is “only alive and actual” when engaged in the ontological

questioning at the center of such scientific crises. That is, philosophers (and others) *philosophize* only by doing the potentially revolutionary work of questioning the ontological presuppositions that guide the natural, social, and human sciences. Thus Heidegger proclaims in 1928 that the Husserlian concept of a “scientific philosophy” is like the concept of a “circular sphere,” that is, not simply redundant, for as a sphere is more circular than any circle, so “philosophizing” is “more scientific than any possible science.” Indeed, strictly speaking, “philosophy is *not* science, ...but rather the *origin* [*Ursprung*] of science” (Heidegger 1998: 17-18, 221, 226). Science “springs from” philosophy in a way which resembles the emergence of normal science from revolutionary science, namely, through an eventual routinization and procedural exploration of the ontological insights gained philosophically during a period of revolutionary science, a time of crisis and decision over the ontological posits that normally guide the positive sciences.

To practice philosophy so conceived, Heidegger explains in *Being and Time*, is “to interpret entities in terms of the basic constitution of their being” (Heidegger 1962: 30). Focusing on a positive science’s guiding ontological presuppositions, philosophy explicitly interprets the being of the domain of entities a positive science studies. In so doing, philosophy can clarify the ontological posits of the positive sciences and so transform and guide the course of their future development.⁷ Thus Heidegger writes:

Laying the foundations for the sciences in this way is different in principle from the kind of [Kantian] “logic” which limps along behind, investigating the status of some science as it chances to find it, in order to discover its “method.” Laying the foundations...is rather a productive logic—in the sense that it *leaps ahead*, as it were, into a particular region of being, discloses it for the first time in its constitutive being, and makes the structures acquired thereby available to the positive sciences as lucid directives for their inquiry. (Heidegger 1962: 30-31, my emphasis.)

Here Heidegger is employing *Being and Time*’s well-known distinction between “leaping ahead” and “leaping in,” which for him marks the difference between the authentic and

inauthentic methods of pedagogical “being-with” (*Mitsein*). The point of using this distinction here, I take it, is that philosophy guides the sciences not by imposing pre-existing standards upon them from outside, but rather by anticipating the ontological understanding toward which the sciences themselves are heading and reflecting that understanding back to them in a perspicacious manner, thereby illuminating their developmental trajectory from within and so facilitating their continued progression. (Heidegger tried to do this himself for the positive science of “historiography,” through close readings of Nietzsche, Dilthey, and other philosophers of history—as Guignon shows in “FROM THE BEING OF HISTORY TO THE HISTORY OF BEING”—and this reveals another important connection between Heidegger’s conception of “historicality” and his politics.)⁸ Philosophy so-conceived is no longer the Kantian “train-bearer,” following behind the sciences, retroactively straightening out their methodological tangles. By clarifying the positive sciences’ ontological posits, philosophy plays a guiding role with respect to the other sciences, proactively clarifying their development, even issuing “lucid directives for their inquiry.” In this way, Heidegger believes philosophy can reclaim its historic role as the “torch-bearer” of the sciences. But toward what end will philosophy thus light the way? Does Heidegger know in which direction he seek to guide the sciences, the university, Germany?

III. The Philosophical Lesson

As such questioning reminds us, Heidegger’s attempted restoration of philosophy to her throne as the queen of the sciences can easily sound, under a less flattering description, like a kind of philosophical imperialism. Such an impression would seem to be reinforced by the idea that the positive sciences as such can neither account for nor supply their own guiding ontological posits, but must rather take these over from philosophy. Recall, however, that Heidegger’s view does not entail a subordination of scientists to philosophers, since, as we have seen, he does not conceive of the philosophizing that guides science as the

exclusive provenance of any particular academic department. Scientists too can philosophize; indeed, Heidegger strongly urges that they should. It is just that when scientists philosophize they are no longer doing positive science; they are doing philosophy. Exchanging one hat for another, they have, in Kuhnian terms, left behind the background ontological suppositions of their normal scientific paradigm in order to philosophize, entering, at least temporarily, into the uncharted waters of revolutionary science by throwing into question the basic ontological assumptions that normally guide their research. In fact, Heidegger's Rectorial Address lays great stress on the need for scientists to philosophize, since he thinks that when "the faculties and disciplines get the essential and simple questions of their science underway," this will bring "down disciplinary barriers" and "transform the faculties and the disciplines from within" (Neske and Kettering 1990: 36-37). Still, an underlying worry remains. Given Heidegger's strong emphasis on the importance of cross-disciplinary philosophical questioning and his assurance that such ontological questioning will transform the scientific disciplines from within by revitalizing and reunifying fragmented academic departments, how are we to explain the authoritarian character of some of the actual reforms he sought to impose during his brief tenure as the *Führer-Rektor* of Freiburg University—including, most notably, his proposal to abolish academic freedom and his seeming readiness to reorganize the departmental divisions of the university immediately, by philosophical fiat if necessary?

To begin to answer this question, we must understand several further aspects of Heidegger's view. At the time he wrote *Being and Time*, Heidegger believed that the various ontological presuppositions guiding the different positive sciences were not all distinct and irreducible. Instead he held, first, that the positive sciences' guiding understandings of the being of life, history, the psyche, and so on, all reduce down to a small number of what he calls "regional ontologies," and second, that these regional ontologies are all grounded in a single common foundation, what *Being and Time* calls a "fundamental ontology," that is, an understanding of "the meaning of being in general"

(Heidegger 1962: 227; Guignon 1983: 65-67). Taken together, these two claims entail that the different ontological posits implicitly guiding the various positive sciences all stem from a common ontological ground. An understanding of the meaning of being in general (a *fundamental ontology*) underlies the regional ontologies, which themselves underlie the positive sciences' various ontological posits. In 1927, Heidegger writes that "it is integral to the positive character of a science that its prescientific comportment toward whatever is given (nature, history, economy, space, number) is...already illuminated and guided by an understanding of being, even if this understanding of being is not conceptualized" explicitly (Heidegger 1998: 42). Hence, as *Being and Time* says:

The question of being aims therefore at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine entities as entities of such and such a type, and, in so doing, already operate with an understanding of being, but also for the possibility of those [regional] ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundations. (Heidegger 1962: 31)

What, then, is this fundamental ontology which ultimately underlies and implicitly guides all the positive sciences? It takes Heidegger most of the decade after *Being and Time* to answer unequivocally this difficult but crucial question.

Being and Time famously calls for a "deconstruction" (*Destruktion*) of the history of ontology by which Heidegger believes he will be able to "recover" the fundamental understanding of being which has shaped every subsequent ontology in the history of the West (Heidegger 1962: 44). This idea that a transhistorically binding ontology can be discovered "beneath" Western history helps explain the more authoritarian dimension of Heidegger's Rectorial Address. For, if a philosophical vision which recognized that and how all the different ontological posits fit together into a fundamental ontology could reunify the university (and, behind it, the nation), then Heidegger, as the unique possessor of just such a vision, would be the natural ("fated") spiritual leader of the university—and thus the nation (see Thomson 2003a). Clearly, Heidegger's neo-Husserlian ambition to

restore philosophy to her throne as the queen of the sciences helped fuel his political vision for the revitalization of the German University. Such political defects in Heidegger's Rectorial Address now seem glaringly obvious. The main *philosophical* problem, however, is that Heidegger got ahead of himself here. For he had not yet actually worked out *how* the ontological posits fit into the regional ontologies, or how the regional ontologies fit into an underlying fundamental ontology, *before* he assumed this mantle of political leadership. It is in this sense that despite Husserl's warning, Heidegger did indeed give "in to the force of the motive to influence practice more thoroughly than his theoretical vocation would permit." In 1933 Heidegger was still in the process of working out his view of the way in which an underlying ontology gave rise to the different ontological posits, and when he does, the details of the view undermine rather than support the authoritarian elements of his political project.

In *Being and Time* and in 1929's "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger singles out the ontological classes of "nature" and "history" as "regional ontologies" (Heidegger 1998: 95). By 1935, he has traced the regional ontologies of nature and history back to the pre-Socratic conceptions of *phusis* and *alêtheia*, respectively (Heidegger 2000: 107). By 1941, he will explicitly characterize this "*phusis-alêtheia*" couple as "the inceptive essence of being," that is, as the first way Western thinkers conceptualized "being" (Heidegger 1973: 10). Already in 1937, however, he begins redescribing "being" as a never fully conceptualizable phenomenological "presencing" (*Anwesen*) that, owing to its non-static and non-substantive nature, cannot be the "meaning of being in general" (Heidegger 1999: 173, 210; Thomson 2003b). Between 1929 and 1937, that is, during the period of intense philosophical tension and transformation popularly known as Heidegger's "turn" (or *Kehre*), one of the things he came to realize was that there was no *substantive* fundamental ontology waiting beneath history to be recovered. When Heidegger traces the regional ontologies of nature and history back to *phusis* and *alêtheia*, then traces this *phusis-alêtheia* couple back to a conceptually inexhaustible ontological "presencing," this is as close as he

ever comes to actually “grounding” the regional ontologies in a fundamental ontology, and it is quite instructive. For it shows that the relations between the positive sciences, the regional ontologies, and fundamental ontology are too murky and indirect to allow for a top-down hierarchical re-organization of the university in which the philosopher who has learned to be receptive to phenomenological presencing will be able first to carve the regional ontologies out of this basic fundamental ontological presencing and then construct the new academic disciplines around these regional ontologies. In other words, had Heidegger succeeded in working out these views a few years earlier, in 1933 instead of 1937, they would have undermined some of the authoritarian policies of his Rectorate, such as his apparent readiness immediately to legislate new academic disciplines from on high.⁹ Ironically, Heidegger thus illustrates the real dangers he and Husserl had so presciently cautioned against, since he allowed “external entanglements” to interfere with his philosophical development and so gave in to the temptation to intercede politically before having worked out the philosophical views that would have legitimated or, more to the point, *undermined* such an engagement. What, then, did Heidegger learn from this mistake?

Heidegger drops the very notions of “fundamental ontology” and “regional ontologies” from his later work, and instead builds his mature understanding of university education around the idea that “ontotheologies,” rather than regional ontologies, mediate between a basic ontological “presencing” and the guiding ontological presuppositions of the positive sciences. Whatever its political motivations, this was basically a *philosophical* lesson. For, when Heidegger actually carried out the deconstruction of the history of ontology called for in *Being and Time*, he discovered that a series of metaphysical “ontotheologies” have temporarily grounded and justified a succession of ontological “epochs,” historical constellations of intelligibility. Every age in the West has been unified by such a basic metaphysical understanding of what and how beings are, he concludes (Thomson 2000a). It thus turns out that the ontological posits that guide each of *our* positive sciences come not from some fundamental ontology beneath Western history, but

rather from our contemporary age's reigning ontotheology. The later Heidegger would thus hold that contemporary biology, for instance, takes over its implicit ontological understanding of what life *is* from the metaphysical understanding of the being of entities that governs our own Nietzschean epoch of "enframing." And indeed, one has to admit that when contemporary philosophers of biology proclaim that life *is* a self-replicating system, it certainly appears that they have unknowingly adopted the basic ontotheological presuppositions of Nietzsche's metaphysics, according to which life *is* ultimately the eternal recurrence of will to power, that is, sheer will-to-will, unlimited self-augmentation. (It is alarming—if predictable, given Heidegger's critique of our historical reliance on this unnoticed ontotheology—to thus find philosophers of biology extending the logic of Nietzschean metaphysics in such a way as to grant "life" to the technological entity *par excellence*, the computer virus.) Because Heidegger comes to believe that all of the sciences' guiding ontological posits are implicitly taken over from this nihilistic Nietzschean ontotheology underlying our "atomic age," the first task of his mature understanding of *ontological education* involves making us reflective about the way in which our experience of what is commonly called "reality" has been shaped by the fundamental conceptual parameters and ultimate standards of legitimacy provided by Nietzsche's metaphysics. When we become aware of the way our age's reigning ontotheology shapes our understanding of ourselves and our worlds, and thereby come to recognize the subtle but pervasive influence of this ontological understanding of entities as mere resources to be optimized, we begin to open up the possibility of understanding ourselves otherwise than in these nihilistic, Nietzschean terms (Thomson 2000c; 2001).

In 1933, however, Heidegger was still "on the way" to clearly articulating these mature views, and not surprisingly, he had little success convincing audiences to follow a philosophical leadership they could barely understand. This lack of understanding was disastrous politically, for it allowed Heidegger to appear to be endorsing a regime he was in fact attempting philosophically to contest and redirect (Edler 1990). As we have seen, the

views Heidegger worked out by 1937 would have undermined authoritarian aspects of his Rectorial Address (see also Dreyfus 1993). One crucial question, then, is: Would Heidegger's later claim that the sciences take their ontological pre-understandings over from a subterranean ontotheology—one which they need to learn to use the methods of Heideggerian phenomenology in order to explicitly recognize and so contest in order to progress beyond—still have helped convince him to institute a philosophical version of the *Führer-Prinzip* at Freiburg University? Here we must tread carefully, acknowledging that Heidegger's later views could indeed have justified the core of the politico-philosophical program he advanced in the Rectorial Address. For if one examines "The Self-Assertion of the German University" carefully, the role of the Rector (as Heidegger presents it there) is to unify the university around the various disciplines' shared commitment to ontological questioning. I believe the later Heidegger would modify this program primarily by *refining* it, focusing such potentially revolutionary ontological questioning more precisely on the Nietzschean ontotheology that, he came to realize, the various university disciplines already implicitly shared. The goal would no longer be the Rectorial Address's neo-Nietzschean pursuit of ontological revolution simply for the sake of revitalization (by 1937-38 Heidegger will realize that this Nietzschean program of constant overcoming is part of the problem), but the basic strategy would likely remain the same: First, awaken the faculty to the way in which their research is grounded in unquestioned ontological presuppositions, then send them out to the ontological frontiers of knowledge, so to speak, in order that they might discover ways of understanding the being of the classes of entities they study otherwise than in terms of this underlying Nietzschean ontotheology, the nihilistic effects of which Heidegger is just beginning to recognize in 1933.¹⁰ The core of the Rectorial Address would be preserved in such an attempt to enlist the entire academy in the philosophical struggle to transcend the nihilistic ontotheology of the age. Indeed, such a project is deeply consistent with Heidegger's lifelong philosophical goal, although it does not seem that one would need the full authority of a *Führer-Rektor* (rather than, say, a

powerful university president or even an influential funding agency) in order to awaken the university community to their possible role in fomenting such an ontohistorical revolution. What this shows, then, is that it is not the core of the Rectorial Address that is objectionable.

I should thus add that the single most troublingly authoritarian aspect of the Rectorial Address—namely, Heidegger’s infamous rejection of “academic freedom”—is not solely related to the underlying philosophical views we have been examining. Indeed, I believe we better understand Heidegger’s enthusiastic institution of the “leadership principle” in 1933 as a result of the influence of Nietzsche, who argued in early lectures *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* that the educational renaissance Germany needed would require a revolution, one which could be accomplished only by the great *leadership* of a philosophical genius (see Nietzsche 1909; Thomson 2003a). It seems likely that Nietzsche’s virulent critique of academic freedom and his call for a “great *Führer*” to lead this revolution of the university exercised a strong and regrettable influence on the program for university reform Heidegger set forth in the Rectorial Address. Those seeking to understand Heidegger’s famous later complaint that “Nietzsche ruined me! [*Nietzsche hat mich kaputt gemacht!*]” would thus do well to consider this political dimension of Nietzsche’s influence on Heidegger.

In conclusion, let me try to forestall any unnecessary controversy by stating that the direct connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and his politics I have argued for here will not enable anyone to dismiss Heidegger’s philosophy, for at least two reasons. First, because, as we have seen, the excesses in Heidegger’s university politics rest in large part on an important philosophical mistake (the belief in a fundamental ontology) that he later corrected (as a philosophical “lesson learned”). Second, and admittedly more provocatively, because the underlying project that led Heidegger to National Socialism is motivated by a deeply insightful critique of the university he continued to refine after the war, and this prescient critique has only become increasingly relevant ever since (as I argue in Thomson 2001). Certainly Heidegger realized by 1937 that it was too late to redirect the

National Socialist movement into the ontological revolution he never stopped pursuing (Rickey 2002), but he did not give up on his long-developed program for radically reforming the university, nor did he abandon the positive project of transforming higher education so that it would serve his life-long philosophical cause (Thomson 2003a; 2003b). It is thus to this critique, and Heidegger's positive vision of the university, that I believe at least some of the discussion concerning Heidegger's politics should be shifted.

Notes

¹ We will thus seek to address what Dreyfus rightly calls "the central question," namely, "to what extent was Heidegger's support and then rejection of National Socialism a personal mistake compounded of conservative prejudices, personal ambition, and political *naïveté*, and to what extent was his engagement dictated by his philosophy?" (Dreyfus 1992: 19).

² For Bourdieu, it is Heidegger himself who represses the fact that his "philosophy is political from beginning to end" (Bourdieu 1991: 96). According to Bourdieu's reductive "socioanalysis," Heidegger's repressed "id, his unthought—that of an 'ordinary university professor'—and the entire train of social phantasms [generated by Heidegger's position in the academic field—]...led around by the nose this small bearer of a cultural capital...whose 'fixed assets' were in danger" (in Wolin 1991: 277).

³ Rorty 1998 imagined that Heidegger could have lived a politically blameless life and written essentially the same works. Few Heidegger scholars find this edifying "other possible world" plausible, however, since it denies the existential intertwinement of life and thought Heidegger himself insisted on before 1933.

⁴ In letters to Jaspers in 1950, moreover, Heidegger mentions his sense of "shame" when thinking of Jaspers' Jewish wife, refers to "the worst evil [that] set in with the vile persecutions," and says that "from year to year, as more viciousness came out, the sense of shame also grew over having here and there, directly and indirectly, contributed to it. ...Then came the persecution of the Jews, and everything fell into the abyss" (Biemel and Saner 2003: 185, 189). The full context of this politically important correspondence would need to be carefully unpacked. Before 1934 Heidegger and Jaspers were "comrades-in-arms" in the project to revolutionize the university, but they remained permanently estranged afterward owing to Heidegger's unwillingness to apologize to Jaspers for the above-mentioned letter (which also contained a politically-threatening allusion to Jaspers' "liberal democratic circle of Heidelberg intellectuals" (ibid.: 209)). Nevertheless, Jaspers would finally conclude in 1966 that Heidegger expressed "the usual clichés about 'the international [Jewish conspiracy],' etc., but without inner-conviction. He was no 'anti-Semite'" (ibid.: 281 note 5).

⁵ As Dreyfus (2000) shows, *Being and Time* presupposes a neo-Aristotelian understanding of practical wisdom as operating beyond the domain of principles—and so outside the space of possible "derivations" of praxis from theory—without, for that reason, being "decisionistic" in the objectionable sense of *arbitrary*, let alone "blind and uninformed" (Wolin 1990: 52).

⁶ I make this argument in a longer essay (Thomson 2003a), section 3 of which contains an earlier and abridged version of the following analysis.

⁷ Heidegger's sole exception to this rule concerns the positive science of theology, in which the guiding ontological posit is accessible only to faith, not to phenomenological analysis (Heidegger 1998). This, ultimately, is what Heidegger means by his oft-repeated, provocative assertion that "philosophical theology" is an oxymoron, "wooden iron."

⁸ To recognize this further connection, it helps to introduce a terminological distinction. "Historicality," *Geschichtlichkeit*, is often translated as "historicity," but this is misleading when discussing the views of

the early Heidegger. The later Heidegger does indeed use *Geschichtlichkeit* to convey his recognition that being has a history (his hard-won recognition of the fact that humanity's most fundamental sense of reality changes with time), and this is precisely what most of us mean by the notoriously slippery term, "historicity." Indeed, I take Heidegger's increasingly radical "historicization of ontology"—to which he is driven by his *Destruktion* of metaphysics—to be one of the definitive characteristics of his famous "turn" (or *Kehre*), the philosophical transformation which distinguishes the "early" (pre-1937) from the "later" Heidegger (see Thomson 1999). This means, however, that we cannot read the doctrine of "historicity" back into 1927's *Being and Time*, where Heidegger pursues a "fundamental ontology" ultimately incompatible with a radical historicization of ontology (as I argue below). It should not be surprising, then, that the early Heidegger's use of *Geschichtlichkeit* is quite different. Let us thus disambiguate *Geschichtlichkeit* by introducing a distinction Heidegger's lifelong use of the term tends to elide, using *historicality* to refer to the being of history (the early ontological understanding of what history is), and reserving *historicity* for the history of being (the later *Seinsgeschichte*, with its radical historicization of ontology). This helps clarify that historicality and historicity are distinct but developmentally related concepts (as Guignon shows in FROM THE BEING OF HISTORY TO THE HISTORY OF BEING). More importantly, for our purposes, distinguishing historicality from historicity helps us recognize another connection between "authentic historicality" and Heidegger's politics. *Being and Time*'s notion of authentic "historicality" seeks to explain philosophically what it is that makes an entity *historical*, properly speaking. As we have seen, this understanding of the *being* of history is what enables historians to distinguish historical from non-historical entities and events. Through the notion of authentic historicality, then, Heidegger was himself seeking to provide a positive science (namely history, or "historiography") with its guiding ontological posit. (As Guignon explains, Heidegger sought to "derive" an account of authentic "historiography" from his understanding of authentic historicality.) This makes Heidegger's discussion of authentic historicality in *Being and Time* the beginning of an attempt actually to *legislate* philosophically the ontological understand that should guide the research of another science, although I think it clear that here too the project did not yield the kind of determinate, science-guiding results for which Heidegger hoped. Unfortunately, rather than abandoning that task in 1927, Heidegger simply pushes it back to his even more ambitious quest for a fundamental ontology capable of guiding all the positive sciences.

⁹ In his Rectorial Address, Heidegger adds "language" (a category meant to map onto his understanding of the pre-Socratic *logos*) to the regional ontologies of nature and history (which he traces back to *phusis* and *alêtheia*), suggesting that the university should be reorganized into twelve academic disciplines, which would be unified as four different ways of approaching and elucidating the three regional ontologies (Neske and Kettering 1990: 9).

¹⁰ Instead of asking when exactly Heidegger brought his critique of technology to bear on the university, it is better to recognize that this critique of technology *grew out of* his critique of the university. De Beistegui jumps the gun a bit when he writes that the target in "The Self-Assertion of the German University" is already "the university of the *Gestell*," but he is right that "Heidegger's attacks on...technology, still somewhat veiled in the Rectorial address, will become most explicit in the *Contributions to Philosophy*" (de Beistegui 1998: 60, 50; see also Thomson 2000c). When one reads the critique of the university Heidegger elaborates in his 1929 Inaugural Address and his 1933 Rectorial Address from the standpoint of his later work, one can indeed see that Heidegger is beginning to develop his critique of "enframing" there. Nevertheless, this critique of our Nietzschean, "technological" understanding of the being of entities remained veiled *even to Heidegger himself* in 1933. After the failure of his Rectorate, Heidegger sought to understand the deeper ontohistorical etiology responsible for the crisis of the university, first fully sketching this underlying understanding of the history of being in his 1936-37 *Contributions to Philosophy* (Thomson 2003b).

Further Reading

Neske and Kettering (1990) and Wolin (1991) collect many of the primary texts at the heart of the controversy surrounding Heidegger's National Socialism. The best succinct introduction to the philosophical issues is Dreyfus (1993). The two most important in-depth treatments remain the critique by Wolin (1990) and defense by Young (1997). Safranski (1997) is less philosophical but provides a balanced narrative. Zimmerman (1990), Sluga (1993), and Losurdo (2001) are invaluable for an understanding of the broader context. On the specific philosophical views responsible for Heidegger's attempt

to transform the university, see Crowell (1997), Milchman and Rosenberg (1997), and Thomson (2001; 2003a). On Heidegger and the Shoah, see Agamben (1999).

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