

13. On Heidegger's Nazism

(1990)

Heidegger's writings – both early and late – are full of polemics against the appearance–reality distinction. In the early work, this polemic centres upon a Dewey-like insistence on the priority of *Welt* to *Wirklichkeit*, of the *Zuhanden* to the *Vorhanden*, and of *Auslegung* to *Aussage*. If one reads paragraphs 31–3 of *Being and Time* as I should like to, and as Mark Okrent has in his book *Heidegger's Pragmatism*, Heidegger will be seen as making theory an instrument of practice, as construing assertions as tools for the accomplishment of some human project. Even in the later work, where Heidegger treats pragmatism as a banal variety of Nietzschean nihilism, he still insists over and over that the Greek appearance–reality distinction is symptomatic of the West's metaphysical way of speaking Being. Indeed, he sometimes traces the pragmatism of our time – its technological understanding of Being – back to that distinction.

Yet Heidegger himself, in his own rhetorical practice, clings to the very appearance–reality distinction that he repudiates in theory. In *Being and Time* he constantly describes himself as excavating down to conditions of possibility deeper than those discerned by his predecessors. In his later works he is always telling us that every contemporary understanding of our historical situation other than his own is shallow – that it is unable to penetrate to the essence of technology, and instead gets hung up on superficial questions like nuclear holocaust. In these writings, Heidegger refuses to think of himself as one more finite and contingent bit of *Dasein* assembling tools for the accomplishment of various finite projects. Rather, he wants to see himself as projectless, will-less, a mere open ear, a conduit for the voice of Being.

Those who, like myself, have taken more from the early pragmatist

Heidegger than from the later listener to the voice of Being, are very suspicious of this project of becoming projectless. It seems to us that as Heidegger grew older he drew back from the insistence on finitude that dominated *Being and Time*. We see this as regression. We have to admit that Heidegger became a more original and more interesting thinker as he grew older and more megalomaniacal, but we regard this as one more example of passionate and idiosyncratic error being more instructive than sober and useful truth. So for us Heidegger's writings are not a conduit through which we can hear the voice of Being. Rather, they are a toolbox. They are the receptacle in which Heidegger deposited the tools that he invented at various times to accomplish one or another project.

These projects were varied, and sometimes got in each other's way. Early on, Heidegger wanted to revive Aristotle in order to follow through on the neo-Thomist criticism of Descartes. Later he wanted to go beyond Nietzsche by going back behind Aristotle. Sometimes he wanted to describe *Dasein* in general, and at other times to describe only twentieth-century *Dasein*. Once he wanted to be the heroic leader of a national movement, but later he wanted to be the wise old hermit who knew that 'only a God can save us'. His suggestion that he always followed a single star seems to me self-deceptive self-flattery. I see the toolbox we have inherited from him as containing a very varied assortment, constructed for various different purposes – an assortment in which only some items are still useful. I think that the best tribute we can pay to Heidegger's achievements is to be selective about what we take from him. For myself, I should like to keep the pragmatist and ignore the Nazi, keep the plot outline of Heidegger's history of metaphysics while rewriting its downbeat ending, keep selected items of Heidegger's imagery and jargon while shrugging off his world-historical pretensions.

Heidegger would have been exasperated with this way of appropriating him. But so are his most implacable critics. These critics claim that his Nazism was not just one facet of his thought, just one of his various projects, but rather a vital clue to the underlying essence of his thought. They insist that his thought is just as tightly unified as he believed it to have been. They think that there is an underlying reality

beneath the diverse appearances, that he really was following a single star – a dark, evil star.

For these critics, Heidegger is not just a collection of projects, some good and some bad. For they have the same essentialist attitude toward Heidegger as Heidegger had toward the twentieth century. Heidegger needed to see everything in our century other than its technologism as mere transitory appearance. The critics I have in mind need to see everything in Heidegger other than his antiegalitarianism and devotion to the *Führerprinzip* as superficial. By contrast, we pragmatists see the twentieth century as a mixed bag of good news and bad news, and Heidegger's work as a toolbox containing some splendid things lying next to a lot of outdated junk.

For those of us who wish to continue to pick over the tools in Heidegger's box, the fact that the man who designed these remarkable tools was first a Nazi and later a cowardly hypocrite is just one of history's many ironies. We wish the fact were otherwise. We have the same wistfulness about other thinkers whom we admire. We wish that Carnap had listened to Sidney Hook's good advice and not stooged for Stalin by sponsoring the 1948 Waldorf Peace Conference. We wish that Sartre had not waited until 1956 to break with the party line. We wish that Yeats and Shaw had not enthused over Mussolini before finding out what was happening to his political prisoners. We wish that the New Left of the 1960s had not enthused over Castro and Mao before finding out what was happening to their political prisoners. But we regard the political initiatives of these premature enthusiasts as largely irrelevant to their intellectual legacies.

This claim of irrelevance is not acceptable to critics who would like Heidegger to remain a pariah. They see the rectorial address as a glimpse of the real, the essential Heidegger, whereas I do not believe that there is such a thing as the essential Heidegger. I think that these critics are right only to the following extent: Heidegger was antiegalitarian throughout his life, and never cared in the slightest for the liberal project of increasing the sum of human happiness. But I doubt that this antiegalitarianism would seem very important to his readers, would seem an index to the real, true, essential Heidegger, if it were not for Heidegger's silence about the massacre of the Jews.

For this silence is what makes Heidegger's case different from that of Carnap or Sartre. Carnap and Sartre were judging political events in Russia and central Europe at a distance. But Heidegger watched his Jewish colleagues being dismissed from their jobs, and then watched them disappear to a fate about which he could easily have learned if he had thought it worth the trouble. That silence is also what makes Heidegger different from the general run of antiegalitarians. Many eminent twentieth-century writers have mistrusted democracy, but he was the only one to have remained unmoved by the Holocaust.

I think that Habermas and Derrida are right in saying that any of us might, given Heidegger's background, have thought that Hitler was Germany's only hope in 1933. They are right in saying that the really unforgivable thing is the postwar silence. I agree that this silence was unforgivable, but I am unable to deduce this silence from the content of Heidegger's books, or even to see it as a sign of something that should make us suspicious of those books. This is because I take a person's moral character – his or her selective sensitivity to the sufferings of others – to be shaped by chance events in his or her life. Often, perhaps usually, this sensitivity varies independently of the projects of self-creation that the person undertakes in his or her work.

I can clarify what I mean by 'chance events' and 'independent variation' by sketching a slightly different possible world – a world in which Heidegger joins his fellow antiegalitarian, Thomas Mann, in preaching resistance to Hitler. To see how this possible world might have been actual, imagine that in the summer of 1930 Heidegger suddenly finds himself deeply in love with a beautiful, intense, adoring philosophy student named Sarah Mandelbaum. Sarah is Jewish, but Heidegger barely notices this, dizzy with passion as he is. After a painful divorce from Elfride – a process that costs him the friendship of, among other people, the Husserls – Heidegger marries Sarah in 1932. In January 1933 they have a son, Abraham.

Heidegger jokes that Sarah can think of Abraham as named after the patriarch, but that he will think of him as named after Abraham a Santa Clara, the only other Messkirch boy to make good. Sarah looks up Abraham a Santa Clara's anti-Semitic writings in the library stacks, and Heidegger's little joke becomes the occasion of the first

serious quarrel between husband and wife. But by the end of 1933, Heidegger is no longer making such jokes. For Sarah makes him *notice* that the Jewish *Beamte*, including his father-in-law, have been cashiered. Heidegger reads things about himself in the student newspaper that make him realize that his day in the sun may be over. Gradually it dawns upon him that his love for Sarah has cost him much of his prestige, and will sooner or later cost him his job.

But he still loves her, and eventually he leaves his beloved Freiburg for her sake. In 1935 Heidegger is teaching in Berne, but only as a visitor. Switzerland has by now given away all its philosophy chairs. Suddenly a call comes from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. There Heidegger spends two years slowly and painfully learning English, aching for the chance once again to spellbind seminar rooms full of worshipfully attentive students. He gets a chance to do so in 1937 when some of his fellow émigrés arrange a permanent job for him at the University of Chicago.

There he meets Elizabeth Mann Borgese, who introduces him to her father. Heidegger manages to overcome his initial suspicion of the Hanseatic darling of fortune, and Mann his initial suspicion of the Black Forest *Bauernkind*. They find they agree with each other, and with Adorno and Horkheimer; that America is a *reductio ad absurdum* of Enlightenment hopes, a land without culture. But their contempt for America does not prevent them from seeing Hitler as having ruined Germany and being about to ruin Europe. Heidegger's stirring anti-Nazi broadcasts enable him to gratify a need to strike a heroic attitude before large masses of people – a need that he might, under other circumstances, have gratified in a rectorial address.

By the end of the Second World War, Heidegger's marriage is on the rocks. Sarah Heidegger is a social democrat to the core, loves America, and is a passionate Zionist. She has come to think of Heidegger as a great man with a cold and impervious heart, a heart which had once opened to her but remains closed to her social hopes. She has come to despise the egotist as much as she admires the philosopher and the anti-Nazi polemicist. In 1947 she separates from Heidegger and takes the 14-year-old Abraham with her to Palestine. She is wounded in the civil war but eventually, after the proclamation of

independence, becomes a philosophy professor at Tel Aviv University.

Heidegger himself returns to Freiburg in triumph in 1948. There he gets his old friend Gadamer a job, even though he is acidly contemptuous of Gadamer's acquiescence in the Nazi takeover of the German universities. He eventually takes as his third wife a war widow, a woman who reminds all his old friends of Elfride. When he dies in 1976, his wife lays on his coffin the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the medal of the order *Pour le Mérite*, and the gold medal of the Nobel Prize for Literature. This last had been awarded him in the year after the publication of his brief but poignant elegy for Abraham, who had died on the Golan Heights in 1967.

What books did Heidegger write in this possible world? Almost exactly the same ones as he wrote in the actual one. In this world, however, the *Introduction to Metaphysics* contains a contemptuous identification of the National Socialist movement with the mindless nihilism of modern technology, as well as the remark that Hitler is dragging Germany down to the metaphysical level of Russia and America. The seminars on Nietzsche are much the same as those he gave in our world, except for a digression on Nietzsche's loathing for anti-Semites, a digression that contains uncanny parallels to Sartre's contemporaneous but independent *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*. In this world, Heidegger writes most of the same exegetical essays he wrote in our world, but he adds appreciations of Thoreau and of Jefferson, composed for lectures at Harvard and at the University of Virginia respectively. These two essays evince Heidegger's familiar sentimental agrarianism and suspicion of the urban proletariat. His books in this world are, in short, documents of the same struggle he carried on in the actual world – the struggle to move outside the philosophical tradition and there 'sing a new song'. This struggle, this private pursuit of purity, was the core of his life. It was incapable of being greatly influenced either by his love for particular persons or by the political events of his time.

In our world, Heidegger said nothing political after the war. In the possible world I am sketching he puts his prestige as an anti-Nazi to work in making the German political right respectable. He is adored by Franz Josef Strauss, who pays regular and worshipful visits to

Todtnauberg. Occasionally Heidegger appears with Strauss at political rallies. Social Democrats like Habermas regret Heidegger's being consistently on the wrong side in postwar German politics. Sometimes, in private, they voice the suspicion that, in slightly different circumstances, Heidegger would have made a pretty good Nazi. But they never dream of saying such a thing in public about the greatest European thinker of our time.

In our actual world Heidegger was a Nazi, a cowardly hypocrite, and the greatest European thinker of our time. In the possible world I have sketched he was pretty much the same man, but he happened to have his nose rubbed in the torment of the Jews until he finally *noticed* what was going on, until his sense of pity and his sense of shame were finally awakened. In that world he had the good luck to have been unable to have become a Nazi, and so to have had less occasion for cowardice or hypocrisy. In our actual world, he turned his face away, and eventually resorted to hysterical denial. This denial brought on his unforgivable silence. But that denial and that silence do not tell us much about the books he wrote, nor conversely. In both worlds, the only link between Heidegger's politics and his books is the contempt for democracy he shared with, for example, Eliot, Chesterton, Tate, Waugh and Paul Claudel – people whom, as Auden predicted, we have long since pardoned for writing well. We could as easily have pardoned Heidegger his attitude towards democracy, if that had been all. But in the world without Sarah, the world in which Heidegger had the bad luck to live, it was not all.

To sum up: I have been urging that we can find in the early Heidegger's pragmatic antiessentialism reasons for abandoning the attempt to see the man and the books in a single vision, and perhaps even the attempt to see the books as stages on a single *Denkweg*. If we take that antiessentialism more seriously than Heidegger himself proved able to take it, we shall not be tempted to dramatize Heidegger in the way in which he dramatized his favourite thinkers and poets. We shall not assign thinkers and poets places in a world-historical narrative. We shall see both them and their books as vector sums of contingent pressures. We shall see Heidegger as one more confused, torn, occasionally desperate, human being, someone much like our-

selves. We shall read Heidegger's books as he least wanted them read – as occasions for exploitation, recent additions to our *Bestand an Waren*. We shall stop yearning for depth, and stop trying either to worship heroes or to hunt down criminals. Instead, we shall settle for useful tools, and take them where we can find them.