

## A progress report on the ongoing Heidegger reception

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**Abstract** Philosophy, which does not begin again, always unfolds against the background of the ongoing philosophical tradition, which it needs to interpret. I argue that Heidegger's theories, like all philosophical theories, can neither be reduced to, nor separated from, the historical context. In that sense they are like all other philosophical views, perhaps in theory ahistorical but in practice historical, hence always bound up with and inseparable from their historical moment. If, as I believe, Heidegger's theories led him in part toward National Socialism, there is no alternative, if philosophy is to survive in a meaningful sense, to rejecting those aspects of his position, which must now be considered as simply and wholly dead, in favor of other aspects of Heidegger's thinking that, if they are still living, can possibly be saved.

**Keywords** Heidegger · National Socialism · the Heidegger Reception · *Being and Time* · *Schwarze Hefte* (The Black Notebooks)

Philosophy, which does not begin again, always unfolds against the background of the ongoing philosophical tradition, which it needs to interpret. Philosophical interpretation is a form of philosophical reception of earlier theories, positions and insights. Understanding philosophical texts is central to philosophy, but there is nothing resembling agreement about how this should be done. Kant suggests we should not take passages out of context but rather strive to grasp the central insight. Yet there is still no agreement in the Kant debate about even the main thrust of the critical philosophy. Paradoxically, Kant's claim for apodictic cognition presupposes an ongoing and apparently endless hermeneutical debate as its precondition.

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Nelly V. Motroshilova's important recent study, *Martin Heidegger and Hanna Arendt. Being, Time, Love* (Motroshilova 2013), centers on philosophical consequences of this specific interaction, whose analysis belongs to the ongoing Heidegger reception. This is a progress report on the ongoing Heidegger reception in general.

## On the Heidegger reception

The Heidegger reception, which suddenly began in earnest with the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927, and is, at the time of this writing, still in full swing, is unusual in several ways, such as: its enormous breadth, its intensity, and its deeply political character. Heidegger is obviously one of the most influential thinkers of this period, certainly one of the very few, maybe the only one, at a moment when the philosophical debate has clearly lost any overall unity in fragmenting into separate tendencies, to attract interest from all or nearly all sides. It is then ironic that a thinker, who did not disguise his conviction that at a never clearly specified moment in the early Greek tradition philosophy had already lost its way many centuries later, functions as a unifying factor among disparate contemporary philosophical tendencies, which other than their interest in a few common figures understand themselves as having nothing or next to nothing in common. Hardly a week passes at present without the appearance of a new book on some aspect of Heidegger's thought. This can be said about very few other thinkers.

A second feature is the intense degree of disagreement about Heidegger, disagreement leading on occasion to clear acrimony among observers who disagree fundamentally about the nature and importance of Heidegger's thought. On the one hand, there are those who think he merits unusual respect, as a shining example of the best that philosophy has to offer, even as a rare philosophical genius, whereas others believe his work is largely derivative, mythological, vastly overestimated, for some even dangerous.

Then there is the intensely political cast of his thought, which is apparently linked in ways we do not understand to the political events of his era, and which, arguably, has political consequences he himself tried to draw during his period of interaction with the German Nazi Party. Though he clearly insists on his desire to renew the discussion in returning behind the later tradition to early Greek philosophy, his own contribution seems to some observers to be intimately bound up with the right wing politics of the period in which he was active, including National Socialism, all of which, at least by prevailing philosophical standards, renders Heidegger's theories unusually controversial.

In these, and perhaps in other ways as well, the ongoing Heidegger reception is unusual, unlike the reaction to, hence the reception of, most other philosophical theories. Yet in at least one way it is not unusual at all but rather almost boringly normal, even banal, in that the reaction under way to Heidegger's theories illustrates a deep tension, perhaps even an outright contradiction between the constant but constantly unavailing effort, an effort which appears to be constitutive of philosophy itself since its origins in ancient Greece, at least in theory, to escape to a region

beyond history, in virtue, despite its infinite aspirations, what in practice looks very much like its intrinsically historical, hence resolutely finite character. In examining the complicated case of the Heidegger reception as an extreme instance of this problem, I will be suggesting that Heidegger's position, like all philosophical positions, can neither be reduced to nor isolated from its historical moment. I will further be suggesting that those among Heidegger's followers who seek to minimize or otherwise deny the political cast of his thought are triply mistaken with regard to Heidegger's philosophical intentions, his conception of the subject, and the nature of the philosophical debate.

### ***Being and Time* and the Nazi turning**

We will be concerned here only with the reception of Heidegger's theories. There is a difference between the initial position and its later development. The initial position, which reached an early peak in *Being and Time*, almost instantly called extraordinarily widespread attention to Heidegger's philosophical theories. This period was followed by Heidegger's increasingly overt turning toward Nazism, culminating in his period as rector of the University of Freiburg. Heidegger's Nazi turning arguably influenced the later evolution of his position, in which it was perhaps even central, and certainly influenced the later reception of his position in a large and rapidly growing debate. I believe these two factors are independent each of the other but that taken together they structure the reception of the position. Before *Being and Time*, Heidegger was known mainly as Husserl's assistant and later former assistant as well as for his unusually influential teaching. After *Being and Time*, he was known for this book and other writings before his turning toward National Socialism, then for his period as rector of the University of Freiburg in 1932–1933, in effect as Hitler's man in the German academy, a period quickly followed by his later voluntary withdrawal from that role. Yet there was no demonstrable withdrawal from the consequences of the Nazi turning.

Heidegger's brief period as Nazi rector is highly unusual in several respects. He is, to begin with, the only important philosopher to become an active Nazi. It needs to be explained how a thinker of intellectual power could be led to endorse Nazism. His view is clear and unambiguous for all but the most blinkered observers. He writes: "The works that are being peddled about nowadays as the philosophy of National Socialism but have nothing whatever to do with the inner truth and greatness of this movement (namely the encounter between global technology and modern man)—have all been written by men fishing in the troubled waters of "values" and "totalities" (Heidegger 1977, p. 199).

Heidegger, who composed this passage shortly after resigning as rector, republished it in unchanged form in the early 1950s after the end of the Second World War. The simplest interpretation is that Heidegger was convinced there was a deep metaphysical significance to Nazism, a significance which is neither understood nor even perceived by those committed to the rival philosophical approach known as axiology, or value theory, which Heidegger rejected, and which was represented when Heidegger was still a student by Windelband and Rickert,

with whom he studied. Efforts by Heideggerians to explain away this apparent reference to the importance of the views of the NSDAP, for instance by denying that “the movement” refers to the Nazi movement, are unsuccessful and reflect badly on the philosophical enterprise.

Heidegger’s Nazi turning arguably affected the later evolution of his position as well as its reception in an already huge, steadily growing international debate. After the Nazis lost the war, Heidegger’s voluntary service in the projects of the German Nazi party, and his numerous explicit and implicit references to Nazism, became hindrances to his reception by the philosophical community. The later reception of Heidegger’s writings can be divided into three groups, including those who think we do not need or in fact should not take Heidegger’s turn to Nazism into account in considering his theories since they are unrelated to his political views, those who think that since his theories are inseparable from his Nazism they can simply be reduced to it in turning away from any possible philosophical claim, and those who believe we can only understand Heidegger’s theories in the context of his times, to which they cannot be reduced but from which they also cannot be isolated.

### **On the Heidegger reception**

With *Being and Time* and then the period as rector as the backdrop, we can roughly divide the ongoing reception of Heidegger theories into five main phases, which I will be calling: Heidegger the teacher; Heidegger the teacher and writer; Heidegger’s Nazi turning; Heidegger’s French connection; and finally the ongoing international Heidegger reception throughout the philosophical debate.

To begin with, there is the phase before *Being and Time*, including the period when Heidegger was still largely unknown, mainly known for his unusual teaching style. This stage came to an end when, after publishing *Being and Time*, Heidegger burst like a bolt of lightning onto the German philosophical scene. This second phase also includes *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* published in 1929 (Heidegger 1997), in which Heidegger lays claim to special status as the only one to identify and carry forward the central theme of the critical philosophy in his phenomenological ontology. This is further the period when, as a wildly successful professor, Heidegger directed the work of an astonishing number of often gifted younger philosophical colleagues in eventually coming to dominate the German philosophical debate.

The third and fourth phases of the Heidegger reception, which overlap chronologically, both concern aspects of Heidegger’s Nazi turning. We can arbitrarily divide these phases into German, or national, and French, or international, sub-phases. Both Heidegger’s philosophy and German National Socialism developed on the basis of extremely conservative political thought during the early part of the twentieth century. Sometime during the early 1930s Heidegger became interested in National Socialism, eventually going on to serve for a short period as rector of the University of Freiburg (1933–1934), and later apparently maintaining an interest in Nazism.

At the time of this writing, many things about this period are still unclear, including the precise nature of his interest in National Socialism, the relation of his philosophical theories to his Nazism, and finally the effect of his Nazi beliefs on the later evolution of his thought. Thus, to take a single example, the *Letter on Humanism* (1948), which he wrote in difficult circumstances after the Germans lost the war, can be read simultaneously as a philosophical document in which Heidegger announces a turn from phenomenological ontology, or more generally from philosophy, to so-called thought (*Denken*). It can also be read in a very different way as a response to his political jeopardy, in short against the background of the political situation.

The fourth phase in the Heidegger reception is the complex French connection. It is widely known that French philosophy is often influenced by German models. Important German models in twentieth century French culture include Hegel, Nietzsche and Freud. It has been claimed that Hegel is the single most important German model for French thought in the first half of the twentieth century. It is arguable that Heidegger is even more important than Hegel as a model for French thought in the second half of the twentieth century. Heidegger's French connection falls into two sub-phases divided by different readings of the link between Heidegger's phenomenological ontology and traditional French humanism.

At roughly the same time that Heidegger was becoming interested in the German Nazi Party as supposedly linked to a form of authenticity clearly described in *Being and Time*, interest in his thought was beginning to rise abroad, especially in French philosophical circles, which it eventually came to dominate and perhaps still dominates. In France, this period extends roughly from 1931, when the first translation of Heidegger's writing appeared, until 1987, when Victor Farías' notorious book *Heidegger and Nazism* came out (Farías 1989).

French philosophy has always loosely centered on the general theme of humanism broached early in modernity by Montaigne and Descartes. Humanism takes different forms including the revival of classical letters, the focus on human being as well as on the social relevance of the philosophical to life in society. The early French interest in Heidegger perhaps not surprisingly attributed to him a humanist position not dissimilar to the one later roughly sketched by Sartre in "Existentialism is a Humanism" (Sartre 2007). Heidegger, who sharply rejected this comparison, was at pains to separate his position from existentialism while laying claim to a supposedly new and deeper humanism in his *Letter on Humanism*.

A possible link between Heidegger and humanism of any kind was later called into doubt by the appearance of Farías' work. This book engendered a scandal that for a brief, incandescent moment engulfed a large part of the French philosophical establishment. The turning point was obviously Heidegger's Nazi affiliation, which at the time was almost completely unknown to the wider public, known mainly to a very few French Heidegger specialists. Farías' intervention changed this situation in bringing the link between Heidegger and Nazism before the wider public. This link suddenly seemed central to Heidegger's theories, hence to the Heidegger reception in France.

The difficulty was clearly not, or not merely, the link between philosophy and politics, which goes back to early Greece, for instance to Plato's *Republic*, but rather

the putative link between Heidegger's philosophy and so-called French humanism. Farías' book created what one can only call a philosophical scandal, which rapidly evoked a series of written responses if not necessarily to his book at least to the problem it apparently raised.

The scandal ignited by Farías is due to the obvious contradiction between Heidegger's turn toward Nazism, which no one directly denied and the distinguished French humanist philosophical tradition. Many observers were surprised and shocked by the apparent incompatibility between Nazism and humanism.

Fariás book, which did not end or even diminish Heidegger's influence in France, immediately and fundamentally forever changed the tenor of the debate, which almost immediately refocused on the link between Heidegger's philosophical theories and his political engagement in effect asking a central question: is Heidegger's phenomenological ontology humanist?

### **Why the Heidegger reception is problematic**

It is difficult to distinguish clearly if at all between Heidegger's phenomenological ontology and his politics. Once Heidegger turned to National Socialism, his interest in politics took on a less theoretical, more specific, clearly threatening dimension. Since at this point it was no longer possible to draw the usual distinction between his philosophical theories and a specific form of politics, it was no longer plausible to conduct the reception of his philosophical theories without regard to the surrounding social context as well as to the possible political consequences.

The obvious objection that Heidegger's later evolution occurs on purely immanent philosophical grounds internal to his philosophical position seems to me not only false but also misleading. It tends to conceal Heidegger's political engagement, which he apparently and certainly stubbornly later maintained even as he took steps to suggest he had turned away from it in order to protect his reputation for future generations. His effort in this regard is aided by his followers, for instance by withholding writings from his *Nachlass*, by retouching unpublished documents, by denying what could be denied, and so on. This is unusual in the reception of an important thinker, perhaps even without clear precedent.

The fifth phase of the Heidegger reception concerns the ongoing international debate after the French debate on Heidegger's Nazism. The French debate, more clearly than the German debate, raises what has since become the unavoidable central question about the link between Heidegger's philosophy and Heidegger's politics. *Being and Time* was published after *Mein Kampf* but before the NSDAP assumed power in Germany. Though on a close reading Heidegger's philosophical theories appear to suppose as well as to support an extremely conservative worldview, *Being and Time* is not itself a Nazi book. Yet, since philosophical theories always arise within the historical moment, it is plausible to infer that Heidegger, who initially formulated his position in the German political context between the two world wars, relies if not in whole at least in part on his philosophical theories in his turn to Nazism.

It is too early to determine the results of the Heidegger reception after Farías, hence after Heidegger's Nazi turning became widely and scandalously known. In the 1930s Heidegger was in competition with Nazi thinkers like Ernst Krieck and others. Yet though some observers reject Heidegger because of a supposed Nazi taint, no one seems to favor an interpretation of Heidegger's philosophical theories as Nazi philosophy. Everyone, including Heidegger, seems to be aware that even the suggestion of Nazism severely compromises what can be said for his position. Hence it is hardly surprising that Heidegger himself and a number of his followers seem concerned to deny or at least to minimize any hint of a link between Heidegger's theories and his Nazism.

There seem in general to be two main strategies in the later reception of Heidegger's thought. On the one hand, there is the usual philosophical effort to come to grips with the theories of someone deemed an important philosopher but without any significant reference to the social surroundings. This in no way distinguishes the reception of Heidegger from any other significant thinker, who is at least tacitly represented as situated within but as not dependent on the social surroundings. This strategy is a form of the usual depiction of an important thinker if not as unaffected by, at least as certainly unconstrained through, the social context. On the other hand, there is the quasi-behaviorist model, more usual in psychological studies but unusual in philosophical debate in which observers sometimes strive to "reduce" a theory to its surroundings, in this case to explain Heidegger's theories as not only related to but further as no more than the reflection of his Nazi turning.

Each of these approaches has its obvious limits. The ongoing effort to treat Heidegger's position as if it were unrelated to its context after Farías' intervention in the debate is at least questionable, perhaps even intellectually dishonest. There can be legitimate questions about the nature, extent, length and depth of Heidegger's attraction to Nazism. It is, for instance, unclear when Heidegger became interested in Nazism, what he accepted and what he did not accept, for instance biological anti-Semitism, extermination camps, and so on, about whether, as is sometimes claimed, his Nazi turning was a mere episode in his biography, since he quickly cut his visible ties to the National Socialist government, or rather if he even after the end of the war continued to maintain a form of philosophical Nazism as it could be in striving to disguise his interest in National Socialism as it in fact existed.

## **Excursus on philosophy, time and history**

If efforts to grasp Heidegger's position either by neglecting its relation to the context or on the contrary by reducing the theory merely to the context both fail, how should we understand Heidegger's position? The question can be rephrased as follows: how should we understand the relation between any position and its surrounding context?

The relation between philosophy and its surroundings is not well understood. The venerable view of philosophy as in time but not of time conflates time and history

while denying more than an incidental link between philosophy and its surroundings. It was only in later modern philosophy when the subject was rethought as an intrinsically historical being that philosophy came to be understood as a historical discipline, hence as dependent on the historical context.

The idea that philosophy is in more than an incidental way dependent on context, which is relatively recent, depends on the rise of the view of the philosophical subject. Ancient Greek philosophical theories often seem to presuppose a conception of the subject as reduced to a mere cognitive function, as in the Platonic conception of the ability literally to “see” the real. The Christian concern with moral responsibility later led to a view of the subject, which was reconfigured in the modern tradition in epistemological terms. Such modern thinkers as Descartes, Kant, perhaps even Wittgenstein understand the subject not as within but rather as outside the world, hence as free of its constraints. The Kantian conception of the subject as both phenomenon and *noumenon*, hence as causally determined but also as wholly undetermined, is the basis of his view of moral choice. It is only later when the subject becomes a historical being that philosophy itself becomes a historical discipline, hence subject to historical constraints.

It is not easy to distinguish between time and history. Things are in time, but human being is in history. Time and history are utterly distinct, but often conflated. It took centuries for philosophy to cast off an atemporal approach to cognition. The venerable conception of the philosophical object as unchanging, for instance in the Parmenidean view of reality, naturally points toward an ahistorical view of the knower. In eschewing relativism, the epistemic problem took shape as the effort to know what is as it is, in short to cognize reality itself presumably from the vantage point of an a-historical space.

Different thinkers contribute to a historical conception of philosophy itself in transforming the view of philosophy as a supposed source of atemporal knowledge, valid now and forever, into a historical discipline. This latter conception arises in stages in the modern debate, initially in the British empiricist view of knowledge as human knowledge, then in the post-Kantian German idealist view of the subject as finally no more than a finite human being situated in an ongoing historical context. By the time we reach Hegel, we find a conception of philosophy as intrinsically historical, as always part of the ongoing history of philosophy.

## Heidegger’s position and the historical moment

It is plausible to think that Heidegger’s political turning, which arose very naturally through a general, obvious political affinity between himself and Nazism, was given a particular shape through inferences Heidegger’s drew from his philosophy. Though *Mein Kampf* appeared in 1925–1926, hence before *Being and Time*, there is as already noted no reason to believe that the latter is anything other than an important philosophical study and in no way a Nazi tract or even an anticipation of National Socialism. Nonetheless, in the context of the times in which he lived, Heidegger can be read as relying on *Being and Time*, especially on § 74, including his conceptions of resoluteness, authenticity, destiny, fate and so on. On this



philosophical basis, he draw specific inferences, which he later synthesized in the infamous Rektoratsrede (1933) (Heidegger 1985a), in sketching how to bring into line, or reconcile (in German “*gleichschalten*”) the organization of the university in the early days of the Third Reich.

In general, after he cut his official ties to Nazism Heidegger strove to turn attention away from the link to the present and toward his version of the traditional philosophical claim to be timeless. The same difficulty is central on at least three different levels: in the relation of philosophy to the philosophical tradition, in the specifics of the Heidegger reception, and in Heidegger’s conflicting views of the relation of his theories to history. As concerns Heidegger’s understandable desire in difficult circumstances to free himself or at least his thought from the taint of Nazism, we can distinguish between his own efforts and those of his followers. In retrospect, it appears that his ongoing efforts to distance himself publicly from Nazism, while maintaining roughly the same level of belief in the so-called “movement,” runs like a red thread through his writings after the end of the rectorate.

Heidegger’s efforts to conceal aspects of his commitment to National Socialism include the so-called *Kehre*, or turning in his thought, which has never been satisfactorily elucidated; the article entitled “The Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts” (1945) (Heidegger 1985b), in which Heidegger claims that he never abandoned the defense of reason even in the darkest hour of his Nazi collaboration; the infamous Spiegel interview (Heidegger 1966). Kant calls attention to a Copernican reversal in his critical philosophy. In references to the *Kehre* or so-called turning in his thought, Heidegger obscurely indicates that some time after the publication of *Being and Time* there was an unspecified, but fundamental change in his position. This point seems, however, to be countered by a clear declaration of allegiance to National Socialism in *Introduction to Metaphysics* as noted above.

The article “The Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts” (Heidegger 1985b), was written immediately after the war, at a time when Heidegger was rusticated from the university and in danger of losing his pension. Heidegger’s claim there that he never abandoned the defense of reason is contradicted by a long series of actions during this period, including the denunciation of colleagues, the speeches extolling Nazism, his explicit acceptance of the infamous Führer-Gesetz, his complicity in barring Jewish students and such colleagues as Husserl from the university, and so on.

The infamous “Spiegel Interview” (Heidegger 1966) was intended very obviously to be published only after his death as his authorized testament, hence meant to be retained by posterity. Heidegger here defends himself against criticism in implausibly directing attention to the menace of technology while exclaiming helplessly, and certainly implausibly, that only a god can save us. In now adopting a passive posture that contrasts sharply with the militant posture he recommended in *Being and Time*, Heidegger depicts human beings as well as himself not incidentally as helpless before omnipresent modern technology.

Heidegger’s fruitless efforts to free, if not himself, at least his philosophical theories from the taint of Nazism illustrate his conception of truth as disclosure, that is, every revealing is also a concealing. More precisely, each claim Heidegger

makes on his own behalf to liberate his theories from a relation to the surrounding context seems to be opposed, even contradicted, by a plausible counterclaim situated within his own thought. This point is not negated but rather supported by his own theories, which, on even a simple interpretation, appear to undermine any attempt to “deconstruct” or otherwise explain away what is now a matter of historical record and that, hence, cannot be simply expunged to disappear forever down the memory hole.

The problem is somewhat different as concerns Heidegger’s followers, who often seem concerned to present a sanitized image of Heidegger’s person as well as his writings as supposedly unrelated to time and place. The concern to depict Heidegger as in effect a very late “pre-Socratic” unaware of the world in which he lived is contradicted by the documents, for instance the lectures on Nietzsche, which initially contained a series of references edited out of the later versions, for instance to the blond beast, in short to Nazi man, to aerial bombing, and so on; the claim that there is not a single anti-Semitic line in the 84 published volumes of his writings, which is contradicted by the references in the unpublished writings (see Sieg 1989, p. 50) and so on.

### **Recent discovered documents in the Heidegger reception**

In most cases all the participants in the reception of a given thinker have equal access to the same set of documents, which during the posthumous reception usually remains the same. The situation which prevailed after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which at least initially appeared possibly likely to challenge established doctrine, and which for this reason led to their being withheld from publication, is indeed very rare in scholarly circles.

In the case of the Heidegger reception, where the stakes are high or for whatever other reason, this is not the case. The materials in the Heidegger *Nachlass*, which have never been fully made public, have always been under the control of the Heidegger family, which has every interest in keeping up appearances. At the time of this writing, this again appears difficult because of the very recent publication of materials in the so-called *schwarze Hefte* (Heidegger 2014a, b, c), notebooks Heidegger kept over decades, which he insisted be included in the current edition of his collected works, and which clearly depict his anti-Semitic convictions.

At stake is the extent of Heidegger’s complicity in Nazism. The new material is explosive in that Heidegger’s defenders have over decades maintained that he, like many others at the time, was metaphysically disinclined toward Jews but in no sense a racist. On the contrary, passages from these so far unpublished notebooks that have so far come to light demonstrate that Heidegger relies on his seminal philosophical distinction between being and beings to argue that the Jews are collectively responsible for what in his strange philosophical universe is a horrible sin: the predominance of mere beings over being (see Assheuer 2014).

## Conclusion: on the Heidegger reception and philosophy

I come now to my conclusion. This text has examined the ongoing Heidegger reception. The Heidegger reception is complicated by such factors as the political reaction to Nazism, the obscurity of his views, the tension in his position between his comprehension of *Dasein* as always already in the world, on the one hand, and his depiction of his position, more precisely phenomenological ontology, as escaping from historical relativism, hence from history. In conclusion, I suggest that his theories, like all philosophical theories, can neither be reduced to, nor separated from, the historical context. In that sense they are like all other philosophical views, perhaps in theory ahistorical but in practice historical, hence always bound up with and inseparable from their historical moment. If, as I believe, Heidegger's theories led him in part toward National Socialism, there is no alternative, if philosophy is to survive in a meaningful sense, to rejecting those aspects of his position, which must now be considered as simply and wholly dead, in favor of other aspects of Heidegger's thinking that, if they are still living, can be possibly be saved.

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