

Introduction

This book offers an exegesis and friendly critique of Martin Heidegger's moral and political philosophy, interpreted on the basis of his metaphysics. Most scholars, I realize, view Heidegger as a thinker who proposed no moral or political philosophy, and who held no metaphysical position on which any such philosophy could be grounded. Support can be found for this view in Heidegger's writings, where he problematizes such concepts as "morality" and "politics," and claims to be attempting an "overcoming" of metaphysics in favor of a different mode of thinking. Nonetheless, I believe and will seek to demonstrate that Heidegger's relation to the philosophical tradition he allegedly overcomes involves less of a radical break than is often supposed, and that he is still grappling with recognizable issues within moral and political philosophy.

These issues include: free will and responsibility; the place of humanity within the design of nature; the subjectivity of values and the nature of justice; cultural, national, and racial identity; historical relativism; and the status of reason, public and private. Certainly, Heidegger's engagement with such issues does not result in his developing a moral and political philosophy of the sort one finds in the writings of thinkers such as Aristotle or Kant, and it would seem that his primary focus is on ontology rather than ethics. Heidegger's reflections are not explicitly normative, and his guiding question concerns the meaning of being rather than what is good or right. Richard Velkley therefore claims that, for Heidegger, furthering the renewal of this question "takes precedence over any considerations of the good, the moral, and the just, as these have been understood in the philosophic tradition as having some universal articulation, reflecting ends (happiness, perfection, virtue) inherent in human nature or reason" (Velkley 2011, 93). I will suggest in the following pages, however, that such judgments about Heidegger's privileging of ontology over ethics misconstrue his attempt to retrieve an original understanding of being that precedes its bifurcation into the "is" and the "ought," into fact and value. An implication of my analysis is that, for Heidegger, questions of truth are not separate from questions of right and wrong, in the normative sense of these terms, since being and goodness are intimately intertwined. Heidegger's

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descriptions *are* normative, for on his analysis an appropriate understanding of how things “are” necessarily includes reference to the good.

At the same time, an essential element in Heidegger’s understanding of how things are is that they are constantly changing. Heidegger’s critique of substance ontology and his insistence on the temporality of being carry the consequence that there are no eternal forms to be grasped, and that all thinking is in time. If “metaphysics” is defined as the quest for a permanent and stable rational foundation for knowing and acting, then Heidegger not only has no metaphysics himself but undermines its possibility. This consideration has led interpreters to label his thinking as postmodern or postmetaphysical, and some to worry that it entails historicism, relativism, or irrationalism. Appropriating Heidegger positively, Leslie Thiele writes that for Heidegger “thinking is necessarily open-ended” (Thiele 1995a, 96), and “philosophy is a decidedly lawless endeavor” (101). Thiele supports this judgment by citing Heidegger’s remark, made in a posthumously published interview, that “in the domain of thinking, there are no authoritative statements . . . The only measure for thought comes from the thing itself to be thought.”¹ Similar observations lead to Reiner Schürmann’s description of Heidegger’s thinking as “anarchic,” in the literal sense of lacking an *arche* or fundamental principle on which being and acting are grounded (Schürmann 1987, 1), and to Werner Marx’s searching in Heidegger’s thought for a “measure on earth” that could serve as a foundation for a “nonmetaphysical ethics” (Marx 1987, 4).

Against these and other readings of Heidegger as a “postmetaphysical” thinker, I contend that he is so only in a highly particular sense involving a narrow understanding of “metaphysics.” In a broader sense, where the term indicates judgments about the relation between humanity and being (what the Western philosophical tradition has sometimes termed “reality,” though this is a term Heidegger questions), Heidegger is better understood as espousing and providing cogent arguments to support a particular metaphysical position. This is a qualified realist position, and my analysis will challenge readings of Heidegger as an anti-realist (Braver 2007, 2014). Getting this issue right is essential to understanding Heidegger’s positions on moral and political subjects, which constitute a “philosophy” not in a postmodern but remarkably ancient sense: a conception of the nature of things and of humanity’s place among them. Determining the sense in which Heidegger is a realist is crucial to assessing whether he counts as a cultural or historical relativist, a judgment with serious repercussions for his position on goodness and justice. Likewise, Heidegger’s understanding of the status of humanity within nature affects the normative implications of his thought for our treatment of both human and

¹ The remark is from Heidegger’s interview in *Der Spiegel*; cited Thiele 1995a, 101.

nonhuman individuals. I argue that Heidegger's recognition of the limitations on what is in fact thinkable in a particular age and culture does not commit him to historical or cultural relativism, if that means we have no access to truth. This argument requires some clarification of his metaphysical – or if one prefers, ontological – standpoint, which might be best described as a form of dynamic monism.²

It also requires attention to the thought of Heidegger's philosophical antecedents. There exists a wealth of scholarly literature on Heidegger's readings of past philosophers as evidenced in his explicit engagement with their thought in lectures and published writings (e.g. Schalow 1992, 2013; Pöggeler 1993; Kisiel 1993; van Buren 1994; Boer 2000; Brogan 2005; Gonzalez 2009). Less thoroughly recognized and examined are Heidegger's largely unacknowledged adaptations of his sources of influence in the formulation of his own positions, particularly in relation to his moral and political thought. There are, for example, strong similarities between Heidegger's and Herder's understandings of culture, although he rarely discusses Herder except in a rather uninspired lecture course (GA 85). There are also intriguing parallels between Heidegger's dismantling of the fact/value distinction, and Plato's conception of the idea of the good. And Heidegger's sense of what we owe to others creatively adapts ideas of justice as inscribed within nature among pre-Socratic thinkers. From a modern perspective, the latter are likely to be judged as involving an anthropomorphization of nature, but Heidegger challenges precisely this genre of judgment. In light of such parallels, I would question Fred Dallmayr's reading of Heidegger "chiefly as a nontraditional or postmetaphysical philosopher of 'freedom,' including political freedom" as well as "a philosopher of human solidarity," and thus "as the oblique heir of at least two enlightenment maxims: liberty and fraternity" (Dallmayr 1984, 207). In my view, Heidegger is better understood as a counter-Enlightenment thinker, where this does not mean, however, that he is an irrationalist or dogmatic traditionalist, as some of his critics have alleged (Wolin 1990; Philipse 1998).

I do, on the other hand, agree strongly with Dallmayr's contention that "the episode of 1933 holds the key neither to Heidegger's philosophical opus nor to 'the problem of the political' in his thought," and that "the latter problem really can be decoded only via a close interpretation of the general philosophical work" (Dallmayr 1984, 3). Heidegger's commitment to Nazism has cast a long and very dark shadow over the entirety of his corpus, especially in relation to moral and political matters. Yet it is odd that, although the basic facts of

² I prefer this term to John Cooper's description of Heidegger as a "dynamic panentheist," which assumes, without having demonstrated, an identity between "being" and "God" (Cooper 2006, 216). I explore the relation between these terms in "Heidegger's Argument for the Existence of God?" (Sikka 2016).

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Heidegger's membership in the Nazi party and his public support of Hitler in 1933 have never been hidden, these same facts have repeatedly been presented over the past few decades as if they were a new discovery warranting a complete reappraisal of his thought. The first episode in this repetitive tale occurred in the 1980s with the publication of Victor Farias's *Heidegger et le nazisme* (1987). Already at that time, Gadamer expressed surprise at the uproar provoked in France by Farias's book, pointing out that "almost all of what Farias reveals has long been known" (Gadamer 1988, 176). Still, Farias's book, along with Hugo Ott's *Heidegger: Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (1987), claimed to provide evidence that Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism was stronger and deeper than those who had judged his thought in a positive light and incorporated it into their own had realized. In line with such findings, Lacoue-Labarthe argued in *La fiction du politique: Heidegger, l'art et la politique* (1987) that it was no longer possible to dismiss the issue by assuming that Heidegger's political commitment had been accidental.³ Analyses like Richard Wolin's *The Politics of Being* (1990) addressed the relation between Heidegger's politics and his philosophy, claiming to establish an intrinsic connection between these on a number of significant points.

Given the flurry of debate generated by Farias's and Ott's books, one might have expected that the issue would be resolved one way or the other in the few years that followed. Peculiarly, though, the publication in 2005 of Emmanuel Faye's *Heidegger, l'introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie: autour des séminaires inédits de 1933–1935* employed the same gesture of purportedly offering shocking new revelations that would demonstrate once and for all the extent of Heidegger's agreement with Nazism and its deep roots within his philosophy. Again the evidence turned out to be not so decisive after all, generating arguments and counterarguments much like those occasioned by Farias's work. In the latest episode, at the time of writing in 2016, the publication of the so-called "Black Notebooks" has turned out to be déjà vu all over again. A 2014 item in *Slate* magazine can stand for many others. Titled "Heidegger's Hitler Problem Is Worse Than We Thought," its first sentence runs: "The upcoming publication of the Black Notebooks – three never-before-seen volumes by the legendary German philosopher Martin Heidegger – may reveal a direct link between Heidegger's lengthy dalliance with Nazism and his landmark treatise *Being and Time*" (Schuman 2014). Yet since then more than one Heidegger scholar has pointed out how little there is in these notebooks that we did not know before (Farin 2016, 307; Harries 2016, 207).

No doubt there are a number of factors behind the recurrence of this highly polarized debate, but one explanation for its repeated semblance of

³ See English translation of this work (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990), pp. 17–29.

novelty, I suspect, is that Heidegger's Nazism easily gets forgotten, because the vast majority of his published philosophical works contain no overt sign of fascism or anti-Semitism. It does not follow that the works are unproblematic, or that in interpreting them there is no hermeneutic advantage to knowing about Heidegger's political actions and remarks. Heidegger had serious faults in both his character and his philosophy, and there is certainly a link between the man and his works. There is also considerable room for informed disagreement about the interpretation, as well as the value, of his central claims. However, in assessing Heidegger's contribution to *philosophy*, it is not helpful that the launch of each new Heidegger exposé seems to proceed in ignorance of the substantial existing scholarship on the issue, or dismisses it as apologetics, even though many of its authors are not Heidegger acolytes and do not maintain that his association with Nazism is inconsequential to understanding his philosophical corpus. The rhetoric of Heidegger's most hostile detractors often implies that there is an attempt at cover-up on the part of Heidegger scholars as a whole, or that those who take his philosophy seriously are dangerously unaware of the Nazi ideas hidden within his writings, by which they may become unconsciously infected as by some latent virus.

My aim is to build on existing scholarship in order to highlight what is of continuing value in Heidegger's moral and political philosophy, while addressing at the same time the limitations of his thinking as reflected in his political affiliations and sympathies. With this aim in mind, I have chosen to organize my inquiry according to topics rather than works or chronological periods. In each chapter, I offer a critical explication of Heidegger's position on the topic in question, challenging misinterpretations while acknowledging what is genuinely problematic in his account. As a further step, I also seek to isolate those aspects of Heidegger's thought on a given issue that survive critical analysis, including awareness of the objectionable moral and political implications that he himself drew, and to highlight their positive significance. Heidegger's political acts and sympathies were foolish, as well as morally culpable, but that should not lead us to overlook what is interesting and insightful in, for instance, the phenomenological grounding he provides for the Kantian idea of human beings as ends in themselves, or his subsequent critique of the modern sense of alienation that this very idea entails, and his proposed alternative. Similarly, the blind spots in Heidegger's thinking and personality that made possible his support for Nazism in its early days do not render invalid the resources offered by his rich account of the significance of culture and place in the lives of individuals, and the consequences for a just form of politics. Thus, my approach to Heidegger's thought in this book is itself Heideggerian in its method of engagement with the philosopher I am questioning. It includes critical confrontation and transformative appropriation, relating what is being said

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in the text to what is being talked about (BT 168), led by an orientation toward what needs to be thought at the moment.

Because this was Heidegger's own approach to thinking, appreciating his revisionary adaptations of philosophical antecedents – the pre-Socratics, Plato, Eckhart, Schelling, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, to name a few – is essential for understanding his initial enthusiasm for National Socialism, as well as the philosophical aftermath of his disillusionment, for it reveals the way he connected philosophical ideas with contemporary events. Much of the scholarship on “Heidegger's Nazism” has been oriented toward his proximate social and political context. Such research enriches our knowledge of Heidegger's milieu, which is naturally relevant to understanding his decisions, personal as well intellectual. It can also be misleading and superficial, however, yielding a one-sided and ultimately false portrait of the movement and foundations of Heidegger's moral and political ideas, while losing what is of lasting philosophical significance in them.⁴

Heidegger actually inhabited two realms, I will suggest, the one a realm of deep reflection in dialogue with his philosophical and theological heritage, the other the realm of concrete events and circumstances. His way of bringing these together was at times prescient, and at other times demonstrated a stunning lack of the *phronesis* he valued in Aristotle and partially emulated in some of his own writings (Bernasconi 1990). In the latter respect, Heidegger's case provides an object lesson in how not to be an engaged philosopher. But his philosophical reflections on the current age also contain an unusual depth, isolating and interrogating fundamental assumptions about knowledge and reality that shape the modern worldview and its way of negotiating questions about how we should be, and how we know how we should be.

I begin this book with an examination of Heidegger's position on human freedom, assessing the twin, and on the face of it contradictory, characterizations of his thought as endorsing decisionism or voluntarism on the one hand, and determinism or fatalism on the other. I argue that Heidegger actually embraces neither. Rather, we find in his writings a consistent and complex analysis of the situated character of human freedom, affirming its existence while exposing its limits, which are at the same time the conditions for its possibility.

While Chapter 1 focuses on the “how” of being moral, I argue in Chapter 2 that the early Heidegger is also committed to a general moral principle, as *Being and Time* provides a phenomenological and ontological basis for one

⁴ A case in point is the otherwise highly informative work of Charles Bambach (2003, 2013). Alexander Duff also misses Heidegger's transformative appropriations of authors such as Kant and Hegel, as well as his retrieval of ancient modes of ethical realism (to use an anachronistic descriptor). This leads Duff to conclude, in my view wrongly, that “Heidegger's thought forecloses ethics and in doing so articulates an understanding of human existence that entails profound ethical and political consequences” (Duff 2015, 26).

version of Kant's categorical imperative, namely the formula of humanity stating that a rational being should never be treated merely as a means but always also as an end in itself. Heidegger's later works seem to reverse this judgment, with humanity standing in the service of something that transcends it, a view that also finds some surprising parallels within Kant's moral philosophy and philosophy of history. Although it has some troubling aspects, this idea of humanity as "for" something is proposed as an antidote to a nihilistic vision of our place within the scheme of things. On that vision, which Heidegger thinks forms the dominant worldview of the present age, being has no meaning except in relation to subjective judgments of value, and nature is nothing but raw material for the satisfaction of collective wants in light of these values. Heidegger offers and defends an alternative interpretation of ourselves, one that preserves and may even enhance human dignity.

The next chapter takes up the problem that Heidegger's analytic of Dasein – the entity that I myself am (BT 53) – in *Being and Time* leaves uncertain the status of animals. They neither conform to the structure of "care," the term Heidegger uses to describe Dasein's self-interested but also necessarily self-reflexive character, nor are they merely tools or objects. Heidegger's later works seem to stress a greater continuity of human beings with the rest of nature in some respects, and have therefore been taken up in a positive way within environmental ethics. Humanity retains a special status in these later writings, though, and the question of where animals and nonliving entities stand in relation to this status needs further examination. I argue that one of the implications of the very Kantian account of Dasein in *Being and Time* could be the exclusion of nonhuman sentient beings from moral concern altogether, but that Heidegger's explicit uncertainty about the character of animals – which we understand, he suggests, through modifying our understanding of our own being – also leaves room for reaching a different conclusion. Animals may not possess the full structure of Dasein as "care," to which "liberating solicitude," Heidegger's version of the Kantian notion of respect, is the appropriate response. But there is nonetheless a sense in which their being is an issue for them, too, and in which they also "project" themselves forward into the future while registering what may befall them. These features of the being of animals mean that they cannot appropriately be treated as tools or objects. Furthermore, Heidegger's later works, in which the special status of humanity consists in its being able to discern the design of things, and to take up an appropriate place within that design, can be developed as a form of environmental philosophy that sees human beings as privileged *precisely because* they are able to take care of other beings, whether sentient or nonsentient, in their relations to one another, and are responsible for doing so.

Chapter 4 examines Heidegger's adaptation of Plato's idea of the good, and of pre-Socratic writings that speak of justice, arguing that ideas gleaned from

these sources inform Heidegger's historically dynamic but nonetheless ultimately realist conception of goodness and justice. To some, this will seem an unexpected reading of Heidegger, who does not propose a theory of "objective values" or of "justice." Yet a close analysis of a number of Heidegger's works reveals a repeated attempt to retrieve an ancient manner of understanding the way of things that can form the basis for a theory of natural justice. Such a retrieval might strike modern sensibilities as naïve and unscientific in its understanding of the world, but again Heidegger questions fundamental modern assumptions about the nature of nature, according to which it could not possibly contain ends, purposes, or prescriptions.

In the first part of Chapter 5, I examine the view of nations and peoples expressed in Heidegger's directly political speeches and lectures, against the background of the German line of thinking about *Volk* that includes Herder, Fichte, and Schleiermacher, among others. Because this line of thought emphasizes cultural particularity and played a role in the development of National Socialist ideology, it is often contrasted with Enlightenment universalism. Its emphasis on *Volk*, however, was generally accompanied by a species of cosmopolitanism influenced by Kant's conception of the proper relation between peoples. This type of cosmopolitanism is preserved in Heidegger's validation of a form of interaction between peoples that would be based on national autonomy and mutual respect.

I go on to suggest in this chapter that *Being and Time* offers resources for thinking about the constitution and political significance of cultural identity that have remained underutilized due to an understandable suspicion of such themes in the writings of a philosopher who supported fascism. There are certainly shortcomings in Heidegger's understanding of culture as grounding the unity and identity of peoples and nations, in particular the cultural essentialism Heidegger shares with the Herderian tradition, along with its positioning of Jews as perpetual outsiders to European nations. While Heidegger's conception of being a "people" is guilty of essentialism, and his views about different peoples are contaminated by self-preference and bigotry, his writings are nonetheless helpful for analyzing the role of language, place, and history in the constitution of cultural identity; the possibilities and pitfalls of cross-cultural dialogue; and the narrative structure of cultural identity that conditions who we imagine ourselves to be. Some of these ideas have been taken up by contemporary philosophers such as Charles Taylor, who apply them to support multiculturalism, rather than cultural nationalism. I maintain that this type of application is not invalidated by Heidegger's own political conclusions, and may be fruitfully extended through a closer consideration of Heidegger's phenomenological reflections on culture, space and time.

Heidegger's concept of *Volk*, nation or people, is based primarily on cultural characteristics, but he also seems to have thought that cultural membership

was decided by birth. For a time, moreover, he did support a political regime whose ideology was heavily based on the idea of race, and he has been accused of being a racist of some sort – cultural, metaphysical, or “ontohistorical” (Trawny 2014, 11). Approaching the question of race and racism in Chapter 6, I emphasize that Heidegger was clearly not a biological racist, and that biological racism was central to Nazi ideology, as Heidegger came to understand. He consequently criticized biologism and the idea of race itself as based on ideas inappropriate to an understanding of human beings, and typical of modern scientism. Biological racism is not the only kind there is, though, and descent does play a role in Heidegger’s understanding of what identifies a people, whom he always imagines as belonging to a common stock. But I contend that, in spite of his own bigotries, Heidegger is in a way right on this point, albeit for reasons he does not make explicit, because descent, in the form of self-identification through lineage, does play an important role in people’s own understanding of the community or communities to which they belong. Only it does not follow that states should be monoethnic, even if Heidegger himself inclined to that view. On the contrary, recognizing the role of lineage in self-identification can lend support to multiculturalist policies, leading to an acknowledgment that narratives of descent play a legitimate role in people’s self-location among communities and that their self-interpretations on this point should be respected.

The final chapter in this book takes up Heidegger’s critique of “reason” and the accusations of irrationalism elicited by it, as well as by the style and methodology of his thinking. It has been charged that Heidegger’s suspicion of reason abandons science and objectivity in favor of a historically relative and ultimately confused notion of truth, leaving us with no sure grounds for assessing existing social structures and relations, or producing normative prescriptions. In response to such charges, I ask whether Heidegger’s diagnosis of modernity as the triumph of calculative rationality works with a one-sided conception of reason, as Jaspers and Habermas claim. Granting that there are problems with the insular manner of Heidegger’s thinking, moreover, I argue that models of communicative reason aiming for clarity and consensus are also problematic, as they disallow novel forms of critique, ones that challenge what are taken to be the self-evident truths of a universal reason, but may in fact only be a set of hardened cultural assumptions. In addition, Heidegger’s understanding of truth as historical “disclosure” suggests that poetry, art, and myth can never be permanently superseded by reason. They are instead much-needed participants in an ongoing and never completed historical process of responding to distress, while envisioning salutary change.

The position Heidegger develops does not undermine the use of reason understood in a more humble and flexible manner, nor does it leave us with historical relativism. Recognition of the temporality of being, and thus of the

fact that all thinking is timely, is compatible with commitment to revealing the truth about how things are, and how we are to comport ourselves toward them if we genuinely hold ourselves to that truth. Belief in the possibility of such revelation is a condition for commitment to it, and Heidegger argues for a way of understanding our relation to being that legitimates such belief. That argument forms the core of Heidegger's revisioning of human thinking, including our thinking about moral and political issues. It could be described as a "realism about values," were it not for the queer metaphysical pictures on which such assertions rest and the pseudo-problems they consequently generate.

I end this introduction with a note on style. Heidegger's texts are notoriously difficult, a fact that likely explains the ever-increasing number of introductory books on his philosophy.⁵ It is also a factor in efforts at translating Heidegger's idiom into terms that would be more readily familiar to analytic philosophers, although these efforts are equally motivated by a sense that the division between "analytic" and "continental" philosophy is unhelpful, serving as a barrier to potentially fruitful lines of philosophical investigation (Thomson 2012). This book is not meant to be an introduction, and I will not attempt to assimilate Heidegger's thought to the style of analytic philosophy, whose methodology and assumptions are, in my view, at odds with Heidegger's own, and apt to be distorting. That said, I do seek to elucidate rather than merely channel Heidegger's own language. This is a complex task, since Heidegger's vocabulary is essential to his meaning and to the critical thrust of his thinking. The multiple solutions I adopt include avoiding Heideggerese as much as possible (and admittedly it is not always possible), explaining why Heidegger uses the terms he does while rejecting more readily comprehensible ones, and highlighting Heidegger's critiques as well as his revisionary appropriations of contemporaries and predecessors, to show why he wants to speak differently about what may appear to be the same matter. I hope thereby to clarify and evaluate Heidegger's moral and political ideas in a manner that will be comprehensible to more than a small circle of Heidegger experts, but that still retains what is original in his thinking.

⁵ Examples include Richardson 2012, Wisniewski 2013, and Braver 2014.