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Iain D. Thomson

Excerpt

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Introduction

Heidegger on Ontotheology

Martin Heidegger is now widely recognized as one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Until the late 1960s, this impact derived mainly from his early magnum opus, *Being and Time* (published in 1927). Many of the twentieth century's most significant continental thinkers – including Hannah Arendt, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Paul Tillich – acknowledge profound conceptual debts to the insights elaborated in this text. *Being and Time* was never finished, however, and Heidegger continued to develop, refine, and in some places revolutionize his own thinking for another fifty years. This “later” Heidegger’s prolific body of work decisively influenced the next generation of continental philosophers, helping to shape the concepts and concerns of major contemporary figures such as Jean Baudrillard, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Hubert Dreyfus, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, Richard Rorty, and Charles Taylor, to name but a few. Despite this unparalleled impact, however, important aspects of Heidegger’s later philosophy remain obscured by confusion and controversy.

Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education seeks to clarify five interrelated aspects of Heidegger’s later thought, namely, his neglected understanding of metaphysics as ontotheology, his controversial critique of technology, his appalling misadventure with Nazism, his prescient critique of the university, and, finally, his important philosophical suggestions for the future of higher education. My title is “fortuitously ambiguous,” as Heidegger would say – that is, “ambiguous in a positive sense” (KPM 157/GA3 231) – for, in *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, I first

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explain Heidegger's philosophical understanding of ontotheology, then develop an interpretation of his later thought *on the basis of* this understanding of ontotheology. The subtitle, *Technology and the Politics of Education*, expresses my sense that the other important aspects of Heidegger's later thinking just mentioned are interrelated in a way we can appreciate only once we understand his views on ontotheology.

I thus begin, in Chapter 1, by arguing that Heidegger's unjustifiably neglected understanding of metaphysics as ontotheology in fact forms the crucial philosophical background for much of his later thought. Until now, Heidegger's complex understanding of ontotheology has been either ignored or misunderstood. When his view of "ontotheology" is mentioned at all, it is usually taken to be a dismissive way of characterizing any theology that treats God as the outermost anchor in the causal chain of creation. Yet, this reduction of the divine to "the God of the philosophers" is only one of the profound consequences of the ontotheological structure Heidegger discovers at the core of the entire tradition of Western metaphysics. To clarify this more complex and nuanced understanding of ontotheology, I show how Heidegger's historical deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition leads him to the view that all our great metaphysical systems make foundational claims best understood as *ontotheological*. His guiding idea is that the metaphysical tradition establishes both the fundamental and the ultimate conceptual parameters of intelligibility by ontologically grounding and theologically legitimating our changing historical sense of what is. Heidegger's notorious antipathy to metaphysics thus obscures the fact that, on his view, it is metaphysics which unifies and secures our successive historical "epochs." A series of metaphysical ontotheologies anchor our successive constellations of historical intelligibility, temporarily securing the intelligible order by grasping it from both ends of the conceptual scale simultaneously (as it were), both *ontologically* (from the inside out) and *theologically* (from the outside in). By first elucidating and then problematizing Heidegger's thesis that all the great systems of Western metaphysics share this ontotheological structure, I reconstruct the most important components of the original and persuasive history of metaphysics he provides in support of this thesis. It is precisely this historical narrative, I show, that generates the critical force of the later Heidegger's main philosophical project, namely, the attempt to find a philosophical path leading beyond our nihilistic, Nietzschean age. (Because it provides crucial philosophical background for the rest of the book, Chapter 1, of necessity, engages closely with Heidegger's technical vocabulary, and readers who find the going too slow might do

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well to skip ahead to Chapter 2 or 3, circling back once the stakes become clear.)

Chapter 1 thus presents Heidegger's rather dystopian critique of our own historical age, and Chapter 2 begins to respond to some of the controversy this critique has understandably provoked. Specifically, Chapter 2 seeks to demonstrate that three of the major criticisms advanced against Heidegger can be persuasively countered once we comprehend the way in which his famous critique of our "technological" understanding of being *follows from* his understanding of metaphysics as ontotheology. To make this case, I focus systematically on the three longstanding criticisms appropriated, refined, and leveled against Heidegger's view by the leading critical theorist of technology, Andrew Feenberg. I first make clear that Feenberg's formidable criticisms are addressed not to technological essentialism as such, but, rather, to three particular kinds of technological essentialism, namely, *ahistoricism*, *substantivism* (or fatalism), and *one-dimensionalism* (that is, the charge that Heidegger's understanding of technology is "totalizing" or indiscriminate). After explicating these three forms of technological essentialism and explaining why exactly Feenberg finds them objectionable, I ask whether any of them should in fact be ascribed to Heidegger. By showing how Heidegger's critique of technology follows from his understanding of ontotheology, and then drawing out the implications of the heretofore unnoticed connection, I am able to respond to each of Feenberg's criticisms in turn, establishing three important conclusions: first, that Heidegger's rather limited technological essentialism is not at all ahistoricist, but the opposite, an historical conception of the essence of technology; second, that although Heidegger does indeed advocate a substantivist technological essentialism, he also suggests a plausible, indirect response to Feenberg's voluntaristic, Marcusean objection; and, third, that Heidegger's one-dimensional technological essentialism is of a nonobjectionable variety, because it does not force him to reject technological devices *in toto*. These conclusions help vindicate Heidegger's groundbreaking ontological approach to the philosophy of technology. In so doing, moreover, they reinforce my overarching thesis that Heidegger's understanding of ontotheology needs to be recognized as the crucial philosophical background of his later thought. For, I show, deprived of this philosophical background, later views such as Heidegger's critique of technology can easily appear arbitrary and indefensible, but when this background is restored, the full depth and significance of those views begins to emerge with new clarity.

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After proposing an interpretation that restores Heidegger's understanding of ontotheology to its rightful place at the center of his later philosophy (in Chapter 1), and then, on the basis of this interpretation, vindicating his later work against some longstanding objections (in Chapter 2), I turn in Chapter 3 to confront what is surely the greatest obstacle to any sympathetic reconstruction and defense of Heidegger's work, namely, his brief but appalling alliance with National Socialism. Why did one of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers join forces with its most contemptible political movement? This profoundly troubling combination has spawned a secondary literature of singular immensity. Cutting through this controversy, Chapter 3 advances a new understanding of the philosophical basis of Heidegger's infamous politics by focusing on the development of his philosophical views on university education. Elucidating these views and situating them within their broader historical and philosophical context, I show them to be largely responsible for his decision to become the first Nazi Rector of Freiburg University in 1933. I then ask: Did Heidegger learn from this horrific political misadventure and so transform the underlying philosophical views that helped motivate it? Pursuing this important question, I show that Heidegger did indeed learn several crucial philosophical lessons here, but I also argue, against the interpretations of Otto Pöggeler and Derrida, that the later Heidegger continued to develop and refine the basic philosophical research program that originally motivated his failed attempt at political activism, rather than simply abandoning this philosophical program after 1933. Instead of using this conclusion as an excuse to dismiss Heidegger's later views on education, however, I suggest that his prescient critique of the university has only become more relevant since he elaborated it, and that, with the important philosophical corrections suggested for this philosophical research program by his so-called turn, the later Heidegger's mature vision for a reontologization of education merits the careful attention of those of us now seeking to understand the roots and implications of our own growing crisis in higher education. In order to justify these admittedly provocative claims, I turn in the concluding Chapter 4 to critically appropriate, develop, and defend several aspects of the later Heidegger's radical philosophical vision for a university of the future.

Chapter 4 begins by showing that Heidegger presciently diagnosed our current crisis in higher education. Important contemporary theorists such as Bill Readings extend and update Heidegger's critique, documenting the increasing instrumentalization, professionalization,

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vocationalization, corporatization, and technologization of the modern university, the dissolution of its guiding and unifying ideals, and, consequently, the growing hyperspecialization and ruinous fragmentation of its departments. Unlike Heidegger, however, these critics do not recognize such disturbing trends as interlocking symptoms of an underlying ontotheology, and, as a result, they are unable to provide a positive vision for the future of higher education. In contrast, by understanding our educational crisis in terms of its deep ontohistorical roots, Heidegger is able to develop an alternative, ontological conception of education, one devised to help bring about a renaissance in higher education. To make this case, I show how Heidegger, through a creative reading of Plato's famous allegory of the cave, excavates and appropriates the original Western educational ideal of Platonic *paideia*, thereby outlining the pedagogy of an ontological education capable of directly challenging the nihilistic but increasingly widespread conception of education that follows from our technological understanding of being and its underlying Nietzschean ontotheology. Reconstructing Heidegger's mature notion of ontological education, I suggest that his view can best be understood as a species of philosophical perfectionism, one which seeks to reessentialize the currently empty ideal of educational "excellence" in order to both reconnect teaching to research and restore a meaningful sense of communal solidarity to the academic community. In developing such a view, however, I argue that we need to recognize, criticize, and steer well clear of the authoritarian and totalitarian excesses that distorted and misdirected Heidegger's own attempt to intervene politically in 1933 on the basis of his still insufficiently clarified philosophical views on university education. *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* thus concludes by suggesting that, once those aspects of Heidegger's earlier view that encouraged his disastrous politics have been isolated, criticized, and rejected, the later Heidegger's mature understanding of ontological education represents an important contribution to current philosophical efforts to both diagnosis and respond to our own growing crisis in higher education.

Ontotheology?

Understanding Heidegger's Deconstruction of Metaphysics

§1. INTRODUCTION: ONTOTHEOLOGY?

On hearing the expression “ontotheology,” many philosophers start looking for the door. Those who do not may know that it was under the title of this “distasteful neologism,” for which we have Kant to thank, that the later Heidegger elaborated his seemingly ruthless critique of Western metaphysics.¹ The forcefulness of Heidegger’s “deconstruction” (*Destruktion*) of the metaphysical tradition helped turn a generation of post-Heideggerian thinkers into antimetaphysicians, but Heidegger’s deconstruction is actually premised on his attribution to metaphysics of an unparalleled pride of place in the historical construction and maintenance of intelligibility.² Heidegger’s deconstruction presupposes that

¹ Kant observed of philosophical neologisms that: “It is not as easy to invent new words as one thinks, because they are contrary to taste, and in this way taste is a hindrance to philosophy” (*Lectures on Metaphysics*, 120). Kant coined “ontotheology” and “cosmotheology” in order to distinguish between two opposing kinds of “transcendental theology.” “Ontotheology” is his name for that kind of transcendental theology exemplified by St. Anselm’s famous “ontological argument” for the existence of God, which “believes it can know the existence of an [original being, *Urwesen*] through mere concepts, without the help of any experience whatsoever” (*Critique of Pure Reason/Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A632/B660; see also P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*, 17). Heidegger may have appropriated the term “ontotheology” from Kant, but his use of it, as we will see, is quite different.

² In an erudite genealogy of “destruction,” Dermot Moran traces a family of similar philosophical concepts back through medieval thought to Plato’s *Euthydemus* (“The Destruction of the Destruction, 176–96; cf. Jorge Borges, “Averroës’ Search,” *Collected Fictions*, 235–41). Moran translates Heidegger’s *Destruktion* as “destruction” in order to stress its difference from Derrida’s “deconstruction.” My riskier rendition of *Destruktion* as “deconstruction” throughout is justified by the fact that Derrida coined the word “deconstruction” in an attempt to translate Heidegger’s *Abbau* (“quarrying, dismantling,

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metaphysics is not simply the esoteric concern of philosophers isolated in their ivory towers but that, on the contrary: "Metaphysics grounds an age" (QCT 115/GA5 75). To put the matter too quickly, but by way of anticipation, Heidegger's claim is that by giving shape to our historical understanding of "what *is*," metaphysics determines the most basic presuppositions of what *anything* is, including ourselves.³ "Western humanity, in all its comportment toward entities, and even toward itself, is in every respect sustained and guided by metaphysics" (N4 205/NII 343).⁴

By codifying and disseminating an understanding of what entities *are*, metaphysics provides each historical "epoch" of intelligibility with its ontological bedrock. And by furnishing an account of the ultimate source from which entities issue, metaphysics supplies intelligibility with a kind of foundational justification that (for reasons we will examine shortly) Heidegger characterizes as "theological." To assert that "metaphysics grounds history," then, is to claim that metaphysics establishes both the most basic conceptual parameters and the ultimate standards of legitimacy for history's successive epochs of unified intelligibility. These epochal "constellations of intelligibility" are thus neither contingent nor free-floating but, rather, are grounded in and reflect a series of historical

or decomposing"), a synonym for *Destruktion* Heidegger later employed in order to emphasize that *Destruktion* is not merely a negative act, a "destruction" (*Zerstörung*), but rather "must be understood strictly as *de-struere* [the Latin "*struere*" means "to lay, pile, or build"], *ab-bauen* [literally, "un-building" or "de-construction"]" (GA15 337, 395). (See Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 86–7.) As I will show, Heidegger's deconstruction of Western metaphysics does not destroy or even destructure metaphysics. On the contrary, it deconstructs, decomposes, or decompiles metaphysics' sedimented historical layers, reconstructs its obscured ontotheological structure, and seeks to uncover the "decisive experiences" responsible for this common structure, with the hope that recognizing the contingency of these experiences will help us to envision a path beyond ontotheology. I am, however, in complete agreement with Moran's concluding claim that: "The concept of destruction as used by Heidegger is... bound to a certain view of history... that has not been clarified" (192). Indeed, that is one of the gaps in the literature I attempt to fill here in Chapter 1.

³ As Dreyfus succinctly explains: "The practices containing an understanding of what it is to be a human being, those containing an interpretation of what it is to be a thing, and those defining society fit together. Social practices thus transmit not only an implicit understanding of what it is to be a human being, an animal, an object, but, finally, what it is for anything to be at all" ("Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics," 295).

⁴ Understanding Heidegger's critique of ontotheology thus helps us see that his allegedly Occidentric views, rather than indefensibly privileging "the West," in fact result from his refusal immediately to generalize the results of his close reading of Western metaphysics to traditions not rooted in our ontotheological tradition. The colonizing spread of our Western "technological" ontotheology seems to be increasingly neutralizing such distinctions, however, and not for the better.

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transformations in our metaphysical understanding of what entities *are*.⁵ Straightforwardly enough, Heidegger calls such an understanding of what it means for something to be an *understanding of being*, and his famous *history of being* is simply a shorthand for designating the historical series of these epoch-grounding understandings of being.

In what follows, I shall give a more carefully nuanced exposition of Heidegger's account of the way in which the metaphysical tradition establishes the foundations for every epoch of intelligibility by ontologically grounding and theologically legitimating our changing historical sense of what is. First, however, in order to help motivate a journey through such hermeneutically uncharted terrain, let me briefly address one of the potentially most troubling presuppositions of the foregoing, namely, Heidegger's claim that our ontological bedrock is temporally variable. Explaining that I am using "bedrock" in the Wittgensteinian sense, as that inevitable point at which the explanatory spade turns, may not sufficiently alleviate the worry.⁶ For, if our foundationalist intuitions are rigid enough, we are likely to feel a certain vertigo before the claim that ontology, our bedrock understanding of what is, changes with time. Nevertheless, the idea that even humanity's most fundamental sense of reality changes, and so needs to be understood in terms of its history, is indeed the later Heidegger's doctrine of *ontological historicity*, a controversial doctrine the truth of which Heidegger himself had yet to recognize in his early magnum opus, 1927's *Being and Time*. By 1941, however, Heidegger had come to consider *Being and Time*'s famous first call for a deconstruction of the ontological tradition *precritical*, precisely because of the philosophically "naïve" assumption that this deconstruction would allow him to recover a transhistorically binding "fundamental ontology," that is, a substantive understanding of "the meaning of being in general" fundamental enough to have been operant within every different historical epoch of intelligibility (GA15 395; EP 15/NII 415), as we will see in Chapter 3.⁷ Heidegger's

⁵ I get this nicely descriptive phrase by combining those of Dreyfus (*Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*) and Schürmann (*Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*). On Heidegger's account, as we will see, Western history presents us with what are basically five different ways of understanding what beings *are*, hence five overlapping epochs in this history of Being: the pre-Socratic, ancient, medieval, modern, and, now, the late modern – that is, "enframing" (*das Gestell*).

⁶ *Philosophical Investigations*, ¶217, 85.

⁷ I will suggest in Chapter 3 that the link between Heidegger's philosophy and his disastrous political commitments during the 1930s can best be understood in terms of his own metaphysical ambition (exhibited prominently in such texts as *Being and Time* and his Rectorial Address) to recover a fundamental ontology capable of unifying the German academy and, behind it, the German nation. If this is right, however, it means that the

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recognition that there is no such substantive, transhistorically binding fundamental ontology encouraged him to radically historicize ontology, the move which, most scholars would agree, constitutes the *sine qua non* of his “later” thought.

However controversial this central doctrine of the later Heidegger may be, it now forms a taken-for-granted point of philosophical departure for virtually every major practitioner of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction. Why is it, then, that in the growing philosophical literature contesting or critically appropriating these otherwise diverse schools of thought, we nowhere find a careful reconstruction of the idiosyncratic understanding of metaphysics on which Heideggerian historicity is based?⁸ Even thinkers such as Derrida, Baudrillard, and Irigaray, who often speak not just of metaphysics but of philosophy *tout court* as “ontotheology,” never adequately unpack the meaning of the term. This chapter (and, more broadly, this book) can be understood in part as a response to this rather glaring exegetical lacuna. But beyond clarifying an unspoken presupposition of much recent continental philosophy, and so laying some necessary groundwork for those who would understand that work on its own terms (whether to criticize it, build on it, or both), there is for me an even more important motivation for reconstructing Heidegger’s deconstruction of the history of Western metaphysics, and that is this: Heidegger’s conception of the foundational role played historically by the metaphysical tradition provides much of the philosophical background for his mature critical philosophy, a background without

later Heidegger’s rejection of fundamental ontology is also a renunciation of the major philosophical motive behind his politics. This suggests, in turn, that the influential Habermasian view, which would dismiss the later Heidegger’s philosophy as politically tainted, rests on a basic misunderstanding of the connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and politics.

⁸ For a Hegelian criticism of “historicity” and the “left Heideggerian” who espouses such a doctrine, see Robert Pippin, “Heideggerian Postmodernism and Metaphysical Politics,” 17–37. My own complaint would be somewhat different: Too many post-Heideggerian “continental” philosophers (both at home and abroad) fail to appreciate the precise scope of Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics as “ontotheology” and so simply disparage all manner of philosophical doctrine as “metaphysical.” One result of such unfortunate overgeneralizations is that a number of self-undermining positions have been advanced, falsely, under the patrimony of Heidegger’s deconstruction of metaphysics. It should become clear from what follows that, although Heidegger ascribed great importance to the experience of that which seems forever to exceed the final grasp of discursive knowledge, his deconstruction of metaphysics does not require philosophers to abandon all propositional language and silently “eff” the ineffable. Nor did Heidegger think we should dissolve all positive political programs, coherent identities, and substantive commitments into the flux of efficient flexibility. Indeed, as we will see, such ersatz radicalism merely reproduces the underlying nihilism it has not first adequately understood.

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which his later views can easily appear arbitrary and indefensible. I thus take it that Heidegger's understanding of metaphysics as ontotheology is sufficiently important and complex to merit careful elaboration in its own right, and this will be my primary goal here in Chapter 1.

This chapter is structured as follows. In Section 2, I unpack and explain the meaning of Heidegger's initially strange claim that metaphysics has an ontotheological structure. Section 3 then situates Heidegger's understanding of ontotheology within the broader context of his thought, outlining the significance of his deconstruction of metaphysical foundationalism for his critique of nihilism. In Section 4, I reconstruct the most important components of the original account of the history of metaphysics that Heidegger gives in support of his claim that metaphysics is ontotheology, investigating one of the deepest problems in this account. The concluding Section 5 shows that Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics has a positive dimension whereby it helps motivate the elaboration of nonmetaphysical ways of understanding ourselves and our relationships with our worlds.

§2. METAPHYSICS AS ONTOTHEOLOGY

Every question specifies [*grenzt*] as a question the breadth and nature of the answer it is looking for. At the same time, it circumscribes [*umgrenzt*] the range of possibilities for answering it. In order for us to ponder the question of metaphysics adequately, it is necessary in the first place to consider it as a question, rather than considering the procession of answers descending from it in the history of metaphysics.

(N4 206/NII 344)

From the late 1920s through the mid-1940s, Heidegger worked to distill the structural commonalities of the metaphysical tradition down to a formal framework into which he could fit every "fundamental metaphysical position" in the history of the Western tradition (N3 179/NII 25). In so doing, he continued to refine the understanding of metaphysics he first set forth in 1929 (in texts such as "What Is Metaphysics?" and *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*) until, in 1940, he presents what he calls: "The concept of the essence of metaphysics," which states that: "Metaphysics is the truth of the totality of entities as such" (N3 187/NII 257). What does this "concept of the essence of metaphysics" tell us? Let us take the advice Heidegger gives in the epigraph to this section and consider the way in which the question of metaphysics specifies and circumscribes its own possible answers.

As Heidegger understands the history of metaphysics, "Western-European thinking is guided by the question: 'What is an entity?'