

## Method of Citation

Heidegger's writings are cited parenthetically using the abbreviations listed separately after the concluding section. English translations that have been consulted are also listed in that place. In cases in which the German original and the English translation are cited in the body of the text, the citations are divided by a /. Otherwise, English translations are the author's own.

## Introduction

The ancient image of philosophy as a journey, what Bonaventure calls an *itinerarium*, is quite fitting for Heidegger's life-long engagement with religion. Along his way, Heidegger initiates radical lines of questioning about the history of religious thought, while maintaining the "atheism" of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The impact of Heidegger's investigations of religion has been considerable.<sup>2</sup> A scholarly conversation about what Gadamer calls the "religious dimension" of Heidegger's work has likewise been underway for decades.<sup>3</sup> Instead of providing an overview of "Heidegger on religion," here I take up just three parts of Heidegger's massive output: (1) the 1920–1921 lectures on Paul given in Freiburg (GA 60); (2) the unpublished treatises on *Ereignis* from the 1930s and 1940s; and (3) postwar essays and addresses from the late 1940s and 1950s. While these parts of his corpus are crisscrossed by commonalities and resonances, I am not claiming that they evince any sort of systematic unity. Heidegger's exploratory, experimental, and self-revising approach to philosophy defies any conventional understanding of what a philosophical system looks like. But one thing that is shared by these three moments in Heidegger's philosophical *itinerarium* is a call to suspend received conceptual frameworks and to venture a new engagement with religious life in manifold forms. Heidegger argues in his 1920 lectures on the New Testament that we must give up on a certain scientific "attitude" [*Einstellung*] and its assumptions about objectivity to understand the "sense of the performance" [*Vollzugssinn*] of early Christianity. In manuscripts and notes centering on

<sup>1</sup> For two accounts of what could perhaps best be termed Heidegger's "a-theism," or bracketing of any consideration of God within phenomenology, see Hemming 2002 and Wolfe 2014, especially chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the earliest to respond to the publication of *Being and Time* (1927) were theologians, both Protestant and Catholic. See Wolfe 2014 for details.

<sup>3</sup> Select contributions in the development of this conversation include Macquarrie 1965, Van Buren 1994, Kiesel 1994, Coriando 1998, Crowe 2006 and 2007, McGrath 2006, and McGrath and Wiercinski 2010. Besides the first of these, this list includes more strictly scholarly treatments of Heidegger and religion, rather than Heidegger-influenced works of philosophical theology or phenomenology of religion. A bibliography of all of the original work, in various fields, that references or alludes to Heidegger's ideas about religion would surely approach an overwhelming length.

the *Contributions to Philosophy* (GA 65), Heidegger looks to overcome “metaphysics,” as an inflexible explanatory schema, and to perform a “leap” into a space of indeterminacy that enables a possible reconfiguration of the relationship between the divine and the human. In postwar writings, Heidegger gestures toward such a reconfiguration, “dwelling,” in the midst of the reigning “positioning” [*Ge-stell*] that places everything, including God, “on order” [*bestellbar*]. These various ways of placing [*stellen*] things, producing [*her-stellen*], representing [*vorstellen*] them, restrict the range of possibility for the actual performance [*Vollzug*] of meaningful life. As ways of setting up or adjusting into place [*einstellen*], they all stand at “arm’s length” from life.

### Excursus: “Performance” [*Vollzug*]

An aspect of Heidegger’s thought that I want to emphasize, especially because of its relevance to his investigations of religion, is that it is, itself, performative, and that performance is the subject matter of Heidegger’s explorations. The language of “performance” derives from Heidegger’s usage in early lectures from 1919 to 1921, as well as in later texts from the 1930s and 1940s (see Section 2). The thematic of “performance” [*Vollzug*], which can also be translated into English as “enactment,” “implementation,” and “actualization” appears first in the context of Heidegger’s early reorientation of phenomenology away from the model of theoretical science. What Heidegger has in mind when he discusses “performance” in a phenomenological sense has an (unacknowledged) Husserlian pedigree in the notion of intentional “fulfillment” [*Erfüllung*] in intuition. In both cases the intuition (Husserl) and the performance (Heidegger) realize or carry out (otherwise only ideal) meaning. In Husserl’s case, what is intended becomes subjectively present or actual; for Heidegger, the performance [*Vollzug*] itself has a meaning [*Sinn*] or “how” that enacts a relation [*Verhältnis*] to a content [*Gehalt*]. The “how” of the performance cannot be specified or determined ahead of time (GA 60, 59–61). In the 1920–1921 lectures, Heidegger explores the “how” of early Christian life, carried out “in” the world and yet not “of” the world (GA 60, 121–122). The tendency to focus on the “what” in theorizing a domain of objects, on getting it “right,” excludes this “how,” and its indispensable role in the formation of a life becomes inaccessible. If we want to avoid this tendency, which Heidegger sees as built into adopting an “objective” attitude in order to secure “certainty,” then, to paraphrase, we are going to have to get personal with philosophy. While Heidegger later gives up talk of “factual life,” and of the threefold “senses” that collectively constitute the conditions for life’s intelligibility – performance sense

[*Vollzugssinn*], relation sense [*Verhältnissinn*], and content sense [*Gehaltsinn*] – the same cannot be said of the language of “performing” [*vollziehen*] as such. Sections 1 and 2, in particular, will bring out the importance of the performative nature of Heidegger’s philosophy at different moments in his career.

### Doing Philosophy with Heidegger

The herdsman [*Hirt*] can ex-ist as a thinker. In that case, the herdsman is a shepherd [*Schäfer*] whose flock consists of the thoughts that are to be thought about the world. His thoughts are *sheep*, and they are as refractory as the name suggests. Sheep go astray [*irrig*]. (GA 98, 240)

In truth, thinking is thrown into a torrent [*Strom*]; it involves a great deal of trouble and distress to remain upright in the current [*Strömung*] and not to be cast out of the stream’s course [*Stromrichtung*] onto the bank. (GA 98, 241)

In these two adjacent passages in private notebooks from the late 1940s, Heidegger uses vivid images to portray what philosophy is for him. Both images suggest being forced or impelled along unpredictable courses, either by one’s errant charges or by a raging river. For Heidegger, philosophy is something that one is drawn into; philosophy has a compelling force despite the risks of failure and loss that come with it. For my own part, a more redolent image of philosophy is of the public space (*agora*) in which people are called upon to give an account (*logon didonai*) of things.<sup>4</sup> It is from this way of thinking about philosophy – call it Socratic-Platonic – that I approach thinking through what Heidegger says about religion in the texts I am considering in this Element. To be sure, Heidegger shares with the Socratic–Platonic approach the understanding of philosophy as *performative*, as a risky venture in which everything is put at stake (see above). That is precisely what makes what compelled him still so compelling for others. There is indeed something bracingly revolutionary about Heidegger’s way of doing philosophy. Such a venture could hardly fail to turn up something important. Heidegger’s philosophical work in this respect could be likened to a mining drill that casts off chunks of material as it bores into a subterranean rock face, among which we can find much that is precious and valuable in surprising ways, whether or not we join in the excavation. Or, to stick with Heidegger’s own metaphor, as he patiently shepherds his thoughts along the way, he leaves no lack of stray “sheep” behind that are worth being gathered in. Rather than taking on Heidegger’s own project, and being swept

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger’s great predecessor Husserl articulates a similar starting point for thinking about philosophy in 1923–1924 lectures on “First Philosophy.” See Husserl 2019.

along in its unpredictable current, I think it worthwhile to linger over some of what this project uncovers, and to sort out what is worthwhile from what is not.

There is a general reason for why I am not aiming at faithful reconstruction of the ins and outs of Heidegger's lifelong philosophical peregrination, but at a more selective consideration of a few segments of his work. As already indicated, what Heidegger does is to inaugurate a distinctively performative approach to philosophy which he, at certain times, compares to a "leap." It is reasonable to expect to find something that *motivates* the "leap," which makes the performance perhaps mandatory or commendable. To summarize in advance some ideas that will be examined in more detail in the following sections, Heidegger's principal reason for the "leap" is that, if we fail to undertake the performance that is being called for, we are destined to inhabit a world empty of significance, simply marking time until humanity annihilates itself and its planet. This, Heidegger says, is the "emergency," "plight," or "need" [*Not*] that lends the leap its necessity [*Notwendigkeit*].<sup>5</sup> This is all the final legacy of the history of "metaphysics," a way of thinking that we must learn to see our way past, or beyond, or beneath. This is where a difficulty arises. One might accept that there is indeed a planetary "emergency" or "plight." Yet accepting Heidegger's account of it requires accepting his conception of metaphysics and what it entails about the history of philosophy. In various ways in the following sections, I point out that it is not unreasonable to find something dogmatic and reductive about Heidegger's schema of the history of philosophy that eventuates in the "emergency" of the present. To summarize what receives further discussion below, Heidegger largely abandons *any* conventional projects of justification, stipulating that his goal is neither explanatory nor does it aim at an improved description (see Sections 1 and 2). As a result, Heidegger does not clarify the relationship between the complex historical actuality of philosophy and the background ontological assumptions of an era in the "history of being."

Most fundamentally, I find that Heidegger's account of the history of metaphysics conflicts with the pursuit of a "destructive" retrieval or "repetition" of historical possibilities, carried out over against rigid conceptual frameworks and distorting assumptions built into prevailing intellectual attitudes [*Einstellungen*], which Heidegger at times called for (Section 1). Heidegger assumes that what a given thinker has to say about *being* is what is most significant and most worth thinking about [*denkwürdig*]. He strenuously avoids all contextualization, all

<sup>5</sup> The connection between "emergency" [*Not*] and "necessity" [*Notwendigkeit*] in Heidegger's thought, particularly from the 1930s, has been convincingly examined by Richard Polt. See Polt 2006 and 2019. I am indebted to Polt's work for gaining an understanding of this important aspect of how Heidegger does philosophy.

examination of what he sometimes called the “hermeneutical situation” of both the philosopher being investigated and the one doing the investigating (Heidegger himself). Heidegger often proceeds as though what he says in 1923, that “[p]hilosophy is what it can be only as a philosophy of ‘its time,’” were not true (GA 63, 18). History, Heidegger had maintained, is not a research program, but a matter of direct personal and shared urgency.<sup>6</sup> But, it would seem that Heidegger’s schema of “metaphysics” and its history gets in the way of actually uncovering what is valuable in the philosophical tradition. Of course, none of this amounts to a refutation in detail of what Heidegger says about the history of philosophy. There is certainly much that is worthwhile in his readings of the likes of Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant, and other key figures in the history of Western thought. My point is only that Heidegger motivates his “leap” with an approach to understanding the history of philosophy that is questionable.

What I am going to present here is at once less than Heidegger and more than Heidegger. It is *less* than Heidegger in that important commitments that motivated him are not shared. Practically speaking, this means that what follows is meant neither as an exegetical commentary on nor even a general overview of what Heidegger says about religion. I am investigating not the “whole” Heidegger, but rather three possibility-laden stops along his lengthy *itinerarium*. While what I am presenting is in this way *less* than Heidegger, it is also meant to be *more* than Heidegger. Heidegger himself often describes his own thought as a series of “pointers,” “indications,” “hints,” and “gestures” meant to draw attention to an experiment of thinking that must be performed. In the spirit of these insistent suggestions, I pursue lines of thought that Heidegger himself does not explore, but which he, at times, seems to point out. The chief example of following up such hints in what follows starts from the recognition that the three bodies of work on which I draw for my investigation differ in an important respect. As will be explored in Section 1, in his 1920 lectures on Paul, Heidegger undertakes to suspend objectifying and classificatory “attitudes” [*Einstellungen*], and in this way to indicate the shape of the performance of a unique religious life. The acknowledged difficulty of carrying out this intellectual task is at least somewhat eased by the presence of an exemplar, a *text*, that would constrain the interpretation, namely, some of Paul’s letters in the New Testament.

By contrast, as Sections 2 and 3 make plain there is no such exemplar for Heidegger’s equally radical philosophical experiments from the 1930s into the 1950s. Heidegger is trying to indicate something that escapes the grasp of metaphysics and of technological “positioning [*Ge-stell*].” But there is no text there guiding his reflections, no example of the sort of thing he is trying to

<sup>6</sup> I examine Heidegger’s earlier approach to the history of philosophy in Crowe 2006 and 2019.

indicate, which is, after all, the outcome of a creative “leap [*Sprung*].” Fortunately, Heidegger does turn out to give at least *some* indication of what he is talking about in materials added to the published version of his important postwar address, “The Thing.” There, in response to an inquiry, Heidegger says that “divinity” [*die Göttliche*] is exemplified by its presence “in Greek culture [*Griechentum*], in prophetic Judaism [*Prophetisch-Jüdischen*], in the preaching of Jesus” (GA 7, 185). In Sections 2 and 3, I follow up the second and third of these suggestions in order to articulate a richer understanding of the possibilities opened up by Heidegger’s thought, in both cases drawing on biblical texts, in something like the way Heidegger had done in 1920.

### Excursus on Nazism

Today there are plenty of people who think that, because Hitler and his henchmen were crushed by the International, the eternal truth of Christianity has been confirmed. One takes the international to be the incarnation of morality; one thinks it is evidence for faith if an ecclesiastical regime and its faith are thrust into power. (GA 98, 21)

Read in isolation, for the first time, by a person with a basic understanding of the major events of the twentieth century, these lines could be read as a warning against moral complacency on the part of the victors in the Second World War. If it were recalled that this was written in a world on the brink of radical upheavals like globalization and decolonization, unfolding beneath the shadow of nuclear annihilation, then the warning being issued by the writer might even be taken to be salutary. In point of fact, however, the author of these lines was a noted supporter of “Hitler and his henchmen,” who, beyond scattered, obscure remarks, never had much to say after the fact about what he had participated in. Looked at again in light of this news, these lines give off the whiff of evasion and misdirection, of an attempt to dodge responsibility by casting aspersions elsewhere. In this manner, these lines from the notorious *Black Notebooks* epitomize the problem of Heidegger. On the one hand, his criticisms of modern culture and his calls for authenticity, alongside the depth and rigor of his philosophical inquiries, mean that Heidegger demands our attention. On the other hand, the indisputable fact that he put his intellectual gifts in the service of a hideous regime rightly repels many people from examining his thought carefully or even at all. To be sure, much has been written, and needs to be written still, about the problem of Heidegger.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>7</sup> Some of the seminal examinations of Heidegger’s Nazism, while they succeeded in prompting much needed reflection and some important work, unfortunately have a tendency toward the sensational or tabloid-esque. These include Farias 1991, Faye 2005, and Trawny 2015. For a contrastingly sober and exhaustive examination of Heidegger and the Nazis, see Zaborowski 2010.

conversation on Heidegger and Nazism is far from over, and a great deal remains to be thought through and articulated. I am going to argue in this Element that Heidegger provides resources that help us read an indelibly Jewish book (i.e., the Bible). The fraught nature of this undertaking is apparent given Heidegger's serious involvement in the cultural politics of the Third Reich. What I am going to say in this study requires that the darker side of Heidegger be discussed, but I will limit myself here to explaining why I think that the problem of Heidegger, which is very pressing indeed, does not require ignoring what he says or forswearing the effort to think it through.

Martin Heidegger was a convinced Nazi who failed to take any real public responsibility for that fact after the cataclysm that ended the regime. Does that mean no one should bother to read, ponder, criticize, reconstruct, or teach his work? It is difficult to see how this could be so. To demand that Heidegger be laid aside because of his politics alone seems to assume something like an "intellectual contagion" theory of the transmission of philosophical thinking. It is as if the "Nazi" or "fascist" tendencies in Heidegger's work could "infect" another person who simply thought some about what he says. It is for social scientists to investigate whether something like this actually happens or not. I will only point out that such a view of how ideas travel is part of the case that fascists of all stripes make to undermine free inquiry (remember "Jewish science" or "bourgeois historiography"?). Demanding the excision of Heidegger from the canon of European philosophy is questionable for other reasons as well. It looks to be the sort of move that is meant to establish maximum moral credentials at minimum personal cost, which in turn sounds self-exculpatory in the manner of some of Heidegger's own postwar comments. Denouncing Heidegger for his Hitlerism, in fact, buys two things in one go: a public exhibition of one's own virtue, and an excuse not to read thousands of pages of tortured German.

Is Heidegger's philosophy in and of itself "Nazi" or "fascist"? The problem with the question, thus formulated, is that "Nazi" and "fascist" are not especially precise terms. Part of what characterizes these political ideologies is that they are vague, contradictory, and equivocal. The name "National Socialism" itself is best understood not as an indicator of the party's convictions, but as a marketing strategy designed to evoke politically significant terms current at the time, and to suggest an illusory all-embracing solution to the current problems. The very fact that Heidegger could think of his own call for a "new inception" as consistent with the "inner truth and greatness" of Nazism proves the point. A workable conception of what Nazism entails is something that requires historical research, which so far has yielded an ideology held together by very little. This means that it is pointless to ask whether or not Heidegger's