

HEIDEGGER, NATIONAL SOCIALISM AND “IMPERIALISM”: RESPONSE TO RADLOFF

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Discussion of the theme of Heidegger and National Socialism long ago reached the point of saturation. “New” contributions to the discussion are more often than not variations on prior contributions. Especially from the Heideggerian side, enormous efforts have been deployed to “save” their hero. In the 1940s, when the extent of Heidegger’s relation with Nazism began to be known, certain Heideggerians immediately began to circle the wagons. This started in France, soon to fall largely under Heidegger’s sway, where he became the master thinker for a generation of French intellectuals, not all of them philosophers, before rapidly spreading elsewhere. In defence of Heidegger, a series of strategies were invented. The list is long and ingenious. Access to key documents was restricted. Everything that could be denied was denied. A distinction was drawn between Heidegger the unpleasant German writing in the first half of the twentieth century and the philosopher allegedly unrelated to time and place, a thinker out of time so to speak, someone who simply could not be understood through his relation to the events of his historical moment. Important, but embarrassing contributions to the discussion were often overlooked, and competent observers were discredited as incompetent to grasp the subtleties of Heidegger’s writings. An indulgent version of his *Collected Writings*, which eschewed textual fidelity and which omitted the letters, which are routinely part of such an endeavour, was soon underway. Heidegger’s texts were translated in ways that made difficult texts simply unintelligible. An instance among many is the rendering of the ordinary German word “*Ereignis*,” which is easily intelligible to a German speaker, as the English hapax “enowning,” which is unintelligible to an English speaker or perhaps to anyone else. Fanciful interpretations of key texts were offered, of which a recent instance is the suggestion that *Being and Time* is constructed along the lines of Kantian ethics. The motives of Heidegger’s critics were impugned. And so on.

This and more awaits any serious student of this theme. But, at the end of the day, the problem is simple enough. Heidegger confronts us with an unprecedented situation, unprecedented at least in the academy

since, for reasons that may or may not be rooted in his philosophy, and if we accept that he is a thinker of the first rank, he was the only first-rank thinker of the time to turn to Nazism.

This point needs to be explained, not explained away. Though there is considerable room for variation, there are only a few main approaches to the interaction between Heidegger and National Socialism: either one attempts to grasp this series of events from a vantage point situated inside his position, hence internally; or from a vantage point situated outside his position, hence externally; or, again, by simultaneously combining both strategies. The latter seems the preferable approach, since it makes sense to do what one can to grasp Heidegger on his own terms, by following his texts as best one can, and while preserving enough independence to be able to judge them in relation to other views and events.

Bernhard Radloff's recent book¹ falls squarely into what I am calling the internalist camp. It is clear he has done a lot of research and tried to think through a long series of issues linked to Heidegger's Nazi turning. One has to assume he is sincere in what he says. But one does not have to agree with any of his views. I disagree with him on a long series of points about Heidegger's position and its relation to National Socialism. My main criticism concerns his approach to the issues he identifies from a point located entirely, or nearly entirely, within Heidegger's later position. Yet, if, as I think, and even as Gadamer, Heidegger's former student and tireless defender thinks, Heidegger's position led him to Nazism, then this is not a useful way to take on the problem.²

Radloff's treatment of the relation of Heidegger and Nazism points to an obvious difficulty. Interpretation is problematic, since, other than through *fiat*, there is no way of bringing interpretation to an end in

¹ Bernard Radloff, *Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism: Disclosure and Gestalt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HQNS.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Superficiality and Ignorance: On Fariás' Publication," in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, (ed.) E. Kettering and G. Neske (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 142. Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of his main defenders, wrote: "Sometimes, in admiration for the great thinker, Heidegger's defenders declared that his political error had nothing to do with his philosophy. That they could pacify themselves with such an argument! They did not notice how insulting such a defense of such an important thinker was."

showing that one interpretation is correct and all others are false. Paul de Man, who had things to hide, exploited this factor in claiming it is not possible to make out the distinction between history and fiction.³ In practice, this means that any reading, no matter how inconvenient, can, as Derrida shows, always be “deconstructed,” hence rendered inoperable.

In his analysis of *Dasein*, Heidegger insists on what he calls thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), roughly the anti-Cartesian idea that the subject is always already in context. On the contrary, Heidegger’s earlier defenders took an anti-contextualist approach in claiming in effect that his theories were in time but not of time. This is a variation on the familiar anti-contextualist view of the philosophical subject as not limited by time and place. As applied to Heidegger, it is sometimes claimed, though the texts suggest otherwise, that he was in effect a pre-Socratic thinker, someone unaware of and certainly unrelated to the modern world, above all unrelated to Nazism about which he understood very little.

The anti-contextualist effort to “save” Heidegger later gave way to a form of contextualism, its exact opposite, which was advanced in the Heidegger debate with the similar intent of exculpating the master thinker. Roughly since Ernst Nolte, the revisionist historian of the Third Reich⁴, and following him Rüdiger Safranski⁵, a contextualist approach was invented to argue that, when we understand the context, it becomes clear that there is really no problem. The argument is inverted, but the conclusion is the same. Naturally, I have no objection to contextualism, provided it is used in responsible fashion. I am only opposed to contextualism when it is employed as an interpretive strategy to save the phenomena by contextualising Heidegger with the intention to explain everything away. What I have in mind is a kind of *Scheinkontextualismus*, that is, a way of putting into context that makes use of the context to hide or obscure what is at stake.

In Radloff’s book, this difficulty is present virtually everywhere. It takes various forms, including a curiously selective attention to the facts, so to speak, in which inconvenient facts are never mentioned, an

³ See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

⁴ See Ernst Nolte, *Martin Heidegger: Politik und Geschichte im Leben und Denken* (Berlin: Propylaen, 1992).

⁵ Rüdiger Safranski, *Ein Meister aus Deutschland, Heidegger und seine Zeit* (München: Hanser Belletristik, 1994).

interweaving of the various texts in such a way that none of them is ever discussed at length, so nothing appears very questionable, a simple contradiction without argument of the more difficult critics but careful attention to those who are closest to and most sympathetic to Heidegger's view, who are discussed often, and finally in depicting Heidegger's position as reasonable, always reasonable, even if that concerns supporting Nazism, and so on.

The results of Radloff's discussion are unfortunately predictable. At the end of the book we arrive at the view that Heidegger, whom many believe was largely unaware of and interested in the modern world, and which he condemned, was on the contrary a canny critic of imperialism. Of course, this suggestion is only plausible on the assumption that "imperialism" does not mean what the term usually means, but that Heidegger can redefine it in any way he pleases. In this case, a discussion of Parmenides, an ancient Greek thinker, serves to criticise imperialism that, at least on ordinary accounts, concerns recent political and economic developments, but in Heidegger turns on the difference between *veritas* and *aletheia*.

Like Heidegger, like many who write about Heidegger, Radloff discredits, simply ignores, or is unfortunately unaware of significant contributions to the discussion, which bear squarely on his theme. It never seems to occur to him that it is implausible to cast Heidegger in the role of an anti-imperialist critic, or that objections to his thought and actions perhaps cannot be answered merely by thinking with Heidegger against his critics. An instance is the work of Bestegui, whose careful effort to distinguish and evaluate Heidegger's successive theories of politics is directly relevant to Radloff's effort to identify and recommend the political view he attributes to Heidegger, but who is never mentioned.⁶

Radloff properly casts Heidegger as a political conservative. This point has been made by others, such as Herf⁷ and Fritsche.⁸ Radloff's study, which is organised around the concept of *Gestalt*, appears to strike out in a novel way in the vast literature. Radloff regards form (*Ge-*

⁶ See Miguel de Bestegui, *Heidegger and the Political: Dystopias* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁷ See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁸ See Johannes Fritsche, *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

stalt) as a kind of master concept central to Heidegger's understanding of being in the 1930s as well as to German conservative thought. He tells his readers, "I will focus on the question of 'form,' in the sense of *gestalt* [sic] as the guiding thread which determined not only Heidegger's understanding of the being of beings in the 1930s, but also German conservative thought in the arts, technology, and political science." (HQNS, 3, Radloff's emphasis)

It is unclear what Radloff is claiming. Is he restricting his analysis, as he says, to Heidegger's view or views of being in the 1930s? How does this relate to the so-called turning in Heidegger's thought, which Radloff does not consider? How does Heidegger's conception of being in the 1930s relate to the view he expounds in *Being and Time*? Is it the same, different from, discontinuous with, or a further development of the earlier view? Thomä, who has helpfully traced the continuous development of Heidegger's theories, contends Heidegger's theory of being later evolves, but never basically changes.⁹

Heidegger's thinking is clearly difficult to grasp. Radloff's immersion in his writings results in a text that is often not very different from, and unfortunately frequently not significantly clearer than, what he is explaining. According to Radloff, "Heidegger understands being [i.e., being in general—T. R.] as *differentiated presencing in beings*, and that being, consequently, is always to be conceived as incorporated, finite, temporal, and historically sited in beings." (HQNS, 3, Radloff's emphasis) One must regret that he does not stop to unpack the impenetrable conceptual thicket of this Heideggerean jargon. I take Radloff to be attributing to Heidegger the view that being in general is in some unknown way the cause of beings, in which it manifests itself. Such pronouncements suggest to some observers, myself included, a theological analysis of history. Other than the terminology, I do not see a lot of difference between claiming that the world is created by God and claiming that being presences itself in beings. I am further surprised by what I take to be an attempted "explanation" of human history in terms of the mythological history of being, a conceptual fairy tale concocted by Heidegger for which I find no evidence nor argument of any kind. I will come back to this point below.

⁹ See Dieter Thomä, *Die Zeit des Selbst und die Zeit danach: zur Kritik der Textgeschichte Martin Heideggers, 1910–1976* (Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp, 1990).

Radloff's master concept is form. He thinks the question of the relation of Heidegger's thought to his politics is posed since Farias' intervention in the debate (1987). Though the latter focussed attention on the theme of Heidegger and Nazism, in fact, it was raised considerably earlier in a number of ways. They include Jaspers' report to the commission that removed Heidegger from the university after the war, in the heated debate in the pages of *Les Temps modernes*, Sartre's journal, in the late 1940s, in Schneeberger's important collection of Heideggerean "political" texts that initially appeared in 1960¹⁰, and so on.

Radloff claims that insufficient attention has so far been devoted to the relation of Heidegger's theory of being to his political engagement (HQNS, 4), which supposedly occurred during a threatened crisis of formlessness. I think he is not quite correct here. A number of observers, including myself, have devoted a lot of space to considering precisely this problem.

Radloff's discussion deals in some detail with what he calls the interwar cultural crisis in Germany. Culture is obviously a facet of the tragic multi-dimensional crisis in Germany between the two world wars, which cannot fairly be labelled as merely cultural. It is unclear whether threatened formlessness is an adequate way to characterise the very deep crisis, which broke out as the failed experiment in democracy as the Weimar Republic disintegrated and Hitler came to power. Radloff suggests not enough attention has been devoted to the relation of Heidegger's view of being to his politics. Yet, in focussing on Heidegger's philosophical theories, he turns away from their relation to his historical moment. Everything happens as if Heidegger's theories were unrelated to his times. Yet, this aspect has been discussed in detail by a series of different writers, including Fritsche, whom he mentions but dismisses, as well as Losurdo¹¹, Safranski¹² and others whom he neither discusses nor even mentions.

Radloff claims Heideggerean political philosophy is a reflection of, which I assume means based on, his so-called politics of *Gestalt*.

¹⁰ See Guido Schneeberger, *Nachlese zu Heidegger: Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Denken* (Bern, 1962).

¹¹ See Domenico Losurdo, *Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death and the West*, (tr.) M. Morris and J. Morris (New York: Humanity Books, 2001).

¹² Ruediger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, (tr.) E. Osers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Though he concedes—how could he deny it?—that Heidegger was mistaken in his attitude toward Nazism as a new founding of the *Volk* and the state, Radloff still thinks we should take Heidegger's political philosophy seriously. This is a deep enigma if, like Gadamer, one thinks Heidegger's Nazi turning is based on his position. In Radloff's account, everything turns on the concept of *Gestalt*. This concept, which is central to the book in question, is, despite extensive discussion, never adequately clarified.

Radloff devotes considerable space (HQNS, 13–35), some two thirds of the long introduction, to the concept of form, beginning with Goethe's "organicist" conception that supposedly prefigures later conservative discourse in what Radloff calls the concretely embodied universal. "*Gestalt*" refers to the *Urphänomenon* or intrinsic form, which Radloff links to Gestalt psychology and Merleau-Ponty. Yet, the central idea finally remains hazy. It is never sufficiently focussed to enable a reader to identify it as central to Heidegger's position in general, even in *Being and Time*, in which it plays at most a minor role, or in his turn to Nazi politics.

Since the study is long and complex, it will be necessary to select only a few of the many different topics. I will restrict my comments to the infamous rectoral address, the conception of the *Volk* in the *Logik-Vorlesung* and elsewhere, and the supposed Heideggerean critique of imperialism. The account of the rectoral address is embedded in a longer discussion of "Heidegger and the Conservative Revolution" in Chapter 4. Radloff's modest claim, which is certainly correct, is that this speech, which reflects certain Heideggerean theses, is not merely opportunistic. To the best of my knowledge, no one disputes this mild affirmation. The difficulty, which is obvious, is that, if one concedes that Heidegger's philosophical concepts are ingredients in his Nazism, there is no clear line of demarcation between one and the other. This concession renders or would render large parts of his philosophy suspect. One way to put the point is to say that his theories are highly original, but the moral concepts that inspire them are apparently often reprehensible. Radloff deserves credit for admitting Heidegger's philosophical theories are inseparable from his Nazism. Yet, that honest concession only complicates the work of those who wish to recover something significant out of the political ruins of the philosophy of being. If one wished to defend Heidegger, it would obviously be easier, but less plausible, to make the stronger, but

false claim, still often heard, for instance as recently formulated by Caron, that his philosophy has nothing, nothing at all to do with his Nazism.¹³ Caron has been very effectively countered by Emmanuel Faye's painstaking demonstration of the complex links between Heidegger's philosophical theories and National Socialism.¹⁴

I find Radloff's remarks on the rectoral address (*Rektoratsrede*) to be very unhelpful, even evasive. This speech was delivered by Heidegger, who took office as, in effect, the Nazi representative in the University of Freiburg, at a time when the National Socialists were interested in bringing about a *Gleichschaltung* in the German educational system. Certainly, the Nazis were not interested in academic integrity either as an end or as a means. They were, rather, interested in carrying out a political programme for which academic integrity could only provide a hindrance. The job of Rector when Heidegger assumed it was not a mere academic position. And Heidegger, who was aware of his role, was certainly not shy about enforcing adherence to Nazism in a variety of ways. The letters and speeches from his period as rector exhibit a flawless public adherence to the Nazi line. In one particularly egregious instance, in a speech to German students in fall 1933, Heidegger clearly endorsed the infamous *Führerprinzip* in stating that "The Führer himself and alone is today and in the future German reality and its law."¹⁵ Radloff, who does not mention this dimension of the context, treats the rectoral address in terms of Heidegger's reading of Aristotle as well as the relation of *Volk* and science.

This is, it seems to me, only a part, in fact a minor part, of the story, a part that would be more adequate if the rectoral address had not occurred in the specific historical context just mentioned. Yet, Radloff's reading, which takes the part for the whole, unfortunately obscures the overall problem. If one thinks, as many observers do, that Heidegger was seeking to put his philosophical theories into practice, in a word, to leave the library for the streets of Nazi Germany, then what Radloff says about

¹³ See Maxence Caron, *Heidegger : Pensée de l'être et origine de la subjectivité* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2005).

¹⁴ See Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger : l'introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005).

¹⁵ See Heidegger's speech entitled "Deutsche Studenten," printed in *Freiburger Studentenzeitung*, no. 1, November 3, 1933, cited in Guido Schneeberger, *Nachlese zu Heidegger*, 136.

this speech is not very helpful. In virtue of the primitive character of much of Nazi ideology, there was at the time a clear rivalry between philosophy, as represented by Heidegger (and to a lesser extent Jaspers), who already, as a young professor, was concerned to reform the university system, and the Nazis. Heidegger seems to have believed that the Nazis were not up to taking on a fateful reorientation of the German state after the collapse of the Weimer Republic and the downward spiral eventually leading to World War II. He seems to have been concerned, as Jaspers says, to lead the leaders (*den Führer führen*).¹⁶ In setting out his views in the rectoral address, it is plausible that he was at the time attracted to a certain form of Platonism in which philosophy assumes a leadership role in the city-state. That is still the most plausible reading of the notorious, scabrous passage, after the failure of the Rectorate, in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935, 1953), in a clear reference to National Socialism, about the supposedly misunderstood “inner truth and greatness of this movement” (*“die innere Wahrheit und Größe dieser Bewegung”*).¹⁷

In any case, it is highly regretful that, despite a few desultory references, there is nothing resembling a systematic analysis of Heidegger’s talk in Radloff’s book. This gives the unfortunate impression that the main theme is the relation of the *Volk* and science, not, as many others believe, the problem of bringing philosophy, above all Heidegger’s philosophical theories, to the fore in the context of the rise of German Nazism. While it is correct that Heidegger is also referring in the rectoral address to the relation of the *Volk* and science, this way of depicting the overall intention of the speech in the context of the times is misleading. To put the same point more sharply: Radloff is certainly right to say that the rectoral address “is not merely an opportunistic response to the political situation of 1933.” (HQNS, 88) Heidegger was a philosopher and, as Radloff points out, the address reflects these historical surroundings. But it further reflects in a way and to a degree that Radloff does not discuss something else, much more sinister, which is sometimes described as the effort to “found” Nazism in philosophy.

¹⁶ See Otto Pöggeler, “*Den Führer führen? Heidegger und kein Ende,*” in *Philosophische Rundschau*, 32 (1985), 26–67, reprinted in O. Pöggeler, *Neue Wege mit Heidegger* (Freiburg i. Br.: Alber, 1992), 203–54.

¹⁷ Richard Polt and Gregory Fried, eds., *A Companion to Heidegger's Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 213.

Radloff's comments on *Volk*, a literally untranslatable term, are interesting, but also misleading. In Radloff's mention of *Volk* we have an effort to rethink the problem of truth from what might be called, in reference to Husserl, a psychologistic perspective ultimately linked to the problem of being. Radloff, who is too committed to Heidegger to be easily discouraged, devotes a great deal of space interpreting various passages and concepts from the writings. The result is to suggest that, as concerns the *Volk*, Heidegger offers a deep philosophical insight, which should not be conflated with Nazi ideology. Perhaps, though I am not persuaded, since I do not grasp the supposed insight. In my view, an analysis of the rectoral address, which Radloff never carries out, would show that in 1933 Heidegger was above all concerned in his capacity as rector to educate the "leaders and guardians of the German *Volk*."¹⁸

In his zeal to demonstrate continuity in Heidegger's position, Radloff conflates the theory in *Being and Time*, which, despite some "gestures" to the group, is less concerned with the *Volk* than with the development and authenticity of the individual, with the important exception of the fateful §74, and the view during the Nazi period. The latter is squarely concerned with the *Volk*, hence with a plural conception of authenticity, a conception that, in the early 1930s, Heidegger squarely linked to Nazi politics. Later, when he moved away from his official relation to Nazi politics, but not from the Nazi party from which he never resigned, Heidegger maintained his interest in the German *Volk* while dropping the idea of authenticity, which looms large in the early writings, but a mere half dozen years down the road simply became inconvenient.

"*Volk*" in the 1930s did not only mean a variation on Herder's view of the independent self-worth of every nation, which Kant opposed, but Heidegger approved. (HQNS, 168) It also meant something more sinister linked to Nazi ideology. There is, in this respect, an important distinction between biologism, represented by Krieck and others, which Heidegger perhaps avoids (*Ibid.*, 171), and an understanding of human being in terms of the *Volk*, or on the basis of blood and soil (*Blut und Boden*). Since this point may appear vague, consider the following example in a letter written by Heidegger in 1933, in response to an invita-

¹⁸ *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität; Das Rektorat, 1933/34: Tatsachen und Denken*, (ed.) H. Heidegger (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 10.

tion to take a position on Richard Höningwald, a German neo-Kantian and Jew, who came under attack. I will now cite this letter, which has only recently been published in German¹⁹:

Höningwald comes from the neo-Kantian school, which represents a philosophy directly corresponding to liberalism [*dem Liberalismus auf den Leib zugeschnitten ist*—literally cut to (or on) the body]. The essence of man is dissolved [*aufgelöst*] in a freely floating consciousness in general, and this is diluted to a universally logical world reason. In this way, through an apparently rigorous scientific justification, attention [*der Blick*] is deflected from man in his historical rootedness and in his folkish [*volkhaften*] tradition from his origins from soil and blood [*Überlieferung seiner Herkunft aus Boden und Blut*]. Together with it went a conscious pushing back [*Zurückdrängung*] of all metaphysical questions, and man appeared [*galt*] only as the servant [*Diener*] of an indifferent universal world culture. Höning-

¹⁹ “Höningwald kommt aus der Schule des Neukantianismus, der eine Philosophie vertreten hat, die dem Liberalismus auf dem Leib zugeschnitten ist. Das Wesen des Menschen wurde da aufgelöst in ein freischwebendes Bewußtsein überhaupt und dieses schliesslich verdünnt zu einer allgemein logischen Weltvernunft. Auf diesem Weg wurde unter scheinbar streng wissenschaftlicher philosophischer Begründung der Blick abgelenkt vom Menschen in seiner geschichtlichen Verwurzelung und in seiner volkhaften Überlieferung seiner Herkunft aus Boden und Blut. Damit zusammen ging eine bewußte Zurückdrängung jedes metaphysischen Fragens, und der Mensch galt nur noch als Diener einer indifferenten, allgemeinen Weltkultur. Aus dieser Grundeinstellung sind die Schriften Höningwalds erwachsen. Es kommt aber hinzu, daß nun gerade Höningwald die Gedanken des Neukantianismus mit einem besonders gefährlichen Scharfsinn einer leerlaufenden Dialektik verfißt. Die Gefahr besteht vor allem darin, daß dieses Treiben den Eindruck höchster Sachlichkeit und strenger Wissenschaft erweckt und bereits viele junge Menschen getäuscht und irreführt hat. Ich muß auch heute noch die Berufung dieses Mannes an die Universität München als einen Skandal bezeichnen, der nur darin seine Erklärung findet, daß das katholische System solche Leute, die scheinbar weltanschaulich indifferent sind, mit Vorliebe bevorzugt, weil sie gegenüber den eigenen Bestrebungen ungefährlich sind und in der bekannten Weise 'objektiv-liberal' sind.” From HStA, MK 43772, Heidegger on 25.6.1993, cited in Claudia Schorcht, *Philosophie an den bayerischen Universitäten: 1933–1945* (Erlangen: Haren Fischer, 1990), 161. The translation that follows in the text is my own.

swald's writings arose from this basic attitude [*Grundeinstellung*]. It is however the case that Hönigswald defends [*verficht*] the thoughts of neo-Kantianism with an especially dangerous acumen and an idle dialectic. The danger consists above all in that this drive [*Treiben*] awakens the impression of highest objectivity [*Sächlichkeit*, also means objectivity] and rigorous science and already has deceived and induced many young people into error. I must also today again qualify the calling [*Ruf*; note: in German university parlance, an academic is called to a job in the university] of this man to the University of Munich as a scandal, which can only be explained in that the Catholic [*katholisch*] system preferentially favours such people, who are apparently ideologically indifferent, because they are not dangerous with respect to its own efforts and are "objective-liberal" in the usual way. I am always available to answer further questions.

With best regards! Heil Hitler!
Your very devoted Heidegger

In his letter, Heidegger abandons the so-called neutrality of reason, which he sharply rejects in regard to neo-Kantianism. He claims that the insistence on scientific status deflects one's glance from human being in its historical rootedness. One must concede that it is difficult to reconcile the theory of knowledge as Kant and the neo-Kantians understand it with real finite human beings. But Heidegger's parallel between the historical rootedness of human being and the "*volkhaften Überlieferung seiner Herkunft aus Boden und Blut*" can most plausibly be understood as an effort to translate the theory of *Being and Time* into national socialist ideology. It cannot be denied that Heidegger here understands *Dasein* in a *völkisch* manner and not otherwise. Heidegger correctly protests that from the neo-Kantian perspective the metaphysical question is suppressed. Yet, in the same way as *Dasein*, he also understands metaphysics on the basis of the *Volk*. On the one hand, he stresses this meaning, in opposition to an understanding of man as the servant of an indifferent world culture, that is, as not engaged and, on the other hand, as a servant of the *Volk*, in this case as a National Socialist.

Hönigswald, the neo-Kantian, is a liberal, who favours the Weimar Republic, which came undone in the flux of history. Heidegger apparently considered himself to be a representative of the new National Socialist world in writing this letter. He was at the time concerned to perfect the National Socialist revolution. Heidegger was correct to underline that Hönigswald's writings belong to another world, which Heidegger is at pains to reject.

One of the strong themes in Radloff's book is the idea that, when we read Heidegger carefully, it turns out that he is a supposedly much maligned author since he was not really a supporter but, in fact, a critic of Nazism. For Radloff, it is true that he overestimated the historical opportunity when he became Rector of the University of Freiburg, but he was never a real Nazi and his Nazi interlude, if it was that, was really very short. This overall thesis is put forward by a number of other observers as well, for instance the French Aristotelian scholar Pierre Aubenque.²⁰ In its most trenchant form, it takes shape as the claim that Heidegger's period of enthusiasm for Nazism, if it was that, did not survive his short period as Rector.

Heidegger's critique of Nazism is really less than meets the eye. That is why it is not possible to specify when he broke with the Nazi regime. In truth, his allegiance was always of a peculiar, philosophical kind, tempered with the philosophically critical attitude he exhibited elsewhere. A clue is provided in his reading of other positions. In his well-known effort to dialogue with "great" thinkers on what he immodestly calls their own level, he consistently relies on a distinction between vulgar or inauthentic and authentic interpretations. This is roughly the difference between the ordinary, usual way others might read a given thinker and the way that Heidegger rereads that thinker, supposedly to "free" that person's thought from the restrictions imposed by the trappings of the tradition in which it has come down to us. The justification for this approach is that it provokes further debate, as in Heidegger's controversial reading of Kant's critical philosophy in terms of ontology instead of epistemology. An example to which Radloff attaches importance is Heidegger's references in the rectoral address to "*Kampf*" as in *Mein Kampf*, references which, when run through the interpretive mill,

²⁰ See Pierre Aubenque, "Encore Heidegger et le nazisme," in *Le Débat*, 48, January–February 1988, 113–23.

allegedly turn out to refer to Heraclitus fr. 53 and not to the views of the Nazi dictator. Yet, if we allow this kind of interpretive licence, then, through a kind of semantic disintegration widely known as deconstruction, anything can be explained or even explained away.

I think that, in the enormous debate on Heidegger and Nazism, this is in effect Radloff's main "accomplishment." Through the device of interweaving references to difficult terms or passages of Heidegger's enormous bibliography, he "explains away" Heidegger's Nazism by insisting that it is finally not significant, or not very significant, since he was not a racist and he was critical, or later critical, of National Socialism.

To end this discussion, I would like to address Heidegger's relation to racism and then to Nazism. This is relevant since, like many other observers, through the assumption that Heidegger does not favour Nazi biologism, Radloff comes to the conclusion that Heidegger was not a Nazi. Racism, of course, comes in different forms. One does not need to be a raving maniac to be a racist, since there are more subtle forms of this phenomenon. Many well-meaning Germans, basically decent people, were Nazis and racists. That is part of the problem to which Hannah Arendt points in her well-known view of the banality of evil.

Two particularly egregious types of what I think of as racism are illustrated by Heidegger's view of Jews and blacks. The term "*Verjüdung*" is a particularly vile noun that was relatively unusual prior to Hitler, but became more popular during the Nazi period. Heidegger uses this term both in his early letters to the woman he later married during World War I in 1917 and then again in a letter about Eduard Baumgarten, whom he mistakenly took to be Jewish, and about whom he expressed the dilemma of either Jew or German in the phrase "*die Verjüdung des deutschen Geistes*" in 1929. Slightly later in the *Logik-Vorlesung*, on which Radloff comments, Heidegger states that blacks, who as a group do not think, therefore have no history.

I take these and other passages one might cite as pointing to the inference that Heidegger is finally a racist. But what about Nazism? Is he really not a Nazi at all, or at least very reluctant, in disagreement on all or most major themes? With the possible exception of biologism, on which there is conflicting evidence, could one say that Heidegger was finally closer to National Socialist ideas than many of his followers like to admit, that is, not only for a short moment during his rectorate. I share

the latter view. I believe that on even an average interpretation there is an impressive and growing body of evidence that supports the view that once Heidegger turned toward Nazism he never later turned away from it.

Radloff's limited purpose is to show that, despite everything, there is always a philosophical component in Heidegger's apparent relation to Nazism. This supports the philosopher's view that he never wholly abandoned philosophy, even in the darkest times. I think that is correct. Yet, that factual claim does not get at the relation of Heidegger's thought and action to National Socialism, which is very complex. Elsewhere I have argued that the relation between his thought and his Nazism can be understood as a series of three turnings: an initial turning on the basis of his philosophy to National Socialism as it existed, a turning in which social, political and historical factors, including German *Volk*-ideology, and Heidegger's own philosophy of Being come together; a second turning away from really existent National Socialism when Heidegger became aware that the rectorate had failed; and a third turning—still based on his personal and philosophical acceptance of the manifest destiny of the German *Volk*—toward an ideal form of Nazism, from which he never later averted his gaze, and whose acceptance influenced the later evolution of his theory of Being.²¹

To make my case in any detail would inevitably take me beyond the limits of the present text. One problem is to understand what the term "Nazism" means. Like any political program, the historical phenomenon of Nazism covered a vast series of publicly asserted beliefs, doctrines and practices. Radloff develops a form of the "ignorance" defence according to which when Hitler came to power and Heidegger became rector, no one knew how things were likely to develop. This seems to me misleading since the Nazi party program was available since 1920, and certainly well known after the publication of *Mein Kampf*; and Hitler, who was hardly shy, made no secret of his intentions in his speeches and writings.

If anything, I find it even less plausible to ignore Heidegger's statements after the rectorate. These statements are part of the historical record and should be cited in any effort to characterise Heidegger's rela-

²¹ See Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

tion to National Socialism. The record, of course, is still incomplete, since unrestricted scholarly access to the Heidegger Archives has never been available. In particular, our knowledge of Heidegger's correspondence and lecture courses during the 1930s is still woefully incomplete. Faye, whom I mentioned above, has recently analysed in detail Heidegger's links to Carl Schmitt, Erik Wolff and others, including previously unpublished lecture courses from the early 1930s.²² These lecture courses arguably show Heidegger at work in providing a philosophical contribution to National Socialism. One dimension of this is his attempt to found the National Socialist state through a rereading of Hegel from a Marxist perspective, and so on. Yet, one does not have to mention previously unknown materials to make this point since so much that is unflattering to Heidegger is already on the historical record.

Here are two examples, one from the lecture courses on logic before the war and another after it. So far as I know, neither figures in the edition of the *Collected Writings*, which is now being published. In the logic lectures, Heidegger writes: "Even nature has its history. But then blacks also have history. Or nature has no history? It can surely disappear into the past, but it is not the case that everything that becomes past enters into history. If the propeller of a plane turns, then as a result nothing really 'happens.' But if this plane brings the Führer to Mussolini, then history occurs. And the plane itself enters into history, and perhaps will one day be preserved in a museum. The historical character of the plane does not depend on the turning of the propeller, but on what in the future will arise from this coming together."²³

²² See Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger : l'introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005).

²³ "Auch die Natur hat ihre Geschichte. Aber dann haben die Neger auch Geschichte. Oder hat die Natur doch keine Geschichte? Sie kann zwar in die Vergangenheit als vergehend eingehen, aber nicht jedes, was vergeht, geht in die Geschichte ein. Wenn sich der Propeller eines Flugzeuges umdreht, dann "geschieht" dabei eigentlich nichts. Allerdings wenn dieses Flugzeug den Führer zu Mussolini bringt, dann geschieht Geschichte. Und das Flugzeug selbst geht in die Geschichte ein, wird vielleicht einmal in einem Museum aufbewahrt. Der geschichtliche Charakter des Flugzeugs hängt nicht von den Umdrehungen des Propellers ab, sondern von dem, was künftighin aus dieser Zusammenkunft entsteht." *Logik*, 1934, 11–12, cited in Victor Fariás, "Lógica. Lecciones de M. Heidegger (semester de verano 1934) en el legado de Helene Weiss" (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1991).

An arguably more important example is Heidegger's infamous remark in a lecture in Bremen (December 1, 1949) after the War, hence after the end of Nazism: "Agriculture is now a motorised food-industry—in essence, the same as the manufacturing of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starvation of the countryside, the same as the production of the hydrogen bombs."²⁴

Taken together with other remarks scattered throughout Heidegger's voluminous corpus, these passages cast doubt on even the most ingenious effort to show that Heidegger's Nazi engagement was short, insignificant and disappeared without a trace. The reality is unfortunately more complex and less flattering to Husserl's successor in Freiburg, less propitious for his many supporters.

This point is relevant to an assessment of the extent of Heidegger's resistance to Nazism. It is often said by Heidegger's supporters that his later thought is a confrontation with Nazism. Heidegger himself makes this claim more than once. It is possible this claim expressed his deep conviction and not merely what it was convenient to state, possible as well that it was not finally a statement of what the many in their unwisdom desired to hear from him. Heidegger may sincerely have believed he was confronting Nazism. But he did not and could not do so since his thought of Being, as he understood it, turns away from human values and human being. Nazism's threat to human values and human beings cannot be usefully understood through the lens provided by technology or even by inauthentic metaphysics. Heidegger's critique of Nazism is limited precisely and solely to its philosophical status, its character as a *Weltanschauung* that falls short of philosophy as he conceives it, since this is the only aspect of the problem which falls within the domain of philosophy or even authentic thought (*Denken*) as Heidegger understood it. In a position, which puts Being before human being, there is literally no way to differentiate the extermination of human beings in gas chambers from agricultural technology. As his statement of this point makes clear, Heidegger's position simply does not possess the conceptual resources necessary for this end. If to name reality is the paramount

²⁴ Cited in Wolfgang Schirmacher, *Technik und Gelassenheit* (Freiburg i. B.: Alber, 1983), 25. This passage, which is from page 25 of Heidegger's original manuscript, was unfortunately reworked in the published version to render it "inoffensive."

philosophical task, Heidegger's thought suffers from its paradoxical incapacity, despite its emphasis on concreteness, to do so.

Radloff, who does not deny Heidegger's thought led him to Nazism, underestimates the degree to which it is compromised. In trying to save too much he makes it difficult to save much of anything. For, if one wants to save nearly everything, to have Heidegger whole as it were, then nothing or almost nothing can be saved. Heidegger, who was clearly an important thinker, one of the most important of the twentieth century, was led by his own philosophical theories toward perhaps the most evil phenomenon of that century. The two are unfortunately inextricably and forever linked in history. The problem of how to separate them in order to save what in Heidegger's position is still of interest is a difficulty that cannot be answered by minimising or otherwise explaining his Nazi turning away.

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