

A Note on Heidegger



A Pair of Shoes, Vincent Van Gogh, 1886

I have thought too much about Martin Heidegger in my life. I even wrote a dissertation on Existentialism a long time ago. But the other evening, when casually reading a general essay, I came upon a sentence with which I immediately disagreed and which I paraphrase here: *Martin Heidegger was an anti-Semite*. No, I responded, *he was a Nazi*. An odd response, I admit. And odder because my denial that he was anti-Semitic was not meant as a defense or compliment of him of him, but, ironically, the opposite. Surely this will need some explaining.

He was a godawful person who had no reason for becoming a Nazi

other than the choice facilitating his becoming rector of his university. Of course, not everyone thinks or thought him godawful. I remain pained to this day that one of my favorites among philosophers, Hannah Arendt, in some fashion or other “loved” him in spite of his Nazi sins, and I cannot understand that, even if love is blind. His self-Nazification was no aid to his philosophy, was no clarification of *Dasein* or the revelation of the true nature of Being, and so on. It only confuses things in two ways: 1) Mental time is wasted in seeking some metaphysical connection between his politics and philosophy, and 2) Attention which could be spent on grasping his existentialism is wasted instead on grasping his Nazi choice. Maybe it is best not to waste much time on Heidegger at all.

I am comfortable being among a minority of philosophers you might call anti-Heideggerian—but I go further than that. I go further even than Karl Popper, who once counseled that Heidegger’s name should not be mentioned in serious philosophical deliberations. Whatever my opinion is worth, I think that Martin Heidegger is the worst philosopher in the modern history of philosophizing. I hasten to add that I mean *philosophy* as serious human thought—not the casual sloppy use of the word as in, say, “Senator Claghorn’s philosophy on the matter is the following” or “I have a unique philosophy of food,” etc. And my judgement is so negative not because I think he is *wrong*. To judge someone wrong requires the same prerequisite for finding someone right: you have to know what that someone is saying. Heidegger is the worst because he is *incomprehensible*.

There is a curious human habit involving mental confidence. When we find someone’s ideas incomprehensible, we have a choice to make. 1) Are his ideas simply without meaning? 2) Are they not expressed with sufficient clarity? 3) Are we incapable of grasping his ideas? Heidegger’s defenders and followers are certainly not going to consider option 3, nor

option number 1, God forbid. They're going to go with option 2, or some will invent option number 4, proudly displaying their Heideggerian brilliance: the ideas are already expressed with sufficient clarity, the problem being the intellectual inadequacy of Heidegger's detractors. One detractor—I, me, myself—go with option number 1: his ideas are without meaning. His ideas, *plural*, are. Bear with me.

Reading Immanuel Kant is, with rare exception, hard work. He does not write graceful prose. His ideas are deep, beyond casual thought. His terminology is alien, often defiant of normal denotation and connotation (which is a part of the gracelessness). But if you adjust to the prose (don't expect William James or Rene Descartes), get used to his odd terminology, and do not despair of re-reading, the work remains hard but worth it. A new mental world opens up, and a new physical, phenomenal, world is available to you as well. Since I first read and re-read Immanuel Kant, the natural world has not looked the same to me.

Reading Martin Heidegger is also hard work, although the prose is graceful, sometimes even poetic. The ideas are apparently deep, but deep the way the ocean is deep: you can't see below the surface to the bottom. Terminology? Ah, there's a problem. Take *Dasein*. In German, not necessarily the same as Heideggerian, *da* means "there" and *sein* means "being" or "to be." So the noun *Dasein* translates generally as "being there" (less awkward than "there being" or "there to be" or the verb-sounding "to be there"). "Being there" means what? Apparently, it sometimes means, in *Being and Time*, "existence," but there's a perfectly good word for that, *Existenz*, or more properly "human existence," in German *menschliche Existenz*. But no, Heidegger insists on *Dasein* and his learned translators on "Being there" —not a tree or rock or house being there, but *you*, my human reader, being there. But if you try to understand "Being there" in this human fashion, "You being *there* and I being *here* ... maybe we could meet somewhere,"

you are not thinking in Heideggerian. Nonetheless you assume that "Being there" or *Dasein* means, in some fashion or other, human "Being there," so you move on to grasp what is going on with the "Being there," which means reading the statements or question about it.

But unlike the case of reading Kant, where once the terminology is learned the meaning of statements and questions becomes comprehensible, in the case of reading Heidegger, the connections between the various conceptual terms remain as obscure as the terms themselves were at the beginning. Let me invent an absurd example of what I mean. Imagine you are dealing with a series of terms; you learn that one of them means "elephants," another means "frustrate," and another means "alligators." The statement is "Elephants frustrate alligators." Does that mean that elephants confuse alligators or annoy them or whatever? Or, if indeed alligators have the mental capacity to be annoyed or confused or whatever the hell *frustrate* can mean in this context, whatever the hell is the context? This is like reading Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. This is why I said earlier that his ideas, *plural*, are without meaning.

Now, I will confess that I might be satisfied to call Heidegger merely a *bad* philosopher instead of the *worst* but for the fact of his extraordinarily exaggerated reputation. I cannot count the number of times I have read or heard him called the greatest or most important philosopher of the 20th century, but it must be about the same number Ludwig Wittgenstein is called that. I think that, and now am on record writing this, I think they are both frauds. Neither is in the same league as their rival in reputation, Bertrand Russell. But I have an embarrassing problem here. For my choice of the best philosopher of the 20th was an admirer—and even lover—of Heidegger ... that is to say Hannah Arendt. What'll I do, what'll I do?

Now, the reader will recall that I said at the beginning I do

not think Heidegger was really an anti-Semite, not by conviction. Heidegger wrote no political philosophy. You can't call his National Socialist speechifying philosophy. His metaphysics is free of any hint of anti-Semitism: how could it be, any more than Richard Wagner's music could be anti-Semitic? Nonetheless, Wagner was indeed an anti-Semite, and so *could* Heidegger be. But there is no evidence in his life before 1933 and after 1945 of any animus toward Jews. His close relation with and being a student of Edmund Husserl was not that of an anti-Semite. Nor was his love affair with the young lovely Jewish Hannah Arendt and his lifelong intellectual relationship with her. This, however, is not to speak of his *actions* during the Nazi period. For instance, when Rector of the University of Freiburg: Jewish professors were suspended from faculty. Whether Heidegger "approved" or not, that's the fact.

If Heidegger *had* been an anti-Semite—and here the irony enters—there would have been some "justification" for his joining the Nazi Party: that's what German anti-Semites did! But Heidegger had no "excuse." What he had was the pleasure of becoming Rector. Although much less important, Heidegger was the kind of Nazi that Albert Speer was. By conviction, Speer held no anti-Jewish opinions—in His memoirs he recalls that Hitler withheld anti-Jewish rhetoric in his presence—but, eager for power and architectural success, was willing and anxious to serve the vilest anti-Semite in history. A similar but somewhat vaguer case was movie-star-handsome Rudolf Diels, a lawyer who became the first Gestapo chief in 1933-34 before moving on to other responsible administrative positions, one of which he lost for declining to arrest Jews. He was a love-interest of the daughter of Ambassador Willian Dodd (see Eric Larson's *In the Garden of Beasts*), and I can't imagine her attracted by a raving anti-Semite. Later on, Diels was arrested and imprisoned for *suspicion* of being involved in the July 1944 plot to kill Hitler, but survived. Yet all along, he was a protégé of Hermann Goering—even marrying his cousin. An

odd story all around.

Martin Heidegger was not such an odd story. Here was a case of a brilliant man who *achieved* incomprehensibility through the arrogant and challenging (see how smart I am) avoidance of Jamesean and Cartesian clarity, and joined the National Socialist Party in 1933 to advance his career and, of course unwilling to admit that motive, justified his choice with incoherent rigmarole about National Socialism being a brave revolt against Life-and-Being-defying Technologism—nonsense which vulgarized his *Introduction to Metaphysics* in a sentence he was too arrogant or too stupid to remove after his Nazi period.

Heidegger was a godawful person. And a godawful thinker.