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# Heidegger, pride and national Socialism

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**Abstract:** This article looks at the controversy surrounding Heidegger's National Socialism and asks the following question: was Heidegger a Nazi and if so, why did he not disavow it more vigorously after the war? This leads to an argument that Heidegger's pride led him to amend his work to dilute the consistencies of his work with National Socialism after the fact, in addition to allowing his work to remain obscure in meaning. He did the same with the rejection of transcendence, and for the same reasons: to do so would be to point out that his work, however radical, achieved less than he claimed for it. Heidegger's story remains a cautionary tale for any intellectual who comes after him.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, National Socialism, Sein, Zeit, Existentialism

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## 1. Introduction

The controversy surrounding Heidegger and his Nazism spilled onto the front pages of French dailies in the mid-2000s and made best-sellers of several scholarly books.[1] But to say only (or knowingly) that the French get more involved in philosophical controversies because philosophy is taught in high schools is not enough of an explanation. Nor, by itself, does it explain the numerous book reviews and articles on the topic.[2] A better explanation is the scholarship arising out of a change of literary executor for the Heidegger archives, and of policy on access, for these archives. This article looks at the controversy and asks whether there was any consistency between his thought and National Socialism? And if so, why did he not disavow it more vigorously after the war?

Anyone asking such serious questions should be held to account. The best answers come from Heidegger's writings themselves, and it is in pursuit of this evidence that I endeavoured to read Heidegger's writings in their entirety in chronological order, using at least two translations, one in French and one, sometimes two, translations into English. Excluded were some, although not all, articles, as well as some twenty volumes of Heidegger's complete works which are still only available in German.

The present article marshals the evidence so gathered under three headings: Heidegger's degree of involvement in National Socialism; consistencies between Heidegger's thought and the philosophy of National Socialism; Heidegger's post facto thought and actions; and the question

of Heidegger's pride.

## 2. Heidegger's Degree of Involvement in National Socialism

For the purposes of this discussion, there are three increasingly stringent ways in which one can judge an individual's degree of involvement in National Socialism. An individual may have been a member of the party, joining when it became necessary for survival or joining earlier and being more active than necessary. History is, History is, on this question at least, undisputed. It is a matter of record that Heidegger was a member of the Nazi party.[3] It is also clear that Heidegger thrived as a member, accepting the chair from which his Jewish Ph.D. supervisor, Edmund Husserl, had been forced and becoming the Nazi-appointed rector of the University of Freiburg.[4]

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Heidegger did apologize after World War II. These apologies make painful reading today, decades after his rehabilitation. But if fairness dictates our acceptance of this apology as the apologies of others have been accepted, we are also entitled to note that Heidegger compared the post-war system of agriculture to the death columns bringing Jews to the camps and the ovens.[7] Nonetheless, the indictment must be much more serious if there is philosophical support in Heidegger as well as Nietzsche for National Socialism. With that, we turn to the next question.

### 3. Consistencies between Heidegger's Thought and National Socialism

Considered as a whole, Heidegger's work makes a great contribution to philosophy, and that contribution is to shift the point of view in the scientific study of being. Instead an observer looking at being, or sometimes at being in interaction with other realities, it is the being itself which is observing what is its own nature and the nature of other realities. In *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* and *Time and Being*, he moves from being an observer before one or more beings, and instead taking the point of view of being under study, and studying the situation from there.[8] It is also obvious in *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. [9] This brilliant basic intuition brings us to consider seeing in a much more basic and fundamental way, by shifting from the point of view of being itself to that of that of the observer and vice versa. At this most basic level, it is not even possible to distinguish time from being. This is a shift of considerable potential and significance, and required what can only be called genius to effect. This great contribution, however, is still less than what Heidegger and his admirers since have claimed.

What is of interest here is that, once Heidegger had established that new point of view and explored its possibilities, he erected it into a new philosophical paradigm. This paradigm took the new point of view on being to be of absolute and primary importance. Therefore, it became both easy and tempting to build too much into it. From there, it was only a small step towards making other characteristics of being equally, primordially important. When applied to human beings, and many of Heidegger's writings show that the being must also be human, some essential or intrinsic characteristics of humanity also become primordial. It is clear in *Metaphysical Foundations* that Heidegger's *Sein* is always a human being, indeed a being conscious of being a being. To be coherent with the philosophy of National Socialism, one need do nothing more than rank-order these characteristics. It follows that human beings may also be rank-ordered according to their intrinsic characteristics. The human beings along with them, then the philosophical

support to National Socialism then becomes frighteningly clear.

Beyond that fundamental contribution, there are other works which provide consistencies with national socialist belief.

- There is more than a hint of the intellectual roots of this greater commitment in Heidegger's essay «Chemins d'explications. »[10] Here, he refers in almost civilizational terms to the relations between France and Germany.

- *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry* contains references to the 'German homeland.' [11]

- In *Nietzsche*, volumes I and II have Heidegger analyzing the concept of superman while referring two or three times to Wagner. [12]

- *German Existentialism* is an accusing pamphlet about Heidegger that examines his Nazism. It does not make edifying reading, but it does include some of Heidegger's newspaper articles from the 30s, as well as some of his speeches when he was rector of Freiburg, which are undeniably Nazi in character. [13]

- In section 26 of *Fundamentals of Metaphysics*, Heidegger discusses the fact that 'the animal is poor in world' and that 'man is world-forming.' [14] It is therefore possible that Heidegger would put man, or the more generic form of animal, at the center of the universe.

- There is evidence of ontological absolutism in *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, including in the appendix. [15] By doing this, Heidegger not only hierarchizes various types of being, but he also places humanity above animals. If that hierarchical reasoning is permissible, then it is also permissible to hierarchize human beings as well, according to biological characteristics.

- In *Concepts Fondamentaux*, the first book of Heidegger's maturity, the question of the escape of the object towards the subject is underlined. [16] Heidegger even promotes being as the fulcrum of origin. [17] Even here, his lack of discipline shows: « Si l'homme des Temps Nouveaux éprouvetant de difficulté à se retrouver dans l'essentiel, c'est évidemment à ce qu'il a d'autre regard s'il connaît trop de choses, quand il ne s' imagine pas tout connaître. » [18] The contrast with the clarity of Karl Jaspers' Introduction to Philosophy, for example, is striking. [19]

- In *Being and Time*, Heidegger gives the impression that he is describing what he is perceiving. However, it is he who defines Da-sein and assigns the characteristics. [20]

In directing itself toward... and in grasping something, Da-sein does not first go outside of the inner sphere in which it is initially encapsulated, but, rather, in its primary kind of being, it is always already 'outside' together with some being encountered in the world already discovered. Nor is any inner sphere abandoned when Da-sein dwells together with a being to be known and determines its character. Rather, even in this 'being outside' together with its object, Da-sein is 'inside,' correctly understood; that is, it itself exists as the being-in-the-world which knows. [21]

- In *History of the Concept of Time*, « Knowing as a

derivative mode of the in-being of Da-sein, » confirms the preceding analysis on the fact that Heidegger moves to the point of view of the external observer.[22] Heidegger discusses the structure of knowledge, in relation to the structure of being.[23] His multiple chapters on boredom also leads the reader to notice that Heidegger was not self-disciplined about language.[24]

In addition to all this, Faye discusses how Heidegger used the concept of essence as a foundation for the cult of essence of the German people.[25]

Such are the consistencies between Heidegger's work and the philosophy of National Socialism.

#### 4. Heidegger's Post Facto Thought and Actions

I take my argument further, and it is this: that Heidegger came to see that he had claimed too much for his philosophical contribution, and that this explains why in maturity he did not clarify much of his writing. However, it is true that Heidegger says in *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry*, that he turned to poetry because the words he needed did not yet exist, and that he had never given the fullness of his thought in his books because he lack terminology.[26] With others, I can exclude that Heidegger, who brilliantly understood the weaknesses of Western philosophy, could not have not known where National Socialism was heading.[27]

Indeed, the argument has been made that Heidegger edited his own works in the postwar period and then closed the archives where the originals remained unaltered.[28] Faye established that the seminar on Heraclitus was revised by Heidegger himself before it was published, as well as the seminar on Nietzsche.[29] And Jean Pierre Faye discusses certain works which translations at least, previously available, failed to contain.[30]

Emmanuel Faye speaks of Heidegger's taste for secrecy, which also supports this hypothesis.[31] And this *maquillage de larcin* is borne out by what he did to avoid immanence, as I shall now discuss.

Heidegger claimed to have a new theory of being, as we have seen, although it is really a new perspective on it. And yet it is hard to see how he manages to avoid including other types of beings, including transcendent ones, with this treatment of *Da-sein*.

First, he only treats of a particular category of being, humans; otherwise, he would have had to philosophize over matter and not being. In effect, Heidegger is anthropocentric only some of the time. Second, the central property of *Da-sein* is awareness of being, and engagement of this self-consideration. But if *Da-sein* has awareness powerful enough to become aware of being, then why doesn't this same *Da-sein* use it in a variety of other ways?

Again, this path leads directly to transcendence. For *Traité des catégories et de la signification chez Duns Scot*, we can repeat the criticism made of *Sein und Zeit*. When

Heidegger concludes, however, he speaks of his reverence for God, one form of transcendence. *Introduction to Metaphysics* addresses transcendence directly: "...anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth already has the answer to the question...before it is even asked; beings, with the exception of God Himself, are created by Him. »[32]

Similarly, in *Problèmes fondamentaux de métaphysique*, Heidegger discusses the concepts of *personalitas psychologica* et *personalitas transcendentalis* from Immanuel Kant.[33] As with essence, Heidegger inexplicably stops short of the natural conclusion of transcendence. His article "Concept of Time," published in a theology journal, discusses the difference between a theologian and a philosopher.[34]

If our access to God is faith and if involving oneself with eternity is nothing other than this faith, then philosophy will never have eternity and, accordingly, we will never be able to employ eternity methodologically as a possible respect in which to discuss time. Philosophy can never be relieved of this perplexity. The theologian then is the legitimate expert on time...the philosopher does not believe. If the philosopher asks about time, then he has resolved to understand time in terms of time...which looks like eternity but proves to be a mere derivative of being temporal.[35]

Further, "The following considerations are not theological. In a theological sense – and you are at liberty to understand it in this way – a consideration of time can only mean making the question concerning eternity more difficult, preparing it in the correct manner and posing it properly." [36] And it is in the second volume of his work on Nietzsche that it becomes clear that Heidegger was in some measure aware of the problems in his own philosophy regarding object-subject relationships.[37]

Instead of trying to solve them he simply removed the possibility of the existence of transcendence. The early warning by one of his professors, Ernst Jünger, on the dangers of looking for originating fantasies and myths, went unheeded.[38] We can only agree with Faye's conclusion that « ...au fond du questionnement heideggerien, il n'y a pas ...une intuition spirituelle ou une pensée inspiratrice, mais au contraire un vide... »[39] With the avoidance of transcendence comes also the avoidance of a train of thought reducing Heidegger's paradigm into a shift in point of view.

#### 5. Pride, Inattentiveness, Laziness

It is hard to accept an arrogance that would lead a scholar to call Plato a sophist, as he has done in 'Chemins d'explication.' But, ironically, a Platonic approach to Heidegger's work shows up his limitations more quickly than Plato's.

Similarly, *History of the Concept of Time*, previously cited, is structured in much more detail than most of his other books. Section 13, in particular, « Neglect : sense of being, » contains a literature review for some of his arguments. It is

by far the easiest to read, « Chapter 2 : Elaboration of the Question of Being in Terms of an Initial Explication of Dasein » in particular offering a summary explanation of his argument on being and time. For *Dasein* itself, section 18, « Acquisition of the fundamental structures of the basic constitution of Dasein. » is so clear that it comes almost as a surprise, and shows what Heidegger might have accomplished had he so wished. His place in history and the assessment of his contributions would have been much clearer much earlier.

In *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger alters the level of abstraction at which he is working, without mentioning it. Did he think it unimportant, did he think no one would notice, did he not notice he was doing it ? There is no evidence on this point.

## 6. Conclusion

There may be evidence contributing to this analysis awaiting translation in the documents from Heidegger's youth, or the opening of the French archives on denazification.<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, we can now see the consistencies between Heidegger's thought and National Socialism. We cannot exclude the suggestions that he failed to disavow Nazism more vigorously because to do so would point to the same problem as does his treatment of transcendence. This casts his closure of archives for up to twenty years after his death in a different light. If borne out, my conclusions may tarnish his work and move him towards his proper place in history. But his sin, however telling, is in the end less than bigotry. It is only pride, pride in himself, pride in his work, and pride in his place in philosophy.

Marcuse once asked how Heidegger, a philosopher who understood western Philosophy better than anyone else fail to see where Nazism was inevitably leading.<sup>[40]</sup> If Heidegger did not know, it was because he did not want to know. But astoundingly, in the end, he preferred to be thought a Nazi than a lesser philosopher.

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