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*The Political Implications of Heidegger's Existentialism**

by Karl Löwith

It is possible that a philosopher could be guilty of a compromise with political authority in an apparently inconsequential manner; he himself might be aware of this. But what he could not be aware of is the possibility that this apparent compromise with authority finds its basis in the most profound deficiency . . . of his own doctrine. If therefore a philosopher should “conform” (by making concessions to authority), his disciples will have to explain what he himself was aware of in a merely external way, in an internal and essential fashion.

Karl Marx, *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

The essay that follows was written outside of Germany in 1939 with the sole aim of clarifying my own ideas and without any intention of being published. Today (1946), I am publishing it in French translation, since I am convinced that the immediate political — i.e., National Socialist — implications of Heidegger's concept of existence — though they might seem outstripped by contemporary events — possess an historical significance which reaches well beyond the figure of Heidegger, as well as the German situation of the interwar period. The

* Löwith's essay originally appeared (in French translation) in *Les Temps Modernes* 14 (1946-47): 343-360. A partial version of the German original can be found in Karl Löwith, *Sämliche Schriften*, (Stuttgart: 1984) 8: 61-68. In our translation, we have relied on a more complete German version — which includes a number of passages that were omitted from the 1946 version published in *Les Temps Modernes* — which has recently appeared in an autobiographical essay by Löwith entitled “Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933” (Stuttgart: 1986) 27-42. We have included several of the more interesting omissions in the present translation.

fact that during the last war, Heidegger found a wide audience among French intellectuals, in contrast to the situation of Germany at that time, is a symptom which merits renewed attention.

His *Sein und Zeit*, which appeared in 1927, is still one of the rare, truly important contemporary philosophical publications, and when, in an era such as ours, an author is able to develop a following and to increase his influence continually over the course of 25 years, he must certainly contain something of substance. One should not forget either that this same man, whose thought was so relevant, also assimilated Greek philosophy and scholastic theology into his work. His knowledge, which is of the first hand variety, derives from the sources themselves.

The following study treats the implications and historico-philosophical consequences of Heidegger's philosophy almost exclusively in relation to his speeches and lectures, rather than in terms of his philosophical oeuvre properly speaking. This may appear unjust insofar as the influence of Heidegger's thought has been spurred much more by his work than his speeches, which aim explicitly at a practical effect. This appearance of injustice disappears, however, as soon as one realizes that *Sein und Zeit* also represents — and in a far from inessential manner — a theory of historical existence; whereas, on the other hand, the practical application of this project to an actual historical situation is only possible insofar as *Sein und Zeit* already contains a relation to contemporary reality. It is this practical-political application in terms of an actual commitment to a determinate decision that in truth justifies or condemns the philosophical theory that serves as the basis of this commitment. What is true or false in theory is also so in practice, above all when the theory itself originates in conscious fashion from a supreme fact — historical existence — and when its path leads it toward the latter.

The author, for many years a student of Heidegger, indebted to his master for certain essential intellectual impulses, will undoubtedly have to justify the employment of passages taken from private letters in face of the currently dominant conception of the separation of public from private life. My sole justification is that the personal and spontaneous thoughts of a thinker who was so discrete and guarded about his powerful dialectical capacities clarifies the fundamental traits of his philosophical aim better than a sagacious discussion of the existential categories, the aspects of which have already been fully elaborated.

The reader of this essay may choose to find a significant defense of Heidegger's philosophy or a condemnation of his political attitudes. In

the author's eyes, however, these alternatives lack real meaning, insofar as the historical importance of Heideggerianism rests to a large extent on the fact that he took on political responsibilities and involvements in a manner consistent with the fundamental thesis of *Sein und Zeit*:

Only an essentially futural being . . . that is free for its death and can let itself be thrown back upon its factual "there" by shattering itself against death . . . can, by handing down to itself the possibility it has inherited, take over its own thrownness and be in the moment of vision for "its time." (*Sein und Zeit*, # 74).

In order to understand the historical background of Heidegger's philosophy, it will be useful to relate it to remarks by Rilke and Van Gogh. Certain sentences from Rilke's letters (cf. *Briefe, 1914-1921*, pp. 89ff.) could easily serve as guiding threads to the intellectual achievement of Heidegger's oeuvre. By dint of belief in progress and humanity, observes Rilke, the bourgeois world has forgotten the "ultimate instances" of human life, i.e., "that it has been once and for all surpassed by death and by God." In *Sein und Zeit*, death has no other meaning than that of an "unsurpassable last instance" of our Being and capacities. In Heidegger, God is no longer at issue; he had been too much of a theologian to be able, like Rilke, to once again tell "Stories of the Dear Lord." For Heidegger, death is the nothingness that reveals the finitude of our temporal existence; or, as he put it in one of his first courses in Freiburg, death is historical "facticity."

Van Gogh is the painter whose influence was the greatest in Germany after World War I. "For years," Heidegger wrote me in 1923, "a saying of Van Gogh's has obsessed me: 'I feel with all my power that the history of man is like that of wheat: if one is not planted in the earth to flourish, come what may, one will be ground up for bread.' Woe to him who is not pulverized." Instead of devoting oneself to the general need for cultivation, as one would upon receiving the command to "save culture," one must — in a [time of] radical disintegration and regression, a *Destruktion* — convince oneself firmly of "the one thing that matters"¹ without bothering with the chatter and bustle of clever and enterprising men.

1. As Rilke said in 1927: "It seems to me that at present, one thing alone, the sole thing that is valid and that matters, accords me the right to express myself."

In this search for the “one thing that matters,” Heidegger turns above all toward Kierkegaard, though he does not permit himself to be consumed by him. The goal and theme of his existentialist philosophy is not “to attract attention to Christianity, but to formally thematize this-worldly existence.”

“My will, fundamentally, aspires to something else, and that is not much: living in an actual revolutionary situation, I pursue what I feel to be ‘necessary,’ without caring to know whether it emerges from ‘culture’ or whether my search will lead to ruin” (letter from Heidegger, 1920). He had a horror of all “philosophies of culture,” as well as of philosophy conferences; the vast number of journals that appeared after World War I aroused his emotional wrath. With bitter severity, he wrote to Scheler that he “renewed” E. Von Hartmann, while other scholars published an *Ethos* and a *Kairos*, in addition to an already antiquated *Logos*. “What will be next week’s joke? I believe that a lunatic asylum viewed from within would offer a more reasonable and clear perspective than this epoch.” Following this negation in principle of all that existed, as well as all programs aiming at reform, Heidegger at the same time made us guard against a false interpretation and over-estimation of his own work — against the idea that he would have something “positive” to say or “new results” to show.

“The idea has emerged that our critique must be opposed to something that corresponds in content to that which has just been denied, or that our work would find its destiny in a school or trend, that it could be continued and complemented.” This work, he continued, is nothing of this nature. It is limited to a critical and rational destruction of philosophical and theological traditions; it thereby remains “something apart from and perhaps out of reach of the bustle of the day” (letter from Heidegger, 1924). On the whole, by viewing himself as beyond what is in and out of fashion, the philosopher must derive satisfaction, for where things age rapidly, there is not necessarily much depth to be found. The later attempt at a “fundamental ontology” was born of this attitude: i.e., an analysis of Being that is based on temporal existence — our *Dasein* which is at the same time historical and tied to particular moments — and the attempt to “destroy,” beginning from this position, the history of the reflection on Being, from the Greeks to Nietzsche, in order thereby to concentrate this reflection completely on the unique question of the meaning of Being — the question that is, at the same time, the simplest, the most essential, and the most original.

It was only against his original expectations that the enormous success of his courses and the extraordinary influence of his work — despite its difficulty — pushed him beyond the desired limits and made his thought fashionable. The primary attraction of his philosophical doctrine was not that it led his disciples to await a new system, but was instead its thematic indeterminacy and pureness; more generally, it was his concentration on “the one thing that mattered.” It was only later that many of his students understood that this “one thing” was nothingness, a pure Resolve, whose “aim” was undefined. One day a student invented the far from innocent joke: “I am resolved, only toward what I don’t know.”

The inner nihilism, the “national socialism,” of this pure Resolve in face of nothingness, remained at first hidden beneath certain traits which suggested a religious devotion; in effect, at this time (the early 1920s), Heidegger had not yet definitively broken with his theological origins. I remember having seen on his desk in Freiburg portraits of Pascal and Dostoyevsky, and on the wall in a corner of the room — which resembled a cell — hung a magnificent Expressionist crucifixion scene. He gave me *The Imitation* by Thomas à Kempis as a Christmas present in 1920. Again in 1925, he saw spiritual substance in theology alone, and even here, only in Karl Barth, whose *Commentary on the “Epistle to the Romans”* had appeared in 1918 (at the same time as Spengler’s *Decline of the West*).

The extraordinary fascination that Spengler, Barth, and Heidegger — despite their various divergences — exerted upon a generation of young Germans following the First World War derives from a common source. Their shared position can be seen in the clear awareness of being situated in a crisis — a turning point between epochs; and thus being obliged to confront questions too radical to find an answer in the enfeebled, 19th-century belief in progress, culture, and education. The questions that agitated this young generation, devoid of illusions, yet sincere, were fundamentally questions of faith. One read Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard; and here one rediscovered the internal nexus between radical negation and radical affirmation, between skepticism and faith. In this period, Heidegger still explicitly counted himself among the ranks of the “theological Christians;” just as, ten years later, he affirmed that Nietzsche, the great destroyer, had been the “sole true believer” of the 19th century. The power of this spiritual stance is in direct relation to its power of negation, for a new

faith is possible and necessary as soon as one has recognized the decrepitude of what one formerly believed. It was above all the young Luther — the Protestant whose rigorous faith considered the “natural reason” of the Scholastics a form of prostitution — to whom Heidegger was attracted. He knew Luther’s works better than many a professional theologian.

The hidden motto of *Sein und Zeit* — “*Unus quisque robustus sit in existentia sua*” — also comes from Luther. Heidegger, abandoning faith in God, translates it by ceaselessly insisting on that which alone, in his opinion, is important: “that each individual do what his capacities permit,” — i.e., the “authentic capacity-for-Being always specific to each individual” — or the “existential limit of our ownmost particular historical facticity.”

He referred to this “capacity-for-Being” both as a duty and as a “destiny.” “I do only what I must do and what I believe to be necessary, and I do it as my powers permit. I do not embellish my philosophical labors with cultural requirements suitable for a vague historical present. I no longer subscribe to a Kierkegaardian outlook. I work from my own ‘I am’ and from my entirely particular spiritual origin. From this facticity surges the fury of ‘Existence’ ” (Letter, 1920).

Whoever, on the basis of these remarks, reflects on Heidegger’s later partisanship for Hitler, will find in this first formulation of the idea of historical “existence” the constituents of his political decision of several years hence. One need only abandon the still quasi-religious isolation and apply [the concept of] authentic “existence” — “always particular to each individual” — and the “duty” (Müssen) which follows from it to “specifically German existence” and its historical destiny in order thereby to introduce into the general course of German existence the energetic but empty movement of existential categories (“to decide for oneself”; “to take stock of oneself in face of nothingness”; “wanting one’s ownmost destiny”; “to take responsibility for oneself”) and to proceed from there to “destruction,” now on the terrain of politics. It is not chance, if one finds a political “decisionism” in Carl Schmitt² which corresponds to Heidegger’s existentialist philosophy, in which the “capacity-for-Being-a-whole” of individual authentic existence is transposed to the “totality” of the authentic state, which is itself always

2. Cf. *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: 1927). English translation: *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (New Brunswick, N.J.: 1976). On this theme see Löwith’s essay “Der okkasionale Dezisionismus von Carl Schmitt,” *Sämtliche Schriften* 8: 32-60.

particular. Corresponding to the preservation and affirmation of this authentic "*Dasein*" [in Heidegger] is the affirmation of political existence [in Schmitt]; to "freedom for death" [in Heidegger], the "sacrifice of life" in the politically paramount case of war [in Schmitt]. The principle is the same in both cases: naked "facticity," which is all that remains of life when one has surpressed all traditional living contents.

The term in *Sein und Zeit* which expresses the concept of facticity is "*Existenz*." It does not mean "the Being of a thing" (*Was-Sein*) (*essentia*), but the fact that a being is (*existentia*) — i.e., the pure fact of existing. This existence, stripped of all security and standing in relation to nothing other than itself, constitutes the essence of *Dasein* in Heideggerian philosophy; and *Dasein* itself is the foundation of all awareness of Being. Pure *Dasein*, the fundamental thesis of existential philosophy, presupposes that all traditional truths and contents of life have lost their substance. If one compares the modern conception of naked, resolute existence with the parallel notion in the Christian tradition, the revolutionary radicalism of Heidegger's central thesis emerges clearly. Medieval philosophy believed that all created being was differentiated into essence and existence; whereas God alone exists essentially, insofar as perfection pertains to his essence and perfection requires existence. The creator of Being alone unites essence and existence. But Heidegger's fundamental ontology no longer acknowledges an eternal creator outside of time with respect to this unity of essence and existence (formerly, the ontological prerogative of God). Instead, one is left with a "temporal" *Dasein*, abandoned to itself, the essence of which derives solely from the fact "that it is" and that it "must be."

Certainly, Heidegger has not furnished an answer to the question of why this having-to-be is, and by not answering it, he avoids posing the question of suicide. In the Heideggerian analytic of *Dasein*, "freedom-for-death" merely signifies the possibility of consciously anticipating the temporal "end" and integrating the latter in "everyday *Dasein*." In this projection toward the imminence of death, the supreme freedom of *Dasein* as such is affirmed. But when one thinks of the thousands of actual suicides committed in Germany after 1933, first, by the adversaries and victims of the Third Reich, and later by its defeated representatives, one cannot deny that the attitude toward there-being and not-being [*Dasein* and *Nicht-Sein*] expressed in Heideggerian philosophy has an importance concerning practical consequences for life that cedes nothing to the belief in God and immortality. Without recourse

to the idea of an eternal creator of Being, it would undoubtedly be very difficult to refute Heidegger's fundamental thesis concerning death as the "ultimate instance" of human *Dasein*, or to refute it from a moral standpoint. It is true that, from another perspective, the experience of the naked and insecure state of human *Dasein* constitutes a negative condition of the possibility of a religious vision of life. When one refuses to draw a religious conclusion from this fact, nothingness represents in effect the ultimate horizon before which the "meaning of Being" manifests itself. From this perspective, the nihilism of Heidegger's existential ontology possesses foundations that are much more solid and profound than his adversaries — who cling to the ideas of progress and culture — are willing to concede. The fact that Heidegger, by virtue of an irreverent radicalism that can often repel, constantly attracted new disciples, that he was offered a chair in 1930 (during Weimar, and not only during Nazi rule) at the most prestigious German university (Berlin), an offer which he refused, should give his adversaries cause for reflection. However, though Heidegger resisted the call to Berlin, he succumbed to the temptation of directing Freiburg University.

Heidegger's accession to the rectorship of Freiburg University was an event. It came at a decisive time during the "German Revolution," insofar as all the other universities at this critical juncture lacked a leader capable of filling his role — not merely by virtue of his Party membership, but by virtue of his intellectual stature. As a result, his decision took on a more than local significance. It was felt everywhere, for Heidegger was then at the zenith of his fame. The students in Berlin demanded that all the other universities follow the example of "*Gleichschaltung*" practiced in Freiburg. Heidegger's disciples were surprised by his decision. He had almost never expressed his opinion about political matters, and it did not seem that he had a firm opinion concerning such issues.

Heidegger, however, inaugurated his rectorship with a speech on "The Self-Affirmation of the German University." Compared to the numerous pamphlets and speeches published by professors who were the beneficiaries of "*Gleichschaltung*" after the fall of the Weimar government, Heidegger's speech is philosophically demanding, a minor stylistic masterpiece. From a strictly philosophical standpoint, the speech is strangely ambiguous from beginning to end. It succeeds in positing existential and ontological categories at a specific historical "moment," in a way that suggests that their philosophical intentions a priori go hand in hand with the political situation, and that academic freedom

jibes with political coercion. "Labor service" and "military service" are on a par with "service in knowledge" such that at the end of the speech, the listener was in doubt as to whether he should start reading the pre-Socratics or enlist in the SA. This is why the speech should not be judged according to one point of view alone, be it purely political or purely philosophical. It would be equally weak considered as a political speech or a philosophical essay. It transposes Heideggerian historical existentialism to contemporary German reality; and thus for the first time the master's will to action finds suitable terrain and the formal outline of the existential categories receives decisive content.

The speech begins with a strange contradiction. In opposition to the subordination of university autonomy to the state, it advocates the "self-affirmation" [of the university], while denying academic freedom in its "liberal" form as well as [academic] "self-administration," in order to integrate the universities seamlessly into the National Socialist schema of "leaders" and "followers." The duty of the rector consists in the spiritual leadership of the professors and students. But he too — the leader — must in his turn be led, by the "spiritual mission of the *Volk*." The content and direction of this historical mission remain indeterminate. The mission is in the last analysis decreed by "fate." Corresponding to the indeterminacy of the mission is an emphasis on its inexorability. The fate of the *Volk* is related to that of the university by unarguable decree; the mission with which the universities are charged is "the same" as that of the *Volk*. German science and German fate affirm their power in a single "essential will to power" ("*Wesenswillen zur Macht*"). The will to essence is tacitly identified with the will to power, insofar as, from the National Socialist perspective, what is essential is the will as such. Prometheus, symbol of Western Will, is the "first philosopher" deserving of a following. As characterized by this promethean will³ European man is alleged "to have risen up against 'beings'" to inquire concerning their Being⁴ and this revolutionary "uprising" characterizes "*Geist*" — the latter surrenders before the superiority of fate, but becomes creative by virtue of this very impotence. Spirit is neither "universal reason" nor (the faculty of) understanding, but rather "knowing Resolve" (*wissende Entschlossenheit*) toward the essence of Being. Thus the true world of spirit would be a "world of extreme outer

3. In the same way, Karl Marx, in his dissertation on Epicurus and Democritus claims Prometheus as the greatest of all philosophers.

4. Here it is the Being of beings that is at issue, not the Being of man.

and inner danger.” With military rigor, the student, animated by the will to knowledge, is commanded to “advance” to “the outpost of the most extreme danger,” to march, to engage himself and to expose himself, to persevere resolutely in the acceptance of German destiny “there” in the Führer. The relation to Führer and *Volk*, to honor and the fate of the *Volk*, is part and parcel of “service in knowledge.” In response to the Nietzschean question as to whether or not Europe wants to be itself, Heidegger says: “We want ourselves.” The youthful power of the German *Volk* has already decided in favor of the will to self-affirmation, not only in the university, but also with respect to German “*Dasein*” in its totality. In order to fully appreciate “the splendor and greatness of this awakening,” one must recall the wisdom of Plato’s saying which Heidegger translates (in a willful distortion) as “*Alles Grosse steht im Sturm*” — “Everything great stands in the storm.”⁵ So aggressively did Heidegger speak, that what young SS officer would not have felt moved or would have been able to see through the Greek nimbus of this highly German “*Stürmen*.” The community of teachers and students would also be a “community of struggle,” for only struggle (*Kampf*) furthers and preserves knowledge. In a lecture from the same period, Heidegger says: “essence” discloses itself to courage alone, not to contemplation, truth allows itself to be recognized only to the extent that one requires it of oneself. The German “*Gemüt*” (or temperament) itself is related to such courage (*Mut*). Even the enemy is not only “*vorhanden*,” but *Dasein* must create its enemy in order not to become deadened. In general, all that “is” is “governed by struggle,” and where there is neither struggle nor authority, decadence reigns. Essence “essences” in struggle.

Heidegger was leader for only a year. After much disillusionment and many vexations, he resigned his “commission” in order to oppose in his usual way the new “they,” risking bitter remarks in his lectures, which in no way contradicted his substantive attachment to National Socialism as a protestational movement of faith. For the “spirit” of National Socialism pertained less to its national or social dimension than to its Resolve (*Entschlossenheit*) and dynamics, which, trusting in itself alone — i.e., in its ownmost (German) “*Seinkönnen*” (Capacity-for-Being) — renounced all discussion and agreement. Expressions of violence and Resolve thoroughly determine both the vocabulary of National Socialist speeches and Heidegger’s speeches. The apodeictic character of Heidegger’s emotive

5. In truth, this statement reads: “That which is great is most exposed to risk.”

formulations corresponds to the dictatorial style of the politics in question. It is the level of discourse, not the method, which defines the internal differences among a "community of followers;" and in the end it is "fate" which justifies all willing and confers its metaphysical (*seinsgeschichtlichen*) mantle on the latter.

One month after Heidegger's speech, Karl Barth wrote his theological appeal against accommodation to the reigning powers, "Theological Existence Today." To be capable of an analogous act, philosophy, instead of treating "Being and Time," would have to treat "the Being of Eternity." But the important point about Heideggerian philosophy consisted precisely in its "resolute temporal understanding of time;" as a philosopher, Heidegger remained a theologian on this point, insofar as eternity seemed identical with God, concerning whom the philosopher "could know nothing."

From this historical-political background, the specifically German aspects of Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* become clear: Existence and Resolve, Being and Capacity-for-Being, the explanation of this capacity as duty and destiny, the stubborn insistence that this Capacity-for-Being is "my particular" (German) Capacity. The terms recur ceaselessly: discipline and coercion (even to attain "intellectual clarity," one must "coerce oneself"), hard, inexorable and severe, taut and sharp ("existence must be maintained at its peak"), to persevere and stand on one's own, to encounter and expose oneself to danger, revolution, awakening, and disruption. All these terms reflect the disastrous intellectual mind-set of the German generation following World War I. The minutiae of their thought was concerned with "origins" or "ultimates" or "boundary-situations." At base, all these terms and concepts are expressions of the bitter and hard Resolve that affirms itself in face of nothingness, proud of its contempt of happiness, reason, and compassion.

With the appearance of *Sein und Zeit*, it is likely that none of Heidegger's students would have imagined that "my ownmost" death, radically individualized, and a central category of *Sein und Zeit*, would be travestied six years later in a celebration of a National Socialist "hero." But the leap in the existential analytic from death to Heidegger's Schlageter speech (*Freiburger Studentenzeitung*, June 1, 1933)⁶ is merely a passage

6. Schlageter, a student at Freiburg University, participated in acts of sabotage against the French occupation army after the First World War; he was executed and then canonized by the National Socialists. Heidegger's speech is reprinted in this issue of *New German Critique*.

from a particular and individual *Dasein* to one that is general, no less particular by virtue of its generality insofar as it is a question of German *Dasein*. In this memorial speech, composed in bombastic style, it is said that Schlageter died “the most difficult and greatest of all deaths,” shot in cold blood while his humiliated nation was on its knees. “Alone, drawing on his own inner strength, he had to place before his soul an image of the future awakening of the *Volk* to honor and greatness so that he could die believing in this future.” Heidegger inquires after the origin of this “hardness of will” and “clarity of heart.” He cites in response the mountains of the Black Forest (Schlageter’s home) and their autumnal limpidity. These earthy, natural forces are said to have been transposed into the heart of the young hero. In truth, Schlageter had been one of numerous young Germans left without recourse during the post-war years. Some became communists, some followed an opposite course. They are superbly described in E. von Salomon’s novel, *The City*. Disenfranchised by the war, they returned from military service unable to find a place in civilian life and joined one of the numerous Freikorps units, living their lives in anti-social aimlessness, adhering to whatever unruly cause presented itself. This is what the existential philosopher calls a “duty.” “He was compelled to go to the Baltic; he was compelled to go to Upper Silesia; he was compelled to go to the Ruhr;” he was compelled to fulfill the destiny chosen by himself! Here is the fatum of classical tragedy become German verbosity — that of a philosopher, no less!

A few months after this speech Germany, with much fuss, left the League of Nations. The Führer decreed elections after the fact in order to demonstrate to world opinion that Germany and Hitler stood united. Heidegger made the Freiburg students march in formation to the local polling place so that they could give their assent to Hitler’s decision en bloc. A “yes” to Hitler’s decision seemed to him to signify an affirmation of “authentic existence.” The electoral appeal he published in his capacity as rector conforms entirely with the National Socialist idiom and at the same time represents a popularized version of Heidegger’s philosophy:

German men and women!

The German people has been summoned by the Führer to vote; the Führer, however, is asking nothing from the people. Rather, he *is giving* the people the possibility of making, directly, the highest

free decision of all: whether it — the entire people — wants its own existence (*Dasein*) or whether it does *not* want it.

This election simply cannot be compared to all other previous elections. What is unique about this election is the simple greatness of the decision that is to be executed. The inexorability of what is simple and ultimate (*des Einfachen und Letzten*), however, tolerates no vacillation and no hesitation. This ultimate decision reaches to the outermost limit of our people's existence. And what is this limit? It consists in the most basic demand of all Being (*Sein*), that it preserve and save its own essence. A barrier is thereby erected between what can be reasonably expected of a people and what cannot. It is by virtue of this basic law of honor that a people preserves the dignity and resoluteness of its essence.

It is not ambition, not desire for glory, not blind obstinacy, and not hunger for power that demands from the Führer that Germany withdraw from the League of Nations. It is only the clear will to unconditional self-responsibility in enduring and mastering the fate of our people.

That is *not* a turning away from the community of nations. On the contrary — with this step, our people is submitting to that essential law of human existence to which every people must first give allegiance if it is still to be a people. It is only out of the parallel observance by all peoples of this unconditional demand of self-responsibility that there emerges the possibility of taking one another seriously so that a community can be affirmed.

The will to a true community of nations (*Völkergemeinschaft*) is equally far removed both from an unrestrained, vague desire for world brotherhood and from blind tyranny. Existing beyond this opposition, this will allows peoples and states to stand by one another in an open and manly fashion as self-reliant entities (*das offene und mannhaftige Aufsich- und Zueinanderstehen der Völker und Staaten*).

The choice that the German people will now make is — simply as an event in itself, and independent of the outcome — the strongest evidence of the new German reality embodied in the National Socialist State.

Our will to national (*völkisch*) self-responsibility desires that each people find and preserve the greatness and truth of its destiny (*Bestimmung*). This will is the highest guarantee of security among peoples; for it binds itself to the basic law of manly respect and unconditional honor.

On November 12, the German people as a whole will choose its future. This future is bound to the Führer. In choosing this future,

the people cannot, on the basis of so-called foreign policy considerations, vote *Yes* without also including in this *Yes* the Führer and the political movement that has pledged itself unconditionally to him. There are not separate foreign and domestic policies. There is only the one will to the full existence (*Dasein*) of the State.

The Führer has awakened this will in the entire people and has welded it into a single resolve.

No one can remain away from the polls on the day when this will is manifested. (*Freiburger Studentenzeitung*, November 10, 1933).

It was in his Freiburg inaugural address (“What is Metaphysics?”) that Heidegger spoke for the first time of “the ultimate greatness” of *Dasein*, which consisted in the latter’s “daring” willingness to expend itself without regard to consequences. Here he makes even greater use of the idea of heroic grandeur. The latter applies to Schlageter’s death no less than Hitler’s daring decision to undertake an audacious and surprise move that rendered meaningless all contractual relations and juridical principles. This act, moreover, was allegedly not an abandonment of the community of European nations, but it alone, “on the contrary,” established the possibility of a true community, where each nation exists on its own, discovering in this stance the true basis of mutuality!

One week before this electoral appeal, Heidegger published a speech intended for the student body composed in very general terms (*Freiburger Studentenzeitung*, November 11, 1933) in which he stated that the National Socialist Revolution represents a “total transformation of German *Dasein*.” It is up to the students, in their will to knowledge, to remain faithful to what is essential, simple and great, to be disciplined and authentic in their demands, clear and sure in their refusals; to be engaged fighters and to fortify their courage in being ready to sacrifice to save what is essential and to enhance the strength of the *Volk*. Ideas ought not guide the existence of the students. Hitler alone should be their only law: “The Führer alone is the German present and future reality and its law.”

The philosophical definition of *Dasein* as an existing factum brutum which “is and must be” (*Sein und Zeit*, #29) — this sinister, active *Dasein*, stripped of all content, all beauty, all human kindness — is a mirror-image of the “heroic realism” of those Nazi-bred, German faces that stared out at us from every magazine. In his lectures, Heidegger “philosophized with a hammer,” as Nietzsche had done in *Twilight of the Idols*, yet without the latter’s brilliant psychological acumen. And while

Nietzsche maintained an oppositional stance towards Bismarck's Reich, the "highest free" decision of Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede* philosophy gave the sublime name of "fate" to the factum brutum of contemporary German events.

The petty-bourgeois orthodoxy of the party was suspicious of Heidegger's National Socialism insofar as Jewish and racial considerations played no role. *Sein und Zeit* was dedicated to the Jew, Husserl, his Kant-book to the half-Jew, Scheler, and in his courses at Freiburg, Bergson and Simmel were taught. His spiritual concerns did not seem to conform to those of the "Nordic race," which cared little about Angst in the face of nothingness.⁷ Conversely, Professor H. Naumann⁸ did not hesitate to explain German mythology with the help of concepts from *Sein und Zeit*, discovering "care" in Odin and the "they" in Baldur. Yet neither the aforementioned disdain or approval of his National Socialist credentials counts for much in itself. Heidegger's decision for Hitler went far beyond simple agreement with the ideology and program of the Party. He was and remained a National Socialist, as did Ernst Jünger, who was certainly on the margins and isolated, but nevertheless far from being without influence. Heidegger's influence came through the radicalism with which he based the freedom of one's ownmost individual as well as German *Dasein* on the manifest-ness of the naught (*des Nichts*). Even today (1939),⁹ Hitler's daring decision to risk a war for the sake of Danzig serves as a good illustration of Heidegger's philosophical concept of "courage for Angst" before nothingness ("*Mut zur Angst*" vor dem Nichts) — a paradox which captures the entire German situation in a nutshell.

Given the significant attachment of the philosopher to the climate and intellectual habitus of National Socialism, it would be inappropriate to criticize or exonerate his political decision in isolation from the very principles of Heideggerian philosophy itself. It is not Heidegger, who, in opting for Hitler, "misunderstood himself;" instead, those who cannot understand why he acted this way have failed to understand him. A Swiss professor regretted that Heidegger consented to compromise himself with the "everyday," as if a philosophy that explains Being from the standpoint of time and the everyday would not stand in relation

7. Cf. A. Hoberg, *Dasein des Menschen* (1937).

8. *Germanischer Schicksalsglaube* (1934)

9. Translator's note: this sentence was inserted from the original 1939 version of Löwith's essay and does not appear in the version published in 1946.

to the daily historical realities that govern its origins and effects. The possibility of a Heideggerian political philosophy was not born as a result of a regrettable “miscue,” but from the very conception of existence that simultaneously combats and absorbs the “spirit of the age.”

The ultimate motivation of this will to rupture, revolution, and awakening, of this newly politicized Youth Movement from before World War I, is to be found in the awareness of ruin and decline, in European nihilism. It is significant that in Germany, Nietzsche had elevated this “European” nihilism to the rank of the principal philosophical theme, and that it was in Germany that it was able to take on a political form.

The German, first and foremost, bears witness to the universal historical mission of radicalism. . . . No one else is so inexorable and ruthless, for he does not merely limit himself to turning upside down a world that is already upright in order to remain upright himself, he turns himself upside down. Where the German demolishes, a god must fall and a world must perish. For the German, to destroy is to create, and the crushing of the temporal is his eternity. (Max Stirner)

The Germans have no aptitude for the rational application of freedom within the bounds of human experience (*in den Grenzen des Menschlichen*). One cannot understand the influence which Heidegger’s philosophical corpus has exerted upon us apart from this will to destruction. Its internal justification is always based on the radical character of the historical situation, on the fact that “old Europe” is finished. Heidegger’s fundamental idea is in effect free of all concern for the alternative: “whether from this destruction a new ‘culture’ will emerge or an acceleration of decline” (letter of 1920). Similarly, the conclusion of the rectoral address of 1933 says that it is too late to transform the old institutions, let alone add new ones. One should instead return to the “original beginnings” of the Greeks in order to begin again in Europe. The danger according to him is that the spiritual power of the West will dry up, that the West will come apart at the seams before we can decide in favor of this renewal, and that as a result, “this exhausted pseudo-culture” will collapse, encompassing all that is still living in the disorder. At this time, Heidegger still thought that our surviving the collapse or not depended entirely on ourselves, “whether we want ourselves, ourselves again and anew, or whether we do not want ourselves.” He believed that the question had

been decided positively in the collective decision to follow the Führer. Three years later in 1936, in a lecture on Hölderin, Heidegger concluded on much more resigned note. He shows us, with Hölderin, “the era in which the gods have fled and [that] of the god to come.” The present, hemmed in by this double negative, the “being-no-longer of the gods who have fled” and the “not-yet” of the God to come, is essentially an impoverished and indigent era; it is no longer a question of the “glorious” beginning of 1933.

In such an era, the poet resists and perseveres in the nothingness of this night, an image that recalls the somber conclusion of Max Weber in “Science as a Vocation” (1919). “Of what use are poets in an impoverished era?” Heidegger, too, posed this question on many occasions. To find an answer would undoubtedly be more difficult for him than for the poet himself.

The fascination Heidegger has exerted since 1920 as a result of his Resolve devoid of content and his ruthless critique has endured. The influence of his teachings can be felt almost everywhere — in France no less than elsewhere. The extraordinary success of his teachings is independent of the various relations, good or bad, which Heidegger has maintained with the National Socialist Party over the course of the last twelve years. In reality, what is demonstrated by the somewhat naive apology of the author of “A Visit With M. Heidegger” (Jean Beaufret) (*Les Temps Modernes* [January 1946]) is not that Heidegger was not a distinguished representative of the German Revolution, but that he was so in a manner more radical than (Ernst) Krieck or (Alfred) Rosenberg.

Whether he merely put up with Hitler’s rule or whether he regretted his involvement as an error, the very possibility of his support for the “revolution of nihilism” must be explained from his basic philosophical principle. This principle — existence reduced to itself and resting on itself alone in face of nothingness — is by no means a gratuitous invention. It corresponds, on the contrary, to the radical character of the real historical situation with which Heideggerian existentialism, understood temporally and historically, explicitly identified. This historical situation cannot be dated from the contemporary period, nor is it specifically German. For a century, it has already been felt and expressed by perspicuous Europeans of all countries as a relentlessly approaching catastrophe. “European nihilism” which “prefers to will nothingness than to will nothing at all,” as the later Nietzsche acknowledged and defined it, has had its nervous prophets from the beginnings of

the 19th century, in Niebuhr and Goethe; at mid-century, it had them in Burckhardt and Bruno Bauer, in Danilevsky and Kirojevsky, in Marx and Kierkegaard, in Proudhon and Donoso Cortes, in Flaubert and Baudelaire; and at the end of the century, in Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. And if the truth of *Dasein* is really temporal and historical, it must be admitted — at the possible risk of self-contradiction — that the truth of contemporary German existence must be found more than ever in the philosophy of Heidegger, in the theology of Karl Barth, and in Spengler's philosophy of history; and not with those who try to resurrect the tradition of German idealism for the benefit of German youth. Radical events require radical decisions and modes of thought. The German situation, for which Heidegger was the principal philosophical spokesman, has not become less radical since 1945; it has become, on the contrary, all the more so, and it is difficult to say where this will lead.

-- Translated by Richard Wolin and Melissa J. Cox.

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