



Heidegger's Forgetfulness of Difference

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Abstract Martin Heidegger's National Socialist political sympathies are plainer and more troubling to contemporary readers than ever before. This paper examines the relation of leader to society he uses to ground his account of the state in the 1930s. But breakthroughs in the previous decade, in *Being and Time* in particular, make the political ontology he endorses less compelling. Heidegger's political positions are incompatible with his account of the ontological difference. The power of the leader of the society he or she leads cannot repeat the relation of Being over entities. Ontologically speaking, totalitarianism is a category mistake. Confusing the transcendental domain for its ontical contents, Heidegger refuses to learn his own lessons in ways Eric Voegelin helps us detect.

1 Introduction

Confidence in our public institutions continues to erode. Call this a short-term meta-narrative, a contemporary myth. Oppositional and defiant behavior is more common. It is praised and rewarded more frequently. News reports show how many resist wearing protective masks during the coronavirus pandemic and how many remain reluctant or resistant to be vaccinated. According to neurobiologist Darcia Narvaez, college students in the United States of America experience and exhibit less empathy. It is more common to flout “social rules” and, when challenged, to show “less shame for selfish behavior” (Narvaez 2014, 4). It has never been easier to double down, never harder to apologize and mean it. Antipathy stubbornly endures in public

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life. As the far- or alright's recent visibility around the world shows us, separatism and individualism flourish like never before, while subcultures and perhaps entire cultures may form around the fellow feeling of disunion. Liberalism has managed to invert Fichte's key terms: the not-I has become the new I.

Taking a wider view of the short-term metanarrative, we can see at least two distinct but interrelated precursors to it, one from modern politics and the other from the naturalism of modern science. Hobbes looks to the headlines of his own day, which describe the violence of the English Civil Wars. He observes how both sides of the conflict disguise their cruelty behind the legitimating vocabulary of justice and God's will. He finds the will to power lurking behind the scenes of political community, justifying policies that promote violence. Social Darwinists in the past contended charity was contrary to nature, that it disrespects those who accept it. Nature, in this characterization, dispenses strength and weakness by its own devices. Reflecting Robert Chambers's idea of species transmutation, as evolution was known before Darwin, Alfred Lord Tennyson gives us the line about nature red in tooth and claw. Richard Dawkins approves in *The Selfish Gene*, unselfconsciously, shamelessly declaring that this description "sums up our modern understanding of natural selection admirably" (1989, 2). It is bald praise for the predator tenaciously willing to do what it takes to survive.

When trust is in short supply, when many suspect good faith is *Realpolitik* in disguise, rational persuasion, difficult in the best of circumstances, can seem impossible. Nowhere is this more true than in matters of politics. Readers may remember how Leo Strauss, writing against Max Weber, identified a new informal fallacy, the *reductio ad Hitlerum*. Strauss worked against what he saw as the low standards of public discourse and reasoning by which it was enough to reject a view if "it happens to have been shared by Hitler" (1965, 42-43). Decades later, after seeing one too many heated online debates go nowhere, Mike Godwin, writing in *Wired* magazine, formulated Godwin's law of Nazi analogies: "as online discussions grow, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one" (1994). Both Strauss and Godwin, their audiences different, worried about Hitler as cheap caricature, as litmus test, and as rhetorical hyperbole.

Surprisingly or not, depending on your attitude toward the short-term metanarrative, many today do all manner of intellectual gymnastics to preserve the unkind choices of the past, to defend the injustices that stick to history and, by extension, to us too. Martin Heidegger did so in his day. But it is not enough, nor is it particularly interesting, to vilify him for this, showing how he reflects the prejudices of his time and culture. Nor is refusing to read his books the best way to avoid prolonging his oversights (cf. Faye 2011). What is more interesting, I think, is to prove he should have known better using the resources of his own considerable insights. We can restore vision to his blind spots and lower the probability that our future will resemble his past.

The rise of the right around the world means Heidegger's politics remains relevant and troubling. I think totalitarian politics is actually the rejection of politics, insofar as it mistrusts people to direct themselves, favoring a strong leader to do deciding's heavy lifting for us. People overestimate their leader, underestimate their own capacities for careful self-direction, and altogether overlook how the leader



only has the power that the people yield. Heidegger's Nazism, predictably idiosyncratic, is nevertheless plain, consistent, and sincere: plain, in the sense that it is out loud and not hidden; consistent, in the sense that his politics was always more than rightleaning, with even his rare moments of stifled regret attempting no reform, no rescue; and sincere, in the sense that he appears to have honestly, intentionally, and deliberately developed his politics with aplomb, even where the details of his reasoning diverge somewhat from conventional party rhetoric.

Granted many have written about how Heidegger's political commitments inflect or, among his most strident critics, wholly contaminate his allegedly politically neutral theory of being. The problem with this approach is that the views of the scholars doing this kind of scholarship recede from view. Heidegger's works become laboratory specimens to be dissected, his conclusions held at arm's length, and meanwhile the injunction to performance contained within the works is lost or suppressed. Heidegger's political conclusions are incompatible with his account of basic reality. Rather than softball psychological, moral, political, and theological excuses for this oversight, this paper attempts to provide an ontological justification for rejecting fascisms of all forms. Perhaps surprisingly, given the informal fallacy described by Leo Strauss, portions of Heidegger's own work are useful in this respect. In what follows, I will be alternatively drawing on and departing from Heidegger's analyses, using his work to posit an anti-fascism he would refuse. An advantage to this paper's approach is that it shares Heidegger's phenomenological method, demonstrates its importance, but disabuses his readers of the many faulty political inferences made by one of the twentieth century's most celebrated, most flawed thinkers.

Rather than articulate a full anti-fascist political theory, here I have selected a more specific task. Heidegger urged his audience, students and readers alike, against forgetfulness and toward authentic retrieval. In the case of the ontological difference, however, I will show that this standard is unevenly met. Political works from the 1930s fantasize about a political regime that would instantiate this difference, in effect de-differentiating its poles. Heidegger's politics in these years must be the result of forgetting his own hard-won conclusions: the kind of politics Heidegger endorses, from which late in life he will attempt to distance himself, can only result when the ontological difference is de-emphasized (Malpas 2006, 312-313).

The point is relevant beyond the field of Heidegger scholarship. Since Heidegger's phenomenological method depends on differentiating the ontological from the ontic, the following gets to the heart of what it means to do phenomenology. It is a warning about how the most promising philosophical methods may fail to guard against disastrous results. Since Heidegger's philosophical career takes place before, during, and after the rise and fall of National Socialism, among other important events in the previous century, the following has implications for the practice of philosophy in a totalitarian context.



2 Ontology as a formal drama

The world is full of differences, and not only that, but different differences. Time keeps things from happening all at once, space keeps them from happening all in one place, and the differences among particular times and particular spaces keep things from happening all to themselves. Heidegger focuses especially on one occasion of difference, the difference between Being and beings, which he labels the ontological difference. According to Stephan Käufer, “it is the most basic distinction of [Heidegger’s] philosophy” (2007, 146). My claim is that the meaning of the ontological difference shifts when Heidegger directly addresses the changing political winds of his time, so recovering the meaning of the terms composing the difference is the natural first step: what the ontological difference is must be addressed before showing how its function becomes distorted. In other words, since we are trying to understand the ontological difference, it makes sense, first, to understand the poles composing it, to better detect when or whether their meaning is subject to change. Accordingly, to reach an understanding of it as a differential is first to understand the terms or poles composing the difference, namely, Being and a being, before turning, in the next section, to the ways in which the meaning of these terms shifted and deformed to accommodate a dark politics.

The ontological difference is a centerpiece of the Marburg lectures of 1927, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* in which Heidegger defines it as “the difference not between one being and another but between being and beings,” and as how “we first enter the field of philosophical research” (1982, 17). But the ontological difference can also be detected, though it was never given a name as such, in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962, 25; see also Malpas 2006, 173-174). The relation between Dasein and the world, painstakingly articulated across the pages of *Being and Time*, is the precursor to the ontological difference explicitly discussed in *Basic Problems*. *Being and Time* is about the careful analysis of Dasein, the discovery of its world, and the temporality of their structured and structuring relation together (White 2005, 48). *Basic Problems* continues the narrative arc insofar as it continues to move away from the analysis of Dasein and turns toward a less Cartesian ontology. *Basic Problems* presupposes what it also goes beyond in its predecessor, but, as a pair, the two books share problematics, methods, and rhetorical tones.

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, proposes to investigate the meaning of Being. To the consternation of his readers, he does not offer a direct definition of Being. It is not a book that begins from a definition that is then defended in sections or chapters against imagined philosophical antagonists. In fact, much of the book is about how and why a direct definition is unavailable to us. Heidegger uses directed questioning to accomplish the goal of getting readers to respond to what he thinks they overlook (1962, 37). Being is camouflaged. Often we fail to notice it as it blends into prior expectations, or we confuse it for something else (*ibid.*, 25). Indeed, what is worse, we get in the way of our own questions. The methods and conceptual figures of *Being and Time* promise to help us uncover what tends to elude direct detection and, thus, elude interrogation too. The book is less instructions to lay an effective trap and more about bringing something into view that was always there but also unrecognized, to raise new, previously unavailable questions about it (*ibid.*,

31-32). Like a negative theologian, Heidegger begins with a hole. We are entities ourselves, peculiar only insofar as being may be or may fail to be an issue for us, entities ontologically curtailed by our finitude, making a direct, first-order definition of Being impossible (Dreyfus 2017, 51-52).

One reason Heidegger gives is very old. In section 7, in the second part of the book's introduction, he compares his project to those composed by authoritative predecessors in the history of philosophy. He agrees with, for example, Aristotle and Hegel, for whom Being "is no class or genus of entities" though "it pertains to every entity" (1962, 62). The argument is an influential one. Perhaps, says the argument, Being is what all existing things have or do. It is what all real things share. But there is a problem with this line of reasoning. When we make Being a highest-order genus, something each thing and everything have in common, we eliminate what we sought to find. For if Being were what each thing and everything share, if it were the common denominator of the real, no direct definition of it is possible.

Aristotle first, then Hegel, and now Heidegger concur that if Being were a genus, then it and the entities it conditions would be connected by a maximally common type that itself would have to be said to exist in virtue of some non-existing differentia, an absurdity that undermines metaphysics. "Being and the structure of Being lie beyond every entity and every possible character which an entity may possess. *Being is the transcendens pure and simple*" (ibid., italics in original). It does not have a direct definition because it is not an entity in the first place; it is not a what about which we can ask further questions. Later, Heidegger will track this mistake all the way back to Thales (1982, 319). Being exceeds not just definitions but, as much or even more, our interrogative reach for them (White 2005, 50). The incredible idea that a politician or a political regime could stand in for any of this, by the lights of a witting authority, is the subject of the next section of this paper.

Even closer to *Being and Time's* opening pages, in section 2, Heidegger acknowledges how our pre-ontological understanding of Being has made fundamental ontology more difficult and more complicated. We walk around with our minds made up about it already, rendering further questions superfluous (Brandom 2007). Heidegger persists, however, raising "the question which we are to work out" over the course of two divisions, with subsequent others projected but never finished, at least not in the way he expects when composing the introduction to *Being and Time* (1962, 25). He goes on: "what is asked about is Being—that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood, however we may discuss them in detail. The Being of entities 'is' not itself an entity" (ibid., 25-26). Too often existence is so readily understood that it is in fact self-evident (ibid., 23): we use *to be* frequently, with confidence and ease, and expect we know what we mean when doing so. Things plainly exist, so existence is no mystery. To his credit, Heidegger works against ostensive definition and other forms of questionbegging metaphysics (1962, 86-87). He grants that we think, speak, and act with an implicit understanding of being but urges readers to avoid confusing this pre-ontological appearance for the understanding formed on the basis of comprehensive and systematic interrogation, the results of which are called ontology.



Ontology is what happens when language refuses to beg questions. The presumed obviousness of being, common enough in ordinary speech about what is, what has being, is real, and exists, is an obstacle to the study of it, for the study of it depends on the interrogation of it. We take Being for granted so that we may use and talk about all manner of other things. It comes first, at least analytically, so all other subjects can step forward (Käufer 2007). Since nobody wonders about what is obvious, the study of phenomenological ontology is unlikely to complete for the simple reason that it is unlikely to begin, dismissed before its puzzles have a toehold in our attention. Heidegger uses phenomenological ontology, which he stipulates is not a parochial philosophy but rather the most basic, elemental form of philosophy, to encourage us to advert to what we overlook (1962, 62). Since they call for analysis of what is routinely overlooked, as we tend to be dispersed among everyday diversions, phenomenology and ontology, for him, come together in a counter-cultural way.

If Being is installed heuristically as both what we ask about yet also what transcends all entities, what then is an entity? Heidegger belongs to a long tradition of philosophers attending to the form our questions take and what these forms indicate about their targets. Formal indication plays an important role in Heidegger's habilitation on Duns Scotus about categories, meaning, and pre-worldly determination in the years leading to *Being and Time* (2008, Appendix II; 2013a, 198, 248, and as a means to self-knowledge, see 106-107, and 157). It plays a defining role in what it means to do philosophy and even is the primary means of doing it at all. For example, Heidegger writes, "philosophy is the formally indicating ontological corrective of the ontical" (1998, 53). In a way, this is exactly the injunction of this paper: to use the philosophy of being to correct for a politically expedient exaggeration of the ontical into the ontological.

Note though that formal indication has come to be seen as playing something of a contested role in Heidegger's scholarship and the secondary interpretation of it. When he writes the most important secondary study of *Being and Time*, Theodore Kisiel shows how much and how often formal indication is used by Heidegger (1995, 146). But subsequent commentators are reluctant to grant it a decisive role. Blattner is representative when he writes, "Kisiel makes much out of formal indication as a potential solution to the problem and thereby places a heavy burden on the few references to formal indication in *Being and Time*. As with hermeneutics, however, 'formal indication' is merely the name for the problem, not a solution" (2007, 239 n. 46). I can provide an everyday example of formal indication's usefulness for framing everyday experience. Nobody would think that the meaning of going to the movies is adequately conveyed by being seated in the theater at an arranged time. The former experiential state of affairs is much richer than the latter impoverished impersonal description. What does this have to do with the study of reality?

With respect to fundamental ontology, formal indication plays the role of a heuristic guide. Reality and our experience of it are too complex to integrate in advance. We cannot say much about Being given our partial, shifting, and haphazard experience of it. Formal indication is a useful way to anticipate, interrogate, and make limited statements about the meaning of existence without a comprehensive performance of it (Dahlstrom 1994, 780-783). Aristotle was the first to pay attention to the anticipatory economy of question and answer in a systematic way. In continuity

with Aristotle's analytic works, Heidegger shows how questions can be carefully organized according to the logic of their inner demands and possible targets. The inventory of cross-indexed patterns and the possible productive relations among them, showing what fits with what, are important to classical philosophy as well as to subsequent skepticism about its value. We have seen already the problem of the question of the meaning of Being: what makes it unlike other everyday inquiries is that when we ask what Being is we presume it is a what (Brogan 2005, 47 and Chapter 3). Being though is not an entity. First-order questions about Being must misfire from the outset when they presume it is an entity or a what (Shockey 2010).

Thus our questions turn out to be laden with prejudicial expectations that threaten to deform all possible results of the study of basic reality. Does this make ontology impossible? No, Heidegger finds a way forward by adopting an indirect approach. He shifts attention back a step, away from the Being-question's target and toward the one for whom Being is an issue in the first place. Dasein, as this recursive function is called, is not an ordinary term of art in natural history or any other scholarly field (Heidegger 1962, 37, 72). It is the being implicit in whatever we think, say, and do (Roesner 2006). Keeping in mind that the text we have represents only about a third of the promised work, Heidegger uses *Being and Time* to work backward from the question of the meaning of Being by analyzing the kind of being that raises such a question. When direct investigation fails, backward becomes the only way forward: rather than answer the question of the meaning of being, Heidegger interrogates the origin of the question, the questioner (1982, 120).

I understand this to be a hallmark of anti-realism. Realism and anti-realism both allege support from the phenomenological tradition, and from *Being and Time* in particular (Dreyfus 2017, Part II). Both camps have their extremists. Realists boast of their confidence in an indisputable given, mistaking definitions for demonstrations, conducting philosophical investigation on the finger-pointing model Aristotle disdains back in *Posterior Analytics* II.7. In his book *Fields of Sense*, Markus Gabriel refuses the exaggerations of anti-realism, which he calls ontic nonsense (2015, 78). Anti-realism's claims about the role of cognitional mediation go haywire when, for example, they enable some to make absurd claims about how before humans arrive on the natural-historical scene, nothing happened (Meillassoux 2010). *Being and Time* does not often contribute to these debates directly, the notable exception being sections 43 and 44. For the most part Heidegger's focus is more about Dasein, the questions it raises, the ends it pursues, the anxiety underneath it all, and the limits of these questions, projects, and basic moods as they reveal its ontological situation.

Though Being is an issue for it, Dasein cannot completely address the question that defines it (Heidegger 1962, 32–33). We have a specific, humbling lesson to learn, namely, that we often talk about what we do not fully understand. In *Basic Problems*, this is called a "restriction" (1982, 120). To this extent Heidegger is engaged in transcendental arguments. Such arguments approach a restriction but shy from trespassing over it. Ontology studies what it cannot control, so transcendental arguments, examples of which can be found throughout *Being and Time*, are less about recommended norms, policies, or claims, and are more about the rarified grammar or form on which all such arguments depend. Transcendental arguments use formal indication to cast a line out into the unknown, like someone fishing,



someone more in control of the method they adopt but less in control over what, if anything, comes next. Notwithstanding this special exception, the incompatibility of Being and a determinate something, other ordinary questions reveal the curiosities, dispositions, and ongoing projects of their bearers. Identifying them helps us see what we want to understand ahead of actually understanding it.

Thus the transcendental arguments found in Kant's work exhibit what will later become a familiar phenomenological strategy. Like a staged drama eliciting and then incorporating audience participation, these arguments depend on readers' abilities to shift their attention to concepts of objects from objects or the possible experience of them. But when the reader does not share the author's questions, when participants check out, conclusions and their intermediate arguments become underwhelming. It is always possible for the book *Being and Time* to become present-to-hand, for its analyses to falter, but in general the input of a transcendental argument is an experience. The output of a successful transcendental argument is insight into the relevant conditions of such an experience. They challenge us to shift attention from something to the horizon organizing but thus transcending the same something. It may be tempting to think the antonym of *transcendental* is *empirical*. Kant's usage suggests this contrast (2000). But later commentators and critics will remind us that we do experience, if indirectly, the horizons conditioning experience of objects. Second-order thinking is still empirical. First-order experience uses second-order experience to presuppose, to organize, or to explain its contents as such. Kant gets a critique of pure reason on the basis of a manifold of sensations and contingent intuitions. Heidegger shows how the failure of equipment can reveal the project-based orientation of our intentional involvements with entities, each other, and the world.

To anticipate the next section, political writings before, during, and after his rectorate document Heidegger's reversal. It is as if he inverts formal indication into material indication by flipping a favored tool around, using the right thing but from the wrong end. Rather than use ontology as a corrective to the ontical, he uses a particular ontical politics of his day to induce ontological conclusions that must, as a result, be invalid. Heidegger's methods and conclusions attest to the primacy of inquiry over statement-making. When it comes to being, we do not have to look far to find one worth studying. Questions formally indicate or anticipate declarations made in response to them (Käufer 2007, 150-151). Early sections of *Being and Time* use this strategy of argument to distinguish Heidegger's methods from those employed by other canonical authorities. He makes his case by showing how he proceeds differently from the major players of the historical record, that is, from other influential predecessors. He credits predecessors, for example, Thomas Aquinas, but on balance remains dissatisfied with their contributions (Heidegger 1962, 34 and 257). On balance, historically influential accounts remain too derivative. Dasein does not gather but rather is what must be there for any gathering to occur; Dasein is not intentionality but rather what must be there for there to be any intentional relations at all. It is an opening in being that lies behind, and thus is common to, diverse philosophical idioms.

Per his destruction of tradition and, in later works, his attempt to overcome it, Heidegger accuses classical, scholastic, and phenomenological predecessors for



confusing the horizon with something in fact appearing within it. He wants to outdo those who came before him at a transcendental level. To one degree or another, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Husserl fail to account for the Being of entities. They fail to distinguish between form and what it indicates, at best nodding in the right direction. Recovering one's own being from amid the great array of other entities and second-rate philosophical accounts of them is the precondition to uncovering the difference between Being and entities. Heidegger detects a pattern of oversights that confines these figures to the shallow, ontical end of the pool. Ontological inquiry is always deeper, alleges Heidegger, for it attends to those preconditions of appearance assumed and then mistakenly neglected by tradition.

So what happens when, a few years later, Heidegger himself begins to lose this interrogative orientation? What happens when his philosophy does not ask as much as answer? What happens when his arguments become less second- and more first-order?

3 Deflating the transcendental

The previous section was about Being and a being, the pair of which Heidegger comes to set in a relation of difference. Though it may seem counterintuitive, difference is a form of relation. Keeping two things separated is another way to ensure they stay connected. We have seen how Heidegger appears to have a strategy of implicit definition in mind regarding the ontological difference. He installs two opposed terms as poles and then uses a flexible relation to fix the meaning of each, Being and beings. Here the form of relation is difference, and, since the difference regards the key terms of fundamental ontology, the difference is aptly titled the ontological difference.

Heidegger uses this difference in a dynamic way, organizing metaphysical vocabularies and the historical periods that correlate them. For example, the scholastic's real distinction between essence and existence is not a precursor to the ontological difference (1982, Chapter Two). Instead, it is a simpler, more restricted statement of it. Meanwhile, the ontological difference "grows ever richer in the problems it contains" (ibid., 120). Heidegger uses it to make sense of the key terms and important disputes occurring within the historical study of basic reality and, doing so, thereby enriches the difference. In late works, the ontological difference is shown to be something itself derived as opposed to something basic. *Sein* gives or grants the ontological difference its differentiation. It keeps Being and a being different.

However, Heidegger comes to confuse his ontical situation in the 1930s for the ontological one he explains in *Being and Time* and *Basic Problems*. Ingratiating himself to the ship of state, he casts aside the concepts, the tools, that would have been most useful for dismantling it. To make this case, I will consult selections of Heidegger's lectures, addresses, and notes from this time in which the active-passive configuration of leader and led is plainest. These will be the focus of this section. Heidegger wants to use fate to connect the people to their leader, where fate is "guided by the inexorability of that spiritual mission that the destiny of



the German people forcibly impresses upon its history” (In Craig 1991, 323). The leader guards and guides the people, and the people are destined to conform. This is a restatement of the ontological difference in miniature, achieving its small scale only by hollowing out key details.

Heidegger gives lectures in the winter of 1933-34, student protocols of which were published and translated under the title *Nature, History, State* (2013b). Though these lecture notes may not be an authoritative primary source, they help interested scholars situate Heidegger’s reformulation of work first done in *Being and Time* against later works to come, *Introduction to Metaphysics* in particular. The notes are a useful hermeneutic pivot or the documentation of such a pivot by which we see the author of *Being and Time* build a political philosophy to favor the *Führer*.

The sixth and seventh sessions are particularly useful to the present project. Previous sessions identify the community and the city-state. For context, the fifth ends by asking, “who is permitted to rule?” (2013b, 39). Heidegger concludes that the answer will be available when “the state may form our essence and thus come to power” (ibid.) The sixth session rushes chronologically forward from the Greek polis to account for an expanded range of political community. In “our time,” he says directly to his audience, a newfound individual will made possible through industrial-intellectual specialization, in other words, through technology, has conspired to undermine politics, which is the Being of the state and the site of its development (2013b, 42.) Developing the state fully will allow it to be called “the way of Being of a people” (ibid., 43). The ground of the state is its people and not, per the individualism Heidegger indicts in his day, its persons. Heidegger praises folk songs, folk customs, and so on, for they connect public sympathies, sentiments, and feelings, binding the public into a life together. The lecture sounds like Rousseau except in the rising tide of National Socialism.

Held more than a week later, the seventh session builds on the sixth. Heidegger describes the first principles of governance as coming not from consent, representation, the demands of justice, and so on, but from Being itself and from the leader’s connection to it: “For the origin of all state action and leadership does not lie in knowledge; it lies in Being. Every leader *is* a leader” (2013b, 45, italics in original). Elsewhere Heidegger advised his students against depending on knowledge, writing, “Let not theories and ‘ideas’ be the rules of your being. The *Führer* himself and he alone is German reality and its law, today and for the future” (Sheehan 1988). Rickey surveys the ways in which Heidegger’s injunction against theory, surprising to say the least when they come from a philosophy professor steeped in theology and fundamental ontology, reflect and reinforce tenets of National Socialism (2002, 230-244). With obvious allusions to Plato’s *Republic*, in these lectures he distinguishes between the people, for their passivity and want of political education, and their leader, whose lack of political education may be compensated by “a band of guardians” who “bear[s] responsibility for the state” (2013b, 45). The lecture reads like a job application not *for* the people’s *Führer* but rather *to* him. Surveying the *Reichen* that precede this latest one, Heidegger wants to be a guardian, a steward, promoting the people’s love for the state. Heidegger does not use the language of authenticity here though the word appears earlier and later in the lecture series. In these passages, drawing out the implications of the word’s absence, as Heidegger



and scholars of his work often do, it seems Heidegger is speaking to and for and about the authentic folks who need no self-introduction. He is speaking about a political community while ensconced within it, so he and his immediate audience are always already authentic.

Heidegger invokes the ontological difference but steps over it to address threats faced by the leader and the people. He feigns a few now-familiar false starts, considering the possibility that beings are the contents of Being, implicitly recalling the genus argument we considered earlier. He considers that both terms, Being and beings, may be mutually conditioning, but he dismisses this option too. He implicitly alludes back to *Basic Problems* when, exasperated at the chalkboard, he says, "We cannot explain the question of Being further here; we simply see that there is an essential difference between Being and beings, and that this difference is completely other than the difference between one being and another, such as the book and the chalk" (2013b, 47). He marshals human consciousness and contrasts it to the life of non-human animals, suggesting our natural habitat is always political. Thus it is up to each of us, via a rightwing egalitarianism, to do what can be done for the development and persistence of the state, to be faithful to it, and to sacrifice on behalf of it. The leader and the led, at the seventh session's conclusion, share in being to help the state navigate and combat the challenges ahead: "In every new moment, the leader and the people will join more closely in order to bring about the essence of their state, that is, their Being; growing with each other, they will set their meaningful historical Being and will against the two threatening powers of death and the devil—that is, ruination and decline from their own essence" (ibid.).

In the 1934-35 winter semester at Freiburg, during his first lecture course about Hölderlin's poetry, discussing "Germania," Heidegger collapses what he worked so hard to distinguish in the 1920s. Altogether unconvincingly, he equates the transcendental domain with its empirical contents, writing, "the fatherland is beyng itself, which from the ground up bears and configures the history of a people as an existing people" (Heidegger 2014, 109; see Wolfson 2018, 48). Perhaps Heidegger was trying to speak to his changing times by leaving out the distinctions that put him at cross purposes with an emerging Nazism. Knowles, though, suggests a complex hypothesis about when Heidegger is public, loud, and defiant, and when he is private, reflective, and quiet to the point of silence (2019, 16). Overall, lectures delivered from the early 1930s restate Heidegger's account of *das Volk* as it is given in *Being and Time*. But the same lectures fail to attend to key distinctions present in that major work. *Volk* in *Being and Time* refers to historical community, but the form this community takes is highly variable, given the ubiquity of *Mitsein*, found anywhere Dasein finds itself living, working, and being among other beings, in short, everywhere (Wolfson 2018, 134). *Volk* moves forward, in the sense of becoming more prominent, and moves down to earth, in the sense that it refers more specifically to one historical community, one fatherland in particular (Young 1998, Chapter 4).

None of this is a one-off. When he assumes the rectorate at the University of Freiburg in the spring of 1933, a few months after Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany, Heidegger gives an address titled "The Self-Assertion of the German Universities." He pledges to be "the spiritual leader of this noble college" by connecting present to past. "Knowledge and German destiny must come to power above all in



the adherence to tradition,” which will occur only “when teachers and students alike suspend knowledge as their innermost need, and participate in the destiny of Germany” (Heidegger 1965, 22). Only the most dutiful leader can make this happen. Sharpe reminds us that in 1966 a defiant Heidegger claimed “he would be willing to repeat” the address “with greater vehemence” (2018, 179). It is one thing to read the transcript of the rectorship address and another thing to be reminded, as Sharpe provides in his analysis, of the further details of its dramatic performance. The address “was delivered by candlelight before professors in full regalia on a stage adorned with red and black swastikas and the brown-uniformed SA” (2018, 182). Without addressing it explicitly, the address deforms and compresses the ontological difference. Rather than recover the ground of the ontological difference, as he will attempt later, here Heidegger implicitly shoehorns it into the politics of the present (Wolfson 2018, 46 and 52). By doing so, he makes a mereological oversight of some consequence given, as we have seen, his previous sensitivity to this sort of mistake when it was made by others in the history of philosophy and theology. What Heidegger says in public, furthermore, is similar to what he writes in private. Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks* express the same thoughts in similar ways. In a book composed of “exhortations” (2016, 12), §230 defines the people as “guarding and carrying out the empowerment of being” (*ibid.*, 74).

Unsurprisingly, in lectures, addresses, and diaries, Heidegger fails to note how the ontological difference could help work against the *Führerprinzip* in terms of both that principle’s defective reasoning and its political consequences. The most important methods and conceptual figures of immediately prior works, the ontological difference especially, ought to have preempted what he does say. The political circumstances of Heidegger’s lectures and addresses, though extreme, do not traverse the difference between Being and a being. To claim they do, to claim an ontic commitment is identical to or synonymous with an ontological one is, on the author’s own terms, a category mistake, confusing formal, transcendental arguments with empirical contingencies.

The ontological defense of Nazism, coming as it does not from biology but from history, violates the ontological difference. Phillips is reluctant to group Heidegger with conventional biological racists: “Heidegger’s conception of the *Volk* cannot be extricated from his engagement with National Socialism. [...] And yet its role in determining Heidegger’s commitment to Hitler is an insufficient reason for identifying Heidegger’s conception of the *Volk* with the National Socialist conception of the Aryan ‘type’” (2005, 246; see also Sharpe 2018, 181-182). True enough, “Heidegger regarded his anti-Semitism as distinct from the anti-Semitism of the National Socialists” (Trawny 2015, 30). Yet Heidegger makes the very category mistake he foresaw, conflating existentiell or superficial statements for the ontological depths that are their transcendental preconditions. “The displacement of ‘biological’ racism into a metaphysics of racism,” writes Jean-Luc Nancy about Heidegger’s anti-Semitism, “perhaps does not displace much at all” (2015, 52; see also Vietta 1989, Wolfson 2018). Through a kind of ontological suppression, the kind he previously diagnosed in important predecessors, inexplicably trespassing into a restricted area, he makes an absurd political regime appear credible. Logicians may be quick to spot the fallacy of division: what is true of the relation between Being and a being is not also



true of political relations among entities. It is as though the ontological difference, implicit throughout the wending road of *Being and Time*, rendered explicit in later texts, charted a map. But works in the 1930s fail to live up to its ambitions and put a truncated cartography in its place.

In lectures and his rectorship speech, Heidegger addresses his historical community as if they were anything other than another contingent arrangement of political circumstance. He speaks as if *Being and Time* were not written. Setting aside its insights about the complementary relation of ontological and ontic, he backs himself into a corner of his own design. In *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology*, Jacques Taminiaux writes about how Heidegger's focus shifts after *Being and Time*. The analysis of Dasein gives way to meditations "on the history of the Western world as the history of the withdrawal of Being" (Taminiaux 1991, 163). The ontological difference is a lynchpin in this transition. At first its composite terms are formal, transcendental indices. When Heidegger thinks about politics, addressing, co-ordinating, and contributing to Nazification across the 1930s, he misuses this conceptual figure to organize his views.

In its original formulation, the ontological difference relates two opposed terms, Being and a being. Heidegger shunts the difference by rearranging its poles, reconceiving of it as something less transcendental and more suited to his politics. He diminishes the ontological stakes of the difference to accommodate politics and, to this extent, undermines his own view. The relation of leader to led stands in for the difference between Being and a being. Jeff Malpas has done convincing work showing how Heidegger remained restless with his so-called middle period. Much of the key vocabulary from this time, *Volk*, for example, does drop away in the postwar years (Malpas 2006, 20). Later, Heidegger's topology moves past, without leaving behind, the political entanglements that Malpas says do characterize, and I say do cripple, the work done during the brief rectorate (Knowles 2019, 181).

Back in *Being and Time* Dasein struggles to distinguish itself among others. We are what we are like, so much so that the discovery of what each of us fundamentally is, is prone to misunderstanding. Heidegger flips Descartes's *cogito* on its heads, grounding Dasein's being not in a singular, unique, and exemplary being, but rather in a public, averaged, and leveled-down being, one always with others. Heidegger will distance himself from the analysis of the they-self into which Dasein is absorbed, but it remains a central feature of *Being and Time* because its absence indexes authenticity. The They contraindicated authentic being: the more I belong to them, the less I am myself. Heidegger's analyses connect to wider social-political concerns expressed by other intellectuals at the time. According to Knowles, "In his description of 'the they,' Heidegger echoes a common theme among Weimar intellectuals concerned about the distracting effects of modern technologies, the increased tempo of modern life, and the anonymity of urban existence" (2019, 14). *We* comes before *I*, contends Heidegger (Dreyfus 2017, 21; Brandom 2007, 222). Culture, at once the poison and the cure, draws us away from our ownmost being, while the analysis of the totality of relations constituting Dasein insofar as it is its world exposes this basic relation and permits analysis of it.

In a subsequent parade of poetics, however, the occasion for interrogative analysis gives way to nationalistic identification. The lectures and addresses that Heidegger



gives during these years fail to meet the analytic standards formulated in the difference he first articulates in *Being and Time* and expounds in subsequent works, *Basic Problems* most notably. Heidegger will try to disguise the failure as a success, insisting that the new political inflection was what he meant all along (1990, 29; Sharpe 2018, 197). Heidegger, writes Simon Critchley, “sought to cover up” the difference between the ontological and the ontic “in his political commitment to National Socialism and his pathetic attachment to life in the provinces by claiming to find an instantiation of the ontological in the ontic: of, say, being’s historicity in the German people” (2012, 211). But I have tried to make a different claim, logical, ontological, and formally philosophical rather than psychological: the fact is that the ontological difference exclusively makes sense of and applies to transcendental terms. If you think you have stumbled on it in an empirical state of affairs, you have misunderstood it quite completely.

Attempts to leverage a being into the position of Being are implausible, especially given the study of reality carried out by Heidegger. In the 1920s he distinguishes between surface and depth, between contingent arrangement and the conditions of possibility that determine them as such. In the 1930s he compounds or compresses the will into something basic, neglecting its conditioned character, making it into something elemental, into something decisive, into what Sean McGrath frighteningly labels Nazi decisionism. Lectures and addresses of the time “are the strongest witness to [Heidegger’s] political beliefs” (McGrath 2008, 24 n. 26). They document how his politics becomes more compact as one political arrangement bespeaks the truth of being. But this politics ignores the ambiguity and open-endedness he previously established as built into all human experience, including political experience (1962, 217-219). Heidegger the rector ignores and denies this and replaces ontical clarity to cover over ontological depths.

4 The tension of existence

There are resources in Heidegger’s philosophy useful for those of us who would resist his compromised, cruel politics. There are also adjacent thinkers whose work is useful in this respect. At the other end of the spectrum of German political thinking stands the work of Eric Voegelin, who narrowly fled the Nazis, immigrated to the U.S.A., and spent much of his life outthinking the account of history on which he saw Nazism depends (Robinson 2019). Heidegger and Voegelin have a number of philosophical intuitions and commitments in common. They share suspicions about the role of science and its exaggeration into scientism, about ahistoricism, about reductionism, about the numinous breakthroughs made by Plato and Aristotle. Each is suspicious of modernity and the constellation of materialism and individualism that follows from it. Together they share a commitment to the value of the study of method and to philosophy as systematic inquiry. They both learn a lot from Schelling.

Their differences are significant too. When he reflects directly on Heidegger’s scholarship, peculiar rhetoric and “path” (2007, 490), Voegelin observes how Heidegger’s style helps “whip” his readers “up into a reality-withdrawing state of lin-



guistic delirium" (1990b, 9). The two of them are both stylists though. They use words in unusual or idiosyncratic ways. Voegelin labels Heidegger's mistake Gnosticism (Rickey 2002, 8 n. 5). In the history of religion, as it is conventionally understood, gnosticism refers to an understanding of the world as "an alien place created by" a lesser or "evil divinity, from which we must be saved and [thus] returned to our true spiritual home" (Embry and Hughes 2017, xxi). In the present study, we have seen Heidegger, like other Nazi apologists (Bambach 2014), make a formally similar promise to restore a people through the rearticulation of previously hidden knowledge "and the application of proper principles" (Embry and Hughes 2017, xxi). For Voegelin, less conventionally, gnosticism refers to a defective response to the way in which the empirical history of philosophy has derailed. It has gone off track in ways few notice, in ways still fewer attempt to correct. Heidegger says something similar both in *Being and Time* (1962, 59 and 262) and in the work on Nietzsche (1981, 194). For Heidegger as well as for Voegelin, therefore, later generations of practitioners are able to talk past each other without realizing it. Miscommunications multiply until only a hermeneutically sensitive few are able to identify the topology on which the discipline's very existence depends.

Voegelin's mature work begins in what we might call speculative or philosophical anthropology. He contends human life is lived between irreducible, ineliminable poles. Humans in general live lives caught in a tension of existence. He retrieves the symbol *metaxy* from Plato's *Symposium*, using it to stabilize his descriptions of human living in tension (Hughes 1993, 53). Voegelin's editors and translators tend to leave the word untranslated much as Heidegger's leave *Dasein* in the original German. The discovery of rational life both within and as tension has important consequences for the discovery and practice of philosophy and helps Voegelin detect the many times and many ways by which its history careens off course.

The inception of philosophy in particular occurs when classical authorities discover themselves, their lives, their contexts to be situated between mortality and immortality, finitude and infinity, and so on. Because these oppositional poles cannot be eliminated, and because they cooperate to fix human life in tension, Eugene Webb is correct when he writes about the meaning of philosophy for Voegelin: "philosophy is characterized by the realization that one does not actually possess transcendental truth" (1981, 286). A first generation of practitioners puzzle about a hole, respond to an unknown good, and do so under conditions of uncertainty. According to Voegelin himself in "Reason: The Classic Experience," the study of philosophy is not about word definitions but concrete experiences by which some people learn to use reason to resist "personal and social" disorders (1990a, 267). The emerging discipline of philosophy organizes itself around a shared vocabulary and symbol set only to discover down the road that the meaning of its founding terms is woefully underdetermined and subject to misinterpretation by subsequent generations.

Voegelin focuses on a logical error by which the dialectical, flexible between is overlooked. The error of derailment is what happens when authorities mistakenly hypostatizing the *metaxy*'s poles, rendering them determinate and fixed. It prompts the endless verbal squabbles among philosophers and deforms the empirical record of philosophy and theology into a dogmatomachy. Plato and Aristotle teach us pow-



erful lessons about reality and our place in tension with it, but Voegelin is thorough in his indictment of what happens after their breakthroughs. “The history of philosophy” after Plato and Aristotle’s inaugurating achievements “is in the largest part the history of its derailment” (Voegelin 1964, 277). We tend to squander our inheritance. Rather than view our lives as caught between poles of mortality and immortality or finitude and infinity, always both, never exclusively one, modern thinking derails when it attempts to eliminate the second term in each pair, compressing and congesting human life into a single explanatory category (McMahon 1999; Robinson 2019). Voegelin calls this an “egophanic revolt” because Descartes’s first-personal cogito is the prime example, as it is for Heidegger too, of philosophy gone haywire (Voegelin 1984, 43). Reality has become a spectator sport. The faulty individualism and separatism implied by the cogito can only serve to obscure philosophical study (McMahon 1999, 3). These defective assumptions introduce obstacles that must be overcome before it can begin.

Heidegger’s ontological difference comes to be, in Voegelin’s terminology, hypostatized. For Voegelin, when the gnostic Heidegger claims to discern ontological significance in the rise of the far right, he depends on secret knowledge belonging to the true people or *Volk*. The ontological difference’s previously inclusive poles, once open to the dynamic tensions of the same history it helps to organize, become the exclusive province of one particular *völkisch* order and its leader. In reply, it is not enough, as Richard Rorty once advised, “that we should hold our noses” to the most objectionable materials and “separate [Heidegger’s] life from [his] work” (1996, 248). The life and the work interpenetrate (Janicaud 1990). In fact, given how *Dasein* and its world are indissociable, it is no exaggeration to say that the life *is* the work. Thus, we are left with two opposed inferential appraisals, which I identify here but leave readers to select from among.

According to a first inference, like a lot of smart people, like a lot of people in general, Heidegger fails to live up to his philosophical ideals in a consistent way. He became a Nazi apologist and sidestepped an opportunity to use philosophy to resist the totalitarian disorder of his day. According to the second inference, he totally lived up to his ideals, Nazism chief among them. Charles Bambach makes a good case for the compatibility of these two inferences, recommending a reciprocal norm according to which “Heidegger’s texts present themselves as a call for action and that Heidegger’s own actions are rooted in the philosophical commitments expressed in these texts” (2003, 25). For Voegelin, if he were to address this question in particular, I think he would agree with Bambach that the two are compatible but not rationally compatible. They can work together, and did in the case of Heidegger’s actual biography, but they remain invalid: Heidegger’s call to action may be profoundly misguided and nevertheless follow from his efforts to live up to his own flawed standards. “Heidegger’s embrace of National Socialism and the manner in which he did so are far from being mere biographical curiosities without philosophical relevance,” writes Knowles (2019, 15). On the contrary, continues Knowles, both his acceptance and his means “are deeply rooted in a complex set of philosophical commitments” that emerge and overlap, “involving antisemitism, anti-modernism, and anti-liberalism, while revering the German language and landscape as sources for the spiritual renewal of the German people” (ibid.; see also Knowles 2015, 96).



Rickey connects “Voegelin’s depictions of gnosticism” to the “antinomian nominalism” of “Heidegger’s politics” (2002, 8 n. 5). Working against Heidegger’s politics by way of transcendental correction, dislodging philosophical commitments from extra-philosophical prejudices, this paper’s criticisms of Heidegger proceed more independently of biography and intellectual history. Still, I am not sure we have enough biographical details to disentangle such issues once and for all.

More importantly, given what Voegelin says, I am not sure it should be a primary focus for students and teachers of philosophy. For if we knew what Heidegger really thought about Nazism, if we had a comprehensive understanding of his understanding of politics, our conclusions would be limited to his biography. We would further hypostatize the metaxy and contribute to the derailment of philosophy. Philosophy’s job is to wonder about and say what is and not to hold court about who says what nor about who seems to believe what. In part I have urged us to return to the formulations of *Being and Time*, composed more than a decade before *Kristallnacht*, because they introduce and depend on formal distinctions lost in the early 1930s.

Prosecuting these incompatible statements, the aim of this paper has been to elaborate how Heidegger’s politics plainly fails to live up to his differential theory of being. He tried again and again to use the latter to prop up the former. I have demonstrated that his efforts are unconvincing given what he had by this time already written about the formal transcendence of Being, Dasein’s finitude, and the ontological difference. What would have happened if Heidegger had listened to his own words? Totalitarianism is less convincing when its ambitions and the means to win them are shown to be partial and contingent. Fascist politics depends on a strong leader to steward an otherwise weak people who have fallen into danger and disrepair. I can restore us, says the leader. I can make us great again. Authenticity may seem to be co-opted by such political rhetoric. Ontology may appear to be conscripted as just another SS tool.

But these claims are too quick. They injudiciously ignore the democratic ideals built into thinking. With respect to authenticity we all have our work to do, our issues and hang-ups. With respect to ontology, it depends on and secures the equality of entities. It helps to make totalitarianism implausible. Of course ontology is political insofar as it pertains to people, among other entities, and people are always political. But our leaders are not ontologically, formally distinct from us as Being is different from beings. On the contrary, leaders are persons, ideally subject to the laws they sign rather than exempt from them. The defective rhetoric that would lift a leader into a *Führer* ought to fail on a number of levels, anthropological, politically, historically, theologically, but also logically and, least of all, ontologically too. Philosophy until then is risky business.

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