
Review

Dangerous minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the return of the far right

Ronald Beiner,
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In this erudite, insightful, and short monograph, Ronald Beiner takes aim at (often French-inspired) intellectuals who believe that Nietzsche and Heidegger can and should be deployed to advance a progressive or radically democratic politics. Beiner believes that the two philosophers often serve as better resources for fascists. *Dangerous Minds* mounts its critique in the light of the recent rise of far-right movements, which often rely on Nietzsche and Heidegger for philosophic ballast.

Beiner believes that fascism is ‘still kicking around in the twenty-first century’ owing to its presumed capacity to address and alleviate the ‘soullessness of modernity’ (p. 10). A number of intellectuals, such as Freud and Weber, share with Nietzsche and Heidegger a concern with the modern disenchantment of the world. While Freud and Weber were pessimistic liberals, however, Nietzsche and Heidegger are described as hopeful and hubristic anti-liberals (pp. 116, 117). The danger inherent in Nietzsche and Heidegger is their longing for, and expectation of, cultural renewal in the face of modern disenchantment. This is to be achieved by unleashing the Dionysian life-affirming forces of heroic individuals for Nietzsche, and cultivating the homespun vitality and world-historic destiny of a people (*Volk*) for (the early) Heidegger.

Beiner’s acknowledgment of the ‘intellectual stature’ of Nietzsche and Heidegger as philosophers (p. 5) is undermined by suggestions that both acted insanely (pp. 63, 73, 74, 113) and may be dismissed on ethico-political grounds. We ought to accept that ‘Heidegger the human being, and hence Heidegger the philosopher, is tainted beyond repair’ (p. 66). Nietzsche is also past mending. The intellectual enterprise of creatively deploying the philosophy of a powerful thinker to purposes that that thinker might abjure – something Left Nietzscheans and Left Heideggerians typically do – ought to be terminated (p. 67).

I can agree that ‘anyone who reads Nietzsche without anxiety about his potential dangerousness is at some fundamental level failing to take Nietzsche seriously’ (p.



62). Nietzsche also made this claim: he announced himself to be dynamite. And one might say something similar about Heidegger. To make political hay out of cherry-picked quotations from these thinkers, while disregarding their censurable thought and action, is an intellectual failing. But is it ‘intolerable,’ as Beiner insists (p. 16)? And having acknowledged the dangerousness of a thinker, including sundry biographical sins and shortcomings, must one incessantly reiterate the charges? It is not clear what such polemical rehearsals achieve, apart from virtue-signaling.

A thinker with deeply mistaken or even disturbed writings may evidence profound insights. This is not simply to claim that even a broken clock is deadly accurate twice a day. Rather, the point is that the human condition is complex, compromised, often tragic, not easily set straight, and quite wonderful. Thinkers made of crooked timber may well reflect life’s crooked features. And, as Derrida suggests, the most useful reading of a profound thinker does not try to capture his putatively singular intentions. The most useful and deepest readings expose aporias and lacunas – intellectual sleights of hand that the thinker found necessary to corral a crooked and often paradoxical reality. More logocentric readings may not be nearly as fertile. To be sure, politics often demands that life be limned in black and white, with enduring allies and enemies. Political philosophy ought to distinguish shades of gray.

The reasons why Nietzsche and Heidegger are appealing to the far-right are rather clear. It is not difficult to damn both thinkers with their own words – often one does not even have to read between the lines. With this in mind, consider the following quotations: ‘The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below them’. ‘[A]ll Negroes stink’ and are ‘lazy, soft and dawdling’. They ‘have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling’, and are so talkative that ‘they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings’. Should the ignorance and hatefulness of the author of these words – a man who also considered Jews to be a people of cowards, liars and cheaters – be announced every time his work is examined or deployed? And should all efforts to utilize his thinking for democratic projects be terminated? I think not. And I would hold this claim even if these statements were made by Nietzsche or Heidegger. In fact, they came from the pen of Immanuel Kant, champion of the Enlightenment and of most democrats (Kant in Eze (1997, p. 63, from *Physical Geography*; p. 46, from ‘On the Different Races of Man’; pp. 55–56, from *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*).

Radical philosophers during the Third Reich, such as Heidegger, were hardly alone in hitching their wagons to the Nazi juggernaut. A good number of Kantians did the same. Hitler himself lauded Kant as one of Germany’s three greatest philosophers, along with Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. As Sluga (1993) observes, most of the 180 philosophers holding appointments at German universities in 1933 had previously kept their distance from politics, and only a few were members of the Nazi party. By 1940, seventy had joined the party, almost half of Germany’s



remaining philosophers. Among them were many neo-Kantians. The reasons for this are varied. Many shades of gray.

My point is not that we should ignore Nietzsche's recklessness, or excuse Heidegger's transgressions. Neither am I suggesting that Kant (or of any other great thinker) can be equated with Nietzsche or Heidegger simply because he, too, displays feet of clay. While we ought not to forget that Kant said some ignorant and hateful things and was endorsed by some ignorant and hateful people, neither should we forgo learning what we can from him. The same applies to Nietzsche and Heidegger, notwithstanding their social, political, and ethical crimes and misdemeanors.

It may be true that Heidegger 'gained not a particle of humility, compassion or wisdom from the Nazi catastrophe' (p. 120). But was Heidegger right in believing that the Holocaust might eventually pale in comparison to future developments that await humanity? To be sure, comparing anything to the Nazi genocide – a frightful evil of unfathomable proportions – is suspect. Still, the Holocaust did not alter the basic features of the human condition as it has been experienced over the eons. If certain developing technologies continue along their accelerated paths, the planet, the world, and the human condition might be fundamentally transformed.

While there are currently enough nuclear weapons to destroy civilization many times over, many experts consider the greatest existential threats to be technologies that are 'dual-use', which is to say, technologies that have many beneficial uses and, at the same time, great destructive potential. Among these are biotechnology, synthetic biology, nanotechnology, robot and cyborg technology, and artificial intelligence. Unlike nuclear weapons, the aforementioned technologies are growing in power at rapid if not exponential rates, are widely dispersed, and may become self-replicating. Whether the world they produce will be better or worse, or whether it will reflect our forgetfulness of Being as Heidegger claimed, is surely debatable. One thing is clear: it will be fundamentally transformed. Before we 'close up shop' (p. 67) on profound but dangerous thinkers, we should consider whether they might provide some traction as we lurch into the future.

Beiner might not wholly disagree. One of the chief virtues of *Dangerous Minds* is its caution to liberals who believe history is inevitably on their side. This 'delusion' (p. 123) leaves liberals liable to discount the recent rise of populism and neo-fascism as unworthy aberrations soon to be swept into the dustbin of history. The problem is that the 'dominant articulations' of contemporary liberal theory are 'variations on end-of-history philosophical complacency' (p. 127). Liberals like Rawls, Habermas and Rorty believe that a proceduralist morality has won the day, and that history and sociology have effectively refuted any grander aspirations. This leaves the world susceptible to all sorts of millenarian, populist, hypernationalist, reactionary, and fundamentalist fantasies.

Beiner recommends an antidote: 'We need to retain our commitment to an enterprise of grand theory that doesn't presume that we've arrived, necessarily, at



the final moral horizon and now just need to “tinker with the details” (p. 125). In the end, however, Beiner’s monograph follows the age-old tradition of ‘do as I say not as I do’ homilies. *Dangerous Minds* does not exemplify, or even describe, the ‘radical and comprehensive’ (p. 128) philosophical thought that it beckons.

Beiner agrees with Kant that nothing straight can be made from the crooked timber of humanity. We must admit that there is no guarantee – or even likelihood – that ‘the problem of the human condition admits of a solution’ (p. 134). Historically, those who believed in a solution typically proffered cures worse than the disease. But the greatest threat we face today may not be neo-fascism or millenarian fundamentalism. We might yet experience the end of human history, not owing to reactionary political movements but by way of progressive technology that promises to do what has never before been done – straighten out the crooked timber of humanity, or simply move beyond it.

The most dangerous minds, in other words, may not be of reckless philosophers. And they may not be those lodged in the meaty interiors of thick neo-fascist skulls. The most dangerous minds this planet produces may be of an artificial variety. Machine superintelligence is considered the greatest threat to the human species and its long-term survival by many of the greatest thinkers of our times, including the late Stephen Hawking. In light of this prospect, the grand theory we most desperately need may be one that grapples with the meaning of a vastly engineered world and increasingly engineered people. Zarathustra’s observation that humankind is not a destination but a bridge to something beyond, and Heidegger’s insights regarding the inexorable grip of technology, may be useful – even indispensable – starting points for such grand political theorizing.

References

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