



Book Reviews

Heidegger and the Place of Ethics

Michael Lewis

Continuum, 2005: xiv + 212pp.

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This dense and demanding book reads Heidegger's philosophical development in the light of Lacan (as interpreted by Žižek), Levinas and (least explicitly) Adorno. More precisely, it understands Heidegger as anticipating some of these later thinkers' most basic insights, even though it took him until the very end of his career to see the full implications of his own early work. Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy* acts as the pivot of this narrative, turning him away from his early, insufficiently self-questioning conception of the ontological difference, and towards something that even his most penetrating critics regard as essentially alien to his thought — the possibility of an ethics and even a politics of acknowledging singularity.

Lewis articulates his complex tale around Heidegger's rethinking of finitude. In *Being and Time*, that finitude is uniquely and fatefully human. The conditions of birth and death confer upon human beings the capacity for singularity — for living a life that is genuinely their own; but the ground of that capacity is our ability to become aware of our existence amidst beings as a whole, and its exercise accordingly amounts to a moment of negativity within that totality — to beings as a whole becoming apparent to themselves from a certain point within that whole at a certain moment in time. 'Being' (as opposed to beings) is thus the perspectival, finite openness of the whole to itself, an intelligibility or self-lightedness that occurs only to and as human beings. Being is therefore tethered to the singularity of human existence, and to its structures of intelligibility.

What Heidegger comes to realise is that this tethering takes for granted the ontological difference between Being and beings, rather than asking how this differentiation establishes and maintains itself. The sheer actuality of birth and death, without which there could be no moment of openness within beings, is (Lewis claims) passed over by Heidegger's exclusive emphasis upon *Dasein's* existential responses to those facts, and so upon the domain of (thrown and projected) possibility. He refuses to acknowledge the constitutive resistance posed to *Dasein's* drive towards intelligibility by its own death, even though the source of that resistance is also the condition for the possibility of what it resists — something vital to the realm of intelligibility that always evades its



grasp. At this stage, only the internal tensions of his account of conscience, in which Heidegger attributes ownership to an existential fact (of death) that cannot by his own lights be owned, show up the inadequacies of his approach.

In the 1930s, he rethinks his conception of finitude so that it applies primarily to beings as a whole. Here, the moment of negativity or death is no longer *Dasein*'s own, but that by which Being withdraws so as to give beings as a whole, and to give them as a certain kind of whole — as articulated in a series of specific, historically various totalities. What marks the constitutive withdrawal of Being is now not *Dasein* but 'the thing' — any being that excepts itself from the unitary defining trait of the specific totality in which it appears, and thereby undermines its self-presentation as a totality. In the specific era of technology, the thing is any singular, fragile being which technology is unable to make — anything that manifests an essential irreplaceability, a resistance to mechanical reproduction and substitutability.

It is through seeking out and acknowledging the thing wherever it manifests itself, and thus placing oneself at one point of the famous fourfold (of gods and mortals, world and earth), that human beings might realise what Lewis calls an ethics of singularity. Heidegger was long convinced that any such ethics was essentially opposed to the realm of politics, whose contemporary form he saw as a technologisation of human being-with — a self-grounding process of manipulating power flows with maximum efficiency; but Lewis claims to locate a final willingness to contemplate the possibility that politics might also acknowledge singularity. This is said to emerge in Heidegger's posthumously published *Der Spiegel* interview, in which he seems to envisage a political system that questions its own totalising tendencies, and thus accommodates not only the endangering dimension of political life, but also its potential for finding salvation in the very absoluteness of Being's withdrawal from beings in the age of technology.

Lewis does not claim to have definitively established the conjunction between Lacanian and Heideggerian thinking that this summary indicates, but rather to have prepared the ground for that task in future work — work which he tells us aims ultimately to bring Heideggerian phenomenology and Marxist materialism into conversation. However, there is much to admire in this preliminary interpretative exercise, despite its hypnotically slow prose rhythms, its increasing reliance upon jargon, and its puzzling deployment of unhelpful illustrations. Lewis is immersed in the primary literature, and able to coopt or deflect many familiar lines of criticism of it; he can debate matters of fine textual detail without losing his grip on their overarching argumentative purposes; and he repeatedly finds new angles of approach to even the most familiar Heideggerian claims and tropes.

My central reservation concerns his reading of *Being and Time*, on which the whole of his argument depends. He insists upon a peculiarly absolute and



mutually exclusive alignment of authenticity with death and inauthenticity with birth, which seems wholly alien to Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* as always already both thrown and projecting; authenticity may never be pure, but that is not because our natality pulls against our fatedness to death — both are surely complementary aspects of our mortality. He also gives insufficient weight to Heidegger's explicit recognition of the threat death poses to the intelligibility of our being, and so of Being. Division two of *Being and Time* begins with the acknowledgement that death is an impossible possibility; the challenge of how phenomenology might make good on that acknowledgement informs the rest of that division, and so the whole of the project of fundamental ontology. It is therefore hard to agree that *Being and Time* is hamstrung from the outset by its restriction of Being to the domain of human intelligibility. After all, Heidegger begins that book by emphasising that *Dasein*'s openness to beings, and so to Being, is essentially enigmatic.

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Bound by Recognition

Patchen Markell

Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2006, xii + 284pp.

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This is one case where a rather less emblematic title would be helpful to give the reader some clues, though it would necessarily be rather long and clumsy. Markell has an ambitious project, namely arguing (in subtly qualified ways) against the liberal paradigm and its relentless encouragement of 'exchanges' of recognition. According to Markell, these are modelled on an ancient paradigm of distributive justice but updated in contemporary theories of multiculturalism and contemporary practices of multicultural politics, including by extension, recent debates and issues in feminist politics and the politics of sexuality. The book is flawlessly written, not overlong, and transgressively engaged with intellectual figures and stock ideas that need just his kind of shake-up. The author's tenacious modesty in defending his downbeat conclusions is thoroughly admirable, and not very much the norm in the literatures through which the book's ideas are developed.

Many readers will enjoy Patchen's very delicate handling of Arendt, Taylor, Aristotle and Hegel, his up-to-date engagement with current scholarship, and