

# Heidegger's Ragnarok

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*Martin Heidegger: rustic sage? Ecofascist? Prophetic thinker? Con man? This essay will explore the psychological linkages between Heidegger's philosophical work, his involvement with National Socialism, and his apparent seizure by a massive collective surge of unconsciously reenacted Norse mythology, an event touched on in C.G. Jung's essay "Wotan." We will also look critically at implications of Heidegger's work for environmentalism, deep ecology, and ecopsychology.*

In my days as a group counselor I gradually developed what the felons I worked with ruefully nicknamed a bullshit detector.

Sometimes I saw the lies in body language: the glance that ducked a question, or the too-straight look into my eyes; the too-tidy excuse, or the start or stilling of a twitching foot or eyebrow. The long pause signaling impromptu inner invention. Often I saw nothing, but always I felt a sudden urge to frown. *He's lying*, said my own body, and in time I came to trust this.

Eventually I learned that the lie detector sprang to life when I read certain writers. The more I read, the clearer grew the reasons behind my distrust. I don't trust Deepak Chopra because he writes like wants to sell me something, a suave mass marketer with the bald-faced nerve to put "success" and "spiritual" in the same book title. *Just what is quantum about "quantum healing"?* I distrusted Carlos Castaneda right from the start, and even more when I learned of his habit of dodging venues where he might be questioned. *"A path with a heart"—and a lot of improvisation.* I suppose it's obvious why I'm not in politics. The clamor of constant detection would be unbearable.

Sometimes the detector prods me with selective warnings about specific writings, such as Gurdjieff's account of the Sarmoung Brotherhood, Ken Wilber's remarks about Jung, whom he studied only to refute, and Derrida's obsession with breaking things apart, like a boy popping all the balloons at his least-favorite cousin's birthday party. *Hostility cloaked as profundity.*

At other times a louder somatic beep from the detector announces: *Bad heart, this one.* Like Ayn Rand, who appointed herself the messiah of Unregulated Capitalism, meddled in the lives of her followers, and ended her life as she deserved, a disgruntled nobody collecting stamps. All this shows in her writing as a stale mixture of priapic heroism and underlying coldness. In interviews her paranoid glance and stiffened face dart and retreat behind what I always imagine to be a sour perfume concocted from stale cat urine.

The detector never goes off simply because I disagree with what's being spoken or written. It does not seem to care about that, any more than it cared whether men in my groups lied to me with factual, colorful, or even beautiful statements. Sartre won't trigger it, for example, even

though I dislike his turgid philosophical writing and disagree with much of his dualistic thought. The detector seems to be tuned, not to content, but to intent.

And so we come to Heidegger. What are we to make of a writer who castigates the Western tradition for its blindness to being and never provides an account of being himself? Did he ever intend to?

I was first put on the alert about Heidegger's work by the generality of the praises sung about it. "Opened new vistas of thought." "Transformed philosophy forever." "Penetrating new insights." How, why, and where? Nobody could be specific about what was so new, transformative, or penetrating.

So I decided to reread Heidegger—*Being and Time* and his later writings—to give them a try without recourse to any of the literature critical of his work until after I had formed my own impressions.

After summarizing that work, I will explore its connections to events in Heidegger's life, including his Nazi days, and from there consider a depth-psychological thesis: that Heidegger lived and wrote as a man caught in a mythology much larger than himself. (Readers not in need of the summary may skip down to ["The Heidegger Maneuver."](#))

### **An Eagle's Eye View of Being and Time**

Heidegger is heavy going. Those who defend him attribute his incomprehensibility to that of a great pioneer coining a new vocabulary as he hacks his way through the bush. Husserl, who had been his mentor, didn't think so. After reading *Being and Time* (published 1927), a book he had pulled strings to get printed, Husserl stated in a letter to philosopher Alexander Pfänder written January 6, 1931 that

I came to the distressing result that I cannot do anything with this Heideggerian profundity, with its ingenious unscientific rigor; that Heidegger's open and concealed critique rests upon crude misunderstandings; that he is caught up in the construction of a system of philosophy of precisely that type that I have constantly reckoned as the task of my life to make impossible once and for all.

Karl Jaspers referred to *Being and Time* as "incomprehensible." Hans Barth accused Heidegger of "feigning depths," and Theodor Adorno of promulgating a "jargon of authenticity." Karl-Otto Apel said Heidegger suffered from a "forgetting of reason." Jung put it like this in a letter written in 1943:

I regard all speculations that exceed our capacities as sterile griping and at the same time a pretext for covering up one's own infertility. This kind of criticism leads only to the mastery of complicated banalities, the Platonic exemplar of which is embodied for me in the philosopher Heidegger.

Nevertheless, the book opens with an intriguing question: What is the meaning of Being? Not this being or these beings, but Being itself?

Since Plato and Aristotle (Heidegger claims), philosophic thought has forgotten Being with a capital B, burying it in “substance metaphysics” analyses of objects, essences, and categories, or indulging in an “ontotheology” of reducing everything to one foundation (water, fire, atoms, etc.) while forsaking what makes objects, essences, categories, and foundations possible to begin with. This “what” cannot be another entity or cause, for that would fail to answer what made it a being. We need to look again at what seems obvious, he tells us throughout his big book and for the rest of his career, to recover a deep understanding of everything in terms of modes of Being.

Here, then, is Heidegger’s first stratagem: to seem radical by accusing philosophy of not doing its real job and proposing to undertake that job himself, or at least to get it started in anticipation of Thinkers Who Are to Come Later.

How? Not with an Ayn Randian dumping of everyone but Aristotle overboard. Heidegger is cunning, not crazy. With the help of an idiosyncratic new vocabulary and a lot of Interpretation (ontological analysis: analysis of the nature or structure of existence), he will go forth by unpacking *Dasein* (literally “there-being,” colloquially “everyday existence”), a familiar German term he redefines to avoid referring to personhood as consciousness, self, subject, or human because none of those static categories do justice to how we actually live. Today we would say they are dualistic because they imply either an interiority separate from the world or a view of life entirely from the outside, as in mainstream biology or “more rigorous than thou” research psychology. They also reify experience into the substances of which it is supposedly composed.

All these familiar categorizations assume the reverse of what is true: that existence, *Dasein*, *founds* consciousness, subjectivity, perception, intentionality, and interiority, not the reverse. “The existential nature of man is the reason why man can represent beings as such, and why he can be conscious of them. All consciousness presupposes ... existence as the *essentia* of man.” “*Dasein* is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.”

*Dasein* can, if it wishes, interpret its nature as rational, biological, historical, psychodynamic, animalistic, spiritual, or apple pie, but it is not essentially any of them. If anything it is the stand it takes toward them and toward itself. It is always on the way, partial, fragmentary, virtual, unsettled, *unheimlich* (uncanny, unsettled), an opening in which it and other beings can express themselves and their absences. *Dasein* is who (not what) can remain involved beyond itself. Where phenomenology studies how beings appear to consciousness, Heidegger focuses on what beings are before they appear to our examinations.

*Dasein* also wonders about its own being. It wonders because, as a specific manifestation of being (“ontic”), it lies close to us, but existentially (ontologically) it hovers far from ordinary awareness. My essence is no thing close by, but a unique existence, an everyday performative “to be.” Think of it as a sense of ever-moving personhood tethered to its surroundings and to other *Daseins* instead of standing entirely apart from them.

What characterizes Dasein? The existential “facticity,” registered by moods like angst and boredom, of being thrown into and limited by specific historical and environment conditions (not for Heidegger Sartre’s “condemned to be free”), projection of itself into future possibilities of being (and the certainty of eventual nonbeing), and, as for the present, self-interpretation of its own existence founded ultimately in “care” (*sorge*) about its circumstances, a quality of “average everydayness,” various moods (especially anxiety), and a choice of authenticity or inauthenticity. Dasein’s sense of itself is *existentiell* (first person), but its fundamental ontological qualities include existentiality, facticity, and being-fallen into world involvements.

Preceding the personality traits and types and dynamics it makes possible, Dasein is a stab at the future, a set of maybes framed by what-have-beens. Tangibly speaking, Dasein is nothing at all, an opening in which other beings show themselves, a forward-gazing performance made of existence that never entirely progresses or self-realizes because it’s not a thing that develops, but a mode of comportment, a “thrown projection” (interesting choice of words) toward possibilities of being, toward itself.

How then do Dasein, ego, body, perception, intentionality, consciousness, sociality, and world hold together in a unity? Through the ontological structure of Dasein’s inherent being-in-the-world. We don’t just take up space in the world, we live here as a “being-in”: not the spatial “in” of a nail in a plank, but involved in the world, permanently intertwined and occupied with it even when it feels distant or strange. Definite ways of “being-in” include producing, attending to, dwelling, tarrying, making use, giving, letting go, accomplishing, interrogating, discussing: in other words, living and acting. Dasein itself gives the world its existential “worldliness.”

Heidegger does not deny consciousness, ego, perception, intention, or belief, but he does deny their primacy. They do not constitute being-in-the-world, they are derived from it.

That being-in-the-world precedes and grounds reflection and analysis remains one of Heidegger’s most important insights. Our very sense of individuality arises from our being-in-the-world (which includes being-with-others) and not the reverse, as in philosophies and psychologies that seek to explain how sociality develops from individuality. For Heidegger, I come out of We.

Being-in-the-world organizes and presents itself in time, the horizon of Being, but not merely in clock time. Dasein “temporalizes” by stretching itself from and gathering up the past (“historicity”) and its attunements (things that matter to us) into which Dasein was thrown toward the “futural” into which it is also thrown as an always-on-the-way-to that never really arrives.

Our daily time sense arises from this temporality, as does the reconciliation of Dasein’s apparent persistence with its change and flow as the unfurling of time emanates from, and happens to, Dasein itself. This is why Heidegger argues that although things undergo change, only Dasein temporalizes. The frequent sentiment “I need to make more time,” and the speed with which time spent having fun passes, both demonstrate what we might rather dualistically think of as the subjective nature of time.

“The Being of Dasein finds its meaning in temporality,” a time sense with existential qualities like datability, significance, extendedness, and publicness. Pressing ahead into future, the character of having been (past), and making-present in-order-to constitute through “openings” and “clearings” the three “ecstasies” of temporality. From page 437 of *Being and Time*:

Only an entity which, in its Being, is essentially futural so that it is free for its death and can let itself be thrown back upon its factual “there” by shattering itself against death—that is to say, only an entity which, as futural, is equiprimordially in the process of having-been, 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.’ Only authentic temporality which is at the same time finite, makes possible something like fate—that is to say, authentic historicality.

If this sounds heroic, Heidegger refers on the same page, in the context of mining the past for present use, to “the possibility that Dasein may choose its hero,” a possibility grounded in anticipatory resoluteness.

In “Heidegger and Deep Ecology,” Michael Zimmerman writes a lucid description that brings together Being and temporality:

“Being” names the self-manifesting or presencing (*Anwesen*) by virtue of which an entity reveals itself as such. For such presencing to occur, Heidegger postulated that there must be an “absencing,” “clearing,” or “opening,” which he called time or temporality. Neither being nor time “are” entities; instead, they are ontologically potent “nothingness”: the conditions necessary for entities “to be” in the sense of becoming manifest.

In all this Dasein can decide whether to be neutral (“average everydayness”), authentic, or inauthentic: seize the possibilities open to it or neglect them, probe its own existence deeply (an existentiell understanding) or live unreflectively, forget its inherited past or take it up affirmatively (“repetition” and “primordial historizing”), hear or ignore the call of existential conscience summoning it back to itself, understand by anticipating or merely wait. In short, Dasein can be consumed by beings—through an ontological “fallenness” that manifests ontically as small talk, technological distraction, or conformism—or remain tuned into Being. To start with conformism is inevitable because Dasein finds itself immersed in “the One” (also translated “the They”), *das Man*, the true subject: the unreflective crowd; but, although always part of the pack, Dasein can heed the personal call of conscience—for Heidegger there is no public conscience—and differentiate beyond the norm.

To be authentic, then, is to grasp one’s full “mineness” and inevitable existential guilt—the guilt of not fulfilling all possibilities and of never being whole—while facing events with open “Resoluteness” (*Entschlossenheit*), a forerunning engagement ultimately pointed at “being-toward-death,” an existential deeper than literal demise. Anticipatory Resoluteness—being towards one’s distinctive potentiality-for-Being—turns Dasein’s face forward: “The primary meaning of existentiality is the future.”

“The primordial unity of the structure of care lies in temporality.” With their linkage to past, present, and future, guilt, conscience, and death in turn constitute the temporal dynamism of

Care, the totality of Dasein's being: "care" in the sense of worry and concern. Existence, Facticity, and Falling erect a Care-structure disclosed by understanding, mood, and authenticity or its lack.

Care means that the things of the world are at our disposal as either present-at-hand (also "occurrent": simply existing) or, at a deeper level, ready-to-hand (available for use). In sharp contrast to philosophies and psychologies that theorize about how we assemble perceptions to make an object, or about how we go from belief or supposition to action, Heidegger insists on our involvement with things before we even thematize (foreground) them. Our skills and practices, not our beliefs and attitudes, teach us about the world and about ourselves. I hammer, therefore I am.

The ready-to-handedness of things with significance—things we can use and that belong in a system of relations with other things—is one way the world reveals its Being to us. Staring at them in an effort to reach naked perception must remain a secondary procedure; we encounter them more genuinely and immediately by taking action with them ("circumspection"). You don't really notice that hammer you swing until it breaks or you can't find it.

The broken or missing item gives us the pause we need to activate conscious intentionality and see the item's "equipmental" relations with other things: nails, workshop, wood, and, at the center, the purpose we intend (the "for-the-sake-of-which"); "and with all this totality...the world announces itself." "...Only by the circumspection with which one takes account of things in farming, is the south wind discovered in its Being."

Although Heidegger spends more time on relations with tools than on relationships with humans, he does name Dasein's posture toward other Daseins ("being-with") as Solicitude as guided by Considerateness and Forbearance (or, less authentically, by Indifference and Inconsiderateness). A Dasein capable of Resoluteness thereby equips itself to relate authentically to others. Telling, the existential foundation of language, includes Harkening and Keeping Silent. Heidegger does not mean togetherness as a pooling of subjectivities, but as a pregiven "being-with" or "Dasein-with" expressed in concrete coping actions, a togetherness into which we are all born and that constitutes a basic structure of our existence even when we are not around other people.

Heidegger does not forget spacial relations. The spatiality of Dasein's Being-in or -with shows up as De-severance (when I look at something distant that matters to me, the distance seems to vanish) and Directionality (what I want is over that way). Dasein discovers space "circumspectively" by acting toward what it wants to secure. Dasein can also move things around and "make room" for them.

Angst holds a special place in Heidegger's thought because it reminds us of what Being ultimately is: not merely what presents itself, but what is absent; not only what things are, but what things are not; at bottom, nothingness. We can feel this in choices not taken, possibilities left untended, fallenness, loss, the uncertainty of knowledge unmoored from absolutes like God, Reason, or matter (hence the importance of interpretation), and, ultimately, death. Out of nothingness surface expressions of Being through beings, but always they carry the unmeasurable, unspeakable nothingness of their origin.

Waiting for sparkles of heroic greatness and vision, unmoored and without a true home (*unheimlich*), with lonely, anxious, guilty Dasein facing the circle of its mortality and ultimate nothingness in a world of Being that veils and unveils itself in an interplay known as Time: this is Heidegger's view of how things stand for us, at least in *Being and Time*.

From Dasein, which always possesses some pre-conceptual understanding of Being, Heidegger's analysis would move (he wrote) to Being in general. But of the three projected parts of the *Being and Time* project, only the first was ever published.

### **Later Work: For Those Who Are to Come**

When Heidegger published *Being and Time* in 1927, the intelligentsia greeted it as profound, if unreadable, and awaited his next revelation.

Heidegger gave the deliberately sarcastic title *Contributions to Philosophy* to what would be a posthumously published (1989) collection of private musings composed from 1936 to 1938. The contempt toward colleagues and students so evident in his letters to Karl Jaspers runs through this book; in one passage, for example, Heidegger writes about "the people of today, who are scarcely worth mentioning as one turns away from them."

The *Contributions* further develop ideas with which Heidegger labored for the rest of his academic career. Picking up on the theme of two great beginnings—the unveiling of Being in pre-Socratic thought, and a second unveiling announced by Heidegger's work but not yet arrived to break philosophy's entrancement by the metaphysics of determinate being—he gathers his musings into six joinings: Echo (the subtle call of shy Being in an age of nihilistic "progress"), Playing Forth (of the first beginning in anticipation of the second), Leap (from one beginning to the other over the abyss), Grounding (of truth via hyphenated Da-*Sein*), the Ones to Come (the thinkers and poets of Being foreseen by Nietzsche and Hölderlin), and the Last God they await as a new source of meaning rooted in Being. The passage of this "god"—highest principle of action, source of sacred experience—calls for a human response: the full realization of the Second Beginning, in part through preparation via "inceptual thinking" that lets Being itself think through Dasein's continual openness and questioning.

In *Contributions* the emphasis is on *Beyng* (spelled the archaic way) showing up in *Da-sein*'s clearing as manifesting Event or Happening (*Ereignis*) even while remaining sheltered and withdrawn: event as ap-propiation, en-counter, un-settling, de-cision, simplicity, uniqueness, solitude, thought. For reasons to become evident later, the mood of heroic action in *Being and Time* has retreated, replaced by a no less heroic waiting for what the future will bring:

...Beings are brought into their *constancy* through the *downgoing* of those who ground the truth of *beyng*. *Beyng* itself requires this. It needs those who go down and has already *appropriated* them, assigned them to itself, wherever things appear. That is the essential occurrence of *beyng* itself; we call this essential occurrence the *event*. Measureless is the richness of the turning relation of *beyng* into the *Da-sein* it appropriates, incalculable the fullness of the appropriation."

—page 8 of the Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu translation.

Abstract and inflated, the style throughout *Contributions* holds itself aloof from concrete examples or applications. Outwardly in professional crisis, Heidegger has been seized inwardly by his god, and like every possessed prophet, he finds it impossible to say clearly what he means. Page 17: “At the ‘disposal of the gods’ means to stand far away and outside—i.e., outside the common way of understanding and interpreting ‘beings’—and to belong to the most distant ones, those to whom the absconding of the gods in the gods’ farthest withdrawal is what is closest.” The withdrawal of the gods, as prophesied by Nietzsche and Hölderlin, will draw us closer to Beyng. Same page: “People today, who are hardly worth the mention...are indeed excluded from the knowledge of the way of thought....”

Poor, misunderstood, unappreciated Beyng! Having emerged briefly in ancient Greece, only to be taken for tangible basement material, Beyng found itself reduced to being caused by “a highest instance of their essence” in the Middle Ages, and to presence at hand as objects in Modernity. It needs us, just as we need it (p. 198), but it withdraws from our attempts to pin it down, hiding because those who seek to grasp it miss “a call destining them to history” (p. 42). Only a few among the poets, thinkers, and heroes discern its plaintive summons as they wait for their Da-sein, perched precariously between the initial advent and the god’s withdrawal, to “leap” beyond everything conventional, get its act together, and open a space. For humans should serve as stewards of the truth of Beyng as care grounded in Da-sein.

Who are those who, like Heidegger, wait alone for further revelation?

Those strangers alike in heart, equally decided for the bestowal and refusal that have been assigned to them. The ones who bear the staff of the truth of beyng, the truth in which beings are built up to the dominance of the simple essence of every single thing and breath. The stillest witnesses to the stillest stillness in which an imperceptible impetus turns truth out of the confusion of all calculatively correct findings and back into its essence, such that there is kept concealed what is most concealed, viz., the trembling of the passing by of the decision about the gods, the essential occurrence of beyng (page 313).

Commentators have sometimes described Heidegger’s Beyng as the truth of things, or what makes beings be, or an all-permeating beingness, but he says such misunderstanding “degrades” Beyng. “...The essence of beyng essentially occurs in the appropriation of de-cision.” Held by the “few single ones” who use art, poetry, thought, deed, and sacrifice to ground Beyng, plus “those numerous affiliated ones” who carry out “the laws of the re-creation of beings,” Being shows up as event, but only if sheltered these cultured activities as offered and grounded by Da-sein. We think we wait for the last god, but it waits for us to give it “Telling” that avoids all objectification.

How to find beyng? Must we light a fire in order to find the fire, or must we not rather reconcile ourselves to *watching over the night* first? Thereby the false days of everydayness might be resisted. The most false of those days are the ones that profess to know and to possess even the night when they illumine and thus eliminate it with their borrowed light (page 383).



Yet being resounds through the madness of our age at the moment when most suppressed. Life itself is a study in “errancy,” the perpetual unveiling and withdraw of being.

Having withdrawn from politics, Heidegger continued to write about freedom, not as “freedom from,” but as “letting things be,” as “Ek-sistence” rooted in the truth of freedom as disclosure of “beings as such.” From the “Letter on Humanism,” 1947:

...If a man is to find his way once again into the nearness of Being he must first learn to exist in the nameless. In the same way he must recognize the seductions of the public realm as well as the impotence of the private. Before he speaks man must first let himself be claimed again by Being, taking the risk that under this claim he will seldom have much to say. Only thus will the pricelessness of its essence be once more bestowed upon the word, and upon man a home for dwelling in the truth of Being.

He writes more openly now about sacred experience:

But the holy, which alone is the essential sphere of divinity, which in turn alone affords a dimension for the gods and for God, comes to radiate only when Being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation has been illuminated and is experienced in its truth. Only thus does the overcoming of homelessness begin from a Being, a homelessness in which not only man but the essence of man stumbles aimlessly about.

“Everything depends upon this alone,” he adds, “that the truth of Being come to language and that thinking attain to this language.”

In 1950 and again in 1960, Heidegger published “The Origin of the Work of Art,” an essay that explored art as an agent of Being. Translating the Greek word *aletheia* (“truth,” “sincerity,” “evident”) as “unconcealment,” he makes an analysis of a peasant’s shoes painted by Van Gogh. For Heidegger this work exhibits the Being of a being, in this case shoes, with their worn inside signifying a toilsome tread, their dampness speaking of the soil through which they walked, all of it redolent of the silent call of the earth:

This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death...Van Gogh’s painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth. This being emerges into the unconcealment of its Being.

Unfortunately for his analysis, the shoes were not owned by a toiling peasant. According to an art student in Paris, Van Gogh bought them at a flea market because he wanted to paint them. However, they still looked too new, so he walked around in the rain in them, then painted them. This error of Heidegger’s takes on a mythic relevance when we reflect on the story of how, interrupted in his work, Prometheus left his workshop while in the middle of fashioning the goddess Aletheia, whereupon Trickery entered and made a replica of her, perfect in every detail, except one: Trickery ran out of clay, so the replica had no feet and could not walk.

Nevertheless, Heidegger is entering what some believe to be his ecological phase. In “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1951) he begins to sound like an environmentalist:

To save means to set something free into its own essence. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from boundless spoliation.

Dwelling on earth, he writes, should found how we build: “building belongs to dwelling.” Our very Being, he argues, rests in how we cultivate and safeguard the earth, protect it from exploitation, defend it from objectification. Although previous philosophers ignored the “thinghood” of things independent of humans (as he had in *Being and Time*), we can now understand with “meditative thinking” that things possess a fourfold nature of earth, sky, divine, and mortal that humans may tend through thought and language.

Heidegger had long been aware of the rising power of technology to heal or destroy, but instead of taking up an either/or position, he diagnoses technology as a manifestation of Being that, because treated without deep reflection, hardens into a mechanistic and inherently expansionist “enframing” (*Gestell*) that results in heaps of cargo, commodities, and stockpiles (“standing reserve”). Backed by the Con-struct (naked power of technology), mass democracy and its machines, polls, buses, planes, statistics, files, and grids have imprisoned us all in a dictatorship of the rootless crowd. But this is not recent: it began with the post-Greek withdrawal of Being and gained momentum with the drive of science toward “deworlding,” a decontextualization and objectification that leveled the things around us, ourselves, each other, and even the world itself, reducing all from *Ereignisse* (now enlarged to mean Being manifestations that seize and claim us) to lifeless spectacles. This is a revelation of Being we may not survive.

Although the technological dizziness of our epoch is beyond human control, we remain the “shepherds of Being.” Being needs us to come to full presence. But it can only if we open ourselves to it, open ourselves to the meaning of technology, grow still, and think. Philosophy has succumbed to nihilism and dissolved into the sciences, cybernetics in particular, and so can offer us nothing, but thinking on Being—now turned against itself in forgetfulness—still offers itself as the most authentic form of action. For the saving power, like Grace, hides in the danger itself. The task of our time is to dwell, think, be open, and wait for that power to be revealed.

The waiting is not passive, however. It partakes of “releasement” (*Gelassenheit*), a serene letting-be that allows us to use our devices without assimilating their nihilistic premises. In this we are aided by dwelling in the “fourfold” as Being reveals itself once again, as it does afresh in every epoch. “Philosophy will not be able to bring about a direct change of the present state of the world,” Heidegger said in the *Spiegel* interview of 1966:

This is true not only of philosophy but of all merely human meditations and endeavors. Only a god can still save us. I think the only possibility of salvation left to us is to prepare readiness, through thinking and poetry, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god during the decline; so that we do not, simply put, die meaningless deaths, but that when we decline, we decline in the face of the absent god.

In “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” (1969), Heidegger asked: should we replace “being and time” with “clearing and presence”?

Goethe notes, “Look for nothing behind phenomena: they themselves are what is to be learned.” This means the phenomenon itself, in the present case the clearing, sets us the task of learning from it while questioning it, that is, of letting it say something to us.

For the late Heidegger, this *aletheia*, truth, clearing, openness is not merely the means to reveal Being: it is Being as primal phenomenon, the ontological ground from which all else arises and to which all returns.

### **The Heidegger Maneuver**

Heidegger believed that every significant philosopher centered on a single important thought. Undefined Being manifesting and withdrawing in a weaving of temporality as evident to Dasein: this, he suggests in *Contributions*, was his own one thought. Some have called it revolutionary.

Heidegger’s frequent disparagements of philosophers notwithstanding, most of them have given us much more than one thought, however central. What would you do, though, if you considered yourself a philosopher, by self-definition and profession, but found yourself armed with only a single thought or a single question, in this case about the meaning of Being?

If you were as ambitious as Heidegger’s letters suggest he was, you might resort to filling out your thought by appropriating the work of other philosophers, occasionally giving them credit but changing their terminology to pass it off as your own. You might then equip the results with an obscure, highly abstract, and deliberately mystical vocabulary by translating everyday things and events into supposed ontologies, coming up with your own specialized meanings for everyday words (“dasein,” “equipment,” “care,” etc.), going back over old ground when you ran out of explanations (because the philosopher’s job is to question what seems familiar), inflating it all with blasts of linguistic wind, and avoiding offering any insights or results because it’s all supposedly preliminary and undefinable anyhow. To keep the balloon aloft you would also minimize criticism and confrontation by carefully stage-managing the few interviews you did permit while suggesting that larger and greater explorations would be forthcoming.

To explore this, let’s start with where Heidegger got some of his key ideas. Granted that every thinker stands on the shoulders of the giants behind him, as Sir Isaac Newton humbly pointed out, it is one thing to build on prior work, but quite another to pilfer it like a stolen car and repaint it to evade recognition:

- “What is being?”: Parmenides, Aristotle, the pre-Socratics, the neo-Scholastics, Franz Brentano (who suggested it to Heidegger), et al. Heidegger acknowledged this as his starting point.
- “Have you ever noticed how *being* beings are?”: Goethe.
- The undefinability of being: Pascal, in his *Pensees*.

- Being as irreducible to beings: Aristotle, who pointed out the difference between being healthy and health itself (*Metaphysics*), Duns Scotus, and Kant.
- Being is unified only in individual existence: Francisco Suarez.
- “Philosophy of Existence” (*Existentialphilosophie*): Jaspers, following Kierkegaard.
- Dasein’s restlessness, and its becoming a question to itself: St. Augustine.
- Primal structures that organize what we sense: Kant.
- The need to study pre-reflective experience to understand the wholeness of life: Dilthey.
- Being opens a horizon of temporality: similar to an activity of Kant’s transcendental imagination. Also, Husserl.
- Our being is a kind of becoming: Aristotle, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Dilthey (who called it a “being-in-motion”), Taoism.
- The significance of subjectively sensed time to becoming: Husserl, Bergson.
- The ego as essentially self-positing rather than leaning on something outside: Fichte.
- Psychic life irreducible to subjectivity: Nietzsche, Dilthey, Husserl.
- Being-with-others: Dilthey, Kierkegaard, Husserl.
- Personal life grounded in its history: Dilthey, Husserl (“sedimentation”).
- The clearing: Goethe’s exact sensorial imagination, Husserl’s phenomenological horizon.
- Time as the pre-intentional and most fundamental structure of consciousness: Husserl.
- The three ecstasies of time: Husserl’s protention, retention, and primal intention ontologized.
- Being revealing itself by unconcealing itself, presenting itself: Aristotle, Husserl.
- Part of Being unearthed remains “earthed” in self-concealment: similar idea in Husserl, who wrote that some aspects of things remain hidden (“horizontal intentionality”).
- Things of the world get to us through our affects: Kierkegaard, Husserl.
- The They: Husserl, for whom the anonymous community and its traditions condition transcendental intersubjectivity.
- The idea of examining everyday structures for their essential features: Husserl ontologized.
- Examining how we actually use objects and for what rather than how we define them: Husserl.
- Sticking with the things themselves without theorizing: Goethe, Husserl, Zen.
- “We shall call the very Being to which Dasein can relate in one way or another, and somehow always does relate, Existenz”: Kierkegaard, Jaspers.
- Life is always particular, “thisly,” irreducible to categories like genus or species: Duns Scotus.
- Existence precedes essence: Averroes (Ibn Rushd), Mulla Sadra.
- Existence as an expression of being, with existences (beings) as no-things filling out essences: Thomas Aquinas.
- Because being is not a thing, being and nothing are the same: Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. For Hegel, pure being by itself is not possible, but only a unity of being and non-being, i.e., becoming.
- Nothingness as ultimate ground: Schelling.
- Nothingness not just as absence but privation: Plato (*Sophist*).
- The difference between knowing-that and knowing-how: Plato, Aristotle (combining *phronesis* with *energeia*), John Dewey.

- Skill as unconscious knowhow rather than conscious mental state: Dewey, Nietzsche.
- The interruption of habit provoking conscious thought and examination: Dewey.
- Repetition of past and tradition consciously taken up: Dilthey, and a reworking of Nietzsche's eternal return.
- Consciousness pointed to world: Husserl's intentionality ontologized.
- The idea that we can dimly sense something but fail to explain it: Socrates, Kierkegaard.
- All understanding is mediated by interpretation: Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and, Ricoeur has argued, Husserl (implied by the discussion of "explication" in the fourth and fifth *Cartesian Meditations*).
- A sense of individuality that transcends subject-object dualism: Hegel (who used the word *dasein*, as did Christian Wolff in contrast to *wasein*, the essence or "what it is"), Husserl, Kierkegaard, others.
- Thinghood combines a "fourfold" of earth, sky, mortal, and divine: Hölderlin.
- The flight of the gods, the last god: Hölderlin.
- Authentic vs. inauthentic: Brentano via Husserl; also, Kierkegaard.
- *Der Augenblick* (moment of transformation) that crystallizes resolution: Nietzsche, who also wrote about fate and destiny, and Martin Luther.
- Resolution as an expression of self-will: Nietzsche.
- Ready-to-hand versus present-at-hand: a distinction made with other terms by Husserl, who wrote in notes read by Heidegger about a pre-reflective mode of being in the world.
- Comportment: stripped-down counterpart to Husserl's version of intentionality. Heidegger knew of Husserl's unpublished work on embodied, pre-theoretical comportment.
- Releasement: Meister Eckhart.
- *Ereignis* as movement and fulfillment of Being: from Aristotle's *kinesis*.
- "Only a god can save us": echo of Martin Luther, who preached that only an irruption of the divine into the world of lies could redeem us from corruption.
- We cannot have God, we seek God: Luther.
- Redemption from a god can come at any moment, so we should wait for it without expectation: the *parousia* (arrival) preached by St. Paul.
- The central significance of care: St. Augustine.

Here is a partial list of what Heidegger obtained and reworked just from Kierkegaard:

- Unlike rocks or other things, human beings exist and take a stand toward our existence.
- Our existence enacts a doubling, a "coming into existence within its own coming into existence," a relation that relates itself to itself. Although part of nature and therefore limited by it, we are aware of it and of our possibilities.
- The self is inherently grounded in and related to things outside itself, including other selves, and fundamentally temporal, its becoming oriented to the future.
- The self is unique and defines itself by the stand it takes toward its own existence.
- We are what we become, what possibilities we tend and decisions we make. Never finished, never complete.
- The sudden upwelling of Being: "When around one everything has become silent, solemn as a clear, starlit night, when the soul comes to be alone in the whole world, then before

one there appears, not an extraordinary human being, but the eternal power itself, then the heavens seem to open, and the I chooses itself or, more correctly, receives itself.”—  
*Either/Or*

- Our time is one in which humans have forgotten how to exist, what it is to exist.
- We face oncoming, devastating, society-corrupting nihilism.
- The existential significance of care, guilt, and conscience as call to authentic being.
- Angst signals nothingness; negation belongs to the structure of human existence.
- Guilt and despair are built into our existence, however much we try to repress them. Recognizing them demonstrates how a negative can nourish the positive goal of individuality.
- Boredom signals a sense of emptiness: “Boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence; its dizziness is infinite, like that which comes from looking down into a bottomless abyss.”—*Either/Or*
- Nothingness and “negative freedom” from cultural conditioning; an absolute, infinite negativity on display in states like irony.
- Falling: translated from Kierkegaard’s notion of sin.
- The need to make sense of our existence as a whole (but for Heidegger toward death rather than God).
- The essence of personhood is existence based on lived experience irreducible to substance.
- Losing oneself in “the Others”. Heidegger also uses Kierkegaard’s terms “publicness” and “leveling.”
- Authenticity as a basic striving.
- The deaths of others felt as more real than our own. The fear of death makes us transparent to ourselves, so we hide from it.
- Historicity: humans are dignified in that we can gain a history, making it our own and giving it continuity.
- Repetition as an avenue for creative change in the present and future.
- Necessity and possibility: a dynamism similar to facticity/transcendence and thrown/projection.
- The human as “witness to the truth” (Heidegger: “shepherd of being”) willing to be ostracized for it.
- We can decide only because we are passionately involved (“carings”). Sustained passions shape us.
- The philosopher’s job is to help us reflect on what we think we know but actually don’t, especially existentially.
- No new proposals, discoveries, institutions, or systems to be found in this existence-directed philosophy. Understanding depends not on easily conveyed results, but on a way disclosed by artful communications.
- Most people stick to tradition and custom and lack authenticity. Conscience tries to call them back to themselves.
- Deepening spiritual life must pass through the moments of resignation, suffering, and guilt.
- To know oneself is to establish a conscious relationship with God (Heidegger: with Being).

- Death frames a life but also includes “dying to immediacy” and “dying to oneself.”

As to Heidegger’s specialized vocabulary:

Much of it amounts to turning ordinary events into the language of how-we-experience-them, branding this “ontological,” and repeating key words. For example: “Wherever Dasein is, it is as a Fact; and the factuality of such a Fact is what we shall call Dasein’s ‘facticity.’” This kind of puffery helps conceal truisms offered as profundities: “Beings are grasped in their being as presence.” In *Being and Time*, Chapter III, “The Worldhood of the World,” we learn that shoes are made of leather and with needles and hide; that the hide comes from animals; and that the animals are raised by other people. “Animals also occur within the world without having been raised at all.”

From page 76 of *Being and Time*, Krell version:

Since a phenomenon is constitutive for “appearance” in the sense of making itself known through a self-showing, and since this phenomenon can turn into a semblance in a privative way, appearance can also turn into mere semblance. Under a certain kind of light someone can look as if he were flushed. The redness that shows itself can be taken as making known the presence of fever; this in turn would indicate a disturbance in the organism.

Translation: things aren’t always as they seem to be.

From page 77:

Now, if the phenomenological concept of phenomenon is to be understood at all (regardless of how the self-showing may be more closely determined), we must inevitably presuppose insight into the sense of the formal concept of phenomenon and the legitimate application of phenomenon in its ordinary meaning.

In other words, to understand phenomenology, we need to know what a phenomenon is.

However, before getting hold of the preliminary concept of phenomenology we must define the meaning of *logos*, in order to make clear in which sense phenomenology can be “a science of” phenomena at all.

He then spends five pages of etymological circumlocution to conclude that *logos* means relating to things. These sections appear among eight pages spent to define phenomenology as Husserl already has: “To the things themselves.” Another several pages to say that hermeneutics interprets “the existentiality of existence.” This is more than clumsy writing: it is deliberate obfuscation.

From page 97 of the Macquarrie and Robinson translation:

The kind of Being which equipment possesses must be exhibited. The clue for doing this lies in our first defining what makes an item of equipment—namely, its equipmentality.

At least he didn't call it "superexistentialisticequipmentalidocious." From page 98:

Equipment [one of Heidegger's redefinitions of ordinary words] can genuinely show itself only in dealings cut to its own measure (hammering with a hammer, for example); but in such dealings an entity of this kind is not *grasped* thematically as an occurring Thing, nor is the equipment-structure known as such even in the using. The hammering does not simply have knowledge about the hammer's character as equipment, but it has appropriated this equipment in a way which could not possibly be more suitable. In dealings such as this, where something is put to use, our concern subordinates itself to the "in-order-to" which is constitutive for the equipment we are employing at the time; the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific 'manipulability' of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses—in which it manifests itself in its own right—we call "readiness-to-hand."

Translation: we begin to appreciate a thing's uniqueness by using it. This reads so much like a parody of pedantic philosophizing that I suspect it to be one. The tangled diction and patronizing tone imply an almost sociopathic contempt toward the intended audience.

The long paragraph on page 87—from "Even if it were feasible to give an ontological definition of "Being-in" down to "unless one has previously clarified how it is and what it is"—amounts to a question: How can "inner" know "outer"?

This item from page 119 stands almost unmatched in its egregiously egregious egregiousity:

This "in-order-to" prescribes a "towards-this" as a possible "in-which" for letting something be involved; and the structure of letting it be involved implies that this is an involvement which something *has*—an involvement which is *with* something. Dasein always assigns itself from a "for-the-sake-of-which" to the "with-which" of an involvement; that is to say, to the extent that it is, it always lets entities be encountered as ready-to-hand.

To hazard a guess: "Dasein is involved with handy things."

Page 278:

By casting light on the source of "time" "in which" entities within-the-world are encountered—time as "within-time-ness"—we shall make manifest an essential possibility of the temporalizing of temporality. Therewith the understanding prepares itself for an even more primordial temporalizing of temporality.



—and maybe one more primordial still? Heidegger’s adventure never ends: each chapter terminates by suggesting what’s still beyond in dire need of analysis.

Between 1959 and 1969, Heidegger presided over a series of talks held for the medical students of psychiatrist Medard Boss. What can these Zollikon Seminars tell us about how Heidegger maneuvered in person without a script?

The Seminars went awkwardly and were often punctuated by long, frustrated silences. The baffled students rarely asked questions, and when they did, Heidegger often replied with another question. The usual pattern:

Participant (discussing motivations): Excitement can be a motive if one attempts to attain it.

MH: What is a cause of motive? What kind of motive do you mean?

He does this repeatedly. What is action? What is psyche? What do you mean by xxx? First we have to analyze / think about / clarify yyy, which leads us to examine zzz.... All in the service, ostensibly, to going back to the basic issues, even if doing so seems redundant, because we don’t understand our own questions. An example of Heidegger speaking taken from page 33 of Franz Mayr’s translation of the surviving seminar transcripts:

We ascertain that it is now 9:37 according to the clock. Am I speaking about time *now*? What are you doing when you read the clock? Basically, you are saying: It is 9:37 *now*. Whenever you look at the clock, you say “now,” whether out loud or not. I am writing on the slip of paper: It is 9:37 *now*. When Dr. Boss reads this tomorrow, the slip of paper will not be correct. Dr. Boss will have to say: It was 9:37 *at that time*.

From page 89:

We specify this hand movement as a “gesture.” Even when I place the watch on the table, I move within a gesture. And the hand? How does it belong to me? The hand belongs to my arm. Putting the watch away is not only a movement of the hand, but also of the arm, the shoulder. It is my movement. I moved it myself.

“But here what does it mean to be related to other human beings? First, we must clarify our relationship to other human beings...” “...One thing may have become clear during these seminars: We must not draw any conclusions from the discussion and elucidation of phenomena.” Evidently not.

Shall we practice the eight steps of the Heidegger Maneuver? To recap:

1. Appropriate and translate to conceal sources.
2. Use an obscure, abstract vocabulary.
3. Convert everyday things and events into ontological terms.
4. Redefine common terms by giving them specialized meanings.
5. When stuck, go back over familiar ground and reconceptualize it.

6. Pad with repetitious, tortuous, endless-seeming phrases and clauses.
7. Avoid concrete insights or specific applications.
8. Insist that more profundity will follow these preliminaries.

Below awaits a piece of false philosophy invented for the occasion. See if you can detect some steps of the Maneuver in it:

Behind the color red is Redness, an uncategorizable, ineffable realm long ignored by philosophers (for whom the color red is just red) and accessible only to a highly specialized inquiry. What, then, is true Redness, and how shall we begin to rescue it from oblivion?

Of course, we all possess some pre-ontological sense of Redness from its expression as red; but for true knowledge of Redness we must abandon all our ordinary methods, measurements, and categories, and seek for its coming-to-expression (a term we need to avoid reification and scientism) or flowering-of-Redness as ontic red in Redsein, or Beingness of Red: not a capacity, not a quality of consciousness, not a part of ourselves, but an Openness to Redness beyond all its closed-off everyday expressions and yet made possible and open only as a result of opening up their openings.

The manifestations of Redness through red as Encountered by Redsein are many. One is through Artistic Apparatus and Appurtenances (AAA, not to be confused with the American Automobile Association), which allow artists to express actual Redness-as-Potential-on-the-Palette by means of Apparatusality. Artists working ontologically facilitate the presentation of Redness through what we will call Painting (a forward-movement-of-the-brush not to be confused with ordinary daubing to create goods and generate revenue). Painting represents the existentialization of the relationship of Redness through its urgent expression-toward-Redsein.

Another manifestation manifests through Redsignation, the metacognitive understanding through analysis of the shadings and hues that at bottom express Redness. We cannot call these “categories” of Redness, however, so instead we will talk about Redextentia, whose movements appear ontically and ontologically through forward-movements-of-the-brush (or-of-the-spray-can) as Tints/Tintalia, Blends/Blendalia, and Hues/Hueicities. Redness, therefore, is Encountered as self-presenting, as presentfully presented, as Presentationalization. If present.

Because Redness reveals itself through rednesses expressed in some medium, to understand Redness we must first explore the Canvas in its widest sense: a medium beyond the canvas but including its existential canvasness. Canvas in turn yields to analysis only through the existential-ontological grasp of Compositional Materials like Paper, Frame, and Stand situated in proximity to the Palette. Let us proceed, then, to a necessary examination of each of these Materials so that we may position our inquiry to move closer to (without reaching, because it's unreachable) an authentic grasp of the reddest red of pre-reflective Redness....

Which we will never define, because Redness is beyond definition and only painters, thinkers, and poets get it. Or as Heidegger himself put it, “In the exposition of the problem of Temporality the concrete answer to the question of the meaning of Being is first given”—which it never was.

Of course Heidegger couldn't go back to finish *Being and Time*. He'd have had to leaf through hundreds of dense pages to relearn his own neologistic language well enough to push his one thought—*we are involved with things because the world of being, which is more than mere presence, matters to us*—into new convolutions. It took him three decades and a thousand circumlocutions to say that only the thinkers and poets could tell the ontological from the ontic, and even then he didn't specify how, beyond vague references to “opening,” “clearing,” and “Ereignis.” In a 1986 interview in which Heidegger's former student Gadamer criticized the invention of a specialized vocabulary, he acknowledged that even Heidegger found it so problematic that, interrupting himself during a lecture while reading his own text, Heidegger admitted to his students, “All of this is Chinese.”

Heidegger's thought does reveal important differences from his acknowledged and unacknowledged sources. Unlike his colleagues and predecessors, he had no use for extended discussions of ethics, equality, love, compassion, creativity, faith, hope, education, religious pluralism, spirituality, self-inquiry, the senses, felt embodiment, or the dialectics of communication, which he treated with open scorn. Art he valued primarily as a uterus for birthing Being. What about discussions of values? Blasphemous, he wrote, against Being itself. As for any real growth or evolution in human affairs, the dominant West had been declining since Plato, and, with the Enlightenment darkened by the nihilism predicted by Nietzsche, enframing technological decadence had captured the entire globe.

It might seem strange that Heidegger could write clearly when he wanted, as proven by his 1940 essay “Nietzsche's Metaphysics” and, to a lesser extent, by his 1947 “Letter on Humanism,” but this shouldn't surprise us. He felt no need to obscure the work of other thinkers.

But why on earth would such a brilliant, gifted man take one of the most interesting questions ever asked and erect upon it a long career of misdirection, obfuscation, and appropriation?

### **The Scribe of Fenrir**

Although we must *evaluate* a thinker's work by its merits or weaknesses, we *understand* its origins fully only by having recourse to the facts of his life to give it a proper context. Freud's obsession with the Oedipus Complex cannot be used to either validate or invalidate it, but it makes a lot more sense when you read what he, worshipped by his mother and rivalrous toward his father, wrote in a flash of insight to Wilhelm Fleiss: “I am Oedipus”—and so, he believed, was everyone else.

Heidegger's predilection for evasion, deception, and obscurity did not confine itself to his work. His postwar claim to having been in combat in the trenches of Verdun: false. His Nazi Party membership having been only a temporary “matter of form”: false. His claim to having assumed the rectorship of the University of Freiburg only to prevent worse men from seizing it: false. His denial of having harmed the careers of his Jewish colleagues: false. “Sometimes,” said Jaspers,

who knew him from years of friendly visits, “it was as if a demon crept into him.” Jaspers concluded, belatedly, that Heidegger’s work on Being was a “great mystification” concealing “a false absolutization of Being,” and, reluctantly, that Heidegger had operated as a kind of “confidence man.” Hannah Arendt, student lover and later defender of Heidegger, acknowledged his notoriety for “lying about everything.”

Below I will relate some of the key events of Heidegger’s life, but with an emphasis on its authoritarian joints and underpinnings.

Martin Heidegger was born on September 26, 1889, in Messkirch (probably “mass” + “church”), a small town between Lake Constance and the Danube River in southern Germany. Names often display a bit of synchronicity pertaining to the life they cling to. It may be that “Heidegger,” like Kierkegaard’s Danish middle name “Aaybe,” referred to a craft, that of brewing. Heidegger had no middle name, but his first name, Martin, means “devoted to Mars.” It is probably no coincidence that Heidegger’s first name matches that of the town’s Baroque-style church, or that his father, a craftsman, also served as church sexton.

Eventually the Catholic priests of St. Martin noticed the bright altar boy and sent him to a junior seminary. Although he would fail to be admitted to the Jesuits because of a (psychological) heart problem, he gratified the priests by how rapidly he learned the philosophical arguments reshaped to combat the sins of modernity.

At age 17, Heidegger had received from future archbishop Conrad Gröber the book *On the Manifold Meaning of Being* by Franz Brentano. This gift, a turning point, led him to the question of the meaning of being and to the University of Freiburg, where he studied under the neo-Kantian scholar Heinrich Rickert and phenomenology pioneer Edmund Husserl. In 1913 he earned his doctorate in philosophy, and in 1915 he finished his habilitation—a second dissertation required for professorial candidates in Germany—on the work of Duns Scotus. He chose this topic in part because he hoped it would bring him the chair of philosophy at the University of Freiburg. It did not, and this second churchly blow to his ego set the stage for his partial withdrawal from Catholic Christendom. It arrived when he studied Martin Luther, Calvin, and other Protestant thinkers and married Elfride Petri, a Lutheran, in 1917, but to the end of his life he marked himself “Catholic” on his tax returns.

For Heidegger, Luther proved as pivotal as Brentano and Husserl. In Luther’s guilt-wracked view, we are dim, disoriented, “fallen,” God-hating (Being-concealing), and incapable of saving ourselves through our powers of reason. Inauthenticity is the rule, not authenticity. The best of us are perpetually anxious about our state and always tempted to depart the path of goodness. We cannot win salvation because only God’s grace can make us just (“only a god can save us,” later Heidegger would avow). Not even death can help us, for we cannot die for each other, and “one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone.” But keeping death always in mind can help us fight off the temptation to fall, as can heeding the call of conscience, giving praise to God through the Word (“language is the house of Being”), and laboring honestly at our daily vocation in this lost world of darkness. As for the Jew, let him be converted to Christianity or, failing that, be expelled from Germany.

When Heidegger began to lecture at Freiburg in 1919, Husserl considered him the heir to phenomenology. By 1923, Heidegger became associate professor of philosophy at the University of Marburg, where his young students appreciated how he brought new life to old thinkers even as his talk of “violent” interpretation to dismantle metaphysics appealed to their rebellious instincts. With the aid of Husserl, he published *Being and Time* in 1927 to qualify for a full professorship. To Heidegger the book’s motto—the words of Luther: “*Unus quisque robustus sit in existentia sua*”—meant that each individual do, alone, what his own capacities permit. Few grasped the book’s strategic self-obscure. Surely all that esoteric language meant something profound.

In 1928, Heidegger took over the chair of philosophy at Freiburg after Husserl retired.

City life never agreed with Heidegger. Like many working class German Catholics with roots in rural places like the Black Forest, he looked with suspicion on the liberal, urban modernists, with their democracy, their cosmopolitanism, and their religious tolerance. Perhaps (Heidegger thought) these upstart National Socialists knew what they were about with their talk of valorizing the German working man, sweeping away the aristocracy, and leveling the power structure of a nation suffering decline. World War I had left Germany a wreck, and the Versailles Treaty, that loathsome reminder of Napoleon’s original invasion of Prussia, demanded war reparations that were breaking the back of the Germany economy. Was it not time for Germans to assert their presence and achieve the greatness long denied them? For the Nazis possessed a key ingredient lacking in the blind, stumbling Weimar Republic: a vision of restoration. Myth power.

Just look at the world! Abandoned by the gods, reeking with industrialized destruction, gridded over with asphalt and statistics. Small talk between people no further individualized than parts in a machine. What had happened to the vitality, the risk, the danger of being fully alive? And here was weary Germany, caught in the middle in so many senses—north and south, eastern and western Europe—as American capital and Soviet might carved up the world between them. What was needed, it seemed clear, was a spiritual revolution whereby German Dasein could rise, reclaim its roots in soil and tradition, and save Europe from domination by technology, capital, and manpower.

Our people, as standing in the center, suffers the most intense pressure—our people, the people richest in neighbors and hence the most endangered people, and for all that, the most metaphysical people.... Precisely if the great decision regarding Europe is not to go down the path of annihilation—precisely then can this decision come about only through the development of new, spiritual forces from the center.

The Nazis might be sixth-rate intellectuals, but they too could be saved, their clunky racial biologism respiritualized into cultural rootedness.

The cold fire of Heidegger’s anticipatory resoluteness (to use his term) struck student Karl Löwith as early as the 1920s. In “Heidegger’s Existentialism: Political Implications” he remembered it well:

...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.”

This was exactly the point Jaspers would raise later: “Resolution, but for what?” From a letter written by Heidegger to Löwith in 1920:

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.”

Nothing in *Being and Time* or in Heidegger’s later work even hints at the need for demonstration, debate, consensus, evidence, or critical engagement with one’s peers. In place of reasoned arguments simmer the ethereal utterances of a malcontented solitary. What was the international language of academia but proof of its intractable “rootlessness and homelessness”?

Heidegger’s distinction between the ontological and ontic is at best contrived, at worst, a strategy for advancing, without argument, questionable ethical, political, and theological positions. He himself cannot maintain the distinction but transgresses it repeatedly: by interpreting Dasein’s average everydayness through the lens of an unnamed but sovereign “ontic ideal”; by privileging a radical Protestantism over his native Catholicism through foreclosing theological options; and finally, and most damagingly, by political ventures, which only proved, in a humiliating way, how far from the purity of a neutral ontological investigation he was.

—S. J. McGrath, from *Heidegger: A (Very) Critical Introduction*

Nor did the professor who translated *arche* as “ruling origin” stop to ponder, as he sided with what he saw as European culture asserting itself against foreign influences, just how much Greek thought owed to Asia, Africa, and Mesopotamia; how much of its cultural and intellectual life the West owed to the depth of its Jewish and Arabic roots; or how modernity, whatever its shadows and faults, opposed the medieval subordination of self to state, caste, and religion by insisting on the preciousness of subjectivity, liberty, rights, education, and self-governance.

As Löwith makes clear, a short step suffices to combine one’s formerly solitary “capacity-for-Being” as duty and fate with those of other Daseins seeking “specifically Germany existence” and its historically realized expression as dominance. The existential categories invoked—authenticity, self-assertion, one’s “ownmost” destiny, freedom for death, one’s unique historicity, angst faced resolutely, stock taken of oneself in the face of nothingness—move all too easily from academic philosophy into reactionary politics.

Especially to one who suffers from an *authoritarian personality*, a syndrome investigated after World War II by Erich Fromm, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Nevitt Stanford, Daniel Levinson, and

Theodor Adorno, who published their research results in 1950. The syndrome they outlined includes the following categories:

- Conventionalism — the tendency to accept and obey social conventions and the rules of authority figures; adherence to the traditional and accepted
- Authoritarian Submission — submission to authorities and authority figures
- Authoritarian Aggression — an aggressive attitude towards individuals or groups disliked by authorities for threatening traditional values
- Anti-Intraception — rejection of the subjective, imaginative and aesthetic
- Substitution and Stereotypy — superstition, cliché, categorization and fatalistic determinism
- Power and Toughness — identification with those in power, excessive emphasis on socially advocated ego qualities
- Destructiveness and Cynicism — general hostility, putting others down
- Projectivity — the tendency to believe in the existence of evil in the world and to project unconscious emotional impulses outward
- Sex — exaggerated concerns with respect to sexual activity

As Fromm observed in *Escape from Freedom*, “It seems that nothing is more difficult for the average man to bear than the feeling of not being identified with a larger group.... The fear of isolation and the relative weakness of moral principles help any party to win the loyalty of a large sector of the population once that party has captured the power of the state.” Bred in rigidly religious families and cultural groups, the authoritarian personality could be counted on to get behind any capturer touting traditional moral values, exceptionalism, and an aggressive stance toward outsiders.

A man with a genuine spiritual core nourished by the worldview of an adequate living mythology might have resisted this ominous move, but Heidegger, a sufferer of thinly concealed narcissism (“those who sit before me are not worth the effort,” he wrote to Jaspers more than once), had looked into his own troubled core and found only emptiness. He spent much of the 1920s repaying Husserl’s generosity by “wringing the neck” of the “old man” in his lectures (“Did ‘intentionality’ fall from the sky?”) even while appropriating Husserl’s thought—the call to return to “the things themselves,” philosophy as primal science, criticism of naturalism, attacks on objectification and metaphysics, three-phase temporality, transcendental investigation—and rebranding it for his own purposes. Access to Husserl’s unpublished lecture notes increased his store of material to work with. To Jaspers he wrote that *Being and Time* had been written against Husserl, to whom he dedicated the book. To Löwith he wrote that Husserl “was never a philosopher, not even for one second in his life.”

Charles Bambach traces Heidegger’s frequently used word *Bodenständigkeit* (“autochthony” or “rootedness”), seen in Heidegger’s lectures as early as 1924, to Aristotle’s *to autochthonas* and to a strident belief in Greek superiority, as when Isocrates contrasted the Greeks, whose lineage was “so noble and so pure” because sprung from local soil, with “a motley horde composed of many races.” Many ancient Greeks believed themselves descended from the mythic king Erichthonius, Gaia-born product of an attempted rape of Athena by Hephaestus: an odd choice, perhaps, considering that his name means “troubles born from the earth” and that the first to see

him went insane and threw themselves off the Acropolis. The Greeks' primordial relation to creative, generative physis gave early Greek thought its power, Heidegger believed, but this power was dimmed by the later rootless, rationalistic religion of Being-forgetting Olympus, an aerial system that spurned the more elemental and subterranean deities hidden below. To become great, Germany's Völk (the people) must reconnect to these original underworld sources and bring them back to life. In the end, Heidegger would feel their underworldly power much more than he had bargained for.

Bambach, Löwith, and other scholars have noted the parallels between Nazi ideology and recurring tropes in Heidegger's thought:

- the return to an idealized Greece ("Graecophilia")
- modernity as a crisis of rootlessness that has poisoned the German Völk
- rejection of Enlightenment, cosmopolitanism, humanism, democracy, Roman-Latin culture, and religious tolerance
- disparagement of the common people as mindless sleepwalkers in need of a leader
- impatience with the small talk and epicurean laxity of bourgeois liberalism
- a brave Dasein without compassion or leniency facing off against the void
- exclusionary idealization of "our" homeland, nature, roots, soil, culture, and rural life
- a false kinship with workers and peasants (Heidegger dressed like one)
- appropriation of and adulation for German poets like Hölderlin and Rilke and thinkers like Nietzsche
- attacks on utility and pragmatism
- suspicion of self-analysis and subjectivity
- celebration of authoritarian male leadership (*Führerprinzip*)
- mystical-sounding terminology
- a violent, militant rhetoric of macho self-assertion, will, hardness, heroism, rescue, greatness, glory, valor, honor, fate, destiny, struggle, war, power, danger, sacrifice, discipline, command, conquest, patriotism, exceptionalism, and "running toward death"

Heidegger also shows his authoritarianism in how he always looked to the greatness of idealized others: the Greeks, the Völk, crazy Hölderlin, psychotic Nietzsche, delusional Hitler. When Jaspers raised a concern about Germany being ruled by someone as uneducated as Hitler, Heidegger replied, "It is not a question of education. Just look at his marvelous hands!"

If the ordinary sleepy ones can't be bothered to awaken; if public life has descended into mediocrity, conformity, and chatter; if politics has replaced cultural and historical unity with fragmentation; if the West as a whole had fallen into spiritual decline; if a people thrown together retained a common language, heritage, and destiny but failed to draw strength from them; if all this was true, then why not overturn the decadent established order and hand the sword of power to men with the will to wield it?

If Being is characterized by anxiety and boredom, the sense of danger provides a way of living dangerously on the brink of the void. Do we have the courage to face the "radical questioning" such danger implies? To grasp the terrible moment of transformation? Who will show us the



way? Perhaps leaders who can inspire Dasein with terror once again. Or as Heidegger puts it in one of his speeches of that time:

For the Great War is only now coming upon us. The awakening of our dead, the two million casualties from out of the endless graves, the graves that extend themselves like a secret wreath around the borders of the Reich and of German Austria, this awakening is only now beginning. The Great War is only today becoming for us Germans—and for us first among all Völker—a historical reality of our Dasein, for history is not what has been, nor is it what is present. History is, rather, the futural and our mandate for the futural.

Karl Löwith observes,

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.

No one should have been startled, least of all Heidegger’s students and colleagues, when he appeared in 1933 in a university auditorium decorated with Nazi flags to deliver, as the new rector of Freiburg, an address laced with authoritarian calls to sacrifice, battle, danger, and “awakening.” Nietzsche had predicted nihilism even while struggling against it. Heidegger now found himself, not Plato, acting as one of its agents.

Contrary to Heidegger’s later claims, a small, Nazi-favoring group within the university had worked to put him into the rectorate. That April, Robert Wagner, the local Reich Commissioner, had ordered the removal of all Jewish scholars. In May, Heidegger sent him a telegram full of congratulations and praise. Wagner would eventually assume the task of sending Jews in the region to die in concentration camps.

In the address, whose title deliberately echoed Hitler’s recent call for German “self-assertion,” Heidegger announced the rise of German Dasein, promised to do away with “much-lauded academic freedom,” told students to prepare for some unspecified “battle,” declared all formerly separate departments and disciplines subordinate to German unity, and held up labor service, military service, and knowledge service as “equiprimordial” bonds tying the Völk to the destiny of Germany’s spiritual mission. “For us this knowledge is not the dispassionate taking note of essences and values as such, but the most severe endangerment of existence in the midst of the overwhelming power of what is. The very questionableness of Being forces the people to work and fight and forces it into its state, to which the professions belong.” In this struggle (*kampf*) for self-assertion, faculty and students must work together to “will the essence of the German university.”

Having delivered a chest-thumping speech filled with coded Nazi references (some of the attendees were officials of the Third Reich) and finished by deliberately misquoting Plato (“Everything great stands in a storm”), Heidegger proceeded to rewrite the university

constitution to place himself in supreme command over the senate, chancellor, and deans. In doing this he instituted *Führerprinzip*, the top-down leadership principle of National Socialism.

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.

— Karl Löwith

This did not go over well with professors and students used to a more democratic academic culture, nor did they appreciate Heidegger's order to release students from class for military drills and work service. With the days of expostulating Dasein and Being to Hitler Youth gathered around bonfires now over, Heidegger faced so much opposition from below and above that he resigned in a year. Never impressive to begin with, his support by Nazi officials had dwindled, in part because they sensed his contempt for their crude philosophizing and in part because a man who couldn't speak straight out about what he stood for was of little public relations use to their projects of domination.

Although not long in office, he managed to refuse to renew the Jew Husserl's research privileges, informed the Gestapo that some of his colleagues had been pacifists during WW I (during which he did no active fighting: he served as a postal censor and meteorologist who informed the troops where to spread their poison gas), went on a speaking tour in support of Hitler's referendum against the League of Nations ("Let not doctrines and ideas be your guide. The Führer is Germany's only reality and law"), gave heroic and philosophically redolent speeches in praise of fallen soldiers, expressed his admiration for Hermann Göring, aspired to serving as Hitler's philosophical guide, slept with students, and cabled Hitler to recommend postponement of a meeting of rectors until the *Gleichschaltung*—the systematic suppression and murder of political opponents—had been concluded.

This future [withdrawing from the League of Nations] 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 Dasein of the State. The Führer has awakened this will in the entire people and has welded it into a single resolve.

Heidegger's defenders have objected to his being accused of anti-Semitism, but in 1929, four years before he joined the Nazi Party, he wrote to Victor Schworer that the decision educators faced was either to be "rooted in the native and indigenous" or submit to "increasing Jewification (*Verjudung*).” In 1933 he spoke to the amazed Jaspers, whose wife was Jewish, about “a dangerous international network of Jews,” after which he declared in writing that “Bolshevism is in fact Jewish.” Another letter referred disparagingly to a colleague as “that Jew, Frankel.” In 1934 Heidegger refused to oversee the doctoral work of any more Jews. He did defend three Jewish professors slated to be fired, but only because firing them might look bad to “German interests” around the world. Heidegger did not buy the racial theories of the Nazis, but he did see Jews as rootless wanderers and outlanders preying on the *Völk*, a stereotype he must have heard often while growing up.

Heidegger to his students, 1933:

When and where, however, was the decision made concerning the fundamental question of philosophy and its own essence? At that time when the Greek *Völk*—whose root stock and language has precisely the same origin as our German roots—set out to create through its great poets and thinkers a uniquely new form of human-historical *Dasein*.

Same year, to his university colleagues:

The German *Völk* has been summoned by the Führer to vote; the Führer, however, is asking nothing from the *Völk*. Rather, he is giving the *Völk* the possibility of making, directly, the highest free decision of all: whether the entire *Völk* wants its own *Dasein* or whether it does not want it. Tomorrow the *Völk* will choose nothing less than its own future.

The tone echoes neurotic Nietzsche, frail, shy, and ailing, calling from the privacy of his study for a strong Führer to stave off nihilism, a ruthless “will to power,” assertiveness of the “blond beast,” and bravery and warfare “in which the time for joking is past.” Inflated, declining Nietzsche, who after making fun of nationalism and *völkisch* ideology asks: “Does anyone but me know a way out of this blind alley? ... a task great enough once again to unite the *Völker*?” Little wonder later Heidegger would claim that Nietzsche had ruined him.

Because of his Nazi affiliations, Heidegger was removed from his professorship after the war and suffered a breakdown—a narcissistic collapse—for which he was briefly hospitalized, although, thanks to Jaspers, he received a pension so he could live and work. In 1945 he told a de-Nazification committee that he had quietly revolted against the Nazis, tried to protect Jewish colleagues, accepted the rectorship reluctantly, and renounced all Nazi ties. None of it was true. Eschewing any responsibility for his actions, he retreated into philosophical jargon:

The case of the rectorate 1933/34, unimportant as it is in itself, is probably a sign of the metaphysical state of the essence of science, a science that can no longer be determined by attempts at renewal and whose essential transformation into pure technology can no longer be checked.... What is essential is that we are in the midst of the consummation of nihilism, that

God is “dead,” and every time-space for the godhead is covered. The surmounting of nihilism nevertheless announces itself in German poetic thinking and singing.

Never mind that Europe was in ruins and six million Jews put to death: the German soul was cavorting in the light of Being renewed.

Heidegger continued to publish—including his Nietzsche lectures, his *Contributions*, and “The Origin of the Work of Art”—and to wait for his exile from academia to end. He had always been adept at convincing people of his sincerity. Jaspers, Arendt, and a number of French thinkers who admired his work pled his case, and in 1950 the teaching ban was lifted.

Did Heidegger turn away from Nazism, as so many of his supporters have claimed? As late as 1936, Löwith spotted him in Rome still wearing a swastika pin in his lapel. Although disenchanted with the Party, and eventually with Hitler, he never formally quit. In his *Contributions* he never mentions Hitler or the Nazis, but he continues to write, as on page 316, about the Völk and its ties to history and compulsive struggle:

A people is a people only if it receives its history as allotted to it through finding its god, the god that compels this people beyond itself and thus places the people back amid beings....How is a people supposed to find the god, however, unless there are seekers who in reticence seek on behalf of this people and who, as these seekers, must apparently even stand against a “people” that is not yet properly a people? Yet these seekers themselves must first be; the task is to prepare for them precisely as beings. Da-sein: what else is it but the grounding of the being of these beings, the future ones of the last god?

He had toned down the heroic rhetoric, but, having gone underground into his private Underworld, he blamed the Nazis, not for their crimes, but for not being radical enough. Through philosophical work he continued to hope for the restoration of the Völk; in a letter he said he was “building for the future,” cultivating a “letting be” until the daybreak of the true uprising of Being.

By the time of his “Letter on Humanism” (1945) and “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1951), he had reinvented his persona to show the world a philosopher-oracle shepherding Being, “the trembling of the Godding,” through commentaries on poetry, art, and closeness to nature. In *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953) he indiscreetly referred to “the inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism. Afterwards, by way of excuse, he quoted Valéry: “He who thinks greatly must err greatly.” (“Returned from Syracuse?” his former student Gadamer had asked him after the war, in reference to Plato’s failed attempts to win over the tyrant Dionyus.)

“Publicly,” Theodor Adorno wrote to Heidegger, “you have not denounced a single one of the actions and ideologies of the regime.” This got no response, nor did Heidegger ever apologize, in public, for his Nazi affiliations. Privately, however, his silence slipped just once in his correspondence with Jaspers.

Heidegger and Jaspers had written to and visited each other for decades, but the correspondence had broken off when Heidegger became a Nazi. In 1942, Jaspers wrote but did not send a letter in which he took Heidegger to task for some thoughts about Plato's philosophy of truth:

I could almost say that, at the end of the reading, I feel deceived, for you always talked about unconcealment without saying what it actually is. At first, the point seems to be provisionally supported by the Greek meaning of the word, which I also read in Soden, but then, at the end, you refrain from conveying anything other than a promise for the future that strikes me as empty—thus, I must confess the shortcomings of my ability to comprehend....

Even then, Jaspers did not recognize this to have been Heidegger's tactic all along.

Once the correspondence resumed at Jaspers' invitation, Heidegger wrote that explanations for his actions during the war would be interminable. Then he wrote (*italics his*):

Since 1933, I no longer came to your house, not because a Jewish woman lived there, but because I simply felt *ashamed*. Since then, I have not only not entered your house, but I have also never again entered the city of Heidelberg, which is what it is to me only because of your friendship.

He also wrote that "when, at the end of the 1930s, the worst evil set in with vile persecutions, I thought immediately about your wife," about whom he received assurances from a professor that nothing bad would happen to her. "But the anxiety remained, and the powerlessness and the failure—I do not relate this in order to give credit to myself with the mere appearance of giving help." Jaspers thanked him for saying this and went on:

You will excuse me when I say what I sometimes thought: that you seemed to behave toward the manifestations of National Socialism like a boy who dreams, who doesn't know what he is doing, who doesn't know how blindly and forgetfully he gets mixed up in an undertaking that looks to him like something completely different than what it is in reality, and then stands before a pile of rubble and allows himself to be driven further.

Heidegger: "You are completely accurate with your image of the dreaming boy." He had been so focused on the university that he lost sight of all else: "Not for a second did I think that my name could have such an effect upon the German, and now the world public, or would be decisive for many young men...." Unable to stay with his guilt, he begins to minimize: "I was lost and fell, if for only a few months, into what my wife describes as an 'intoxication of power.'" But only for a few months.

Then, where I tried with my modest knowledge and abilities to gain historical insight, I fundamentally failed. In the years 1937 and 1938, I reached the lowest point. We saw the war coming and, most immediately, the threat to our growing sons, neither of whom were in the Hitler Youth or in any student Party organization. A human being sees more clearly under such threats. Then came the persecution of the Jews, and everything fell into the abyss.

He added that even in 1945-46 he had no idea what “my step into the public domain in 1933” had meant. Shifting from the personal to the international: “The guilt of the individual remains, and it remains all the more, the more individual he is, but the matter of this evil has not come to an end. It has now entered a genuinely global stage. In 1933 and before, the Jews and the politicians of the left, as those directly threatened, saw more clearly, more sharply, and more broadly.”

Yet Heidegger, as Jaspers realizes, remains caught in messianic pretension:

Despite everything, dear Jaspers, despite death and tears, despite suffering and horror, despite misery and affliction, despite abysmalness and exile in this homelessness there occurs not nothing, but an advent conceals itself there, whose furthest hints we may, perhaps, still experience in a light breath and which must be captured in order to preserve them for a future that no historical construction, especially today's, which thinks technologically throughout, will decipher.

Tired of this and other attempts by Heidegger to erase injustices with evasions, Jaspers confronts him:

You write: “Stalin doesn't need to declare war any longer. Every day he wins another battle, but one doesn't see this. For us, there is no avoiding it. And every word and every piece of writing is in itself a counterattack, if all of that does not play itself out in the sphere of the political, which itself has long been outplayed by other relations to being.”

I am horrified to read something like this.... Is not this power [of evil] something for each of us first to come to grips with where it is present and, for him who speaks, something to come to grips with by speaking clearly and concretely? Is not this power of evil in Germany also what has constantly grown and, in fact, what prepares Stalin's victory: the concealing and forgetting of the past, the new so-called nationalism, the return of the old ruts of thinking and of all the ghosts which destroy us, even though they are empty? Is not a philosophy that surmises and poetizes in such sentences in your letter, that produces a vision of something monstrous, is this not, in turn, something that prepares the victory of totalitarianism by separating itself from reality? Just as, before 1933, philosophy to a great extent actually made ready the acceptance of Hitler? Is something similar happening today?

Your write further: “In this homelessness ... an advent conceals itself.” My horror grew when I read that. As far as I can understand, that is pure dreaming, in the order of many such dreamings that—always at the moment—have made fools of us for the past half-century. Are you about to appear as a prophet who points to something supersensible on the basis of a secret revelation, as a philosopher who leads us away from reality?

Except for brief birthday greetings by post, Heidegger's non-reply to this confrontation ended the correspondence.

As for Heidegger, he continued to play the peasant-shepherd-philosopher, write from within his mountain hut at Todtnauberg, lecture, and, in 1966, submit to a carefully staged television interview that avoided confrontational questions. As he edited his collected works for publication, he carefully removed all citations and footnotes referring to Heise, Hildebrandt, Krieck, Baeumler, and other Nazi philosophers while purging his writings of anything that might connect him to National Socialism. For most of his academic career he had covered himself by insisting that the philosopher's life does not matter and need not be subject to scrutiny. He worked, he said, for the "latecomers" who would inaugurate a new era of thinking.

Heidegger died on May 26th, 1976, and was buried at his own request in the Messkirch Catholic cemetery. Until the end he insisted he had never really broken with the church.

### **Heidegger's Ragnarök: In the Shadow of Thor**

Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth... The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change.

— Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

What do Joseph Campbell, Karl Kerényi, C.G. Jung, Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, John Steinbeck, Christine Downing, Ginette Paris, and Malidoma Somé have in common? All have testified that myths are not dead explanations that hide in books; rather, myths come back to life all the time because their plots and themes express deep psychic currents common to entire cultures. No matter how advanced we might consider ourselves, Moloch the hungry bull god haunts the New York Stock Exchange, ancient fantasies of ascending into heaven power the search for longevity, the Golem peers from the glassy eyes of autonomous weapons and Artificial Intelligence, the hundred-eyed Argus shapeshifts into systems of mass surveillance, Coyote knocks over suburban garbage cans, and Procrustes chops off the living details that mess up neat explanations.

In 1936, as political thunderheads gathered explosively over Europe, Jung wrote a "Wotan," a brief essay in which he made a mythological diagnosis. Because the Christian conversion of Germany remained incomplete, repressing native wildness beneath a civilized veneer, Wotan the god of storm, battle, magic, ritual, poetry, violence, and frenzy had awakened again as the wild personification of a psychic potential restored to life. Nietzsche, Schuler, Stefan George, and Ludwig Klages had anticipated this development. Think about the Wandervogel, the German Youth Movement sacrificing sheep at Solstice and wandering around the countryside in knickerbockers trousers. Jung provided other examples:

The emphasis on the Germanic race (vulgarly called "Aryan"), the Germanic heritage, blood and soil, the Wagalaweia songs, the ride of the Valkyries, Jesus as a blond and blue-eyed hero, the Greek mother of St. Paul, the devil as an international Albrich in Jewish or Masonic guise, the Nordic aurora borealis as the light of civilization, the inferior Mediterranean races—all this is the indispensable scenery for the drama that is

taking place and at bottom they all mean the same thing: a god has taken possession of the Germans and their house is filled with a “mighty rushing wind.”

The word he used, *Ergriffenheit* (“possession”), also refers to strong emotion.

When a man named Alois reached the age of thirty-nine without ever having known his father, he assumed the name of his new stepfather, Hiedler, also spelled “Hitler,” meaning either “shepherd” or “one who lives in a hut.” His son’s name was Adolf, which means “wolf.” It was Adolf who gave long-repressed mythic forces an outlet by twisting images out of Norse mythology—the thunderbolt, the runes, the eagle, the one-armed salute echoing Tyr the one-armed battle god—to his own genocidal purposes. Heinrich Himmler dug up the imagery.

It is fairly common throughout history for a people to give up an outworn mythology for a new one, but forcing them into the new one when the old is still dangerously alive opens a chasm at their feet. For individuals and cultural groups alike, repressing an active dynamism only strengthens it for the day of its eventual, inevitable eruption. Himmler laid out the tinder, and Hitler provided the spark.

In Norse mythology, Ragnarök, the End of the Gods, begins when the Fire Giants, the venomous Midgard Serpent, and the wolf Fenrir invade Asgard, the domain of the gods, for a final accounting. Horns blast, dwarfs shudder, Yggdrasil sways, and “The eagle shrieks, pale-beaked he tears the corpse.” The gods and monsters and giants then kill each other off, all perishing except for a handful of young gods, a daughter of the Sun, a human couple, and one last Aesir god who had died and gone to the Underworld long before the final battle.

When a long-buried myth reactivates, people are enlisted to unconsciously play its parts. Hitler, as a graduate student suggested to me some years ago, played Fenrir the wolf—Führer as Fenrir—even to naming his submarine groups “wolf packs” and his first eastern headquarters the “wolf’s lair.” Neo-Nazis still wear the *Wolfsangel* emblem. Having swallowed Odin, Fenrir was killed by a sword, Hitler by a bullet in his underground hut.

Who was Heidegger mythically?

Perhaps he played Thor, who married the goddess of skiing and swung his giant hammer to crush trolls and giants. Heidegger wrote about hammers, chopped wood and skied for exercise, and tried to “destroy” the legacy of substance metaphysics. Thor’s hammer flashed with lightning; Heidegger’s word “clearing” is cognate with the word for “lightning.” “Only a few,” he writes in his *Contributions*, “stand always in the brightness of this lightning.” One of his students said of his courses that “lightning flashed and left us half dazed.” According to student Georg Picht, Heidegger “lived in a thundery landscape. As we were taking a walk in Hinterzarten during a severe storm, a tree was uprooted ten meters in front of us. That touched me, as if I could then visualize what was going on inside him.” Later Heidegger asked if we can already see the “lightning-flash” of Being in the danger of technology. A philosophical essay dedicated to Heidegger was referred to as a “lightning bolt from the blue.”



Thor fought giants; Heidegger spoke of the struggle against the French coming to collect their Treaty of Versailles compensations as a *gigantomachia*, a war against the giants. He invoked the same image on page one of *Being and Time*. In France he spoke in 1969 at an informal seminar at Le Thor. The threefold distinctions scattered through his writings—to take one example of dozens, that between beings, being itself, and that which gives being to itself—recall the triads in Norse myth, including the *valknut* emblem of Odin, Thor’s father, who stole the mead of poetry from the giants. Heidegger’s description of Germany caught “between pincers” echoes Midgard, the realm of humans also known as Middle Earth. So does his concept of “the between” where world and thing interpenetrate. Dasein is the middle ground between earth and gods.

Young Hannah Arendt compared Professor Heidegger’s quietly growing fame to the “rumor of a hidden king” (Odin’s heir?). But unlike Odin, or even Thor, Heidegger preferred to smash rather than build. His recourse to turgidity, redefinition, and paronomasia recall the elaborate flytings and kennings of the hammer-wielding god. Like Asgard, Heidegger’s hut sat alone on a high place; *Todtnauberg* refers to “mountain,” “newcomer,” and “death.” His talk of bravely facing the “abyss” and “nothingness”\* points not only to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, but also to the primal void of Ginnungagap. Was the extended metaphor of the bridge in “Building Dwelling Thinking” an unconscious reference to Bifrost?

\* How different, Jaspers’ take on this: “In losing the substance of my self I sense Nothingness. In being given to myself I sense the fullness of the Encompassing.”

Thor’s hammer did not always show up as a hammer. Sometimes it was replaced on artwork and in ceremony by another shape: that of a swastika.

Heidegger was wrong, and mad Hölderlin too: the gods never departed. But when they go ignored for too long, they reappear, as Jung observed, as symptoms, pathologies, and psychic contagions, one of which rages as the Ragnarök of blind, aggressive absolutism.

### **Was Heidegger a Deep Ecologist?**

I was frightened when I recently saw photographs of the earth taken from the moon. We don’t need an atom bomb at all; the uprooting of human beings is already taken place.  
—Heidegger’s reaction to “Earthrise,” the famous photo of Earth sent back from space

What are Heidegger’s qualifications for consideration as an early deep ecologist, ecopsychologist, or environmental thinker? In brief:

- His warnings about the dangers of technology and capitalism
- His view of Dasein as opening a clearing to let things be what they are
- His rejection of an instrumental view of nature
- His questioning of our view of ourselves as masters of the world
- His later notion that “things thing”
- His suggestion that dwelling should replace mere building
- His preference of the rural over the urban
- His emphasis on cherishing local roots and traditions

- His later interpretation of *physis* as the power of all-giving nature

The problem with all these claims is that they ignore how roots, land, beings, nature, and earth mattered to Heidegger not for themselves, but as the hallowed origins of greatness, or to use his words, “the soil and blood of the Völk” on its way to reclaim its glorious destiny.

It’s not surprising, then, that Heidegger would look for the saving power of technology in technological thinking as a manifestation of Being, or that he would never renounce his early doctrine that we know the world by manipulating its “ready-to-handness.” Having downgraded to the status of a theoretical construct Husserl’s observation that the things of the world give themselves to us, Heidegger describes in detail a series of cruel experiments with bees to demonstrate that because they get confused when their hives are moved, show disorientation after being trapped in a box, and go on sucking honey even though their abdomens have been cut apart, they are not open (as humans presumably are) to Being, but bound entirely by their environment. Animals have a world, he decides, but remain existentially “world-poor.” They “live, but do not exist.” They have no Dasein. In his “Letter on Humanism” he insists that an abyss separates our existence from our animal kindred. Heidegger never sees this degraded view of animal bee-ing as a projection of his own internal impoverishment.

In the radio address “Creative Landscape: Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?” Heidegger describes the scenery around his hut, but does so through an ideological overlay:

This is my work world...Strictly speaking I myself never observe the landscape. I experience its hourly changes, day and night, in the great comings and goings of the seasons. The gravity of the mountains and the hardness of their primeval rock, the meadows in bloom, the rush of the mountain brook in the long autumn night, the stern simplicity of the flatlands covered with snow—all of this moves and flows through and penetrates daily existence up there, and not in forced moments of “aesthetic” immersion or artificial empathy, but only when one’s own existence stands in its work. It is the work alone that opens up space for the reality that is these mountains.

He sees, not landscape, which he never observes, but only what his philosophy took refuge in from the start: work, hardness, sternness, penetration, gravity, and primality. Not the place itself, of course, for that would be to indulge forced “aestheticism” and artificial empathy. “Earth” for Heidegger means, not plants or animals, but a concealed realm that receives its essence from the “subterranean,” the true ground of thought.

Heidegger’s term *unheimlich* speaks revealingly of his own unmoored restlessness. How could anyone feel secure with world and earth locked in eternal strife? The sole fact of living and working on a plot of land has nothing to do with a bioregional capability for feeling at home on it. If it did, every farmworker, hunter, landscaper, and agribusiness manager would feel at peace in the surround. Heidegger bore a painful and lifelong sensitivity to the difference between dwellers and drifters precisely because his ideology blocked authentic contact with nature, place, and Fatherland (never Motherland!). Little wonder he rejected subjectivity: too rootless, too wayfaring, too worldly. He was, to quote Captain Ahab, who shed one tear for his wasted life before losing it, “damned in the midst of Paradise.”

Heidegger's Ragnarök tells us something important about movements and disciplines designed to draw people into closer contact with the natural world. Deep ecology, ecopsychology, and other nature-centric perspectives are by no means inherently reactionary or ecofascistic; but when they promote local culture at the expense of the regional or international, evade contemporary demands by taking refuge in tradition and heritage, cling to outdated modes of speech and ritual instead of integrating them into new experiments, elevate the rural over the urban as a matter of course, rail against modernity or Judeo-Christianity without seeing their gifts and strengths, retreat into anti-scientism and anti-intellectualism, idealize the indigenous instead of partnering with it, or mistake at-homeness for fixed rootedness, they verge on hardening into reactionary ideologies.

Deep ecology and naturalism appreciate biodiversity and revel in the vast variety of species and cultures. Heidegger did not. His enjoyment is exclusionary. In the 1966 *Spiegel* interview he states, "I know that everything essential, everything great arises from humanity's rootedness in its homeland and tradition." This sounds rustic at first, but when asked if he believed the Germans had specific qualifications for confronting the problems of the modern age, he replied with his usual ethnocentrism: Yes, because of our special inner affinity for the ancient Greeks and their thinking. When the French begin to think, they must speak German, insisting that they can't think with their own language. The interviewer did not see fit to ask Heidegger if he knew any French people who could back this up.

Heidegger's "we" is never Earthcentric; it is the "we" of seers and heroes guarding the privileged Fatherland. In 1969 he states that thinking now requires, not the invention of new terms, as he once thought, but "a return to the primordial content of our own language." (Speaking of language: when asked unexpectedly by admirer Richard Wisser for a response to accusations that he is merely playing with terms, abstractions, and forced etymologies, Heidegger was unable to reply.)

It bears remembering that *Blut und Boden* ("Blood and Soil") was coined, not by a poet, activist, naturalist, or deep ecologist, but by Walther Darré, Hitler's minister of agriculture, for use as a tool of coercive ideology. Those who shout loudest about Fatherland, heartland, Holy Land, and homeland invariably neglect the actual health of soils, waters, and habitats.

Yet how close Heidegger came at times to what he sought, circling all around it without ever settling into it.

In his late book *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* (1969), Heidegger writes that "...The Being of beings has shown itself as the ground (*arche, aition, principle*)." *Arche*: root of the word "archetype." From what archetypal ground emanates the causation of the actual, the objectivity of objects, the dialectic of absolute spirit, the energies of production, and the will to power? Heidegger does not know, but he compares the clearing in which these emanations reach expression to Goethe's *Urphänomen*, the archetypal form within each living being. When Goethe studied plants for long enough with his imagination fully engaged, he saw their forms as gestures of their essential being. He believed this "archetypal" (his word) essence animated all varieties of life. Jung thought of this essence as "soul."

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes a revealing statement on page 56:

The ontic-ontological priority of Dasein was already seen early on, without Dasein itself being grasped in its genuine ontological structure or even becoming a problem with such an aim. Aristotle says, “The soul is in a certain way *all* beings.” The soul (of man) is in a certain way beings.

So Dasein connects to soul. Heidegger switches to Thomas Aquinas, who sought “transcendentals”—nonmaterial characteristics of Being—by “appealing to a being which in conformity with its kind of Being is suited to ‘come together’ with any being whatsoever.”

This distinctive being, “the being whose nature it is to meet with all other beings,” is the soul (*anima*).

Heidegger also refers to “the ‘soul’ which constitutes the Being of man” and discovers the Beingness of other beings. On page 59 he writes about the kind of knowing that “takes itself as the chief exemplification of the soul’s relationship to the world.”

I suspect that, under the philosophic guise of “Being,” empty Heidegger sought his own soul but never found it.

Moreover, he sought the soul of the Earth (*anima terrae*), a sense of animation calling for attention but locked away from him by his belief that only humans were capable of Dasein, of knowing ourselves as living beings. Or, to rely on Heidegger’s own logic, perhaps the *anima terrae* hid from him because he could not appreciate it.

If “Being” deep down really means “soul,” then maybe it’s high time to complement Dasein, “there-being,” with *Hiersein*, “here-being.”

## **Aftermath**

In “The Aleph,” a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Daneri, an inflated and aspiring but mediocre poet, comes into possession of the Aleph: a tiny point in space that when looked into reveals every detail, aspect, and angle of every place, thing, and event in the universe, including the primordial origin of space and time. Instead of sharing this marvel or exhibiting its magnificence for all to see, Daneri keeps it hidden in the cellar so he can use its powers to win poetry contests. He understands the Aleph only enough to get it to help him versify. And so Heidegger with Being/Soul.

As might be expected, his quixotic endeavor for the “subterranean philosophizing” of a primal and pre-rational mode of thought spurred innovative turns of thought as well as bizarre offshoots and imitations. Heidegger’s work influenced that of Camus, Gadamer, Habermas, Sartre (who wrote most of *Being and Nothingness* while high on amphetamines), Merleau-Ponty, Levinas (who said Heidegger unveiled “being” as verb instead of noun), Ricoeur, Foucault, Lacan (cigar and all—*bullshit alert!*), and Derrida (who took “difference” from Heidegger and Saussure, changed the second “e” to an “a,” and made it his business to disagree with everyone while

inverting everything in sight—*bullshit alert!*). The existentialism prompted by Heidegger's writing redirected attention toward existence, death, temporality, anxiety, guilt, despair, and freedom: not labels or abstractions, but how we live.

Heidegger influenced postmodernism, poststructuralism, and a host of thinkers and writers who dreamed forth rich philosophical work without ever suspecting how much of "Heidegger's" thought had arrived, reworked, from elsewhere. Generations of students attempting *Being and Time* gave up on philosophy in disgust, worshipped it as obscure wisdom, or contracted the illness of chronic hyphenation ("re-member," "re-search," and so on *ad nauseum*). For others he dusted off Heraclitus, Parmenides, Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, and Nietzsche and brought them back into relevance.

The work of the first archetypal psychologists to branch off from Jung teems with Heideggerian motifs: Graecophilia, love of convoluted rhetoric, dislike of usefulness, Enlightenment as endarkenment, anti-humanism, avoidance of Roman-Latin culture, criticism of the System (James Hillman: "Let the grid go"), "seeing through" of religion, disparagement of hope, adoration of the subterranean, and impatience with self-analysis and anything too "heroically" ego-oriented or monotheistic. The work of archetypal psychologist Robert Romanyshyn reads off like an extended translation into depth psychology of Heidegger's preoccupations: quotations from Rilke, worship of the poets, the need for descent (à la Orpheus), deep analysis of technology, the image of the mirror, witnessing privileged over direct action, the phenomenologist versus the spectator, diagnosis of space travel as the work of "Homo astronauticus"...

All this aside, it would be sad, although just, if Heidegger's long-term legacy came down to revealing how easily intellectuals are entangled in verbal gyrations, or to demonstrating the disastrous results of being lived unconsciously by a myth. Where Heidegger spoke for only listening to the gods, Gadamer countered, like Jung, by insisting on an active conversation. ("Don't we all run the risk of a terrible intellectual hubris," Gadamer asked, "if we equate Nietzsche's anticipations and the ideological confusion of the present with life as it is actually lived with its own forms of solidarity? Here, in fact, my divergence from Heidegger is fundamental.") Can Heidegger hope for a better legacy?

From a mythic Norse perspective, the Last God standing was Balder, favorite of the Aesir. In his innocence he was slain by shaft of mistletoe, but to good purpose, for it is he who survives Ragnarök. He holds the gentle goodness and bright order waiting at the end of the great war when all the heroes and their enemies have fallen.

Continued by Heidegger, Nietzsche's exaltation of Dionysian rapture, dismemberment, and underworld darkness over Apollonian harmony, objectivity, and order persists in current philosophical and depth-psychological thought, where any move toward clarity or health remains automatically suspect. Once the Ragnarök of these "opposites" pitted against each other finally plays out, will we see a reemergence of brighter Balderian possibilities?

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