

HAROLD FROMM

---

## Wrestling with Heidegger

He who is acquainted with his contingent self is less likely to confuse himself with the heroes of his thinking self. . . . Knowledge of self protects against seduction by power.

—Rüdiger Safranski

**R**üdiger Safranski's biographical/critical study of Martin Heidegger—*Ein Meister aus Deutschland: Heidegger und seine Zeit*—retitled by its translator Ewald Osers as *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*<sup>1</sup>—attempts a more balanced and less polemical treatment of its subject's involvement with National Socialism than we have seen in many of the writings about him in recent years. This Safranski is able to accomplish by directing perhaps three quarters of his attention to Heidegger's works while trying to place both the works and the man within the intellectual and political milieu of early twentieth-century Germany. In certain respects Safranski's book is as difficult as Heidegger himself, since the untangling and restatement of his major opus, *Being and Time*, is an unenviable task. Yet for a dedicated and serious reader, the travail is probably worth it, for even with the biography's frequent obscurity, the net result is a clearer picture of a curious philosophical and psychological phenomenon than we are likely to get for some time. Heidegger lends himself so readily to either rapturous or contemptuous accounts that a sympathetic treatment controlled by irony, as this one is, would appear to be right on target.

Heidegger was born in 1889 in Messkirch and went through traditional Catholic schooling, a spell with the Jesuits, and a curriculum of theology and philosophy. But the skepticism of eternal truths that would eventually lead to his major writings against Western philosophy and humanism turned him away from Catholicism by the time he reached thirty, by which time

<sup>1</sup> MARTIN HEIDEGGER: *Beyond Good and Evil*, by Rüdiger Safranski. Trans. by Ewald Osers. Harvard University Press. \$35.00.

he was married, had a son, and was deeply involved in his academic career. Not long afterwards, he began an affair with a young Hannah Arendt, with whom he retained an on and off philosophical-political-emotional relationship for the rest of his life. As a graduate student he had written on psychologism as well as Duns Scotus, studied with Edmund Husserl, whose phenomenology was at first a major influence, and later produced talks and writing on Aristotle that attracted academic admirers. But his main concern from early on was ontology, the nature of "being," the subject of all his major works and many of his classes at the University of Freiberg and elsewhere. So it seems best to begin an exposition of Heidegger at this point, though it's hard to think any summary of this corpus can achieve in several pages what Safranski can just barely pull off in four hundred.

Heidegger's personality was religious and mystical, utopian and moralistic, and—unsurprisingly—thoroughly undemocratic. He was disenchanted with nineteenth-century science and its legacy of positivism and rationalism, which, like the Frankfurt School thinkers whom he later influenced (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse), he experienced as a smothering of individual subjectivity by corporate, technological, and pop culture megastructures. At first, he thought the phenomenology of Husserl, with its focus on the way subjectivity produces a world, could be construed as an escape route from the alienated life of bureaucratic, post-Enlightenment culture. And then he raised his hopes on faith and logic. But all these methodologies quickly seemed devious masks of the temporal rather than routes to the eternal, an eternal that he gradually saw as itself an evasion of the lived experience of daily life. Even Hegel's historicism, which discovers the transcendent behind the concretions of historical events, gave him only short-lived solace. In the final analysis, it was "haecceitas," the "thisness" of lived experience, that formed the basis of all his subsequent thinking and served as precursor to his key philosophical term, "Dasein," or "being there," a term which he generally used to mean human beings plunked down in a world empty of meaning, a void, the Nothing, which acquired its significance through whatever quality of being each person could achieve. In an important lecture to his students, he tried to show how the very lectern at which he spoke was experienced as a cumulative affective embeddedness in our subjective lives, as a

piece of "world," not as substance with objective qualities superimposed in the manner of scientific or traditional empirical philosophic analysis. The sciences, like Platonism and its legacy, de-experience things by treating existence in time as irrational and insisting that the real reality can be described in objective, supra-temporal terms. Just as his departure from Catholicism was an attempt, as Safranski puts it, to snatch life back from a false Beyond, his repudiation of Western metaphysics and science was an attempt to snatch life back from a false abstractionism that transformed the feel of living into verbal constructs pretending to represent a so-called real world. But this real world was in fact constructed from systems of thought and truth that were themselves products of history and derived their meaning and significance from human thinking, traditions, and culture, as opposed to God or "Reason." "The radical idea of historicity," Safranski remarks, "destroys any universalist claim to validity."

*Being and Time*, published in 1927 and never completed (but already much too long in its stupefying multiplication of psychological terms) "develops the philosophical proof that human existence, *Dasein*, has no other support than this *da*, this there-ness. In a sense, [Heidegger] continues Nietzsche's work: to think the death of God and criticize the 'last humans' (Nietzsche) who make do with pitiful substitute gods and do not even permit appalled horror over the disappearance of God." Employing more neologisms than anyone could have imagined, often used in sentences of an impenetrably numinous obscurity that, perversely enough, "enhanced its aura," *Being and Time* eventually gave birth to the Sartrean existentialism and Frankfurt School cultural critique that by now have calcified into little more than another step in the evolution of Western rationalism. As Richard Rorty points out (in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*<sup>2</sup>), Heideggerian analysis depends on the use of metaphorical language that shakes up conventional "objective" categories while intensifying subjective experience. Metaphor leaves "truth" open to endless reformulations, encouraging a constant reconfiguration of what is experienced as reality. But once the novelty of the metaphors wears off they turn into a lingua franca of the sort that Adorno later characterized as "The Jargon of Authenticity." The attempt

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1991.

to overturn Western rationality in favor of the concrete there-ness of the Now would seem destined to fail, since all new vital sentences necessarily end up on the trash heap of worn-out truth-systems and ultimately produce yet another alienation from so-called authentic being.

Using terms like “worlding,” “thrownness,” “concern,” “care,” “being-towards-death,” “ready-to-hand,” “present-at-hand,” *aletheia* (unconcealment), *Being and Time* does not lend itself to a terse summary in its own often inscrutable vocabulary. Instead, it seems more profitable to generalize by saying that it presents a picture of “authentic” human existence as created by the burning off of everything adventitious that detracts from the intensest experience of one’s self. This means that Heidegger is little concerned with nature, society, politics, and other people, the mass of whom he characterizes as the “They,” the *mobile vulgus* (not his term) manipulated by popular culture, politics, and orthodox opinions. “Thrown” into the world at birth, each individual experiences “anxiety” about meaning and death, which drives him to connect with the “They” for solace while ignoring those “moments of being” (familiar as well from Nietzsche, Proust, and Virginia Woolf) that reveal the essence of what it feels like truly to exist, to *be* authentically in the world. “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself,” writes Heidegger. Yet he does not explain how it could be possible to peel away all the layers of culture-driven adventitiousness and still have as residue an authentic self. And today, when the whole notion of a self is in disfavor, the question of authenticity becomes even more problematic. For if a thing is authentic only by reference to the inauthentic and if everything is ultimately a human construct, a social agreement, how could anything be more authentic than anything else when we are all constructed from the materials of the “They”? Where would we find a purified “self” to experience this authenticity, since all the categories of selfhood derive from “inauthentic” universalist discourse?

Intense immersion in the experience of one’s own being in time enables *Dasein* to capitalize on its anxiety in order to transform the Nothing—the void of meaning in which human life takes place—into moments of transcendence. Being, as it turns out, *is* Time, and the task of thinking is to make humans sensitive to its passage, to forego reifications and hypostatizations and

recognize that only this moment is *there*. As Safranski remarks, "There is no truth in the sense of some great unknown X that we approach in an infinite progression, to which we match our statements in an ever more appropriate and correct manner; there is only the active 'discussion' with that-which-is. . . ." One can see why Rorty found Heidegger so congenial to his pragmatism and wherefrom he derived his own now famous phrase, "the conversation of mankind." Conversation *makes* truths that serve their turn until they cease to be useful, whereupon they are replaced by new metaphorical statements.

Although he became obsessed with the Greeks and had a lot to say about Plato's cave and the philosopher-king who leads mankind out of atavistic life, these are Greeks reconstructed to serve Heidegger's own purposes. The Platonic liberator, returning to the cave after seeing the light, now has a mission "to set a new truth happening into motion for a whole community and to create a new truth relationship" and, adds Safranski, it may even take violence to bring about the new dispensation. Enter the intoxicated twentieth-century philosopher with a fascistic bent, who "intends to be the herald of a historical-political and, simultaneously, philosophical epiphany." At this juncture, Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism seems almost predetermined, and the inevitable question, to use Safranski's chapter title, "Was Heidegger a Nazi?"

Heidegger's quest for authentic being, his dissatisfaction with the disorder of the Weimar Republic, and his anti-democratic contempt for the They were fertile soil for the growth of messianic sentiments. National Socialism in general and Hitler in particular intimated a deliverance from wishy-washy democracy through the re-establishment of a potent German blood, spirit, and nation that would countervail over spiritually bankrupt American technology and grubbily calculating Russian communism. Somehow, confusing political with philosophic categories, Heidegger believed the arrival of Hitler marked a critical stage in the history of Being, capable of providing authenticity to a rudderless culture as a whole. In a most enlightening entry in the diary of Hermann Mörchen quoted by Safranski, we find a plausible explanation of Heidegger's immersion in National Socialism: "I would never have believed it, but it is not really surprising. He doesn't understand much about politics, and that

is probably why his detestation of all mediocre halfness lets him expect great things of the party that promises to do something decisive and, above all, effectively to oppose communism. . . . That was why a dictatorship that does not shrink from draconian measures must be approved." Today's consensus is that Heidegger was politically an ignoramus, a bemused philosopher who failed to distinguish between an ideal world of thought and a real world of sordid politics that was light-years away from utopia.

In May of 1933, Heidegger joined the Nazi party and somehow became rector of Freiburg University, where he had been teaching as Husserl's successor since 1928. In both his rectorial address and a eulogy he delivered for a Nazi killed in the line of duty, Heidegger speaks about historical events in the preposterous language of *Being and Time*, treating political revolution as though it were spiritual conquest. With babe-in-the-woods fervor, he downgraded the scholarship of his academic colleagues and spurred them on to what we now regard as political correctness, the willingness to lie and misrepresent in the interests of practical goals. "For Heidegger," Safranski writes, "the Nazi revolution is the attempt to 'give birth to a star' in a godless world. That is why he pulls out all the stops of his metaphysical penny-dreadful romanticism to lend events an unsuspected profundity," addressing his audience of colleagues and their wives as "metaphysical shock troop[s]." Although for a while the Nazis were pleased with Heidegger's half-incomprehensible ravings, it was inevitable that they would soon regard him as a demented political naif. His relationship with Hannah Arendt became increasingly rocky (she did, after all, write *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), and intellectuals outside Germany, like Benedetto Croce, saw him as "stupid and servile . . . vacuous and general." His colleagues at the university regarded him as a "radical visionary gone wild" because of his inability to distinguish political from philosophical reality and his willingness to trash the very sort of serious scholarship that he himself had always produced. Only a year after assuming the rectorship, disparaged and disillusioned, recognizing too late that National Socialism was just another instance of corrosive political power, in truth not nearly radical enough, Heidegger resigns. For the rest of his life, sometimes with a wily lack of candor, he tries to distance himself from the biggest blunder he ever made.

In light of Safranski's well-documented account, Rorty's de-

scription of Heidegger as “only accidentally a Nazi” seems plausible. Like the American academics who—much more successfully—felt flushed with power by their participation in Kennedy’s Camelot, but (unlike them) poorly grounded in the everyday world of sociology, political science, and economics, Heidegger was a dupe in an extended *double entendre* that made it appear he and the Nazis were talking about the same thing. Although he did a lot of harm to fellow academics, wrote horrible letters of betrayal to the authorities, and averted his eyes from innocent people who were destroyed by the Nazi machine, although he was far from inculpable and often unendurably obnoxious, although at times he was little less than a madman, he receives a good deal of understanding from Safranski’s equitable retrospective. An entire chapter is devoted to “Is Heidegger Anti-Semitic?” to which Safranski’s reply is “Certainly not in the sense of the ideological lunacy of the Nazis.” There are no anti-Semitic remarks in his writings or speeches, he defends Jewish professors, and he objected to ideological anti-Semitism. Still, Arendt was highly critical of his behavior, provoking an infuriated self-defense in one of the rounds of their correspondence. She was not unjustified, for Safranski notes that Heidegger did indeed distinguish between Germans and German Jews and defended (to quote Heidegger himself) “bringing genuine autochthonous forces and educators into our German spiritual life” while opposing a “growing Judaization.” And he averted his eyes from the Holocaust. But on the scale of Nazi barbarism, Heidegger comes off as very small potatoes.

Heidegger’s gradual disillusionment with National Socialism was of a piece with his aversion to technology, government, and bureaucratic organization as conduits away from authenticity. By the end of the thirties, he reverts to his traditional role as thinker, turning to poetry and art while shifting emphasis from *Dasein* to language, which he refers to as the house of Being. This consuming idea of Being and the “experience of Being,” although never really clarified by Heidegger himself, is treated again and again by Safranski, most helpfully as “the inexhaustibility of reality” wherein “man discovers himself and his play space. He is not captured or trapped in the existent,” he becomes “the place of the self-visibility of Being.” Yet as Heidegger becomes more and more numinous in his overdetermined readings of poetry in

general and Hölderlin in particular, Being takes on the aura of a godterm, gradually sounding like the very sort of substance he had been at great pains to deconstruct in earlier years as “metaphysical.”

In 1945, when “denazification” proceedings were instituted by the Allies, Heidegger was raked through the coals for his Nazified appeals to the student body while rector, his dedication to “the führer principle,” his political denigrations of the scholarly functions of university professors. As punishment, he was forced to resign from the university and to abstain from teaching, although eventually he was allowed to return as what we would call a visiting professor. Throughout these proceedings, Heidegger felt no guilt, his view remaining that he had believed National Socialism to be a metaphysical revolution, from which he had detached himself once its true nature became apparent, although he did admit some shame for his brief collaboration—which he attributed to delusion. But in 1966, when he was interviewed, rather tactfully, by *Der Spiegel*, he failed to allude to the worst aspects of his collaboration and made his role seem “more harmless than it was.” As Safranski reminds us over again, Heidegger’s worst silence about his participation in the events of the early thirties was his silence about himself, “about the philosopher’s seducibility by power. He too . . . failed to ask the one question: Who am I really when I am thinking?” What Heidegger could not see (as Safranski goes on to explain in the passage I have used as epigraph above) was the contingency of his own self in time and place and the influence of that contingency on his thoughts and acts, lifting the thinker out of the realm of pure innocent thinking and implicating him in the ethos and events of his time. One of his philosophy’s most influential concepts was the contingency of truth in Western metaphysics and the desirability of raising oneself out of socially constructed reality into the thisness of the moment of Being. But he was unable to apply these insights to himself as thinking subject.

The relationship between Arendt and Heidegger continued until his death in 1976, but the two thinkers remained fractious, antagonistic, distrustful, even—on her part—condemnatory, though she never ceased to adore him. For her, his “authentic self” had taken on the function of a selfish, dishonest, solipsistic god while ignoring the essentially social nature of human exist-



tence. As she herself put it, "What, consequently, appears as 'Fall' in Heidegger are all those modes of existence which rest on the fact that Man lives together in the world with his fellows." To reject the ordinary world of the "They" is to reject everything that is human and to flirt with the fascism of the superman.

In the final analysis, Heidegger's contribution to twentieth-century philosophy was great, hammering conclusive nails into the coffin of Western metaphysics, destabilizing the imputed objectivity of rational thought, reaffirming Kierkegaard's notion that truth is subjectivity, and denigrating the modern world's instrumentality, its genius for transmuting *Dasein* into the They. But his attempt to shed light on the "experience of Being" seems to me a case of reinventing the wheel. For since the beginnings of civilization people have intuitively known the secret of intense participation in "moments of being" without the need for a psychological road map, which Heidegger doesn't supply in any case. The most powerful and richly rewarding experiences in human life are those devoid of representation, meaning, and practicality, experiences that lead to nothing but themselves and mean nothing more than the emotional force of their own intensity. Of these, the Big Three would appear to be music, sports, and sex, activities in which, so to speak, you can't tell the dancer from the dance. Once conscious reflection upon representational content enters the picture, we're back in the world of means and ends, of righteousness, aggrandizement, victory, and similar nasty things. Purest being (if you're looking for such a thing) lies in the squelching of the ratiocinative, calculating, purposeful, alienating self. Heidegger's turn toward the arts was a recognition of this, but he ought to have turned to music (for Schopenhauer a "thing in itself") rather than poetry, which is inevitably compromised by meaning, by its attempt to represent a world. Representation is goal-oriented, instrumental, not content to rest within the power of its own formalities. As truths come and go, the power of representational arts waxes and wanes as their correspondence with "reality" becomes more or less adequate, in accordance with the needs of the times. Music says, represents, nothing, and its adequacies are formal, biological, above the flux. Even programmatic music must have a life beyond its program, beholden to the hidden formalities of the body and the rhythms of the psyche rather than to the truths of the world.

In the past few months I've been buying piles of compact disks, usually of music I've owned on LP's but often works, or at least performances, I've never heard before. The other day I acquired my fourth recording of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which I have been listening to over the course of forty-eight years, since the very first one that I bought in 1950 and which I heard almost every day, until I knew it by heart, when the *real* pleasure begins. Hearing this splendid new performance by Helmuth Rilling with his excellent singers and whiny old instruments (though it's not aggressively "authentic"), I once again experienced the ecstatic self-transcendence that this astounding masterpiece never fails to produce in me. Here was a moment of being that lasted almost three hours. But, on a lesser scale, even the opening six minute *Ricercar a tre* (done on a harpsichord) from a new recording of Bach's *Musical Offering* threw me for a loop, banishing all thoughts about getting or spending, or what I needed to do for dinner.

As for the many people for whom demanding music won't produce its magic, there's sports, of course (the aspect of winning, however, seems detrimental). The throw, the hit, the axel, the dive—the exhilarated viewer becomes one with the movement and skill, like the dancer with the dance. So if one can't cut it with Bach, there's always Michael Jordan. And when all else fails, there's sex, nowadays (with birth control and porno videos) less instrumental than ever before. And though I wouldn't put sex on the same plane as Bach, in this game of Being you've got to take what you can get.