Heidegger at Freiburg, 1933

by Roger Kimball

Near the end of April, 1933, Martin Heidegger was elected rector of Freiburg University. At the same time, from May, 1933, until his resignation of the rectorate the following February, he was also a member of the Nazi party. Heidegger was then in his mid-forties. His early work, culminating in the epochal Being and Time (1927)—one of the most difficult, influential, and certainly one of the most controversial books of philosophy produced in this century—lay behind him. Ahead lay equally formidable essays on language, art, and technology, as well as numerous essays and monographs on key figures in the Western philosophical tradition, from Parmenides and Anaximander to Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

Though he has as many detractors as devotees, Heidegger is without doubt among the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. He is a pervasive force in contemporary theology, psychology, and literary criticism as well as in philosophy. Among his contemporaries, only Wittgenstein rivals him in the depth and extent of his influence. And despite his sometimes forbiddingly abstruse language, there is something uniquely sagelike about Heidegger. Philosophy for him was no merely intellectual pursuit. It was a clarion to “authentic being,” a quest for meaning.

In Being and Time, Heidegger sought to raise the question of meaning in the most fundamental and far-reaching way by asking “What is the meaning of Being?” Words like “authenticity,” “guilt,” “fallenness,” and “resolve” abound in the book, imbuing it with an edifying, quasi-religious aura. His avowed atheism—Heidegger followed Nietzsche in affirming that “God is dead”—only added to the effect. His impassioned grappling with the void made his philosophy seem piquantly spiritual and yet up-to-date, a continuation of religion by other means.

In later essays, Heidegger adopted a more lyrical, if no less edifying, manner. Increasingly, he turned to poets—especially to Hölderlin, Trakl, and Rilke—for clues to the meaning of Being. But he also pondered such existentially fertile problems as the vocation of art in the modern age, the uncertain future of philosophy, and the threat posed to modern man by the dominance of science and technological thinking. In an age when philosophy often seemed to be little more than an elaborate
conceptual game, divorced from man’s deepest concerns, Heidegger’s meditations promised new life for philosophy and won him a large and enthusiastic following.

All this—Heidegger’s prestige as a thinker, his enormous influence, his attention to the problem of authenticity—make his assumption of the Freiburg rectorate and association with the Nazis in 1933 extremely disturbing. One might object that no one could have foretold the barbarous character of the Nazi regime that early. After all, the invasion of Poland was nearly six years away, the Kristallnacht nearly five. But by the end of April, 1933, when Heidegger took office, it was later than we might like to imagine. Hitler had become chancellor of a coalition cabinet in the disintegrating Weimar Republic on January 30. It is true that he did not achieve full control of the government until after the death of Hindenburg in July, 1934. But he managed to eliminate any real opposition almost immediately. By the end of February he had enacted an emergency decree, “For the Protection of the People and the State,” that effectively suspended civil rights. In April, he enacted legislation for the reconstruction of the civil service that called for the summary retirement of all civil servants of “non-Aryan” descent. He had thus embarked at once on his program of Gleichschaltung, of “unification” or reconstruction, which aimed at bringing all aspects of German life, not least German academic life, into line with the ideals of the National Socialist state. In March of 1933, a fitting symbol of those ideals appeared near Dachau: the Nazi’s first concentration camp was publicly opened under the direction of “Acting Police-President of the City of Munich,” Heinrich Himmler.

What does it mean that a thinker of Heidegger’s stature, a thinker who challenges the superficiality and blindness of this “dark age,” who searchingly traces the course of Western thought in order to glean some hints of man’s ethos and place in the world—what does it mean that this philosopher should emerge as rector of Freiburg University at the very moment when everything that the German university stood for was being swept away in a frenzy of revolution? What was his involvement with the Nazis? What connections, if any, are there between his thought and the National Socialist ideology? And what are the implications of Heidegger’s behavior during and after the rectorate for the moral authority of his philosophy?

The publication of two central documents from that period in Heidegger’s career provides an apt occasion to consider these questions. Both “The Self-Assertion of the German University,” the address that Heidegger delivered in May, 1933, to mark his assumption of the rectorate, and “The Rectorate 1933/34. Facts and Thoughts,” an apologia that he wrote in 1945, appear for the first time in English in the current (March 198j) issue of the philosophical quarterly, The Review of Metaphysics.[1] Together with Heidegger’s 1966 interview for the German newsweekly Der Spiegel,[2] these pieces are perhaps the best introduction to the significance of Heidegger’s political engagement as rector of Freiburg University.

The chronology of Heidegger’s rectorate can be quickly summarized. Wilhelm von Möllendorf, a
distinguished anatomist, had himself only just taken up the office on April 16, 1933. But as a Social
Democrat, Möllendorf was unacceptable to the new regime and was forced out almost immediately.
Heidegger tells us that he agreed to succeed him only very reluctantly; he had had virtually no
administrative experience and was politically unaffiliated. “Thus it was uncertain,” he writes in
“Facts and Thoughts,” “whether those at the center of political power would listen to me and to what
seemed to me necessity and task.” But though he had not previously belonged to any political party,
Heidegger consented to join the Nazi party soon after he assumed the rectorate. He claims in “Facts
and Thoughts” that he joined “only in the interest of the university” and on “the expressly
acknowledged condition that I would never take on a party office or engage in any party activity.”
And as it happened, Heidegger’s own tenure, both as a party member and as rector, was brief. His
repeated defiance of official policy—he appointed Jewish deans, for example, prohibited the posting
of the so-called “Jew Notice” on university property, and forbade a scheduled book burning of
“decadent” literature—quickly led him into conflict with Nazi authorities. Matters came to a head
near the end of February 1934. Heidegger was asked to remove two deans he had appointed,
Möllendorf, who was dean of medicine, and Erik Wolf, dean of law. He refused. Just ten months after
he became rector, Heidegger resigned in protest, withdrawing from any further involvement in
university, or national, politics.

These features of Heidegger’s rectorate—its brevity, its frequent opposition to Nazi policy—have
prompted many to come forward in his defense. Hannah Arendt, for example, writes in her
anniversary essay, “Heidegger at Eighty,” that Heidegger “corrected his own ‘error’ more quickly
and more radically than many of those who later sat in judgment over him—he took considerably
greater risks than were usual in German literary and university life during that period.”[3] And it
should also be noted that at no time was Heidegger simply a Nazi ideologue. Arendt attributes his
association with the Nazis more to a déformation professionelle than to any programmatic ideology. An
“attraction to the tyrannical,” she rightly observes, “can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the
great thinkers” from Plato on down. (She singles out Kant as the great exception.) Indeed—though
this does nothing to exonerate the “great thinkers” from any political malfeasance they may be guilty
of—it is probably the case that the attraction is generally not to the tyrannical as such but to the order
and unity that tyranny promises. Heidegger’s own understanding of Fascism, Arendt suggests,
derived more from the Italian futurists than from National Socialism. In this context, she claims that
Heidegger never read Mein Kampf, though naturally one must wonder to what extent he could have
been unaware of its contents. But it is true that the racial policies that formed the core of the Nazi
ideology played no part in Heidegger’s thought or in his handling of the rectorate. His appointment
of Jewish deans, admission of Jewish students to his classes, and continued relations with Jewish
colleagues after he became rector make allegations of anti-Semitism insupportable.

Furthermore, as Heidegger was quick to point out, the Nazis were from the beginning uneasy about
his allegiance. His rectoral address was even considered subversive by some. As its very title
suggests, “The Self-Assertion of the German University” proclaimed the spiritual autonomy of academic life. The university, Heidegger insisted, must be allowed to govern itself. “Self-governance means: to set our own task, to determine ourselves the way and manner in which it is to be realized, so that thus we shall be what we ought to be.” Of course none of this accorded with the Nazi dictum of absolute submission to the state.

Also, for all its talk of leadership, there was no mention of the leader, of Hitler, in the address; neither was there mention of National Socialism. And Heidegger pointedly declared that genuine leadership must recognize the autonomy and freedom of those who follow. “All leading must grant the body of followers its own strength. All following, however, bears resistance within itself. This essential opposition of leading and following must not be obscured, let alone eliminated.” But perhaps most remarkably, the crucial concept of race did not figure in Heidegger’s address at all. It is perhaps also worth noting that the Nazis had the address withdrawn from circulation soon after Heidegger resigned the rectorate. Subsequently, many of Heidegger’s works, including *Being and Time*, were banned or restricted by the Nazis. After his resignation, Heidegger was as a matter of course put under surveillance; he was excluded from German delegations to philosophical meetings; and his work was publicly excoriated by party hacks. Finally, in 1944, he was judged one of the “most dispensable” scholars and was sent briefly to the Upper Rhine to dig trenches.

Still, there are many complications in the story and aftermath of Heidegger’s rectorate. Some are trivial. For example, Heidegger claims that his acceptance of the rectorate was conditional upon his being elected by a unanimous vote—which, he claims, the plenum of the university vouchsafed him. But the German historian Hugo Ott maintains that Heidegger fell three votes short of unanimity. In both the *Spiegel* interview and “Facts and Thoughts,” Heidegger presents himself as a selfless champion of the “essence of the German university,” above infighting and petty academic politics. He accepted the rectorate, he tells us, solely for the good of the university and then only on the repeated urging of his colleagues Möllendorf and Joseph Sauer, Möllendorf’s immediate predecessor as rector. But it appears that Möllendorf and Sauer harbored considerably more qualms about Heidegger’s qualifications—and ambitions—for the rectorate than he admits. According to Ott, for example, Sauer writes in his diary that a mutual colleague, Walter Eucken, came to him to complain about Heidegger “acting solely for his own interests according to the Führer system. He clearly feels that he is the born philosopher and spiritual Führer of the new movement, the only great and towering thinker since Heraclitus.”

Throughout his remarks about the rectorate Heidegger suggests that he maintained a careful distance from the party leadership. But Ott cites a telegram from Heidegger to Hitler, dated May 20, 1933, in which Heidegger circumvents the usual channels of appeal in order to petition for a postponement of a planned reception for university leaders “until such time as the *Gleichschaltung*”—which he noted was especially necessary at Freiburg—could be completed, presumably to strengthen his own
position among the rectors.[4] While it is difficult to sort through the convoluted details of Heidegger’s rectorate, it does appear that his motives in accepting the office were not as divorced from ordinary academic politics and power-grabbing as he would have us believe. In fact, it is plausible to conjecture that Heidegger, having finally decided to throw himself into university politics, aimed at becoming the Führer of university Führers, the spiritual leader of the entire German university system.

Yet charges of Heidegger’s opportunism or careerism—though not, I think, without substance—are in the end of secondary importance. For they fail to address the two really disturbing aspects of his political behavior: his persistent blindness to the evil of Nazism during his rectorate and his retreat to utter political quietism in subsequent years. Both permanently compromise Heidegger’s authority as a moral or even (given his understanding of philosophy) a philosophical inspiration.

Heidegger’s blindness to the reality of Hitler’s reign is evident even in the terms he used to describe his goals for the rectorate. As Heidegger saw it, the task facing the university in 1913 was to overcome the fragmentation and artificial division among disciplines that overspecialization had created. In his view, opposition from the entrenched old guard of the university, who would seek to preserve the status quo, was just as much a threat to the spiritual mission of the university as were the Nazis, whose idea of reform was to politicize the very idea of scholarship. “What let me hesitate until the very last day to assume the rectorate,” he wrote in “Facts and Thoughts,”

was the knowledge that with what I intended I would necessarily run into a twofold conflict with both the “new” and the “old.” The “new” meanwhile had appeared in the form of “political [that is, “politicized”] science,” the very idea of which rests on a falsification of the essence of truth. The “old” was the effort to remain responsible to one’s “specialty,” to help advance it and to utilize such advance in instruction .... There was thus the danger that both the “new” and the “old,” opposed as they were to one another, would equally fight my attempt and make it impossible.... It was never my intention to realize only party doctrines and to act in accord with the “idea” of a “political science.” But I was equally unwilling to defend only what had been established, and, by merely mediating and smoothing disagreements, to level everything and keep it in mediocrity.

Simply as a piece of rhetoric, this passage invites scrutiny. One notes, for instance, the distanced, sanitized effect that Heidegger achieves by referring abstractly to “the ’new’” (the quotation marks are essential) when he means the Nazi program for a politicized scholarship. The elevated, academic language, with its careful balancing of this against that, materially contributes to the appearance of disinterestedness.

But there is something very wrong here. How can the problem of academic “mediocrity” be accorded equal weight with the brutality of Hitler’s program? In accepting the rectorate, Heidegger apparently hoped to regenerate the university, steering it on a course relatively free from the rebarbative
elements of Nazi influence. In this he might seem to have been guilty of an extraordinary naivete. In fact, though, his entire performance displays less a naiveté than a willed blindness. For by April of 1933 there could be no doubt about the impact of Nazism on German cultural life. Scholars, scientists, and artists were fleeing Germany in droves: Adorno, Albers, Brecht, Cassirer (himself the rector of Hamburg University from 1930-1933), the brothers Mann, Einstein, Panofsky, Tillich—they and scores of others emigrated from Germany in 1933. It is inconceivable that Heidegger could have been unaware of this exodus or of its cause. For one invested as Heidegger was not only with the institutional authority of the rectorate but also with the far weightier authority of his reputation as a philosopher, acquiescence amounted to complicity. In a situation so pregnant with consequence, his blindness was not merely a failure of insight. It is perhaps in just this sense that Plato meant us to equate evil with ignorance. Heidegger’s hope of reforming the university under the aegis of Nazism tokened a moral as well as an intellectual failure.

Moreover, whatever Heidegger’s agenda for the university, he was not above engaging in the most blatant propaganda. Among his more loathsome efforts in this direction was an adjuration on behalf of Hitler that appeared in the Freiburg student newspaper in November, 1933: “Precepts and ideas are not now the rules of your being,” he declared, “the Führer is your one and only present and future German reality and law.” How can that jibe with his insistence on the autonomy of the university? In the *Spiegel* interview, Heidegger suggests that such statements were merely necessary compromises, compromises whose seriousness was not evident because the Nazis had not yet revealed the scope of their plans for Germany and enemies of the Reich. “When I took the rectorate over,” he told the *Spiegel* interviewers, “I knew I couldn’t get by without compromises. I would not write those sentences today. I wouldn’t have said them anymore by 1934.” (The Roehm purge, in which Hitler had one hundred and fifty of his political opponents murdered, took place in June and July of 1934.) But given Heidegger’s insistence on autonomy and the necessary tension between leader and follower, such statements are more than tactical concessions. In affirming Hitler as “the one and only present and future German reality and law,” Heidegger did not compromise for the sake of his ideals; he compromised his ideals themselves.

And if there are passages of the rectoral address that assert the independence of the university and the dignity of its intellectual vocation, passages that led some Nazis to question its ideological allegiance, there are also numerous passages that shamelessly pander to the party line. In fact, one often finds apparently conflicting sentiments coexisting side by side in the same paragraph. “To give the law to oneself is the highest freedom,” Heidegger affirms, sounding like Kant; but he then explains how this “highest freedom” is to be realized:

> The much celebrated “academic freedom” is being banished from the German university; for this freedom was not genuine, since it was only negative. It meant primarily freedom from concern, arbitrariness of
intentions and inclinations, lack of restraint in what was done and left undone. The concept of the freedom of the German student is now brought back to its truth. Henceforth the bond [Bindung] and service of the German student will unfold from this truth.

It is possible, of course, to take Heidegger’s side and argue that “real” freedom, academic or otherwise, is not arbitrariness and “freedom from concern” but rather consists in an insight into and compliance with the underlying nature of reality. Freedom is to be opposed not to necessity but to mere caprice, accident, spontaneity. As Heidegger put it in “The Origin of the Work of Art”: “He who truly knows what is knows what he wills to do in the midst of what is.” But who can claim truly to know what is? And who, listening to this address in 1933, would harken to such subtlety? What mattered to Heidegger’s audience was not talk of “giving the law to oneself” but banishing the “much celebrated academic freedom” from the German university. Whatever its objective validity, in the historical context Heidegger’s argument is sophistry, a use of truth to propagate deception.

But in attempting to understand why Heidegger would indenture himself to the cause of Hitler’s regime, we should not underestimate his genuine attraction to certain aspects of National Socialism. Its romantic conjuring of the destiny of an historical people rooted to a particular place by work, tradition, and shared values had a particular appeal for him. It was primarily Heidegger’s sense of his own mission on behalf of the spiritual welfare of the German nation that led him into collaboration with the Nazis. He began his rectoral address by asserting that his assumption of the office was a commitment to the “spiritual leadership” of the German university. Such leadership must have the courage and insight to will the “essence of the German university,” and thus to realize “that unyielding spiritual mission that forces the fate of the German people to bear the stamp of its history.”

As Karsten Harries has shown in his essay on “Heidegger as a Political Thinker,”[5] “The Self-Assertion of the German University” is a pivotal document in the evolution of Heidegger’s political thought. It looks back to the analysis of authenticity in Being and Time, forward to Heidegger’s understanding of community in An Introduction to Metaphysics and “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Hence the similarity between the rhetoric of the rectoral address and the rhetoric of National Socialism is not accidental or merely a product of Heidegger’s efforts at propaganda. Rather, it has its foundation in Heidegger’s own romantic view of the tasks of the university and function of the state. It is here that we find decisive affinities between Heidegger’s philosophy and the tenets of National Socialism. Despite the individualism implicit in his concept of authenticity, Heidegger consistently held that true freedom demands the integration of the individual into the historical community, the Volk. The spiritual world that the university is called upon to forge is, he writes in a phrase that chillingly recalls the Nazis’ Blut und Boden (blood and earth) rhetoric, the “power that most deeply preserves a people’s strengths, which are tied to earth and blood.” In “Facts and Thoughts,” Heidegger wrote that he
saw in the movement that had gained power the possibility of an inner recollection and renewal of the people and a path that would allow it to discover its historical vocation in the Western world. I believed that, renewing itself, the university might also be called to contribute to this inner self-collection of the people, providing it with a measure .... The rectorate was an attempt to see in the “movement” that had come to power, beyond all its failings and crudities, something that reached much farther and that might some day bring about a gathering of what is German unto the historical essence of the West.

Of course, it is difficult for us to see the connection between Hitler’s murderous regime and Heidegger’s dream of “an inner recollection and renewal” of the German people. It is now clear that the essence of Nazism did not lie somewhere behind its “failings and crudities,” as Heidegger euphemistically put it. Its failings and crudities—indeed, its unmitigated brutality and crimes—were the essence that Hitler’s rhetoric and a damaged nation’s powerful will to believe somehow managed to conceal. It is thus easy to understand how Erich Heller could preface an essay on Heidegger and Holderlin with the angry charge that

again and again, in speeches, pronouncements, and official letters he verbally behaved as if, with the arrival of Hitler, Being had unexpectedly and triumphantly returned to Time choosing as its vessel the German nation ... [W]hat Heidegger did in 1933 came close to announcing the bankruptcy of a philosopher and a philosophy, a total failure of the intuition of Being without which his philosophy would be as nothing.[6]

In reflecting on Heidegger’s actions at this time, however, it is important to remind ourselves of how mesmerizing Hitler could be. Heidegger was far from being alone in his misplaced hopes. Though he articulated those hopes in more elevated terms than the ordinary German, he, too, saw in Hitler a way out of the economic and social morass in which Germany found itself in the late Twenties and early Thirties. Like many Germans—and distinguished statesmen and journalists outside Germany—Heidegger was seduced by Hitler’s promise of national renewal. The Nazis’ militarism and anti-Jewish sentiments were perfectly apparent to anyone who cared to look, but the very enormity of their plans for social engineering made it easy to dismiss them as impossible. As late as the winter of 1934, many moderate German politicians were convinced that Hitler could be “contained” and manipulated to do their bidding.

Unfortunately, such reflections do not exonerate Heidegger from the charge of collaboration with the Nazis. Nor do they excuse his subsequent evasiveness about his statements and actions as rector. Indeed, Heidegger’s evasiveness and obfuscations, patent throughout his retrospective interpretations of the rectorate, contribute greatly to making the entire episode so repugnant.

Germany’s students, Heidegger correctly observes in the rectoral address, were “on the march.” Their “bond” to the new order would henceforth express itself in a threefold service to the community: in labor service, armed service, and “knowledge” service. The three are said to be “equally primordial,”
but Heidegger writes that in the future armed service will “encompass and penetrate the entire being of the student.”

Some commentators have pointed out that Heidegger’s notion of the three services here alludes to Plato’s discussion of the three parts of the soul in *The Republic*. No doubt this is true. But it is also irrelevant. As Professor Harries notes apropos this passage in “Heidegger as a Political Thinker,” “no matter what the antecedents, in the context of the time this had to be understood as propaganda for Hitler.” The same holds true for other key terms in the address. When Heidegger used the term “Volk,” he was no doubt drawing on a tradition whose roots run to Herder and Hölderlin; but in the context of his rectoral address, the term recalls not the nationalism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German romanticism but the virulent racial fantasies of twentieth-century Nazism. To pretend otherwise is mendacious pedantry.

The point is that our words and actions acquire meaning not in a vacuum but in a particular social and historical context. To bracket that context is to miss the truth of the words and actions. The word “bourgeois,” for example, meant one thing in nineteenth-century France, quite another in Stalin’s Russia. In the address, Heidegger tells us that his three services will “coalesce” and become one force. Students and teachers, he writes, “must confront one another, ready for battle [Kampf]. All faculties of will and thought, all strengths of the heart and all skills of the body, must be unfolded through battle, heightened in battle, and preserved as battle.” He later noted the influence of Ernst Jünger, author of the notorious *Der Arbriter*, with its glorification of conflict and war, on this passage. In the address, he immediately follows his discussion of battle with an approving reference to Carl von Clausewitz, whose posthumous *On War* defined war as “diplomacy carried on by other means” and first introduced the notion of “total war.” But in “Facts and Thoughts” Heidegger claims to have mentioned armed service “neither in a militaristic, nor in an aggressive sense, ... I understood defense as self-defense.” The attitude of the address is “oriented towards 'battle,’” he admits, but “‘Battle’ is thought in the sense of Heraclitus, fragment 53.” It is worth dwelling on this suggestion if only to appreciate the full force of Heidegger’s breathtaking evasiveness.

A literal translation of the Heraclitus fragment is “War [polemos] is father of all things, king of all things, and reveals some to be gods, others men, makes some slaves, others free.” Heidegger tells us that *polemos* really means *eris*, a term that can mean “war” but is more usually translated as “conflict” or “strife.” Further, he says, *polemos* is not to be understood in the sense of *real* conflict, but as “confrontation-that-sets-those-who-confront-one-another-apart, so that in such setting apart the essential being of those who confront one another exposes itself, ... [and] enters into what is unconcealed and true.” Professor Harries accurately renders Heidegger’s translation of the fragment as follows: “Setting-apart is indeed the sowing of all, but also (and above all) it is of all what is highest—what preserves—and this because it lets the ones show themselves as gods, the others, however, as humans, because it lets the ones step into the open as bondsmen, the others as free
beings.” (One is not surprised to learn that Heidegger’s translations of the pre-Socratics are only slightly less controversial than Ezra Pound’s meditations on the Chinese ideograph.)

In a note to this passage, Harries observes that “Heidegger’s translation of the Heraclitus fragment offers a key to his use of the difficult to translate Auseinandersetzung, which means ‘confrontation,’ but a confrontation that is a setting apart that lets those who are thus set apart reveal themselves.” Perhaps so. But while Heidegger’s idiosyncratic translation of Heraclitus may give us insight into the mysteries of pre-Socratic thought or Heidegger’s own “confrontation” or dialogue with other thinkers, it simply evades the issue of his use of the term “battle” in the rectoral address. For one thing, pace Heidegger, polemos means “war,” as in the Trojan War, the Thirty Years War, the Second World War; it is not a “setting-apart” that lets Being appear but an activity in which large numbers of real people systematically kill and maim each other. But more important is Heidegger’s complete unwillingness to take responsibility for his statements. To speak of “battle” in Freiburg in 1933 is not to conjure up Heraclitus, fragment 53, but legions of goose-stepping men in brown shirts.

There is no doubt that Heidegger soon realized that his adventure in public life had gone disastrously awry. But in some ways, his subsequent withdrawal from political activity is even more questionable than his brief period of political engagement. For Heidegger, the problem was that the Nazis had betrayed the promise that was inherent in the ideals of National Socialism. In his view, National Socialism itself, which he saw as a force that challenged the uprooting progress of technology, articulated a noble, if unworkable, ideal. Thus in the 1953 edition of An Introduction to Metaphysics, he retained his remark from the original 1935 edition about the “inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism consisting in “the encounter between global technology and modern man.” Reflecting on his rectorate in the Spiegel interview, Heidegger argued that

Since then, in the last 30 years, it’s certainly become clearer that the planetary movement of modern technology is a force whose magnitude can hardly be over estimated. For me the decisive question today is how this technological age can be subjected to a political system and to which system. I’ve no answer to that question but I’m not convinced that democracy is the way ... The task of thought is to help limit the dominance of technology so that man in general has an adequate relationship to its essence. Now Nazism moved in that direction but those persons were far too limited in their thinking to achieve a really explicit relationship to what had been happening now for 300 years.

Heidegger thus came to believe that the hegemony of technology was so complete that neither philosophy nor “any human contemplation and striving”—least of all the modern, democratic state—could direct or curtail its depredations. Hence, the authentic response is no longer Entschlossenheit, resolve that expresses itself in particular choices and actions, but Gelassenheit, “letting be,” an attitude of waiting and listening in which one does nothing, but remains open to the fugitive voice of Being. The task of thought may be to limit the dominance of technology, but Heidegger, for
one, despaired of thought’s power to help: “Only a god can save us now.”

Yet once again, there is an exasperating evasiveness about Heidegger’s posture. For while he admitted making “mistakes” during his rectorate, he never once publicly acknowledged the enormity of the evil he was party to. Nor did he ever repudiate his involvement as rector of Freiburg University. To adduce “the planetary movement of modern technology” does nothing to absolve him of this responsibility. Whatever the merits of Heidegger’s analysis of modern technology, there is something repulsive—as well as deeply unphilosophical—about his use of highminded philosophical language in the face of the most brutal reality of our time; far from revealing the underlying truth of the situation, Heidegger’s language occludes it. As Hannah Arendt put it in her criticism of Heidegger’s behavior, “this misunderstanding of what [the whole Nazi movement] was all about is inconsiderable when compared with the much more decisive ‘error’ that consisted in not only ignoring the relevant ‘literature’ but in escaping from the reality of the Gestapo cellars and the torture hells of the early concentration camps into ostensibly more significant regions.” And just as Heidegger escaped from confronting the reality of Nazism by filtering it through the transformative syllables of his philosophy, so he sought to escape from the reality of the modern world, essentially shaped as it is by science and technology, by placing it tout court beyond the competence of thought. It is a sad irony that Heidegger, a philosopher who began by speaking with rare eloquence about authenticity and the importance of attending to the elusive whisperings of reality, should have proven to be so deaf when reality burst in upon him with the harsh and agonizingly real strains of tyranny.

1. The Review of Metaphysics, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3. Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität. Rede, gehalten bei der feierlichen Übernahme tier Rektorats der Universität Freiburg i. Br. am 27. 5.1933 and Das Rektorat 1933/34. Tatsachen und Gedanken are translated, together with a brief preface by Heidegger’s son, Dr. Hermann Heidegger, by Karsten Harries, professor of philosophy at Yale University and author of several well-known articles on Heidegger. The rectoral address was first published by Korn Verlag, Breslau, in 1933; according to Professor Harries, “Facts and Thoughts” was first published in a bilingual French-German edition in Phi, a supplement to Annales de l’Université de Toulouse Le Mirail, 1976, under the title “L’Auto-affirmation de université allemande,” translation by Gerard Granel. Both were republished by Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, in 1983. The Klostermann edition provides the text for Professor Harries’s translation. Go back to the text.

2. “Nur ein Gott kann uns retten,” Der Spiegel, No. 23, 1976. Heidegger granted the interview on the condition that it be published only after his death, hence the delay in publication. There are several English translations. I refer in this essay to the one by David Schendler, “Only a God Can Save Us Now,” which appeared in the Graduate Fatuity Philosophy Journal, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1977. Additional documents relating to Heidegger’s rectorate are collected in Guido Schneebberger’s Nachlese zu Heidegger. Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Denken, Bern, 1962. It should be noted, however, that Schneebberger’s bias against Heidegger makes the collection a sometimes untrustworthy guide to the historical record. The reader may also wish to consult George Steiner’s Martin Heidegger (Viking Press, 1979). Though it is philosophically undistinguished, Steiner’s monograph does contain a useful discussion of Heidegger’s rectorate. Go back to the text.

3. “Heidegger at Eighty,” reprinted in Heidegger and Modern Philosophy, Yale University Press, 1978, pp. 293 - 303. It should of course be borne in mind that Arendt was once, in the mid- to late-Twenties, romantically involved with Heidegger, who was her mentor at Freiburg. But Arendt’s relationship with Heidegger does not co ipso disqualify her assessment of his political behavior, which, in my view, is astute and evenhanded. For a discussion of Arendt’s
relation with Heidegger, see Elizabeth Young-Bruehl’s *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (Yale University Press, 1982), especially pages 50ff and 69ff. Go back to the text.

4. Sauer’s diary entry and Heidegger’s telegram to Hitler are cited in Hugo Ott, “*Martin Heidegger ab Rektor der Universität Freiburg 1933/34,*” unpublished lecture. The authenticity of Sauer’s diary, it should be noted, has been questioned. Go back to the text.


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