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Martin Heidegger: A Compromised Man

Working Paper No. 9

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Prepared for Professor John Hall

Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that Martin Heidegger registered as a compromised man in his ethics and philosophy. First, through analyzing Heidegger’s roots in Aristotle and the Pre-Socratics, this inquiry will introduce Heidegger’s philosophical compatibility with the Nazi Party. After deciphering his rectorial address in 1933 and subsequent actions during his rectorship of the University of Freiburg, this inquiry considers the level of Nazi indoctrination in Heidegger’s work. Finally, this inquiry carefully considers Heidegger’s compromised character through his actions in the post-rectorate phase. (words: 83)

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This inquiry seeks to establish that Martin Heidegger registered as a compromised man in his ethics and philosophy. First, through analyzing Heidegger's roots in Aristotle and the Pre-Socratics, this inquiry will introduce Heidegger's philosophical compatibility with the Nazi Party. Through an interpretation of his rectorial address in 1933 and subsequent actions during his rectorship of the University of Freiburg, this inquiry then considers the level of Nazi indoctrination in Heidegger's work. Finally, this inquiry takes into careful consideration Heidegger's compromised character through his actions in the post-rectorate phase.

Philosophical Compatibility

"The best way to study to study politics and other matters is to trace things back to their beginnings and observe their growth." Aristotle

According to Michael Allen Gillespie of Duke University, Martin Heidegger's attraction to Nazism was rooted in his belief that it presented a solution to the crisis of the West. Gillespie (2000, p. 141) advances the idea that Heidegger believed Western civilization to be in crisis resulting from a withdrawal and forgetfulness of the question of Being. For Heidegger, existence itself is mysterious and Being is to be seen only as a question. Western civilization is

rooted in the pre-Socratic perception of the question of Being, later being replaced by the Platonic interpretation of Being as an eternal presence only accessible through an arduous dialectical ascension. This was later replaced by the Christian view that Being is only attainable through grace, pushing Being into territories beyond reach and effectively giving the Catholic Church a role to play. Gillespie (2000, p. 141-2) asserts that for Heidegger, modernity is characterized by the death of God, causing a withdrawal of Being, leaving man as the groundwork on which to build the world; this implies that, in the modern world, man is solely responsible for transforming nature into a universal object that can be manipulated (technology, for Heidegger). For Heidegger, the technological motive, especially for Americans and Marxists, is to transform everything into a raw material in order that it can be exploited and consumed in the production of the means of production, as interpreted by Gillespie (2000, p. 142). Heidegger thought Americans and Marxists falsely believed that technology was merely a tool, and that this shortcoming would not allow man to come to terms with it prompting Heidegger's assertion that, to save the West, the question of Being must be raised as the question of technology.

So, for Heidegger, what would make the humanization of technology possible? How is it to be saved from Americanism and Communism? Gillespie

(2000, p. 143) purports that, through the Nazi's assertion of leadership over theory, Heidegger saw something similar to what Aristotle called *phronêsis* (practical wisdom) in the Nazi's idea of knowledge and action. Seeing what he believed to be an opportunity that might arouse a cooperative encounter with the question of Being, Gillespie (2000, p. 153) interprets that Heidegger thought the American and Communist approach of increasing productivity fell short, and that only the Nazi movement confronted the Western problem of technology with an approach focused on humanization and offered a chance to subordinate the technological problem to the rule of *phronêsis*. Heidegger (Gillespie, 2000, p. 153) asserts that technology must serve the ends of human beings, thus seeing a problem with the hegemony of technology over human action. The anti-American and anti-Communist sentiments of the Nazis resided well with Heidegger (Gillespie, 2000, p. 154), and he agreed with their concentration on entrustment in the sensibilities and feelings of the German *Volk*; further agreeing with the Nazi's persistence to form a German state from the German *Volk*. An important qualification of authenticity for Heidegger (Gillespie, 2000, p. 155) is a courageous confrontation with the question of Being, and he not only believed the Nazis embodied this courage, he believed that Hitler himself was dedicated to confronting the most complex and difficult of questions; Heidegger had even hoped that Hitler would serve as an

inspiration to the German *Volk*, provoking a communal consideration on the question of Being.

Gillespie (2000, p. 155) teaches us that Heidegger was also attracted to was the common belief between the Nazis and pre-Socratics that knowledge at its core is rooted in praxis. The modern place of technology could thus be humanized if praxis is once again established as the fundamental moment of human life and of *phronêsis* as the primary mode of human knowledge. This is also why Heidegger (Gillespie, 2000, p. 156) is fond of the way the Nazis transformed the role of labor (work camps), technology in the modern world is simply production of the means of production, but technology under the rule of *phronêsis* emphasizes the human role in production; labor is service to the *Volk*. *Phronêsis* is the basis for which the *Volk* is successfully established, self-governed, free, and leads to the elimination of class differences, however, Heidegger (Gillespie, 2000, p. 158) purports those with the courage to face death and question Being have *phronêsis*, a leader with *phronêsis* is necessary, and the *Führer* has *phronêsis*. This is why Heidegger (Gillespie, 2000, p. 158) believed that the present and future of the German *Volk* relies on a convincing, inspiring authentic *Führer*.

Rectorship

The closing paragraphs of Heidegger's (Hurst, 2002, p. 31) inaugural (and only) rectorial address at the University of Freiburg, titled *The Self-Assertion of the German University*, wholly encapsulates the Heideggarian view of National Socialism. After calling out the Nazi's in their attempt to politicize the sciences, Heidegger (Hurst, 2002, p. 31) makes clear that his attempt at saving the sciences is only meant for the German nation; Heidegger sees the descent of Western civilization into madness as inevitable, and he holds that this is the opportunity for the German *Volk* to stand firm, to rise from the ashes of the collapse of the West. The goal, for Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 39) was to unify science with the German fate, a fate that rests on the German *Volk's* historical mission (a return to the pre-Socratic origins); the German *Volk* only knows itself in its state. This nationalism sets the stage for many incidents relating to Heidegger during his brief stint as rector.

A short month after his inauguration, Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 39), on May 20 1933, laid the foundation for his goal of becoming the *Führer's* philosophical-consul. To this end, he sent a public telegram to Hitler, and October 1, he was appointed *Führer* of Freiburg, placing special emphasis on the fact that his goal was to reconcile the education of the sciences with the aspirations of the National Socialist State. Further, on September 4 1933, in

the view of Sheehan (1988, p. 39) emphasizes that Heidegger was offered to take the chair of philosophy at the University of Munich, to which he replied that he must put his own aims to the side and do the work that Hitler needed him to do. On November 3 1933, Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 39) put into effect a Nazi law at Freiburg that stripped financial aid from all non-Aryan students, yet awarded aid to those who belonged to military groups such as the S.S. or S.A. A month later, a group of German academics received a letter from Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 39) seeking monetary support for a book that would contain professors' pro-Hitler speeches that would be dispersed to the world's intellectuals, affirming that the signature page would be devoid of non-Aryans. Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 39) also gave advice to the minister of education in Baden, asserting that he should choose a job candidate for professorship based on the criteria of who can carry out the education agenda for the National Socialist Party.

Heidegger's support for the Nazi party was not merely evident in his professional choices during his rectorship, he also had a tendency of denouncing colleagues in secrecy if he deemed them unfit for the agenda for the National Socialist Party. For example, a chemistry professor at Freiburg since 1926 (and later was awarded the Nobel prize in 1953) named Hermann Staudinger became a victim of Heidegger's (Sheehan, 1988, p. 40): Heidegger

tipped off to the local minister of education that Staudinger had been a pacifist during the first World War, after the Gestapo confirmed this, Heidegger called on the ministry to terminate Staudinger's employment without pension. Fearing a foreign policy issue (Staudinger was an internationally reputable chemist), Heidegger later advised issuing a less harsh punishment, but the ministry tormented the chemist by forcing him to submit a letter of resignation, tearing it up six months later and rehiring him to his former position. A more disturbing example was that of Dr. Eduard Baumgarten: in the 1920s, Baumgarten (Sheehan, 1988, p. 40) lectured at the University of Wisconsin, but decided to return home to Germany for an opportunity to research with Heidegger. After becoming close enough friends that Heidegger and his wife were named godparents of Baumgarten's children, the two had a falling out over Baumgarten's inquiry into American pragmatism. After Baumgarten left Freiburg to teach American philosophy and culture at the University of Göttingen, Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 40) wrote a letter to Göttingen's head of the organization of Nazi professors, Dr. Vogel, that condemned Baumgarten for not being a National Socialist, for being in the Heidelberg circle of liberal-democratic intellectuals, and for working with "the Jew Fränkel" (Eduard Fränkel, professor of classics at Freiburg, who was fired from Göttingen as a result of the Nazi racial laws). Believing Heidegger's

(Sheehan, 1988, p. 40) letter to be too filled with hatred, Dr. Vogel would not use the accusations to fire Baumgarten, so he filed it away. Fourteen months later, Dr. Vogel's replacement found the letter, sent it to the minister of education in Berlin, who subsequently suspended Baumgarten from lecturing and recommended that he leave the country. Luckily for Baumgarten, a secretary made a copy of the letter, and Baumgarten was able to keep his job after an appeal.

Post-Rectorship

Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 38) would have you believe that after his rectorship ended, so did his allegiance to the Nazi party, however, it is now well documented that his allegiance went well beyond 1934. Of course, one has to consider the case of Max Müller, one of Germany's most renowned Catholic intellectuals post-World War I. An anti-Nazi, Müller (Sheehan, 1988, p. 40) was in Heidegger's circle of gifted students and held a position as student leader, but when Heidegger joined the NDSAP in May of 1933, Müller restrained from attending his lectures. Heidegger fired Müller from his student leadership position seven months later, deeming Müller's politics unsuitable, however, this is not the end. In 1938, Müller (Sheehan, 1988, p. 41) applied for a teaching position at Freiburg University, but saw his

opportunity blocked by Heidegger: when prompted by the university administration, Heidegger told them that Müller was a great scholar, but his disposition towards the regime was unfavorable. Müller (Sheehan, 1988, p. 41) met with Heidegger, pleading him to strike his comments regarding Müller's politics from the letter; Heidegger denied, and Müller was denied a position "for reasons of world-view and politics."

If some damning evidence of Heidegger's compromise exists, it's that with relation to his attitude regarding the Holocaust. Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, pp. 41-2) was not so much a Holocaust-denier, but he was remarkably silent on the issue, and even plead ignorance, though now there is documentation to prove that he was fully aware of what was happening. Living in the city of Baden, Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, pp. 41-2) had to have people disappearing: the Jewish population of Baden in 1933 was 20,600, in 1940 it was down to 6,400, then nearly all of those that remained were sent to France, then to a death camp close to Lublin called Izbica, leaving only 820 Jews in Baden throughout the 1940s. Giving Heidegger the benefit of the doubt (perhaps he thought they were being moved around, not exterminated, after all, he has no published work that mentions the Holocaust), one delve a little further, perhaps into his lectures, to get a better understanding. From a lecture concerning technology on 01 December 1949, Heidegger (Sheehan,

1988, p. 41-42) advanced:

Agriculture is now a motorized food-industry—in essence, the same as the manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of nations, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.

Then, in another lecture on the exact same day, Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 42) articulated:

Hundreds of thousands die en masse. Do they die? They succumb. They are done in. Do they die? They become mere quanta, items in an inventory in the business of manufacturing corpses. Do they die? They are liquidated inconspicuously in extermination camps. And even apart from that, right now millions of impoverished people are perishing from hunger in China. But to die is to endure death in its essence. To be able to die means to be capable of this endurance. We are capable of this only if the essence of death makes our own essence possible

In 1948 and in a letter, Herbert Marcuse, a former student of Heidegger's, questioned: Why had Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 42) never spoken up out about the number of Jews killed? Heidegger replied by

stressing that the Soviet Republic had killed off many of their own people, and that Marcuse, in his letter, should have replaced the word “Jews” with “East Germans”; Heidegger also stated that such Nazi atrocities were hidden from German people, but were widely available to the world’s public.

Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 43) would have had you believe that his resignation from the rectorate at Freiburg was a result of protest, but further evidence shows that Heidegger simply made too many academic enemies, partly because of his effort in putting deans in positions they did not want, nor did the departments want them, simply to stand the university system on its head; but in April of 1934, the ministry of education fully anticipated Heidegger’s continuance in his position as *Führer*-rector. Another damning piece of evidence against Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 42) is the documentation that confirms he misrepresented at least one of his lectures in the published edition: Heidegger presented a lecture in 1935 called *Einführung in die Metaphysik* that was later published in 1953. According to the published version, Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 42) implies that he is against some kind of “bad Nazism” (the NSDAP) and is trying to philosophically defend a kind of “good Nazism”. On two separate occasions, Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 42), contended that no change to the lectures had been made pre-publication, however, Professor Harmut Buchner helped

Heidegger review the gallery proofs, and Buchner holds that he saw the original wording, a wording that made no mention of two separate National Socialist movements, and made the recommendation for Heidegger to correct them for fear of misunderstanding. Heidegger refused to alter the text on grounds that it would be “a falsification of history”, however, Heidegger later altered them anyway. Until he died, Heidegger (Sheehan, 1988, p. 42) maintained that he did not alter the text; if you travel to Marbach, Germany and find the original manuscript in the archives, you will find that this page is missing.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that Martin Heidegger registers as a compromised man in his ethics and philosophy. First, considering Heidegger’s roots through an Aristotelian and Pre-Socratic lens, this inquiry introduced Heidegger’s philosophical compatibility with the Nazi Party. Then, by deciphering his rectorial address in 1933 and subsequent actions during his rectorship of the University of Freiburg, this inquiry has contemplated the level of Nazi indoctrination in Heidegger’s work. Finally, this inquiry has taken careful investigation into Heidegger’s compromised character through his actions in the post-rectorate phase. Heidegger’s affiliation with the Nazi Party

is one that has been a point of contention for decades; accusations against arguably the most important philosopher of the twentieth century of accepting genocide has only become more prevalent with the more evidence collected. Heidegger himself requested that a controversial interview with *Der Spiegel* regarding his affiliation with the Nazi Party be published only posthumously. Heidegger was heavily influenced by Nietzsche; the irony that Nietzsche was misrepresented by the Nazi Party, yet Heidegger was misrepresented by his existential followers is almost amusing.

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