

Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Fourth Edition (Enlarged). Translated by Richard Taft. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). 224 pp.; \$35.00.

FRANK SCHALOW

Loyola University, New Orleans

More than fifty years after its publication, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* continues to be one of Heidegger's most important and extraordinary works. Richard Taft's welcome new translation, which is adopted from the expanded fourth German edition, brings forth even further the unmistakable vitality of Heidegger's classic albeit controversial exchange with Kant's transcendental philosophy.

There is little doubt that Heidegger's innovative dialogue with transcendental philosophy, as first translated by James C. Churchill in 1962, has dramatically changed the English-speaking audience's view of Kant. Indeed, the impact for American scholarship may be even greater than Heidegger's contribution in rediscovering Nietzsche. Yet in the almost thirty years that have elapsed until the appearance of the second translation of the "Kant book," we stand on the threshold of a corresponding shift in how to interpret the entirety of Heidegger's thought. Traditionally, he has been viewed as one of the most esoteric thinkers because of his preoccupation with the perennial question of Being, the stalwart of a "meditative thinking" which seems rather distant from some of the more politically involved concerns of human existence.

Recently, the opportunity has arisen to address Heidegger's meditative thought in terms of its possible interfacement with explicitly ethical concerns and pathways of political engagement. In spirit, this revolutionary move bears a distinct affinity with Heidegger's attempt in the Kant book to expand the breadth of Kant's celebrated Copernican revolution (pp. 8–12). The continual effort to think the unthought and to bring what is "unsaid" into speech defines the trademark of Heidegger's appropriation of the entire Western tradition, a task which the Kant book exemplifies (p. 138). Correlatively, the challenge to us today lies in redirecting Heidegger's own hermeneutical strategy back upon itself to see what marginal aspects of his own inquiry into Being can be brought to the fore. The development of this way of reinterpreting Heidegger receives much of its impetus from, but is certainly not reducible to, the continued revelation of the autobiographical fact of his adherence to National Socialism. But even more significantly, the dawn of a new reading of Heidegger's fundamental ontology arises from a positive appreciation of his affinity with Greek political thought, particularly with Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*. Of equal importance

is the deliberate effort to discover the germ for an ethic in the vast reservoir of his ontological meditations, despite his remarks to the contrary in the now famous “Letter on Humanism” (1944). In what way does Heidegger’s radical reinterpretation or “retrieval” (*Wiederholung*) of Kant, to which this new translation unequivocally directs our attention, bespeak the revolutionary move toward appreciating anew the inclusion of ethics and politics within meditative thinking?

Before addressing this question, it is important to place Heidegger’s task in the Kant book in its proper context. In terms of pages, Heidegger devotes almost the whole of that study to a radical re-examination of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. From the start, Heidegger emphasizes that his basic intent is to recast the first *Critique* as a preliminary inquiry into the understanding of Being constitutive of human nature, as a “laying of the ground for metaphysics” (pp. 9–12), in contrast to a “theory of knowledge,” which has been the primary focus for neo-Kantians (p. 172). Thus, Heidegger shifts his own study of transcendental philosophy from the direction of the task undertaken in *Being and Time* and develops the issue of finitude or temporal transcendence as the central consideration to be recovered through Kant’s effort to delimit human reason. Kant’s Copernican revolution thereby becomes less an attempt to establish the possibility of an object according to antecedent conditions of knowledge and more a recognition that any comportment toward things hinges upon a preliminary understanding of Being. Heidegger’s interweaving of his own task with Kant’s forms the heart of the controversy whereby he displaces the priority of reason in both its theoretical and practical guises in favor of the synthetic power of the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*). “This [root] is indicated by the fact that pure sensibility and pure understanding lead back to the power of imagination—not only thus, but to theoretical *and* practical reason in their separateness and their unity” (p. 171). When transposed within the context of *Being and Time*, the power of imagination becomes the corollary to the “openness” of concern (*Sorge*) through which the manifestness of beings (including human existence), and hence the possibility of understanding Being, first arise. In this way, Heidegger brings forth his own version of human existence as “Dasein”—in its radical finitude as oriented toward futurity and death—as the preliminary theme of investigation on which the broader project of ontology rests.

As Heidegger observes in the preface to the second edition (1950) of the Kant book, critics have often questioned the “violence” of his interpretation in emphasizing the priority of imagination over reason. Yet the real focus of controversy hinges on the implications that this approach has for reinterpreting the *Critique of Practical Reason*, to which he devotes only three pages in his entire study.¹ In the second *Critique* Kant seemingly roots moral reason in the domain of freedom divorced from sensibility, experience, and temporality, in a manner completely contrary to Heidegger’s inquiry into Dasein’s finitude. It was Ernst Cassirer who called attention to this paradox, first in a famous discussion with

Heidegger at Davos Academy (1929), which provided the spark for the Kant book, and subsequently in his review of that work in 1930. The new translation of the Kant book, which includes the Davos Disputation as an appendix, accents Heidegger's exchange with Cassirer as the point of clarification for his novel reading of transcendental philosophy. But what is only now coming to the surface with Heidegger's preparation of the fourth edition in 1973 (three years before his death) is how pivotal the unraveling of the above paradox becomes to providing a fuller appreciation of the scope of his own reinterpretation of Kant.²

Thus, the issuance of the new translation of the Kant book becomes a call to take up a forgotten thread in Heidegger's critical exchange with transcendental philosophy; we discover the opportunity to show how the finitude of moral praxis leads to a deeper concern for the underpinnings of all ethical and political involvement. As Heidegger stated in his dialogue with Cassirer at Davos:

I believe that we proceed mistakenly in the interpretation of Kantian ethics if we first orient ourselves to that to which ethical action conforms and if we see too little of the inner function of the law itself for Dasein. We cannot discuss the problem of the finitude of the ethical creature if we do not pose the question: what does law mean here, and how is the lawfulness itself constitutive for Dasein and for the personality? (P. 175)

Taking his cue from a retrieval of Kantian ethics, Heidegger maintains that all moral comportment begins from a fulcrum of finite transcendence whereby an individual's concern shifts away from the narrowness of immediate interest to include his or her commonality with the other. According to Heidegger, the perennially Kantian doctrine of respect for persons and of treating human beings as ends in themselves rather than as mere means becomes possible through the very finitude which enables me to discover the limited scope of my own possibilities. Through the disclosure of my own being as care, I experience the corresponding affinity between the welfare of other human beings and myself.

When seen in this light, praxis is never simply an isolated event; instead it arises with the self's response to the challenge of addressing its own nature and relocating its place (along with an expanded sense of the good) within the broader social community.³ The prospective projection of Heidegger's fundamental ontology upon the hidden premises of Kantian ethics points to a way of rescuing the Enlightenment political view of the human being as a "citizen of the world" (*weltbürgerlicher*). This creative retrieval of Kantian ethics may very well hold the key which points beyond the impasse of the regrettable linkage of Heidegger's thought with his affirmation of National Socialism in the 1930's.⁴

For Heidegger, the laying of the ground for metaphysics expands into the concrete arena of praxis. This is an insight which one of his foremost students, Hannah Arendt, pioneered in *The Human Condition* in suggesting that the finite

capacity for “world-making” allows human beings to take up concerns that are not merely reactive or instrumentally motivated, e.g., the administration of the good in an encompassing rather than in a fixated, self-serving way. Within this more contemporary context, the power of imagination becomes a vehicle of ethical and political judgment (*Urteilstkraft*) which discriminates various alternatives for action in pursuit of the good. Arising on the furthest frontier of moral and political philosophy, this development may very well provide the authentic measure for the validity of Heidegger’s retrieval of Kant.

The new translation of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*—fluent, while painstakingly faithful to the original German—will ultimately prove indispensable for anyone interested in Heidegger’s thought as well as in current trends in hermeneutics, ethics, and political philosophy. The publication of this important volume of Heidegger’s collected works includes insightful and valuable annotation and scholarship which will benefit even the more erudite of readers. Yet even beyond this scholarship the patient reader will rediscover the animating spirit of much of Heidegger’s thought, which rarely occurs so powerfully as in his venturesome attempt to probe the depths of Kant’s transcendental philosophy.

NOTES

1. Heidegger takes up the issues of freedom and practical reason in a much more detailed fashion a year later in his 1930 Freiburg lectures, *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, Gesamtausgabe 31 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982). Also see Heidegger’s earlier lectures from 1927–28, *Phänomenologische Interpretation von Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Gesamtausgabe 25 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977).

2. Cf. my article “Toward a Concrete Ontology of Practical Reason in Light of Heidegger’s Lectures on Human Freedom,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 17, No. 2 (May 1986), 155–65.

3. Cf. Charles M. Sherover, *Time, Freedom, and the Common Good: An Essay in Public Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989). Also see my exploration of his thesis, “Imagining the Good: Politics in Transition,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 20 (1990), 188–94.

4. Cf. Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).