

Interpretation

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This book, a study of the relationship between Heidegger's thought and his politics, begins with a dilemma familiar to many who have studied Heidegger. On one hand, we cannot brush aside Heidegger's thought easily, as many who say that his Nazism defines or exhausts his thought wish. Something in Heidegger undeniably speaks to us, challenges us in ways not easily forgotten. On the other, despite what others might hope, Heidegger's thought cannot be cleanly severed from his politics, including his engagement with the Nazi party. The problem for anyone who would have us think more about Heidegger is thus: how exactly are we to understand the relationship between the dangerous elements of his thought and whatever it is in it that still speaks to us? Is what we have to learn from Heidegger merely a negative lesson? Or is there something positive there, despite or perhaps because of the manifestly problematic consequences of his thought?

Duff aims to show how "Heidegger's focus on and formulation of how the question of Being relates to human life entail a paradoxical and radically discontented politics" (17). To understand his thesis, it helps to start with what Duff describes most fully at the end of his book, Heidegger's political stance. As commentators before him have done, Duff notes two at least initially quite different stances towards politics in Heidegger. One is a moment of resolve and resolution, expressed in Heidegger's life most notably in his actions and speeches as rector of Freiburg University in 1933–34 and member of the Nazi Party. The other moment is quietism, in which Heidegger asserts that genuine thoughtfulness cannot and should not try to act in the world. This moment is familiar to readers of the "Letter on Humanism" and from the interview

from *Der Spiegel* in which Heidegger claims “only a god [i.e., not a political movement] can save us.” Duff’s task is to show how these apparently contrary moments reveal something about Heidegger’s formulation of “how the question of Being relates to human life,” something that is presumably still worthy of our thought and reflection.

In fact, this book spends most of its time explaining how Heidegger got to the moment of resolve and resolution and what that moment meant to him. Duff suggests that politically Heidegger at this time is best understood as a peculiar kind of revolutionary. Heidegger believes that human life, at least in the late modern epoch, is characterized by a thoroughgoing fallenness, superficiality, and lack of any greatness of spirit, and he traces this to the human tendency to refuse to face up to the genuine questionableness and fragility of our existence. The unreflective nihilism of our times is ultimately due to our obliviousness to the question of Being; yet, Heidegger thinks, our openness to that question is the very thing that makes life human. At the time of *Being and Time* and the years immediately thereafter, Heidegger thinks that the appropriate response to this situation is revolution, total revolution. This revolution cannot be a merely academic or hermeneutic matter, as if it were simply a matter of changing the leadership at a professional association. Rather, it must be, in Duff’s words, “a total theoretical-practical transformation of the everyday” (187). It follows that only some strong political authority could accomplish what Heidegger has in mind. Compromise and moderation must be rejected, since they easily become captured by the very obliviousness to Being that must be overcome. Toughness is the order of the day. Heidegger’s political stance clearly has some kinship with right-wing or conservative movements. Yet, properly speaking, he is neither conservative or progressive as we normally understand those terms. Heidegger does believe that any worthwhile politics must be particularist rather than universal, and in this sense he shares some views with conservatives. But he does so, Duff suggests, only as a means for completely overcoming the status quo, which in a sense brings him closer to left-wing revolutionaries. Moreover, the revolution as envisioned by Heidegger cannot be a one-time thing, since everydayness does not vanish but continues to distract us from the question of Being. The revolution Heidegger envisions at this moment, then, is both thoroughgoing and incompletable. Because of the Being-occluding power of everydayness, “perpetual instability” or ever-renewed revolution is the “mark of authentic politics.”

The striking thing about Heidegger is that this political stance seems to have been a consequence of his philosophical thought, not the product of a preexisting political commitment. The main work of Duff's book is to show what in Heidegger's thought in the 1920s prepared him for this view of politics. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with Heidegger's earliest mature writings, which deal with (or are in correspondence with) Edmund Husserl, Paul Natorp, neo-Kantians like Wilhelm Windelband and Hermann Cohen, and Karl Jaspers. In these writings, we find Heidegger arguing that ethics as traditionally conceived is superficial because it privileges stability and intelligibility and refuses to face up to the questionable foundations of human experience. Yet at the same time, Heidegger still holds on to the notion characteristic of the German Idealist tradition, that philosophy has responsibility for shaping culture: to be ethical one must be a philosopher (61). On Duff's telling, then, the pre-*Being and Time* Heidegger already articulates a considerable practical dilemma: on one hand, the philosopher rejects all inherited ethical and political standards as mere attempts to impose a specious clarity on the world. On the other, that same philosopher must be the paradigm or guide for political and social life. The philosopher must rule, even while all traditional ethical and political guidance has been rejected, leaving only the imperative to raise the question of Being.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 extend this analysis into an interpretation of *Being and Time* (with occasional segues into other texts). Chapter 3 takes up the ambiguity or doubleness of Heidegger's concept of "everydayness" in *Being and Time*. On one hand, everydayness is just the way that we all exist pre-reflectively. It is the way the world first comes to us—Duff calls this its "disclosive" aspect—and so not something we could ever leave behind or do away with simply. On the other, there is a deep tendency in "everydayness" to make the world more intelligible and stable than it is by covering up the ways in which our opinions and practices break down. Duff calls this the "occlusive" aspect of everydayness. A sophisticated version of this tendency, Heidegger thinks, is at work in the major philosophies of the Western tradition, which impose rationality and intelligibility on the world. Chapter 4 extends Heidegger's analysis of everydayness to social life, which is marked by the same ambiguity. We are "essentially communal" beings (93), especially with regard to our thought about the character of the world we live in (or the question of Being). Yet the social dimension of our existence does not mean that we typically treat each other in a manner befitting our humanity. Even when we are with others, we tend not to see them as they are, but only as they are defined socially. We tend to treat them as just another tool. More

troublingly, we tend to see ourselves in the same way and to define ourselves in the light of the opinions of *Das Man*, the anonymous “they.” Yet while reliance on the opinions of others makes the world more manageable and predictable, it also makes us more superficial and less authentic. Chapter 5 brings us to the crisis of Heidegger’s thought. What if the ability to face up to the uncertainty and anxiety lurking underneath the surface of ordinary life is in fact the greatest and most authentic thing about us and the chatter of everyday life only alienates us from ourselves? If so, philosophy must take on an active role in political life, taking up the task of shattering illusions, of holding up the truth of our fundamental ignorance of Being, a task that necessarily puts it on a collision course with everyday life.

In chapter 6, the capstone of the book, Duff shows how this analysis of the human condition leads to a specific politics: a revolution against everydayness in the name of the question of Being. But since everydayness permeates all of human life, Heidegger’s revolution must be a total revolution requiring violence and even ever-renewed violence. From here we begin to understand why Heidegger was attracted to the Nazis. It is not that Heidegger started out as a Nazi or even that Heidegger was an adherent of all aspects of Nazi ideology, such as racism. (Whether this claim can be sustained in the light of the recent publication of Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks* from the 1930s is a question.) It is rather that, for the reasons just sketched, Heidegger has a powerful attraction to a total revolution (67–69). The Nazis came along at the right time to appear, for a moment, as though they could be the vehicle for the revolution Heidegger had in mind.

Duff’s book provides an extremely helpful guide to Heidegger’s early texts, all the more needed since many political theorists tend to focus on (relatively) more accessible later texts such as the “Letter on Humanism.” Yet since the political reflections of those later texts depend on the failure of the hopes of the earlier texts, those later texts may well not be fully intelligible without a full understanding of the earlier texts: all the more reason to welcome Duff’s work. Yet we are now in a better position to pose to Duff’s work the questions with which we started. What is it in Heidegger’s thought that leads to his “paradoxical and radically discontented politics,” and is there, in Duff’s opinion, something positive to be learned here beyond our marveling at Heidegger’s political missteps? As I understand Duff’s argument, Heidegger’s most important philosophical theme is the “doubleness of everydayness,” which “both occludes the most important question but also points the way toward disclosing it” (20). Everyday opinion both gives us access to

the world (or Being) and prevents us from seeing it clearly. Because he cannot either simply affirm everydayness or simply reject it, Heidegger's thought contains a deep tension that manifests itself more publicly in the two modes of his extremist politics: total revolution or complete passivity. This is a helpful set of observations, and it seems safe to assume that Duff thinks that this theme is indeed a problem or a question of interest in its own right, independently of Heidegger. But if this tension in Heidegger's thought is the matrix of his politics, what is the more adequate account of everydayness? What would such an account even look like? It is a sign of the excellence of this book that it provokes questions that, given the nature of the project, it cannot answer.

There is another question germane to Duff's core concerns that is worth raising here. While Duff does explain the two modes of Heidegger's politics (revolution and passivity), because of the scope of his book, he focuses to a large extent on the first mode. But this neglects the post-1933 developments and downplays Heidegger's own self-critique. For example, in his letter to the rector of Freiburg University of 1945, when he was asking to be allowed to rejoin the faculty, Heidegger claims that by the mid-1930s he had recognized that the Nazis were another manifestation of nihilism. Did Heidegger himself come to think that the revolutionary moment in his thought so well described by Duff was a delusion and a mistake? And how does that change our judgment on the core of his thought? Duff points to this issue near the end of his book by remarking that the quietist inclination "follows the revolution and thus comprehends the revolution" (193). Of course, there may well be defects in Heidegger's later thought rooted in the same tensions in his understanding of everydayness that Duff finds in his earlier thought. But those defects would have different manifestations and thus presumably need their own account: is the thought of the late Heidegger open to the same objections that the thought of the early Heidegger is? Those who still wrestle with Heidegger's thought, early and late, will find Duff's book a most useful companion.