

STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, PHILOSOPHY
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Heidegger and the Problem of Evil



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EDITION

Introduction: The Debate

It is the power to challenge which decides about the greatness of a philosophical work; the power – and sometimes it takes the form of unconditional imperative – to make us think *with* it. If we answer this challenge, the work becomes part of our thinking.

A philosophical work opens a new way for thinking – and it is precisely in this opening that the power of the challenge constitutes itself. There is no opposition between work and way. Quite to the contrary, a work exhorts us to go down the road it has opened. Thinking together with a philosophical work means to go with it. Its power of challenge depends on how far this new way diverts us from the usual paths of our thinking. The bigger the diversion, the greater the power.

But this refers only to the very moment of initiation and our decision to participate in the work. The act of going together down the same path depends on two further factors: on how deep, significant and communicative are the traces the work left on its way, and on how responsive we are to their meanings and importance. In the case of a philosophical work, the traces it imprints on its way are philosophical questions. The power of the challenge increases with the importance of the questions the work left on its way as road-signs. The right answer to the challenge of a philosophical work is to think together with it. The responsibility of the response lies in this questioning together.

However, it is in the nature of such thinking-together to set up oppositions: to think-together and to ask-together means always to think-against and in-spite-of. By coming to us as a challenge, philosophical work wants us not only to sympathize with the importance of its questions – in the sense that they become our own questions – but also to stand apart from and distance ourselves from them. The appropriation of questions, which constitutes the real thinking-together, is possible only thanks to this dissent. Unless we disagree, our going-together is nothing more than a passive following, never an active thinking-together on the way. To be on the way means something more than just to follow, to step into traces. Thinking-together will not tolerate imitation. The right answer to the philosophical question is always another question. Asking-together is an act of appropriation of the questions which are signs on the work's road of thinking. An appropriated question is never the same question; its virtuality depends on our participation in the work. The same question would be only a consenting "question", a question without the power to challenge. The appropriation of a philosophical question is possible only on the basis of an understanding of

its importance. The measure of importance of a philosophical question which defines the way of a work is its potential of being *co-important*: a potential it would be impossible to keep up in the smooth atmosphere of consent. The dissent which originates in the co-importance of philosophical questions is the real act of thinking-together. The attempt to answer the challenge thrown at us by a philosophical work fulfils itself in dissent.

Heidegger's philosophical work has without doubt the power of a challenge in all these senses. Taking up the challenge – an attempt to think-together, ask-together and go-together down the way the work opens – requires dissent. In a letter to one of his pupils Heidegger wrote:

“It is, I think, a high time that people stop writing “about” Heidegger. A substantial dissent (*eine sachliche Auseinandersetzung*) would be far more important.” (in Pöggeler 1983, 355).

Philosophical dissent is of a peculiar nature. Its semantic structure is, in fact, far more complicated than the common term “dissent”, which I used here only tentatively, suggests. We need to reach for other definitions. It is worth looking closer at Heidegger's own concept of *Auseinandersetzung*. In Heidegger's vocabulary it fulfils a significant function whose many-layered meanings can be captured only by a close inspection of the way it is presented by Heidegger himself. Dissent, when understood as *Auseinandersetzung*, is not just a quarrel, disagreement or even a confrontation which aims at conquering and disempowering the adversary. It is an opposition in which two opposed sides reveal their true essence. Such opposition is a form of unveiling, of disclosure. The adversary is here less important than the nature of the opposites themselves. Moreover, philosophical dissent does not consist in just setting one opinion against another; it does not strive to replace one standpoint with another.

“*Auseinandersetzung* – writes Heidegger in *Beiträge* – is not an opposition in a sense of simple refusal or total overcoming of one standpoint by another.” (LXV, 187)

Dissent cannot, in addition, be reduced to “besserwisser” polemic or “conceited” critique. These both tend to reject the opposite standpoint as a collection of “blunders” and “inadequacies” which they measure according to purely external criteria known only to themselves.

“If *Auseinandersetzung* were nothing but a ‘critique’ in a sense of enumeration of deficiencies and mistakes (*Bemängelung*)... But it is, in fact, something totally different: it is all about choosing an adversary, bringing him to an opposite stand and forcing on him a struggle for what is most essential (*ein Kampf um das Wesentlichste*).” (XLIII, 276)

But this requires the development of questions which reveal themselves in such opposition: a development from their most intrinsic characteristics – that is, the sources they originate in – to their most external, most remote consequence. *Auseinandersetzung* does not wish to overcome or to triumph over its opposite but, quite to the contrary, wants to disclose that which is its essence and to “elevate it to its own heights”.

“*Auseinandersetzung* – says Heidegger in *Beiträge* – must be prepared to see every significant philosophy as a mountain peak among other mountain peaks and to take from it what is most essential.” (LXV, 187)

Therefore, neither devaluation nor annihilation but *exposition* lies at the core of philosophical dissent. Without a thorough delineation of the limits of the opposite it is impossible to unveil its essence. Affirmation of its importance is not uncritical; it cannot transcend the limits of the opposite or become unlimited, for then it loses touch with its very essence. Only de-limitation allows us to unveil what is really essential:

“*Auseinandersetzung*, to repeat this again, has nothing to do with underlining drawbacks and highlighting blunders. It is all about establishing the limits – but not in order to know *better* and to show off! Rather, in order to undertake the task again and understand the unavoidability of its necessary limitations.” (XLIII, 277)

Opposition as delimitation constitutes also a condition of becoming what one really is, of unveiling one’s own essence.

“Only a power of a determined and creative dissent (*Auseinandersetzung*) – writes Heidegger about Greeks – with what appeared to be the most alien and difficult, the Asiatic mind, gave this nation a short period of a historically unique distinctness and greatness.” (NACH, 262)¹

Heidegger avoids opposition of the terms “mine – not-mine” (“me – other”) which could misleadingly suggest an intention to appropriate, to transform what is “not-mine” into “mine”. The appropriation which is characteristic for the right kind of opposition consists in essentialization: that is, in revealing what is most proper for the essences of both opposites. This movement of appropriation not only does not annul the difference of the opposite “sides”, but, on the contrary, makes them stronger. It is only in *Auseinandersetzung*, says Heidegger, that “creative interpretation” can grow.

1 Usually, the term *Auseinandersetzung* is translated as “confrontation”. Here, however, I decided to use the concept “dissent” which sits better within the complex argumentation of the author (trans.)

Dissent takes the form of an interpretation – but it has nothing to do with any highly specialized hermeneutics or with answering any practical need. Interpretation merely strives to unveil what is most essential and important and to prepare for a confrontation with it. Jaspers talks about a similar aspect of philosophical dissent:

“In principle, *Auseinandersetzung* always differs from scientific discussion which proceeds on the basis of arguments and counter-arguments; here, they are only means of expression in the service of opposite spiritual powers.” (Jaspers 1977, 81)

Moreover, as Heidegger emphasizes, the confrontation with the most essential often leads to the open confrontation with the adversary’s most efficient weapon. To become aware of this danger and not to surrender – to successfully oppose it – is the last task of the dissent as *Auseinandersetzung*.

The German verb *auseinandersetzen* has many meanings. It means among other things: 1) to separate, isolate and oppose; 2) to explain, explicate, clarify; 3) to disagree and discuss; 4) to come to understanding and agreement. In the following expressions – *sich mit einer Sache...* or *sich mit einem Problem auseinandersetzen* – it means, accordingly, to deal with something, to think a problem over. The noun *Auseinandersetzung* has two significant semantic layers: on the one hand dissent, discussion, dealing with something; on the other, explanation, explication and clarification. The the closest English equivalent would probably be “debate”, a noun of equally ambiguous denotation. It contains two mutually interfering semantic fields which are, each one in itself, additionally polarized. “Debate” is on the one hand “dissent”, “dispute”, “discussion” – and, on the other, “clarification”, “explication” and “explanation”. “Debate” means battling with someone over something. In its first meaning, it is opposition and dissent which strike the most dominant note. But in its second meaning, “debate” suggests a way of presenting a subject of mutual opposition. From this time on, I will understand the expression “philosophical dissent” as “debate” in its four meanings and also as “debate” in the Heideggerian interpretation of the word *Auseinandersetzung*.

Philosophical dissent as debate is a conglomerate of all these senses. The dissent I undertake in this essay will consist in the gradual unveiling of the subsequent layers constructing the term “debate”. It will be an attempt to understand what the word “debate” really means and what it refers to. The “how” of philosophical dissent, which is closely linked to the “against” and “about” of the “debate”, determines the gradual revelation of its proper “what”. It is being “revealed” – which means that it is not immediately given, in a singular and direct act of presentation. It is not given – or rather, it is given as a task. It cannot be

presupposed – it must be interpreted. The way in which the proper “what” of dissent reveals itself is governed by “debate” as interpretation.

The first stage is preliminary and to a large extent historical. I present here a history of the notorious “case of Heidegger” which focuses on his political involvement in the years 1933–1934: “Heidegger and national socialism”. This part serves most of all – apart from a sheer historical presentation – as an attempt to elaborate an efficient hermeneutical strategy which would allow us to capture the strictly philosophical dimension of the “dissent **about** Heidegger” and separate it from all of its quasi-philosophical mystifications. My way is mainly negative: I try to undermine all these interpretations which obfuscate the “problem” so deeply that it is impossible not only to investigate it in its full philosophical complexity but even to formulate the right questions. The first stage of my reflection is an enquiry into the philosophical meaning of “Heidegger’s case”. Here, I delineate a hermeneutical strategy which will remain valid in the further stages of my argument and also a more general hermeneutical perspective in which the subsequent senses of our “debate” will develop. The task of the next two stages is to fill this freshly opened hermeneutical space. In harmony with the semantic dynamics of “debate”, my reflections will be ordered according to the principle of interpretation whose main intention is to explore and understand the conditions under which it would be possible, this time, to “dissent **with** Heidegger”. In the last two stages I venture a final explication of the proper “what” of the whole “debate” – that is, the matter “about” which it debates – while getting into a “dissent with Heidegger”. This scheme, which is organized around the subsequent meanings of the word “debate”, is only one of the architectonic pillars of the book. The other is the internal “logic” of the hermeneutic strategy itself. It bifurcates into two complementary but nonetheless methodologically separate perspectives. They cut through the hermeneutical space and, by shaping it in two opposite directions, divide it into two asymmetrical planes. The rhisomatic perspective of the first three parts (from the Greek *rhisomata*: roots) investigates the entanglements and ambivalences of our “problem”, which lurks behind the headline “political involvement of Heidegger’s project of thinking” (or, less philosophically “Heidegger and national socialism”). By analyzing few relatively isolated fragments of Heidegger’s philosophical project, it aims to dissect the strata which build this complex rhisom of meanings.

The word “project” means here an act of opening a new way of thinking and a challenge to think-together, a fundamental quality of every philosophical work. In the preliminary part, the rhisomatic analysis tackles the “meanings of first degree”, that is, the meanings linked to the “dissent **about** Heidegger”. Whereas in

the next two parts, it deals with the “meanings of the second degree” which are grounded in the philosophical project itself and as such are the conditions of our “dissent **with** Heidegger”. The initial question about the philosophical motivations of Heidegger’s “political commitment” is translated into a number of more concrete questions which together create a somewhat blurred and ambiguous picture. Parts II and III are chiefly devoted to the task of putting this polisemically dispersed archipelago of meanings back in order. While the rhisomatic operation is ruled by the principle of dispersion, deconstruction and dislocation, the archeic perspective I deploy in parts IV and V consists in the partial reversal of the former. It is a regression and, at the same time, transgression within the circular movement of hermeneutics. It aims at the consolidation and concentration of the dispersed meanings in their original *arche* from which they draw their philosophical validity. This archeic dimension is the fundament of the unity and totality of Heidegger’s philosophical project. The sphere which is penetrated by the archeic perspective I call the sphere of sense (and, correspondingly: non-sense). Speaking Heidegger’s language, one could say that it is this dimension of a philosophical project in which “a phenomenon in a distinctive sense” comes most prominently to the fore:

“What is it that phenomenology is to ‘let us see’? What is it that must be called a ‘phenomenon’ in a distinctive sense? (...) Manifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does **not** show itself at all: it is something that lies **hidden**, in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself; and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and ground.” (BT, 59)

Thanks to the bifurcation of the hermeneutic strategy, it is possible to reflect on our problem in two different aspects: an aspect of meanings and an aspect of sense. In both aspects the subject is “the same” but reflected in two different ways. When asking about meanings, the “debate” takes the form of interpretation and “dissent with...” (this refers mainly to the “meanings of the second order” which are analyzed in parts II and III; the “dissent about Heidegger” is meant only as a prelude to its full development in the later parts). Whereas asking about sense (and non-sense) leads to the essential “debate about...”. The proper “about” of dissent – intangible dispersed and vague – reveals itself only in the sphere of sense. The “about” of the dissent and the sense are identical.

“Political involvement of Heidegger’s philosophical project”: can this many-faceted formulation have any philosophical sense? Is it a sufficient ground for a dissent Heidegger himself wanted to instigate? Or maybe, the challenge of Heidegger’s philosophical work is being reduced here to a mere intellectual provocation?

Can the dissent “about” Heidegger be transformed into a dissent “with” Heidegger’s philosophical project and, in the last instance, in the debate “about” its fundamental, primordial, archaic sense? By setting off from this point, can we think-together, go-together and ask-together on the way opened by Heidegger’s work? In such a hermeneutic perspective, is it at all possible to understand and share a sense of the importance of Heidegger’s questions? Or, rather, isn’t it so that by following this marginal issue, we miss the occasion for the real philosophical debate? And finally (we should not multiply the doubts beyond necessity), is this non-philosophical and vague formulation a correct reading of the challenge we face while we are confronted with *Being and Time* and Heidegger’s other works?

I can see no easy answer to these questions: no smart argument or philosophically sophisticated demonstration. Neither can these doubts be appeased by a thorough reflection on the relationship between philosophy and politics, which is rightly held for one of the most fundamental problems of contemporary philosophical thought. The issue is far more complicated; most of my work here consists in showing the scope of this complication. At this moment, I can merely risk a hypothesis that would tentatively answer the above questions. I would say that such a hermeneutic perspective does not necessarily distort Heidegger’s philosophical challenge, although it frames it in a very specific way. My motivation to try precisely this and not the other hermeneutic angle is best described by Lévinas:

“How is it possible – writes he – that the indisputably greatest philosophical mind, full of such speculative panache, hermeneutical insight and capable of creating such beautiful and important new words, could have been seduced and raped by the indisputably criminal regime of the Nazis? Apart from a private scandal, this is an truly irrational event which deeply disturbs intellectual atmosphere of the XXth century. I say these words with full gravity. I listened to Heidegger and read his works as one of the greatest in the history of philosophy. I will never forget the unique way in which he lectured and how among the paths trodden by many pupils and teachers he managed to show us the way to the very origins of Western philosophers and their thought.” (Lévinas 1991, 33)

I share Lévinas’ confusion although I never listened to Heidegger’s lectures and know them only through reading. Yet, I cannot agree with his qualification of this event as “irrational”, if it implies that we should give up the attempts to decipher its hidden sense. Such an attitude can only result in neglecting the issue in a holistic sense, with all its problematic and contradictory features. I must admit that once I also submitted to this escapist temptation:

“We should also be able look at this short and unfortunate episode in Heidegger’s life – I wrote in one of my earlier texts – from precisely this perspective: that it was so short. The philosopher drew right conclusions from his experience pretty quickly and never again dared to betray his calling. What would be left of Heidegger if his “pact with the devil” lasted longer than just nine months?”

Today, I know that such a view is no longer tenable. I also know that it hides in it a real abyss of questions that urgently need to be asked. It is worthwhile to follow Lévinas’ wonderment, if only for the reason that wonderment has always been a source of philosophical inspiration. But it makes sense also for different reasons. The question about the relationship between Heidegger and the criminal regime gives us a true vintage point to look at his philosophical project. This is a point “pointed to” internally by Heidegger’s work; there is no need to stand “outside” or “beyond” in order to reach it. It is also one of the gates which lead to the way where it is possible to walk-together with Heidegger.

Surely, the pretension of covering the whole way from only one point of view poses the threat of distortion, caused by such a shortening perspective. But it also gives us a chance to see what otherwise would be invisible from other points of view. In other words, it lets us share certain questions which, in another perspective, could go unnoticed and unshared. In the last instance, all this is about the skill of dealing with optical illusions: that is, about a hermeneutic strategy which would be able to radiate light from different points and different angles. Once a certain point of departure is taken, one has to ask what view can be seen from this particular place; what is visible, and what is not; what remains veiled and hidden. Once the road is chosen, one has to ask where this road leads to and where it does not. Every road has a direction; it can change slightly, when the road climbs through hills and takes turns, but no road can lead in all directions simultaneously. Every turn has reasons. The questions one asks in this way are by nature co-questions, resulted from the act of asking-together. For we are on the way which has been already opened, on the way we can only walk-together-with....

Heidegger and the problem of evil... How can one translate the vague headline “political involvement of Heidegger’s thinking” into this equally problematic title? How does it happen that the way which has been opened by Heidegger’s philosophical project suddenly turns in the direction of evil? And what does it really mean, “the turn to the side of the problem of evil”? It would seem that there is nothing more alien to Heidegger’s thinking than this precise problem; that it is almost impossible to ask about evil within its conceptual framework and that there are no words for it in the Heideggerian vocabulary. “Evil” would seem to be here a “foreign word” in the strongest sense.

“The famous little hut in Todtnauberg, surrounded by the high forest which muffles the sounds coming from the world of ‘destitute time’ and creates the atmosphere of *Gelassenheit*, essential for thinking; you can see from its windows a forest clearing and a field path leading to the woods, but you cannot see evil...”

Why is it impossible to see evil from this place? What covers the view? And what kind of evil is invisible? There is a certain contrary arrogance which motivates these questions and which will dominate the last stage of our “debate”. They take us to the hermeneutic dimension which unveils in opposition the real “what” of the dissent; this is also where *Auseinandersetzung* finds its completion. Obviously, there will always remain a suspicion that by confronting Heidegger’s philosophical project with the problem of evil – at the moment we must content ourselves with this deficient formulation – we pose, in fact, a purely “external” question. A question from “beyond”, from the “other world” of Heideggerian thought. In that case, we would not be on the way but somewhere nearby, and our question would be merely a side-question, not a truly important co-question we should be able to pose in our effort to walk-together-with... Are we making here a mistake against which we were warned by Heidegger in his explication of the word “debate”? For we are asking about a certain “absence”, about something which does not have a place in the space opened by the project – and a such manner of investigation can never become an asking-together on the way marked by meaningful road signs, but can only lead us to a “critique” or a “polemic”, essentially unable to face the challenge.

But still, if properly elaborated according to its peculiar negative dialectics, the question about evil does not have to lead us astray from the way of the debate. For it is not a question about an accidental “absence”, about some minor drawback. Quite to the contrary, the question about evil asks about such “absence” which Heidegger’s philosophical project makes fully justifiable and strongly sanctioned. Moreover, this “absence” is a condition which makes it possible for this project to evolve from its sources up to its most extreme consequences. That is why the question about evil reaches the deepest foundations of Heidegger’s project. It is only superficially “external”; in fact it stems from the most “internal” depths, which remain hidden and veiled. But for thinking, that which is silent and concealed is as important as that which is openly said. It can even make possible the very act of opening and bring about from unconcealment that which is thought and then thought-together. It makes us think the stronger, the less it is thought of. So, why is it so that thinking of Being silences evil?