

Two letters and two replies on "The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi"

1 November 2000

On April 3-5, 2000 the WSWS published a three-part series entitled, "The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi." Today and tomorrow we will post two letters from readers criticizing the articles, and replies by the author of the series, Alex Steiner.

To the editor,

Thank you for your enlightening and disturbing series on the life of Martin Heidegger. However, you actually wind up doing what you set out not to do: describe a rather simplistic relationship between Heidegger the man and Heidegger the philosopher. The historical evidence you present seems very solid, for which Heidegger must be held accountable; such truths, terrible frightful truths, cannot be whitewashed. But the fact remains that Heidegger's philosophy has already become something quite beyond the Volkish nonsense that may underlie it. It may be illegitimate to go back and trace the roots of Heidegger to certain repugnant views and say Heidegger means this, this specific thing, nothing more, and other appropriations of the philosophy are dishonest and invalid. This kind of author-centered historicizing of the text is both philosophically suspect and cannot do justice to what actually happens in the history of philosophy. I.e. the reception of philosophy by other hands is just as much the story of philosophy as some supposed "true" meaning of the philosophy based on the author's life. Numerous examples from the history of philosophy could be cited, but the reception of say Plato's Timaeus into the Latin west, through the Middle Ages, up to Kepler and Leibnitz, is a case in point. Many scholars would question the validity of these interpretations; but to publish a work is to give it a life of its own, separate (at least to some degree) from the particularities of the life of the author. Your approach leaves NO room for these realities.

A further point, one that is more complicated than you allow for (your own initial disclaimers aside), but one that is touchy because of the horrors of the Holocaust in particular, is that the political lives of many philosophers have been questionable or repugnant, or their philosophies have been put to repugnant, immoral uses. They might not merit the censure of Heidegger's involvement with Nazism (again, let me stress, a fact that has no justification whatsoever), but anyone might find elements in their lives ranging from the distasteful to the loathsome (it is Plato, after all, in the Republic, who envisions the most radical social engineering to ensure the domination of the elite over the lower orders, at that time democratic among the Athenian male citizenry; and Hegel undergirds some of the injustice of the nineteenth century, giving impetus, perhaps unintended, to the "world-civilizing" mission of the West.) And other philosophers engaged in similar philosophical projects to Heidegger without having to bear the scandal of involvement in Nazism, or of using that philosophy to serve a genocidal state (Kierkegaard, Sartre, etc.).

Lastly, I think you too easily disregard the seriousness of Heidegger's thought. For example, in his essay "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics," he makes two very important, and if correct, damning indictments of the modernist, humanist, scientific project. One, that Galileo imposed upon his experiments with falling bodies a mathematical model that did not correspond to "what actually happened" (or even what

others actually saw): the possibility of a mathematical explanation of reality for Galileo became more important than what the senses actually perceived (bodies falling at different rates), a model that stripped reality of some of its "fullness," subordinating reality, "what really happened," to mathematical, scientific language [and why do that? Good question; one reason might be Will to Power]. Second, and more important, Descartes is engaged in a similar undertaking in his dictum, cogito ergo sum. Descartes is attempting not only to formulate a logical, even mathematical statement of "proof" for identity, he in fact makes that kind of a statement coterminous with identity itself: what I the human subject am can be expressed in logical mathematical statements. (He in effect says that math and logic have a necessary relationship with reality, with his particular existence, an assertion which can never be demonstrated, as Sextus Empiricus, Leibniz, Kierkegaard, et al have shown. Indeed, logic's relation to reality may be the fundamental question of philosophy. Hegel, by the way, compounds the problem by making history the unfolding of logic. Maybe that's why it's so important to vilify Heidegger and then postmodernism by extension? Because if Hegel's logic of history is flawed ...) In both cases, most importantly in the second case I think, reality is forced to submit, put on the rack as Kant observed, of language. Note the agonistic relationship between language and reality here: language (math, logic) must conquer reality, must be true. Again, perhaps, a Will to Power.

As Heidegger and others sought to say, the relationship between language and reality is never a given, is never settled. This is the point that modern humanists have assumed for the last several centuries is settled, is done with, something we can move on from. This also explains Heidegger's interest in poetry and "mysticism", to assert that logic, math, and language itself are tools for the disclosure of reality, tools which like any other tool do not have the capacity to fully explicate what they are to be used for, which require other tools, like art. Tools which are never fully adequate to the task for which they employed [a good example is the genocidal Nazi apparatus itself, the most mathematical of systems, the most depraved and immoral.]

Thanks again for your articles, on Heidegger and many other subjects.

JB

Princeton, NJ

Dear JB,

Thank you for taking the time and effort to reply to my piece on Heidegger. Your letter raises a number of issues, some of which go beyond the initial discussion of Heidegger. These issues are important in their own right and I will try to address them. However, before I can get to some of the substantive issues raised in your discussion, I must reply to a number of statements you made which misrepresent my position. The essence of your charge is that I am somehow reducing Heidegger's ideas to the reprehensible biographical details of his life.

In the third part of my essay I examine several key categories of Heidegger's philosophy. Among these are Heidegger's concept of "authenticity," "resoluteness," "Being-towards-death," and "thinking". Anyone who has read your letter and has not read my article would

doubtless form an impression that I am guilty of the “genetic fallacy” in my examination of these categories. In other words, I am supposedly deriving the National Socialist content of the category of “authenticity” from the mere fact that the author of this cogitation was a Nazi. But that is precisely not my method. Instead, leaning heavily on the interpretive work of Johannes Fritsche and others who have been there before me, I try to tease out the content, one that is far from straightforward given the difficulty of Heidegger’s prose, that is contained in the text of *Being and Time*. I try to demonstrate that behind the category of authenticity is the response to the “call” of a predestined fate involving the *Volksgemeinschaft*. [1] We are then in a position to compare this conception to the classical writings of *Volksideologie* [2] and their elaboration in the writings of Adolf Hitler. It is as a result of this comparison that I conclude that the category of “authenticity” as explicated in *Being and Time* [3] is of a piece with the central ideas of *Volksideologie* and particularly its Nazi variant. The kind of “simplistic” genealogical arguments of which I am accused simply do not appear anywhere in my piece.

On the other hand, if you are accusing me of bringing in a historical analysis in my attempt to understand the meaning of a text, then I plead guilty. Texts are never just self-referential in the manner that a deconstructionist “immanentist” reading understands them. Texts that address fundamental issues of the human condition always have a reference to that which stands outside the text—the larger cultural world in which the author is taking a stand. For example, you cannot understand the meaning of the term *Volksgemeinschaft* in Heidegger’s work without having an acquaintance with the rhetorical role that this word had in the writings of the German radical right in the 1920s. We cannot do without this historical material in seeking to understand an author, unless you think that ideas germinate in a self-contained bubble having no relationship to the larger society and its problems.

Having failed to prove your point as regards my “simplistic” reductionist account of Heidegger’s philosophy, you then tack about with another very different accusation in which you characterize my method as involving an “author-centered historicizing.” If by this you mean the attempt to uncover the meaning that a text had for the author who was writing it in relation to his historical situation, then once more I plead guilty. You suggest that this enterprise is somehow illegitimate. Yet you offer no explanation as to why you think this enterprise is “philosophically suspect.”

We do, however, get a hint of how you would explain yourself when you contrast our method to “... what actually happens in the history of philosophy. I.e., the reception of philosophy by other hands is just as much the story of philosophy as some supposed “true” meaning of the philosophy based on the author’s life.”

As part of my effort to uncover the meaning of your letter, I would suggest that your qualification of the word “true” with “supposed” and your bracketing of the word indicates that you reject the notion of objective truth. From this skeptical thesis it follows that any interpretation of a philosophy—“the reception of philosophy by other hands”—is equally legitimate. According to the view you are proposing, we are all actors in a language game and it is only our hubris that legitimizes one “cultural text” at the expense of another. This is the ironical stance that is typical of the postmodern condition.

First, I am charged with holding on to a “simplistic”, reductionist interpretation of the relationship between Heidegger’s philosophy and his politics. Next, I am accused of subscribing to an obsolete concept of objective truth in attempting to uncover the meaning of a text. Note, however, that the second charge is inconsistent with and undercuts the first one. How can you maintain that my interpretation of Heidegger is “simplistic” when you yourself do not accept the possibility that there is a “true” interpretation of Heidegger? Why is my supposedly “simplistic”

interpretation of Heidegger any less valid than your interpretation? You cannot have it both ways. If you wish to have your first charge against me stick, then you must admit at least of the possibility of arriving at an objectively valid interpretation of Heidegger. Yet that is exactly what you deny in your next charge against me. Your arguments therefore lack internal consistency.

Here I am not making any judgment as to your rhetorical skills. The paradox in which you are entwined is symptomatic of the skeptical outlook. Skepticism is not a viable philosophical attitude because it is ultimately self-refuting.

To return to your second charge, you claim that I do not do “justice to what actually happens in the history of philosophy.” You state that I do not allow for the appropriation of a philosophical text “by other hands.” But where in my essay did I state that a philosophical text cannot be appropriated by other thinkers? Within the competing claims of different interpretations we can certainly make distinctions. There is in the history of philosophy both the appropriation of a philosophical text, and its misappropriation.

It is part of the job of a historian of philosophy to distinguish between the two. We know, for example, that the history of philosophy gives us numerous examples of the misappropriation of Socrates, the most bizarre being the school of Nazi Platonists that flourished during the Third Reich. [4] Perhaps the most well-known instance of misappropriation is the fate that befell the teaching of a young revolutionary from Galilee who preached against the Roman Empire. His words were eventually transformed into the state religion of Rome. In making this point I am certainly not suggesting that historical interpretation is always or even for the most part a straightforward and unproblematic task. Yet the difficulties notwithstanding, it is only by virtue of the *possibility* of arriving at a common understanding that social interaction and communication are enabled.

Rather than abandoning the search for truth as hopeless, should we not steel ourselves to undertake the process of investigation and analysis aimed at uncovering the order and logic hidden within a text. Concretely, this requires a study of the relationship of the language of a text to the language that was current at the time the work was written, the historical uses of such language and the concepts they represent, and the broader social framework within which the discussion emerged. Further insight can be gained by studying the historical development of an author’s thought. This mandate often requires us to delve into unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, and accounts by contemporaries as well as the whole corpus of significant secondary literature. Whereas my essay makes no claims to being a comprehensive treatment of the subject, it does present a historically informed analysis of the relationship between Heidegger’s philosophy and his politics.

Elsewhere you imply that my procedure leaves no room for conflicting interpretations. This seems to be the point of your caricature of my methodology as saying that, “Heidegger means this, this specific thing, nothing more, and other appropriations of the philosophy are dishonest and invalid.”

To set the record straight, I never said that all the different interpretations of Heidegger’s philosophy are “dishonest and invalid.” Clearly there are individual interpreters of Heidegger who have honestly tried to wrestle with the problem of the relationship between his philosophy and his politics. In my piece I mentioned a number of authors who I think are due some respect for the seriousness of their efforts. What I also tried to evoke, particularly in my discussion of the cover-up of Heidegger’s Nazism, was the mendacity of those who have spent their careers providing Heidegger with an alibi. They have been the rule rather than the exception. How else would you explain the failure to even acknowledge Heidegger’s deep commitment to Nazism over a period of five decades by many Heideggerians? How do you explain the ferocious

assault orchestrated against Farias's book when it first appeared? Why are key documents pertaining to Heidegger's Nazi period still kept under lock and key by the guardians of his archives? Is it not reasonable to suggest that more is involved in the defense of Heidegger than an honest difference of opinion? Are we possibly witnessing an institutionalized response to a perceived threat?

It may help to recall the historical context in which the Heidegger cover-up began. The overwhelming majority of the philosophy professors in Germany in 1933 took an oath of allegiance to the Führer, Adolf Hitler. A few, like Karl Löwith, emigrated. An even smaller number who remained never accommodated to Nazism. At the end of the war, when the victorious Allies were carrying out their de-Nazification campaign, the same academics who had previously professed their loyalty to Nazism now suddenly discovered the principles of liberal democracy. In many cases, the conversion of these professors was paper-thin, the result of a calculated career move. Rather than confronting their past activity, they preferred to forget the past altogether. This fit in with the needs of the Allied occupiers and the post-war German government. The imperatives of the Cold War meant it was impolitic to examine too closely the background of those now professing faith in the principles of the West. The spirit of evasion characteristic of Germany academia in the postwar years was well captured by the following description of a participant at a philosophy conference:

"It is not surprising that in Bremen there was little discussion from the organizers of the recent history of the National Socialist dictatorship, of the genocide and the extermination of the European Jews, for this did not occur at the previous conferences either. Even less could one expect that a large number of speakers would have felt compelled to speak about their own philosophical and scientific-political contributions to these events." [5]

Heidegger's attempt to distance himself from his Nazi past in the immediate postwar period was thus typical of the actions of many of his colleagues. It was his misfortune that he was too prominent an international figure to simply be ignored. He was one of the few ex-Nazi professors who was actually barred from teaching for a number of years. Nevertheless, despite the widespread knowledge of Heidegger's commitment to fascism, many influential friends in France, Germany and the United States were more than willing to forgive and forget. A chorus of supporters were enlisted in those early postwar years. Eventually this mushroomed into a virtual industry of Heideggerian apologetics. This is very much the situation in France today and to a lesser degree throughout Europe and the United States. Heidegger's influence would no doubt have remained confined to a relatively small circle of scholars were it not for the rise, first, of postwar French existentialism and later the postmodernist and poststructuralist currents of thought of the past two decades. These movements, in their search for philosophical legitimacy, have uncritically appropriated the worst excesses of Heidegger. The fruit of this marriage has been a most unfortunate influence not only on philosophy, but likewise on historical research, aesthetics, literary criticism and political thought.

To sum up, I would maintain that it is not only possible to arrive at an objective determination of the trajectory of Heidegger's thought and its relation to his political practice, but that if we are to make any progress in liberating the broader culture from the malaise of postmodernist-inspired skepticism, it is absolutely necessary that we do so.

Proceeding to the substance of your disagreements with my interpretation of Heidegger, you write that I, "...too easily disregard the seriousness of Heidegger's thought."

You cite as evidence Heidegger's discussion of Galileo's methodology in his essay "Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics." You state that Heidegger draws up a damning indictment of "the modernist, humanist and scientific project ... [by showing that Galileo] imposed upon

his experiments with falling bodies a mathematical model that did not correspond to 'what actually happened'."

Heidegger's point in the essay that you cite is that the modern Galilean-Newtonian mathematization of nature was not arrived at through experimental procedures, as was commonly supposed, but rather was an article of faith which was then imposed upon a recalcitrant nature. Furthermore, claims Heidegger, the modern scientific outlook ushered in by Galileo loses much of the original intuitive grasp of nature that was embedded in the Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy, which it replaced. As evidence for his view, Heidegger provides the following version of Galileo's leaning tower experiments:

"It becomes a decisive insight of Galileo that all bodies fall equally fast, and that the differences in the time of fall derive only from the resistance of the air, not from the different inner natures of the bodies or from their own corresponding relation to their particular place. Galileo did his experiment at the leaning tower in the town of Pisa, where he was professor of mathematics, in order to prove his statement. In it bodies of different weights did not arrive at precisely the same time after having fallen from the tower, but the difference in time was slight. In spite of these differences and therefore really against the evidence of experience, Galileo upheld his proposition. The witnesses to this experiment, however, became really perplexed by the experiment and Galileo's upholding his views. They persisted the more obstinately in their former view. By reason of this experiment the opposition toward Galileo increased to such an extent that he had to give up his professorship and leave Pisa.

"Both Galileo and his opponents saw the same 'fact.' But they interpreted the same fact differently and made the same happening visible to themselves in different ways." [6]

Before discussing the methodological issues, perhaps we should examine the historical validity of Heidegger's account of the leaning tower experiments. The dramatic attribution of these experiments to the leaning tower of Pisa was first presented by Galileo's student Vincenzo Viviani in his hagiographic *Life of Galileo*. Many modern scholars today consider Viviani's account of these particular experiments to be largely fictitious. Viviani's account also has its defenders, notably the historian of science Stillman Drake. Galileo undoubtedly did perform some experiments from a high tower, but the circumstances and the specification of the leaning tower is highly dubious. Skepticism about Viviani's account dates back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1935 Lane Cooper, an American professor, significantly raised the level of controversy about the leaning tower experiments of Galileo by claiming the whole episode to be fictitious. Cooper's book was immediately followed by Alexandre Koyre's groundbreaking *Galilean Studies*. Koyre's work was above all an examination of Galileo's methodology. He sought to demythologize Galileo, particularly the version that had become popular in the eighteenth century of Galileo the experimenter. According to Koyre, Galileo had already carried out his revolution in scientific thought prior to carrying out any experiments. [7] Note that Heidegger presents a strikingly similar thesis. The main difference between the two accounts is that Koyre's is a much more serious historical study. Heidegger's essay is based on lectures he gave in 1935-36 and is roughly contemporaneous with the publication of Koyre's book. It is not clear whether Heidegger was acquainted with Koyre's or Cooper's work at the time of his lectures or afterwards, when his lectures were published in the 1960s. One would expect that a serious account of the significance of Galileo's experiment would have at least made a reference to Koyre's or Cooper's account of the leaning tower episode. Instead, Heidegger is satisfied with repeating the old legends drawn from Viviani, with the difference that where Viviani sought to enhance the image of his great teacher, Heidegger's purpose is to undermine Galileo and with him the entire project of modern science.

This episode is worthy of some discussion because it is illustrative of an

important facet of Heidegger's style. He constantly plays fast and loose with the facts of history. He is not a serious student of history. Rather, he manipulates history to suit his subjective purpose, in this case to demonstrate the arbitrary and counterintuitive methods of modern science. One could adduce many other examples of Heidegger's disdain for genuine historical investigation. His bowdlerized translations of Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus and Plato, for example, are only too well known.[8] His "dialogues" with other philosophers, such as Kant and Hegel, are notorious for their contempt for the actual thought of these figures. Heidegger's interpretation of the German poet Hölderlin is just as tendentious.[9]

Heidegger's discussion of Galileo may also be placed within a historical context. Whereas in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Galileo was typically seen as a martyr of science, the twentieth century has witnessed a reactionary reinterpretation of Galileo as an arrogant and imperious figure who tried to topple a valuable tradition. This depiction of Galileo has more than passing resemblance to the indictment of Galileo by the Inquisition for contravening Church doctrine by espousing the Copernican view of the universe. Conservative forces within the Church have always viewed Galileo in this light. But it was not until the twentieth century that a group of prominent intellectuals outside the Church joined them. Arthur Koestler, the anticommunist ideologue, presented this negative view of Galileo in his novel, *The Sleepwalkers*. More recently the late philosopher of science, Paul Feyrabend, took a position squarely in line with the Inquisition against Galileo. He wrote:

"The judgment of the Church experts [condemning Galileo] was scientifically correct and had the right social intentions, viz. to protect people from the machinations of specialists. It wanted to protect people from being corrupted by a narrow ideology that might work in restricted domains but was incapable of sustaining a harmonious life. A revision of the judgment might win the Church some friends among scientists but it would severely impair its function as a preserver of important human and superhuman values." [10]

Feyrabend's attack on Galileo and defense of the Inquisition is certainly more extreme than Heidegger's formulation. Feyrabend's original contribution to the discussion of Galileo is to frame the position of the Church in terms of an impulse to "protect people from the machinations of specialists." He thus invests the Church with the mantle of a populist concern for ordinary people against the elitist Galileo who would deprive ordinary folks of "important human and superhuman values." Amazingly, what begins as a critique of Galileo's scientific method turns into a defense of the "superhuman". This is a truly remarkable sleight-of-hand. What is even more remarkable, however, is that this reactionary tract was penned by a self-proclaimed freethinker and anarchist. The case of Feyrabend highlights the dangers of abandoning rationality, even when starting from the most radical of intentions. It is also illustrative of one of the points in my essay, that radical postmodern thinkers find common ground with Heidegger precisely on the terrain of his attack on Reason.

Heidegger sums up his critique of Galileo's endeavor as follows, when in referring to Galileo's procedure of providing a mathematical explanation of bodies in motion he writes:

"What remains questionable in all this is a closer determination of the relation of the mathematical in the sense of mathematics to the intuitive experience of the given things to these things themselves. Up to this hour such questions have been open, Their questionability is concealed by results and the progress of scientific work. One of these burning questions concerns the justification and limits of mathematical formalism in contrast to the demand for an immediate return to intuitively given nature." [11]

Here we get to the essence of Heidegger's critique of Galileo. The mathematization of nature introduced by Galileo, he says, leads us away from the intuitive grasp of the world around us. Our intuition or common sense, as it were, tells us that heavy bodies fall faster than light ones, but

the mathematical laws of nature force us to reject our intuitive grasp. This is but a variation of the complaint that *Lebensphilosophie* (Philosophy of Life) has always introduced against the natural sciences. Science is dead and rigid and consigns our living perception to a netherworld of unreality.

More specifically what Heidegger has in mind is the contrast between the Aristotelian-Scholastic outlook and the modern Newtonian outlook. In doing so, Heidegger makes use of certain limitations of the Galilean-Newtonian view of nature that we have since come to appreciate. The Galilean-Newtonian view of the world was mechanistic and as such tried to reduce all phenomena to the mathematical relations of mechanics. In the process it lost sight of what *Lebensphilosophie* considered more real—the intuitive perception. We should note that this critique does not originate with Heidegger. Rather Heidegger was simply borrowing one of the main points of his teacher, the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl. Husserl penned a slogan to express his critique of the scientific mechanical outlook: "Back to the things themselves."

We will grant that there is a grain of truth in the reaction of *Lebensphilosophie* to the natural sciences. The science that began with Galileo was mechanistic. It was also naively reductionist. Descartes, who was one of the key founders of the new science, thought that animals were nothing more than living machines. The mechanistic outlook introduced rigid dichotomies when it tried to depict reality. The opposition between the body and the mind first introduced by Descartes split the living individual into two parts.

Yet at the same time, the introduction of modern mechanics was a great advance in its time. For with it began the systematic classification and elaboration of the relationship between the different elements of nature. The intuitive grasp of the cosmos, which was codified to some extent in the medieval cosmology, had to give way to a more systematic exploration of the different parts of nature and their relationship to each other. In the course of its own development, modern science itself confronts the limitations of the mechanical outlook from which it arose. It finds, as the new discoveries of physics in the last century have dramatically shown, that the old rigid dichotomies—waves versus particles, cause versus effect, finite versus infinite universe—are completely unable to account for the world as depicted in relativity theory, quantum theory and the new attempts to unify all phenomena in string theory.

This does not mean that contemporary scientists or philosophers have grasped the implications of the new science. Far from it, the great majority of scientists and philosophers are still stuck in the conceptual dichotomies that were appropriate to an earlier stage of science. To explore this issue is well beyond the scope of this piece, but I would suggest that it is the inadequacy of a non-dialectical conceptual apparatus to account for the new developments of science that has launched two seemingly disparate but symbiotic movements in the philosophy of science.

On the one hand we see a crystallization of an increasingly shrill mechanical reductionism as presented in the works of the erstwhile sociobiologist E.O. Wilson, who would reduce all phenomena, natural and social, to the laws of physics. The latest pronouncements of the evolutionary psychologists, viz. that rape is biologically, not socially determined, or that human behavior is largely the result of a "selfish gene," are recent examples of this trend. On the other hand we are met with a skepticism about the ability of science and rational thought to provide answers to fundamental questions. This in turn often leads to a retreat from science into mysticism and religion. An example of this latter trend can be found in the religious speculation of the physicist Paul Davies. In either case the diagnosis is not that there is something intrinsically wrong with science as such, but that the philosophical implications of the new science have not yet caught up to the limited conceptual apparatus inherited from a previous era.

The elaboration of the mechanical outlook of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries was a necessary condition for the possibility of a new

organic dialectical outlook that is demanded by all the new developments in science. As such, we must view the mechanical science launched by Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes and Newton as a necessary moment in the history of rational thought about the world. Heidegger views the advent of modern science merely as a negative, as a procedure that takes us away from the immediate certainty of the intuitive. Here once more is the heart of the problem with Heidegger's intention of returning to the primordial. He identifies the certainty of immediate intuition with truth. But Hegel already pointed out a long time ago that there is no such thing as a purely immediate intuition, i.e., one that is uncontaminated with mediation.

"The antithesis between an independent immediacy of the content or of knowing, and, on the other side, an equally independent mediation that is irreconcilable with it, must be put aside, first of all because it is a mere presupposition and an arbitrary assurance." [12]

You argue that it is a mistake to regard our mathematical understanding of the natural world as something that is simply given outside of a historical context. True enough, but it is equally true that our "immediate" intuitions are not given once and for all, but are culturally and historically determined. The "immediate" intuition of a Trobriand Islander who has never seen an airplane, when first confronted with this phenomena, will not be the same as that of an inhabitant of the island of Manhattan. What is immediate is therefore relative. Every intuition is a combination of the relatively immediate with the relatively mediated. Truth as such does not lie with the certainty of the immediate, as Heidegger would have it, but with the most highly developed forms of mediation.

An empirical confirmation of the relative status of "immediate" intuition has been demonstrated by the work of the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget. He showed that children go through a pre-cognitive stage in which the axioms of our common-sense view of the world have yet to emerge. Truths that we take for granted because of their supposed "immediacy," truths such as the subsistent identity of external objects, are actually acquired over a protracted period, the result of a process of interaction between the child and the world around him. Those who identify the common-sense view of the world with "primordial truth" are guilty of ignoring the more primitive forms of perception from which they emerge and simultaneously turning their backs on the higher forms of mathematical relations to which common sense must give way in interpreting the natural world.

These considerations point to a problem shared by those who would return to some supposedly uncontaminated past. The political reactionary literally wishes to return to a previous period of history that is conceived as superior to the present. There is always an arbitrary element however as to what period of history the reactionary favors. Would a German reactionary in the 1920s favor a return to the time of Bismarck and the anti-Socialist laws? How about a return to the period of Frederick the Great in the eighteenth century? Why not return to pre-Roman and pre-Christian times, when the Germanic tribes were uncorrupted by the cosmopolitan civilization of Europe? All these are real issues that taxed the minds of reactionary nationalists in the 1920s.

Similarly, the "reactionary" epistemologist cannot avoid an element of arbitrariness in assigning a privileged role to a form of consciousness. Try as he might, there is no primordial intuition which can be invested with the exclusive mantle of truth. All intuitions imply some form of mediation with concepts.

Furthermore, you make an even more fundamental error when you suggest that our historically developed scientific outlook is merely an arbitrary mental construct reflecting our "Will to power." Galileo's grasp of the law of inertia, later systematized and formalized by Newton, was a turning point in the establishment of modern science not because his "Will to power" buried his opponents. Galileo's insight was able to overcome centuries of dogma backed by the imprimatur of the Church, because it provided a truer explanation of the actual structure of the natural world.

For the same reason, the Copernican view of the world championed by Galileo gradually replaced the Ptolemaic geocentric outlook because it provided a superior account of events in the cosmos. If you simply replace "will to power," a term borrowed from Nietzsche, with "ego," as popularized by Max Stirner, you arrive at the classic position of subjective idealism as formulated by Bishop Berkeley. The world is an expression of our "mind," "ego" or "will to power." Does the phrase "will to power" add any new content to this old shibboleth? "Will to power" is nothing but old wine served up in new bottles.

In your attempt to show Heidegger's depth and originality as a thinker, you also raised the issue of his remarks on Descartes. Heidegger goes to some length to point out that Descartes dictum, *cogito ergo sum*, (I think therefore I am) should not be taken as a logical, inferential statement.

"Descartes himself emphasizes that no inference is present. The sum is not a consequence of the thinking, but vice versa; it is the ground of thinking, the fundamentum." [13]

Heidegger's point is that Descartes is not making just another logical inference in the manner of older metaphysical systems, but that he fundamentally changes metaphysics by forcing all inquiry about the nature of being to submit to the dictates of reason and mathematics. In making this point, Heidegger is hardly providing an original contribution to the history of philosophy. Virtually the same point was made by Hegel in his discussion of Descartes.

"But the proposition '*Cogito ergo sum*' which stands at the very center, so to speak, of the entire concern of modern philosophy, was also uttered by its author in the mode of immediacy. Anyone who takes this proposition as a syllogism must know little more about the nature of the syllogism than that '*ergo*' occurs in it." [14]

While Hegel makes a historical judgment of Descartes' method that would be repeated by Heidegger, his assessment of the value of the Cartesian turn is precisely the opposite of that of Heidegger. Hegel was cognizant of the limitations of Descartes, particularly with what he called his "naïve" equation of the certainty of our subjectivity with truth. Yet at the same time Hegel pays tribute to Descartes precisely for this insight, for without it philosophy could not liberate itself from the clutches of Church dogma. He quite correctly puts Descartes in the same class with Giordano Bruno, who paid with his life for insisting on the priority of science against the authority of religion.

"Presuppositions in religion are given up; proof alone is sought for, and not the absolute content which disappears before abstract infinite subjectivity. There is in Descartes likewise a seething desire to speak from strong feeling, from the ordinary sensuous point of view, just as Bruno and so many others, each in his own fashion, express as individualities their particular conception of the world." [15]

Heidegger, on the other hand, views Descartes as the first instigator of the turn toward the modern conception of the world, and as such plays the role of *bête noir* in his conceptualization of the history of thought. To buttress his case he brings up the one-sidedness of the mechanical view of the world with which the Cartesian philosophy was involved. Yet his "solution" to the one-sidedness of Cartesianism is a retrogressive step. He proposes, as we have demonstrated, another form of immediacy to counter the Cartesian criteria of "clear and distinct ideas." He champions a form of intuitionism, a return to "primordial thinking," whose content is even more vague and abstract than the Cartesian cogito.

In concluding, you make one more point that I think bears some reflection. You claim that I dismiss the role of art at the expense of philosophy. Yet nowhere in my essay do I dismiss the role of art in the cognition of reality. What I do object to is the attempt to supplant the role of philosophy and science with that of art. In framing the relationship as one of an "authentic" attitude of the artist contrasted to the "inauthentic" attitude of the philosopher, Heidegger has resurrected the ancient quarrel between the philosophers and the poets that is the subject of Book 10 of

Plato's *Republic*. Plato's solution, if you recall, was to banish the poets from the city at least until they agree to write Socratic verse. Heidegger's solution in effect, is to banish the philosophers. Particularly in his later philosophy, he counterposed poetry and other forms of art to conceptual thinking, maintaining that the former was more genuine. Furthermore Heidegger does violence to our understanding of art and poetry by reinterpreting the history of art as a celebration of pre-rational spontaneity. We have already alluded to Heidegger's misrepresentation in this respect, of the poetry of Hölderlin.

I would banish neither the philosopher nor the artist. Nor would I assert that the artist, as a paradigm of nonconceptual thought, could simply replace the philosopher. Conceptual thought is still required today more than ever.

To sum up, I do not think that I "... disregard the seriousness of Heidegger's thought" as you claim. Rather, I think you are dismissing the serious nature of the crisis of our contemporary intelligentsia who are more than willing to provide an apology for such retrogressive thought. I have looked long and hard for the supposed wisdom contained in Heidegger. What I found is that when Heidegger has something relevant to say, as for instance about Galileo or Descartes, he is neither original nor profound, and compares unfavorably with others. Moreover, where he does have something original to say, as in his musings on Hölderlin, he is just plain wrong. Heidegger it turns out, is not "the uncrowned king of thought" (Arendt). He is the emperor who has no clothes.

To be continued

Notes:

1. A polemical term used by the Nazis to refer to the "community of the people," bound by natural, usually racial ties.
2. A body of thought and mythology developed by reactionary German nationalists in the nineteenth century. It was characterized by a celebration of an ancient heroic age of the "people" that has been overlaid by modern, alien influences. *Volksideologie* gave birth to political movements that sought to "cancel" the corrupt society of modern industrial Germany and return to a mythic existence of kings, warriors, and gods.
3. Published in 1927, *Being and Time* is the work that made Heidegger's international reputation and is considered his *magnum opus*.
4. The Nazi's misappropriation of Plato as well as other philosophers is analyzed in detail by Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany*, Harvard University Press, 1993.
5. Cited in Rainer Alisch, Heidegger's "Silence" about the Holocaust: An Attempt at a Reconstruction, *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust*, edited Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, Humanities Press, 1996, p. 134.
6. Martin Heidegger, *Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics*, *Basic Writings*, Harper and Row, 1977, p. 266.
7. For an excellent summary of the historical reception of Galileo from the Renaissance to modern times see, "The never-ending Galileo story", by Michael Segre, in *The Cambridge Companion to Galileo*, edited by Peter Machamer, Cambridge University Press, 1998.
8. For a discussion of Heidegger's mistranslation of Heraclitus, see Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy*, University of California Press, 1992, p. 106.
9. See the excellent note on Heidegger's mangling of Hölderlin by Margaret Rees, A letter on "The Case of Martin Heidegger," 15 April 2000, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/corr-a15/shtml>
10. Paul Feyrabend, *Against Method*, Verso, 1993, p. 133.
11. Martin Heidegger, *Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics*, *Basic Writings*, p. 270.
12. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris, Hackett Publishing Company, 1991, p. 124.
13. Martin Heidegger, *Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics*, *Basic Writings*, p. 279.

The Encyclopedia Logic, p. G.W.F. Hegel,
15. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, trans.
E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, Humanities Press, 1974, p. 228.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact