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# HEIDEGGER AND RELIGION

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## HEIDEGGER: AN INTRODUCTION TO A (*VERY*) *CRITICAL INTRODUCTION*

**Abstract.** The following paper is a short summary of a critique of Heidegger, which I formulated at greater length in *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken* (Catholic University of America Press, 2006), and *Heidegger: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2008). The critique is motivated by ethical and theological concerns and interrogates Heidegger's key methodological distinction between ontological investigations and ontic discussions. I argue that this distinction allows Heidegger to re-populate the ethico-theological horizon with presuppositions that remain unexamined and, under the terms of the distinction, unexaminable. These presuppositions set the stage for Heidegger's politics in the 30s and his theological impact on Catholic and Protestant theology in the latter half of the 20th century. In conclusion I argue that ontology must never be divorced from the ethico-theological concerns which are endemic to it.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, ontology, Dasein, immanentism, fascism, phenomenological method

In 2007 I was asked to write a theological critique of Heidegger for the *Interventions* series edited by the Center of Theology and Philosophy, University of Nottingham. The Center is the hub of radical orthodoxy, the theological movement started by the British theologian John Milbank, among others. The book was published in 2008 by Eerdmans

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under the title *Heidegger: A (Very) Critical Introduction*.<sup>1</sup> It was no surprise to me that the book was generally unpopular with Heideggerians. I connect Heidegger's crypto-ethics, his political misdeeds, and his ambiguous legacy in theology to what I see as the basic flaw in his thought: the methodological separation of ontological inquiry from ontic concerns. While the thesis of ontological difference is undeniable (and not particularly original), Heidegger's effort to do ontology in suspension of ethics, politics, and theology, is misguided – an all too modern attempt to keep philosophy's hands clean, which always results in the imposition of an encrypted ethics, an encrypted politics, and encrypted theology on philosophy. The book was an opportunity for me to sharpen a critique that was already a central theme of my first book, *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken* (Catholic University of America Press, 2006)<sup>2</sup> The equiprimordiality of ethics and ontology is of course at the heart of Levinas's critique of Heidegger but it has much older roots. One can read it in the late Schelling, who argues that “the first speculative concepts are also the first moral concepts, and a true philosophy cannot be conceived without morality”.<sup>3</sup> One can perhaps even connect the idea to the medieval doctrine of the convertibility of the transcendental notions of being, truth, and goodness.

The critique is ultimately directed at Heidegger's immanentism. From the early Freiburg lectures, through *Being and Time*, to the later mytho-poetic writings, philosophy in Heidegger contracts to the compass of the merely human. Others in the German tradition had attempted to immanentize philosophical discourse, Feuerbach, for instance, or the early Husserl. But in Heidegger the immanentization takes a particularly vicious and non-negotiable turn. It is not only the *what* of thinking that is now diminished by the confinement of thought to the

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<sup>1</sup> S. J. McGrath, *Heidegger: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2008.

<sup>2</sup> S. J. McGrath, *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2006.

<sup>3</sup> F. W. J. von Schelling, *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung*, ed. W. E. Ehrhardt, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 1992, 39.

merely human, but also the *how*. The time-honored methods of philosophical analysis, not only logic, deduction, and explanation but also description and intuition are dismantled as implicitly onto-theological.

According to Heidegger, phenomenology, as practiced by Husserl and his school is still caught up in the metaphysical enterprise, the fetishizing of the theoretical attitude. Heidegger's is not only a philosophy of *finitude* (objective genitive) but also a philosophy *of* finitude (subjective genitive), a finite philosophy, which no longer has any terms with which to dream the possibility of an infinite cause; all historical routes of access to the absolute are closed. The surgical removal of *ens infinitum* from the philosophical lexicon was the earliest motive of Heidegger's destruction of the history of ontology. Only one who knows how an organ or a tumor functions in a body can also surgically remove it. Schooled in Aristotelian scholasticism from an early age and conversant with the transmutation onto-theology undergoes in modernity and German idealism, Heidegger targets God as more than just an idol of philosophical piety, but a fundamental infection of philosophical thinking, diverting it from its only legitimate theme, life as we in fact live it, and sending it wandering in a maze of constructions and illusions.

But this was also Heidegger's great error: he wanted a philosophy of life, but refused to allow life to spontaneously express itself. And what is life if not spontaneity of self-expression? Heidegger dictates in advance what kind of life is granted phenomenality: a life that does not care about God (I use the term care technically – *Sorge*). God is not one of Dasein's concerns, not a source of its anxiety or curiosity. God does not enter into Dasein's average everydayness, nor is the anticipation of God a feature of Dasein's resoluteness. Religion, silenced so forcefully in the early Heidegger, returns in the later work, like the repressed, breaking through Heidegger's carefully constructed rhetoric with intimations of "the Holy," "the Fourfold," or "the granting." The great irony of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy is that the most deliberately atheological thinker became the most fertile ground for theological speculation: Welte, Bultmann, Rahner, Coreth, Siewerth, Macquarrie, and the late comers, Marion, Hemming, etc.

How does one introduce Heidegger? How do you introduce a natural disaster? A general introduction to Heidegger was beyond me. I was entirely seduced, however, by the invitation to write not only a critical introduction, but a *very* critical introduction. What is the critique? Heidegger's theological defection from the Scholasticism on which he cut his teeth influenced the anthropology of *Being and Time*, as I have argued in my first book, *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy. Phenomenology for the Godforsaken*. Heidegger's sympathy for the early Luther's polemic with the Scholastic approach to the relation of reason and revelation – Luther's binary of *theologiae gloriae*, which presumes an immediacy with God as present in creation, and thus avoids the uncomfortable revelation of absence in the crucified, and *theologia crucis*, the theology that stays with God's *no* to human understanding – substantively and methodologically determined Heidegger's Daseinanalytic and his later writing on the last God. This is the unsaid in the ontic excursus of division two of *Being and Time*: Heidegger needs to draw upon a decision made outside of the phenomenology if he is to complete the Daseinanalytic. Heidegger must presume a decision with respect to an axial religious question, which his own philosophy cannot settle. The analytic of Dasein will be an investigation of a being who has no care for the Creator, does not think about it, question it, or spontaneously seek it. As in the young Luther, Dasein is in the grip of an *aversio dei* which locks it into a pattern of lies and idol making. Such an existence, is from a theological perspective, not just Godless, but Godforsaken, bereft of any ontological traces of its being created.

How could phenomenology presume such a thing without violating its own rule, to presume nothing, especially in the areas of theology and ethics?

The suspension of the methodological distinction between the ontological and the ontic at key points in the Daseinanalytic inverts the founding ambition of phenomenology, which Heidegger pretends to also, at the same time, and in self-contradiction, endorse: to give an impartial account of the recurring features of being human, prior to any ethical-political or theological decision.

I don't presume for a moment that Heidegger does not know what he is doing. What disturbs me, haunts me, about this is the question, why does he do it? What is he trying to do, under the cover of the ur-science of phenomenology?

The distinction between the ontological and the ontic, and its related Dasein-relative distinction, the existential and the existentiell, everywhere at work in *Being and Time*, is never properly defined. We must construct it for ourselves. Ontology, clearly, is Heidegger's word for philosophy; the investigation of that which is always presupposed in science, as much as in living, the pre-understanding of being, which makes possible, all modes of being-in-the-world. The ontic is often mistakenly identified with the substantive or positive, with things and their attributes. The ontic has a much wider reach: it includes what everyone else calls philosophy. It concerns beings, but not only in a positivistic sense. Ontic is not only the physicist's inquiry into the substructure of molecules or the biologists inquiry into the building blocks of life. Ontic is also the ethicist's question concerning the criterion for moral action in any given situation, the metaphysician's inquiry into the distinction between essence and existence, or the theologian's question concerning the relationship of grace and nature.

Heidegger claims to have accessed a privileged perspective on all these matters, a quasi-transcendental horizon, which empowers him to philosophize *before* science, ethics, and theology do their work, to have recourse to a more fundamental arena of inquiry which these other sciences always presuppose but are constitutively incapable of themselves investigating. And yet Heidegger's ontology must presume the ontic at the decisive moment. What can this mean? It can only mean that Heidegger's ontology presumes an ethics, a politics, and a theology in some concealed and non-negotiable way. The foundation is itself founded on that which it presumes to ground.

This impossible relation of the ontic to the ontological sheds light on a particularly messy area of Heidegger studies: Heidegger's unpleasant political errors. There is indeed an implicit politics in *Being and Time*, an ontological foundation of political life that happens to be in substantial alignment with certain forms of fascism, for example, Mussolini's (but perhaps not Hitler's).

It is not that Heidegger has subscribed to fascism in *Being and Time*, any more than he has subscribed to Lutheranism; it is rather that he has so constructed his ontology (with its inevitable ontic presuppositions) as to foreclose certain political options and enable others. Among the foreclosed is the liberal humanism advocated by the Weimar republic; among the enabled is a spiritually elevated form of fascism which arrogates to the state the rights that liberalism preserves for the individual, on the understanding that the state is not an ad hoc collection of autonomous unrelated individuals but an organic being, united by a common history and a shared destiny.

On the question of whether this problem follows Heidegger in his later work, I have argued that while the language of the ontological / ontic distinction is abandoned, the facade of a privileged intuition into being, beyond all ethical, political, and theological discussion, which functions as a screen behind which Heidegger's ethico-political and theological preferences are inscribed into ontology itself shapes the later work as well. Now Heidegger speaks of thinking, what the great poets, statesmen and thinkers accomplish, by distinction from metaphysics. The thinker no less reserves for himself the right to make ethical-political and theological claims, as Heidegger does with increasing audacity as he grows older.

What is to be said about this? Insofar as Heidegger is in my view the greatest of all phenomenologists, his failure to keep his phenomenology clean of the ethico-theological is not insignificant. It is not merely a question of endeavoring post-Heidegger an even more methodological rigorous phenomenology, unless we are content to confine our phenomenological analyses to trivial objects, hammers for example. Heidegger's problem indicates a flaw in the modern philosophical project itself, one that has been identified before, by anti-moderns such as Pascal, Jacobi, Kierkegaard, and Derrida. In spite of Heidegger's many pretenses to have transcended modernity Heideggerian ontology is all too modern. It is Descartes' presuppositionlessness, Kant's transcendental knowledge, the German Idealist's *Vernunft*, dressed up in a new outfit; the arrogance of philosophy to be able to think without also

living, to think beyond life, which is as common to analysts as to phenomenologists. Indeed this is what is perennial in Western philosophy, the true *philosophia perennis*, not a substantive position or method but a delusion of grandeur.

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