



Beyond Heidegger: From ontology to action

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Abstract

Heidegger's blatant anti-Semitism in the recently published volumes of the *Black Notebooks* has led several philosophers to question the future of Heidegger scholarship. In this article I suggest that the publication of the *Notebooks* indeed provides a deeper understanding of Heidegger's entanglement with National Socialism. Yet rather than viewing this entanglement as cause to reject his work, I examine how it might help us to define philosophy's role in the project of building a society in which Nazism is impossible. Through reference to Heidegger's public voice during the years covered by the first three volumes of the *Black Notebooks* I identify a paradox in his thought: Heidegger powerfully diagnoses modernity's penchant to encase the natural and social orders in a determinate ontology, and yet his diagnosis introduces a new kind of determination that actively sides with totalitarianism. By representing the political sphere as the site of ontological movement, Heidegger opens us to the fluidity of politics only to obfuscate the priority of action. Through attending to this paradox I argue that the way of thinking capable of responding to the problems of modern politics cannot be ontological but must be political – with others.

Keywords

Black Notebooks, Martin Heidegger, National Socialism, politics, Sophocles

Ought we to continue reading Heidegger? The extensive networks of Heidegger scholarship are still recovering from the release of the first three volumes of his personal writings: the ominously titled *Black Notebooks*. While Heidegger originally entitled these writings *Überlegungen* or *Considerations*, the title 'Black Notebooks' has captured public consciousness not because of the black oilskin covers on the original bindings but

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the supposedly dark revelations within.¹ The first three volumes were released in the spring of 2014, and cover the tumultuous years from 1931 to 1941.² They contain evidence of Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism that is so condemning that several of his greatest proponents now question the entire enterprise of interpreting his thought.³ In certain passages Heidegger links his critique of western metaphysics to the popular National Socialist ideology of race. He refers to the Jewish gift for 'calculation', which he finds expressive of the 'empty rationality and calculability' of western metaphysics (Heidegger, 2014c: 46). He endorses the myth of a 'world Jewry', suggesting that the 'rootlessness' of the Jewish community drives the 'world-historical task' of modernity to its homogenous, technological end (2014c: 262, 243). Yet the Jews are not a cause or even *the* cause of calculative rationality. In Heidegger's meta-philosophical approach to history, the Jewish people appear as pawns in a larger game. They exhibit an acute presentation of the symptoms of *Machenschaft*, machination, the technological 'bog' into which everything is sinking (2014c: 159).

For Peter Trawny (2014), editor of the *Notebooks*, the newest insight into Heidegger's personal writings confirms a fear that has underpinned Heidegger scholarship over the past half-century: that Heidegger's anti-Semitism was not a naïve and momentary lapse of thought but rather a political commitment 'tied in to his philosophy'. Richard Wolin (2014: 45) argues that the *Notebooks* constitute 'a betrayal of philosophy', declaring that 'any discussion of Heidegger's legacy that downplays or diminishes the extent of his political folly stands guilty, by extension, of perpetuating the philosophical betrayal initiated by the Master himself'. While Wolin's arresting claim demands attention, it is worth noting that only a small number of passages (roughly two pages) in the voluminous *Notebooks* mention the Jewish people. Heidegger spends far more time attacking the National Socialist leaders and the German people for failing to take up the task that he had set for them. What is even more confronting than his commitment to popular anti-Semitism is his fundamental ambivalence to the events occurring in Europe during the 1930s and early 1940s. It is Heidegger's ambivalence toward the specific events unfolding in his own historical epoch, I suggest, that is tied in to his philosophy in a way that provides the greatest cause for concern.

The guiding assumption of this article is that, despite Wolin's warning, the *Black Notebooks* do not end the question of Heidegger and politics but call for further philosophical analysis. Ultimately I agree with Wolin that Heidegger moves progressively away from a mode of reflection that can be called philosophy. Yet I am not convinced that there is anything altogether new in the *Notebooks*. On this point I agree with David Farrell Krell (2015: 130), who, arguing against the polemic reaction against the *Black Notebooks*, claims that 'there is nothing here that adds to Heidegger's more considered *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (1936–8) and other already published works'. Yet I do not agree with Krell that there is 'precious little of philosophical or "thoughtful" importance in the three volumes'. The *Notebooks* are extremely well thought out. The problem is that they cannot be separated from other moments in his work where he is supposedly 'really' thinking.⁴ By reading the private *Notebooks* alongside his public work we are faced with the task of considering how one who so powerfully diagnoses modernity's penchant to encase the natural and social orders in a determinate ontology could, through this very diagnosis, introduce a new kind of determination that actively sides with totalitarianism.

Rather than separating one of these moments from the other, as does Krell, I propose to examine them in the form of a paradox. Of course, the reader may suggest that there is no paradox at all; that Heidegger's philosophy is precisely a *coherent* appraisal of National Socialism. My task is to show that there is a paradox, however minimal it may be.

To identify this paradox, and to show how it provides a fruitful approach to Heidegger's work, I consider two lecture courses Heidegger gave during the years encompassed by the *Notebooks: Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) and *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'* (1942). I turn to these lectures for an insight into his public voice; it is my contention that the private and public aspects of his work must be considered together. In these lectures Heidegger attempts to build a critique of National Socialism from two very different historical moments. His method is to diagnose the problems of modernity in terms of a technalized mode of thinking through reflecting on a time that precedes modernity, namely, the time of the pre-Socratic Greeks. It is not my concern in this article to assess Heidegger's account of western history or his translation of the Greek texts. This has admirably been done elsewhere (Gibson, 1982; Castoriadis, 2007; Stephens, 2014). Rather, I am concerned with Heidegger's claim that a fresh encounter with these texts can transform the 'way of thinking' (*Denkungsart*) undergirding the problems of modernity. His diagnosis of the malaise of modernity in terms of the way of thinking constitutive of the modern political sphere is, at first glance, extremely lucid, and his attempt to remedy this sickness through a fresh encounter with Greek poetry promises to undermine the very possibility of Nazism. Yet by framing this diagnosis in terms of ontology Heidegger does not take issue with the present actuality of National Socialism but rather with a deeper ontological meaning that can be grasped only in terms of history. Given this ontological frame, what might have served as the means for self-awareness – the failure of the National Socialist regime to institute his philosophical program – ultimately moved Heidegger to climb higher and higher to the position of aesthetic observer of the history of Being. The philosophical importance of Heidegger's work, I argue, lies in struggling with the question of how his apparently lucid diagnosis could fail so spectacularly to provide a remedy. This struggle has ongoing significance for philosophy to the extent that the need for a way of thinking in which Nazism is impossible remains important today.

The forgetting of Being

Before I turn to Heidegger's lectures a few contextual remarks are necessary. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger interprets historical and political problems in terms of ontology. He claims that the primary problems we face are not the kind of problems that require practical solutions. Rather, they are the result of an ontological condition that requires our understanding of *Being* to be transformed. To search for a solution to the social problems we face in terms of new laws or technologies is to assume that all the pieces of the puzzle are available for the solution. Such an approach is overly concerned with beings, having forgotten the deeper question of Being.

After *Being and Time*, Heidegger's ontological approach to social problems takes on a historical dimension. During the early 1930s, he moved away from an ahistorical analysis of social and historical problems to suggest that such problems arise from a 'technalized'

mode of thinking that is a result of the history of western metaphysics. Technalized thinking limits what can appear according to a prescribed understanding of Being. It is not simply the result of individuals who are absorbed in beings, but rather a planetary, global movement wherein historical events and future possibilities are framed according to the human capacity to shape and control their environment through technology. The struggle against technalized thinking must therefore be historical itself. To this end, Heidegger ties the ontological project of retrieving Being to the German nation. After the Nazis established a one-party state in 1933, Heidegger was bestowed the role of National Socialist rector of Freiburg University. He turned to politics as the medium through which the German nation might be spiritually renewed at the direction of philosophy.

Heidegger anticipates this transition in the *Black Notebooks*. In an entry dated to the autumn of 1932, he writes about the ‘*The end of “philosophy”*’. ‘We must bring philosophy to its end’, he states, ‘and thus prepare for the completely other – metapolitics. And, correspondingly, the *transformation of science*’ (Heidegger, 2014a: 115). Heidegger’s reference to metapolitics is illuminating, for it gives us an important insight into one of the motivations behind his so-called ‘turn’ in the coming years. Metapolitics constitutes the end of philosophy to the extent that it unifies the theoretical and practical components of philosophy that have hitherto remained separate. It is both a rejection of speculative philosophy and the Platonic project to conceive of philosophy as a sphere that ought to provide the ground and direction of politics. In his inaugural address as Rector, Heidegger explicitly and publically outlines this metapolitical response to the problem of technalized thinking. The technological framing of the world cannot be overcome by novel projects of self-fashioning, he argues, but only by the decision of the German people to ‘submit to the command of the beginning’ (Heidegger, 1985: 474). Only in this way can they avoid falling into ‘the settled comfort of a safe occupation’. Heidegger identifies this ‘beginning’ in antiquity, suggesting that the German people must take up the task of ‘questioning’ and ‘holding one’s ground’ in the chaos of the modern world by participating in the first questioning inaugurated by the Greeks. Heidegger’s argument is that the university must take a metapolitical role in the National Socialist movement. It must become the ‘centre’ and ‘middle’ around which the German people can gather, for it has exclusive access to a more original sense of Greek *techné* that is unavailable to the western political tradition. The ideal state requires the alliance of ‘political power’ and ‘philosophy’, echoing Plato’s call for the consilience of state power and philosophical thought.

In an entry in the *Black Notebooks* dated around 1938, Heidegger (2014b: 408–9) declares that he ‘misjudged’ the National Socialist movement. He states that by

thinking purely ‘metaphysically’ (i.e. in terms of the history of being), in the years 1930 to 1934 I took National Socialism to be the possibility of another beginning. . . . In that way I misjudged the ‘movement’ . . . what is beginning here is the completion of modernity, and in a much deeper way than fascism.

Was this a moment of genuine self-reflection? Heidegger states that his misjudgement led him to see that the failure of National Socialism occurred on the level of ‘*thinking*’. His dissatisfaction with this failure led him to resign from the rectorate in February 1934,

not even a year after accepting the position. This recognition does not directly alter his philosophy, however, but rather his conception of the relation between philosophy and the *polis*. As we will see in his lectures given in the years following his resignation from the rectorate, Heidegger became increasingly critical of National Socialism, arguing that is not up to the task of realizing the destiny of Being. His withdrawal from public life was not a break with National Socialism, however, but rather an attempt to guide the movement from an indirect position.

Introduction to Metaphysics

A year after his resignation from the rectorate Heidegger gave a lecture series that was later published as *Introduction to Metaphysics*. In these lectures he ceases to examine the task of philosophy in terms of metapolitics and instead considers an alternate way of conceiving of philosophy's intrinsically practical character. Rather than exploring philosophy as a politically instrumental form of thinking in the shape of Plato, he turns to the poetic resources that precede theoretical philosophy's split from the practical to outline an account of how philosophy might assist the state to rediscover Being. To begin, Heidegger diagnoses the present political crisis in ontological terms. Reflecting the kind of move repeated endlessly in the *Notebooks*, Heidegger (2000: 47–8) couches this ontological reflection in a sweeping generalization about the metaphysics of nationhood: The German people lie 'in the pincers between Russia and America, which are metaphysically the same in regard to their world-character and relation to the spirit'. Actualities of culture, politics, and modes of production are metaphysically reducible to the same root, for both nations show 'the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man'. Rather than 'listening to spirit' they relate to spirit via a 'technological assault' (2000: 52).

To give genuine audition to spirit, Heidegger locates his critique of Russia and America in a much larger historical narrative. He informs us that their technological assault is expressive of an original error made by Plato when he distinguished *techne* from *poiesis*. By separating *techne* from *poiesis*, Plato constructed a rule-governed notion of *techne* that removes the poetic or receptive dimension of *poiesis*. This account of human making problematically fixes the subject as rational legislator of a bare material world that awaits amalgamation. To provide an alternative, Heidegger turns to the work of thinkers who precede Plato. To 'recapture' this time in which technology did not hinder the task of listening to spirit, Heidegger proposes a 'violent' (*gewalttätig*) response that could change the people on the level of thinking. This violent response does not involve political rallies and military displays of power. The renewed attention to Being must be 'retrieved' through a new and more powerful kind of *techne* wherein thinking and poetry are understood in connection.

Heidegger begins his retrieval with Parmenides' (1984: 56) famous third fragment, which reads *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*. He informs his students that the tradition of western metaphysics renders this fragment as 'because thinking and being are the same', conjoining the knowledge of the thinker with Being itself (Heidegger 2000: 154). This picture of thinking renders the world as ready-made for thought to intuit its structure, entailing that thinking is a faculty of the human being who is already defined as

a rational animal (2000: 189). In contrast, Heidegger (2000: 155) proposes a translation that he claims to be unencumbered by metaphysics: 'belonging-together reciprocally are apprehension and Being'. In this rendering, Parmenides does not posit the unity of Being and thinking but rather uncovers the irreducibility of thought and Being, where Being is a 'happening', a temporal event in which humanity itself happens (2000: 6). Heidegger claims that Parmenides' understanding of *techne* is a poetic mode of thought that 'brings forth what is present out of unconcealment'.

By encountering Parmenides' disclosure of the shared event of apprehension and Being, Heidegger claims that our modern construction of nature begins to unravel. In modernity, our technical framing of the world begins with the translation of *phusis* as 'nature', which derives from the Latin *natura* ('to be born' or 'birth') (2000: 14). The Latin translation 'thrusts aside' the originary content of the word, Heidegger explains, issuing the theologically exhaustive concept of nature prevalent during the Middle Ages. It posits nature as the determining ground of beings, thereby ascribing a sufficient reason for every appearance in the model of Aristotle's efficient causation. Nature becomes the stable essence of beings, meaning that poetic creativity (*poiesis*) must be understood in terms of *mimesis*, imitation. By understanding *poiesis* as the imitation of *phusis*, medieval philosophy removed the concealing/disclosing event from the 'nature' of beings.

Heidegger's aim is to free Being from the logicism characteristic of western thought, from the metaphysical drive to construct nature as an exhaustively determined sphere that can be mastered by knowledge. He claims that a new encounter with the pre-Socratic Greeks (mediated, of course, through his philosophy) can alter the priority of nature in experience, for it was not by a natural process that the Greeks first experienced *phusis* but rather *phusis* itself that allowed the Greeks to experience natural processes. Through the experience of Being in poetry and thought, 'what they had to call *phusis* disclosed itself to them' (2000: 16). The drive of technalized thinking to frame the world according to pre-established rules remains oblivious to the self-appearance of beings that precedes subsumption. Drawing our attention to a mode of appearance primordial to this subsumptive activity, Heidegger takes human existence as the unavoidable starting point for any attempt to think about nature. This starting point displaces *phusis* from the conception of nature as determining ground and replaces it with a dynamic sense of happening and unconcealing. Under the temporal conditions of *techne*, *phusis* is uncovered through poetic engagement with the world.

Heidegger's diagnosis of technalized thinking is radical to the extent that it aims to free the anthropic relation to entities from conceptual determination. This diagnosis aims to critique not only America and Russia but also the National Socialist leaders who believed that they could stabilize the political sphere through technical administration and military displays of power. Yet Heidegger's diagnosis restricts the remedial possibilities of resistance to an alternative horizon. This horizon may not be that of conceptual fixity, yet, like the Kantian a priori construction of nature, Heidegger's diagnosis of modernity does not open the present on its own terms but rather through its history, that is, through *what it is not*.

The negative structure of Heidegger's diagnosis is evident in the remedy he proposes to the sickness of technicalized thinking. Having identified how Parmenides' third fragment reverses the priority of nature in human experience, Heidegger then seeks to allow this primordial sense of *phusis* to appear though an examination of the connection between thinking (*noein*) and poetry (*poiesis*) in Sophocles' *Antigone*. The text at the centre of his analysis is the famous choral ode in which the chorus sings of a world dominated by technical knowledge and its terrible consequences. With a word that dynamically captures the ambiguity of human creativity, the chorus describes human beings as *deinos*: awe-inspiring, terrifying, or, as Heidegger translates, uncanny (*unheimlich*). The importance of Sophocles' poetizing of *anthropos* is that he does not describe the human being in terms of the established references of his time: the gods, social status, or Homer's poetry. Neither are his words intelligible according to the established references of our own time: Descartes' thinking thing or Kant's unity of apperception. Rather, the choral ode transports us to an understanding of human beings that precedes Platonic ontology.

The significance of the choral ode in Heidegger's narrative is that it presents the 'overpowering' (*das Über-wältigende*), something in nature that resists determination by *techne*. In the attempt to commune with nature, humans create technologies such as boats and cities. Heidegger claims that what Sophocles poetically reveals is that this communing does not domesticate nature but allows the overpowering to appear. Such a poet is 'the one who is *violence-doing*', who 'makes appear what is unseen' (Heidegger, 2000: 172). The revelatory power of the poet shows that the state cannot be instituted according to the knowledge of the philosopher, as Plato contested. Rather, the poet must take the central role of leading the people if they are to recognize the movement of Being in their midst.

Heidegger claims that the conception of *techne* expressed in the choral ode is far from both Plato's rule-governed account of practical knowledge and Aristotle's understanding of *techne* as a uniquely human virtue whereby the agent produces something according to a rule. The choral ode depicts *techne* as a form of knowledge that is not necessarily under human control. *Techne* can produce either bad or good, destruction or greatness. It is associated with escape, and yet while *anthropos* can escape from most of nature – even at the expense of becoming *apolis*, without a city, or *aporos*, losing his way – it cannot escape its own death. In death *anthropos* encounters the limits of its skilfulness. Thus the better *anthropos* becomes at conquering the land through agriculture or at governing cities, the more it will come to think that *techne* might be able to control all things.

By focusing on this primordial disclosure of the human being, Heidegger does not interpret Sophocles' choral ode as a historically specific meditation on the limits of human action experienced by the Greeks. He rather interprets it through a meaning that precedes the actuality of Greek civilization, framing the poetic sensibility of the tragedians as the capacity to give voice to the movement of Being, the mysterious agent of history that operates *through* those who attempt to control and domesticate the natural and political spheres. This interpretation rejects the project of finding a conception of *techne* that could navigate the differential character of human action. Instead, it advocates the acceleration of the arrival of a new epochal moment in which Being might appear in the confrontation of humanity and nature. If the finitude of beings only comes

to light when nature pushes back against human *techne*, Heidegger reasons that the solution is to engage in creative, violent *techne* in such a way as to draw the uncanny nature of human being into appearance.

Heidegger's appraisal of violent *techne* is evident in his translation of a much-discussed clause in the choral ode, *astunómous orgás*, which marks the transition from the presentation of human beings as the terrifying/wondrous masters of nature to the terrifying/wondrous masters of themselves as builders of cities. In Liddell and Scott's lexicon, this phrase is rendered as 'feelings of law-abiding or social life'. Heidegger translates it instead as 'the courage of dominance over cities' (*den Mut der Herrschaft über die Städte*) (see Stephens, 2014: 86). Here we see Heidegger's (2000: 165) rather forced attempt to read the ode as an appraisal of the construction of a well-ordered state from 'democratic chaos'. This courage is not about bringing ordered and just cities into being – about the human capacity to shape themselves and somehow institute for themselves the very passion to do so – but rather about disclosing the uncanny nature of humans as those who seek to master their condition. Cornelius Castoriadis (2007: 17) criticizes Heidegger's translation as 'aberrant,' for it wilfully overlooks the fact that Sophocles is not presenting the domination of already constructed cities but rather the moment when '*anthropos* creates language and thought as well as *astunómous orgás*, the instituting passions . . . that give laws to cities – that institute cities'. For Castoriadis, Sophocles' ode presents the irreducibly creative nature of human beings that incessantly brings new social forms of life into being through their dynamic and passionate relation to the natural sphere that is not entirely under their control. Heidegger (2000: 165) justifies his translation precisely on the rejection of human plasticity. It is not development but rather the poetic 'inception' of human beings that is 'most uncanny and mightiest'. What follows from the inception of human beings, the poetic self-awareness of being ontological creatures, is 'not development but flattening down as mere widening out'.

On one level it seems that in *Introduction to Metaphysics* Heidegger abandons a Platonic kind of metapolitics in favour of a new, poetic account of thinking. Setting the work of the poet as the origin of political change is, in one sense, a radically anti-Platonic move, not only returning the poet from exile but also placing him at the centre of the *polis*. Yet in another sense it simply reproduces Plato's logic: Heidegger effectively argues that in a phenomenal (tragic) world Plato's philosopher-king *must* be a poet. Heidegger's approach remains metapolitical to the extent that it relegates the realm of practical decision-making – of human creative action – to a sphere that is subordinate to thinking. Here the paradox I want to identify is apparent. While Heidegger initially confronts the technalized thinking in such a way that releases the political sphere from entrapment to ontologies of fixity, he does not challenge the subordinate position of politics to other modes of presentation. Rather, he replaces the hegemony of philosophy over politics with the hegemony of poetic *techne* – of appearances liberated from technical legislation – over politics. This move frames the *polis* not in terms of *praxis*, that is, action aimed toward the good of the *polis*, but in terms of poetry, of *poiesis*. The task of philosophy – if it can be called philosophy at all – is not to adjudicate political events or to identify the ground of normativity but to unveil the differential character of the so-called 'political' field. Heidegger's goal is to aestheticize both philosophy and politics in a move that collapses the political order that, for Plato, must be governed by

the philosophic, into the sphere of appearance, which is free from the philosophic platonically conceived. The form of politics authentic to such an order lies in the transformative leadership of the state-creator at the instruction of the poet.

Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'

While Sophocles' choral ode featured as an alternative to the existing ontological order in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger develops an alternative solution in his 1942 lecture series *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*. A few observations from the *Black Notebooks* give us a clue to the shift that occurs in Heidegger's thinking during this time. In the *Notebooks*, it is only from the year 1939 that we begin to find Heidegger's oft-cited anti-Semitic comments. While his criticisms of National Socialist propaganda and the biological determination of race also increase in regularity during this time, Heidegger's critique somehow does not prevent him from accepting the set of prejudices against 'Jewish Civilisation'.⁵ In his lectures on *Hölderlin's Hymn* he argues that the National Socialist party, as it stands in 1942, is unable to overcome the technical thinking that he claims it ought to combat. Heidegger (1996: 111–12) attributes this failure to the conviction of the Nazi politicians and academics that thinking 'only needed to be liberated from the "poetic" if it is to discern the truth. Their research turns on the presumption that thinking does not have a historical origin but simply exists, subordinating the confusion of poetry to the clarity of thinking. Heidegger's claim is that this subordination can only be overcome if we recognize the *historical* basis of thinking.

Heidegger (1996: 53) proposes to recover thought's historical basis by exploring Hölderlin's poetizing of 'the historicity of human beings' in *The Ister*. In this poem Hölderlin presents the journeying of the Danube River in search for a 'place' (*Ort*) of dwelling or a 'homeland' (*Heimat*), exploring the flow of the river that connects Germany to the 'oriental vitality' of ancient Greece (1996: 2–6). What Heidegger seems to be saying is that the Greeks cannot simply be reclaimed as the forbearers of the German nation, as the Nazi academics attempted. They must rather be encountered through the unique journeying of the German people. To demonstrate how this is to be achieved Heidegger returns to Sophocles' choral ode, claiming that it was Hölderlin's 'poetic dialogue' with Sophocles that opens a passage for a new encounter with the Greeks. The task facing the German people is to journey with Hölderlin though the foreign (the Greek world) so that they might become homely within it. Returning to the central theme of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger claims that this journey must go through the choral ode of *Antigone*, which presents the experience of what it is like to live in a world that is bigger than we can understand.

To join Hölderlin on this journey, Heidegger reflects on three different determinations of human being poetized by Sophocles in the choral ode. The first determination, that which constitutes 'the essential ground of this tragedy' (1996: 60), is the determination of human beings as *deinon*. Heidegger (1996: 71) begins with a definition of *deinon* that is similar to that in *Introduction to Metaphysics*: *deinon* names the uncanny, 'that which is not at home, not homely in that which is homely'. Yet he then qualifies this definition: 'Uncanniness does not first arise as a consequence of humankind; rather, humankind emerges from uncanniness and remains within it – looms out of it and stirs within it'

(1996: 72). Here again we see Heidegger's attempt to couch human creativity within an ontological movement that is prior to action. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the uncanny was a profound description of the creature who, in search of a home, uses transgressive creativity, which renders itself unhomey. In *Hölderlin's Hymn*, Heidegger (1996: 72) identifies the uncanny as a 'fundamental kind of essence' that belongs to human beings. While the powers of nature are 'sublime' in that they 'demand awe' and 'compel our astonishment' (1996: 76), the uncanniness that gives sublimity its power lies solely in the human being, leading us back to wonderment at what kind of being the human is. The uncanny is 'that which presences and at the same time absences', not something that is manifest in the creative engagement with nature but something that *determines* human beings to have a counterturning essence. While Being allows beings to appear, Being is not a being and is lost in human activity. Heidegger interprets Sophocles as opening us to a sense of Being that determines human beings to forget Being; it is *natural* for human beings to be outside Being, lost and without a way.

The second determination of human being Heidegger explores in the choral ode is the middle part of the second strophe (l. 360), *pantoporos aporos*, which he translates as 'venturing forth in all directions – without experience' (1996: 74). According to Heidegger, this determination captures the nature of human creativity whereby the very attempt to make our world our home is that which makes us unhomey (*Unheimlich*). He states that *poros* connotes an 'irruption of autonomous power' (1996: 75) expressed in the profound ability of human beings to build shelters for themselves and to domesticate wild animals. Yet it is this very power that leaves them *aporos*, without experience, for they cannot transform their experience into self-understanding. All the things that human beings attain merely drive them to go further in each pursuit. Yet none of these skills manifests the propensity for bringing human beings into what is by essence their own.

The supreme example of this determination of human beings is their inability to come to terms with their own finitude. Heidegger notes that no 'skilfulness', 'acts of violence' or 'artfulness' can 'stave off death' (1996: 75), for there is no *techne* that is able to domesticate our essence. Death is not some state of affairs that can be circumvented, nor does it 'come to' human beings externally. Indeed, the great danger that faces human beings is not a problem that needs a solution but rather an ontological condition that requires our understanding of Being to be transformed. Heidegger (2001: 114) explains this danger in his essay 'What Are Poets For?' in a similar way: 'What threatens man in his very nature is the willed view that man, by the peaceful release, transformation, storage, and channeling of the energies of physical nature, could render the human condition, man's being, tolerable for everybody and happy in all respects'. The fundamental threat to humanity is not the fact that we will die. It is rather our tendency to fool ourselves into thinking that some kind of skill can stave off death. If the problem is technically framed then all is hopeless, for death cannot be conquered. Yet if our understanding of Being is transformed, we discover that death is not something to be escaped, but that the 'being of humans in itself proceeds towards its death' (1996: 76). To find a home in our essence, death must be embraced as our ownmost possibility.

The third determination of human being Heidegger (1996: 79) notes is the middle part of the second antistrophe (ll. 370–1), *hupsipolis apolis*, which he translates as 'towering high above the site – forfeiting the site'. Heidegger frames the technical understanding of

the *polis* as the great error of National Socialism. This third determination poetizes the movement that humans undergo whereby their aspirations to political greatness – the creation of laws and cities that Sophocles praises in the ode – inevitably throws them out of the city, making them *apolis*, without a site. Here we come closest to an explicit attempt to confront actual political agents of the Nazi regime. Yet Heidegger is quick to show that a successful confrontation with National Socialism cannot be articulated in terms of good and evil or even in terms of an error of judgement, for it must attack the movement on a level that precedes ethical or judicial determination. For Heidegger, evil means that something is ‘essential to being itself’ (1996: 78). What is important to note is that Heidegger no longer considers the *polis* as a work of human transgressive action, for it is ‘the essence of the polis to thrust one into excess and to tear one into downfall’ (1996: 86). He claims that what we find in *Antigone* is that evil is essential to being, for the essence of the *polis* is to make Creon *apolis*. The Nazi politicians fail National Socialism by attempting to render ‘the political realm calculable and indubitable so that they can “plan and act”’ (1996: 94). Under their rule, the political sphere becomes that which is without question, thereby occluding the possibility of evil appearing in their own action. In this sense Heidegger’s critique of the technicalized thinking of the National Socialists – at least in the sense of political control – aims to undermine any kind of political sphere in which Nazism, understood as the dictatorship of the political sphere according to nonpolitical ideology, is possible. In contrast to such a regime, the Greeks of Sophocles’ time considered the *polis* as that which cannot be controlled, meaning that it is always worthy of question. Their receptive mode of thinking opens a political space that cannot be controlled or predetermined.

Yet in what sense is this space *political*? For Heidegger, the political field must be conceived of as an aesthetic sphere that cannot be framed in advance through Platonic *techne* or governed according to action oriented toward the good through Aristotelian *praxis*. Rather, it must be conceived of as a matter of poetic *techne*. This poetic notion of politics leads Heidegger to frame totalitarianism as a tragic moment in the history of Being, even an evil moment to the extent that evil is a part of Being. Yet these conceptions of tragedy and evil are shockingly thin in light of the gravity of the events occurring in 1942. The historical dimension of the political field praised by Heidegger renders human agency – including evil – as a revelation of being, obfuscating any capacity to confront or alter what is properly public in a mode other than reception. Heidegger calls his students to stand in sublime awe at the monstrous events unfolding in Europe, a call that is so ambivalent to specific moments of violence, suffering, and death that it cannot be understood in any other way than as a call to be complicit with totalitarianism, albeit in an indirect way. From the moment he resigned from the rectorate in 1934 Heidegger climbs higher and higher to the position of aesthetic observer over the wreckage of history. This is especially evident in his interpretation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* (1996: 117). Antigone’s heroism supposedly lies in her ability to poetize the determinations of human being as *deinon* through her *inaction*. She accepts the path that appears before her as destiny, embodying the true path of humanity that does not remain entangled in subjectivity but understands its own being as uncanny. Thus she becomes homely within her essence. This is where humans must make their home: within their counterturning essence. Tragedy’s implied critique of human excess and stubborn fixity

– of *hubris* – is not the call to recognize the limits of one’s agency but rather to recognize *Being* as the centre of agency.

Heidegger (1996: 77) claims that what is ‘tragic’ about the ancient Greek world is that it attained ‘the pinnacle of its essence at that very point where it preserves and brings to appear the counterturning in being itself’. In other words, it was the propensity of the Greeks to allow the *deinon* in its counterturning essence to come into appearance that constitutes their greatness. The implication of Heidegger’s argument is that the historically particular achievements made in the political sphere are mere occasions for the *deinon* nature of human beings to appear. The suffering of Antigone similarly provides a ‘poetic determination’ of human being, allowing death, the counterturning essence, and the uncanny nature of all human endeavours to appear at the heart of collective life (1996: 77). In the drama of *Antigone* the essence of the *deinon* ‘enunciated in its completeness by Sophocles for the first time – but also for the last time – thus extends back into the realms that, in a concealed manner, sustain our own history’. After this momentary greatness, the metaphysics that begins with Plato is ‘not up to the essence of the “negative”, for it seeks to make the essence of humankind as rational beings fully present to philosophical analysis. By arguing that we inherit this inability to grasp the negative dimensions of our being, Heidegger denies any positive dimension to politics. We cannot save ourselves, for we are all tied to the same fate. Salvation lies only in retrieving a primordial attunement to the counterturning essence of Being.

Beyond Heidegger

Between *Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Hölderlin’s Hymn* Heidegger alters his response to the technalized political thinking of the National Socialists. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the artist was the creative agent exemplified by Sophocles who took a transgressive stance toward the metaphysics that held inherited meaning in place in order to give a new rule to art. The task of the philosopher was to direct the political leader in the same creative exercise of *techne* in order to allow the true nature of *techne* to rupture the falsehood of technology. In *Hölderlin’s Hymn*, it is not the poet who confronts a historical epoch, but the artwork that presents the confrontation. It is Sophocles’ patient listening to Being that depicts what it looks like to act in a manner that is fitting with one’s historical endowment. The critical presentation of action through its various modalities in Creon, Haemon, and Antigone become poetic supplements to the prior movement of Being captured so vividly in the choral ode. The so-called ‘misjudgement’ Heidegger notes in the *Notebooks* does not alter his ontological reading of history as the horizon of Being but rather his conception of how National Socialism might serve as an expression of this movement.

The trajectory of Heidegger’s thought during the years of the first three volumes of the *Black Notebooks* sheds light on the paradox I am concerned with in this article. Heidegger is right to question conventional forms of politics that are based on the presumption that technical solutions can solve the problems of humanity. He is right in characterizing our condition as terrifying, awe-inspiring, and beyond our immediate knowledge and control, thereby showing that our task is not to escape our condition but to find a home within it. However, by framing these insights in terms of the history of

Being, Heidegger radically misunderstands their meaning. As we have seen in his lectures, his early notion of the ‘forgetting of Being’ moves progressively further from both philosophical thinking, understood as the making of claims that can be defended and contested, and political action, understood as historically meaningful agency, for he presents the truth of human nature as uncanny. Rather than seeking to respond to the human condition through a self-aware, fragile, even *tragic* understanding of *praxis*, he concludes that we must journey through the foreign in order to allow the counter-turning nature of Being to appear.

Heidegger would likely accept this presentation of his work. His analysis of the political sphere aims to deprioritize human agency, for he came to view an agent-centred conception of politics as an expression of the technalized thinking of western metaphysics that is assured of the ability of *techne* to heal the wounds of humanity. Yet to reframe the political sphere as a site of appearance is merely to invert the technalized understanding of the *polis* characteristic of the National Socialists, collapsing human agency into a prior history of ontology and thereby removing our ability to make serious judgements about specific events and actions that take place. This approach might begin from an illuminating critique of totalitarian thinking, but the diagnosis renders us impotent to provide an alternative.

The paradox internal to Heidegger’s work issues a warning to any attempt to reduce the political sphere to an entirely non-judicial aesthetic domain. The warning lies in the failure of Heidegger’s so-called ontological project to cleave from historically particular ideological constellations, such as his call to the German people to support the transgressive violence of the state-maker in *Introduction to Metaphysics* and, in *Hölderlin’s Hymn*, to remain faithful to their calling to death in the midst of catastrophe. To this extent Heidegger’s public work is consonant with the private thoughts outlined in the *Black Notebooks*; by presenting the contemporary historical moment as continuous with the ontological drama of Being, both are fundamentally ambivalent to the specific events occurring across Europe. While Heidegger was clearly uncomfortable with the direction that National Socialism took after 1933 and sought to attack its foundation, his ontological diagnosis of the problem simply reinforced the National Socialist vision of a world-historical existence. This included a profoundly unreflective reproduction of the propagandist view of the Jewish people as a barrier to Germanic destiny. In this sense I oppose David Farrell Krell’s (2015: 159) conclusion that ‘it is not overweening to say that the *Black Notebooks* represent a *tragedy*’. Heidegger’s *Notebooks* and lectures resist the recognition constitutive of tragedy at every turn. His ontological distinction serves rather to keep reversals at arm’s length by interpreting them as the failures of some group or other – the Jews, the Russians, the Christians, even the Germans – to recognize the ontological history of which they are a part.

By reading Heidegger’s work as paradoxical rather than tragic, the task is not to search for a Heidegger who can take us beyond Heidegger. For scholars such as Krell (2015: 159) who aim to sift the ‘thoughtful’ from the ‘careless’ thinking in Heidegger’s Manichean project, the ‘burden placed on the reading [of Heidegger] – placed there by Heidegger himself – gets more and more difficult to bear’ (2015: 191). Krell’s conclusion is that if ‘Heidegger himself damaged his thinking – massively, even tragically, catastrophically – it is up to his readers, chastened and chagrined by these failures, to

magnify what is thought provoking in it even as they decry its failings'. The alternative way of reading Heidegger I propose in this article is to recognize the impossibility of disentangling his thought: to discover Heidegger's significant effort to escape the philosophies of subjectivity, to find in his lectures a striking vision of what it is like to live in a world that is larger than our capacity to understand, and yet to recognize that his very presentation of the problem re-buffers philosophy from the fragile world of doing and thinking. The paradox of Heidegger's thought shows that we cannot accept his rendering of human action as subordinate to or commensurate with poetic *techne*. Heidegger's failure to attend to the specificity of the events unfolding around him draws our attention to the fact that the history of Being is not prior to action. Rather, history is grounded in and constituted by action. To understand history in terms of the mess and fragility of actual human agents requires the acceptance of the danger and impurity of human *techne* as a basic element of philosophy. This is to say that philosophy cannot be metapolitical or simply poetic; it cannot look *through* human action to the emergent history of Being. Rather, philosophy is itself a historically particular mode of action, one that is brittle, prone to error and involved in and accountable to the public sphere of reason giving and receiving. Such a philosophy not only displaces us from the task of instructing politics according to philosophically defined ends by locating us in the *polis*. It also displaces us from instructing politics according to poetically defined ends, that is, from remaining pure from political engagement.

Hans-Georg Gadamer provides a clue to the paradox I have identified in this article by connecting Heidegger's blindness to politics with his inability to converse. In an interview with Ansgar Kemman, Gadamer (2005: 51) reflects on the disappointment experienced by his students when he had invited Heidegger to hold a seminar. He attributes this disappointment to the fact that great thinkers find it difficult to submit to the preconditions of a conversation, for their ability to place their conversation partner within their own thinking is so great. 'Heidegger never got beyond that stage', Gadamer reflects, 'but it is also difficult when one has such a superior intellect. . . . For people like us, it is easier to notice that the other could also be correct'. Gadamer's reflections assist us to see why Heidegger's thought is paradoxical: it provides an insightful diagnosis of the technical mode of thinking that buffers us from the world and yet this very diagnosis obfuscates an appropriate response, for it ultimately serves to elevate thinking above the activities of political life. The extreme danger that we discover afresh in the *Black Notebooks* is that Heidegger's thought can so powerfully diagnose the self-assured thinking operative in the modern public sphere that it lifts the philosopher above what is deemed non-essential, thereby occluding access to the present, the actual.

Maintaining the tension between the political sphere and ontology rather than collapsing politics into thinking makes it possible to move beyond Heidegger without regressing to the speculative philosophy he aims to deconstruct. This is not a way beyond Heidegger *with* Heidegger, but rather a way of allowing his paradoxical reflections to give us a new sensitivity to the fragility of the political field of human thinking and doing. While Heidegger shows us that the way of thinking appropriate to the political sphere cannot be technical, the paradox in his thought shows that neither can it be ontological. Thinking is *political*; it is always and already with and accountable to others. Only in this way can philosophy depart from both the lofty ground of speculation, as

Heidegger attempted to do, and also from the history of Being that renders human agents as mere figures on the great canvas of Being.

Does acknowledging the paradox of Heidegger's thought entail that we ought to cease from reading his work? Certainly not. To reject the challenge of reading Heidegger in condemnation is to elevate ourselves above his failure. That one who so powerfully criticizes technical thinking can collaborate with views that extend the drive to control and domesticate the political sphere confronts us with the question of how our own thinking remains embroiled in such paradoxes. As the need to maintain a public sphere in which Nazism is impossible remains imperative, it is vital to consider this paradox with humility and reflection.

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Notes

1. The second and third notebooks have slightly different names, *Winke X und Überlegungen II und Anweisungen* and *Überlegungen und Winke III* respectively.
2. A fourth volume spanning the years 1942–8 appeared in March 2015.
3. For example, see the interview with Gunter Figal in *Figure/Ground* on 18 August 2015. Figal (2015) states that 'When I read [the *Black Notebooks*], I was especially shocked by Heidegger's aggressive anti-Semitism. . . . Heidegger's anti-Semitism was the main reason for my resignation as president of the Heidegger Society. I was no longer able to represent Heidegger as a person, and I had also realized that an uncompromisingly critical discussion of Heidegger's ideological position inside the Heidegger Society was not possible'.
4. Krell (2015: 182) seeks to differentiate between the thoughtful and the careless Heidegger, speculating that 'the absence of expressions of care and concern [in the *Black Notebooks*] and the presence of many passages that seem hard-hearted and even ruthless have to do with the happenstance that these notes are philosophical throwaways'. Elsewhere he separates the serious from the polemical Heidegger: 'The perplexing and even disconcerting fact is that Heidegger did an extraordinary amount of serious work precisely at the time he was jotting polemics, lamentations, and pieties into his *Black Notebooks*' (2015: 191).
5. See, for example, Heidegger (2014b: 39–41).

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