

## Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* (1931–1941): Ponderings on Technology, National Socialism and Judaism<sup>1</sup>

**Martin Heidegger: *Überlegungen II–VI (Schwarze Hefte 1931–1938), Überlegungen VII–XI (Schwarze Hefte 1938/39), Überlegungen XII–XV (Schwarze Hefte 1939–1941)*, ed. by Peter Tawny, 2014. *Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*, 94–96, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.**

Controversy over Martin Heidegger's Nazi past has lasted for over fifty years. Possibly the most direct light over the matter is now cast by the notes that Heidegger started to write in black-covered notebooks since autumn 1931. Closely kept from public scrutiny until 2014, three volumes of these *Ponderings* in densely written notebooks cover the fateful years of 1931–1941. All of the *Ponderings* are published in the *Collected Works*, which is mounting up to cover over one hundred volumes. In accordance with the philosopher's own wishes, *Ponderings* will be published chronologically out of sequence, as the final volumes of the series.

### Heidegger searches for a “new start”

The musings recorded in the notebooks reveal a great deal about Heidegger's thinking. Thoroughly philosophical, they revolve around a sole *Seinsfrage*: What is *Being*? The first attempt to answer the question, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), despite its enormous success, did not satisfy Heidegger. In the notebooks, Heidegger describes it an assemblage that, devastatingly, only caused evermore vacuous and idle ramblings about “being”.

At the beginning of *Ponderings*, we encounter a disappointed and depressed philosopher. Heidegger feels that the sham “existentialist trot” has supplanted the genuine search for being a human. People have slipped away from their essence. A fresh start was needed for the *Seinsfrage*, and one can read from the notebooks that the National Socialist movement seemed to offer him one. But

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version was originally published in Finnish ('Heideggerin “Mustat vihkot” 1931–1941: Mietelmiä kansallissotsialismista ja juutalaisuudesta' in *Kanava* 6/2015, pp. 32–37. A posthumous English translation from Finnish by Jukka Nikulainen and Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen. By 2020, four more editions of the *Black Notebooks* (1942–1957) have appeared in *Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*, 97–100, ed. by Peter Trawny.

Heidegger's expectations toward the movement waned. The notebooks record a shocking frustration which, paradoxically, transmogrified into a severe and paranoid antisemitism.

## Heidegger's philosophy of Being "in time"

What was Heidegger searching for? In *Sein und Zeit* he had harshly condemned European philosophy. From Plato and Aristotle onwards all Western philosophers had incorrectly understood the question of what it means to be a human. The true essence of a human being was seen to lie in the ability to think, in the use of reason. Philosophers have started to fulfill that essence by seeking, to the best of their abilities, permanent truths (Plato's *Ideas*, Descartes' *Cogito*, Hegel's *Absolute*). In the concrete world, however, we are rooted in time and place, tied in with our quotidian pursuits. How are we to understand this "being-in-here", *Dasein*? According to Heidegger, this is the only philosophical question that can guide Western philosophy lost in false ontologies back to the correct path—the path on which the truth about *Dasein* is enlightened, like an arrival to a clearing (*Lichtung*!) illuminates a wanderer in the deeps of the dark forest. (Heidegger often thought about *Dasein* on the footpaths of the Schwarzwald forest near his cabin in Todtnauberg.)

The Heideggerian *Seinsfrage* sprouts from the experience of being thrown or cast into the world, into the midst of its manifold of things and events unable to understand why. The world is present here and now, but why have I gotten into it? What for am I in it? How must I face the world? Not everyone meets these questions, and Heidegger makes a fundamental distinction between authentic and inauthentic *Dasein*. We could just live like *they* do, be like everyone else, be *das Man* and follow others, surrender our beings to *them* and lead an estranged life. Or, we can take responsibility of ourselves and nurture our unique and inimitable *Dasein*.

Before long, an inauthentic being-whomever leads to an unearthly feeling of not-being-at-home, until the finitude of my own existence awakens me: my death is not the passing away of whomever but only concerns my very existence. According to Heidegger, awakening to the fact of death is decisive. The inevitability of death distresses, but at the same time evokes our care for our *Dasein*. The Heideggerian care (*Sorge*) means taking responsibility of the conditions of one's own life, the

things around us, nature, other people, and above all of oneself, of one's own being and its authenticity.

The fact of being-in-the-world means that things are not just external objects presented to us (which is how science treats them), but are ready-to-hand (*zu-handen*), used for doing and for fulfillment of one's own work. The nature of work determines how it serves the authentic being. Heidegger hated industrial work; after all, a person-less any-body could do that, unlike a peasant ploughing one's own field or a craftsman fabricating utensils. Responsibility for work has to be direct and personal. Being-in-the-world also involves encounters with other people, being-with (*Mitsein*) them, which may be inauthentic mimicry of everyone else's doings, or genuine caring for one another's being-in-the-world and for its authenticity.

In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger considers the historicity of being-in-the-world. History consists in the earlier realized *Dasein* to be endowed as the heritage (*Erbe*) of the future. Since we live in a society, the question concerns the history of the unified people. Heidegger talks about the destiny (*Geschick*) of a people (*Volk*). It is a historical process in which the heritage of earlier times gives rise to new degrees of freedom for an authentic *Dasein*. The destiny of a people is the history of its authenticity.

## Heidegger and the rise of National Socialism

Right at the beginning of *Ponderings* (1931), Heidegger writes, disillusioned, that despite the popularity of *Sein und Zeit*, it did not enthrall people to care for their *Dasein*. He reckons this is because the book presented *Dasein* as a problem of individuals. People cannot nurture their being-in-the-world solely by their "inner strength", since to do that an external impetus is required. A national revolution is needed that can eradicate the present depraved state and become a harbinger for a new epoch. A new "German *Dasein*" was making its appearance, Heidegger believed, which would alter the destiny of the Western world. However, the people still lacked the necessary courage, and fled towards the Catholic creed and "cultural experiences". Until, Heidegger wrote in 1933, "*der Führer* awakens a new reality" that gives our thinking a correct course and new push. To the great darkness of the world steps forth a "wonderfully reviving national will", and the world shall "yet walk towards the truth".

We need not doubt the honesty in the soul of the author of these jottings. Heidegger truly believed that the National Socialist movement could eradicate the languid decadent culture and bring about a fresh start to a sound and authentic search for *Dasein*: “National Socialism is a barbaric principle. That is its essential and possible greatness. It itself is not the danger—but rather that it becomes an innocuous homily of the truth, good, and beautiful”. For Heidegger, closest to authentic *Dasein* is the primordial life in the German countryside, life on the soil of *Das Vaterland*, in its fields and unblemished forests, free from Christian faith, free from elite culture and scientific and technical progress. It was the empowerment of such a life and the quelling of the “modern”, awry development, which Heidegger expected barbaric Nazis to bring with them. Then the movement would elevate the *Seinsfrage* to a new level, a new path would open, and in return, he could play a historic part in consolidating the philosophical foundation of the Nazi movement.

Heidegger became Hitler’s vassal in April 1933 when he was inaugurated as Rector of the University of Freiburg and he soon officially joined the Nazi party. The party expected the famous philosopher to offer a philosophical ratification of its ideology, and such elements are indeed present in his speeches of these years: “The German people are now rediscovering their essence and making itself worthy of its great destiny.” The German people had regained the will to being (*Daseinswillen*), after being released from the subterfuge of “rootless and inept thinking” by *der Führer*. “Don’t let pretenses and ‘ideas’ control your existence”, he preached to his students. “The *Führer* alone is the present and future reality and law of Germany”.

Many disputes exist over Heidegger’s motives. Was he enticed by power? Was he protecting his rank and position? Was he solely securing conditions to write philosophy? Did he cave in? Did he feign his obedience? The entries in the *Black Notebooks* show that Heidegger believed, sincerely, that the Nazi movement would re-elevate the *Seinsfrage* and that he can contribute to such events. He saw his dreams of a “new start for the *Seinsfrage*” becoming reality, beginnings that mandated wiping out of the present. The new beginning would be found in the *Dasein* of the German people: “The metaphysics of *Dasein* must engross in its innermost structure and expand to the meta-politics of a historic nation.” *Dasein* contains a fundamental idea that does not release into pure spirit but opens and binds “blood and soil” (*Blut und Boden*) to readiness to act, to faculty to perform, and to work. While this reeks of Nazi rhetoric, Heidegger was actually meditating his own *Seinsfrage*. He was so obsessed with it that it beclouded all other points of view.

## Disappointment with the Nazi movement

The dream soon collapsed on both sides. The constructors of the Third Reich could not understand Heidegger's idiosyncratic trains of thought or his obscure language. The rector was being castigated for "private National Socialism" and his tenure was over in less than a year. On his part, Heidegger was disappointed with "NS blockheads" and unloads his chagrin in the notebooks. Surrounded only by "noisemakers, careerists, charlatans and cheaters", people are looking for satisfaction either in superficial culture, Wagner's pompous music or "lame Americanisms". National Socialism does not even try to conquer the present time but instead followed it, with Hitler in the lead. Forgetting *Dasein* was only strengthening.

A passage from Heidegger's lectures in 1935 bears repeating:

What today is systematically touted as the philosophy of National Socialism, but which has nothing in the least to do with the inner truth and greatness of this movement (namely the encounter of a globally determined technology with the man of the new age), darts about with fish-like movements in the murky waters of these 'values' and 'totalities'.

The lecture was published in 1953 and it is widely believed that Heidegger added the parenthetical remark then. In Heidegger's 1976 interview with *Der Spiegel*—the only interview he ever gave—he insisted that those words were present in his lecture manuscript. At that time, Heidegger already took the inner truth and greatness of the Nazi movement to be in its potential to counter "modern" technology and culture.

At the time of the lecture, Heidegger still believed that the destructive force of the Nazi movement could stifle the wicked progress of modernity. But by the end of 1938 at the latest, he was convinced that he was in error. Yet, in 1941, he writes in the notebooks that the "complete realization" of his error merely reveals the "necessity of affirming National Socialism from purely intellectual reasons". The Nazi movement could have given the necessary new beginning to philosophy, but it did not comprehend how to avail itself of this historical chance. In the interview Heidegger states:

I think that the task of thinking is precisely to help, within its bounds, human beings to attain an adequate relationship to the essence of technology at all. Although National Socialism went in that direction, those people were

much too limited in their thinking to gain a really explicit relationship to what is happening today and what has been under way for three centuries.

## The New Era evolves towards the wrong direction

Loathing towards modern progress unwinds in Heidegger's notebooks as a text aggressive in the extreme. Urbanization, entertainment, technology, mass media, bourgeois culture, Christianity and empirical sciences all represent the same worldwide intrigue. The words "intrigue" (*Machenschaft*) and "contriving" (*Rechenhaftigkeit*) and their variants occur in the text with disturbing frequency. "Art becomes technology, politically subscribed and calculative," Heidegger writes. "It evolves to a tool commercializing everything present to it. 'Lohenring' and evermore 'Lohenring', the *Panzer* and a fleet of airplanes belong together and are the same." Christian culture is merely "a brighter flip side of Bolshevism destroying culture".

It is precisely this development that the Nazi movement sought to advance! Resentful and aggrieved, Heidegger tells how its slogans have become just insipid figures of speech, by "preaching '*Blut und Boden*' and simultaneously urbanizing villages and farms to an extent unfathomable until lately". Deployment of radios and strewing movie theaters to rural villages; brownshirts painting steadfast '*Blut und Boden*' slogans to the walls in German villages. Instead of fighting modernization as Heidegger had expected, the Nazi movement became its perpetrator. Now Germany is just partaking a ruinous play, ushered everywhere by the scheming spirit of economy.

After the onset of war, Heidegger throws his aggressions especially towards the English. "The bourgeois-Christian form of English Bolshevism is the most dangerous." It has produced machines, democracy and utilitarianism ending in pragmatism—all the evils that stifle authentic being. Can it be a coincidence, he asks, that "my thinking and questions have in recent decades been ignored only in England, and not a single translation has been attempted."

By the end of the 1930s, the notebooks brim with anger and bitterness. The great chance to revive *Dasein* has been lost. Planet-wide technology, economy and bourgeois-Christian culture have destroyed it. What is happening now, he laments, is the end of man's great historical beginning, where he was once called the guardian of being. This calling has been replaced by "exposing being in its

machinating non-essence (*in seinem machenschaftigen Unwesen*).” The quest for authentic *Dasein* vanishes. “Fire in the hearth of the abandoned house of ‘being’ withers away.”

## The “unworldliness” of Jews

The question of Heidegger’s relationship to Jews and Judaism has never reached a clear conclusion. Heidegger never fully explicated himself publicly during the Nazi reign or after the war. Did he accept Jewish persecution? This cannot be ruled out when reading the “ponderings” concerning Jews from 1938–1941.

Heidegger’s philosophical point of view was the point of view of the *Seinsfrage*. What kind of mode of being does a phenomenon represent? What kind of an answer does it give to the problem of *Dasein*? Does it foster authentic being or hinder its achievement? Heidegger’s notions of Judaism must be understood through these questions.

In the *Black Notebooks*, Heidegger speaks of the “world Jewry” (*Weltjudentum*) as one big collective, with two distinctive characteristics: *Bodenlosigkeit* and *Weltlosigkeit*. Here, as usual, Heidegger again picks his words carefully: *bodenlos* represents standing on nothing, without a ground to root oneself in. Regarding the *Seinsfrage*, this means that Jews lack the possibility to authentic being. They are never really “here” in the manner in which Heidegger was interested in. The question of being-in-the-world never arises with respect to the Jews. *Dasein* does not concern the “unworldly”. From these it is possible to draw conclusions as to why Heidegger never commented on Jewish persecutions.

But why also an indigenous German Jew, having inhabited German soil perhaps for generations, ought to be counted among the collective of rootless people? Heidegger never raises this question; maybe it never occurred to him. To him Judaism is a “principle”, a collective attribute, a way of thinking or a form of life. One common quality unites the Jews: the inability to understand the *Seinsfrage*. Or rather, the effort to obliterate the question altogether: “The question of the essence of Jewry is not a racial question, but a metaphysical question of a species of humans that can licentiously take on as its historical task to eradicate all being from existence” (*Schwarze Hefte XIV*, 1940). The Jews abolish from those who are “being” the possibility of authentic *Dasein*.

According to the *Black Notebooks*, Jews are incapable of creating anything new: “As the new solutions and questions require more initiative, it becomes all the more impossible for this ‘race’ to reach them”. Heidegger puts the word ‘race’ in scare quotes. For him the Nazi doctrine of race represented flawed biologism, and above all was adopted from the Jews. In *Ponderings*, he claims that the Nazis embraced the same “primitive principle of race” that the Jews had practiced for such a long time. The Nürnberg race laws enacted to preserve the “German blood” in fact represent the same root as Jewish endogamy: “The Jews have ‘lived’ for a long time, in their intensely calculated brilliance, according to the race principle, which is why they most fiercely defend themselves against its unbridled use.”

According to Heidegger, Nazi-Germany was a victim of worldwide Jewish conspiracies. The “tenacious prowess for calculative undermining and intrusion” of the Jews was responsible for the rootless spirit of “cunning economy”, a spirit that would penetrate everywhere with modern time. “Espousing culture as a means to power, to thus defend oneself and ultimately gain dominance is fundamentally a Jewish procedure”. Jews used the power but avoided taking responsibility: “The world Jewry, spurred by emigrants from Germany, is inscrutable everywhere. It needn’t partake in war while it is spreading its power, while we are left with sacrificing the blood of our best for it.” (*Schwarze Hefte* XV, 1941)

When Heidegger wrote these lines, three years had passed from *Kristallnacht* and the Nazi regime was in the middle of executing its *Endlösung* campaign in concentration camps throughout Europe. Why did Heidegger fall silent on the holocaust even in his secret notebooks?

Did he really want to insist that the Nazis were Germans deceived by the Jews? Peter Tawny, the editor of Heidegger’s *Collected Works*, asks this pertinent question. But there is no mistaking what Heidegger’s stance was. He explicitly states that in his mind Nazi-Germany collapsed as a result of worldwide Jewish plotting which everywhere produces machines, industry, weapons and metropolises. Heidegger’s postwar lecture (*Das Ge-stell*, 1949), a precursor to his “The Question Concerning Technology” (published in German in 1954 and translated in English in 1977 without the quoted sentence that first appeared in print in 1994), contains the oft-quoted ghastly sentence: “farming is now a motorized food industry, in essence the same as the fabrication of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starving of the peasantry, the same as the fabrication of the hydrogen bomb”. The Nazi



crime is not in that it demolished millions of Jews in concentration camps and gas chambers, but that in their extermination work they resorted to technology and machinery. This is the sole observation the Thinker of Freiburg ever publicly exuded about the holocaust.

## Only seeking out *Dasein* matters

Heidegger is consistent in his attitude towards National Socialism, Jews, and modernity. The only thing that matters to him is finding authentic *Dasein*, the pure being stripped of everything not of essence. But whatever that eventually *is*, remains hidden even to the philosopher himself. Heidegger was convinced that whatever skews and corrupts the *Seinsfrage* will at once defeat the entire question. The corrodors include Anglo-American philosophy, scientific inquiry, technology, industry, mechanization, urbanization, popular culture and whatever makes people unattached and alienates them from nature and native soil—everything, really, that is not in his own philosophy and not part of authentic German culture. Heidegger does not pose moral questions. Musings of the *Black Notebooks* take morality merely the “varnish on Anglo-American commercial reckoning”. Blather about democracy, rights and freedom was merely the duplicitous drudge of “planetary” economics and technology, veiled as humane talk. Philosophy ought to concentrate purely on questions of being. On those questions, destructive powers may be of help. War stirs up the philosopher’s hope that “technology itself would blow the whole world up and decimate current humanity”. That would be “cleansing of the being from its deepest un-form with the help of true being”.

In other words, those who advance modernity will destroy their corrupt *Dasein* with their own technology, thus opening up a chance for the search for being to have a new beginning.

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