

• C H A P T E R O N E •

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Introduction:  
Philosophy and Family Romance

*Dilemmas of Discipleship*

THE PROTAGONISTS of *Heidegger's Children*—Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, Karl Löwith, and Herbert Marcuse—were non-Jewish Jews who thought of themselves as proverbial “Germans of Jewish origin.” As philosophically trained intellectuals, they expected to find salvation and meaning not in the traditions of Jewish cultural belonging but in the hallowed Germanic ideals of *Geist* and *Bildung*. All four were trained by Germany’s greatest philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Although Heidegger was virtually unpublished until the landmark appearance of *Being and Time* in 1927, his talents as a lecturer and teacher had already gained him considerable renown.

Heidegger’s Jewish students were among his very brightest. Each of the protagonists in question carved out a distinctive niche in the world of twentieth-century philosophy and letters. Hannah Arendt is probably the twentieth century’s greatest political thinker.<sup>1</sup> At an advanced age, Hans Jonas achieved renown as Germany’s premier philosopher of environmentalism. Herbert Marcuse gained fame—and notoriety—as a philosophical eminence of the Frankfurt School as well as a mentor to the New Left. (At one point in the late 1960s, he was denounced by the Pope himself.) Karl Löwith, upon his return to Germany in 1956, became one of the leading philosophers of the postwar era. Moreover, Heidegger’s own mentor, Edmund Husserl, to whom the philosopher dedicated *Being and Time*, was also Jewish. In light of Heidegger’s

zealous involvement with Nazism during the early 1930s, the attendant ironies—the Nazi rector of Freiburg University, a former assistant to Husserl, who was in turn surrounded by talented Jewish disciples—are considerable.

However, the inconsistencies in Heidegger’s attitude are less profound than they may appear on first view. Among Heidegger’s Jewish “children,” none were practicing Jews. As assimilated Jews devoted to the allurements of *Geist*, the manifestly Jewish dimension of their personae was in most cases imperceptible. Löwith, in fact, was a convert to Protestantism. Jonas had some Jewish education as a youth and, late in life, published several influential texts on the theme of post-Holocaust theology. Yet, in his major *philosophical works*, traces of Jewish influence are negligible. For a time during the 1930s, Arendt worked with Youth Aliyah, a Paris-based organization that helped send Jewish children to Palestine. Yet, following the Jewish Agency’s 1943 Biltmore declaration rejecting a two-state solution to the question of Palestine, she became one of Zionism’s most vocal critics. And although as we shall see, Heidegger’s worldview was by no means free of the everyday anti-Semitism that seethed beneath the surface of the liberal Weimar Republic, he never subscribed to the racial anti-Semitism espoused by the National Socialists. To him this perspective was philosophically untenable, insofar as it sought to explain “existential” questions in reductive biological terms. For Heidegger, biology was a base exemplar of nineteenth-century materialism—a standpoint that needed to be overcome in the name of “*Existenz*” or “Being.”

This book is a careful study of Heidegger’s Jewish students—their intellectual orientations, doctrines, and political convictions. As such, it oversteps the customary disciplinary boundaries among philosophy, politics, and intellectual history. What is it that such a study has to teach us?

To begin with, there is much to learn about the conditions that governed the global dissemination of Heidegger’s ideas, especially in the postwar period when he had been banned from teaching due to his political fall from grace during the early 1930s. Since his students’ attitudes were often instrumental in determining how Heidegger’s views would be received, *Heidegger’s Children* is in part a study in reception history. In contemporary scholarship, the idea that there can be no

absolute separation between a body of thought and its reception has become commonplace. Long before such notions became fashionable, the philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin formulated a related insight: “*The work is the death of the intention.*”<sup>2</sup> Once objectified, doctrines and ideas tend to defy the will of their author, taking on a life of their own. Often, commentary and interpretation outstrip proprietary assertions of authorial intention: rarely are authors the best judges of their own work. Thus, by observing the peregrinations of Heidegger’s gifted Jewish students, one simultaneously gains new insight into both the richness and the limitations of his manner of thinking.

Insofar as his Jewish protégés went on to become celebrated thinkers in their own right, *Heidegger’s Children* is also a study in the “anxiety of influence.”<sup>3</sup> Heidegger’s impact as a teacher and mentor was, according to most extant accounts, inordinately profound. Few scholars who experienced his mesmerizing lectures and seminars remained untransformed. By the same token, students who fell under his powerful philosophical shadow often had difficulty extricating themselves and establishing an independent intellectual identity—a dilemma that even his most gifted students were forced to confront. Needless to say, such problems were compounded in the case of his extraordinarily talented Jewish students, men and women who often first experienced their Jewish identity in the crosshairs of German anti-Semitism. For these students, the dilemmas of intellectual individuation proved doubly fraught, insofar as Heidegger’s doctrines had fallen within the orbit of contamination circumscribed by the “German catastrophe” in ways that were both readily intelligible and ineffable since, often, what was at issue was a quintessentially Heideggerian habitus or *gestus*. At the same time, as eyewitnesses to Germany’s shocking political devolution, Heidegger’s “children” were able to offer invaluable firsthand testimony concerning the spiritual conditions responsible for the collapse. Yet that privileged proximity often proved existentially and philosophically troubling, for how much of what they had imbibed as students of German thought and culture had been tainted by the *Bacillus teutonicus*? Many would continue to pose similar questions until the end of their lives.

In the aftermath of Hitler’s seizure of power and Heidegger’s brief, though concerted and incriminating complicity with the regime, his

“children” sought to philosophize *with Heidegger against Heidegger*, thereby hoping to save what could be saved, all the while trying to cast off their mentor’s long and powerful shadow. In this respect, *Heidegger’s Children* is the story of the search for new beginnings undertaken by his Jewish disciples. But the task would prove a difficult one, for Heidegger’s children were as much his contemporaries as they were his juniors. Fundamentally, they were shaped by the same momentous political and cultural transformations that formed Heidegger’s own worldview. Hence, rarely did their efforts to circumvent the parameters of his immense gravitational influence prove successful. To wit, *all accepted, willy nilly, a series of deep-seated prejudices concerning the nature of political modernity—democracy, liberalism, individual rights, and so forth—that made it very difficult to articulate a meaningful theoretical standpoint in the postwar world.* Though all came to reject specific features of Heidegger’s doctrine (his later, quasi-mystical *Seinsgedanke*, or philosophy of Being, was a frequent target of attack), at base they shared much of his conservative revolutionary “diagnosis of the times.” Often, the reception of Heidegger the philosopher has led commentators to neglect his extremely influential status as a *Zivilisationskritiker*, or “critic of civilization.” But the two aspects of his persona cannot be divorced; an airtight separation between philosopher and *Weltanschauung* is impossible to maintain.<sup>4</sup> In Heidegger’s view—and this was a perspective that his disciples largely shared—the modern age was an era of “absolute sinfulness” (J. G. Fichte). As such, any and every means was justified to drive it into the abyss. For the “front generation,” to which both Heidegger and his children belonged (Heidegger, Löwith, and Marcuse actually served in the First World War), a distinct flirtation with nihilism was a corollary of the conviction that widespread destruction was required before anything of lasting value could be built.<sup>5</sup>

*Heidegger’s Children* also returns to the question of how to account for the uncanny ideological affinities between Heidegger the thinker and the political movement known as National Socialism. In Chapter 7, I have sought to address this question explicitly, taking as my point of departure the recent publication of a disturbing 1934 lecture course in which Heidegger delivers his own brief on behalf of a starry-eyed “ontological fascism”—Nazism in the service of the *Seinsgedanke* or idea of “Being.” Prior to the 1980s, it still seemed plausible to deny that there

was a causal nexus between Heidegger's philosophy and Nazism. Following the pathbreaking biographical studies by Hugo Ott and Victor Farias, however, the reality of Heidegger's turn to Hitler as the charismatic leader capable of redeeming humanity from a fate of unremitting nihilism has been convincingly established.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it would be foolish to claim that Heidegger's political *lapsus*, however egregious, would somehow disqualify his immense philosophical achievement. Instead, to state the obvious, the truth of the matter lies somewhere between these two extremes. Each of Heidegger's Jewish disciples was compelled to confront this conundrum: how Germany's greatest philosopher—and the man who was heir to so much that was distinctive and admirable about the German spirit—could willingly embrace a political movement that seemed to represent the wholesale negation of philosophy and culture. In this context, it is worthwhile to invoke the reflections of Herbert Marcuse who, in a 1948 letter to Heidegger, formulated the problem in the following way:

A philosopher can be deceived regarding political matters; in which case he will openly acknowledge his error. But he cannot be deceived about a regime that has killed millions of Jews—merely because they were Jews—that made terror into an everyday phenomenon, and that turned everything that pertains to the ideas of spirit, freedom, and truth into its bloody opposite; a regime that in every respect imaginable was the deadly caricature of the Western tradition that you yourself so forcefully explicated and justified.<sup>7</sup>

In this passage, Marcuse emphasizes something that is important to keep in mind: Nazism was a tyranny unlike prior tyrannies, a historically unprecedented form of political terror. To be sure, its gruesome endpoint—Auschwitz—was not foreseeable from its quasi-Chaplinesque beginnings; but those beginnings—*Gleichschaltung*, mass arrests, concentration camps, and convulsive anti-Semitism—were egregious enough. To his discredit, Heidegger never renounced this obscene terminus, the death camps that have become emblematic of twentieth-century industrialized mass murder. His philosophical ruminations on this problem, moreover, were myopic and largely beside the point. In his view, the genocidal politics of the Nazis were attributable to the

evils of “technology,” the distortions of the “modern world-picture,” the post-Cartesian “will to will,” or the “forgetting of Being.” Thus, his contorted, “metapolitical” explanations stressed everything but the obvious: the peculiarities and distortions of German historical development that had from the outset facilitated Nazism’s political success.

### *Heidegger’s “Fall”*

Had it not been for Heidegger’s fateful political lapse of 1933 when, with great fanfare, he joined the Nazi Party and assumed the rectorship of Freiburg University, biographers might have scant material to work with. Heidegger was studiously averse to traveling outside his native home in Baden. In the early 1930s, he twice turned down offers to teach at the University of Berlin with resounding affirmations of the virtues of provincialism. One such account, “Why We Remain in the Provinces,” reads like a parody of the German discourse of “blood and soil.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet Heidegger’s dalliances with Nazism, though short-lived, have made biographical considerations central to the evaluation of his intellectual worth. Heidegger resigned as Nazi rector of Freiburg University after a year in office, but by then sufficient damage had been done. He had effectively delivered the university over to the aims and ends of the “German Revolution.” On the lecture stump, he proved an effective propagandist on behalf of the new regime, concluding one speech by declaring: “Let not ideas and doctrines be your guide. The *Führer* is the only German reality and its law.”<sup>9</sup>

In May 1933, Heidegger sent a telltale telegram to Hitler expressing solidarity with recent *Gleichschaltung* legislation. There were instances of political denunciation and personal betrayal. Moreover, Heidegger remained a dues-paying member of the Nazi Party until the regime’s bitter end. He continued to open his classes with the so-called “German greeting” of “Heil Hitler!” In 1936, he confided to Löwith that his “partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy”; it derived, he claimed, from the concept of “historicity” (which stressed the importance of authentic historical commitment) in *Being and Time*.<sup>10</sup>

As the rector of Freiburg University, Heidegger was charged with enforcing the anti-Semitic clauses of the so-called “Law for the Preservation of a Permanent Civil Service,” which effectively banned Jews from all walks of government service, including university life. Despite his later disclaimers, in his capacity as rector Heidegger faithfully executed these laws, even though it meant banning Husserl, to whom he owed so much, from the philosophy faculty library. In the eyes of Hannah Arendt, this action, which had affected the septuagenarian phenomenologist so adversely, made Heidegger a “potential murderer.”<sup>11</sup> At the time, Husserl complained bitterly in a letter to a former student about Heidegger’s growing anti-Semitism: “In recent years [he] has allowed his anti-Semitism to come increasingly to the fore, even in his dealings with his groups of devoted Jewish students,” observes Husserl. “The events of the last few weeks,” he continued (referring to Heidegger’s joining the Nazi Party as well as the recent university ban on Jews), “have struck at the deepest roots of my existence.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1929, Heidegger had already complained that Germany was faced with a stark alternative: “the choice between sustaining our *German* intellectual life through a renewed infusion of genuine, *native* teachers and educators, or abandoning it once and for all to *growing Jewish influence* [*Verjudung*]*—*in both the wider and narrow sense.”<sup>13</sup> According to a former student, the philosopher Max Müller, “From the moment Heidegger became rector, he allowed no Jewish students who had begun their dissertations with him to receive their degree.”<sup>14</sup> He dashed the hopes of one doctoral candidate with the callous declaration: “You understand, Frau Mintz, that I cannot supervise your promotion because you are a Jew.”<sup>15</sup> In an unsolicited letter in which he tried to block the academic appointment of Eduard Baumgarten (nephew of the sociologist Max Weber), Heidegger complained that Baumgarten hailed from a “liberal democratic” milieu, had become “Americanized” during a stay in the United States, and associated with “the Jew [Eduard] Fränkel.”<sup>16</sup>

With the regime’s fall, Heidegger paid dearly for his transgressions. A university denazification commission found that by lending the prestige of his name and reputation to the regime in its early months, Heidegger had helped to legitimate it in the eyes of other German scholars. During the proceedings, an especially damning letter of eval-

uation was provided by the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who claimed that Heidegger's philosophy was "unfree" and "dictatorial." "I think it would be quite wrong," concluded Jaspers, "to turn such a teacher loose on the young people of today, who are psychologically extremely vulnerable."<sup>17</sup> Heidegger was stripped of his right to teach and granted emeritus status. The man who thought of himself as the greatest philosopher since Heraclitus did not take the verdict well. For nearly two months, he was hospitalized for depression. According to recent reports, at one point he even attempted to take his own life.<sup>18</sup>

Heidegger's children were forced to confront the painful fact of their mentor's political misdeeds. In light of the immense esteem in which they held him, the process proved difficult, protracted, and, at times, disorienting. As youths they firmly believed that, by casting their lot with the Freiburg sage, they were riding the crest of the philosophy of the future. They felt, as did Heidegger's other disciples, that his novel philosophy of "existence" put paid to the stale academicism of the reigning German school philosophies—neo-Kantianism, Hegelianism, and positivism. His abrupt conversion to Nazism took almost all of his students, Jewish and non-Jewish, by surprise. However, if one carefully reconstructs the ideological components of his early philosophy of existence, his political turn seems less than a total break.<sup>19</sup> In a concluding Excursus, "*Being and Time: A Failed Masterpiece?*" I have examined Heidegger's philosophical path prior to the composition of his great work of 1927, in order to show that indeed the "anticivilizational" (*zivilisationskritisch*) elements of his thinking, far from being a later accretion, were firmly embedded in his project from the very outset.

Following 1933, his Jewish students were forced to ponder, under the stress and hardship of exile, whether there was something integral to *Existenzphilosophie* that triggered Heidegger's Nazi allegiance. Perhaps Hannah Arendt's initial response was the most extreme: by her own admission, she abandoned philosophy for a period of twenty years.<sup>20</sup> As late as 1964, the author of *The Human Condition* still bridled at being referred to as a "philosopher." ("Political thinker" was the term she preferred.) Among her fellow students, there was general agreement that Heidegger's philosophical "radicalism" was in part the catalyst behind his political excesses. Paradoxically, the element that accounted for his greatness—his insistence on breaking with all inherited philosophi-



cal paradigms and traditions—also proved his undoing. His students realized that when uncompromising intellectual radicalism is transposed to the realm of politics and society, the results can be calamitous.

Thereafter, a difficult process of coming to terms with the German intellectual past ensued. It was Karl Löwith, Heidegger's first dissertation student, who pursued this project at greatest length. Convinced that Nazism reflected a spiritual malaise afflicting not only Germany but the West as a whole, he sought out the intellectual roots of the crisis in the nineteenth century, when educated men and women abandoned the balance of German classicism (Goethe and Hegel) for the extremes of existentialism, scientism, and nihilism.<sup>21</sup> Both Jonas and Arendt also perceived a Faustian-nihilistic strain in Western humanism—the loss of a sense of proportion and “limit”—that seemingly propelled the modern age headlong toward the abyss. For both thinkers, the dangers of nihilism that had been dramatically exposed by Nazism had not been laid to rest by the Allies' triumph of May 8, 1945. Instead, they lived on in the manifestations of modern technology: the risks of nuclear annihilation, environmental catastrophe, and interplanetary disorientation. Thus, in the opening pages of *The Human Condition*, Arendt gave eloquent voice to the fears of a generation:

In 1957, an earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe, where for some weeks it circled the earth according to the same laws of gravitation that swing and keep in motion the celestial bodies—the sun, the moon, and the stars. . . . But . . . it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which filled the hearts of men, who, when they looked up from the earth toward the skies, could behold there a thing of their own making. The immediate reaction . . . was relief about the first “step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth.” . . . The banality of this statement should not make us overlook how extraordinary in fact it was; for although Christians have spoken of the earth as a vale of tears and philosophers have looked upon their body as a prison of mind or soul, nobody in the history of mankind has ever conceived of the earth as a prison for men's bodies or shown eagerness to go literally from here to the moon.<sup>22</sup>

In *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984), Jonas set forth a series of parallel reflections concerning the threat to human existence posed by the uncontrollable momentum of modern technology:

My main fear relates to the apocalypse threatening from the unintended dynamics of technical civilization as such, inherent in its structure, whereto it drifts willy-nilly and with exponential acceleration: the apocalypse of the “too much,” with the exhaustion, pollution, desolation of the planet. . . . Darkest of all is the possibility . . . that in the global mass misery of a failing biosphere . . . “everyone for himself” becomes the common battle cry, [and] one or the other desperate side will, in the fight for dwindling resources, resort to the *ultima ratio* of atomic war.<sup>23</sup>

In the context at hand, there is another point worth stressing: how difficult it would be for former Heideggerians to escape the Master’s influence entirely, despite valiant efforts. After all, Arendt and Jonas could hardly have chosen a more representative Heideggerian theme than the alienating effects of “planetary technology” on modern society.<sup>24</sup>

Among our four protagonists, Herbert Marcuse stands out as something of an exception. Whereas Arendt, Jonas, and Löwith remained more or less within a Heideggerian philosophical trajectory, Marcuse’s commitment to critical Marxism and the political left produced a significantly different intellectual orientation. Hence, whereas Arendt, Jonas, and Löwith frequently took their normative and political bearings from classical antiquity (as did Heidegger, who endowed the “Greek beginning” with unmatched historical significance), Marcuse, under the influence of Marx and Hegel, projected his Golden Age into the future in the form of a classless society. At the same time, given his strong Hegelian influences, Marcuse’s Marxism was distinctly heterodox: he corresponded with the surrealists (from whom he derived his notion of “the Great Refusal”), published widely on Freud, and wrote an important critical study of Soviet Marxism. In light of these nonconformist interests, it is perhaps no great surprise that during the late 1920s he was preoccupied with the idea of a “Marx-Heidegger” synthesis and wrote a habilitation thesis on “historicity” under Heidegger’s direction.

Yet, if one digs beneath the surface, one detects in Marcuse’s political

thought a palpable indebtedness to the tradition of Jewish Messianism that became a rite of passage for Central European Jewish intellectuals who came of age circa World War I. Whereas by 1900, postrevolutionary promises of universal equality had gone far toward alleviating the plight of Western European Jewry, the assimilationist dreams of their Central European counterparts seemed all but dashed amid recurrent waves of virulent anti-Semitism. Consequently, for Central European Jewry, the “liberal option” seemed to have played itself out. Socialism and Zionism appeared as the only viable political alternatives. Thus, at a time when hopes for assimilation dwindled, the only possibilities seemed to lie either in political radicalism or the pursuit of an authentic Jewish identity elsewhere. The historical dynamic behind this approach has been well described by Anson Rabinbach:

In the years approaching the First World War, the self-confidence and the security of German Jewry was challenged by a new Jewish sensibility that can be described as at once radical, secular and Messianic in both tone and content. What this new Jewish ethos refused to accept was above all the optimism of the generation of German Jews nurtured on the concept of *Bildung* as the German Jewish mystique. They were profoundly shaken by political anti-Semitism and the anti-liberal spirit of the German upper classes, which for them called into question the political and cultural assumptions of the post-emancipation epoch. Especially irksome was the belief that there was no contradiction between *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*; that secularization and liberalism would permit the cultural integration of Jews into the national community.<sup>25</sup>

The classical representatives of the sensibility described by Rabinbach were Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, and it was largely via their influence that themes of Jewish political Messianism surfaced in Marcuse’s work. In his preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács coined the term “romantic anticapitalism” to describe a generation of Central European intellectuals who had been traumatized by Europe’s rapid industrial expansion as well as the aftereffects of the Great War. “The standpoint of their work,” noted Lukács, “aimed at a fusion of ‘left’ ethics and ‘right’ epistemology. . . . From the 1920s onwards this view was to play an increasingly important role. We need only think of

Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* (1918, 1923) and *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, of Walter Benjamin, even of the beginnings of Theodor W. Adorno, etc."<sup>26</sup> Marcuse's unbending revolutionary longings and sweeping critique of the inadequacies of modern industrial civilization make him a direct heir to the aforementioned group, even though his Messianic inclinations were always tempered by other intellectual influences and traditions—above all, a rather unmessianic, Hegelian belief in the power of “reason in history.”

### *Heidegger's Breakthrough*

*Heidegger's Children* also addresses the fate of one of the dominant currents of twentieth-century intellectual life: existentialism—an intellectual trend set in motion by the publication of Heidegger's 1927 masterpiece, *Being and Time*. On few occasions has a work of philosophy had such an immediate and far-reaching impact. Even prior to its appearance, when Heidegger was still an assistant professor in Marburg during the mid-1920s, philosophy students from all over Germany packed his lecture courses and seminars. With the publication of *Being and Time*, however, quantity was transformed into quality and the worldwide dissemination of his doctrines began in earnest. Appropriating the influences of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Dilthey (not to mention literary sources as diverse as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Rilke), Heidegger had in *Being and Time* fundamentally recast the terms of philosophical thought. In comparison with his unassimilable neologisms and theoretical daring, all previous paradigms and precepts appeared hopelessly outmoded.

Given the centrality of *Being and Time* to the intellectual narrative that follows—for Heidegger's children, the encounter with this work and the radical critique of the historical present it purveyed became in many ways a defining life-experience—I have decided to include an Excursus that reviews Heidegger's original motivations for having written it. As we now know, the conditions surrounding its inception were anything but straightforward. Instead, its composition was overdetermined by a number of circumstantial variables—biographical, confessional, cultural, and historical—whose importance has only recently

come to light. In attempting to reconstruct the key stages of Heidegger's early development, I have relied extensively on the recently published lecture courses from the *Collected Works* edition (*Gesamtausgabe*), which shed indispensable light on the genesis of what remains one of the landmark works of modern thought.

Since Descartes, epistemological concerns had been the focal point of modern philosophy. By returning to the "question of Being" in the opening pages of *Being and Time*, Heidegger cast aspersions upon this entire post-Cartesian conceptual lineage. Epistemology's success had gone hand in hand with the rise of modern science. Yet this legacy had triumphed, it seemed, at the expense of the more basic human concerns. Following Nietzsche's ruthless debunking of democracy, morality, and religion, the blandishments of Western humanism, appeared to offer little more than false consolation. Their empty assurances and assertions, it seemed, represented merely the window-dressing for the predicament of modern nihilism. By forthrightly posing the question of nihilism, Nietzsche established the discursive parameters for a subsequent generation of philosophers and literati. As he memorably phrases the problem in *The Will to Power*:

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests? . . . What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves.* The aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer. . . . *Radical nihilism* is the conviction of an *absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes*; plus the realization that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be 'divine' or morality incarnate.<sup>27</sup>

With these observations, Nietzsche appeared to seal the fate of traditional approaches to philosophy. He referred to his new method as "philosophizing with a hammer." He claimed his books were "assassination attempts" and "dynamite," having little to do with drawing-room notions of what it meant to do philosophy. During the 1930s, Heidegger devoted a multivolume lecture course to Nietzsche, whose thought he regarded as a key to understanding the dilemmas of the modern age. Already, in the early 1920s, the encounter with Nietzsche had left him convinced that the traditional concepts of philosophy were inadequate to the momentous tasks of the historical present: the prob-

lems of technology, mass society, and social “leveling” that had been apocalyptically set forth in Spengler’s powerful treatise on *The Decline of the West*.

*Dasein* was Heidegger’s response to the missteps of transcendental philosophy. Heidegger rejected Descartes’s point of departure—*res cogitans* or “thinking substance”—because it harbored too many substantive and misleading preconceptions. To take disembodied subjectivity as philosophy’s starting point predisposed one to follow a certain line of questioning that led to a class of predictable and fruitless responses. The neologisms preferred by Heidegger, culled from colloquial German, indicated his strong preference for a nonscientific new beginning whose point of departure would be *Dasein*’s irreducible “situatedness” or “Being-in-the-world.” Unlike the theoretical “subject” of modern epistemology, Heideggerian *Dasein* was defined more by its moods, its capacity for silence in the face of idle talk, its “Being-toward-death,” than by its capacities for “clear and distinct ideas” (Locke) or syllogistic reasoning.

It would be foolish to deny the fruitfulness of Heidegger’s existential *démarche*. It offered a method of addressing life, or Being-in-the-world, that surpassed in many respects the theoretical standpoint of philosophy qua epistemology. With the advent of logical positivism, whose heyday coincided with Heidegger’s youth, philosophy was at risk of shriveling to the status of a handmaiden to scientific inquiry. Heidegger’s existential approach presented a constructive antidote to this perilous foreshortening of philosophy’s purview and scope.

Today, philosophy departments are ruled by the methods of linguistic analysis. Yet this school of philosophy represents another manner of narrowing philosophy’s influence and range. The existential concerns that occupied pride of place in Heidegger’s rich phenomenological inquiries seem banished from philosophy’s horizon. History and social criticism, too, seem to have forfeited their place. Wittgenstein claimed that language games must be understood as “forms of life,” but he leaves us without a way of evaluating their respective merits and deficiencies, for as “forms of life,” all language games make sense internally. Thus, the goals of philosophy should be *therapeutic* rather than *substantive*. The elimination of misunderstandings, rather than the establishment of positive goals or agendas, is the end toward which

thought should aspire. Philosophy should, we are told, place more trust in common sense or everyday linguistic practice. As a perceptive critic has remarked:

Linguistic philosophy is conceived not merely as therapy or euthanasia, but also as prophylaxis, and as a prophylaxis against a necessarily ever-present danger. . . . This is the Night Watchman theory of philosophy: it has no positive contribution of its own to make, but must ever be on guard against possible abuses that would interfere with, or confuse, genuine knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

One of the grave inadequacies of the linguistic approach is that it lacks a capacity for strong evaluation, for making conceptual distinctions of far-reaching significance.<sup>29</sup> Its quietism seems well captured indeed by Wittgenstein's dictum that "philosophy leaves everything as it is." Moreover, with philosophy's professionalization, a corresponding measure of specialization has taken hold. Prospects of reconnecting philosophy with the lifeworld or "everydayness"—the experiential basis of human society—so that it might thereby become meaningful once again, seem increasingly remote.

Heidegger sensed the shortcomings of traditional philosophy and developed his paradigm of *Existenz* to offset them. The promise of his approach continues to merit our serious attention. Yet this scrutiny must not be allowed to devolve into hagiography or uncritical devotion—constant temptations when one is confronted with a thinker of Heidegger's singular talents. Heidegger believed his philosophy was able to capture and convey an experience of the "primordial" (*das Ursprüngliche*); as such, it was viscerally opposed to superficialities of modern thought. Yet he was often unable to explain *why* the primordial itself was valuable, or why it was intrinsically superior to the more contemporary philosophical approaches he deemed misguided. Providing "rational accounts" of his positions and preferences was never Heidegger's forte. Despite its merits, his approach, too, possesses distinct limitations. Too often, it glorifies "immemorial experiences" and "unreason." It remains suffused with an antidemocratic sensibility that Heidegger himself perversely viewed as a badge of distinction. All of these prejudices played a role in his delusional political misstep of 1933. His supporters—on the whole, an adulatory lot—have yet to disen-

tangle the intellectual threads that precipitated his Nazi involvement. Until they do, their attempts to perpetuate his legacy will remain afflicted by many of the same oversights and conceptual imbalances. Thus, like a Greek tragedy—though on a smaller scale—the sins of the father will be visited upon the daughters and sons.