

**Heidegger, the Jews, and Religion: Thoughts on *Martin Heidegger, Between Good and Evil*,
by Rüdiger Safranski, Translated by Ewald Osers (1989)**

by Scott Alexander

Martin Heidegger, Between Good and Evil is another success for Rüdiger Safranski in his ongoing project to explain modern German philosophy. I recently enjoyed reading Safranski's *Romanticism, a German Affair*. The translation by Ewald Osers is good, but not up to the stellar standard of Robert E. Goodwin in the *Romanticism* book.

Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) was the most influential philosopher of the 20th century. Born in idyllic Catholic small-town southern Germany, the product of a lower middle-class family, his path to fame was nurtured, advanced, and largely financed by the Catholicism he rejected, in one of his many inauthenticities (“inauthenticity” is a Heidegger term).

Heidegger's breakthrough came with *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)* in 1928. My exposure to this volume came in the early 70's, not long after its English translation in 1962. I thought it was impressive for Heidegger's commitment to his encounter with *being*, in the character of *Dasein*, meaning “being-there.” Although in the philosophical form known as phenomenology, the work is really a meditation on the inner world of meditation. He brought back to the fore of philosophic inquiry the classic original questions “What is being?” “What is time?” “What do we do when we think?”

The Heidegger Story

It was not until later that I heard anything about Heidegger's Nazi history. It came as a shock. Back in the early 60's we still didn't talk a lot about what happened in Germany, especially in my family. I believe that generational silence is the reason why Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, a movie comedy about the Nazis released in 1967, turned into such a hit.

Later still, I learned about the strange story of the lifelong adulterous affair between Heidegger and the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt. There was even a play called *Martin and Hannah*, based on their correspondence, that I saw performed by Timeline Theater in Chicago in 2003.

So, knowing that the Heidegger story was going to be complicated, it was with pleasure that I learned that Safranski had written a serious, substantial volume taking all this apart clearly for the reading public.

Before *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger had done important work in Greek studies, for which he was mildly famous among philosophers. Since I am reading a lot of Aristotle now, I recently learned of Heidegger's new approach to reading the Athenian sage, rejecting 2000 years of bad translations. The Aristotle presented to us by the Middle Ages was formulaic, dogmatic, and boring. The new way of reading “The Philosopher” took us back to the words themselves, to show how they were the battleground of Aristotle's own struggle to understand. In this new view, Aristotle's writing is anything but formulaic, dogmatic or boring. Rather it shows him grappling with how to articulate his wholly new organic vision of our universe constantly actualizing itself.

Between that early period, through his 1927 writings, and the terrible events of 1933, something happened to Heidegger. That explains Safranski's subtitle, “*Between Good and Evil*,” an obvious reference to Nietzsche's famous 1886 book “*Beyond Good and Evil*,” in which Nietzsche rejected morality and religion in favor of “the Will to Power.” The “good” in Heidegger, to the extent it was good, came in the period up to around 1927, but between 1927 and 1933 his path turned away from the good.

Safranski is at some pains to clarify the evidence, and to show that many allegations against Heidegger were unfounded. But we know enough now to affirm the latter part of Safranski's title, Heidegger's evil.

Heidegger in the 1930's

As a young adult, and through much of the 1930's, Heidegger was an enthusiast of the *Wandervogel*, a young people's back to nature movement, complete with guitars and campfires: they sang as they hiked. This predecessor of the hippie movement gradually morphed into the various organizations of Hitler youth, and Heidegger was right there with them, as leader and enthusiast, frequently showing up to his lectures in hiking and skiing gear.

Things started to change rapidly when the Nazi ascension in 1933 roiled the schools. Though Heidegger had gained fame with his writings, he was still low on the greasy pole of the German professoriat. But his cheerleading for national socialism resulted in his spectacular ascent to the Rectorship of Freiburg University, a Catholic school. In May 1 of that year he officially joined the Nazi party. He made propaganda appearances on behalf of the party in Leipzig, Heidelberg, and Tübingen.

In December, 1933, Heidegger denounced philosopher Eduard Baumgarten to the Nazis, because he was, in Heidegger's words, "closely tied to the Jew Fränkel," referring to the philologist Eduard Fränkel. In the summer of 1933 – 34, Heidegger argued for the "total extermination" of internal enemies and intoned against "Semitic nomads" who lacked any relation to the German homeland.

After joining the Nazi party, Heidegger broke contact with his mentor, Edmund Husserl, the Jewish born father of phenomenology. Husserl wrote of this, "...there was his self-initiated break in relations with me – in fact, soon after his appointment at Freiburg – and over the last few years, his anti-Semitism, which he came to express with increasing vigor – even against the coterie of his most enthusiastic students, as well as around the department."

In November 1933, as Rector, Heidegger announced that economic aid would be denied to Jewish students. He declined to direct the doctoral dissertations of Jewish students. In several speeches in 1933, Heidegger expressed support for the "Führer Principle," calling for the imposition of autocratic leadership in all institutions, particularly at Freiburg. In one speech he stated:

"Let not propositions and 'ideas' be the rules of your being. The Führer alone is the present and future German reality and its law. Learn to know evermore deeply that from now on every single thing demands decision and every action responsibility. Heil Hitler!"

In his famous address inaugurating his Rectorship, he transformed the philosophic doctrines of *Sein und Zeit* into propagandistic exhortations for the new regime.

In *Heidegger and the Jews: The Black Notebooks* (2018, Polity Press), Donatella Di Cesare recently reviewed Heidegger's posthumously-published writings. Those "Black Notebooks" that surfaced after his death were diary notebooks hardbound in black dating from the 1930's through 1970. After the Nazi defeat, Heidegger wrote in those notebooks that the survival of the Jews threatened the German "essence." He associated Jews with "the desert void, the nothingness of technical modernism." "World Judaism," Heidegger writes in the notebooks, "is ungraspable everywhere and doesn't need to get involved in military action while continuing to unfurl its influence, whereas we are left to sacrifice the best blood of the best of our people." In another passage, he writes that the Jewish people, with their "talent for calculation," reject Nazi racial theories because "they themselves have lived according to the race principle for longest."

Heidegger's anti-Semitism was of a piece with his anti-religious fervor, which resulted from what Safranski called "his campaign for the purity of the revolutionary movement, as he saw it: the renewal of the Western spirit after the 'Death of God.'" This revolutionary movement, "The overturn of the entire German *Dasein*," required opposition to all religious organizations. It was in this context that Heidegger strongly approved the suspension of the Catholic student fraternity at Freiburg. However, following the Nazi-Vatican Concordat of 1934 (*Reichskonkordat*), the Nazi authorities readmitted the fraternity. Heidegger raged against this "clear Catholic victory... This error will be costly for us." Safranski voices Heidegger's militant anti-religious attitude:

"[In their churches] real godlessness reigned, because their God had been molded for the comfortable and the cowardly, as a kind of life insurance,"

and the party's response:

"Heidegger's radical critique of Catholicism was not accepted by the Nazi party authorities, who, for the time being, were anxious to come to terms with the traditional powers."

Safranski does show that in several cases Heidegger tried to help Jewish scholars, which Heidegger, of course, trumpeted to the denazification authorities after the war. But any such aid must be taken together with the fact that his reputation with the Nazi authorities slipped shortly after they came to power. The Nazis never took Heidegger seriously, regarding him as an undependable and incomprehensible egghead. A Nazi party Journal, in 1938, called Heidegger a philosopher "who owes his celebrity solely to the fact that nobody understands him, and who teaches the doctrine of Nothing." The Nazis ignored his attempt to lead a movement to mobilize all the universities for the Nazi party. In hurt reaction he gave, in 1936, a series of lectures on Nietzsche, in which he pointedly criticized the power thinking of National Socialism. From that time on he came under surveillance by the Gestapo.

Postwar Influence

During the late 30's and early 40's, and certainly after the war, Heidegger's influence as the new prophet of existentialism increased, as he met with Jean-Paul Sartre and other leading thinkers of the French new wave. In France his reputation still grows, with his thinking finding its way into the writings of deconstructionism and postmodernism. In Germany, his fulminations against technologization, the barbarism of modern culture, and his rants about the destruction of the environment became a kind of fig leaf, not only for himself but for Germany, since, in Safranski's words, Germany was "a country happy to be excused from personal responsibility," and which sought "an immediate escape into overly grand questions."

"... Once again the 'spirit' believed itself to be above these issues and that, once again, in its Gnostic despair, its apocalyptic obsessions, and its fantasies about the twilight of mankind, ... was surrendering to ideas of ascent or decline."

It's there for all to see in his famous interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1966, where he rages against technologization, capitalism, environmental waste, and so on, but can't glimpse his own moral blindness. He thus furnished Germans with a new and higher inauthenticity, letting them ignore their own ethical crisis, which they could then leave as their sickening legacy to their children.

These problems were crystallized in Theodore Adorno's relentless critiques of Heidegger. Adorno was the apostle of neo-Marxist "critical" thinking, a leader of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, and author of *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). The fact, which even Adorno acknowledged, that Heidegger's existentialism was almost identical to his own, only encouraged him to pick at its edges,

hoping his neo-Marxian socialism would not be identified with Heidegger's national socialism. But both paths opposed the "banality" of everyday life, and saw mass society as a trap, like the *Matrix* of the 1999 movie, leading them, as well as Sartre, to reject postwar arrangements. The result blew back in their faces, especially when Adorno called in the police against the 1968 student sit-in of his own office. This found its inane reflection in the antics of "Danny the Red," "Red Rudi," and the Red Army Faction. Their language and ideas still pervade academia. I felt for some time that anyone who still uses the Adornoesque term "critical theory," or even just capital letter "Theory" in an academic or philosophic title discloses his own charlatanism.

Heidegger and the Sacred

All in all, viewing Heidegger's work in its best aspect, it is a journey into the regions disclosed by meditation, but I prefer to navigate those regions with contemplatives who do not divorce it from the sacred, like Rudolph Otto, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan or even Eckhart Tolle, rather than the mostly atheist ontologists of existentialism. Indeed, the ancients, of whom Heidegger always claimed to be enthralled, would never have conceived of his entirely subjective approach to meditation and the mystical journey. The religious always tried to center their thoughts on God or knowledge of God. Even when Plato, the paradigm case of the philosophic mystic, engages in his meditations, he focuses on the eternal ideas, at the top of which is the idea of the Good. When Plato looks upon being, he sees it as the way the Good expresses itself. This was not an inauthentic escape from being, but rather the realization of being at its highest level. Heidegger, by contrast, strongly separated God and being: being for him remains a finite thing, incommensurable with divine infinitude. The thing is not God, and pure contemplation on the thing must therefore not be compromised by escape into religion.

By transferring his meditation on God to a meditation on being, it is as though Heidegger makes his protagonist, *Dasein*, the object of his devotion. But does this shift in holiness create a dualism, like the dualism of Manichaeism and Gnosticism? In Gnostic Manichaeism the God of the Jews is always made the enemy of man (see on Manichaeism my commentary essay on *Guide to the Perplexed*, Ch. 1:75, pp. 1-3, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/a8eec7_1b7bd2243ebd43dbbd9b55ab869a0800.pdf). This dualistic turn should not be surprising, since German interest in Gnostic dualism and Manichaeism had been kindled by ancient documents of these movements discovered and published in Berlin for the first time in 1933.

Religion abhors Heidegger's unbridgeable contradiction between the objective and the subjective, which is why its greatest seekers were viewed as prophets rather than philosophers. They were not in it merely for their personal confrontation with the revelation of being but sought closeness to the divine for its own sake, knowing that it could only be for the good of all.

The solution of problems and penetration of problematics is not the prophet's primary concern. His deepest desire, expressed in his awed mystical love, is contact, mind to mind, the transforming moment when the limited meets the transcendent, and attains transcendence.

The great philosopher, theologian, and Torah scholar, Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1137/8 – 1204) and his familial descendants were known to be adepts of this inner life, in the general context of a world-historical turn to this inner world by *Khasidei Ashkenaz*, the *Zohar*, Sufism, and the Illuminationism of the philosophic martyr Suhrawardi, not to mention similar movements in Catholicism. I emphasize Maimonides, in this context, because a great portion of his famous *Guide to the Perplexed* is devoted to charting the proper and improper paths of the contemplative seeker. There is danger involved in this quest.

Part of the long-term training Maimonides provided for prospective prophets in his *Guide to the Perplexed* was the expectation that the student would master himself as moral paragon and halakhic adherent before embarking on the inner meditative journey. The worst possible result could be expected if that student divorced this dangerous voyage from those eternal lighthouses. Maimonides repeatedly warns against this unmoored quest, especially in his invocation of the account of the four who went to heaven, and the apostasy of one of them, Akher (Talmud, *Hagiga* 14B).

Heidegger's meditation on being, by contrast, was meditation on matter, the material of the world nakedly disclosed by *Dasein*. But Maimonides' saw matter as evil, as occlusion of the light, following the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition. By contrast, for Heidegger, every attempt to ascend from the material before us, or to direct our gaze elsewhere, is inauthentic "Oblivion-of-Being."

Was Heidegger's atheist voyage into the realm of the sacred doomed to founder in the chasm between the world and God, between good and evil? "With his solitary thinking on being, Heidegger has set out to catch a god." A god, not God, i.e., an idol. In this paganism, Being (*Seyn*) becomes a member of the pagan pantheon. Heidegger writes: "Why the *Seyn*? Because of the gods? Why the gods? Because of the *Seyn*?" Ultimately, he is trapped in the meditation. Safranski writes, "This was not a thinking about Being but a thinking by Being. The Being takes control of him and thinks through him." His son, Hermann Heidegger, reports his father's statement, "It thinks in me. I cannot resist it." This is Heidegger in the hell of his own creation.

Translation Issues

Returning to Heidegger, *Between Good and Evil*, I question some of the formulations of Safranski's translator, Ewald Osers. For instance, I have never been happy with the frequently seen translation of the Heideggerianism, "Questioning is the piety of thought," repeated here by Osers. In modern philosophic English, that sounds like Heidegger would be downgrading the importance of questioning, in the sense that it would be *merely* a piety, and not an authentic approach to being. This does not seem to be the meaning that Heidegger would have intended by the term *Frömmigkeit*, which would be the real sanctity or holiness of the questioning engagement.

Safranski plays it straight with his readers, but there were a few formulations which made me uncomfortable. He gets it right when he says that Heidegger's "ontological long-distance view lets the ontically nearest become blurred" and when he notes Carl Schmitt's sarcastic remark that Heidegger and the other politically engaged existentialists had "discovered fellow-traveling as a form of resistance." On the other hand, his repetition that Heidegger had "never been a racist" seems forced. Similarly, his statement that Heidegger "distance(d) himself from the murder of millions of Jews – that Heidegger, rightly, regarded as monstrous," does not seem to be borne out by any evidence, even Heidegger's self-serving statements to the denazification commission and to *Der Spiegel*. I was also unconvinced of the justness of his statement that:

"When Heidegger refers to the perversion of the modern Will to Power, for which nature and man have become mere 'machinations,' he always, explicitly or not, also means Auschwitz. To him, as to Adorno, Auschwitz is a typical crime of the modern age."

I saw nothing to support this claim of what Heidegger "always... means." Nor is there anything "typical" about this crime, and to say so is monstrous, another generalizing escape from German guilt. This may be the sin of his translator and not of Safranski, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was not.

Even with those reservations, I encourage you to read this book, and I don't think that there will be a better one on the subject for a long time to come.

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