

HEIDEGGER, REASON, AND THE BURDEN OF BEING

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Abstract

This essay investigates the nonrational basis of human existence according to Heidegger. In particular, our own being is at issue for us, and since we are being-in-the-world, the being of all entities in the world is at issue for us. I argue that Heidegger did not sufficiently explore the political questions that this human condition entails, and that a “traumatic ontology” could speak of events in which our own being becomes an issue.

Keywords: Heidegger, rationalism, existentialism, politics, trauma.

The thought-provoking power of Heidegger’s writings is evident to those who allow themselves to be moved by them. The depth of his thought is also undeniable: can there be deeper questions than the meaning of being and the essence of truth? So I am confident that Heidegger will continue to be appreciated, discussed, and rediscovered as long as his writings exist and there are readers to read them.

But to be thought-provoking and deep is not necessarily to be right. The sheer force and range of Heidegger’s thought, together with his well-honed rhetoric, can draw us into believing that he must be on the track to answers—despite his own repeated insistence that his thought is a series of *Holzwege*, “woodpaths” that do not issue in any solutions but only get us farther into the woods.

At some point, a truly philosophical reader must establish some critical distance and try to decide which of the paths blazed by Heidegger are still promising and which are misguided.

Heidegger’s antirationalism is one key issue to consider. Is his rejection of rationalism an abandonment of thought itself, even an invitation to irrational violence? Or is it a clear and legitimate critique? What does Heidegger offer instead of reason as an essential characteristic of human beings? There are many answers to this last question, but here I will focus on a central insight from *Being and Time*: Dasein’s being is at issue for it. Our own being is a gift, but also a burden—a weight that we must carry. This condition is more fundamental than rationality; it sustains reason, without destroying it.

I propose that the burden of being is a primary insight that post-Heideggerian philosophy ought to develop. When we explore this path carefully—with more care, in some respects, than Heidegger himself demonstrated—we can catch sight of the gaps in his political thought, explore a field of questions that I will call traumatic ontology, and avoid rationalism while fostering an appropriate use of reason.

■ Heidegger's antirationalism

“Reason,” writes Heidegger, “is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought.”¹ His fiercest critics, from Rudolf Carnap to Emmanuel Faye, have long denounced his denigration of reason. Does it not make Heidegger illogical and unphilosophical? Does it not turn him into a mystic, a poet, a sophist—anything but a thinker?

In its crudest form, this line of criticism is not hard to answer. The logical positivism advocated by critics such as Carnap has long been recognized by most philosophers as narrow and dogmatic. Furthermore, Heidegger himself writes that “irrationalism, as the counterpart to rationalism, speaks only with a squint about matters to which rationalism is blind.”² In his *Black Notebooks*, he rejects “Aryan” ideology with its celebrations of passionate “life experience”;

“against the illusory depth of the [irrationalist] swamp,” we must emphasize “the need for clarity and light.”³ That is, even though Heidegger denies that thought must be guided by reason, he leaves room for the proper operation of reason in its legitimate domain, and he does insist on thinking, not just feeling or acting. If this sort of thought is no longer “philosophy,” so be it—the Heideggerian may concede—but at the end of philosophy, we must still pursue the task of thinking.

However, the question of Heidegger and reason deserves to be investigated further. For one thing, even though we might be quite ready in principle to accept the non-logical course of his reflections—their circles, their shifting significations, their sudden twists—we may suspect that there are moments when he simply injects dubious claims, tenets that may be disguised as questions, and relies on the force of his rhetoric to secure our assent. At such moments he verges on sophistry, and one wishes for a debate and dialogue that one cannot find on the pages of his text.

These concerns are important—one could reply—but no philosophers have anticipated every possible objection or been fully aware of their own unwarranted assumptions. Heidegger’s way of thinking may be no more essentially irrational than anyone else’s; it is a matter of degree. Nothing hinders a responsible and intelligent reader of Heidegger from questioning this or that assertion in his writings, just as one should with any other philosopher.

¹ Martin Heidegger, «The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is Dead,’» in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 112 = *Holzwege* (GA 5), 267. «GA» will refer to volumes of Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976-).

² *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), 136. Henceforth referred to as SZ.

³ *Überlegungen VII-XI* (GA 95), 60, 61.