

Timely Meditations

Martin Heidegger
and Postmodern
Politics

LESLIE PAUL THIELE

TIMELY MEDITATIONS

MARTIN HEIDEGGER AND
POSTMODERN POLITICS

Leslie Paul Thiele

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Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Chichester, West Sussex
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thiele, Leslie Paul.

Timely meditations : Martin Heidegger and postmodern politics /
Leslie Paul Thiele.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 0-691-08659-1 (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-691-04336-1 (pbk. :
alk. paper)

1. Heidegger, Martin, 1889–1976—Political and social views.

2. Political science—Philosophy. I. Title.

B3279.H494T45 1995

320'.092—dc20

94-43133

This book has been composed in Sabon

Princeton University Press books are printed
on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines
for permanence and durability of the Committee
on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council on Library Resources

Printed in the United States of America by
Princeton Academic Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

(Pbk.)

TIMELY MEDITATIONS

For Susan _____

WHO ALWAYS KNOWS HOW SHE FEELS

Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE to thank William Connolly, Fred Dallmayr, Tracy Strong, and Paul Wapner for their insightful comments on various drafts of this work. I would also like to thank Al Damico, whose intellectual integrity and sense of justice have been inspirational. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Susan, and son, Jacob. Sharing their lives has brought me into the world in ways that made the writing of this book possible.

An early version of chapter 1 appeared as "Twilight of Modernity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Politics," *Political Theory* 22 (1994): 468–90, © 1994 Sage Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications, Inc. An early version of chapter 3 appeared as "Heidegger on Freedom: Political, Not Metaphysical," *American Political Science Review* 88 (June 1994): 278–91. Generous support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada allowed the completion of this book in a timely fashion.

Abbreviations

Index to Heidegger's Works

IN THE TEXT, abbreviated references are followed by page numbers, with the exception of the *Gesamtausgabe*, whose abbreviation is followed by volume number and page number.

- BP *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Trans. A. Hofstadter. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.
- BT *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.
- BW *Basic Writings*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
- DT *Discourse on Thinking*. Trans. J. Anderson and E. Freund. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
- EB *Existence and Being*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1949.
- EGT *Early Greek Thinking*. Trans. D. Krell and F. Capuzzi. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.
- EP *The End of Philosophy*. Trans. J. Stambaugh. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.
- ERS *Nietzsche*. Vol. 2, *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*. Trans. D. Krell. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.
- G *Gesamtausgabe*. 65 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976–89.
- HCT *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*. Trans. T. Kisiel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- HPS *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. P. Emad and K. Maly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- ID *Identity and Difference*. Trans. J. Stambaugh. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.
- IM *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. R. Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
- KPM *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Trans. J. Churchill. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962.
- MFL *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. Trans. M. Heim. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- MHC *Martin Heidegger in Conversation*. Ed. R. Wisser, trans. B. Murthy. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1970.

- N *Nietzsche*. Vol. 4, *Nihilism*. Trans. F. Capuzzi. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.
- OGS “‘Only a God Can Save Us’: The *Spiegel* Interview (1966).” Trans. William Richardson. In *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. T. Sheehan, 45–67. Chicago: Precedent, 1981.
- PLT *Poetry, Language, and Thought*. Trans. A. Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- PT *The Piety of Thinking*. Trans. J. Hart and J. Maraldo. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.
- QB *The Question of Being*. Trans. W. Kluback and J. Wilde. New York: Twayne, 1958.
- QT *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. W. Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
- SAG “The Self-Assertion of the German University and the Rectorate, 1933–34: Facts and Thoughts.” Trans. Karsten Harries. *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (March 1985): 467–502.
- ST *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*. Trans. J. Stambaugh. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985.
- TB *On Time and Being*. Trans. J. Stambaugh. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.
- WBG “The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics.” Trans. W. Kaufmann. In *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. W. Kaufmann, 206–21. New York: Meridian, 1956.
- WCT *What Is Called Thinking?* Trans. J. Gray. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.
- WL *On the Way to Language*. Trans. P. Hertz. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- WP *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. W. Kluback and J. Wilde. London: Vision Press, 1958.
- WPA *Nietzsche*. Vol. 1, *The Will to Power as Art*. Trans. D. Krell. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.
- WPK *Nietzsche*. Vol. 3, *The Will to Power as Knowledge and Metaphysics*. Trans. J. Stambaugh, D. Krell, and F. Capuzzi. New York: Harper and Row, 1987.

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TIMELY MEDITATIONS

Introduction

Many are the wonders of the world, but none
walks stranger than man.

.
And the noblest of gods, the Earth—
ageless she is, and untiring—yet he wears her
away.

.
He has taught himself language, and thought
as swift as the wind,
and the sentiments that form the city.

.
Clever beyond all dreams is his inventive craft
which drives him this time and that to well or
ill.

(Sophocles, *Antigone*)

STRANGE INDEED is the upright walker. With grasping hands and forward-looking eyes, this most wondrous of creatures has developed the sentiment, thought, speech, and craft needed to extend its reign across the expanse of the earth and beyond. What are the limits to its power? The ancients presumably had their answer. “Do not seek to be master in every way,” Creon had warned Oedipus. But Creon, we know, would not follow his own advice. He met a fate no less dire than that of the former king of Thebes. Any human pursuit that ignores limitations, Sophocles suggests, inevitably brings doom. Well or ill may come of our vast ingenuity. With tragic closure the chorus insists that “our happiness depends on wisdom all the way.”

Contemporary liberalism easily marks the limits Creon transgressed in his patriarchal and authoritarian pursuit of power. From the perspective of this hegemonic ideology of our era, the young Antigone appears as the courageous voice of individual liberty. Creon rules as the despot blinded to the inalienability of this liberty by the arrogance of power. But justice prevails, and tyranny brings calamity to both king and kin. The sentiments that allowed the city to form are vindicated. Surely this interpretation is an anachronistic imposition. Nevertheless, liberalism

may rightly claim to have forged many of the needed restraints for despotic power in the modern world. And surely this is no small feat. Of late, however, in the midst of its most glorious, global vindications, liberalism has been challenged anew and from within. Its very success in valorizing individual liberty has potentially undermined both the sentiments needed to sustain political community and the wisdom needed to restrain the cumulative craft, consumption, and propagation of billions of individuals who are wearing away the earth. It is, I believe, an open question whether some form of liberalism can cultivate these sentiments and this wisdom. What is not in question is the need for such cultivation.

We call ourselves *Homo sapiens*, and by the latter term mean to indicate both the wisdom and the cleverness of our species. Wisdom and cleverness, as Sophocles observed, are far from the same thing. While the former denotes a capacity to discern limitations and live within them, the latter denotes an ingenuity and craft designed to shatter barriers. Today, the imbalance between wisdom and cleverness is more extreme and the shattering of barriers more dangerous than anything Sophocles imagined. Cultivating wisdom is, for us even more than for the ancients, an indispensable practice. Today, as E. F. Schumacher observes, "man is far too clever to be able to survive without wisdom."¹ Yet today, more than ever, we count on cleverness to compensate for a dearth of wisdom. We falsely believe, to paraphrase Schumacher, that a technological breakthrough a day will keep the political and ecological crises at bay. By comparison, the hubris of the ancient tyrant pales.

These practical concerns about political and ecological sustainability orient this work. Yet they stand enmeshed with a third concern, equally important but philosophic in nature. Wonder is the root of philosophic inquiry, and wonder at ourselves lies deep within all our wonder at the world. At the core of our concern about the caretaking of the earth and the caretaking of political community lies the philosophic enigma of that strangest of all creatures. Pondering this enigma is not idle musing. The political and ecological wisdom that would sustain the earth and its communities is, or at least may be, grounded in the contemplative wisdom that describes philosophy proper. I believe that these three concerns, political, ecological, and philosophic, confront us today with the mandate of addressing a single, increasingly pressing question: *How are we to understand and exercise our freedom?* It is our freedom—demonstrated in thought, speech and deed—that grounds our growing power over the earth, our capacity for political community, and our philo-

¹ E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 32.

sophic disposition to question their meaning and limits. How we understand and exercise this freedom largely determines whether our ingenuity and craft will be balanced with the sentiments and wisdom needed to sustain a common earthly home.

In an attempt to grapple with the question of human freedom, I have chosen to expound and build on the thought of Martin Heidegger. Following Heidegger, who insists that “the question of the essence of human freedom is the fundamental question of philosophy, with even the question of Being entwined in it” (G 31:300), this book roots the question of freedom in the question of Being. In so doing, it departs from liberal theory, which is loath to ground politics in ontology. Yet it would be misleading, with this in mind, to characterize this book as an *antiliberal* tract. If a label is required for it, I would propose *postliberal*, signaling not so much an effort to undermine or subvert liberal claims to freedom as an effort to reach beyond them—redirecting their political and ecological implications by reordering their philosophic foundations. While the redirection of political and ecological implications is largely my own doing, the reordering of philosophic foundations is largely Heidegger’s achievement.

Martin Heidegger was born at Messkirch in 1889, the same year Nietzsche was “received into the protection of the night of lunacy,” to use Heidegger’s description of Hölderlin’s untimely exit (EB 282). Heidegger seldom left his German homeland, or his south German province of Baden Württemberg for that matter. He died there in 1976. His life was distinguished by a career spanning more than fifty years as a teacher and writer. In terms of his intellectual development, Heidegger, along with Wittgenstein and a few other philosophers, is known almost as much for the distinct phases of his work as for its substance. Through his late student years, Heidegger evidenced a Catholic and medievalist orientation with an early focus on logic. His key interests were Aristotelian and scholastic in nature. From about 1920 on, culminating with the publication of his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, in 1927, Heidegger demonstrated more Lutheran and Kierkegaardian existentialist concerns. His problem was with the meaning of Being. Influenced by, but also departing from, the phenomenological orientation of his mentor, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger attempted to develop a fundamental ontology. By the late 1920s, Heidegger had turned to Jünger and then to Nietzsche. For a time, his work took a distinct nationalistic and voluntaristic direction. Subsequently, Heidegger distanced himself both from the systematic search for a fundamental ontology and from its translation into a popular revolutionary force. He began to focus on the historical development of Western metaphysics. With the publication of the “Letter on Humanism” in 1947, and in many ways beginning in

1935 or 1936, Heidegger entered his final stage. From his reassessment of Nietzsche until his death, he engaged in the poetic-philosophic celebration of ontological disclosure while describing the threat posed to it by the hegemony of technological life.

We may, then, roughly divide Heidegger's work into three periods. The first culminates with *Being and Time* and the third begins with the "Letter on Humanism." They are separated by a transitional period marked by Heidegger's "turning," or *Kehre*. Heidegger himself first wrote publicly of his *Kehre* in the "Letter on Humanism," noting that a reorientation of his thought had already been "at work" in his thinking a decade earlier. He also maintained that his turning in no way constituted an abandonment of the concerns identified in *Being and Time*, but rather marked a progression of his thinking about them. One might describe Heidegger's shift in orientation as a recharacterization of human being, or *Dasein*, from the role of the heroic protagonist to that of a humble participant in the historical saga of Being's disclosure. In Heidegger's own words, the distinction made between the early period and the late one is "justified only on the condition that this is kept constantly in mind: only by way of what Heidegger I has thought does one gain access to what is to-be-thought by Heidegger II."² The distinct stages of Heidegger's work are, as Heidegger himself suggested, less striking than its continuity.

Apart from intellectual monuments, Heidegger's life was also marked, or rather marred, by his involvement with National Socialism, which he fervently supported while serving a year as rector of Freiburg University beginning in 1933. The controversy surrounding this period has been much heightened because of Heidegger's stubborn reluctance after the war to express remorse or come to terms with the meaning of his dangerous political escapade. The reader might then question, particularly in light of the proposed continuity of Heidegger's thought, what a largely unrepentant former Fascist might have to teach us about freedom. At this juncture, however, I shall say no more about the connection between Heidegger's biography and his philosophy. Indeed, an even briefer biographical introduction to his work might have been appropriate. A rendition of Heidegger's own preface to his lectures on Aristotle—that he "was born, worked, and died"—might have served best. The reason, as Heidegger himself writes with Nietzsche in mind, is that "the work as work closes itself off to us as long as we squint somehow after the 'life' of the man who created the work instead of asking about Being and the world, which first ground the work" (WPK

² Martin Heidegger, preface to *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, by William Richardson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), xxii.

4). I do not think Heidegger was self-serving in making this remark; it is unnecessary and unfortunate to abridge or prejudice one's confrontation with a work of philosophy because of its author's regrettable choices in life or the character traits that made these choices possible or even likely.

Commentators have pointed out that Heidegger's own notion of authenticity precludes the separation of his politics from his philosophy.³ Authenticity does indeed demand a holistic self-understanding and self-accounting. But the lesson to be drawn from Heidegger's discussion of authenticity is not that we should dismiss a person's philosophy on account of his or her politics. Holistic self-understanding and self-accounting demands the integration of one's philosophic and political insights and judgments. That this integration remains dogged by uncertainty is part of the burden of authenticity. There are no fast and easy formulas for translating a philosophy into a politics, and we are remiss if we peremptorily reject the former because of the shortcomings of the latter. For this reason I have postponed extensive biographical discussion until chapter 6. And there my purpose is neither to praise Heidegger in spite of his biography nor to bury him with it. Rather, I attempt to think through Heidegger's philosophy to arrive at sober political insights. Thus I invoke an interpreter's prerogative to derive from a philosophy sensibilities that its author has not earned, and might perhaps disown. In turn, I attempt to think through Heidegger's politics to arrive at sober philosophic insights. Thus I invoke an interpreter's prerogative to derive worthy theoretical lessons from unworthy practices.

This work grapples with the nature of human freedom, its philosophic foundations, and its political and ecological import. Why, the reader might ask, is such a task couched in an extended account of Heidegger's thought when other exegetical works already exist in abundance? One of Heidegger's more illustrious students, Hannah Arendt, once spoke of the need to think without bannisters. She believed that thought needed to escape from the dead weight of tradition and habit as well as from the fickleness of fashion, to move beyond conventions, whether those of one's times or those of one's teachers.⁴ In many ways

³ Karsten Harries, "Heidegger as a Political Thinker," in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Michael Murray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 305.

⁴ In a conference in Toronto on her thought, Arendt was criticized for "groundless thinking." She responded: "I have a metaphor which is not quite that cruel, and which I have never published but kept for myself. I call it thinking without a bannister. In German, *Denken ohne Geländer*. That is, as you go up and down the stairs you can always hold onto the bannister so that you don't fall down. But we have lost this bannister. That is the way I tell it to myself. And this is indeed what I try to do." Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 336–37.