

JEFFREY ANDREW BARASH

MARTIN HEIDEGGER AND THE
PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL MEANING



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Preface by Paul Ricoeur

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Jeffrey Barash

Preface

In a few pages I would like to express and to justify my admiration for the exceptional book of Jeffrey Barash. His training as an historian, complemented by that of the philosopher, has served him richly, not only in the discovery of rare texts and of unpublished correspondence but in the reconstruction of the philosophical landscape at the beginning of the century, and then in the period between the two wars. Standing out in the foreground of this landscape are the two mountains constituted by *Sein und Zeit* and Heidegger's work following the *Kehre*. This reconstruction by no means intends to establish 'influences' in the mediocre, mechanistic sense, but rather subterranean continuities between Heidegger's work and his intellectual environment in order to enhance, by the effect of their contrast, the specific intelligibility of this work.

In order to appreciate the consequences of continuity as well as of discontinuity, it was necessary to identify and to emphasize a touchstone-question, endowed with the quality of great perdurability, and to summon before it all of the protagonists, including Heidegger himself, in an intellectual combat dating back nearly a hundred years. Announced in the title of the work, this question concerns *historical meaning*.

By this term the author wanted to designate the stubborn question, most exactly approximated by the term *coherence* in its application to history. At an early point the reader will spot the incessant return of this key term and the touchstone-question which it signals. This is a strange emphasis if one considers the variety of meanings of the term history, the coherence of which is precisely what one seeks to evaluate. By history, indeed, we understand alternately in this work the events of the past taken as a whole (the

course of history), the discourse centered on these events (historiography), the historical condition of the being that we are (historicity), Being itself in its epochal manifestations.

The fortunate discovery of Jeffrey Barash is precisely this: as vast as the space of variation covered by the term history might be, as suggested by the preceding rough enumeration, one question returns each time, the same and other, other and the same: what makes it 'hold together' – *Zusammenhang* – the phases, if it concerns the course of history, the conditions of possibility, if it concerns the critique of historical understanding, the ontological components of what one terms historicity, and finally the epochs of a history of Being, no longer considered to be our being. Jeffrey Barash devotes his work to situating Heidegger in the space of variations opened by the answers to this lancinating question: in it Heidegger appears at once consonant with the question of coherence, identifiable in its new guises, and dissonant in regard to all other responses. This accounts for the strange impression which issues from a reading of the book: Heidegger appears in it at times infinitely more integrated within his period than could be suspected, for example, through a reading of *Sein und Zeit* deliberately out of context, and more refractory to impressment under whatever possible generic expression: existentialism, relativism, irrationalism . . . or to all categorizations in progressive or reactionary terms.

And yet, it is indeed the tie connected by the question of meaning, of the coherence of history – in whatever way one takes this term – which makes Heidegger and his times themselves *hold together*.

The reader will first discover a remarkably articulated investigation of the great debate centered in Germany, before and after World War I, on the problem of the sense of history. The reader will thus initially take the gage of Heidegger's proximity to this debate – a proximity which often leads to an underestimation of the brief discussions, even the silence of *Sein und Zeit* above all regarding the epistemology of historical knowledge. With the same stroke, the reader will be prepared for a consideration of the 'history of Being' of the 1940s and 50s as an unexpected resurgence of the question underlying the controversies of the beginning of

the century. It is not one of the lesser audacities of this book that it attempts to retie the thread held – and, if I dare say, obstinately so – between the beginning and the end of a life work of which one might more readily say that it never ceased moving away from itself. But before turning to the question of the ‘history of Being’, to which the entire second part of the book is devoted, it is necessary to accompany the patient *mise en place* of the theme of the historicity of *Dasein* in *Sein und Zeit* that concerns the first part. This theme that seemed so familiar assumes a new shape as soon as one recognizes the philosophical standpoint to which it offers a resolutely discordant reply, without ever abandoning a certain common field of questioning.

Holding firmly the thread of his investigation, Jeffrey Barash essentially applies his efforts to the identification of a *dilemma* encountered by critical philosophy of history at the beginning of the century, that this philosophy never ceased reinforcing by the very efforts it employed toward this dilemma’s resolution. This dilemma is the form that the question of meaning in history assumes as soon as one no longer searches with Hegel in the eternal present of the Absolute Spirit for the totality of cultural and spiritual meanings deposited in the course of historical development, or once one has abandoned hope of distilling from the historical flux an island of immutable metaphysical truths. If all is historical in what sense would truth itself not be so? In this regard the destiny of the term ‘historicism’ is eloquent: on one hand, it celebrates the triumph of a vision of the world which establishes the *history of culture* as the matrix of all conceptions, of all norms, of all values; on the other hand, it stigmatizes the relativism which seems to be the heavy tribute to pay for this glorious discovery. That truth should be historical, this is what asks to be thought. But where then is the difficulty? Precisely in the possibility of continuing to conceive of something like a coherence of history, without which nothing more could even be signified by the term history itself.

In the first chapter of Jeffrey Barash’s book we find an extremely detailed study of the diverse forms that this dilemma assumed in the work of thinkers as different as those of the Marburg School, Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, and above all of the Baden School, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, who were more directly concerned with the problem of criteria of validity of

historical judgment. We are familiar with the struggle engaged by these thinkers in favor of the autonomy of historical knowledge in relation to natural sciences. Yet, what the author brings into clear light is the connection between two questions which are usually misunderstood: that of the role of historical comprehension in the so-called human disciplines, and of the coherence of normative truth given the diversity of its historical expressions. The more indeed one underlined the specificity of historical comprehension as the method appropriate to the human sciences, the more urgent became the establishment of universal criteria of coherence transcending historical individuality and the diversity of cultural perspectives. Our attention is focused above all on Rickert's attempt to guarantee the systematic stability and the coherence of normative values beyond the diversity of empirical contexts. Nonetheless, it is Dilthey and Husserl, who themselves responded to the neo-Kantianism of the authors previously cited, that Heidegger confronted in *Sein und Zeit*. For these two important thinkers it was again the possibility of normative criteria of truth in the face of truth's historicity which remained the pivotal theme of analysis. In this regard the *Logos* article of Husserl, 'Philosophy as Rigorous Science', his refutation of historicism, assumes a decisive significance. The principle of coherence was no longer sought in supra-historical norms, but in the structures of a consciousness which are as much pre-historical as pre-natural. Heidegger might have insisted that Husserl never took historical themes seriously into account. The role of Dilthey appears more complex, since it is truly he who elaborated the problem of a concatenation (*Zusammenhang*), thus of a coherence inherent to manifestations of human life. The topic of a *coherence of life* was even adopted by Heidegger himself for a while, under the neighboring vocable of 'life-experience'; one can thus legitimately see in the historicity of *Dasein* a theme of analysis substituted for Dilthey's concept. What remains difficult to think, however, in Dilthey's own work is precisely the principle of coherence, above all when it is transferred from an individual consciousness to the level of world history: indeed the question of the status of objective mediations which guarantee this coherence commands our attention, and we fall back again into the difficulties of the Baden School.

It is this kinship in the dilemma that Jeffrey Barash succeeds in

making visible among all of these thinkers: dilemma resulting from the double assertion of the primacy of historical comprehension and of the trans-historical character of norms and values, the former assertion undermining the latter from underneath, which supposedly grounded the former.

What may surprise the reader still further is the mediating role exerted by theology in the formation of Heidegger's thought. The author illustrates very well the two sides of the question: on one side theologians like Troeltsch and Harnack encountered the same problem as the critical philosophy of history, that of the trans-historical, indeed a-historical character of the cultural phenomena to which these values do not cease to belong. The cultural approach to Christianity was condemned to engender the same dilemma, which Karl Barth denounced with force in the famous *Römerbrief* of 1919. On the other hand, there was precisely the anti-historicist and anti-culturalist riposte of Barth, Bultmann, and Gogarten. And we discover the Heidegger of the period immediately following the War, a Heidegger who is almost Protestant after having been almost Catholic in his pre-war neo-Thomist phase. At this time we note the appearance of the term 'destruction' – cultural destruction, destruction in the history of the spirit – in the 'Annotations' to the *Psychology of World Views* of Karl Jaspers; this is an expression, it is true, which was inseparable from that of 'life-experience' and of 'interpretation of existence by the self (*Selbst*)'.

But it is above all important to appreciate the dimensions, along with the author, of the collapse of the pre-World War I thinkers' convictions – a spiritual collapse running parallel to that of political Germany – which an entire generation of thinkers had to face in the post-war period. Nothing remained stable: neither the methodological formalism of neo-Kantianism, nor the phenomenological immediacy of Husserl. In this regard, the shock incited by the publication of Spengler's famous work, *The Decline of the West*, becomes comprehensible, even if it astonishes us today.

It was against this background that the attempts to resolve the problem of historical meaning emerged in the courses given by Heidegger in Freiburg in 1920-21: 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion', 'Augustine and neo-Platonism', and then more boldly in the conference of 1927, 'Phenomenology and Theology'.

Jeffrey Barash modulates with great precision, on one hand the kinship between the neo-orthodox Protestants concerning what he very rightly designates as the negative potential of modern culture, in truth already denounced by Nietzsche in the second of the *Untimely Meditations*; on the other hand the hidden discord which insinuates itself between this dialectical theology and what became for Heidegger a purely philosophical attempt, without theological presuppositions, to respond to the challenge of historicism and of nihilism. On one hand, a philosophy of culture could no longer respond to the question of historical meaning; at the same time the methodological debate or *Methodenstreit* which such a philosophy had brought about in preceding decades lost all sense. On the other hand, a return to the eschatology of primitive Christianity was placed out of reach, as Franz Overbeck had perceived, even if it was in meditation on Augustine and Luther and in friendship with Bultmann that Heidegger learned to discern in 'curiosity' and 'lust of the eyes' the first manifestation of fallenness and of the forgetting of the sense of existence, and to locate in vigilant anticipation and in decision the deep-seated origin of historicity.

What had to be radically changed were the categories of *philosophical* thought.

It is at this point that Jeffrey Barash asks the key question: did Heidegger not exacerbate the ordeal, the dilemma of historical thinking of his times? Did he respond better than his predecessors, who had become the target of his critique, to the question regarding what it means to think historically? In subordinating this question to that concerning the meaning of Being, did he resolve the question? Or did he even neutralize it, by showing its irrelevance? Armed with these questions, the author proposes his own reading of *Sein und Zeit*. It is already so concise that I will not attempt to summarize it. I insist only on the originality of an approach which never loses sight of the dilemma of historicism, even while recognizing the change in perspective introduced by the analysis of *Da-sein* and its reference to the question of Being. The advantage of such a strategy is to offer a very strong interpretation of the paragraphs on the 'they', which very exactly occupied the terrain delimited not long before by a philosophy of culture – a term which remains absent from *Sein und Zeit* – and of the final paragraphs of the section 'historicity', dedicated to the critique of Dilthey by

Count Yorck. Here we estimate to what extent the diminution of the epistemological problem to a level of extreme subordination is tantamount to a dismissal of the entire critical philosophy of history, henceforth placed in the shadow of forgetfulness of the question of Being. But has the initial question concerning the coherence of history thus disappeared? No, Jeffrey Barash tells us: it has simply changed position and taken refuge in the question concerning the unity of the temporal ek-stases and regarding the choice between an authentic and an inauthentic mode of confronting the *problématique* of this unity. To the extent that from now on anticipatory resoluteness and repetition, authentic modes of temporalization, constitute historicity, the coherence of this historicity which permits historical thought is not separable from the decision in favor of authenticity. To this extent it can no longer be an objective phenomenon, even on the cultural level.

Jeffrey Barash does not conceal that the shift in the question of coherence — a shift which, according to him, does not suppress the question — renders more opaque the transfer of the authentic choice of *Dasein* that we each are to an historical community and to the destiny of a people. One sees well what the inauthentic community is: it is the 'they'. But what of an authentic community? It is here that a well-known slip, in a situation however, where reflective discernment was required by the circumstance, finds perhaps not its explanation, but at least the point of smallest resistance if not the occasion for a fall. More opaque also appear the elaborations on the topic of the 'world-historical' dimension accompanying the facticity of *Dasein*, a dimension which Heidegger claimed could be apprehended without the aid of historiography.

I appreciate the obstinacy with which the author returns to the question of coherence, once it is shifted from the history of cultures to that of the historicity of *Dasein*. Because what is finally in question is the truth status of the propositions themselves concerning historicity. This is a question homologous to that which had not been resolved by the critical philosophy of history. Yet, is it not necessary to attribute a universal ambition to ontology in order that the historicity of an each time singular *Dasein* make sense? Does the notion of finitude not thus establish itself on an a-historical basis? Does the forgetfulness of Being not designate — in the negative — a trans-historical unity of intellectual traditions

of the West? This last question provides the starting-point for the second part of the book of Jeffrey Barash.

The author might have legitimately concluded his work with the questions raised by *Sein und Zeit*. Indeed, as much as the proximity of this masterwork to the same space of questioning as critical philosophy or phenomenology seems undeniable, so much too the work following the *Kehre* seems on the contrary to have broken adrift, not only in relation to the previous way of situating the question of meaning in history, but to the question itself. Does the dialogue with the poets and with the pre-Socratics not radically and definitely remove thought from the previous field of battle? It is precisely in opposition to this apparently reasonable conclusion that Jeffrey Barash has written the second part of his book. There he tests the bold hypothesis according to which the new notion of the 'history of Being', in spite of its apparent lack of a tie to the historian's history, gives testimony to a resurgence of the original question of historical meaning, the very question which had given birth at the beginning of the century to the famous *Methodenstreit*.

The course of thought of the author seems to me to have been the following: after the enthusiastic reception of *Sein und Zeit*, sanctioned by the famous debate at Davos with Ernst Cassirer, Heidegger passed through a profound crisis brought on by anthropological interpretations of *Sein und Zeit*. Certainly such interpretations proceeded from a miscomprehension of the very term *Dasein* and the entire ontology of finitude. This Heidegger never disavowed. But how might it be proved that an anthropological reading was tantamount to miscomprehension? To reverse the accusation: in deploying a world of representations structured in the image of man, it is all of Western metaphysics which is secretly anthropological, even when it projects into an a-historical absolute a foundation of meaning that remains under the control of the human subject who projects. It is this 'reversal' itself which places Being, set aside from human control, at the origin of its own history. Yet, if it is true that the question of Being offers itself only in an epochal way, the question unavoidably raises itself again regarding the coherence of a history of Being, to which the history of mortals provides neither the measure nor the key. This coherence is evidently not that of a cultural *production*, it is that of an

errancy; but this errancy has — if one may say so — a structure, a way of orientation. It is precisely this way which makes of it an epochal movement. Anthropocentric criteria may vanish, the history of Being nonetheless has articulations of its own, which permit the designation of a certain unity of Western metaphysics. Certainly, the ‘historical consideration’ which this history of Being authorizes does not coincide with the ‘coherence of history’ presented by a periodization in terms of great cultures. It remains that there is a tie of filiation and of affinity between Greek antiquity and the modern West, with its technology, which is equivalent to a coherence underlying the history of mortals.

On the basis of this hypothesis which guides his reading, Jeffrey Barash asks the two following questions: how is it possible to think the history of Being as a non-human source of the historical movement of truth? In what way does this historicity of truth, incorporated within the unity of Western history, place in question the criteria of truth of scientific rationality, permitting thought concerning the meaning of history beyond these criteria? It is in the formulation of these questions that the author sees the resurgence of the same problem of meaning and of coherence which led the critical philosophers of history, phenomenology, and perhaps equally *Sein und Zeit* itself into an impasse. Yet, how is it possible not to speak of coherence, be it even in errancy, if one wants to grant some meaning to the affirmation repeated without pause that the basic retreat of Being is the thread which makes ‘hold together’ the epochs of the history of Being up to Modern Times? The question of the coherence of the movement which constitutes the unity of Western intellectual traditions thus returns to the foreground by the detour of forgetfulness of Being and of errancy. The increasing errancy of metaphysics and the ever more opaque retreat of Being are, in relation to variations of truth, in the position of an inverted foundation. But it is ever and again for the historicity of truth that the philosopher seeks a non-human foundation in a history that mortals do not direct.

Considered in this way, the movement of Heidegger’s thought, contrary to the interpretation suggested above, appears less as an incessant moving away from itself, than as a way of *rethinking* the problem of historical meaning which had set in motion his research as well as that of his predecessors since before the First World War.

It is for the boldness of this hypothesis and for the care taken in its support that I warmly recommend to his readers the fine book of Jeffrey Barash.

Paul Ricoeur

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