

Sympathy for the Devil: Edwards and Heidegger

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The essay 'Heidegger's Quest for Being' by Professor Paul Edwards has caused the stir which it was surely intended to cause and Sharon Janusz and Glenn Webster have stepped in in an effort to defend Heidegger.¹ Unfortunately, this exchange has been characterised by a marked lack of sympathy for the concerns of Heidegger on the one hand, and for those of Edwards on the other. The questions which have gone unasked but which surely need to be asked are: (i) why does Edwards unleash the torrent of criticism which constitutes his essay? and (ii) why does Heidegger write in the way that he does?

Sympathy for Edwards

To say that Edwards' 'negative critique amounts to no more than expressions of distaste, dislike, and displeasure' (J&W p. 380) is patently unfair. What he offers is a hatchet-job but one which is well-argued on the basis of an extensive knowledge of Heidegger's works and what is perhaps most remarkable about Edwards' piece is that someone can read so much material with such little sympathy. In the course of his attack, Edwards ably illustrates a number of important truths, such as that the works of Heidegger are, for the most part, obscure in the extreme. (The day that the assertion 'the thing things' ceases to raise eye-brows will be a sad one indeed.) He is also correct in claiming that a lot of the secondary literature on Heidegger is uncritical and unenlightening. Janusz and Webster ask what this has to do with Heidegger himself and Edwards' attribution of guilt by association (an approach also very much in evidence in his monograph *Heidegger and Death*²) certainly threatens to confuse the issue of Heidegger's worth. However, it is

¹ Edwards' essay (P. Edwards, 'Heidegger's Quest for Being', *Philosophy* 64 (1989), 437-70) is referred to in the text as E, the response by Janusz and Webster (S. Janusz and G. Webster, 'In Defence of Heidegger', *Philosophy* 66 (1991), 380-85) as J&W and Edwards' ferocious reply ('A Reply to Crude and Reckless Distortions', *Philosophy* 67 (1992), 381-85) as E-R.

² P. Edwards, *Heidegger and Death* (Hegeler Institute, 1979).

'the whole Heidegger phenomenon' (E, 469) to which Edwards takes exception and if the secondary literature is taken to constitute the richest fruit of the study of Heidegger then we have here a *prima facie* case for dropping him from the syllabus.

This brings me to a third point in defence of Edwards. Janusz and Webster comment:

[Edwards] may not believe that philosophy should concern itself with the types of question that Heidegger asks, but should he be allowed to set the standards, so to speak, or the goals for the discipline? (J&W, 384–85)

The question I would like to oppose to this is: if Edwards happens to think that the study of Heidegger is fruitless, why shouldn't he say so? His 'gloves-off' approach is eminently preferable to the sneering to which the study of Heidegger is often subject, and there is an unavoidable practical problem to be faced here, that of deciding which thinkers should figure in our university curricula. Arguing that someone's work makes no real contribution to knowledge is surely the only acceptable basis on which to exclude him or her from the canon and if we have grounds for saying that Russell is, in some intelligible sense, 'better' than Heidegger, let's read Russell.

One final point regarding the approach taken by Janusz and Webster is that the reader who feels drawn towards the perspective offered by Edwards will have no time at all for the supposedly legitimizing claims that Heidegger uses 'being' and 'is' 'playfully' (J&W, 383), that he is 'a virtuoso at creating and exploiting the meanings of words' (ibid.). The making of such claims in this context strikes me as a failure to appreciate just what it is that the analytically-minded philosopher cannot stand about Heidegger. If the playful use of words and the exploitation of their meanings is valuable, we need to know why. The failure to ask or answer such 'Why-questions' is the basic weakness in the debate in *Philosophy* and I turn to Edwards' version of this failure next.

Sympathy for Heidegger

Heidegger says the strangest things, asks the strangest questions and gives the strangest answers. What we need to ask is 'Why?'. Edwards is not without an answer, implicit in 'Heidegger's Quest for Being' and explicit in *Heidegger and Death*. According to Edwards, Heidegger is '*not wrong but perverse*'.³ Heidegger 'uses

³ Ibid., 37.

language which is almost certain to be misunderstood' and this 'misuse' of language 'is not completely unintentional':

Heidegger never says anything simply and clearly if he can say it oddly, obscurely and ponderously; and I have no doubt that the desire to sound esoteric and original is part of the reason.⁴

It is a fundamental methodological principle of the art of interpretation that one attribute to the writer one is reading the best intentions and as few errors as the text will allow and it is a sad indictment of either Heidegger or Edwards that an interpreter should come to the kind of conclusion quoted above. In the rest of this piece, I want to offer *one* way in which we might avoid this most damning interpretation of Heidegger's 'hideous gibberish' (E, 468).

The express goal of *Being and Time* is to 'raise anew the question of the meaning of Being'.⁵ In setting out part of what the achievement of this goal would amount to, Heidegger strikes a distinctly Kantian tone:

The question of Being aims . . . at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine entities as entities of such and such a type, and, in so doing, already operate with an understanding of Being, but also for the possibility of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundations.⁶

While space prevents me from basing the claim soundly through textual analysis, I wish to suggest that a useful way of looking at Heidegger's later work is as the examination of possibilities that open up once one acknowledges that the intelligibility of this Kantian project rests upon some questionable assumptions, assumptions which Heidegger comes to see as shared by a whole tradition of Western thought. That tradition Heidegger labels 'metaphysics'.⁷

Heidegger is prompted not only by the traditional philosophical thought that we need to go beyond our ordinary ways of thinking

⁴ Ibid., 37, 35.

⁵ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (Blackwell, 1962), 19.

⁶ Ibid. 31.

⁷ Exactly what Heidegger means by this term is a difficult question to answer and, in this piece, I ignore his claims regarding the historical reality of this 'tradition'. It will be sufficient for our purposes to take 'metaphysical thought' as meaning a particular brand of thought which accepts, among others, the assumptions we shall be discussing.

but also by the thought that philosophy has itself been insufficiently philosophical in taking its own activities as unproblematic. In doing so, it becomes 'metaphysics'. Driven by this notion that '[m]etaphysics does not go back to its ground',⁸ Heidegger attempts to 'think more originally than metaphysics',⁹ thereby exploring the implicit assumptions and unacknowledged limitations of that way of thinking. By reading his work in this way, I hope to shed light on several prominent issues in the *Philosophy* debate. In particular, I will concentrate on how we understand metaphor and on what the attempt to characterise Being's relation to beings is meant to achieve.

Belief in the possibility of a form of thought more fundamental than metaphysics would have too schematic a basis, would be too distant from any compelling sign of metaphysics actually *being* in some way limited or partial, were it not for Heidegger's identification of what appear to be reasonably specific premises upon which metaphysics relies but which it cannot justify. The aspect of metaphysics' limitation upon which Heidegger focuses in much of his later work is the manner in which it conceptualizes language and our relation to language. It assumes, for example, that there is an uncontroversial literal/metaphorical distinction and Edwards' attitude towards metaphor reveals him to be what Heidegger would label a 'metaphysical thinker'. Edwards talks of Heideggerian language as 'highly metaphorical language which stands in need of translation' (E, 449) and an example of such a translation is that which Edwards gives of Heidegger's description of man as 'the site of openness':

When the metaphors are eliminated his assertion comes to no more than that of all known entities human beings are the only ones who are reflectively conscious of the world, who not only see, hear, touch, and taste objects, but also think about them and ask questions about their meaning and value. (E, 448)

Heidegger would reject this kind of translation for at least three different, but related, reasons. The first concerns the claim that one of Heidegger's statements regarding 'openness' can be translated without any loss of *substantive* content into a statement in terms of 'reflective consciousness', 'meaning' and 'value'. This is a claim which Heidegger would present as rooted in the metaphysical tradition which 'does not go back to its ground'. One of

⁸ M. Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, trans. W. Kluback and J. T. Wilde (Twayne, 1958), 33.

⁹ M. Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', trans. D. F. Krell in *Basic Writings* (Harper and Row, 1977), 242.

Heidegger's aims in using unfamiliar terms like 'openness', 'Being-in-the-World' and '*Dasein*' is to raise the possibility that more familiar philosophical terms fail to capture something about the subject-matter they attempt to embrace. One might wonder whether there is any real basis for the claim that those terms are somehow inadequate. But a consideration that even non-Heideggerians might acknowledge is that the theories those terms inform repeatedly generate apparently insoluble problems.¹⁰

Heidegger's reflections on the concept of metaphor pinpoint two further complacencies in Edwards's view of his 'translation'. Heidegger emphasizes that what counts as 'mere metaphor' is itself fixed by a presupposed metaphysics, by a theory which demarcates certain uses of language as 'literal' and others as 'metaphorical'. In this sense, '[t]he metaphorical exists only within metaphysics'.¹¹ Thus when one insists that claims which challenge one's favoured metaphysics contribute nothing new other than a layer of potentially-misleading metaphor, one is in danger of simply reasserting the adequacy of that metaphysics. In the particular case above, what amounts to 'metaphor' is fixed by contrasting certain statements with statements made in terms of Edwards' favoured metaphysics of 'reflective consciousness', 'meaning', etc. By assuming that we have a clear notion of where and when metaphors only serve to 'hide meaninglessness' or make 'platitude[s] appear to be . . . profound insight[s]' (E-R, 382), we may merely be expressing a foundationless commitment to certain entrenched ideas.¹²

There is, however, a more radical sense in which it is only within the boundaries of metaphysics that the metaphorical exists and this uncovers a yet deeper complacency in Edwards' understand-

¹⁰ This is the explicit motivation offered in his early works for the rejection of terms like 'human being' and 'reflective consciousness' and the adoption of the family of terms which includes 'Being-in-the-World' and '*Dasein*'.

¹¹ M. Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. R. Lilly (Indiana, 1991), 48.

¹² Related suspicions underlie Heidegger's attitude towards methods of formal analysis, an attitude which Edwards attributes to Heidegger's lacking the necessary 'intellectual aptitude' (E, 461). The results of formal analytic methods have the significance that their advocates claim they have only against a certain background, one constituted by what Heidegger would see as a number of highly contentious metaphysical theses about language. In his later work, Heidegger insists that our relationship to language is essentially non-rationalizable and that consequently there is an aspect of language which escapes formalization. For this reason, to say that the formalization of our language dissolves Heidegger's problems is to say nothing with which he would disagree.

ing of his 'translation'. Among the concepts that Heidegger views as metaphysical, and therefore insufficiently fundamental, is the very concept of metaphor. Particular metaphysical theories may pick out certain kinds of utterance as literal and others as metaphorical. But, in addition, such theories assume that there is a distinction of this type to be made, that language use breaks down into these two elements. Heidegger's understanding of his own writing is shaped by the belief that, in postulating a literal/metaphorical distinction, one has already prejudged the character of language. In attempting to ground metaphysics one must accept that its proving to be groundless is a possibility which at least makes sense. A direct result of this 'insight into the limitations of metaphysics' is that '[m]etaphysics loses the rank of the normative mode of thinking'.¹³ Metaphysics' own prescriptions regarding respectable thought have no authority over a form of thought more fundamental than metaphysics and among the prescriptions thus thrown off is the demand for 'literalness' that has played such an important role in the defining of philosophy since Plato. Hence, this more fundamental kind of thinking explores forms of expression alien to the metaphysical tradition. In doing so, it must also resist the suggestion that it is composed of metaphor because, in breaking away from the (supposedly) ossified categories of metaphysics, it must also break away from the very concept of metaphor, a concept as discredited as that of the 'literal' by which it is defined.¹⁴ Thus, rather than demarcating a possible area of agreement, the gulf between Heidegger and Edwards is highlighted when the latter casually insists that '[t]here is nothing wrong with the use of metaphors as such' (E-R, 382).

Turning to the problem of the relationship between Being and beings, Edwards complains that Heidegger shifts from descriptions of the relationship as one of 'grounding' to one of 'warranting', even to descriptions which suggest the relation is causal, and as Edwards rightly remarks, none of these can be appropriate as all of these concepts have application only to 'ontic realities', to 'objects'. A first step in defence of Heidegger is to point out that the kind of fundamental thinking he seeks can neither use words like 'cause' and 'warrant' as they are normally used nor as they are used in metaphysics (however one wishes to understand the relationship between this and 'normal use') because these uses are what his perspective hopes to be a step back from. A second step in his defence is to note that in questioning the foundations of metaphysics, Heidegger steps back from metaphysics' characteris-

¹³ *The Principle of Reason*, 48.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., *ibid.* and 'Letter on Humanism', 239.

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tic way of thinking, a central definitional feature of which is, he argues, its activity of bracketing and then regrounding our activities. If this activity is itself seen as sensible only on the basis of questionable premises, the bracketing of those premises implies the bracketing of this activity.

This is another respect in which Heidegger's thought can be thought of as hyper-philosophical. While the metaphysician suspends his acceptance of particular practices and attempts then to ground them, Heidegger suspends his acceptance of metaphysics itself. In so doing, he suspends the characteristic metaphysical activity of suspension plus attempted regrounding. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger traced a number of Cartesianism's fundamental notions (such as its interpretation of the subject-object relation) to an overly rationalizing mentality which sought rational, grounding relationships where there were none. The later work can be seen as involving a more thorough experimental suspension of this mentality, the bracketing of bracketing, if you like. This may seem like chasing one's own tail. But where is the point at which one can respectably stop the chase? Metaphysics is seen by its practitioners as successful only when rational relationships are uncovered. But what then of areas where there are none to be found? Metaphysics can never recognize this possibility, as its guiding vision of human life only allows a non-rational appearance to be a problem to be solved, an appearance to be dissipated. If Heidegger is right in depicting this as symptomatic of premises upon which metaphysics relies but which it cannot justify, the question we are faced with when we face Heidegger is: 'Which form of thought is more deserving of our respect—one which accepts these unjustified assumptions or one which leaves their validity an open question?'

The relevance of these points to Edwards' complaint, regarding Heidegger's apparent vacillation over the nature of the relationship between Being and beings, is that giving Heidegger a fair hearing requires us to acknowledge that none of the alternatives Edwards implies Heidegger must ultimately choose between would do justice to the peculiar area of thought that he is trying to explore. Edwards could take this conclusion as a vindication of his complaint but what I have tried to show is that it is a conclusion which cannot be seen as an unpleasant surprise for Heidegger. Rather it is an immediate consequence of the hyper-critical task he has set himself. A core feature of the metaphysical mentality that Heidegger wishes to challenge is its assumption that insight amounts to the identification of the causal or rational presuppositions of the matter one is examining. In seeking a perspective on this mentality, one must also distance oneself from this core assumption. Hence, Heidegger's efforts

to understand the context within which this mentality has appeal (and perhaps some validity) cannot be identified with the effort to isolate causal or rational grounds, an effort which the scrutinized mentality equates with the pursuit of insight. What then does this leave, once a philosophical conscience has apparently driven you out of your metaphysical mind? Heidegger is forced to pursue an experimental line of thinking and he takes as his guides figures such as Hölderlin and the pre-Socratic philosophers. In response to those who see this as just something *other than* philosophy, I have tried to make out a *prima facie* case for seeing it as motivated by a philosophical conscientiousness and its points of departure from more familiar forms of philosophy as dictated by specific perceptions of limitations on metaphysics' self-justifying power.

An objection to my treatment of Heidegger could be that it only takes us to the threshold of his new way of thinking, that it reveals his reasons for departing from metaphysics but fails to give us criteria by which to judge how successful Heidegger is *within* his experimentation. Indeed, one could add to this complaint the charge that it is very hard to say what the *goal* of this line of thinking is. Heidegger's reflections on the concept of 'metaphor' may offer the beginnings of an explanation, in suggesting that Heidegger's thinking seeks a form of enlightenment more akin to poetic insight than to metaphysical truth. However, it would undo all Heidegger's efforts if the standards by which we were to assess his later writings were those that *metaphysics* characteristically claims we use in assessing poetry, standards which are depicted as fundamentally 'non-rational', as 'merely emotive', or as 'purely aesthetic'. That the concept of poetry which such views inform is inadequate is a direct corollary of Heidegger's suggestion that philosophy and poetry are not as radically divorced as metaphysicians may maintain. In challenging our conception of philosophy, Heidegger also challenges our conception of activities with which philosophy has traditionally been contrasted and this includes poetry. For Heidegger, the philosophical and the poetic offer related readings or interpretations of our lived experience. But this should not bring down upon philosophy the charges of 'subjectivism', 'emotivism' and 'vagueness' that metaphysics uses in characterising poetry. Neither philosophy nor poetry belongs in the category to which metaphysics condemns poetry because the background against which such categories appear adequate is exactly what is being challenged.¹⁵

¹⁵ Correspondingly, Heidegger's insists that 'the opposite of the poem . . . is not prose', that '[p]ure prose is never "prosaic"' (M. Heidegger, 'Language', trans. A. Hofstadter in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper and Row, 1971), 208).

In assessing this Heideggerian perspective, we must note that there is a certain plausibility to the notion that the history of philosophy is a history of great interpretative insights (the Platonic form, the Cartesian ego, the utility principle etc.) rather than a history of great argumentative rigour. While Bentham may not have written poetry, the ability to formulate the initial, schematic picture of the art of good government as resting on sound mathematical analysis seems to owe more to something like poetic imagination than it does to logical acumen. But we must also recognize that, in challenging the boundary between the philosophical and the poetic, it is easier to talk about the avoidance of subjectivism, emotivism, etc. than it is to convince one's audience that such vices have indeed been avoided. One may suggest that, in recognizing continuities with the form of thought we call 'poetry', we uncover philosophy's true rationalism, a rationalism which metaphysics overlays with *illusions* of rationality. But it is notoriously difficult to distinguish this kind of suggestion from the nihilistic pronouncement that there is *no such thing as rational thought*, that philosophy's claim to intellectual conscientiousness is merely a disguise for the same kind of confused half-truth that metaphysical aesthetics characteristically identifies with poetry. In the abstract, it is easy to talk of a form of thinking which, for example, is committed to being neither literal nor metaphorical. But in practice, such thinking typically looks distinctly metaphorical, like a parody of philosophical literalness. This is, of course, exactly what Heidegger would predict given that he believes that we are in the grip of powerful metaphysical illusions. It is also predicted, however, by the claim that the literal/metaphorical distinction is very real and ignored only at great risk.

Consider one last, possible perspective on Heidegger. It is a perspective which involves the interpreter's mortal sin of presenting the author one is reading as deeply confused but it is a perspective to which I must confess I am myself often attracted. It concludes that the writings of Heidegger *show* that the kind of fundamental thinking he seeks is an impossibility. Such writings would then indicate that the assumptions Heidegger wishes to challenge cannot intelligibly be challenged and his work would be revealed as a grand, unwitting *reductio ad absurdum*. Even if we can tolerate the interpretative flaws of this last account, there are at least two good reasons why its conclusion is one about which we cannot be smug. Firstly, any form of thought which challenges deeply engrained illusions about what thought is is liable to appear confused to those it must attempt to disabuse. If such thinking refuses to be governed by the standards it sees as illusory (as perhaps it must), it

will necessarily appear neither intelligible nor respectable to those still in the grip of those illusions. In this way, thought which challenges fundamental notions of intellectual respectability inevitably seems to be itself of indeterminate respectability. Secondly, even if we somehow manage to substantiate the claim that this revolutionary thinking amounts to a *reductio*, there seems to be nothing obviously awry with the motivation behind that thinking, namely, Heidegger's identification of apparently specific premises upon which metaphysics rests but which it itself cannot justify. Hence, we cannot claim to know how or why Heidegger was wrong to experiment as he did, how or why the assumptions he sought to challenge must be accepted. If Heidegger's suspicions amounted to no more than that most formal of scepticisms which challenges established standards simply by pointing out the bare possibility that they are somehow limited, we might have some basis for dismissing his doubts. But in picking out what seem to be specific assumptions, Heidegger's doubts appear to have some substance. If Heidegger's work does indeed constitute a spectacular, unself-conscious *reductio*, it can be said to be 'a grotesque aberration of the human mind' (E, 469). But such a label is a cold form of comfort because the line of questioning which produced this aberration is not one which we can, with any confidence, dismiss.

The debate in *Philosophy* illustrates an unfortunate pattern of mutual antipathy which is hopefully receding into the history of Heidegger studies, undermined by the growing number of works which seek to analyse Heidegger's thoughts with a sensitivity to the exotic appearance that they present to the analytically-minded reader.¹⁶ In this piece, I have attempted to show that by examining the project Heidegger sets himself, we can see why his thinking takes its characteristically obscure form. I hope that this approach may prompt readers unfamiliar with Heidegger to read him with a little patience, the degree of patience that any difficult but rewarding writer deserves.

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¹⁶ Cf., e.g., H. L. Dreyfus *Being-in-the-World* (MIT, 1991), J. Richardson *Existential Epistemology* (Oxford, 1986), C. B. Guignon *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* (Hackett, 1983) and F. A. Olafson *Heidegger and the Philosophy of Mind* (Yale, 1987).