

On Teachers and Students: Heidegger in America©

Martin Heidegger is among the most controversial thinkers of the twentieth century. The depth of his thinking and his approach to the reading of philosophic texts has had a profound impact on multiple fields in Europe, America, and Japan since the late 1920s. His explicit support for National Socialism in the 1930s and his critique of liberal democracy and parliamentarianism both then and throughout the rest of his life, however, has called into question the moral and political significance even of his most abstruse philosophical remarks. His critics have repeatedly suggested that his thinking about ontology and logic played an essential role in shaping his attachment to the political policies of National Socialism. Moreover, with the passage of time the shadow of his political affiliations have extended to darken the reputations of many of his students as well, including many of those who were forced to flee from the regime he supported, some to America where they were manifest opponents of the Nazi regime and deeply critical of their teacher for his support of the National Socialist movement. There are obviously many questions here. Perhaps the most important is whether and if so in what ways Heidegger's thinking leads or lends support to National Socialism or similar political movements. This is a question I have considered at length on several occasions and that I won't deal with it extensively here. Suffice it to say that I think this claim is true but limited in a variety of ways. A second question, is whether

the work of his students, readers, and admirers is in some way perhaps even without their knowledge and against their intentions, infected with the elements of Heidegger's thought that lead them in the direction of National Socialism. Should they in other words be suspect simply due to their having studied with Heidegger or having read and been influenced by his thought. In this talk I will try to answer these question by examining the relationship between teachers and students within the context of a general notion of the way in which thought is transmitted from person to another, from one culture to another, and from one generation to another. I will try to show that in the end such a claim is very difficult to sustain and will suggest that we need to consider the thought of each of these students in his or her own right before passing judgment on any of them merely by reason of affiliation or association.

Forty-five years ago as I was deciding where to go for graduate school, one of my teachers, Judith Shklar, cautioned me about my future career: "You are about to enter a profession in which you teach and students learn," she said, "but you should never forget that there is no causal connection between those two things." Many years of teaching have convinced me that she was largely correct. What I say and what students hear often seem quite dissimilar and what I say or write and what they later write are also separated by a gulf sometimes small and sometimes large, but always apparent. To begin with, then, I would like us to consider the nature of

the connection between teaching and learning.

At an elementary level learning is the process by which one becomes part of a common world, learning how to control one's body, how to digest food, how and when to excrete waste, learning the routines of a family, developing habits, learning a common language, learning to distinguish friends and strangers, learning the accumulated knowledge of how the world works, learning what is good and bad, learning how to make and do things—to tie one's shoes, to drive a car, to pound a nail, or to write a literate essay, but also learning to understand one's own motivations, learning the limits of learning, etc., etc. In all of these matters we have teachers but teachers of many different sorts, parents and extended family, friends, mentors, school teachers, professors, and above all experience. And outside of a few utopian or totalitarian experiments these various forms of teaching and learning are seldom if ever all aligned. And even when they are, they do not always have the same impact on every group or individual. Each stands in his or her or their own unique way within a world with others, some with a similar perspective, but many quite different, and each with a particular past and expectations of the future that differentiate him or her to a greater or lesser extent from all others. Moreover, over time our views of things change, in part because of the new people and situations we encounter, in part because the shape of the social world changes, in part because we become older and see behind us a longer and often more

problematic past and in front of us a brighter or darker but in any case more limited future.

As a teacher, scholar, and writer I have noted time and time again how difficult it is to determine how what I say or write will be received. Once many years ago, filling in for a fellow faculty member who was also teaching in the Core program at the University of Chicago, I taught four sections of a course back to back to back to back, asking the same questions, covering the same material, to students the same age and of roughly the same intelligence, and yet the results couldn't have been more different. The responses of students, their different perspectives and concerns all led us in different directions. The times alone made a difference. The 8 o'clock class was bright and awake, the 9 o'clock class sleepy, the 10 o'clock class on the top of their game and the 11 o'clock class hungry. This should not be surprising. A number of years ago a group of scholars studied an Israeli pardoning commission to determine whether Jews were receiving better treatment than Muslims. What they discovered was that they were not but in the course of their investigation they also found out that the chances of being pardoned at 9am right after breakfast were vastly higher than at 11:30am when commission members were hungry.

Such differences don't merely affect conversations but have a profound impact on the reception and interpretation of written work as well. A book I wrote

20 years ago entitled *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* led one group of scholars to imagine that I was blaming Christianity for nihilism, another that I was encouraging a return to Thomism, a third that I was characterizing all of modern thought as nihilistic, and finally one madman (who had actually been institutionalized) that I had demonstrated the truth of his *idee fixe* that the Queen of England in league with the philosopher Michael Oakeshott was leading a nihilist conspiracy to take over the world. Needless to say none of these were what I had in mind when I wrote the book.

These and similar experiences have led me to be very cautious in trying to determine what impact if any one teacher or thinker, however great and influential, has had upon his or her students, on the thinking of others, or on the world at large. I have learned to be especially careful when it comes to the question of whether his or her impact has been for good or ill, and especially whether it has been pernicious or evil. We are all too ready to look for someone to blame when things happen we don't like, often imagining a conspiracy where either chance or stupidity are at work. During the Bush Presidency there was a concerted effort to find someone to blame for the war in Iraq and many sought to blame the fiasco on neo-conservatism and the man they thought was the inspiration for neo-conservatism, Leo Strauss. I wrote a short paper at the time in an effort to deflate this notion called, "Things That Go Bump in the Night or Is There a German Jewish Professor Under Your

Bed Reading Plato.” Our desire to find someone to blame all too often ends up generating a conspiracy theory that conceals the multiple causes and accidents that are the antecedent of all events.

All this said, I do not mean to assert that we should not try to understand the impact of thinkers and ideas. That would be somewhat disingenuous since I have spent most of my career trying to do just that. Ideas do have consequences some more and some less direct. That said they are not the only source of causation. Some of our great musical works were written because a composer had the hots for a particular soprano. Dostoevsky wrote his novel *The Gambler* to escape from debt. And many, many economic and political decisions simply boil down to a desire for power or money. That said, ideas do have consequences, and I certainly do believe that the analysis of the impact of ideas can be done better and worse. But this leads to an important question: what constitutes better or worse.

One is tempted to say that better means more true and worse means less true. But what does it mean to say that something is historically true or false? History in a strange way stands between fact and fiction. It is rooted in facts—the original Greek term *histor*, for example, meant witness—but it also constructs those facts into a story. Any historical account can be mistaken about the facts, can get dates wrong, attribute written work to the wrong person, etc. Depending on the importance of the erroneous facts we might conclude that the history is

unconvincing but some of the best historical works ever written have some errors of fact. Facts alone do not make up history. There are many more so called "facts" than we can ever recognize or connect. "Facts" do not speak for themselves. Thus every historian has to choose which out of an almost infinite number of facts are relevant to his or her story. And to be honest none of us ever considers the butterfly effect, which chaos theory points towards, as a serious force in history, although all of us can think of tiny and apparently unrelated events that have made or at least may have made a huge difference in the social or political outcome of a situation. The historical story in this sense is almost always constructed out of near and plausible events. No reputable historian today relies upon divine intervention to explain the victory of one side of a war over another. The divine may play a role as the primary cause, but we all try to develop a coherent account of secondary causes that explains an event. The historian chooses facts and links them together for the purpose of convincing us about something that has occurred, not just *that* it occurred but also *how* and *why* it occurred. But this leads us to another question: why would anyone construct such an account about the past? The past is, after, all "passed," so to speak. Dead and gone by. Or at least so we think. But is it really? If history is merely about the past, then it is something that serves no purpose in the present. And why then would anyone engage in telling such a story, go to all of the work to carefully collect and connect facts into a story if it has no purpose? And

yet they do. Why are such stories constructed? What practical purpose do they serve? Or to bring the question closer to home, why for example would anyone be concerned with the impact of Martin Heidegger in America? Why should we care?

The historical stories we tell ourselves and others concern the past but our interest is never merely antiquarian, never merely or even primarily the result of idle curiosity. The purpose or goal of a historical story is almost always futural and involves linking together what has been with what we imagine will come into being or what we want to come into being or to prevent from coming into being.

Histories in this sense always have a practical or even, as Cicero and Quintilian argued, a moral purpose. The story of Martin Heidegger's reception and impact in America might thus aim to show the way in which his raising the question of Being offers us an answer to the aridity of analytic philosophy, or to show us new ways of understanding the end of metaphysics and thus revealing the need for a new beginning and new ways of thinking. It also might be driven by a desire to show that his thought has fostered anti-liberal and indeed fascistic ways of thinking in America that must be resisted to avoid an illiberal future. It could also be taken to have served to undermine the metaphysical foundation of Western rationalism and thus to teach us an important way of freeing ourselves from neo-liberalism for a post-modern future. Similarly, it could be imagined to have alerted us to the dangers of technology and thus the need to be more environmentally sensitive. Or

to provide the foundations for a more artistically or poetically based way of life. Or a new method for reading texts. Or even finally, it could be imagined to provide the foundation for a new theology that will enable us to reengage the divine in new and more immediate ways. Heidegger's thought has in fact already been used in all of these different ways. And we should not assume this list is exhaustive. There are thus as many factually possible histories of Heidegger's impact in America as there are possible futures. They just remain to be written. Or to paraphrase Nietzsche, there are always new bridges to be built.

We should also be very clear that history is not something necessary but something fundamentally characterized by contingency. To give you just one example relevant to our discussion, if Martin Heidegger's wife had divorced him when she discovered his affair with Hannah Arendt and he had then married Arendt, and emigrated with her to the United States the story we are trying to tell here would be radically different. We thus need to be very careful not to assume that there is some ineluctable necessity underlying events that we can in some better or worse way reveal. Aristotle argues in chapter nine of the *Poetics* that philosophy is concerned with the necessary, poetry with the possible and history with the actual, but his notion of history is more limited than ours. He still imagines that the historian only writes what he actually witnesses or what occurs in his own lifetime and that he thus can verify. In recounting history as we understand it, however, the

story is always constructed, made up, a form of *poiesis* that it is neither arbitrary in the manner of poetry nor necessary in the manner of philosophy, rooted in facts and governed by a method and standards of evidence. As a result, there is thus never just one true history.

Intellectual history presents us with an additional problem because the “facts” we are generally concerned with are not objectively given but are always subjectively concealed, ideas that are available to the historian only through the moments of thinking that appear in speech or writing. We invariably have to consider intentions. Moreover, in thinking about the transmission, reception and effect of thinking it is important to remember that all three are deeply rooted in the translation of that thinking from one to another or to many other persons, often through many intermediaries. While in some sense we share a common intersubjective world, this world is both various and fluid, and each individual is to some degree enclosed within him or herself. We do not know what other people are thinking or what their true motives are except insofar as they reveal them to us and of course even then we can never be certain how true their revelations are. Part of their goal may be to deceive or to deliver a differentiated message that some will understand in one way and others in different way.

That said, we also need to pay attention to the fact that no one fully understands his or her or their own motives or intentions. These too can be

understood only when they appear in language and we can easily misunderstand ourselves when we try to put feelings and motives into words. At the center of our self-understanding and our capacity to communicate is language. The common world that we inhabit is thus constituted by logos. By logos, I do not mean merely words we use but the structures by which words, gestures, tones, colors, and other symbols come to have meaning, that which lies in the spaces between words and other symbols that bring them together into a meaningful sentences, musical phrases, dances, and melodies, and brings all of these together into paragraphs and arguments, movements and symphonies, etc. The logos within which we live, however, is not merely a collection of verified or unverified assertions, not merely observations about how things are. This was one of the mistakes that analytic philosophy made. Logos is in fact shaped by questions which propel us in multiple ways and directions. In fact our very observations about the world only make sense as the answers to questions. If in a conversation I say “I am going to lunch with Jim at noon today at MacDonalds,” the meaning of this statement only makes sense if you know whether the question my interlocutor asked was, “Can you have lunch with me today?” Or, “Would anyone in their right mind ever eat at MacDonalds?” Or, “Are you still a vegetarian?” Or perhaps even, “Isn't Jim a jerk?” etc. You see my point.

Of course while questions are essential to thinking, we also obviously try to

answer them both for practical purposes and to put to rest the anxiety that every question evokes. Some answers are wrong—the world is not flat, or at least not flat in the way many in the Middle Ages imagined it was—and some answers are more convincing than others, some are relevant to the future and some are not—while every ancient Greek citizen for example wanted to be a hoplite, and I could explain to you what went into becoming a successful hoplite, I am fairly certain that this is not a career path that any of you have chosen or hope to pursue. Thus if you had come to me with questions about employment and I had explained how to become a hoplite, you would feel you had wasted your time, but if you had asked me how the training of ancient Greek warriors might be relevant to training our soldiers today, you might be pleased.

Questions thus may point us in particular directions and in that sense determine the region within which answers may be found (if there are answers to be found), but they do not determine what the right or relevant answers are. If you ask me what time it is and I tell you blue, I have made what we might call a category error. If you ask me who a tree is, I may think you have made a category error, but if we were in Greece during the archaic period, I would know you were asking about the dryad that inhabited the tree. Similarly, if we asked Aristotle who a tree is, he might correct us and say, “I think you mean what a tree is,” then go on to describe its genus and species. Or if you asked a modern botanist, he would more

likely say, “I think you want to know how a tree works” and describe the process of photosynthesis, etc. Different kinds questions in that sense point us to different ranges of possible answers but do not determine which answers within that range are correct or even whether one region of possible answers is better or more appropriate than another.

When we turn to the question of the impact of the thinking of someone like Heidegger, we then need to establish certain parameters:

- 1) Who did he impact both directly and indirectly? What was his impact on philosophers? On other intellectuals? On practical life? On social and political movements? Etc
- 2) Was this impact something he intended or something unintended? How was the reception of his thought impacted by the changed circumstances within which it was received? Did his students, followers, children, or step-children vastly distort or reshape his thought to purposes different than he intended?
- 3) What was the impact of the questions he posed as opposed to the answers he suggested? To what extent was his way of approaching the subject matter, his method impactful irrespective of the questions he asked and the answers he suggested?
- 4) To what extent is it possible to isolate his impact from that of others who preceded and succeeded him? e.g., Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Derrida, or

Rorty?

5) Can we distinguish a particular influence that he had upon his actual students who came to America and has this influence continued to exist in certain schools of thought and if so how?

A large number of books and articles have been written about the impact of Heidegger as charismatic teacher, Heidegger as profound but enigmatic thinker and writer, Heidegger as brilliant reader of texts, Heidegger as existentialist, Heidegger as deconstructor of the Western tradition, Heidegger as the source of post-modernism, Heidegger as a notorious National Socialist, Heidegger as a proto-environmentalist, Heidegger as the way to God, etc. I will mention two that for our purposes are particularly useful, Richard Wolin's *Heidegger's Children* and the work of his student, Martin Woessner's *Heidegger in America*, the latter especially detailing the impact of Heidegger's thought in the United States mostly through his students and those who had some more immediate contact with him. While I don't agree with all of their claims, I would certainly recommend these works as the place to start in any effort to come to terms with our question.

Woessner's book in particular goes into great detail about the different ways in which Heidegger's thought had an impact in the America. He argues persuasively that Heidegger had a profound substantive impact both directly and indirectly not merely on philosophy but also on theology, architecture, our

understanding of Italian humanism, postmodernism, pragmatism, environmentalism, and existentialism. He demonstrates this through a thoughtful discussion of his direct influence on a variety of thinkers including Charles Hawthorne, Paul Weiss, Sidney Hook, Marjorie Grene, Daniel Liebeskind, Hannah Arendt, Richard Rorty, Glen Gray, Gunther Anders, Hans Jonas, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Hans Loewald, Karl Löwith, and Leo Strauss, and his indirect impact through the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Arne Naess, Jacques Derrida, Jean Beaufret, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Gianni Vattimo, Jan Patocka, Vaclav Havel and others. He does not go into detail on those thinkers already discussed in the work of his mentor, Wolin, that is, Arendt, Jonas, Löwith, and Marcuse. He also wants to argue that Heidegger had a profound impact not merely substantively but as a model for the way in which the philosopher sees and comports himself, a model quite different than that of analytic philosophers who saw themselves, as Quine put it, more as handmaidens to science than as oracular founts of wisdom. He also suggests a third sort of impact, an impact on the way in which people read texts, moving away from a historical or historicist reading of texts as rooted in the dominant world view of their times toward a confrontation or *Auseinandersetzung* with the text, treating it as a living and relevant contemporary document. Thus even many of those who rejected Heidegger's conclusions are characterized as Heidegger's step-children because they adopted or adapted and modified either his

philosophical style or his methodology. This approach to discussing Heidegger's impact is very useful but poses certain dangers since it makes it easier to confuse methodological Heideggerianism with philosophic or political Heideggerianism.

Heidegger's substantive teaching is problematic in large part because of his brief or perhaps not so brief support for some sort of National Socialism. The question regarding his affiliation with the Nazis is whether it was a necessary or likely consequence of his thinking or whether it was simply an error growing out of contingent life circumstances. Many of his readers want to argue that his strictly philosophic teaching can be separated from his politics, while others (increasingly more) want to argue that his awful political views were not an accidental appendage to his thought but a necessary or at least an understandable consequence of his philosophical views. To characterize both those who accept his philosophical views and those who employ his methodology as Heideggerians is at least implicitly to tarnish their reputations by associating them with philosophical and political positions that many of them not only did not share but actually found abhorrent, explicitly rejected, and in many cases fought against.

Also and in part almost inevitably because of his guiding question, Woessner focuses so much on *Heidegger's* impact on his “children” and “step-children” that he often does not see that much of what he attributes to Heidegger may very well have come from their studying with or reading the works of other thinkers. To take

just one example, Woessner argues that Leo Strauss's rejection of historicism was due to the impact of Heidegger, whereas the impact of Nietzsche or Husserl are equally if not more likely the source of his anti-historicism. Indeed, one of the things that Strauss finds most objectionable in Heidegger is his historicism. To be fair to Woessner, it is almost inevitable in a book of the sort he has written, which seeks to delineate the influence of a particular thinker on a time or place, that many other influences or sources will be overlooked or treated with less than comprehensive attention. By contrast, if one were asking instead about the sources that influenced Leo Strauss, one would tell a much different and more varied story, as many of the recent books on Strauss have done. Because Woessner seldom asks what other sources were important for all those he sees as Heidegger's step-children his work generally overstates Heidegger's contribution to their thought. While these are limitations of Woessner's work, I do believe his work has performed a signal service in laying out in some detail Heidegger's impact on American thinking. In fact, having read his book, one is tempted to conclude that there is little left to do but fill in the gaps.

I don't, however, believe this to be the case and in what follows I want to argue that we need to do several other things in order to parce out Heidegger's actual influence on American thought all of which has to do at least implicitly with the relationship among teachers and students that I discussed above. First, I think

we need to see the reception of Heidegger's thought in a broader context or actually contexts, and particularly the antecedent impact of Nietzsche on American thought. I won't say much about this but would direct anyone who is interested in knowing more to Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen's *American Nietzsche*. Second, I think we need to distinguish the prevailing attitudes that characterized America at different periods and places that shaped the reception of Heidegger's thought. Third, I think we need to carefully consider the importance of the translation of Heidegger's German into English. Fourth, I think we need to reflect somewhat and in the same vein on the transfer and translation of his teaching from one generation to the next. Strauss, for example, may have imitated Heidegger as a teacher without accepting his doctrine but what of his students or his students' students? Bloom took things in one direction, for example, Rorty in another, and queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (who came to philosophy through Allan Bloom) in yet another. Fifth, and I think perhaps most importantly, we need to consider in more than a passing fashion a topic that is almost entirely absent in Woessner's work, whether it is possible to separate (and perhaps admire, be troubled, or be moved by) the questions that Heidegger poses without being thereby constrained to accept his answers. And thus finally sixth, whether these questions are of enduring importance to us as Americans or whether they only made sense in the context of the crisis thinking of the Weimar period?

At the core of determining any thinker's impact is distinguishing what the relative influence of that thinker is in comparison to that of other thinkers. To give you some idea of the difficulties of such a task I want to show you a diagram that tries to sketch out the impact of various thinkers upon others. (Show slide one) As you can see the net of relationships among even most major thinkers is enormously complicated and this chart doesn't even begin to lay out the depth or intensity of the various connections. It is certainly clear, for example, that Heidegger was deeply impacted by Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Husserl and that all three also had a profound impact upon Hannah Arendt, for example. But which thinker was more important for her is hard not merely for us to determine but was hard even for her to understand. It is also clear that the previous reception of Kierkegaard, for example, deeply influenced the way in which Arendt and other students initially read Heidegger, interpreting *Dasein* in a radically individualistic fashion rather than in the more collectivist fashion suggested by Heidegger's reference in section 74 of *Being and Time* to the fact that the destiny of *Dasein* is never individualized but always in and with one's people or generation. Had they seen Heidegger less against the background of Kierkegaard and more against the background of Herder or some ethnic nationalist, they might have been less surprised by his support for National Socialism.

When we reflect then upon Heidegger's arrival in America, we need to

remember that there was no one dominant school of thought in philosophy let alone in the broader intellectual world. Pragmatism, idealism, positivism, populism, transcendentalism, neo-Kantianism, modernism, capitalism, evangelical Christianity, Zionism, as well as the pessimism and nihilism of the lost generation and the rise of socialism and communism in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the advent of the Great Depression were only a few of the events and movements of thought already having an impact when Heidegger first appeared on the American intellectual horizon. The United States of America was also not Weimar Germany. The country was an established industrial democracy of continental proportions that had helped win the WWI. Moreover, America had no threatening neighbors. Weimar Germany by contrast suffered from the unexpected loss of the war, was partially occupied by foreign troops, was beset by a series of economic disasters, and had such ineffective democratic institutions that it was governed in the late 1920s and early 1930s by presidential decree under the famous state of exception clause in the Weimar constitution. American optimism even in the face of the Great Depression in this sense stood in stark contrast to the pessimism and nihilism of Weimar Germany. Moreover, America emerged from the Depression and WWII as the world's leading industrial and military power, and during the 1950s optimism among the general population soared, even as Heidegger's critique of technology and "Americanism" came to play a more central

role among the intelligentsia and particularly with those intellectuals who had grown up in Weimar Germany and come to America as refugees from the Nazis. Many of these men and women of course were teachers during this period in American universities and were faced with the difficulty of teaching students who had not obtained a classical Gymnasium education, and had not experienced the nihilism of Weimar intellectual and political life, but instead had obtained a Dewian education with a focus on practical and vocational training, were caught up in the ideological conflict of the Cold War, and were worried more about winning the space race than they were about domination of technology. The consequences of this disjunction were visible in the awkward way in which many of Heidegger's students attempted to come to terms with an America that their mentor had despised, that had been their refuge, that had defeated National Socialism, and that in the USSR faced a similar threat to civilization.

Each of them faced the necessity of what the Heidegger student, Hans Georg Gadamer, called the “fusion of horizons.” What does this mean? Gadamer argues that each of us exists within a tradition of interpretation, a stance toward the world, or a perspective to use the word that Nietzsche made popular, and every time we confront something from outside that tradition our views are challenged. We may reject these new views as false or anathema, or we may learn from them and modify or replace our own way of looking at the world. For Heidegger as for Nietzsche

there is a stark choice between what he calls inauthenticity and authenticity, between chatter and thinking, or to use Nietzsche's terminology between the activities of the last man and those of the superman. Within this framework Heidegger came to see the American system and Soviet communism as inauthentic and “metaphysically identical,” the same dreary technical organization of everyday man. Many of Heidegger's students brought up in the context of Weimar Germany were convinced by this dichotomy but when they came to the US they were forced to confront a new reality where class and cultural differences played a much smaller role and where mandarin intellectuals had only a marginal impact on cultural life. Moreover, even those who continued to cling to this view had difficulty convincing most Americans that these were the only two possibilities. More typically they found themselves confronting a contradiction between what they had been taught and what they experienced. Leo Strauss is a good example. As Michael and Catherine Zuckert have pointed out, Strauss believed three things

- 1) That modernity is bad
- 2) That America is modern and
- 3) That America is good.

The students of Strauss held some combination of these three views and the particular way in which they fused them together gave each of them or at least each of the groups of them a specific character. East coast Straussians, for example,

generally adopted the first two, west coast Straussians the first and third, and midwest Straussians some combination of all three. In all three cases, however, we can see the way in which Heidegger's impact was transformed by the necessity of confronting an American reality quite different than that of Weimar Germany and from the America of Heidegger's imagination.

Heidegger's reception in America was also deeply affected by the difficulty of translating his peculiar terminology which was deeply rooted in German (and Greek) etymology into English. It is always difficult to accurately translate philosophic concepts and prose but it is especially difficult in the case of Heidegger who uses terms that do not have an exact or even an inexact English equivalent. Moreover, many of his key terms are used in new or at least very uncommon ways in German drawing on etymological roots that often don't exist at least in modern English. In fact in some cases he uses terms that make sense grammatically in German but simply don't exist or make sense in English. Heidegger's two central terms *Sein* and *Seiend* in German are “to be” and “being” but we do not have infinitival nouns in English and are forced to use the participial form to translate it. This makes it very difficult to understand the difference between the two and the temporal reference imbedded in this difference that is so important to Heidegger. Similarly Heidegger's later term that describes the central problem with technology, *Gestell*, in colloquial German means 'frame' or 'picture frame'. In attempting to

render it in English translators have been tempted to translate the term as 'enframing', and while this is not wrong, it is also misleading and conceals a great deal of the sense that Heidegger wants to give to the term. The *Ge-* in the term is a collectivizing prefix whereas *-stell* comes from *Stellen* which means 'to set', 'to put', or 'to establish'. *Gestell* in this context means the collective or total setting or establishing of the world that technology brings out, not the framework within which this occurs but the actual force that challenges out the world in a new way. It is thus much closer to what Nietzsche called the will to power than the more structuralist term enframing would suggest. These translation difficulties, however, are only the tip of the iceberg and while Heidegger authorized the translations of his works, and while Arendt and Glenn Gray worked hard to make them as accurate as possible, Heidegger himself was skeptical that they could be understood in anything other than German.

The translation from one language to another creates many problems for reception but equally as problematic is the translation of understanding from one generation to the next as Heidegger himself emphasized in his *Underway to Language*. Not only do words take on new meanings but the character of culture and institutions is constantly changing, sometimes gradually and sometimes more rapidly. For example, many Weimar intellectuals who found refuge and taught in America who had earlier been taught or influenced by Heidegger understood the

student activism of 1968 against the backdrop of the failure of the Weimar Republic as a crisis that threatened the American regime itself. And yet the differences were stark, in the state of the economy, the stability of long established political institutions, the absence of armed gangs fighting for control of the streets, etc. Many of the perceived similarities were little more than inexact analogies that stopped at appearances but led the followers of Marcuse, for example, to misestimate the possibility for radical change and the followers of Strauss to an exaggerated view of the danger to the American regime. In both cases there was a failure to see the difference both in context and in the character of the generation. In contrast to Weimar where Yeats prediction that the center could not hold had proven to be true, in America the center was never really threatened and after the elimination of the draft much of the student activism simply dissipated as even the leaders of the student revolt became part of the system.

Heidegger and many of his students in an odd way accepted Hegel's claim that a people without a metaphysics was an absurdity and sought a new way of thinking, sometimes drawing on the pre-Socratics and the poets, sometimes on Marx, sometimes on the Greeks, sometimes on ancient Stoicism, and sometimes on Judaism or Christianity to replace Western metaphysics that in their view had come to an end with Nietzsche and the nihilism that had destroyed Weimar. Americans, however, largely reject the notion that one needs a metaphysics or any kind of

cultural unity to be a people. As David Hackett Fisher has shown in his wonderful book *Albion's Seed*, from the earliest times of settlement, Americans have been deeply divided religiously and culturally, certainly without a single metaphysics. Lincoln pointed to something perhaps more important, what he called a religion of the laws and what we have come to think of as a dedication to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. America has never been a single people or monochromatic nation but a constantly changing mix of peoples united by laws and coordinated by very astutely constructed political institutions.

Of perhaps supreme importance in understanding Heidegger's reception in America, however, is separating the questions he posed from the answers to those questions he himself developed, and remembering that these answers differed in some measure over the course of his career. Heidegger was quite clear that there was a distinction between questions, especially fundamental questions, and their answers. He noted repeatedly that for the pre-Socratic philosophers the fundamental question that motivated them was *to ti on*, "What is being?" and while there is some similarity between their answers to this question that distinguish them from their predecessors who were much more likely to ask who something was or who was responsible for something, the pre-Socratic philosophers among themselves clearly gave different answers to this question. In Heidegger's view it was only with Plato and Aristotle that the overwhelming power of this question was

superseded by a specific set of answers.

Heidegger's goal as announced at the very beginning of *Being and Time* was to raise anew the question of Being or literally the question of 'To Be'. Getting his students and readers to see that Being was always *only* as a question, that it was the perennial source of all questions and thus of all wonder was his central goal and ultimately the basis for almost everything else in his thought from the destruction of metaphysics to the critique of technology and the attempt to revive thinking.

Teaching in his view was bringing students and readers to encounter this fundamental question, to see that it is inexhaustible and that there is no final answer to it. The experience of this question, as Heidegger made clear in his inaugural lecture, *What is Metaphysics?* is the terrifying recognition that Being itself at its core is always only no-thing, a nothingness or abyss. The experience of this question thus opens up existence in a radical way that forces us to come to terms with who we are, with what we are to be, and with what we have been. Teaching for Heidegger is the evocation and posing of the question of Being. Every statement, assertion, or commandment, every doctrine, or rule that we have ever been taught thus has to be not merely forgotten but deconstructed in such a way that the very foundations of existence are all made visible and revealed as shaped by a set of ungrounded theses that we have taken to be true for so long that we think of them as eternal and unchangeable. The teaching that prepares students for genuine

philosophizing thus depends upon a systematic investigation and revelation of the abysmal character of what Heidegger calls Western metaphysics. Teaching, as Heidegger understands it is thus not indoctrination or training, and does not entail memorization, repetition, the application of algorithms, or the adoption of general moral principles or rules of behavior.

Heidegger also asserted that on the basis of such a fundamental deconstruction of the structures of a world we have come to take for granted, it might be possible to begin to see the shape of a different world that was rooted in the particular way in which in the question of Being directed us toward a specific sphere or region of answers that would shape our future, a particular sending or destining that would enable us to turn onto a new path that led to a new way of being.

For Heidegger in contrast to Nietzsche, however, this new form of life is not something that is established by individual human or superhuman beings acting creatively to establish new values as the basis for a new world, but by those who hear the call of Being and who in response to that call move in a new direction. This call as he came to understand it was akin to a conversion experience, not however as an individual but in keeping with one's people or generation. In the 1930s Heidegger became convinced that Hitler had become the voice of this new calling of Being that was embodied in the National Socialist movement, a

movement that sought to turn humanity away from the technical civilization that was the end product of Western metaphysics toward a more practical way of being rooted in a notion akin to what Aristotle called *phronesis*, and thus away from *techne*, from the domination of the economics and planning so central to both the USSR and the USA toward what he considered a truly political life rooted in the people or community.

Since that time there have been waves of controversy about whether Heidegger's political affiliation with National Socialism was either compatible with or a consequence of his philosophical teaching. I believe and have argued more fully elsewhere that this conclusion was indeed a consequence of his philosophical thought and not separable from it, but and this is a big but, it was not the *only* possible stance that was compatible with his thinking, not the *only* possible response to the question of Being. Understanding this is extraordinarily important for understanding the moral valence of the impact of Heidegger in America.

Taken literally Heidegger's claim that the question of Being must always receive an answer in the context of one's people or generation suggests that the answer given to this question that is most authentic or most appropriate to the American context is one that situates itself in the context of the American tradition, in the context of the American multi-religious background, of American constitutionalism, transcendentalism, positivism, pragmatism, progressivism, and

pluralism. In this sense someone like Rorty seems closer to a genuinely Heideggerian American Heideggerian than any of Heidegger's actual students. The German émigrés, Arendt, Strauss, Jonas, Marcuse, and others were in a certain sense caught between two worlds and two languages, still rehashing the problems and debates of Weimar but also trying to make those debates fit America. From this point of view they were always trying to speak to two different traditions that don't easily fit together. Or to paraphrase Gadamer, they were struggling to fuse two horizons but were finally unable to do so. Why was this?

The Weimar period was a period of continual crisis and Weimar thinkers were almost all crisis thinkers. Their reactions and those of their fellows, however, were not shaped merely by Heidegger but from a young age by Nietzsche's teaching that God was dead and that the choice for humanity was between the last man and the superman, by Dostoevsky's sense that nihilism could be overcome only by a revitalized Volk religion that emphasized not the man god but the God man, and by Kierkegaard's recognition that existence had to be faced as an individual and that the solution to the crisis of the West lay in a leap of faith, an ungrounded commitment. In determining Heidegger's impact it is important to recognize these and other antecedent influences. (In passing, it is also important to recognize that the Nietzsche they encountered was the Nietzsche rife with the distortions introduced into his thought by Heinrich Köselitz (a.k.a. Peter Gast), who vastly

overemphasized the importance of the superman in Nietzsche's thought, and Nietzsche's sister who for many years successfully convinced people that Nietzsche was an anti-Semitic thinker.)

The general name that many gave the intellectual crisis of the time was nihilism but it took many different forms, and it would be incorrect to imagine that Heidegger was the only or even the primary source of such crisis thinking. What Heidegger did do was to raise the question in a philosophical rather than a theological, sociological, or cultural manner. The question of Being was for him the question of the nothing and thus the question of nihilism that had characterized all metaphysics since Plato. In search of a means for overcoming nihilism, he turned first to Aristotle's notion of praxis. Theoretical knowledge of the unchanging, he knew from Nietzsche, was an illusion because everything was in a state of flux. The knowledge of change or what Aristotle called praxis thus had to be central. Aristotle, however, recognized two forms of praxis, *techne* or knowledge of things made, and *phronesis* or knowledge of things done. Heidegger believed that the final stage of Western metaphysics was the triumph of *techne* (aided by science) that came to its culmination in America and the USSR. He rejected such technologism and turned instead to the pursuit of a political *phronesis*. He interpreted *phronesis*, however, not as simple practical reason, but in terms of historicity or *Geschitlichkeit* as bound up with one's people or generation. From

here the passage to National Socialism was not difficult. The answer to the nihilism that undermined all metaphysics and morality was then the *phronemos*, the supremely practically wise leader articulating the historical destiny of the Volk or nation, pointing out the way to all those who knew how to resolutely follow the path he described.

While Heidegger's students who came to America were one and all struck by the question of Being, they all rejected the Heideggerian answer and sought to find ways of their own. They also reconceptualized the origin of Western nihilism not as the withdrawal and forgetfulness of Being, to use Heidegger's most famous phrase, but in a variety of different ways, as the collapse of authority (Arendt), the rise of gnosticism (Jonas), the rise of historicism (Strauss), the rise of a continuous notion of number in place of the discrete notion that characterized Greek mathematics (Klein), and the collapse of the theological grounds that gave meaning to history (Löwith).

While on one level they seem to have followed Heidegger in turning to the Greeks for an answer to nihilism, it would be a mistake to see them as agreeing with Heidegger. Indeed, their focus on the Greeks was more an *Auseinanderstzung* with Heidegger, an attempt to set themselves apart from Heidegger and explain where he had gone astray. For Arendt it meant formulating a ground for democratic political judgment rooted in the Greek polis that was different than Heidegger's

notion of a revelatory *phronesis*. For Strauss it was a rejection of Heideggerian historicism and conventionalism that roots politics in the Volk community and a turn to the universal standard of nature that had its origin in Plato. For Löwith the solution lay in a return to a pre-Christian worldview such as that of the Stoics, while for Jonas it meant a return to transcendence in place of the decisionistic gnosticism of Heidegger.

What of course was missing in many of these students were the elements that were so central to the Anglo-American tradition of Mill, Dewey, and Rawls, the notion of rights, toleration, pragmatism, pluralism, constitutionalism, etc. This gap has continued to set Arendtians, Straussians, and others at odds with many Anglo-American theorists. This is one of the principal factors that made and makes it difficult to achieve a fusion of the two horizons, and to integrate continental thought with liberal democratic theory. The Heidegger students showed little concern for these questions. One might attribute this to Heidegger's influence but this seems implausible to me since one finds a similar neglect or rejection of many of these same matters in thinkers such as MacIntyre and Taylor.

As Woessner has pointed out, there were obviously other pathways by which Heidegger's thought came to America, perhaps most often at least early on because of American students who had gone to study in Germany. These students by and large were better able to find some bridge between the two worlds, in large part I

believe because they were not as driven by the sense of crisis that characterized Heidegger's German Jewish students who had lived through the failure of Weimar and after WW II had to confront personally and as Jews the question of the Holocaust. I won't discuss them further here but would encourage anyone who is interested to read Woessner's excellent book.

I would like to conclude by posing the larger question of whether Heidegger both directly and indirectly through his students remains relevant for America in the 21st century? And if so, then how so? In my view Nietzsche and Heidegger are the two most compelling thinkers since Hegel, not so much because of their positive or substantive doctrines but because of the profound questions they have posed. We may reasonably criticize them for much that they wrote and for the impact that they had in the past, but we cannot avoid the questions they asked that continue to disturb anyone who reflects seriously on human existence. I have tried to argue, too briefly, that the students who were largely responsible for bringing these questions to America sought to distance themselves and their thought from their mentor's pernicious doctrines. I have also suggested that they were never entirely able to present their own questions and answers in a way that could be melded to the existing traditions of American thought. If there is a task that remains for those who take the questions that Nietzsche and Heidegger posed seriously, it is in working to articulate positive doctrines that confront these questions in ways that

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make sense in America and that both challenge and enrich American philosophical thinking.

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