

Nothing Against Natality

Luce Irigaray's confrontations with some of the canonical figures in Western Philosophy invite and often challenge us to reconstruct or reconsider how they might respond to her many penetrating insights and searching criticisms. A philosophical figure that, arguably, looms larger than any other for Irigaray is Martin Heidegger. In the following paper, I will gloss some ideas and themes from Heidegger's work in ways that might push the conversation between Heidegger and Irigaray further or at least shed light on the conversation already taking place. I will do this with the notion of birth/natality in mind (especially given the way that that notion is developed in *To Be Born*), by revisiting Heidegger's concerns with the importance of nothingness in any projected attempt at an overcoming of Western metaphysics. Against this backdrop we can perhaps begin to see Luce Irigaray's work as an attempt to offer a thinking that might inaugurate a new or different kind of metaphysics and thus as an overcoming of traditional metaphysics. But in what ways can she profess to have gone beyond Heidegger? Are we thinking with Heidegger against Heidegger? Are there possibilities still? If there are - what limits the possibilities of the 'possible', as deployed in *Being and Time*, to signify the role that absence plays in terms of what it means for anything to be? What do birth and natality bring to the table that is not already anticipated by a vision that tries to anticipate an understanding that overcomes the stifling, binary grip of the metaphysics of presence and offer instead *spielraum* for the interplay of presence and absence?

One of Heidegger's great disappointments in the immediate aftermath of the publication of *Being and Time*, and something he bemoans frequently to the end of his life, concerns the myriad ways in which his early masterpiece was misread. Heidegger's 1927 text was misinterpreted variously as existentialism, nihilistic, preoccupied with the bleak nature of an absurd human

condition in the face of an inevitable death, a contribution to philosophical anthropology, psychology, humanism, subjectivism – the list goes on and on. As Heidegger writes in his 1949 “Introduction to ‘What is Metaphysics?’”

If, as we unfold the question concerning the truth of Being, we speak of overcoming metaphysics, this means: recalling Being itself. Such recalling goes beyond the traditional failure to think the ground of the root of philosophy. The thinking attempted in *Being and Time* sets out on the way to prepare an overcoming of metaphysics, so understood. (Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 279)

In a 1943 “Postscript to ‘What is Metaphysics?’” Heidegger suggests that his basic question “springs from a thinking that has already entered into the overcoming of metaphysics.” (*Pathmarks*, p. 231) Heidegger further argues, as he will again, famously, in “Letter on Humanism” (though in a way that has been routinely misinterpreted) that any such attempts to overcome “must continue to speak the language of that which they help overcome.” (*Pathmarks*, p. 231) Furthermore, Heidegger, in returning to some of the key ideas animating *Being and Time*, while re-assessing a lecture first delivered two years after he published that text, reminds his readers that his key question is related to the Leibnizian question (Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?). He famously revisits the Leibnizian question in his 1935 lecture course, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, (where he has routinely been thought to have effected a turn away from *Being and Time*) identifying it as the fundamental question for Western metaphysics (which he has by now diagnosed as a metaphysics of presence) – a metaphysics that he wants to overcome. As he writes in another 1940s retrospective on the 1929 lecture

Metaphysics does not ask this question [the Being question/Seinsfrage] because it thinks Being only by representing being as beings. It means beings as a whole, although it speaks of Being. It names Being and means beings as beings. From its beginning to its completion, the propositions of metaphysics have been strangely involved in a persistent confusion of beings and Being. (“Introduction to ‘What is Metaphysics?’” *Pathmarks*, p. 281)

In the 1929 lecture, Heidegger anticipates much of what he will discuss in his famous 1935 lecture course concerning the question of the nothing and the related ways that he attempts to put pressure on the tradition. He dismisses again what he takes to be stock objections which rely on the principle of non-contradiction since that approach, for Heidegger, has already conflated being with presence and has made a decision about the meaning of being, unwitting or otherwise, which he wishes to call into question.

When returning to this traditional and, Heidegger suggests, ‘first’ question of metaphysics in the 1935 lecture course, that is, Leibniz’s question, Heidegger claims that

we are each touched once, maybe even now and then, by the concealed power of this question, without properly grasping what is happening to us. In great despair, for example, when all weight tends to dwindle away from things and the sense of things grows dark, the question looms. Perhaps it strikes only once, like the muffled tolling of a bell that resounds into Dasein and gradually fades away. The question is there in heartfelt joy, for then all things are transformed and surround us as if for the first time, as if it were easier to grasp that they were not than that they are, and are as they are. The question is there in a spell of boredom, when we are equally distant from despair and joy, but when the stubborn ordinariness of beings lays open a wasteland in which it makes no difference to us whether beings are or are not – and then, in a distinctive form, the question resonates again: Why are there beings at all instead of nothing? (Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp 1 – 2)

Closely read, one can also see that this passage contains a series of buried allusions to the role that moods could play in terms of how they phenomenally attest to the manner in which Dasein is the open site for the interplay of presence and absence. Heidegger is underlining the phenomenal importance of moods in terms of how they disclose more than what is simply present. Instead, they are a constant source of evidence of movement, of interplay between presence and absence. He is trying, that is, to show how there is a liminal awareness of ‘more than this’, ‘more than what is just present’ constantly attested to in our affectivity. Heidegger introduces this idea in *Being and Time*, and will attempt to explain it more succinctly in 1935 and in the 1929 lecture through some simple

examples involving the role that possibilities play in the manner in which anything can be taken by us to be. One of the ways that Heidegger blew the tradition apart was to open up the possibilities for philosophical reflection and inquiry by demonstrating the historical nature of experience and the concomitant interplay of presence and absence. Our historicity infuses the very deepest recesses of human awareness and is such that the abstracted and highly artificial model of rationality, which Heidegger did much to subvert, is shown to be itself based on a deeply wrongheaded metaphysics of presence. But a question we might begin to pose toward the latter stages of this essay is whether Heidegger himself failed to develop his own insights sufficiently and reverted instead to a somewhat anaemic account, devoid of the same humaneness and carnality which Irigaray wants to reinstate? Is it in fact the case that the thinker who admonished Husserl for his failure to recognize our historicity, and the illegitimate attempt to bracket what could not be bracketed, is, in the end, guilty of bracketing aspects of the same experience he looks to excavate in the existential analytic in ways that skew the results of that same analytic and the way it is put in the service of a fundamental ontology? We will return to these questions in the second half of this essay.

In terms of Leibniz's question, Heidegger, as we know, believes that he must pose another, deeper question – the question concerning the *meaning* of Being which already demands a re-examination as evidenced by the way the 'nothing' in Leibniz's question is simply passed over. We need to return to this question, so Heidegger argues, unencumbered with the presuppositions of the metaphysics of presence:

Is it perhaps from this that the as yet unshaken presumption has entered all metaphysics that an understanding of 'Being' may simply be taken for granted and that the Nothing can therefore be dealt with more easily than beings? That is indeed the situation regarding Being and Nothing. If it were different, then Leibniz could not have said in the same place by way of an explanation: 'Car le rien est plus simple et plus facile que quelque chose [For the nothing is simpler and easier than any thing].' ("Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics?'"', *Pathmarks*, p. 190)

For Heidegger, then, the ‘nothing’ is dismissed as a result of a fateful prejudice concerning the meaning of Being which has dominated Western thought since the time of the Presocratics. Being has, since that time, been discussed always and everywhere in terms of beings and, thus, as reducing always and everywhere to ‘presence’. In the series of texts I have mentioned, when discussing the notion of ‘nothing’, Heidegger, both explicitly and implicitly, targets the principle of non-contradiction; the upshot would appear to be that those that appeal to that principle are already relying on a metaphysics of presence. The principle of non-contradiction then is routinely invoked, even amongst Heidegger’s critics, to dismiss all talk of the Nothing as simply wrong-headed, illogical, unscientific, in short, as contradictory. After all, to talk of Nothing as ‘being’ in any way is to treat it as a being and one simply cannot make no-thing into some-thing – this is already to have conflated being with beings. And again, for Heidegger, this is to decide in advance that being reduces to presence, that it is present, or that it is itself *a* being and not nothing.

In the 1929 lecture, when his sights are set squarely on the role of nothingness, Heidegger returns to his *Being and Time* account of states-of-mind or the bare moods which all of our experience presupposes and which themselves attest to the way we find ourselves already thrown open as a site for the interplay of presence and absence as finite transcendences. Part of what we are held out into, even in this early account in *Being and Time*, is the nothing and Heidegger returns to and defends this idea in 1929, in 1935 and in his 1940s introduction and postscript to the 1929 lecture. And again, this seems to invite us to begin to think of *Being and Time* itself as very much anticipating the continuing attempts to resist or overcome traditional metaphysics for the rest of his career. In 1929, for example, Heidegger will state

The founding mode of attunement [*die Befindlichkeit der Stimmung*] not only reveals beings as a whole in various ways, but this revealing – far from being merely incidental – is also the basic occurrence of our Da-sein. (Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 100)

Heidegger is quick to distinguish this notion, which is called a 'bare mood' or basic attunement in *Being and Time*, from feelings which are in fact a way of diverting us away from the 'nothing' which is what he is looking to investigate. Such feelings, psychic phenomena, directed or thematic moods, if you like, are taken up with things or matters in the world of everyday concern. Heidegger is looking for something else, however; he asks

Does such an attunement, in which man is brought before the nothing itself, occur in human existence? This can and does occur, although rarely enough and only for a moment, in the fundamental mood of anxiety. By this anxiety we do not mean the quite common anxiousness, ultimately reducible to fearfulness, which all too readily comes over us. Anxiety is basically different from fear. We become afraid in the face of this or that particular being that threatens us in this or that particular respect. (*Basic Writings*, p. 100)

Heidegger is thinking of a kind of anxiety that is not specifically directed then. He is thinking of a 'fundamental mood', something which is there, simmering away behind all our directed experience and which reaches up fully into our conscious awareness only rarely. But there is some sense of it whispering away in the background, just out of earshot, in a manner that we perhaps register as background noise that never leaves us entirely alone in any particular moment of existence. When anxiety comes into full view for us, we are not anxious in a specific way, we are anxious before nothing in particular; all things that normally have significance are suddenly robbed of that same significance, they recede from our concern and we are left anxious about, nothing in particular, anxious over, if you like, nothing. Heidegger believes in fact that in the most basic occurrence of Dasein, the nothing is revealed; this is what anxiety discloses, but anxiety understood now as a fundamental mood, a bare mood, a basic attunement of our awareness, a fundamental dispositional state. And, the nature of our everyday evasion, our absorption with things, is itself phenomenological testament to the nothingness which is disclosed in our most basic disposition/disposedness. We are normally turned toward things, we are preoccupied in one way or

another and turned away from the prior experience of the Nothing. Our ‘turned-awayness’ testifies in fact to the Nothing which we are held out into – the manner in which we are a transcendence in that we are already beyond beings as a whole. To be Dasein, is in a way, to be non-static, moving, thus there is this constant bare sense of ‘more than now’, ‘more than this’ constantly at work in our awareness.

Part of what I want to begin to gesture at very briefly (and speculatively) for the remainder of this essay – is the idea that, in some ways, Heidegger can be understood as the philosopher that most obviously stands as a rich repository of ideas to be mined and developed in ways that Irigaray’s philosophy speculatively calls for, but yet in ways that he himself left lamentably under-developed. Again, most recently in his private notebooks, we see Heidegger railing against the perils of calculative thinking and the rigid constraints of the metaphysics of presence where everything is reduced to the sterile, anaemic calculus of the binary. Indeed, we have seen how this way of viewing things came to be more and more dominant as the twentieth century progressed: true/false, truth functional logic (TFTFTF), programming (101010), all more or less derived from the longstanding principle of non-contradiction such that it cannot be the case that both p & $\neg p$ are simultaneously true ‘in the same respect’; being and nothing such that no-thing means not a thing, not a being and thus being understood as meaning ‘present’ in the same way that a thing or being is present and opposed to no-thing since it is ‘a thing’. Are we back in the quagmire of confusion prompted by Socrates’ inability to see the role of the intermediary in *The Symposium* – as Irigaray points out in her interpretation of that dialogue? (See Luce Irigaray. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*) Heidegger further sees the current effects of *Gestell*, the culminating epoch in the history of Western metaphysics, as copper-fastening its grip on the way and manner in which anything can appear to us and in which we think.

But, what about the alternate, subversive history running from Heraclitus to Nietzsche? A thinking that rejoices in ‘opposites’ since they are not strictly ‘opposed’ according to the strictures of the truth-making and falsification procedures of the metaphysics of presence which favours the monological over the dialogical and reduces everything to sameness or negates it – that looks to eradicate paradox and opposition through complete assimilation! Instead of a thinking of harmony through assimilation, a thinking that *requires* opposites, but opposites that are conceived outside of the metaphysics of presence, a variance that issues in harmony. Heidegger himself frequently invokes Heraclitus’ famous *polemos* fragment positively and underlines the importance of ‘strife’, ‘confrontation’, ‘difference’ and the capacity to resist the all-consuming, all-levelling, assimilative character of the final stage in the unfolding of the history of Western metaphysics – namely – *Gestell*. And yet, ultimately, Heidegger seems to consign everyone and everything to the scrap heap of the unfolding of the metaphysics of presence.

If we think of one of the most abysmally under-developed discussions in *Being and Time* (in section 26 of that work), namely, the notion of solicitude (*Fürsorge*) and the concomitant notions of ‘leaping-in for’ and ‘leaping-ahead of’, we can maybe put some flesh on the bones of our criticisms here. Is the leap-ahead of another Dasein, as glossed in paragraph 26 of *Being and Time*, a leap that allows for the difference of a different human being? (See Luce Irigaray, *To Be Born*, pp 72 – 73) Is it a leap that can grant the space for the birth of another person in one’s understanding, but without reducing the other person to that same understanding – an opening and invitation rather than a recognition that reduces? A leap that invites and gives way, that opens rather than closes? In the granting submission that involves the leap ahead of another human being, are we also allowing for the fact that the horizon that opens before them is one that singularizes them in a way that unites ‘us’ and yet individualizes ‘them’ in the same instant? Is this where Heidegger should have taken

his account in *Being and Time*, for example, but could not? Instead of the tortuously inscrutable equivocations between Dasein as *solus ipse* and as *Mitsein*, the non-relationality of the experience of finitude over against the undeniability of the way that it is an experience that happens to a solicitous being who is irreducibly connected to other beings-in-the-world – instead of all of this confusion, should he have seen that leaping-ahead allowed more? Is this the transcendence of giving-birth to another person that is latent, available, but underdeveloped in Heidegger, and that Irigaray is beginning to flesh out under the rubric of birth – understood now as pointing toward the metaphysical *Gestalt* through which beings appear to that being whose own being is an issue for it – the human being – a sexuate being that cannot get behind its sexuate body, even in the act of leaping-ahead? Unless, that is, we smuggle back in a Cartesian abstraction onto the original look of the human being that looks ahead of another human being in a moment of non-reductive, non-assimilative recognition and hospitality?

We can almost hear the way Heidegger would remark on such a series of questions - Whence this torrent of questions? Whither the answers? Who is to say? But now the ‘who’ in this question is put into question once more, but in a way that Heidegger himself failed to put into question. Is it the identity of the ‘man’ that types these words onto the screen in front of him that is put into question in a new way? Am ‘I’ given birth to anew in Irigaray’s vision? Is this the consummation of possibilities in Heidegger’s vision which were nevertheless lacking carnality and the transcendence available through a re-inscription of sexual difference onto the ‘original position’?

In *Ulysses*, Stephen Daedalus famously describes history as a nightmare from which he is trying to awake. Heidegger, as a twenty seven year old ambitious young philosopher, ten years before he publishes the book which propelled him to international fame, writes a letter to his wife –

Elfride. In this letter he describes the difficulty he had reconciling the philosophical desire for the absolute over against the undeniable fact of relativity. He tells Elfride that he kept finding himself locked in this dilemma until historical man came to him ‘in a flash’. (See Heidegger, *Letters to His Wife*, p. 33) But, what did Heidegger see in this flash? In this epiphany, what was revealed to him? Was it the spectre of death, hovering over us all that continues to animate popular readings of *Being and Time*? Was it thus a nightmarish vision of the finitude to which we are all condemned from the moment we are born – as Heidegger quips in *Being and Time*, from the time a person is born they are at once old enough to die? (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 289) As Irigaray herself notes - “to live entails the risk of death. . .because living involves a perpetual becoming: if we do not become, we decline.” (*To Be Born*, p. 7)

For my own part, I don’t think that Heidegger’s account is mired in the moribund; his is not a meditation on coffin-ripe existence, which fuelled the discussions of the absurd in existentialist literature. Rather, what Irigaray unearths in her excavation of the idea of birth or natality is close to what Heidegger finds while sifting through the experiential structures associated with the notion of being-towards-death. Birth confirms again the fact that we come to be from a state of not having been. Generation itself does not vouchsafe an eternal substance or any notion of eternity – birth is as much a guarantee of nothingness as death. And this is all that Heidegger wanted in the first place – a way of showing that not everything has to reduce to the sempiternal, the timeless – the underlying substance which persists unchanged through all change or indeed that which does not persist as such or which cannot be said to be in that way since it is not itself a being.

So, as the title says (in one of its double senses), I have nothing *against* natality – however – my questions relate to what natality and birth provide that is not already somehow latent or available in the idea of nothingness and the concomitant traces of it that are stifled under the metaphysics of

presence such as possibility, absence and the role they play in terms of what it means for us to be at any given moment? In *Introduction to Metaphysics* we realize that Heidegger isn't only interested in anxiety in the face of death, rather he wants to examine the manner in which our barest levels of affectivity and indeed our directed moods depend for their content on something more than just 'now', more than the present. He suggests that nothingness is somehow attested to in moments of great joy, in boredom, in anxiety and indeed, most likely, as we discover again in "What is Metaphysics?", in the love of another person as well. (See *Basic Writings*, p. 99) He connects his early notion of angst from *Being and Time* with the notions of awe, wonder and horror – thereby relating it back to the motivating wonder of the Ancient Greeks, in his retrospectives on his 1929 lecture. In his famous lecture on the origin of the artwork, Heidegger writes:

From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs *to the earth* and finds protection in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself. (Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 14)

This of course is Heidegger's famous description of what is to be discovered and experienced in van Gogh's painting of a pair of worn boots. We will leave to one side the fact that history tells us that these are a pair of boots that van Gogh purchased for himself at a flea market in Montmartre; the boots became the subject of a series of studies when he found they didn't actually fit him. Heidegger is beginning to develop something like his famous account of the strife between earth and world here and we note in particular his mention of the role of birth in this context. He writes that the boots are "pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once

more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death.” We can shiver when faced with the surrounding menace of death, but we can also tremble before the impending birth. Does Heidegger here, in terms of the historical horizon through which we bestow and are granted meaning, appear to favour death over birth? Or is he rather pointing us to questions as to what is going on such that meanings accrue in the historical ways that they do and the background conditions which must be in play such that this happens as it does? And the ultimate background condition is the necessity of movement, the constancy of the interplay between presence and absence. Constantly coming toward/going toward and moving away/falling behind/passing away. Natality itself, for Heidegger, vouches for the primacy of absence and its importance in terms of what it means for us to be, namely, historical, differentiated, one thing or being and *not* another.

Irigaray, it seems to me, is telling us that that is not enough; we need more! Part of what Heidegger brackets, for all of his professions to resist the Cartesian *epoche* of the later Husserl, is something which cannot be bracketed from our bare moods, our everyday being-in-the-world. What is given, already there, is our sexuate body, our carnality, our flesh – they are irreducibly given in ways that cry out, almost like the newborn, asking *not* to be bracketed; crying out again not to be placed under the symbolic gesture of erasure which this implicit bracketing amounts to and which is, itself, the patriarchal gesture par excellence.

To do any more than simply gesture at these putative blind-spots in Heidegger requires some speculation and, in the context of the strictest adherence to hermeneutic charity, requires more than what a careful and evenhanded reading of Heidegger’s texts can disclose. However, let us try out some speculations and see if they lend any weight to our suggestions and fit with the kinds of

readings we have been flirting with thus far in ways that seem to shed light on certain tendencies in Heidegger's texts. In the final part of this admittedly speculative essay, then, I want to consider an aspect of Heidegger's legacy which he himself looked to prescind from any and all consideration of a philosopher's work – parts of his own biography. And, one cannot help but think that at times this was a strategy of evasion on his own part since the attempt to veto such considerations allowed him and continues to allow his disciples to block and bar any discussion of his politics and his, often despicable, actions or character as entirely irrelevant to his thinking.

To be fair, we are typically foresworn from any kind of ad hominem considerations or arguments in philosophy and not without reason. However, in terms of his biography, the case of Heidegger is a little more complex since he himself consistently underlined the importance of his own heritage and history to an understanding of his work. Perhaps the most explicit statement of all to this effect is to be found in the cloying, pretentious rubbish that he subjected his listeners to in a radio address so memorably ridiculed by Adorno in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (See Heidegger "Why Do I Stay in the Provinces" pp 27 – 31 and Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, pp 43 – 45) What is more, the very notion of the hermeneutic circle which he adheres to demands at least some consideration of the historical context of the individual that makes interpretive claims. Of course, we do not want to subordinate philosophy to biography; and yet, perhaps we can search for some clues, shards of light to illuminate the hidden or unsaid tendencies or omissions in Heidegger's thought which, if they seem productive, can be used with a degree of caution and, if not, can be discarded.

I want to consider briefly then the documented evidence of Heidegger's repeated transgressions against the trust of two of the most important women in his own life – Elfride Heidegger and Hannah Arendt. Of course, we are playing with philosophical fire when we stoop to rummage in the dirty laundry of the private lives of philosophers and would do well to remember

that what we are doing is not strictly philosophy. However, we are already at the margins to an extent here since we are already examining the hidden and the unsaid of the Western tradition when we engage with Irigaray's work

The process of interpretive rereading has always been a *psychoanalytic undertaking* as well. That is why we need to pay attention to the way the unconscious works in each philosophy, and perhaps in philosophy in general. We need to listen (psycho)analytically to its procedures of repression, to the structuration of language that shores up its representations, separating the true from the false, the meaningful from the meaningless, and so forth. (Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse", *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 75)

And so, we proceed with caution and trepidation on the hunt for the occasional scent of something that might at least give us pause for thought.

More has been written on the subject of Heidegger and Hannah Arendt's brief love affair than on Heidegger's relationship with his wife. However, it seems to me that we can learn a lot concerning the attitude and outlook of the man to romantic love from studying the letters to his wife and, crucially, from the one letter of her own that she chose to retain for posterity and which was published by her granddaughter in a collection of Heidegger's letters to his wife spanning the years 1915 to 1970. Heidegger is all too often accused of anti-humanism in his later work where his earlier work is accused of a rather problematic humanism which is, in turn, charged with being responsible for Heidegger's decision to enthusiastically support the Nazi regime for a period of time. I have neither the time nor the inclination to revisit some of the relevant issues here; suffice it to say, I think the juxtaposing of humanism with anti-humanism as a way of parsing Heidegger's philosophy is an example of a pretty crude, ill-conceived and false dichotomy. Heidegger insists in his famous "Letter on Humanism" that his work, which many by now see as having jettisoned the humanist baggage of his early work, is profoundly concerned with restoring to humanity the highest dignity of its essence. However, what if Heidegger is in fact guilty of the typical patriarchal plumage of an austere and abstract metaphysics in his own idiosyncratic way? After all, all aspects of human

existence and relationality are ultimately only excavated with a view to telling a story concerning the history of the unfolding of Western metaphysics. Everything, including our affective lives and our love of others, our embodied intersubjectivity and being with one another, is relegated or sidelined once the role that possibility plays has been siphoned off from the analysis. Following that, everything about human existence is simply looked at, (historical significance, emotions, politics, culture, conflict, economics) reductively and purely in terms of the history of metaphysics. Is this not the gesture of erasure so typical of a patriarchal metaphysics par excellence?

We are dealing with a man then whose interests in human existence and in human love involve strip mining at the level of philosophy and the level of the personal respectively – where he uses up, exhausts, consumes and exploits the fertile soil of what he tills until there is nothing left to sustain him and he moves on to the next available strip of arable alterity. These are speculations of course and we acknowledge again that Heidegger himself warned against the perils of devoting too much time to poring over the details of a philosopher's biography. However, if, as Heidegger himself insists, some of the most important well-springs of the philosopher's motivation come from the personal as opposed to the impersonal and the philosopher is placed *in* his time and place and is *of* his time and place so intimately – we wonder again at this attempted veto. We wonder again as to whether this is an act of erasure.

We won't rehearse here the innuendo-laden anecdotes about Heidegger's many and various amatory adventures which are a staple of almost every Heidegger conference dinner or drinks reception these days, as more and more details of the sensational and salacious nature of his love life have come to light. However, we will look in particular at one letter penned by Elfride, but which she never sent to her husband, in 1956 – twenty years before his death and in the midst of yet another torrid affair with a woman who is only referred to in their correspondence as 'M'. In

response to Heidegger's rather feeble and half-hearted attempts to make excuses for his indiscretion with a woman roughly half his age, Elfride expresses indignation and profound dismay at the dishonesty and lack of scruples on her husband's part. More shocking still, for this reader at least, is Heidegger's willingness to remind Elfride of his own acceptance of her indiscretion some 40 years previous when she gave birth to a son, fathered by a longtime friend, who Heidegger accepted as his own. I have long suspected that while Heidegger outwardly bore all the signs of an understanding and forbearing husband who accepted his wife's infidelity and decided to move beyond it with her – that he privately must have been tormented and spent the rest of his life exacting his revenge. The fact that he is willing to remind his wife of the sins of her own remote past surely testifies to the 'presence' of his wife's infidelity at the forefront of his own consciousness as he uses it to place his own affair into the context of a marital situation which she bore a certain amount of responsibility for. Elfride is unmoved by his stratagems and rhetorical ploys across a number of letters and remains flatfooted and candid in the face of the grandiloquence with which he rehearses his **exculpatory evidence**. Her letter, which she chose not to send to her husband, is a devastating and poignant riposte; following the conventional salutations she writes

I hope by now you've made a good start with your work, which is the centre of your entire life, - but then what happens on the sidelines anyway! This is why you cannot understand how – through you – I've been cast out from my centre.

In your first letter there were words from a quite shallow sphere, 'weakness' & 'excuse', oh no – that just won't do. For I know of what you do, of the inspiration you need, & even now I've striven once more to see what makes you happy & her as the one who can give it. But that all this should be bound up not only with 'lies' – no, with the most inhuman abuse of my trust, this fills me with despair. – Please imagine (I've said it before but you've already forgotten) just what it would be like if M. were now – while she seems so bound to you in this great love & in your letters you speak as one heart to another – if she were now to deceive you with another & only your mistrust revealed her deception to you. Where would this leave your love for her? What would you do? How would you bear it? And I'm supposed to be able to endure it – not once – but again & again throughout four decades? can any human being do so if he isn't superficial or made of stone? Time & again you say & write that you're bound to me – what is the bond? It isn't love, it isn't trust, you look for 'home' in other women – oh Martin – what is happening to me – this icy loneliness.

But I won't write anything more; you don't like hearing it anyway; there are many letters I've started here, but I haven't posted any. – Have you ever thought about what empty words

are – hollow words? What is lacking in such words? (Elfride Heidegger, *Martin Heidegger: Letters to His Wife 1915 – 1970*, p. 255)

A stronger indictment of Heidegger's personal failings as a husband and a human being can scarcely be imagined and it further lends credibility to the idea that he spent the majority of his adult life exacting his revenge on his wife over her youthful indiscretion while justifying his own numerous affairs as moments of weakness or indeed the understandable extravagances of a great spirit that constantly needed succour to sustain its titanic intellectual tasks. But what can we learn from this unsavoury tale of woe? What does it tell us? How does it inform our current concerns? After all, at issue is not the character of the man Heidegger; we are interested rather in how we should read some of his work in the context of Irigaray's confrontation with Heidegger. And, in that context, it underlines some suspicions we might have concerning the tenuous and tokenistic nature of Heidegger's gestures to intersubjectivity, sociality, community, humaneness, compassion, love and so on. Perhaps our concerns here could be thought to go hand in hand with the outrage of those who waited for a 'word' from Heidegger following the end of the Second World War. Why did he refuse to break his silence? Why was he so insensitive to the hardships endured by those that suffered at the hands of a regime which he supported with full-throated fervour? Granted, the infamous remarks in Bremen *are*, in my view, an attempt to say something meaningful about the Holocaust. And what Heidegger has to say can be read in a way that is profound and thought provoking. However, these remarks are not enough. Lacoue-Labarthe will dismiss his remarks as scandalously inadequate, and while I don't agree with Lacoue-Labarthe's assessment of Heidegger's Bremen remarks – I do agree that it is simply not enough to describe the background metaphysical conditions at play in terms of the technological nature of the modern world. Of course, this is relevant – but where is the *humanity* of the *man*?

Is Heidegger's own 'humanism', a term which he refuses to eschew but rather claims to enrich according to his assessment of it in "Letter on Humanism", so exsanguinated in the end that for all his philosophical lip service toward the immediate, the local, the blood and soil of a locality and lived history – that he himself ends up offering little more than an anaemic formalism at times? Stripped of flesh, sexuate belonging, lived experience – we are left with little more than a series of disembodied existential clues which in turn can facilitate an attempt to inaugurate a new and fundamental ontology! Looming over everything then is the spectre of a new metaphysics or, better, a new way of being which has overcome metaphysics. But, what has Heidegger bracketed in the existential analytic as he moves to the first attempt at a fundamental ontology? Is Heidegger himself then the arch **solipsist** in a way in that he refuses to 'see' anyone else except through the lens of his history of Western metaphysics which is, despite his best efforts, still somewhat constrictive?

As mentioned earlier, one of the most infamous and widely discussed of Heidegger's affairs was from his early days as a lecturer in Marburg with his brilliant young student – Hannah Arendt. A lot of pointless ink has been spilled on this subject by people with all manner of agendas – from those, on one side, hostile to Arendt whose agenda is heavily motivated by their enmity towards Arendt's judicious and admirable response to the Eichmann trial and her generally objective and critical attitude to the more militant and unrestrained tendencies within Zionism and the Israeli government. On the other side, there are supporters of Arendt, who know little to nothing of Heidegger's work, who see Heidegger as little more than an improbably cartoonish villain – a lecherous and conniving old Nazi who bewitched an impressionable young school girl and behaved abominably towards her. I have no interest in weighing in on that particular controversy since I see little that merits consideration on either side and little that pertains to the truth of the matter or which is of any significance. That Heidegger was a liar and capable of great deception and insensitivity to the women in his life is incontestable. However, I think many of the same commentators are ignorant

of the fact that once Heidegger had returned to Freiburg and decided to end his illicit affair with Arendt – he soon became infatuated with a series of other younger lovers, falling in love it appears with at least two of them – in both of these cases struggling for extended periods to decide whether he would in fact stay married to Elfride. Hannah herself believed however, somewhat naively (and along with certain commentators), that Elfride was the great cause of distress in Heidegger's life and that if only Arendt herself had been permitted a life with Heidegger that things might have turned out very differently between them. I suspect, however, that Heidegger's interest in Hannah would have waned in exactly the manner it did, that is, far more quickly and precipitously than it ever did with his wife.

Nevertheless, it is telling to witness just how detached and insensitive Heidegger manages to become when push came to shove. On the one hand, there is the undeniable fact of his mendacity in terms of managing to keep his young mistress from making his life awkward. And, no doubt, there are plenty that will point an accusatory finger at Heidegger, and not without cause, owing to this. However, it also seems clear that Arendt herself, though quite young, had no qualms or scruples when it came to her own part in the affair. She actively pursued a romantic relationship with a man, in secret, for an extended period of time despite knowing that he had young children and had no intention of leaving his wife. Granted, Heidegger's self-exculpatory behaviour and desire to keep his 'bit on the side' for as long as possible is unsavoury and adds to the litany of grievances one could count against his character; but Arendt herself can hardly be held blameless in the affair. Be that as it may, Heidegger's coldness and lack of sympathy to Arendt at the end of their affair is jarring. Early in 1926, Arendt was beginning to feel neglected by Heidegger who had clearly withdrawn from his young lover while in the throes of working on the manuscript that was to become *Being and Time*. We know now that Heidegger tended to retreat into complete seclusion for extended periods during his research – leaving his wife and children, sometimes for months on end.

He wrote to Arendt (looking to excuse his behaviour in a way which may well shed light on some of our concerns here) to explain that his change in behaviour was

not from indifference, not because external circumstances intruded between us, but because I had to forget and will forget you whenever I withdraw into the final stages of my work. This is not a matter of hours or days, but a process that develops over weeks and months and then subsides. And this 'withdrawal' from everything human and breaking off of all connections is, with regard to creative work, the most magnificent human experience. . .[but] with regard to concrete situations, it is the most repugnant thing one can encounter. One's heart is ripped from one's body. (Daniel Maier-Katkin, *Stranger from Abroad: Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Friendship and Forgiveness*, p. 43)

When we read these self-serving remarks, written to his young lover soon after she had decided to leave Marburg and put the affair behind her, we can see the levels of callousness and selfishness of which this man was capable. We can also see, that, ultimately, Heidegger's abstract philosophical concerns trumped everything human for him – even the most concrete and intense relationships of all, namely, the romantic relations between two people. (Irigaray also alludes to this idea. See *To Be Born*, p. 89) Again, does this suggest to us an unwitting predilection for what are in the end aspects of the patriarchal view? After all, in Heidegger's work we seem to repeatedly find an emphasis on nothingness, death, anxiety – an emphasis on the importance of absence rather than the lop-sided tendency of reducing everything to pure presence. And, we know how Heidegger looked to retrieve this absence through zeroing in on possibility and the role it plays in the way anything can reveal itself to us as meaningful. Nevertheless, are Heidegger's own possibilities restricted such that we can almost anticipate the manner in which he looked to live his own 'authentic' existence? In other words as pure abstract philosopher, with his heart 'ripped' from his body and thus disembodied, disincarnate, the quintessential patriarchal philosopher *a la* the Socrates we find in Plato's *Phaedo* – the philosopher who reduces the philosophical life to the attempt to practice the mortification of the flesh and the constant preparation for death, the flight from corporeality into the world of pure spirit.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Translated by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will. Routledge Classics, London and New York, 2003.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Edited by David Farrell Krell. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Blackwell, Oxford, 1962.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Letters to His Wife: 1915 – 1970*. Selected, edited and annotated by Gertrud Heidegger. Translated by R.D.V. Glasgow. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2008.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Off the Beaten Track*. Translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Pathmarks*. Edited by William McNeill. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.
- Heidegger, Martin. “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?”. In Thomas Sheehan (ed.). *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*. Precedent Publishing, Chicago, 1981.
- Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. The Athlone Press, London, 1993.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985.
- Irigaray, Luce. *To Be Born: Genesis of a New Human Being*. Palgrave MacMillan, London-New York, 2017.
- Maier-Katkin, Daniel. *Stranger from Abroad: Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Friendship and Forgiveness*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 2010.