

Review of Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann and Francesco Alfieri. *Martin Heidegger and the Truth About the “Black Notebooks”*. Translated, with a “Foreword” and “Afterword” by Bernhard Radloff. Cham, Switzerland: Springer (Analecta Husserliana Volume CXXIII), 2021.

I.

In *Martin Heidegger. Die Wahrheit über die “Schwarzen Hefte”* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2017), Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann and Francesco Alfieri put into context the most controversial passages from Martin Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks*, which have fueled a new wave of criticism surrounding his connection to National Socialism along with its anti-Semitic implications.¹ With Bernhard Radloff’s meticulous and nuanced translation of this book, an English-speaking audience will now have access to von Herrmann’s and Alfieri’s detailed arguments, as well as the hermeneutic backdrop that sheds light on the origin of the *Black Notebooks*. For the first time, a wider audience will have the opportunity to uncover a new perspective on these texts, which has been masked in most circles of Anglo-American scholarship.

Martin Heidegger and the Truth About the Black Notebooks includes an “Introduction”, co-authored by von Herrmann and Alfieri (Chapter 1), and chapters alternatively written by von Herrmann (Chapter 2), in which he provides a succinct and insightful outline of the development of Heidegger’s thought (pp. 23-29), and Alfieri (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4). There is also an Epilogue, “The ‘Jewish Question’ in the *Black Notebooks* in the Perspective of the ‘Critique of Metaphysics’”, written by Leonardo Messinese, and finally, a Postface, “Martin Heidegger Was Not an Anti-Semite”, written by Heidegger’s son, Hermann Heidegger. The book provides a detailed exposition of the central themes *Black Notebooks*, juxtaposing the original German text and the English translation. Von Herrmann and Alfieri also identify the number of times a key term occurs in each volume of the *Black Notebooks*, which underscores the scholarly precision of their exposition.

¹ For an outstanding review and analysis of the original German version of von Herrmann’s and Alfieri’s book, see George Kovacs, “Returning to the ‘Texts Themselves’: On the Way to the Truth of Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks*”, *Existentialia* Vol. XXVIII/3-4 (2018): 297-314.

II.

In the opening paragraph of their “Introduction”, von Herrmann and Alfieri summarize the thesis of their book:

The word “truth” as used in the title of this book, *Martin Heidegger. The Truth about the Black Notebooks* refers not only to the correctness of statements, but also more fundamentally to “un-concealment”, and to the “undistorted” transmission of Heidegger’s legacy. The intention of this book is to allow the truth communicated in the manuscripts that are collected in the black oilcloth notepads, or notebooks, as Heidegger also called them, to be understood (p. 1).

The emphasis that the authors place on the equation of truth with “un-concealment” cannot be underestimated. As “notebooks”, the manuscripts cannot be approached on a par with other philosophical texts that comprise Heidegger’s lectures and writings. Throughout his ontological inquiries, truth appears first and foremost through the lens of a hermeneutic fore-having (*Vorhabe*). This hermeneutic directive adjusts to bring its interpretive horizon in concert with the phenomenon, of what can show itself, or “being” (*Sein*), precisely as the uniqueness arising into un-concealment (from its opposite, or concealment). Because the phenomenon or “being” withdraws into concealment, a rigorous hermeneutic exposition must be followed in order that a wider orbit of inquiry can unfold (e.g., from the initial “hermeneutic situation”), allowing the light of unconcealment to shine forth (and to circumvent arbitrarily “associative” models of understanding superimposed on the phenomena). *Per se*, the *Black Notebooks* lack this hermeneutic rigor of exposition, and, contrary to the trend in recent scholarship, cannot be substituted for the insights that arise from the enactment of Heidegger’s thinking. As von Herrmann states in Chapter 2: “*In this sense, the oft-considered thirteen passages from volume GA 95 and GA 96 of the Complete Edition are simply occasional thoughts, whose removal in no way touches the jointure of the asking of the question concerning the truth of being*” (p. 20).²

We must also be able to appreciate the converse: the hallmark of his philosophy in the 1930s is that it is itself in transition, that is, *in the early stages of “way-seeking”, in order to be “on the way” to being-historical thinking*. Thus, these “transitional” dimensions, in preparing for a crossing

² For further discussion, see Friedrich von Herrmann, “The Role of Heidegger’s *Notebooks* within the Context of His Oeuvre”, in *Reading Heidegger’s Black Notebooks 1931-1941*, ed. Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2016: 90-94 (esp. p. 91). The “thirteen passages” contain Heidegger’s remarks on Jewish matters.

(*Übergang*) to the other beginning (p. 93), must be included in the search for hermeneutic guidance (here I am suggesting that the “hermeneutic guidelines” for understanding must be “crafted”, rediscovered, and renewed into open confrontation with the manuscripts, e.g., with an eye to fostering their “un-concealment”). These guidelines include 1). a precaution *against* extracting a predominant motif from which to impose a systematic unity on Heidegger’s thinking, e.g., the claim of “being-historical anti-Semitism”; and, 2). the preliminary emphasis on the historical epoch of machination as orienting Heidegger’s discussions in the *Black Notebooks*.³ These hermeneutic guidelines illuminate the interpretive backdrop provided by Heidegger’s being-historical texts, most notably, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* and *Mindfulness*; and the enactment of *die Kehre* in all its “trajectories” (*Kehrungsbahnen*, GA 65: 372), including “the turning in enowning” (*die Kehre im Ereignis*). Von Herrmann (Chapter 2) summarizes the effect of conflating Heidegger’s being-historical thinking with a “being-historical anti-Semitism” in this way:

For Heidegger, Judaism and its ancient, honored history do not belong to the history of being, which pertains only to the philosophy of the Occident. This history extends from the Greeks to Hegel and Nietzsche, encompasses modern and contemporary science and technology. The latter is characterized by ‘*calculative thinking*’, a form of thought which Heidegger regards as a danger to mankind.

The vague and misleading concept of “*being-historical anti-Semitism*”, coined by the editor [of the *Black Notebooks*, i.e., Peter Trawny] in response to the few sentences written in reference to the Jews, leads to the disastrous confusion that being-historical thinking as such is anti-Semitic (p. 21).

Without aiming at hermeneutic rigor, the *Black Notebooks* include various reflections on ‘world-historical’ events (*Begebenheiten*) (GA 65: 98-99). It is up to the reader to weigh and evaluate the relevance of these “observations”, and what can be inferred or concluded on their basis. As is well documented, Heidegger consistently opposed the “biologism” of his day, which the National Socialists exploited in their search for ethnic purity and racial superiority. But the *Black Notebooks* also include remarks pertaining to popular views of race and of different versions of National Socialism, even if Heidegger ultimately denounces the National Socialist regime. From a hermeneutic vantage point, however, confusion arises from a little recognized ambiguity in his use of the word “world”, for which in his writings (through the ontological difference) he reserved a distinctly philosophical meaning. As a backdrop for the manifestation of being (as a “proxy” for

³ See Parvis Emad, *The Issue of Anti-Semitism*, Part 5-6. “History” and “Nothingness” in Heidegger and Nietzsche: Learning from *Beiträge*, Budapest: Societas Philosophia Classica, 2015, pp. 41-45. Also see Kovacs, “Returning to the ‘Texts Themselves’”, pp. 311-312.

being, as least in his “phenomenological” writings), world is distinct from the far-reaching (if not “global”) events that happen therein. These so-called events have to be addressed anew on a par with the enactment of the world as such and the accompanying “worldlessness” that arises in the modern age of technicity, that is, through the *inception* of its historical disclosure. In the 1930s, as these events reach their most dangerous and tumultuous crescendo, Heidegger has *only begun* to develop the crucial distinctions to address the fissure (*Zerklüftung*) and destabilizing conflict of the West. Accordingly, the *Black Notebooks* offer a partial and incomplete “snapshot” of the development of his being-historical thinking, and hence cannot be representative thereof.

As von Herrmann and Alfieri argue throughout their book (and Hermann Heidegger summarizes in the “Postface”, p. 316), it is a mistake to decontextualize the (pejorative) remarks (infrequent as they may be) that are scattered throughout the *Black Notebooks*. Rather than construing these remarks as self-standing statements signifying a brand of “cultural” (but not necessarily “biological”) anti-Semitism, they must be “read” against the backdrop of the thinking enacted through Heidegger’s lectures and writings. Indeed, Heidegger’s being-historical texts provide the hermeneutic background for interpreting the *Black Notebooks*, and not the reverse (as Peter Trawny and others have erroneously argued).

In short, there is no intrinsic correlation between the questionable passages in the Notebooks and Heidegger’s being-historical thought.

Given that it is correct to distinguish between racially motivated anti-Semitism and religiously motivated anti-Judaism, then these questionable passages do not belong to the one or the other...Although Heidegger speaks of the calculative thinking of finance and economic Jewry, this does not imply that these texts compose systematic components of the systematic jointure of the thought of enownment [*Ereignisdenken*]. The gigantic error of Trawny, and all those who trot along after him, is to suppose this to be so (p. 22).

Unlike Hegel and Karl Marx, Heidegger does not develop a philosophy of global events or of ‘world-history’ (as the coalescence of ‘past’ occurrences now impacting the ‘present’), but instead enacts being-historical thinking that thinks ahead (*vordenken*) to the retrieval of a deeper origin of Western history. For Heidegger, the world (*Welt*) grants the horizon for the possibility of those events, but is neither the mere aggregate nor the cultural mosaic of those (actual) occurrences.⁴ While some of his more problematic comments in the “notebooks” may mirror the cultural

⁴ For an account of the key distinction between Heidegger’s concept of world and the expression of cultural motifs, see Bernhard Radloff, “The Metaphysics of Cultural Production in the *Black Notebooks*”, *Heidegger Studies* 36 (2020): 57-76 (esp. p. 69).

Zeitgeist of his day, these cannot be conflated with the philosophically rigorous and nuanced language of being-historical thinking. This becomes clearer in *Contributions to Philosophy* when Heidegger juxtaposes “worldlessness: (Earlier as *world-poorness*)” with “darkening” (*die Erdunkelung*), in which the latter pertains to an eclipse of the light of the clearing (rather than a cultural permutation of a specific ethnic group) (GA 65: 277). Heidegger’s most vehement critics, on the other hand, fallaciously abstract from this language and fall prey to a “reductionism” which ignores the “enactment sense” (*Vollzugssinn*) of being-historical concepts. As Bernhard Radloff states in the “Translator’s Afterword”, “Once abstracted from their specific, philosophically determined enactment sense, concepts such as *Kampf*, *Volk*, or *Verwüstung* can be reduced to terms of common opinion, and what is worse, to highly-charged ideological ciphers of a worldview that may have nothing in common with their structural, philosophical import in Heidegger’s thought” (p. 318).

Let us consider a crucial passage from GA 95, which Alfieri cites and explicates in considerable detail:

For example, consider section §5 of Ponderings VIII: 97 “one of the most concealed and perhaps oldest forms of the gigantic is the tenacious dexterity in calculating, hustling, and interblending through which the worldlessness (*Weltlosigkeit*) of Jewry (*des Judentums*) is grounded”.

This is the only passage in the *Notebooks* that uses the word “worldlessness (*Weltlosigkeit*)”. In Heidegger’s philosophy, “worldlessness” is not exclusive to Jewry (*Judentum*), it belongs to the modern epoch as such, for one cannot conceive modern humanity except in terms of an understanding of world defined by the calculative thinking that permeates the epoch. In fact, the word “worldlessness” is also used in the Freiburg lectures of the Winter Semester 1929/1930 in the context of a comprehensive investigation of the following, threefold division: the stone is “worldless”, the animal is “poor in world”, human being is “world-forming”....Modern humanity—to which Jewry *also* belongs—is subject to the privation of world-significance, and the fundamental helplessness to which it leads, for its existence is accountable to calculative thinking. Significance of world arises out of the ground of being-historical thinking, which can never be experienced by calculative thinking (p. 158).

The following reference confirms Alfieri’s analysis. In *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger juxtaposes “worldlessness: (Earlier as *world-poorness!*)” with “darkening” (*die Erdunkelung*), in which the latter pertains to the eclipse of the light of the clearing (*Lichtung*), rather than a cultural permutation of a specific ethnic group (GA 65: 277). The cultural and “racial” divisions that become present in ‘world-events’ cannot in any way be defined as “being-historical”, which yields the groundless ground (e.g., the *Ab-grund*) for the presencing of the conflicts pervading the

contemporary 'world'. Hermeneutically speaking, the 'world' as it appears through the prism of these events, is, as it were, refracted and inverted, that is, *appearing in such a way as to be compartmentalized*. In the context of Heidegger's groundbreaking essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935-36), worldlessness means the clashing of world-views, which excludes the fabric to integrate beings into a whole and thereby to establish a place of dwelling, i.e., via the strife (*Streit*) between world *and earth* (GA 5: 30-32). We could suggest that in modernity (*Neuzeit*) there is a gestalt by which this compartmentalizing takes place, e.g., the "world-picture" (*das Weltbild*), giving rise to the "factioning" of ethnic, racial, and religious divisions via the "battle of world views" (*mit diesem Kampf der Weltanschauungen*, GA 5: 94)—including those that involve the stereotyping of specific groups, e.g., "Jewry". The attempt to attach such negativity to Heidegger's thought not only falls prey to 1). a reductionism of the "hindsight"⁵ of what we can see today in a new cultural climate; but also 2). a naiveté concerning the "deconstructionist" strategies (pioneered, ironically, by Heidegger and subsequently Jacques Derrida). When extended into the arena of social criticism, these strategies allow us to "read off" from 'world-events' the ground of a collective subject, of the "dominion of subjectivism" (pp. 119-120), which casts in a new light the hypocrisy of Western colonialism—including forms of genocide perpetrated against indigenous peoples and the slave trade (of the 1600s) whose backlash is just coming to fruition in the United States today.

It can be argued that within the purview of the *Black Notebooks* Heidegger never questioned how such stereotypes arise from (a deficiency of) the collectivism of the "they-self", which carves up the occupants of the 'world' into competing groups and factions. The suggestion that "Jewry" stems from a "worldlessness" should not be converted into independently made assertions [*Aussagen*] (*cf.* GA 94: 1),⁶ however, but rather *should be understood as "indicative" of a specific gestalt that makes present* the falsification of the "world" or its un-worlding within the late stages of modernity, i.e., in which human beings are set forth into a gridlock of oppositions. Such a gestalt appears more sharply to us given the distance of intervening decades and the institutionalized checks, laws, and prohibitions against different forms of discrimination, including a semantics of racial equality (even if within limits Heidegger did acknowledge the importance of race [GA 65:

⁵ For questions stemming from this perspective of hindsight, see Francesco Alfieri, "Concerning Certain Unpublished Letters Received by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, p. 269; "Gadamer to von Herrmann. Letter No. 1" (concerning "the Farías Affair", p. 284).

⁶ See Emad, *The Issue of Anti-Semitism*, pp. 41-42.

117] and, along with his successors, planted the de-constructive seeds for developing such distinctions). Opponents of Heidegger fail to recognize that broad, sweeping ‘cultural’ observations can neither be projected upon nor attributed to being-historical thinking, but instead become relevant today only *given* a broader hermeneutic vision of where humanity stands on the cusp of the latest phase of modernity.

III.

What about modernity? Heidegger has much to say on this topic throughout the *Black Notebooks*. As von Herrmann and Alfieri point out, references to “homelessness”, and “worldlessness” pervade these manuscripts. Heidegger’s being-historical thinking, however, is born precisely in this attempt to think the philosophical ground of the modern era, including the basis of its definitive *gestalt* or machination (*Machenschaft*), and ultimately, trace the source of these developments to their origin in the abandonment of being (*Seinsverlassenheit*). In *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger argues that the abandonment of being is the basis of the forgottenness of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*) (GA 65: 115-116). This “abandonment”, in which beings (including human beings) are “instrumentalized”, defines the origin of modern technicity. In other words, the shifting of focus away from being to beings, which spawns the impetus to exploit beings for exclusively instrumental ends, or this “forgottenness”, comes to fruition and is experienced *as* being’s abandonment of beings. The interposing of the “hermeneutical-as” means that technicity constitutes the encompassing way in which beings become manifest, narrowing the scope of what is understandable to the nexus of technical applications (e.g., witness the “apps” of the “smart phone”). Modernity marks the high point or zenith of this technological development. Throughout the *Black Notebooks*, Heidegger seeks examples to confirm and give experiential credence to the “effects” of machination, including the rise of “mass society” (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche’s observation) and “commercialization” (Karl Marx’s insight into *productionist* metaphysics). But in this “transitional” undertaking, an ambiguity remains that invites misunderstanding.

Specifically, Heidegger is still to formalize the distinction between “das Wesen der Technik” and its experiential effects (including various cultural permutations and distortions). The premise of being-historical thinking is to bring this distinction to light in its ontological origin, that is, as

rooted philosophically in *Seinsverlassenheit*, rather than as signified merely through the examples illustrated in new configurations of culture, society, and education (e.g., the quantifiable methods of “modern science”). Conversely, being-historical thinking distinguishes the “sending” of different epochs, yielding a new set of possibilities in which various cultural pursuits can take precedence over others. Yet while indirectly signifying the emergence and divergence of one epoch from another, these activities and corollary ‘world-events’ are derivative of rather than commensurate with, the gifting of these epochs (“*Es gibt Sein*”). In *Contributions*, Heidegger makes this difference philosophically explicit by distinguishing between *Geschichte* and *Historie* (GA 65: 10). Yet within the course of the *Black Notebooks* the corresponding distinction between the “ownmost” dimension and the “essential sway” (*Wesen*) of technicity and its technical applications, remains embryonic.

In *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger distinguishes the “gigantic” (*das Riesenhafte*) as a key feature of machination (GA 65: 441-443). In simplest terms, machination introduces a “mass scale” as a new gauge for determining beings according to the model of calculation. Beings appear through a matrix of quantification, or a “mathematical projection”, and that generic determination also leads to pressing all that is, including human activities, into “standardized” formula. Calculability thereby defines the encompassing framework (*Gestell*) for the appearance of beings in the whole. Such a mass scale provides the calculus to magnify the “will’s” potential for domination and exploitation, the form of which comes to actuality in the totalitarian program of National Socialism. But what about the basis of depravity, if it is only through the forces of technicity that something as insidious as genocide can occur on a mass scale? We can answer this question by following through on the intersection between Heidegger’s account of machination and his *Auseinandersetzung* with Nietzsche in outlining the transformation of the will to power into the will to will.

The will to self-aggrandizement, as a form of the will to will, suggests an operational way in which the forces of machination can interface with human culture and trigger the most abhorrent outcomes. In his lecture-course on Schelling from the Summer Semester of 1936 (GA 42)⁷ and his lectures from 1941 (GA 49), Heidegger shows how evil can arise when the will substitutes its self-assertiveness for the (limitation) of the law (*Gesetz*), thereby positing aggrandizement as a value

⁷ See Frank Schalow, “Why Evil? Heidegger, Schelling, and Tragic Side of Being”, *Idealistic Studies* 25/1 (Winter 1995): 151-167.

ahead of and to the exclusion of everything else (e.g., will as “transposing itself into self-willing”, GA 49: 136-137).⁸ The twisted character of this cycle of the will lies in exploiting untruth as a precondition to advance the ends of self-aggrandizement, in such a way as to represent (fraudulently) the search for “goodness” with its opposite. Heidegger suggests that modernity plants the seeds to unleash this form of willing, providing a metaphysical basis for evil (*Böse*) that arises in the shadow of but cannot be reduced to the extreme phase of modern nihilism. Just as we can view the “they” (*das Man*) in a dual way both ontologically as an *existentiale* and experientially (factually) as a persona for social conformity or “peer pressure”, so the forces of technicity can double as harboring an “essence” (*Wesen*) capable of *revealing* an organizational scheme to “totalize” (by exclusion) *and* as extending a metaphysical ladder for the elevation of willful self-aggrandizement. In other words, the metaphysical basis of evil runs so deeply as to find traction for its ascent in what is “gigantic” [*das Riesenhafte*] (as a new gestalt of unfettered self-willing), i.e., on a mass scale (pp. 112-113). The dissembling of the face of evil and its perpetration of unfathomable suffering—whether as exhibited in heinous individual actions or as carried out on a mass scale through the violence of entire nations—appears to us as defying all comprehension. If Heidegger can be criticized for not following through on these implications, we can at least discover hints for a pathway (*Denkweg*) of further inquiry that reside in what remains unthought (*das Ungedachte*).

Ultimately, the merit of von Herrmann’s and Alfieri’s precise and unparalleled scholarship lies in rediscovering the hermeneutic landscape of Heidegger’s writings, as well as unveiling the unthought dimensions of his philosophy. Through their collaboration, these two outstanding scholars both broaden and counterbalance the conversation concerning the recent controversies sparked by the *Black Notebooks*. In an especially timely way, their book stands out as one of the most important contributions to Heidegger studies in several years.

Frank Schalow

⁸ See Parvis Emad, *Translation and Interpretation: Learning from Beiträge*, edited, with an “Introduction”, by Frank Schalow, Bucharest, Zeta Books, 2013, p. 197. Citing Heidegger’s letter to Hannah Arendt (April 12, 1950), Emad identifies one of the few references in which “Heidegger opens a new hermeneutic horizon for addressing the question of evil” by pointing out its connection to the will to will.