CAN A BAD PERSON BE A GREAT PHILOSOPHER?

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In so far as philosophers can agree about anything, a majority would agree that the two most influential philosophers of the twentieth century were Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger. Both possessed unmatched philosophical profundity, both challenged and overturned fundamental areas of philosophical discourse and both changed philosophy forever. Both were charismatic teachers who generated and inspired a legion of followers and both spawned trajectories of philosophical research which remain vital to this day. And one of them – Martin Heidegger – supported the most evil regime in history.

Heidegger published his most famous work, *Being and Time*, in 1927 and was one of Germany's most renowned philosophers by the time he was elected to lead the University of Freiburg in April 1933. He joined the Nazi Party in a grand public ceremony in May and was a vociferous supporter of Hitler and National Socialism. Heidegger resigned from his position in April 1934 but remained a member of the party until the war's end. He never publicly recanted his Nazism and, except for a few minor though notoriously crass comments, never wrote or said anything about the Holocaust.

Heidegger's Nazism has been one of philosophy's most controversial issues since 1945. It is not hard to see why. If one half of the greatest philosophers of last century was a Nazi then philosophy's claim to be the highest order of critical thinking looks rather shaky. It also means that being a philosopher, even a great one, is no safeguard against being politically naïve or just plain nasty – or even chillingly

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evil. Moreover, philosophy's stock must inevitably be diminished by a system of thought that is incapable of assessing a political phenomenon like Nazism, let alone resisting the manifest evil of genocide. The word 'philosophy' derives from ancient Greek words meaning 'lover of wisdom', but adherence to National Socialism seems about as far from wisdom as it is possible to be.

However, does it really matter that Heidegger was a Nazi? After all, millions of Germans were Nazis – and among them were some of the most brilliant minds on the planet – so why should Heidegger's affiliation be so controversial? Can't we read and assess Heidegger's philosophy on its own merits, without any reference to his politics or morals? If we do not then aren't we committing an *ad hominem* fallacy, attacking the man instead of his ideas?

Consider, by comparison, the great physicist Werner Heisenberg. He was not a member of the Nazi Party but he certainly supported Hitler's war aims and never expressed regret about directing Germany's wartime nuclear program. However, no rational person would suggest that Heisenberg's groundbreaking work on quantum physics was thereby suspect or tainted. Surely we can approach Heidegger's philosophy in the same way.

The example of Heisenberg, however, demonstrates a fundamental problem with the *ad hominem* argument – its failure to take into account the matter under discussion. Heisenberg's science has no bearing on how we should think about or live our lives, so his political inclinations are irrelevant to our assessment of his theories of quantum physics. The situation is very different with Heidegger, whose overriding philosophical concern was the explication of 'being'. In other words, his work focuses on the core of what we are, of what it is 'to be' human. Heidegger's philosophy has unavoidable political and ethical implications in so far as politics and ethics are intrinsic to what and who we are. To the extent that a philosopher's doctrine touches on politics and morality then it seems reasonable to argue that his or her behaviour becomes admissible evidence about that doctrine.

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The point can be illustrated with the example of a politician drafting his government's fiscal policy. How should we approach that policy if we subsequently found out that the author beat his wife? We would deplore his domestic violence but could still examine his fiscal policy with almost complete detachment because the two matters are fundamentally different. What, however, if this man also wrote a policy on domestic violence? According to the *ad hominem* argument we should consider this policy with the same detachment as we considered his fiscal strategy. Acceptance of the policy should depend entirely on its ability to address domestic violence, and if the policy is a good one then its author will be convicted by his own words. One problem with this argument is that the politician was clearly being a hypocrite when formulating his policy on domestic violence. The fact that he continues to beat his wife shows that he doesn't mean a word of his own policy, or if he does mean it then he clearly has psychological problems and needs help. In either case we should reject his policy. After all, what would be the point of considering a policy that is intended to have practical application if it fails the most elementary test of not even convincing, or changing the behaviour of, its own author? Further, if the author considers himself to be 'above' the standards he recommends for others, then our acceptance of his policy would also constitute tacit acceptance of his condescension towards us. In this example, application of the *ad hominem* argument, far from being an exercise in objectivity and fair appraisal, would be nothing but a cunning ruse to deflect attention from actual domestic violence.

What, though, if the government, knowing nothing of its member's spousal abuse, decided that the policy was suitable and therefore implemented it? This might work for a while, but if or when the general public discovered that the author is a domestic tyrant then the policy would immediately lose any credibility it might have had.

Would this loss of credibility thereby entail that the policy's intent or goal also lacks credibility? Not necessarily,

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even though the taint of its authorship will, for many, contaminate the objective. We can still agree, though, on the general goal to reduce domestic violence while rejecting a policy written by a perpetrator. Similarly, if a policy advocating respect for other people is written by a person who patently has no respect for others, this does not invalidate a government's goal to have its citizens respect each other. The point here is that we would all agree with the objective, though we might not agree about the best way to get there, and most of us would agree that taking directions from a hypocrite is not a prudent path to follow.

Can't we apply these arguments to Heidegger's philosophy? Can't we accept the worthy intent or ethical goals of his philosophy whilst acknowledging that he was an unsavoury character, as even many of his supporters acknowledge? One problem here is that it is well nigh impossible to divine any ethical intent from Heidegger's philosophy. Indeed, he quite deliberately did not furnish his readers or students with a system of ethics or political values. This means that if we are to take Heidegger seriously and not reduce his philosophy to an intellectual exercise for the self-indulgently profound, then we have only one exemplar before us – Heidegger himself – of what his philosophy might entail in practice. Moreover, this is precisely what Heidegger would approve, because he was firmly of the view that there was no separation between Heidegger the philosopher and Heidegger the man.

What if I reject this argument and resolve nonetheless to focus on the philosophy and disregard the man? This could put me in an 'aporia', the philosophical equivalent of being between a rock and a hard place. In short, Heidegger's political commitment either did derive from his philosophy or it did not. If it did then this would put his philosophy beyond the 'philosophical pale' because it leads to, or at least leans in the direction of, National Socialism. If it did not then it is clear that a great philosopher can make a very grave life choice – and becoming a Nazi and never recanting is about as grave a choice as one can make – without

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any reference to his thinking, which would demonstrate the futility and irrelevance of his philosophy.

Rather than be caught in the aporia, some of Heidegger's defenders wisely refuse to enter it by postulating the only other possible position: Heidegger's own post-war view (which he very rarely enunciated) that his attachment to National Socialism was a mistake, a brief episodic blunder that was inconsistent with his overall character and philosophy. This appears plausible. After all, can any of us say that he or she has never done anything that was totally out of character? In other words, Heidegger made a mistake, but the man was not essentially a Nazi and his philosophy does not culpably condone fascist politics.

This argument might have some purchase if Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism were brief – if, say, he cut all ties with the party after he resigned as head of his university in April 1934. This is not what happened. In May 1934 the Commission for the Philosophy of Law was established by Hans Frank. Members of the commission were chosen by Frank and included Heidegger, Julius Streicher and Alfred Rosenberg. Readers of *Think* will hardly need reminding that Frank, Streicher and Rosenberg were leading Nazis and all were executed in 1946 for war crimes. Heidegger loathed Streicher, as did many Nazis, but he remained a member of the commission until at least 1936.

It is further worth noting that Heidegger remained a member *after* promulgation of the Nuremburg Laws of September and November 1935. These laws institutionalised antisemitism and effected the complete disenfranchisement of Jews from German citizenship. In summary, then, Heidegger was still consorting with leading Nazis three years after his election as head of Freiburg University and even after promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws. When these facts are set alongside Heidegger's long-term party membership, his refusal to recant his Nazism and his silence over the Holocaust, it is clear that his involvement with National Socialism was neither brief nor an aberration. Our apparently clever refusal to enter the aporia has left us stranded.

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However, aren't we being merely 'subjective' if we do not attempt a complete separation between our attitude to a set of ideas and our attitude to the person who produced them? Don't the demands of objectivity require such a separation? Indeed, have not modern philosophy and literary criticism proclaimed the 'death of the author' so that the text stands alone? At first glance this clamour for objectivity appears convincing, but on closer inspection it is phoney. If I disregard the author then I am not treating the text objectively. Instead, I am treating it like an object, degrading it to something lifeless and inert so that I can appropriate its use for my own purpose. Rather than having a dialogue with the text, and thereby with its author, I am interested only in my reaction to it. Indeed, disregard of the author becomes a curious form of narcissism insofar as I arrogate the text for my own use and make its ideas my own. After all, if we eliminate the author then only I, alone with the text, remain.

Disregard of the author may also have the perverse effect of treating a text as if it were holy writ, the text being read as if it were independent of the interpretative grounds and restrictions of an author's milieu and thereby speaks to us directly – like the voice of god. Of course what we are really doing is reading into it what we want the text to say or think it says, like those who interpret the bible by completely ignoring the tangle of theological, cultural and historical undergrowth from which it emerged. It is hardly surprising to find that Heidegger's writings are often handled with uncritical reverence and without reference to their authorial and historical context.

Moreover, it is an odd form of objectivity that demands I leave all my 'prejudices' aside when I read a text. Such spurious objectivity would have us put aside our disgust with Heidegger's Nazism so that we may read his philosophy with detached equanimity. However, this is not objectivity but rather a callous (or lazy) abrogation of the moral outrage we should feel if we are engaging with the text rather than exploiting it for our own ends. Worse still would be condescension to the text from the supposedly objective

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but actually arid heights of one who fraudulently declares, 'Who am I to judge?'.

We have returned to where we started. Some might think that Heidegger's philosophy is a load of faux-profound nonsense, but we cannot deny his status as a great philosopher, if only because of his vast influence. Of course by that criterion even a murderous despot like Stalin is 'great' – a great political leader – but we expect great philosophers to be great people because we see philosophy as an emanation (perhaps *the* emanation) of what is most significant about human beings – our capacity for self-reflection and insightful thought. Perhaps the best answer to our question is to state that Heidegger *should* have been a good man, but wasn't. This means that even great philosophers can be bad people, but to concede this can be constructive. At the very least it acknowledges that philosophy is part of the human condition, not above it, and that sometimes its pursuit does not avoid the occasional grime and nastiness of ordinary human endeavour.

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