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Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland¹ – Heideggers Todesfuge

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„Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus
Deutschland
wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken“

Paul Celan²

Emmanuel Lévinas once said that his admiration of Heidegger “mainly is an admiration of *Being and Time*“.³ At the peak of the Heidegger-controversy in France, Jacques Derrida confessed, he often really felt like asking all those people who were suddenly interested in the National Socialism of Heidegger a very simple question: “Have you read ‘Being and Time’?”⁴ At the time the book was published in 1927, the year 1933 was still inconceivable, Lévinas said. What he meant by “still inconceivable” was Heidegger’s commitment to National Socialism reaching its peak in the ceremonial assumption of the rectorship of the University Freiburg im Breisgau on May 27, 1933 and in his famous Rector’s Inaugural Address. In my talk, I want to pose the following question: Aren’t there already in “Being and Time” these “affinities”, “synchronicities” and “common origins” between Heidegger and National Socialism which Derrida pointed out by himself?

To avoid misunderstandings, let me make something clear in advance: I am less interested in the political commitment of an important thinker than in the political dimensions of his thinking. “In contrast to the assertions which were made here and there, there is an absolute coherence between Heidegger’s commitment and his thinking”, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe said. And Lacoue-Labarthe added: “The commitment of 1933 is neither an *accident* nor a *mistake*” – “in 1933 Heidegger is not mistaken. But in 1934” – when he steps down from the

¹ Death is a Master from Germany

² At the lecture not quoted.

³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Bewunderung und Enttäuschung*, in: *Antwort. Martin Heidegger im Gespräch*, ed. by Günther Neske and Emil Kettering, Pfullingen 1988, pp. 163-168, p. 163. The English translation used here is based on the German translation of the French original. Translation by the author.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Heideggers Schweigen*, in: *Antwort. Martin Heidegger im Gespräch*, ed. by Günther Neske and Emil Kettering, Pfullingen 1988, pp. 157-162, p. 158. The English translation used here is based on the German translation of the French original. Translation and emphasis by the author.

rectorship – “he knows that he has been mistaken. Not in the *truth* of National Socialism but in its *reality*”.⁵

Heidegger himself told the story that the party had accused him of having developed a kind of *private version of National Socialism*.⁶ I am convinced he never dissociated himself from his private National Socialism. Least of all after he dissociated himself from the Nazi-regime in 1934 and started his version of criticism in his lectures on Nietzsche and Hölderlin. I here argue that one already finds a lot of motives of Heidegger’s private National Socialism in “Being and Time”. The manner in which the question of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* – in German: die Frage von *Eigentlichkeit* und *Uneigentlichkeit* des Daseins – is connected to a certain *being-toward-death*, ein “Sein zum Tode”, is the example par excellence. To put the argument the other way round: There may be a certain attitude towards death one also finds in other German writers of the 1920s (for example in Ernst Jünger and Oswald Sengler) which might allow us to understand at least one dimension of their relationship to National Socialism.

Well, let’s read “Being and Time”. We are in a rush, so I will only try to give you an outline of such a reading and I have to focus on the chosen example of being-toward-death. Besides I will have to presuppose that you are familiar with some of Heidegger’s main-concepts.

Heidegger has dropped the concept of a *subject*. For a number of different reasons, he prefers to speak about “Da-sein” instead. (I will leave this concept non-translated as Joan Stambaugh did in her new translation of “Being and Time”.⁷) But *Da-sein* understands itself as a subject. It conceives itself as maintaining something identical in its different experiences and modes of behavior. In manifold otherness it pretends to have the character of the *self*. [SZ 114]

But Heidegger suspects that Da-sein clamours most loudly that it is “I” whenever it is not itself. [SZ 115-116] *Das alltägliche Dasein existiert in Selbstverlorenheit*. [SZ 116] Everyday Da-sein exists in a mode of having lost itself. Existing in this mode it is never alone in a strict sense. There are always the *others* being with it. [SZ 116] Das *Dasein* ist immer schon *Mitdasein*. „Being-with existentially determines Da-sein even when an other is not factually present and perceived. The being-alone of Da-sein, too, is being-with in the world. The other can be *lacking* only *in* and *for* a being-with. Being-alone is a deficient mode of being-with”.

⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Weder Unfall noch Irrtum, in: Die Heidegger-Kontroverse, ed. by Jürg Altwegg, Frankfurt am Main 1988, pp. 121-125, p. 122 f. The English translation used here is based on the German translation of the French original. Translation and emphasis by the author.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, Das Rektorat 1933/1934. Tatsachen und Gedanken, in: Die Selbstbehauptung der Deutschen Universität. Rede, gehalten bei der feierlichen Übernahme des Rektorats der Universität Freiburg i. Br. am 27.5.1933 [= Rektoratsrede/Rector’s Inaugural Address], Frankfurt am Main 1983, pp. 21-43, p. 30.

⁷ The quotations are taken out of this translation: Martin Heidegger, Being and Time. A Translation of *Sein und Zeit*, translated by Joan Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, Albany 1996. The numbers in the square brackets cite the pagination used in the German original, found in the right margin of the pages of the English text, therefore I use the initials “SZ” for “Sein und Zeit”.

[SZ 120] But who are the others? “The others’ does not mean everybody else but me – those from whom the I distinguishes itself. They are, rather, those from whom one mostly does *not* distinguish oneself”. [SZ 118] At least there is almost no distinction in everydayness of Da-sein.

Regarding the definition of *everydayness* one can see clearly how Heidegger tries to *obliterate ontical traces in creating an ontological concept*. The everydayness which Heidegger handles as if it was ageless, beyond all history, requires a specific *modern experience*. In everydayness as Heidegger conceives it, everybody, first of all, is what everybody does. [SZ 239] And everybody can replace everybody else. There is a universal possibility of replacement. Here it is very instructive to see the examples Heidegger gives: “In utilizing public transportation, in the use of information services such as the newspaper, every other is like the next.” [SZ 126] The subject of everydayness is the neuter, the *One* – in German: das “Man”.

I am afraid that it is absolutely impossible to translate the German “Man” with *They* as Joan Stambaugh did. Its mode of being is *averageness* and *dispersion* – in German: “Durchschnittlichkeit” und “Zerstreuung”. [SZ 127, 129] Heidegger’s analysis of *idle talk* and *curiosity* – von “Gerede” und “Neugier” – by which this mode of being is characterised, is famous. [SZ 167, 170] I only want to point out two definitions by which both of them might be identified as specific modern phenomena: the “groundlessness” of idle talk and the “being everywhere and nowhere” of curiosity – in German: “Bodenlosigkeit” und “Aufenthaltslosigkeit”. In both cases, Heidegger talks about an *uprooting tendency* – eine “Entwurzelungstendenz”. [SZ 169-170, 173] He describes everyday Da-sein as a *being-lost* [SZ 175], as an *entanglement* or *falling prey*, even as a *plunge* or *fall* – in German: “Verlorensein”, “Verfallenheit”, “Absturz”. [SZ 175, 178] Even if Heidegger claims the opposite, as he does, it is very hard to avoid recognizing the topos of a *Fall of Man* – die Vorstellung von einem “Sündenfall”. [SZ 176]

Let’s summarize: everyday Da-sein is an *inauthentic Da-sein* – “ein uneigentliches Dasein“. [SZ 233] But how can we gain an *authentic Da-sein* – ein “eigentliches Dasein”? Heidegger’s answer is: *through a certain attitude towards death*.

Our experience of death first of all is an experience of the *death of the others*. “We do not experience the dying of others in a genuine sense; we are at best always just ‘there’ too.” [SZ 239] This shows us the limits of the possibility of replacement: “*No one can take the other’s dying from him.*” [SZ 240] Someone might go “to his death for an other”. But dying for an other does not mean that his death is taken away from him. “Death is the *ownmost* possibility of Da-sein” – die eigenste Möglichkeit des Daseins. [SZ 263] Even if I am not different from

the others, my own death makes me different. Death is always essentially my own. [SZ 240] Death is the last and probably the only *principium individuationis*.

It is not only remarkable but also convincing that Heidegger conceives death as a *possibility*, as a *potentiality-of-being* – ein Daseinkönnen. Of course death is only one possibility but it is a decisive one. Every Da-sein is characterised by its own attitude to its *potentiality-of-being*. The constitution of this attitude is *constantly unfinished* – eine ständige Unabgeschlossenheit. [SZ 236] As long as Da-sein exists there's something *ahead* of it, there remains something still *outstanding*. [SZ 236] As soon as there is nothing more outstanding, Da-sein has already become "Nicht-mehr-da-sein" – *no-longer-being-there*. [SZ 236] Therefore death is an exceptional potentiality-of-being. "When Da-sein [the being-there] reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the being of the there." [SZ 237]

Heidegger gives the following definition: "Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Da-sein." [SZ 251] Not only everyday Da-sein is afraid of this possibility. But everyday Da-sein is an inauthentic Da-sein because of its *evasion of death*. [SZ 253] Eventhough everyday Da-sein knows that death is a certainty everydayness covers up what is peculiar about its certainty: that death is possible in every single moment. [SZ 258] Heidegger quotes an old German text – which leads us back to the question if a certain attitude towards death might be specifically German. "Der Ackermann aus Böhmen": "*Sobald ein Mensch zum Leben kommt, sogleich ist er alt genug zu sterben.*" – "As soon as a human being is born, he is old enough to die right away." [SZ 245] One might say: Das Sein des Daseins ist von Beginn an ein Sein zu seinem Ende, ein "Sein zum Tode". In English: From the beginning the being of the being-there is a being-toward-the-end of this being, a being-toward-death.

Heidegger implies that being-toward-death is the same for a being-there whether it believes that death is the end or not. I doubt this. Again you may follow the ontical traces in creating an ontological concept. As the concept of everydayness the concept of being-toward-death seems to require a specific modern experience: the Death of God.

In contrast to an inauthentic being-toward-death an authentic being-toward-death must not try to evade the possibility of death. That does not mean it has to cause death. But it has to bear the possibility of death every single moment of its being-there. Heidegger talks about an *anticipation of this possibility* – ein "Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit". [SZ 262]

Let me present you here four quotations and comment each through at least one sentence in German:

1. "In anticipating the indefinite certainty of death, Da-sein opens itself to a constant *threat* arising from its own there. Being-toward-the-end must hold itself in this very threat". [SZ 265] *Sich in der ständigen Bedrohung halten...*

2. „Anticipation discloses to existence that its extreme inmost possibility lies in giving itself up and thus shatters all one’s clinging to whatever existence one has reached.“ [SZ 264] *Die Selbstaufgabe als äußerste Möglichkeit der Existenz...*
3. „Becoming free *for* one’s own death in anticipation frees one from one’s lostness in chance possibilities urging themselves upon us“. [SZ 264] *Freiwerden für den eigenen Tod...*(Heidegger pleads for having “Mut zur Angst” and he talks about a passionate freedom towards death. [SZ 266])
4. “Because anticipation of the possibility not-to-be-bypassed also disclosed all the possibilities lying before it, this anticipation includes the possibility of taking the *whole* of Da-sein in advance in an existentiell way“. [SZ 264] *Ganzsein des Daseins...*

To put it in terms of this conference: It is *finitude* – more precisely: a certain attitude towards finitude through which a *subject* constitutes itself in its entire *individuality*.

But there is a very important remark by Heidegger one has to keep in mind here: “The ontological possibility of an authentic potentiality-for-being-a-whole of Da-sein means nothing as long as the corresponding ontic potentiality-of-being has not been shown in terms of Da-sein itself. Does Da-sein ever project itself factually into such a being-toward-death?” [SZ 266] I would say yes and National Socialism gave Heidegger the historical chance to proof it.

What attracts our attention in his rector’s inaugural address of 1933 is its performative character. The address has the structure of an appeal – in the sense of the German word *Aufruf*. In “Being and Time”, the chapter following the one about being-toward-death introduces the call of conscience as an appeal to become an authentic Da-sein. Heidegger refers to a “Bereitschaft zur Angst” and calls it *resoluteness* – “Entschlossenheit“. “Die Entschlossenheit bedeutet Sich-aufrufen-lassen aus der Verlorenheit in das Man.“ [SZ 299] Following this appeal one has to avoid two possible misunderstandings:

1. Resoluteness or Entschlossenheit is not “simply a matter of receptively taking up possibilities presented and suggested“. [SZ 298] (No “Führer befehl, wir folgen Dir“.) It is *self-determination* of factual possibilities. Dasein places itself *acting* in a certain *situation*. [SZ 300]
2. Resoluteness or Entschlossenheit does not lead to singularisation or isolation – in German: Vereinzelung. “It is from the authentic being a self of resoluteness that authentic being-with-one-another first arises“. [SZ 298]

We don’t have time to discuss details of Heidegger’s rector’s inaugural address. Its title is: “Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität“. It is an appeal to resoluteness: ein Aufruf zur “entschlossenen Selbstbesinnung” inmitten einer “abgelebten Scheinkultur“.⁸ And it presents National Socialism as a historical chance for becoming an authentic Da-sein.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, Rektoratsrede/Rector’s Inaugural Address, p. 19.