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Author(s): Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Paula Wissing

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Neither an Accident nor a Mistake

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe

Translated by Paula Wissing

Something . . . happened . . . in the first half of this century, and the second half, hovering between nightmare and parody, is only its shadow. Even so we must take its measure. Not on a small scale, based on the last three or four centuries. . . . But since philosophy, even in its possibility, is at stake, the true assessment, incalculable as it is, of the entire history of the West is needed. And that is another matter altogether.

We know that this other matter was, at the time, the Heidegger affair. . . . Since Nietzsche no thinker has delved so deeply and so far into the question of the essence of philosophy (and consequently, the essence of thought), nor has there been anyone who has opened a dialogue of such breadth and rigor with the tradition of the West. Nonetheless, a detail concerning this subject requires our attention: to subscribe, as I do, to Heidegger's theses (and particularly to his theses about philosophy), or even to grant a primary place to his thought, does not amount to any kind of declaration or profession of "Heideggerianism," as it is called. . . . Strictly speaking, the idea of a "Heideggerianism" is meaningless. It is not out of coyness or inconsistency that Heidegger constantly reminded us that "there is no philosophy of Heidegger." This clearly was an expression of his own question in condensed form: the question of Being could not in any way produce a new thesis on Being or, even less, give rise to any sort of "concept of the world." . . .

To be or call oneself "Heideggerian" does not mean anything, then, any more than being or calling oneself "anti-Heideggerian." Or rather, both mean the same thing, that one has missed the essential of Heidegger's

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thought and is destined to remain deaf to the question that, through Heidegger, is posed by this era.

Indeed Heidegger committed a political act, with its share of compromise (which was inevitable, accepted, and recognized), but also with a deep allegiance that will never be denied (neither according to what we know today, in the allusions and statements he made as a professor after 1934, nor in any of the three testaments he left behind). . . . His political involvement of 1933 is neither an accident nor a mistake. . . . In contrast to what may have been said, Heidegger's involvement is completely consistent with his thought. And the intermixture of "politics" with "philosophy" was so strong that, after his "break" with the party and until 1944, practically all his teaching was devoted to explicating National Socialism, an effort that in reality gave rise to the truth that Heidegger . . . believed to have perceived there. . . .

There is a great temptation—I myself have succumbed to it—to attribute Heidegger's involvement of 1933 to a failing, to an abrupt lapse of vigilance, or what would be even more serious, to pressure from a system of thought still insufficiently disengaged from metaphysics. But this would be to forget that metaphysics, at least in the form of the ineradicable *Trieb* recognized by Kant and Nietzsche, is at the most secret heart of thought itself. "Thought," if there is such a thing, can never be said to be "disengaged" from metaphysics. And moreover, this is what always *engages* it from the outset, no matter how much care is taken. . . .

This is why it seems to me that one cannot speak of a mistake either. There would have been a mistake if Nazism, whatever its "reality" might have been, had not had the possibility Heidegger saw in it. Now obviously it did have this potential, at least in some of its traits, with respect to the destiny of Germany and that of the West.

In 1933, Heidegger was not mistaken. But in 1943 he knew he had made a mistake. Not concerning Nazism's truth but its reality. . . . But I would add, who in this century, . . . of the "right" or the "left," has not been swindled? And in the name of what? of "democracy"? Leave that to Raymond Aron, that is, to capitalism's official thinker (a system of complete nihilism, in which in fact everything is *worth* something). But what about those who were great in their realm? At random: Hamsun, Benn, Pound, Blanchot, Drieu, and Brasillach (I am not making an exception for Céline, whose writing seems overrated to me, however).

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe teaches philosophy at the University of Strasbourg. His books include *The Literary Absolute* (with Jean-Luc Nancy), *Le Sujet de la philosophie*, *L'imitation des modernes*, and, most recently, *La Fiction du politique*, forthcoming in an English translation from Basil Blackwell Press. **Paula Wissing** is a free-lance translator and editor. She has recently translated Paul Veyne's *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*

Or, in the other camp, Benjamin, Brecht, Bataille, Malraux (I am not making an exception of Sartre, whose moral authority brooks no doubt). What was the old world offering them to resist the irruption of the so-called new world? In that respect, Heidegger's merit, which today is incalculable, was to have succumbed only for ten months to that Janus-headed illusion of the "new day."

In this sense, which has, in short, become banal, one will always be able to speak of errors. But I submit and maintain that, from the moment that one considers the idea that Heidegger, and before him the entire great German tradition (Marx, on the one hand, included), had of the historical destiny of the West, we are not dealing with a mistake. . . . It is not a mistake, but it is a consequence. And if this consequence could have as a consequence, if only for ten months, the acceptance of Nazism, . . . then it is of a wrong that one must speak. . . .

To speak of a *wrong* presupposes the existence, or at least the possibility, of ethics. It is likely that today neither of these conditions is realized. . . . The events of this century—and not a day passes that *we* do not show our ultimate responsibility for them—have subjected the very idea of ethics to an unprecedented shock and have perhaps definitively destroyed its very foundation. Of course, we are forced to live and act according to ethical norms and prescriptions, which are derived from an earlier ethics, but no one can fail to be aware any more . . . that in this domain we are utterly lacking. Undoubtedly, it is still possible to answer the question: How is one to judge? But certainly one can no longer answer the questions: From what vantage point are we to judge? In the name of what and whom? For henceforth what we lack are the names, and first of all indeed, the "holy names," that in many ways used to govern, unaided, the space (public or not) in which ethical life used to unfold. . . .

So it is not the least ethical certainty that makes me risk the word "wrong" with respect to Heidegger. I am only risking it because in Heidegger there is the confession of our utter lack in this regard [*être démuné*], and because, at least once, in what he signed, he hinted at recognizing a wrong—in the interview in *Der Spiegel* dealing with his attitude on the occasion of Husserl's death, he spoke of a "lapse" or "failure": *Versagen*. . . .

I do not want to put Heidegger on trial. What right would I have to do so? I wish to confine myself to a question, and a question concerning thought. This is why it seems useless to go back over the facts. Not to mention the risk, due to a lack of adequate documents, of spreading even more errors, rumors, or outright calumnies, I do not see what the recollection of facts can add to the question, except to consider as admitted and unquestionable that being a Nazi was a crime. This is a language one can hold politically, and personally it is the one I hold. But one still has to think the thing, and in this case anecdotes are no help, even if documents and accounts of witnesses exist that in my view are overwhelming.

The “wrong,” then, does not consist in the “compromises” accepted by Heidegger with full knowledge of the facts and moreover clearly condemned in 1966. Merely by keeping his signature at the bottom—or at the heading—of the “Rectorship Address,” he himself indicates very clearly where his disagreement with the regime led. . . . Just as by insisting on what he had obstinately rejected (the wearing of the Star of David, the book burnings, the firing of deans for political or racial reasons, “politicized science”) he no less clearly reveals what in his view were the limits of the unacceptable. And it is patently clear, no matter what one can say about it, that this was anti-Semitism. But what was unacceptable did not keep him from compromise, and the compromise was with a “movement” for which anti-Semitism was a principal issue, not some ideological outgrowth with which one could agree or not. By aligning oneself with Nazism, however briefly, one necessarily aligned oneself with racism. And if one believed it possible to “remove” racism from the movement, one was not only blinding oneself to its real nature and “truth,” but one was thinking, it is necessary to believe, that the victory of the movement was worth a little racism; anti-Semitism became a matter of profits and losses. . . .

In the apocalypse at Auschwitz, it is no more or less than the essence of the West that is revealed—and that has not ceased since that time to reveal itself. And it was the thought guiding this event that Heidegger failed to recognize.