

# Derrida and Heidegger in France

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For a long period after the war, roughly from the rise of structuralism in the 1950s until the publication of Victor Farías's *Heidegger and Nazism* in 1987, Martin Heidegger played a crucial role as the single most important thinker of "French" philosophy.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, Jacques Derrida, in some ways a quintessentially French thinker, has become, with Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of Heidegger's two most important exponents. Heidegger's special role in French philosophy is attributable to a number of circumstances, including the tireless advocacy of Jean Beaufret, who, more than any other person, promoted Heidegger's position and defended it against criticism, especially against criticism motivated by Heidegger's turn toward Nazism. After Beaufret's death in 1982, Derrida increasingly assumed Beaufret's mantle as Heidegger's most important French proponent. Derrida's theory emerged within a generally Heideggerian atmosphere. Although never wholly uncritical, he has contributed in important ways to maintaining a French reading of Heidegger. Since the resurgence of interest in Heidegger's Nazism and the subsequent, rapid decline of Heidegger in France, Derrida has assumed a double role as both critic and staunch defender of a certain French view of Heidegger.

This paper considers the complex interaction between Derrida and Heidegger in France. Heidegger's effect on his students takes different forms. Many limit themselves to exegesis of the master's thought, while others develop ideas that are often influenced, even strongly influenced, by Heidegger's position. Gadamer, who attended Heidegger's lectures as a student, was unable to break free from his master's influence for many years. His main philosophical contribution, *Truth and Method*, was published relatively late in life, when Gadamer was already 60 years old.

Sartre was always an independent philosophical planet, who revolved in his own orbit, scarcely affected by the gravitational forces of even the largest bodies in the philosophical firmament. He became interested in Heidegger in order to resolve problems he was unable to resolve through intensive study of Husserl. *Being and Nothingness* shows strong traces of his interest in Heidegger. Less scholarly than either Gadamer or Derrida, he took from Heidegger what he needed for his own writings, but maintained a characteristically generous attitude toward Heidegger, whom he defended against criticism directed to the latter's Nazi politics after the war. Although Sartre reworked Heideggerian doctrines for his own purposes in his magnum opus, Heideggerians everywhere, not only in France, generally tend to regard this book as largely derivative.

Derrida did important philosophical work as a young student, when he seems to have developed his distinctive set of problems. It is only afterwards that he encountered Heidegger's thought. Although he quickly developed

an unusual Heideggerian expertise, Heidegger appears to have deflected Derrida from his own course, transforming him into a subtle, original reader of the master's position at the expense of the further development of his own. Unlike either Sartre, who freely borrowed from Heidegger, or Gadamer, whose emergence as an independent thinker was retarded by his encounter with the master, Derrida was permanently deviated from his own independent course by his encounter with Heidegger. My thesis is that as a result of this encounter, Derrida became a student, but finally only a student, of a more powerful thinker.

Derrida's subsequent deflection from his own course is indicated in his reduction to a kind of fantastic interpreter, and in his resolute defense of Heidegger against the political consequences of his Nazi turn. The latter obliged Derrida to abandon the idea of Heidegger's thought as evolving through a series of continuous stages over time, a view he defended in a number of texts, including "Les fins de l'homme,"<sup>2</sup> but later abandoned in *De l'esprit*.<sup>3</sup> Although this strategy allowed Derrida to think he had "saved" Heidegger's later thought at the cost of abandoning his earlier thought, it is refuted by the Heideggerian texts.

### **French Philosophy: The Master Thinker and Foreign Models**

Since Derrida's theory is determined by the context in which it emerged and to which it contributed, it will be helpful to say a few words about the structure of French philosophy, in particular about the role of the master thinker and the characteristic French attention to foreign, particularly German, conceptual models, and then about what we can call the French Heidegger. To a degree increasingly unusual among the major industrialized nations, France is still a strongly centralized country. All major political decisions are routinely made in Paris. Something of this political centralism is reflected in the French philosophical debate that has long focused on a few master thinkers.

The master thinker has been a staple phenomenon in French philosophy for centuries, at least since the rise of modern philosophy. Descartes is widely acknowledged as one of a handful of great philosophers. He is often regarded as the founder of modern philosophy, and his work continues to attract wide attention, though there are few contemporary philosophers who write only or mainly on Descartes. The situation is radically different in France, where Cartesianism is still central to discussion. Now, as before, a number of leading French figures, for instance F. Alquié, G. Rodis-Lewis, and Jean-Luc Marion, are mainly known for their writings on Descartes.

At least since the early nineteenth century, the master thinker phenomenon that allowed Descartes to continue to play a leading role in French philosophy

has been combined with an interest in German conceptual models—in the twentieth century with interest in Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. French interest in Hegel began during Hegel's lifetime through the work of Victor Cousin, who taught courses on his thought in the Collège de France. During the 1930s, that interest was greatly strengthened by Kojève's famous series of lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The Hegelian influence was so strong that French philosophical discussion over almost a half century, starting in the early 1930s, is sometimes regarded as a series of reactions to Hegel, or at least to Hegel as understood through Kojève.

Outside of France, Hegel and Husserl are not often mentioned in the same breath, and Husserlians often think of Hegel as falling outside the scope of Husserlian phenomenology. French scholars interested in Hegel were often interested in Husserl as well, whom they tended to interpret as committed to the same phenomenological method as Hegel. They include Levinas, Kojève himself, Jean Wahl, Alexandre Koyré, and many others. A long list of important French thinkers have been influenced by Husserl, including Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Michel Henry. At present, as Heidegger's influence is quickly waning, the interest in Husserl, which has never waned, remains strong, and is in fact increasing as a by-product of the rapidly decreasing interest in Heidegger.

The French turn to Heidegger was aided by a number of factors, including the obvious importance of his writings, the traditional French interest at least since the nineteenth century in German philosophy, the strong French concern with such phenomenologists as Hegel and Husserl, and the particular situation that prevailed in France after the war. The latter, which is complex, turns on such factors as: resentment against Sartre, who had achieved a dominant role in French philosophy and intellectual life in general; a widespread resistance to the Sartrean claim for existentialism as a humanism; a desire to react against Sartre's atheism; an antipathy against his prolonged flirtation with the French Communist Party, which was very strong at the end of the war; and an offensive started by Heidegger's disciples, such as Jean Beaufret, and abetted by Heidegger himself, to reject Sartre's effort to find significant common philosophical ground between himself and Heidegger.

Heidegger, who had taken an active intellectual role in Nazism during his period as rector of the University of Freiburg, found himself called to account at the end of the war. Freiburg, where he lived and worked, was in the French occupation zone. In his time of need, Heidegger worked to create French interest in his philosophy through a flattering letter to Sartre, who did not respond. He later sent another letter, in response to an unexpected inquiry from a virtually unknown Jean Beaufret, who was drawn to Heidegger through his interest in Sartre. The first letter to Beaufret was followed by another,

more extensive, one, and then finally in 1947 by the "Letter on Humanism." In this text, centered on a traditional French philosophical theme, Heidegger took the occasion to distance himself from traditional humanism while claiming to offer a new, deeper humanism. He further criticized Sartre, his unruly disciple, while indicating, through the conception of a turn in his thought (*Kehre*), that he had in the meantime turned away, as it were, from whatever in his thought could have drawn him to Nazism.

Besides the strictly philosophical imperatives in the text, Heidegger's aim in writing the "Letter on Humanism" may have been to increase his influence in France in order to strengthen his defense before the French commission charged with the delicate task of rooting out former Nazis and Nazi sympathizers from the German university system. In fact, he was unable to defend himself as he would have liked. Largely as a result of a report furnished by Karl Jaspers that depicted Heidegger as a brilliant philosopher but an unrepentant Nazi, he was excluded from teaching at the university, to which he was not allowed to return until 1951–52. Yet he succeeded in another way beyond his wildest dreams in achieving decisive influence in the French philosophical context. For through his "Letter on Humanism," and the series of important disciples he acquired, he was able to displace Sartre as the dominant "French" philosopher. When the history of philosophy in France in this period is finally written, it will be seen that, despite Sartre's important influence in the post-war period, starting some time in the 1950s he was displaced by Heidegger. The latter then became for a number of years the main "French" philosopher in the period after the war.

### **The French Heidegger**

When Derrida came of philosophical maturity, the main lines of the French reading of Heidegger were already in place. He did not create this reading, although he has certainly contributed greatly to maintaining it as well as to exporting it to other places, notably to the United States and to England.

It is a truism that different theories are read differently in different literatures and national traditions. The typical way that many, but by no means all, French philosophers tend to approach Heidegger is determined as much by specific historical circumstances as by traditional French intellectual concerns. Humanism that comes in different flavors and textures means different things, including the revival of learning in the Renaissance and the specific concern with human existence. Broadly speaking, the conflict between secular and religious conceptions of humanity runs through French culture in all its forms.

French philosophy, since its origins in Montaigne and Descartes, has always been broadly humanist in the sense of being centered on a specific concern

with human existence from either a secular or a religious perspective. The human subject is central to Montaigne's *Essais*, which takes the author himself as its theme. Montaigne's early modern concern with human existence is greatly extended in Descartes, who is routinely regarded as the defining figure of modern philosophy.

A broadly humanist concern runs throughout Descartes's writings, from his "Treatise on Man" published in 1633 and immediately suppressed, through his early concern with the subject as either a spectator or an actor in the "Discourse on Method," until his final work on "The Passions of the Soul." It continues today in the writings of any number of French thinkers, including the later Sartre's concern with Marxism as philosophical anthropology, in Althusser's theoretical antihumanism, in Foucault's studies of various human practices, especially human sexuality, and in Mikel Dufrenne's defense of humanism.

The French turn to Heidegger was greatly aided by the appearance of the "Letter on Humanism." This key text, which reads like a letter from Heidegger to the French on how to read his writings, especially *Being and Time*, has long been decisive for the French understanding of Heidegger. Full translations of this work, which appeared in 1927, were not available in French until recently. A translation of roughly the first half of the book, comprising sections 1–44,<sup>4</sup> appeared in 1964, and a pirated,<sup>5</sup> and then authorized,<sup>6</sup> complete translation only appeared in the mid-1980s. Hence, there was a marked tendency to focus on Heidegger's later writings, which became available in French translation more quickly, and to read *Being and Time* through the "Letter on Humanism."

The typical French approach to Heidegger, therefore, might include an approach to the early writings, particularly *Being and Time*, through the later writings, especially the "Letter on Humanism," a deemphasis of the role of the subject, or Dasein, as central to an understanding of Being, a paradoxical insistence on the humanist character of the theory, and a staunch resistance to criticism of any kind. In *Being and Time*, Dasein, or human existence, is seen as providing an essential clue to the question of the meaning of Being. In his "Letter," written after the mysterious turn after *Being and Time*, Heidegger turns away from Dasein. Being is said to be self-manifesting, thereby deemphasizing the role of the subject. Heidegger's turn away from subjectivity was a central theme in French structuralism, in writers such as Lévi-Strauss, Piaget, Barthes, and others, all of whom favor decentering, or at least weakening, the concept of subjectivity. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger can be read, or perhaps misread, depending on the interpretation, as favoring humanism, since Dasein is central to his theory. If anything, this emphasis becomes more explicit as a result of the so-called turn in his thought. For instance in the

"Letter on Humanism," he rejects any other form of humanism in favor of a new, deeper humanism. The typical French Heideggerian resistance to criticism is apparent in Beaufret, the main architect of French Heideggerian orthodoxy, who was never able to tolerate even the slightest criticism of the master. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that Dasein chooses its hero.<sup>7</sup> French Heideggerians, above all Beaufret, typically take Heidegger as above reproach, limiting themselves to explaining his theory and to explaining away potential criticisms, thinking within the theory and never challenging its limits, steadfastly avoiding anything that looks like an attempt to test the ideas.

### Derrida and Husserl

Although Derrida's position took shape when Heidegger's influence was already strong, even dominant, it was formulated in reaction not to Heidegger but to Husserl and more distantly to Hegel. Derrida was a student from the 1950s until the middle of the 1960s. His main theme, already present in his student writings, remains, as he himself notes, virtually the same to now. As a thinker, Derrida is remarkably consistent. His ideas are typically stated in the guise of readings, often excruciatingly close readings, of the texts of different philosophical and literary figures. It is fair to say that both his more strictly philosophical, as well as his more literary, writings belong to a continuing effort, reflected through a wide variety of readings of different texts, to make a single point whose contours were already apparent during his student days.

Like many other leading French intellectuals, Derrida studied at the prestigious *École normale supérieure*. His unusual maturity was already evident in his student writings. The first book he wrote, *Le problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl*,<sup>8</sup> is a manuscript prepared for a degree (le diplôme d'études supérieures) while he was still a young second year student, prior to his doctorate. When Derrida was a student in France, a recently abolished system of two doctoral degrees was still in place. Perhaps the best known of his many books, *De la Grammatologie*,<sup>9</sup> is in fact the text of his initial doctorate, the so-called *thèse de troisième cycle*, which appeared in print even before the dissertation was defended.

Derrida's initial book, the first of several on Husserl, is an astonishingly mature piece of work. He seems to have known nearly as early as he began his philosophical studies, about as soon as he began to write, the point that interested him. He seems further to have already possessed an encyclopedic grasp of Husserl's entire philosophical corpus at that time as well.

Derrida's theme is closely related to the typical French views of Hegel and Heidegger. Everyone knows that Hegel wrote a philosophical classic that is often referred to simply as the *Phenomenology*. Outside France, Husserl, who

knew almost nothing about Hegel, is routinely seen as having invented phenomenology at the turn of the century. Certainly, little attention is devoted to Hegel's role as an important phenomenological predecessor.<sup>10</sup> In France, numerous French writers claim to detect a deep parallel between the views of Hegel and Husserl, in one version through the claim that both philosophers employ the same phenomenological method.

Derrida's main theme can be regarded as a reaction to the then dominant French Hegelianism,<sup>11</sup> which he initially develops in a critique of Husserl, and only later extends to Hegel and Heidegger. The difficulty, roughly speaking, is one that surfaced as early as Hegel's death. In Hegel's wake, there was a widespread view that Hegel had in fact brought the philosophical tradition to a peak and to an end, so that nothing further remained to be done. The same idea, or the conviction that there is closure to philosophical debate, is widely present elsewhere in the discussion of Cartesian foundationalism, which presupposes that, as Husserl later put it, a correct beginning can finally be made, and in Heidegger, who suggests that Nietzsche, but not Hegel, is in fact the last philosopher at the end of metaphysics.

Derrida's theme is the objection to closure in any form. He pursues this theme in the reading of a variety of philosophical texts, beginning with his initial study of Husserl. This latter text provides a stunning discussion of a basic problem in Husserl's entire corpus by a very young student; it is also the initial formulation of a concern that Derrida pursued throughout his own extensive writings.

Derrida's approach to Husserl and later to many other writers is based on his reworking of a purely formal point raised earlier by Jean Cavaillès, the French philosopher of science. In his dissertation, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*,<sup>12</sup> Cavaillès argues that genetic phenomenology is unable to resolve a basic dualism. Absolute logic always runs into the same dilemma since "the final and absolute science itself requires a doctrine that determines [régisse] it."<sup>13</sup> This argument suggests the failure of any effort to provide an absolute beginning, hence the failure of any effort at closure. If any beginning point, which determines everything following it, itself requires to be determined, then an absolute beginning is not possible and any attempt to provide one must fail.

Foundationalism is the main modern epistemological strategy. This strategy, which was given an influential formulation by Descartes, requires an initial principle known to be true and from which the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced in the form of a perfect system. Since epistemological foundationalism depends on an absolute beginning, Cavaillès's argument can be taken as a refutation of all forms of foundationalism, including its most influential formulation in Descartes. Fichte, who is sometimes misunderstood

as a Cartesian, formulated an analogous anti-Cartesian argument in his observation that an initial principle cannot be demonstrated since it depends on nothing else. Derrida restricted his appropriation of Cavaillès's argument to Husserl, whose Cartesianism was publicly elaborated in an important series of lectures given in France.<sup>14</sup> Yet in criticizing Husserl, the Cartesian, he is at least implicitly criticizing French philosophy that for centuries had been dominated by Descartes, as well as the wider Cartesian tendency in modern philosophy.

Derrida's reaction to Cavaillès's argument is twofold. He grants the latter's formal objection, since any effort to provide a transcendental genesis on the basis of creative subjectivity undercuts the very idea of absolute logical truths. Yet he only follows Cavaillès part of the way. He objects against Cavaillès that the absolute logic that the latter favors is not only formal, but also a historical product since "no synthesis nor any evidence would be possible a priori without it."<sup>15</sup> Derrida's critique of the Husserlian conception of genesis works out the implications of his understanding of Cavaillès's earlier objection.

Although he develops his argument through a reading of Husserl, Derrida intends it to apply to Hegel as well. He has stated that it is impossible to finish reading Hegel, and that in a way everything that he does is merely a further reading of Hegel.<sup>16</sup> Derrida perceives a deep affinity between Hegel and Husserl, whose position can, by implication, be regarded, not as a new beginning, but rather as a further development of phenomenology, specifically including the dialectical form of Hegelian phenomenology.<sup>17</sup> In addressing Husserl, Derrida means to address the entire philosophical tradition from Plato to Hegel. According to Derrida, "only on the basis of Husserl, or even explicitly with him, can perhaps be renewed, or at least founded, authenticated, accomplished the great dialectical theme that animates and motivates the powerful philosophical tradition from Platonism to Hegelianism."<sup>18</sup>

According to Derrida, the idea of an absolute beginning is present everywhere in Husserl, in particular in his concern to relate philosophy to the so-called "lived temporality"<sup>19</sup> that is now better known as the lifeworld. The difficulty that Derrida perceives, and which Husserl struggles to overcome in a number of texts written over many years, can be formulated in a number of ways, such as the necessary relation between philosophy and the history of philosophy, or the link between science and life, or again as the question of how to ground a philosophy of history in order to reconcile phenomenology and psychology.

For Derrida, Husserl's entire theoretical effort culminates in the theme of a transcendental genesis intended to overcome this tension in his thought. Derrida's analysis of the conception of genesis leads to a certain conception of Husserlian phenomenology that in turn influences Derrida's view of genesis.



Transcendental genesis concerns an understanding of the absolute foundation through its emergence, which implies its past.<sup>20</sup> According to Derrida, this problem remains unresolved in the Kantian idea of a synthetic a priori that is both intelligible and necessary—namely, without any reference to intuitional content, and atemporal. The advantage of phenomenology is that, through the appeal to intentionality, the critical attitude is transformed into what Derrida describes as “an a priori synthesis in the very heart of historical becoming,” that is, “the originary foundation of all experience that is offered in and through experience itself.”<sup>21</sup> The difficulty, then, is how to comprehend this absolute foundation through a conception of genesis. Derrida’s conclusion, which he announces as early as the preface to the book, is that the conception of genesis in the Husserlian and, by implication, in the Hegelian sense, is not possible. For “[t]he impossibility of any real determination of a real beginning will be the final meaning of the philosophy of genesis....”<sup>22</sup>

### **Critique of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger**

In the preface to his initial Husserl study, Derrida remarks, correctly I think, that on rereading his manuscript for the first time after more than forty years he perceived that the very same reading of Husserl remained, even in its literal formulation, a constant theme in his writings, directing, as he says, all that he has since tried to demonstrate. Derrida’s theme has always been, as he writes, “the original complication of the origin, of an inaugural separation that no analysis can overcome, render present phenomenally, or reduce to the instantaneous, self-identical punctuality of the component.”<sup>23</sup> As he notes, the disappearance of the term “dialectic” in favor of that in terms of which it is necessary to think “différance, the supplement of the origin and the trace,”<sup>24</sup> are merely terminological changes. This is the same theme that he develops in some detail in *De la Grammatologie*,<sup>25</sup> his major work, a brilliant if eccentric study of the so-called science of writing. If this is correct, then his further writings on Husserl and his subsequent turn to Hegel and to Heidegger merely provide a further development of the original formulation of his thesis.

Derrida further develops this thesis in his long introduction to Husserl’s essay, “The Origin of Geometry.” His discussion is an expansion of his briefer treatment of that essay in the earlier Husserl book. There the importance of Husserl’s treatment of this theme is said to lie in the effort to grasp the historical origin of an historical production of human consciousness. In the context of his critique of the Husserlian idea of transcendental genesis, Derrida objects that the analysis of geometry oscillates between the two poles of a formal a priori and an absolute empiricism.<sup>26</sup> He restates this same criticism

in his introduction in different, more complex, less standard language. There he offers the same criticism in a variety of passages; for instance, on the last page of the introduction he writes:

The originary difference of the absolute origin that can and should retain and announce its pure concrete form with an a priori security, as beyond or below giving meaning to all empirical geniality, and to all factual profusion, is perhaps what has always been named under the concept of '*transcendental*' through the enigmatic history of its displacements.<sup>27</sup>

Derrida offers a variation of this criticism in his various discussions of Hegel. He considers Hegel in a number of writings, including an important article entitled "Le puits et la pyramide" in *Marges de la philosophie*, and above all in the two long, tedious, nearly impenetrable volumes of *Glas*. Here he studies the question of what remains of absolute knowledge. He develops a further variation of this criticism in his discussion of Heidegger.

### **Derrida and the French Heidegger**

Although Derrida's theory was originally formulated in reaction to Husserl, Heidegger is unquestionably an important reference point for him. His concern with Heidegger remains constant once it begins. He has said that nothing that he has attempted would have been possible without the "openings" due to the Heideggerian questions.<sup>28</sup> According to Ferry and Renaut, two highly partisan commentators, Derrida's theory reduces to Heidegger plus Derrida's style.<sup>29</sup> This is manifestly unfair since Derrida, who is deeply interested in Heidegger, is not in any sense merely an adherent of any single theory, even Heidegger's, since he is also an original thinker. In fact, in a later work the same authors have taken a more nuanced view of French Heideggerianism which they no longer simply equate to Derrida, whom they now regard, correctly I believe, as a leading French Heideggerian.<sup>30</sup> For Bennington, Heidegger's originality is partially due to Derrida, whose proximity to Heidegger is linked to a so-called profound otherness.<sup>31</sup>

Derrida's complex relation to Heidegger cannot be simply described in a few words. Like Gadamer, Heidegger's other main contemporary student, Derrida's relation to Heidegger is never uncritical; it is always critical, although he continues to remain—certainly more so than Gadamer, who later emancipated himself from Heidegger, while remaining sympathetic to the latter—mainly, perhaps even wholly, within the framework of Heidegger's thought. Indeed, even the critique of origins that Derrida adapts from Cavailles can

be reconciled with Heidegger's critique of Kantian metaphysics and, on this basis, with Western philosophy as opposed to thinking.<sup>32</sup>

In his theory of historical hermeneutics, Gadamer is concerned to recover the historical dimension that is missing in Heidegger. The latter, despite his deep grasp of the history of philosophy, mainly disregards the historical dimension as part of his effort to return behind the history of ontology, which he regards as a series of mistaken theories of being designed to revive the original Greek theory of being. Derrida continually stresses the importance of Heidegger as well as the difference between his own concerns and Heidegger's.<sup>33</sup> According to Derrida, in his thought of presence Heidegger presents the most important and powerful defense of precisely what he, Derrida, intends to question.<sup>34</sup> Yet somewhat paradoxically, since Heidegger is not central to Derrida's main concern, once Derrida turns to Heidegger, he remains a constant presence in Derrida's work, so much so that he can be said to impede the further elaboration of Derrida's own theories.

Heidegger's pervasive influence on Derrida's corpus is especially visible in Derrida's signature concept, deconstruction. Deconstruction is an ambiguous concept. Some commentators regard Derrida as merely taking over and developing an earlier Heideggerian concept.<sup>35</sup> Others point to inconsistencies in Derrida's claims and practice concerning the translation of "Abbau" as "déconstruction."<sup>36</sup> At least one observer regards deconstruction as basically Kantian.<sup>37</sup> Another is impressed by the way that deconstruction breaks down the distinction between philosophy and literature.<sup>38</sup>

The idea of deconstruction has solid roots, if not in Kant, at least in the later Husserl and throughout Heidegger's writings. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger insists on the destruction of the history of ontology. In *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, a lecture course delivered in the same year, he describes the phenomenological method in terms of three basic components: reduction, construction, and deconstruction. The last is "a critical process in which traditional concepts that at first must necessarily be employed are deconstructed down to the sources from which they were drawn."<sup>39</sup>

Derrida's own form of deconstruction can be described as an effort to carry out the proposed deconstruction of the history of ontology in a way that escapes Heidegger's residual commitment to metaphysics. Were Derrida to be successful, he would have carried out the Heideggerian critique of the Cartesian dream of self-founding and self-justifying philosophy in a way that circumscribes its limits from a place beyond it.<sup>40</sup>

### **Derrida as an Interpreter of Heidegger**

Against his critics, Derrida claims that his own reading of Heidegger is more

than a simple grammatological deconstruction based on a failure to understand the theory, more than a simple reduction of Heidegger to a mere ideology, and unrelated to a critique based on Heidegger's supposedly antisemitic resistance to what he considered Jewish psychoanalysis.<sup>41</sup> Heidegger is obviously one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Numerous philosophers have devoted their working lives to interpreting his texts. Yet certainly no one has taken more pains than Derrida to grasp Heidegger, whose theory he has interpreted in careful, often excruciating, detail. This is particularly apparent in his efforts, after the recrudescence of concern about Heidegger's Nazi turning, to "save" what can still be saved, if, as it turns out, and as Derrida himself believes, Nazism is situated at the heart of Heidegger's thought. His avowed intent is not to avoid Heidegger's Nazism, but rather to resolve the problem that precisely lies in bringing together an external and an internal reading of his theory.<sup>42</sup> For the same reason, Derrida typically resists any effort to understand Heidegger through his times as part of his steadfast refusal of the anthropological approach which, as he notes, was so useful in France with respect to Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger after the war<sup>43</sup> and, one might add, in Kojève's reading of Hegel before the war.

Beyond concepts directly or indirectly influenced by Heidegger, Heidegger is present in Derrida's writings in numerous ways, including: writings indirectly influenced by Heidegger, both before and after Derrida became explicitly concerned with Heidegger; texts attacking others in defense of Heidegger; a series of explicit writings on Heidegger; writings directly concerned with Heidegger's Nazism; and texts concerned with further consequences of Heidegger's Nazism. Here are some examples.

Heidegger is not apparently present in Derrida's earliest study of Husserl, although he is perhaps already a silent factor in the introduction to Husserl's essay on the origins of geometry. There, a note refers to the difference between phenomenology and non-Husserlian ontology in the passage from the phenomenological function of facticity to mere "naked facticity."<sup>44</sup> Derrida himself calls attention to an early analysis of the presuppositions of metaphysics, a basic Heideggerian theme to which he repeatedly returns, in "La parole soufflée" (1965).<sup>45</sup> An early instance of Derrida's detailed analysis of Heidegger is provided in "Ousia et grammé, note sur une note de *Sein und Zeit*"<sup>46</sup> in what is in effect an extended discussion of a footnote.

It is obviously more than a coincidence that this text was written in honor of Jean Beaufret, the main architect of the orthodox, but wholly uncritical, French Heideggerianism. The next to last paragraph of *Being and Time* concerns the difference between Heidegger's and Hegel's views of time. In a long footnote, Heidegger calls attention to the link between Hegel's conception of time and Aristotle's. Derrida's text provides him with an occasion to develop

a critique of the theme of presence in Heidegger, thereby identifying the allegedly residual metaphysical cast of the latter's own effort to deconstruct the history of ontology.

This idea surfaces almost at the same time in Derrida's renewed critique of Husserl in *La voix et le phénomène* from a distinctly Heideggerian angle of vision. At this point, his original objection to Husserl's conception of transcendental genesis is transformed into a critique of Heidegger. Derrida's readings of Husserl and Heidegger now seem to converge around the problem of presence. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger notes the traditional approach to Being as "presence" (*Anwesenheit*).<sup>47</sup> He amplifies this point in a later essay through the remark that metaphysics thinks entities in a representational manner through presence.<sup>48</sup> In the earlier study of genesis, Derrida argued that this theme is everywhere in Husserl. He affirms that in every page of Husserl we encounter the necessity of presence made possible through reduction,<sup>49</sup> although presence is in fact indefinitely postponed.<sup>50</sup>

Derrida is also very protective of Heidegger, careful to shield him from even the slightest perception of an incorrect appreciation. An instance is the important lecture, "Les fins de l'homme," which was important in winning an audience for Derrida in the United States. Derrida there attacks Sartre and the Sartreans from the point of view of the later Heidegger in a text that is hardly critical with respect to the latter. Henri Corbin, Heidegger's earliest French translator, originally rendered "Dasein," later translated as "Être-là," as "réalité humaine." This term was borrowed from Sartre, who in turn found it in Kojève.

Derrida describes the proposed rendering of "Dasein" by "réalité humaine" as "monstruous."<sup>51</sup> He continues on, closely following the line Heidegger traces in his "Letter on Humanism," drawing a strict distinction between Sartre's existentialism, which remains metaphysical, and Heidegger's post-metaphysical theory that, he claims, both takes up where metaphysical humanism left off and surpasses it in thinking (*Denken*) that lies beyond philosophy. Exhibiting a Heideggerian orthodoxy, Derrida claims that the thought of Being remains a thought of human being, since, as he puts it, the aim of human being is the thought of Being. This unqualified affirmation, which closely reproduces Heidegger's own claim, was possible when the lecture was given in 1968, when few were thinking about the link between Heidegger and National Socialism; but it would scarcely have been possible after the mid-1980s when attention was briefly but sharply focused on this link.

A similarly uncritical approach to Heidegger is apparent in a study of sexual difference, "Geschlecht: Différence sexuelle, différence ontologique."<sup>52</sup> Although Derrida introduces his discussion through Dasein, the master word of Heidegger's early period is neither masculine nor feminine. There is, to be sure, a

hint of criticism in the rhetorical question about a subject being neither this nor that, which is merely life.<sup>53</sup> Yet this caveat is far too timid. It is not clear, since Heidegger concentrates on the ontological difference, why anyone but an orthodox Heideggerian would think of scrutinizing his texts to better understand sexual difference.

### **Derrida and Heidegger's Nazism**

Like so many French Heideggerians, Derrida's relation to Heidegger was deeply altered, even shaken, by renewed attention in France to Heidegger's Nazi turn.<sup>54</sup> Heidegger's role as the rector of the University of Freiburg in Hitler's Germany was known to the philosophical community as quickly as it occurred. It was debated in France in the pages of Sartre's journal, *Les Temps Modernes*, in 1947–48, in the period after the war when Heidegger was swiftly rising to prominence. At the time, Karl Löwith, Heidegger's first graduate student, pointed to links between Heidegger's philosophical theory and his Nazi commitment. But a series of writers, including Alfred de Tarnowski, Alphonse De Waelens, and Maurice de Gandillac insisted that Heidegger's link to Nazism was short-lived, independent of his theory, and due mainly to his naive appreciation of politics. With characteristic generosity, Sartre went so far as to assert that when the truth is known we will see that Heidegger's link to Nazism is less important than Hegel's to the Prussia of his time. A second wave of the French discussion, of less significance, occurred in desultory fashion during the 1950s and 1960s. A third, much more significant, wave, in fact a tidal wave, was prompted by the publication in 1987 of Victor Farías's *Heidegger and Nazism*. Philosophy generally takes shape slowly, over many years, even over centuries. Yet in less than a year a long series of books, written by Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-François Lyotard, François Fédier, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Ferry and Renaut, Dominique Janicaud, and Derrida appeared on this theme.

It was not merely fortuitous that a book by a nearly unknown Chilean professor living in Berlin evoked a deep reaction on the part of virtually the entire French philosophical establishment. French philosophy had long identified with Heidegger to the point where criticism of his theory was perceived not only as a criticism of French philosophy as a whole, but even of France itself. Renewed attention to his Nazism threatened the implicit claim, following from his "Letter on Humanism," that his own theory was humanist in a non-traditional but deeper way, which by extension implicitly questioned the humanist tradition in French philosophy. It suggested, in effect, that the entire French obsession with Heidegger over many years was based on a profound misunderstanding of the nature of his theory.

French Heideggerian orthodoxy has typically been unwilling to countenance any suggestion that Heidegger's theory is related to his Nazi politics. Beaufret characteristically maintains that Heidegger never did or said anything to justify the political reaction he evoked.<sup>55</sup> Derrida's own reaction to this political crisis was to deepen his commitment to Heidegger, whom he both defended and criticized, while attempting to "save" not only the typically French approach to Heidegger but also as much of Heidegger as could still be saved. In the wake of renewed controversy, we find Derrida in an obviously awkward position: the partially observant Jew and outsider in the heart of French philosophy defending the French Heidegger, a known Nazi and at least an occasional antisemite. There were others in a similar plight, but perhaps none for whom the situation was quite as awkward as for Derrida.

Derrida reacted almost immediately to the renewed attention to Heidegger's Nazism in several interviews as well as in a number of books. In a sense, even now, when direct consideration of Heidegger's Nazism has largely faded from the French philosophical debate, he is still reacting to this theme, with an almost obsessive quality, in everything he writes. An example is a long discussion of Heidegger, "L'oreille de Heidegger," in a recent, typically prolix study of friendship. Here, Derrida straightforwardly affirms, in a clear attempt to exculpate Heidegger, that the latter's views of friendship (*philein*) and of *polemos*—a word that in Heidegger's rectoral address seems to refer to *Kampf*, and even to *Mein Kampf*—are entirely consistent.<sup>56</sup> In this respect, Derrida is merely uncritically following Heidegger's own effort, in an article written in 1945 at the end of the war—but only published by his son in 1983, apparently to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Nationalist Socialist rise to power—to explain away these unfortunate references. In his article, Heidegger explains that in using the word "*polemos*," he merely meant to refer to Heraclitus.<sup>57</sup>

Immediately after the publication of Fariás's book, in an interview Derrida rebuffed any claim that Fariás could possibly shed any insight on the problem that, he insisted, was known in all its details in France. He underlined the need to think through the problem of Nazism as well as, on a deeper level, the link between Heidegger's thought and politics. He stressed as well the need to reflect on a similar link with respect to such other writers as Husserl and Valéry.<sup>58</sup>

Derrida developed his independent analysis of Heidegger's Nazi turning in a book that appeared almost simultaneously with Fariás's. Derrida's analysis borrowed heavily from Lacoue-Labarthe, another orthodox French Heideggerian, and from Louis Althusser, the important French Marxist philosopher. In two papers from the earlier 1980s,<sup>59</sup> respectively titled "La transcendance finie/t" (1981) and "Poétique et politique" (1984), Lacoue-Labarthe examines the

link between Heidegger's rectoral speech and his theory, and argues that Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism was essentially spiritual. In *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question*, Derrida develops Lacoue-Labarthe's dual claims that Heidegger's Nazi turn both is rooted in his phenomenological ontology and is spiritual in the Heideggerian sense of spirit. Derrida further introduces a variant of the idea of a conceptual break in the development of theory that his colleague Althusser used to defend the Marxist reading of Marx after the tardy publication of Marx's early writings. According to Althusser, whereas the early Marx is a philosopher whose theory turned on his conception of human being, the later Marx was a theoretical antihumanist who had in the meantime left the concept of human being behind.

In defense of Heidegger, Derrida tacitly abandons his straightforward claim that the distinction between phases in Heidegger's evolution before and after the turning in his thought is unimportant.<sup>60</sup> This idea, which was the basis of his earlier reading of Heidegger, for instance in the important article on "Les fins de l'homme," now gives way to a distinction that Derrida claims to discern between the views of the early and the late Heidegger.

Derrida changed fundamentally his reading of Heidegger in an obvious effort to salvage what he could of Heidegger's theory after attention was focused on the latter's Nazism. Yet his book is certainly not assimilable to efforts, such as Fédier's,<sup>61</sup> simply to "whitewash" Heidegger. Derrida, who still strives, even in his defense of Heidegger, to preserve a critical distance, takes seriously the idea that Heidegger turns to Nazism on the basis of his philosophical theories. According to Derrida, the early Heidegger's critique of metaphysics still depends on the very metaphysics he criticizes, notably the view of Being as presence. After the turn, Heidegger supposedly surpassed metaphysics and philosophy for "thought." This leads to the inference that Heidegger turns to Nazism because Nazism is itself metaphysical, but that in later going beyond philosophy in the turning to thought, Heidegger goes beyond metaphysics, hence beyond Nazism.

Heidegger's turn has more than one meaning. In introducing this concept in the "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger obliquely suggests that he has turned the page, so to speak, in turning away from all that, say, in leaving politics behind. This suggestion, in a letter to a young French philosopher, was obviously calculated to create support for Heidegger, in trouble for his Nazism after the war. Derrida's ingenious analysis is clearly intended to save the later Heidegger at the cost of sacrificing the early Heidegger, whose turning to Nazism on the basis of his thought, as Derrida interprets it, cannot merely be explained away. To Derrida's credit, he has never favored the more radical explanation, favored by Aubenque,<sup>62</sup> Beaufret, and Fédier in France, and many others, such as Sluga,<sup>63</sup> Safranski,<sup>64</sup> Grondin,<sup>65</sup> and Young.<sup>66</sup> These writers



maintain that Heidegger's Nazism has nothing whatever to do with his theory, since there is a radical discontinuity between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics.

The obvious advantage of this strategy is to allow one to acknowledge Heidegger's Nazism while saving his philosophy as a whole. No changes need to be made in our attitude toward Heidegger, and no adjustments need to be made for the interpretation of his theories, despite his Nazism; one can simply proceed as the discussion has always proceeded since, if there is no link between fundamental ontology and National Socialism, Heidegger's theories are not compromised in any way. The inconvenience is that this approach rests on a view of Heidegger as someone who did philosophy and politics on alternative days of the week, with no overlap, something that is surely counterintuitive and difficult to accept for anyone not already committed to explaining everything away.

Derrida's approach to the problem is more subtle than cruder claims that Heidegger's theory and his politics are simply unrelated. He claims to detect a discontinuity between the early and later phases of Heidegger's view, roughly prior to and after the mysterious turning in his thought. To make this argument, he abandons his earlier claim for the essential continuity of Heidegger's position over time, which in retrospect appears more compelling than the later suggestion of a radical break in Heidegger's development. In Derrida's more recent writings, while Heidegger's early position remained metaphysical, hence prone to a Nazi turning, his later antimetaphysical position simply breaks all links to politics, including Nazism.

Derrida's ingenious effort to save Heidegger's later thought through a claimed discontinuity with his earlier thought is easier to proclaim than to demonstrate. Claims for a radical break within an author's evolution are usually difficult to defend. Derrida's reading follows Heidegger's own view of thinking, his new name for his position in the "Letter on Humanism," where he says that in the wake of the turning he has left metaphysics, hence philosophy of any kind, behind. Yet this idea is inconsistent with Heidegger's own writings. The very basis of Derrida's analysis has been refuted by the tardy publication, in 1989, of Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy*, his longest work, a highly problematic text written from 1936 to 1938. Here, if not elsewhere, it is clear, as Derrida earlier maintained, that there is no break in Heidegger's philosophical evolution, only a continual elaboration of the same obsessive concern with Being. In fact, one cannot even show that Heidegger has left Nazism behind, since there are passages that appear to reflect a continuing interest in and commitment to this movement in the *Contributions* in remarks on blood and race as the bearers of history,<sup>67</sup> in the Nietzsche lectures from 1940, and elsewhere. Examples in the Nietzsche lectures on European nihilism<sup>68</sup> include

his concern with "securing 'living room' [*Lebensraums*]," not as the end, but as "the means to raising living standards,"<sup>69</sup> his suggestion that the "blonde Bestie"<sup>70</sup> is the model for the new man, and so on.<sup>71</sup> Efforts to save Heidegger through demonstrating a break in his evolution must fail, since inspection of the texts fails to exhibit the break to which the argument refers.

### Conclusion: Derrida and French Heideggerianism

In the aftermath of the controversy of Heidegger's political turn, it seems as if the interaction between Derrida and the French Heidegger has been interesting, but perhaps also stultifying to Derrida. Derrida's encounter with Heidegger, so obviously important for his development, had the very unfortunate consequence of reducing this deeply talented man to the role of a disciple, certainly an unusually talented one, but a disciple nonetheless. As a result of this encounter, Derrida seems to have been deflected from whatever it was that he could have done by his steadfast efforts to read Heideggerian texts in an ever more careful, finally excruciatingly careful, but personally self-stultifying way.

Derrida is one of the most celebrated writers of our time. Each of his books is quickly and widely translated into about a dozen languages. Although he earlier published his edition of Husserl's *L'origine de la géométrie* in 1982, he really burst on the scene with a trio of books in 1967: *De la grammatologie*, *L'écriture et la différence*, and *La voix et le phénomène: Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*. Since then he has published more than forty books on an extraordinarily broad range of subjects, running from Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel, to Caryl Chessman, an American prisoner on death row, James Joyce, Marx, and so on. This impressive and rapidly growing list<sup>72</sup> marks Derrida as one of the most influential intellectuals of our time. Since the death of Foucault, he has arguably become the most influential French intellectual. His works receive enormous attention in a mini cottage industry devoted to his thought.

Yet despite all this activity, and all this attention, one wonders what will finally remain. What concept or idea will one be able to attach to his name? It cannot merely be the concept of deconstruction, for one of the persistent strategies employed by Derrida and his followers is to refuse to provide a clear definition of this notion. Yet, if not deconstruction, what will it be?

Here another comparison with Gadamer and Sartre is useful. The destinies of both were linked with Heidegger. Yet Sartre, who freely borrowed from others, sometimes without more than a hazy grasp of the position of which he made use—for instance of Hegel,<sup>73</sup> traces of whose view are virtually everywhere in *Being and Nothingness*—was able to use his relation to Heidegger

to further the development of his own distinctive theory. After many years, Gadamer, who was decisively influenced by Heidegger, was able to put enough distance between himself and his conceptual master to write a significant book of his own. Yet Derrida, who was also influenced by Heidegger, seems mainly to have, as a result of that influence, been deflected from that task. Despite the enormous volume of his writings, it is increasingly difficult to say what it is that Derrida, in spite of his clear gifts, has really accomplished other than calling attention to himself.

There is a further consequence. In virtue of his concern with Heidegger, Derrida's fortunes are in a very real way tied to Heidegger's, so much so that, at least in France since the resurgence of the debate about the latter's Nazi turn, Derrida's fortunes have been rapidly waning.<sup>74</sup> Derrida, who was always less popular and less influential at home than abroad, has lost much of his status in the wake of the attention to Heidegger's Nazism. Despite his own best efforts and those of his French associates, including Nancy, Dastur, Lacoue-Labarthe, and others, Heidegger, who was for many years the main "French" philosopher after the war, has been dislodged from his role with astonishing rapidity through a theological turn already begun before the Heidegger affair surfaced.<sup>75</sup> This theological turning has only been accelerated by the Heidegger controversy, most recently in a startling book in which Michel Henry, the important French phenomenologist, has advanced the surprising thesis that the New Testament is pure phenomenology,<sup>76</sup> and in another study by Jean-Luc Marion.<sup>77</sup> The result is that the specifically French view of Heidegger, to which Derrida made a powerful contribution, has now simply lost its hold as French philosophy recovers from its lengthy infatuation with Heidegger and beats a strategic retreat to religion. Derrida, who over the years has remained an outsider in the French discussion, has now apparently lost the central role he played in France.

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## Notes

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19. Ibid., 3.

20. See *ibid.*, 14.

21. Ibid., 12.

22. Ibid., 6.

23. Ibid., vi–vii.

24. Ibid., vii.

25. Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*. See also Derrida, "De la Grammatologie," I, *Critique* vol. 21, no. 223, December 1965, and "De la Grammatologie," II, *Critique* vol. 22, no. 224, January 1966.

26. Derrida, *Le problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl*, 266.

27. Husserl, *L'origine de la géométrie*, traduction Jacques Derrida (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 171.

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32. Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

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34. Ibid., 75.

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72. For a bibliography, see Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).
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