

meaningful personal relationships, develop self-awareness, be open to discovery for its own sake, be sceptical of corporate manipulation. He also has interesting proposals when it comes to building in reversibility to technology and the right to opt out of technology if one so wishes – as well as unimpeachable views on the need for the Robotic Revolution to ‘do no harm’. His final recommendations are for each of us to learn to deploy our ‘seven lenses of Awe’ – or you might think of them as the Seven Pillars of Wisdom – for a world sleepwalking toward transhumanism. These are essentially thoughts and feelings to hold in mind and heart in all our encounters in the world: to bear in mind the transience of the world and its people; that we cannot know everything about these things, or even very much; that it has the constant ability to surprise and enchant, if we allow it to; that it is vast and incredibly intricate; that it is capable of moving us to deep emotion; and that solitude can be the salve that refreshes and renews us to keep returning to the world. Appearances can be deceptive though. These are profound and radical propositions to transform twenty-first century Being from a drift toward techno-subservience into a resolute stand for the human-ness of humankind.

In his concluding remarks, Schneider comments that ‘The robotic age has the potential to be an *awe-inspiring* dawn or a dehumanising nightmare. The choice is ours’ (p 128). Yes... no... maybe. Such a binary conclusion has its place in a manifesto as a call to arms. But there is also the somewhat less inspiring, or frightening, prospect: the Robotic Age is not really the Robotic Age, just as the Renaissance was not really the Renaissance until the name was given to it much later as a tidy historian’s label. For this reader, the real value in Schneider’s book and, despite my reservations about his use of history and memory, there is value here to the existentially-minded, is in reminding us that the trans-human telos of technology is not inevitable. He reminds us that practising the basic disciplines of phenomenology, taking time, paying attention, keeping our focus on things in themselves, in the world, retaining a sense of the vast scale of our un-knowing and mastering the fear of our ignorance, will serve us well to guide our way to a future that is humane and not simply, post-human.

**Richard Swann**

## **The Banality of Heidegger**

Jean Luc Nancy (2017). Translated with an introduction by Jeff Fort. US: Dogwoof.

This formidable little book is a tightly-argued response to the publication, still ongoing, of Heidegger’s sprawling *Black Notebooks*. In them, the German thinker puts to good use his incantatory jargon to add metaphysical

clout to one of the vilest prejudices in history: anti-Semitism. He writes of *Weltjudentum* (world Jewry), the notion of a ‘Jewish World Conspiracy’ and, in concocting the image of a global network of uprooted, unpatriotic and scheming Jews, he unwittingly followed the advice of another renowned anti-Semite, T.S. Eliot, who advised poets to steal rather than borrow. Heidegger was no poet, though in his late, sibylline pronouncements fancied himself as a pre-Socratic dreaming under an olive tree of a bucolic *Dasein* unharmed by the evils of science and socialism.

What the book unmasks is the embarrassing fact that Heidegger took this ‘most banal, vulgar, trivial, and nasty discourse that had long been scattered across Europe’ from a ‘miserable publication, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*’ (p 23).

Nancy’s merit is to have found an argument that is all the more devastating as it is measured. It does not simply condemn Heidegger but investigates the reasons for the condemnation; it is unsettling because in the process it indicts the history of the West and of Christianity in particular. Heidegger was one of the most sophisticated intellectuals of twentieth-century Europe; his anti-Semitism is not shouty, incoherent, nor (as apologists are keen to say), limited to a handful of ill-conceived statements. It is deeply philosophical; it permeates his thought; it is an incisive statement about world history. It is also utterly banal. Its banality evokes the one perceived by Hannah Arendt (2006) in Eichmann during his trial in Jerusalem, an observation that continues to be misinterpreted to this day as indifference to evil. But it was not indifference; it was instead, as Nancy writes,

*...an attempt to indicate... the extent to which it had been possible for judgements and practices that converged in the extermination of some five million people to be made into a banality*

(pp 1-2)

Eichmann’s defence strategy had focused on describing the huge order-execution machine of the concentration camp he presided upon in utterly normalized terms that made them sound banal and did not question the deeper motives behind those orders. Despite the righteous indignations Arendt’s remarks have provoked, the painstaking work of historians and analysts of the last fifty years confirmed she was dead right.

Eichmann dutifully followed orders; he then went home for dinner with the wife and kids. Heidegger followed the ignorant and prejudiced *doxa* of anti-Semitism of the 1920s and 1940s and turned it into a philosophy. But what kind of philosophy? The first task of any philosophy worth its salt is to think critically. Heidegger’s failure here is not only moral, social and political. It is a philosophical failure. He proved incapable of applying vigilance and critical faculty to a vulgar and murderous thought that the

majority of people in the early years of the twentieth century fell for. He sheepishly followed the abject thinking of *das Man*, the ‘they’ whose mediocrity he had so lucidly decried in his works.

Most philosophers had expressed a fierce criticism of anti-Semitism appealing to either ‘democratic or religious, Marxist or humanist convictions’, while Nietzsche ‘clearly detected’ the ‘vulgarity inherent in racism’ (p 4). Not a single trace of this is present in Heidegger.

He believed instead in the need for a second beginning, a new sunrise in the *Abendland* (evening-land, the place where the sun sets) of the West. The first beginning had occurred with the Greeks. But in order to have a new sunrise, Heidegger tells us, we need to bring about ‘the complete destruction of the Greek beginning’ (p 9), the destruction of Western civilization as we know it. We need to bring about a complete shipwreck, a task that needs its ‘appropriate people’ (ibid). And, Heidegger says, ‘this appropriate people [are] the Jewish people’ (p 10). In his notebooks he writes:

*The question concerning the role of world Jewry is not a racial question but the metaphysical question that bears on the type of human modality which, being absolutely unbound, can undertake as a historical “task” the uprooting of all beings from being.*

(cited on p 10)

‘Historial’ (rather than ‘historical’) is the translation of *weltgeschichtlich* (literally, ‘world-historical’), an expression used by Heidegger in order to give metaphysical import to the perceived world-historical role of the Jewish people in bringing about nothing less than the demise of the West. This is not common or garden racism but racism elevated to dizzy ontological heights. It is, Nancy argues, not so much Nazism as a worldview but a form of ‘archi-fascism’... a kind of hyperbolic revelation of a destinal truth of being based on ‘a people’ (p 13). ‘World Jewry’ is for Heidegger the synthesis of all the evils that befall the West, the quintessential evil he found scattered in Bolshevism, Americanism, rationality, democracy, technology, the necessary evil that in shipwrecking our land of sunset, will bring about a new sunrise.

Among other vices such as calculation, commerce and shrewdness, he sees the Jews bringing about the demise of Western culture by spreading *Bodenlosigkeit*, the *groundlessness* or lack of soil of those ‘citizens of nowhere’ berated by Theresa May during a speech at the Conservative party conference in Birmingham in 2016. Groundlessness, Nancy quotes Heidegger as saying, is ‘being bound to nothing, making everything serviceable for itself (Jewry)’ (p 20). The other evil is what Heidegger calls, literally mishmash, the true beginning of the end, ‘the mixing, confusion, and indistinction of peoples in a humanity that does not place high enough

the humanitas of man' (pp 22-23). All of these arguments can be also found, word by word, in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. That a shrewd thinker 'so adept at tracing provenances... did not ask where anti-Semitism could have come from' (p 27), that he would blindly follow tabloid-style prejudices is precisely what constitutes Heidegger's banality. But he 'knows very well what he is doing', Nancy writes; Heidegger collects 'banal rubbish for the sake of higher ends' (p 24). In so doing, he also shows a lack of historical consciousness and of common historical sense, conspicuous in a thinker who has supposedly made of historical 'Being-in-the-world' his trademark contribution to philosophy.

Heidegger is uninterested in questioning the origins of anti-Semitism because of the predominance in his thought of *archeotropy*, that is, a need to turn towards a beginning. This notion 'prevents consideration of any development, any history in the simplest sense of a succession of events' (p 33). There is also misrecognition in Heidegger of the initial split introduced by the Judeo-Christian culture, a split that for Nancy signalled 'the mutation of a relation-to-self' (ibid) which for Foucault (1986) brought about the very birth of the self as we know it before *askesis* and care of self in Hellenic culture. With the advent of monotheism, the self becomes split and begins to be judged, loved, consulted and summoned. Part and parcel of this split, overlooked (and replicated) by Heidegger is Christianity's rejection of Judaism. In this painful process, Christendom rewrites its own identity, transposing its own self-hatred into a body that it sees as other, as errant (both 'wrong' or bound to err, and 'wandering') and, crucially, that does not belong to the modern European state – a split that is then painfully replicated *within* Judaism with the birth of Zionism.

These historical events, I feel, ought to interest psychologists and psychotherapists because at their core are the disastrous self-hatred and painful rifts of an entire culture. Not only is Heidegger unwilling to diagnose them; he is in fact substantiating them by adding his philosophical gloss to a dishonourable tradition of hatred that has characterized the history of the West at least since Rome – a hatred that is, at heart, *self-hatred*. In a passage that clearly invokes Heidegger while referring to 'we' as a culture, Nancy explains:

*We do not like the Jews, or technics, or money, or commerce, or rationality ... We do not like ourselves, perhaps precisely because we would like to be "ourselves" – which most often we believed we had to interpret as "to be Greek", misrecognizing in this way that with and after the Greeks a great deal has happened that did not always come from the Greeks.*

(p 39)

That ‘we’ in Nancy’s text is not merely rhetorical: we (including the beautiful souls that people so much of the humanistic psychology world) are also implicated in the destructive and self-destructive horror that is the history of the West and that continues to manifest as hatred of difference and otherness and that ‘indulges in beginnings and ends... in sunrises no less than bloody sunsets’ (p 62). I understand Nancy to be saying that the hatred of anti-Semitism, so eloquent and virulent in Heidegger is, at heart, *fear*: a fear of anything that might constitute uncomfortable reminder of fragility, errancy and wandering, of transience and complicity with the wind. One thing only will remain of our cities, Brecht said once: the wind blowing through them. Being acquainted with this primordial fear, with the existential anxiety of impermanence may work as useful antidote.

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