

As If Consenting to Horror

Author(s): Emmanuel Levinas and Paula Wissing

Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Winter, 1989, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter, 1989), pp. 485-488

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343597>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Critical Inquiry*

As If Consenting to Horror

Emmanuel Levinas

Translated by Paula Wissing

I learned very early, perhaps even before 1933 and certainly after Hitler's huge success at the time of his election to the Reichstag, of Heidegger's sympathy toward National Socialism. It was the late Alexandre Koyré who mentioned it to me for the first time on his return from a trip to Germany. I could not doubt the news, but took it with stupor and disappointment, and also with the faint hope that it expressed only the temporary lapse of a great speculative mind into practical banality. It cast a shadow over my firm confidence that an unbridgeable distance forever separated the delirious and criminal hatred voiced by Evil on the pages of *Mein Kampf* from the intellectual vigor and extreme analytical virtuosity displayed in *Sein und Zeit*, which had opened the field to a new type of philosophical inquiry.

Could one question the incomparable impression produced by this book, in which it immediately became apparent that Heidegger was the interlocutor and equal of the greatest—those very few—founders of European philosophy? that here was someone, this seemed obvious, all modern thought would soon have to answer?

This is a greatness whose dimensions it is not easy to measure. It lies in the extension of the work of Husserl, to whom *Sein und Zeit* was dedicated in all sincerity in the twenties. The Heideggerian opus presupposes Husserlian phenomenology but transfigures it. Here traditional notions of rationality are modified, while Heidegger's stylistic genius makes the unsaid of the highest discourses of our culture resonate. Thought had always been understood in terms of knowledge arriving at *what is*,

Critical Inquiry 15 (Winter 1989)

© 1988 by *Le Nouvel Observateur*. English translation © 1989 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/89/1502-0014\$01.00. All rights reserved.

arriving at being [*l'étant*], arriving at the object to be apprehended, and which is revealed in its attributes as if it answered the question, "What is it?" The sense of the real, its intelligibility, was reduced to quiddity, to the content that was to be discovered in experience, which is refined into "metaphysics" by its elevation to the general idea above the given. Such are the pure ideas behind the experience of the world! The critique of pure reason will have denounced as gratuitous the world behind experience, a world where Nietzsche discerned the profile of a dead God.

Heidegger signifies the radical end of this metaphysical rationality. The sense of the real is being itself; the very existing of this real, the meaning of this word in its active, verbal form, is a meaning that cannot be taken as a noun. But this meaning—not that of being [*l'étant*] but that of the Being of being [*être de l'étant*—is it not, here and now, prephilosophically understood? It is understood by every facet of man's Dasein [*être-là*], for whom precisely this very being is at stake. This concern for being, this understanding of being, an onto-logy that lies beyond any objective knowledge of quiddities, is the original rationality that it is the task of philosophical thought to explicate and analyze. This analysis is not another "objective science"—a simple anthropology; it is the very way in which being is thought. Henceforth, the forms of our scientific and political language, our poetic and prophetic language—both objectivity and objectification—would look to ontology for their rank in rationality. Not to reveal the "transcendental illusions" from which they proceed but to recognize their role in the "Being of beings" [*être des étants*"], which is also an appeal to this thought and language.

Nothing in this new phenomenology, as it is elaborated and developed in the magnificent opening pages of *Sein und Zeit*, portends any political or violent ulterior motive.

Yet from various sides and without recourse to any internal criticism of *Sein und Zeit*, or even any objection to the whole of Heidegger's subsequent work, the warning Alexandre Koyré gave me before Hitler came to power has been confirmed by all kinds of information. Concerning Heidegger's relationships with National Socialism we are well beyond matters of sympathy and antipathy! I have not kept track of nor even remembered all the details. Some, however, stand out forcefully: Heidegger forced to take premature retirement from the university by the Purgation Commission after the German defeat; the speech he gave as rector in

Emmanuel Levinas has been professor of philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure Israélite de Paris and at the University of Paris I (Sorbonne). Among his books that have been translated into English are *Totality and Infinity*, *Ethics and Infinity*, and *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. **Paula Wissing**, a free-lance translator and editor, has recently translated Paul Veyne's *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*

1933; and, despite his claimed break with the National Socialist party after he resigned from that post, his meeting with Karl Löwith in Rome in 1936, wearing the swastika while in Italy; the Testament that appeared in *Der Spiegel* after Heidegger's death; and just recently, the book by Victor Farias, in which a great deal of information that was already known is repeated and much is added, all of it certainly calling for a detailed critical appraisal.

But on the issue of Heidegger's participation in "Hitlerian thinking," I do not believe that any kind of historical research, archival data, or eyewitness accounts—even when they do not rest on pure misunderstandings—can equal the certainty that comes to us in the famous Testament in *Der Spiegel*, from his silence concerning the Final Solution, the Holocaust, the Shoah. Indeed it is in the "final solution," in the pure extermination of the death camps that—beyond all the major injustices that stamp the thirteen years of the Hitlerian regime—National Socialism revealed the diabolical criminality, the absolute evil, of what cannot be called "thought." All the rest could, if necessary, still be attributed to the inevitable immorality of politics—haven't all states been responsible for wars? Consequently, all forms of compromise and servility, self-serving contacts and suspect friendship, unworthy statements and acts, and the pure opportunism of the citizens of totalitarian states could still, if necessary, be ascribed to a lamentable self-interest—cowardice or caution—and as human weaknesses appeal to some indulgence on our part. Doesn't Heidegger speak of "human failing," for which, according to the same Testament, he apologized to Mrs. Husserl for not having "once more" paid his respects at the time of his teacher Husserl's illness and death? But doesn't this silence, in time of peace, on the gas chambers and death camps lie beyond the realm of feeble excuses and reveal a soul completely cut off from any sensitivity, in which can be perceived a kind of consent to the horror?

He was silent, but not completely. There is a statement in a fine book on Heidegger by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe that Professor Miguel Abensour has pointed out to me. Martin Heidegger made it during one of the unpublished lectures from the cycle of four talks given in Bremen on technology in 1949, but it is quoted in the book by Wolfgang Schirmacher, *Technik und Gelassenheit*: "Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry. As for its essence, it is the same thing as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and the death camps, the same thing as the blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs."¹ This stylistic turn of phrase, this analogy, this progression, are beyond commentary.

It is impossible to be stinting in our admiration for the intellectual vigor of *Sein und Zeit*, particularly in light of the immense output this

1. Wolfgang Schirmacher, *Technik und Gelassenheit* (Freiburg, 1984).

extraordinary book of 1927 inspired. Its supreme steadfastness will mark it forever. Can we be assured, however, that there was never any echo of Evil in it? The diabolical is not limited to the wickedness popular wisdom ascribes to it and whose malice, based on guile, is familiar and predictable in an adult culture. The diabolical is endowed with intelligence and enters where it will. To reject it, it is first necessary to refute it. Intellectual effort is needed to recognize it. Who can boast of having done so? Say what you will, the diabolical gives food for thought.

15 November 1987