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Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

# Heidegger and Practical Philosophy

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*Edited by*  
François Raffoul  
and  
David Pettigrew

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## Nihilism and Its Discontents

THOMAS SHEEHAN

Although they mature in his later years, Heidegger's reflections on nihilism lie at the heart of his thought and inform his relation to practical philosophy throughout his career, from his early discussion of tool use in *Sein und Zeit*, through his engagement with Nazism in the 1930s, and up to his postwar discussions of technology. This chapter offers a reading of Heidegger on nihilism and technology that differs markedly from much of the literature on the subject. I conceive of it as a philosophical propaedeutic to understanding not only Heidegger's political error of 1933 but also the continuing danger of such mistakes today.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Overcoming Nihilism?

Do we live in the age of fulfilled nihilism? If so, can we overcome such nihilism?

These two questions inform the extraordinary open letter that Martin Heidegger published in 1955 in a *Festschrift* celebrating Ernst Jünger's sixtieth birthday.<sup>2</sup> Heidegger's letter was written in response to an essay that Jünger had contributed six years earlier, in 1949, to a *Festschrift* on Heidegger's own sixtieth birthday, so there was a certain reciprocity in the exchange: a favor returned, a public gesture of respect mirroring an earlier one.

But Heidegger's letter was more than a cordial gesture toward an old friend. It was above all a philosophical engagement with the person who had inspired Heidegger in the late 1920s with his essay "*Totale Mobilmachung*" and with his book *Der Arbeiter*, published in 1932, the year before Hitler took power. These works had opened doors for Heidegger onto such themes as nihilism, technology, and *Gestell*, and since Jünger had raised some of these issues in his 1949 essay, Heidegger took the occasion to address them and, in the process, to reevaluate his intellectual relationship to Jünger.

To return to our two questions: at first glance it seems that, *ex professo*, Heideggerians would agree that we do live in the age of fulfilled nihilism—manifest in the

dominance of technology—and that it is both desirable and possible that such techno-nihilism be overcome. According to this view, the long “history of being” has culminated in the triumph of τέχνη over φύσις, the hegemony of the man-made over the natural. In the process, “being” seems to disappear, to count for nothing, to amount to nihil, a “negative nothing” (GA 9, 415.5;P, 313.35), hence, the age of complete nihilism. It is not that all forms of being (*das Sein des Seienden*) have disappeared (that is impossible, since as long as there are human beings, there will be being, and even nihilism is a formation of being). But the most fundamental kind—φύσις/nature, which underlies all other modes of being—seems to have been obliterated by those who stamp everything with their own Gestalt, turn all entities into reproductions of human will, and thus reduce the being of entities to the state of having-been-produced. In this reading, techno-nihilism means the effective death of nature. In place of φύσις—being that rises up of its own accord—nowadays the being of entities is virtually an artifact: it becomes entities’ unlimited intelligibility and availability for production. Entities *are* whatever human beings would make of them.

Heideggerians who hold this position argue that we no longer live in a natural world that is moved from within by φύσις but in an artificial world frenetically propelled from without by τέχνη into whatever human beings want it to be. The world is too much with us—in fact, it is us, the theater of our mirrored selves: “Think you’re escaping and run into yourself.”<sup>3</sup> The universe of modernity is a hermetically sealed world that reflects modern human subjectivity as much as the cosmos of Augustine and Aquinas reflected divine subjectivity. For those medieval philosophers, each entity had its being to the degree that it stood before God’s mind and was held in existence by his divine vision: “We see these the things you made because they exist; however, they exist only because you see them” [*Confessions* XII, 38 (52)]. Each entity was stamped into existence by God and had being to the degree that it was a reflection of his own divine ideas, the *rationes aeternae*. But today, due to the power of technology, this hermetically sealed world is no longer divine but human. It is referred back to ourselves, and we seem to meet nothing but ourselves *qua* producers extrapolated into our products (GA 9, 407.12–13;P, 307.34–35). Thus the correlative of techno-nihilism is “humanism,” the belief that human being is fulfilled in abetting the limitless availability of everything that is.

Based on this account, it seems that we do live in the age of fulfilled nihilism, in which the power of being is reduced to the power of human labor under Vico’s rubric, *verum et factum convertuntur*.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the task of Heidegger’s philosophy would be to “annihilate nihilism,” to overcome it by drastically limiting the power and reach of technology and making room again for nature. It seems we should turn our backs on industrialization, techno-science, the exploitation of the earth, and first of all on the rationality that drives them. We should strive to preserve ourselves from the ravages of city life and return to nature, the way Heidegger himself did by taking refuge in his simple hut in the Black Forest. Is that not the case Heidegger is arguing? Is this not why he threw his weight behind the Nazis in the 1930s? And

even if his political choice was wrong, was not at least his philosophical motive commendable?

Let us see if that is so. The essay Jünger published in Heidegger’s honor had been entitled “Über die Linie,” roughly, “Across the Line.” There Jünger had discussed how, with the end of World War II, Western humanity seemed to be crossing a line from nihilism into a new age when *das Sein selbst*, being-itself, was beginning once again to “turn toward” human beings and put an end to their homelessness. Jünger called this hoped-for future event *die Zuwendung des Seins*, the turning of being toward human beings, and in that phrase we might think we hear an echo of Heidegger’s own language and thought. But not so. When he responded to Jünger’s essay in 1955, Heidegger subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) rewrote Jünger’s essay and reinscribed it, much transformed, into Heidegger’s own quite different understanding of nihilism and the possibility of “overcoming” it.

Fifteen years earlier, during his 1940 seminar on the *Physics*, Heidegger had shown how Aristotle, in taking up the doctrine of the fifth-century Eleatic Sophist, Antiphon, had radically reinterpreted that doctrine by quietly incorporating it as *Unwesen* into his own vision of *Wesen* (GA 9, 294.1–7;P, 224.27–32). Something similar can be said of Heidegger’s open letter of 1955, in which Jünger’s earlier essay is quietly appropriated as an understandable but finally inadequate “shadow” of the essential issue. Heidegger takes almost all of the major topics that Jünger had expounded and inverts them, corrects them, or takes them beyond themselves. He transforms Jünger’s *Überwindung* into a *Verwindung*; his “topography” into a “topology”; his “line” into a “zone.” Above all, he shows Jünger’s central thesis about a future *Zuwendung des Seins* to be an illusion: we should await no such future moment when being would “turn toward” human beings—because, he says, being is always already a *Zuwendung zum Menschenwesen*.

Heidegger’s transformation of Jünger begins at the very top of the piece. Jünger had called his essay *Über die Linie*, and Heidegger gives his open letter the same title, except that he adds a set of quotation marks around the noun and thereby changes the meaning: *Über “die Linie.”* The preposition *über* can mean both “over”/“across” (Latin, *trans*) and “concerning” (Latin, *de*). Jünger had used it in the first sense, “Crossing the Line” (from nihilism to being), whereas Heidegger’s quotation marks transform the title from *trans lineam* to *de linea*—*Über “die Linie,”* that is, “What about this ‘line?’” This alteration effects an important shift of horizon and allows Heidegger to propose a different kind of question. The purpose of his open letter, he writes, is to take everything Jünger has to say and elevate it to the level of “a higher ambiguity that lets us experience to how the overcoming of nihilism requires that we take the turn into the essence of nihilism, at which point the desire to overcome becomes no longer tenable” (GA 9, 424.10–14;P, 320.34–37). Jünger’s hope of overcoming nihilism is here cut short. Heidegger is making no predictions that techno-nihilism will ever be overcome. What counts for him, rather, is a new awareness and acceptance of *essential* nihilism. The only kind of “overcoming” that interests him is, he says, that

whereby "the essence of the nothing, in its former kinship with 'being,' can arrive and be accommodated among us mortals" (GA 9, 410.4-6;P, 310.1-3, emphasis added).

In the 1930s, Heidegger (not unlike Jünger) had hoped that National Socialism would provide solutions to the problem of planetary nihilism, and he implied that his own philosophy might have served as the ideological superstructure of such changes. By the 1950s, however, it would appear that he was convinced that a more profound understanding of the essence of nihilism invalidated such naïve hopes for a remedy. Heidegger's point hangs on the distinction between

1. the essence of nihilism—the essential *nihil* that is the necessary condition for any understanding of the being of entities to take place; and
2. the historical and cultural phenomenon called "nihilism"—here, techno-nihilism—which Heidegger claims is the result of overlooking or forgetting that essential *nihil*.

Heidegger's focus on the essence of nihilism is the reason he changed the title of his open letter one last time, not simply by inserting quotation marks into Jünger's title but by directly declaring what he thought was at stake in nihilism. When he published his text as a separate pamphlet in 1956, Heidegger entitled it *Zur Seinsfrage*, as if to say the question of nihilism must be brought back to the question of being. But, for Heidegger, "being" denotes something very different from the traditional meaning of the word. In his Preface to the pamphlet, he writes: "The new title is meant to indicate that this reflection on the essence of nihilism stems from a clarification of being as ~~Being~~" (GA 9, 385.5-7;P, 291.7-9). The cross-out indicates that this ~~Being~~ is nothing entitative: it most emphatically does not refer to the being of entities (their whatness, thatness, and howness), which is the traditional topic of metaphysics. Rather, this ~~Being~~ refers to *what makes possible* the being of entities and one's relation to it. Insofar as it is nothing entitative, Heidegger crosses it out (~~Being~~), or calls it "the nothing," the essential *nihil*. ~~Being~~ is just one more name for Heidegger's central topic. ~~Being~~ = *Welt* = *Da* = *Ereignis* = *Lichtung* = the essential *nihil* = *die Sache selbst*. Thus the sentence above, from Heidegger's Preface to *Zur Seinsfrage*, sets our task:

1. to clarify ~~Being~~, that which makes possible all forms of the being of entities;
2. to clarify "essential nihilism" (the essential *nihil*); and
3. to decide whether techno-nihilism can be overcome.

In what follows I focus on Heidegger rather than Jünger, not simply because Heidegger is philosophically more interesting but also because Jünger himself eventually

conceded Heidegger's points.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, I also propose to read the Heidegger of *Zur Seinsfrage* as he demanded (rightly or wrongly) to be read, namely, as *homo philosophicus* rather than as *homo politicus*, that is, as a thinker about ~~Being~~ rather than as the conservative German nationalist who inserted himself dramatically and disastrously into politics more than two decades before he published this essay. It is not that I think we should refrain from reading Heidegger politically—far from it. But regardless of whether one believes Heidegger's postwar *apologia* for his political engagement, regardless of whether one thinks he was amazingly naïve in how he understood German politics in the 1930s and world politics right up until his death, Heidegger did in fact insist to the bitter end that his reasons for supporting National Socialism had to do with his hope of overcoming nihilism and tempering the effects of technology. He claimed that we could understand his political "error" (as he called it) only if we first understood what he thought about nihilism and technology. Taking Heidegger at his word, one might argue (as I emphatically do not) that in his laudable efforts to overcome techno-nihilism he may have picked the wrong party, but at least he intended the right goal and therefore that even as we criticize him for the former, we should join him in pursuing the latter.

However that may be, I propose to investigate nihilism and technology on Heidegger's own terms and to bracket for now the political implications of his philosophy. My focus is on how he transformed Jünger's hope for an *Überwindung* of nihilism into his own vision of a *Verwindung*, a "freeing" of oneself from such nihilism by seeing its rootedness in a deeper, and an unsurpassable "essential nihilism" which is, in fact, the human condition (GA 9, 425.15;P, 321.28).

To repeat, are we in the age of fulfilled nihilism? And if so, can we overcome it? There may well be other, more direct and fruitful ways of broaching these two questions, but for now let us follow Socrates' suggestion that questions of "how to?" follow from questions of "what is?" (*Meno* 70a, 86c, 100b). Let us test Heidegger's thesis that reflecting on the essence of nihilism by reflecting on what makes possible the understanding of being will help us decide whether or not techno-nihilism can be overcome.

## II. Horizon and Method

First, a remark on the horizon within which Heidegger's reflections in *Zur Seinsfrage* move. As we would expect from this thinker of "one thing only," whatever Heidegger has to say about nihilism is bound up with what he has to say about ~~Being~~. Thus we must "reduce" the question of nihilism to the question of ~~Being~~.

~~Being~~, we have said, is not the being of entities but what makes that possible. More accurately (since the being of entities never shows up except in correlation to human understanding), ~~Being~~ is what makes possible the *conjunction* of understanding and the being of things. Thus insofar as it makes possible the presence of things

to human understanding, *Being* is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, beyond or other than being.<sup>6</sup>

We also said that "*Being*" is only one term among many for Heidegger's central topic. In other texts he calls this topic "being-itself" or "being-as-such" (in contrast to the being of entities). In his later years he preferred to call it *Lichtung* and *Ereignis*. All of these terms are about the "open" (*das Offene*), which is Heidegger's principal name for "the thing itself." "The open" also is the proper translation of "the *Da*" of *Dasein*, the prior and necessary condition for understanding the being of whatever-is. Heidegger's central question is focused exclusively on this "open" and how it gets opened up.

If there is a shade of difference between *Ereignis* and *Lichtung*, it is that *Ereignis* is the process, and *Lichtung* is the result. *Ereignis* is the opening up of the open, and *Lichtung* is the open that gets opened up. Taken together, this opening-of-the-open is what must already be the case if we are to perceive that anything is at all, is *this or that*, and is in *this or that way*—the thatness, whatness, and howness (= the being) of things.

*Ereignis/Lichtung* is not some supervenient power ("Big Being") that works upon *Dasein* from without. Rather, *Ereignis/Lichtung* names the Ur-fact that human beings are thrown out of immediacy and into discursiveness, so that worlds of possible significance are engendered and sustained. That is:

1. The finitude or relative lack-in-being that defines our essence
2. is responsible for the non-self-coincidence and thus the temporality of our being
3. and opens a space of finite presence within our being—*Da* or *Lichtung*, the realm of the "as" (i.e., of difference and possible relations),
4. thanks to which entities can be taken as this or that and thus be understood in their current mode of being.

Under techno-nihilism, on the other hand, this Ur-fact gets overlooked and seems to disappear or "turn away." In taking things as this or that, and thus encountering them in their being, people might think they are meeting—presuppositionally—nothing but their own man-made purposes and intelligibilities, their Gestalt as "worker" locked into correlativity with "the total work-character" of everything that is (GA 9, 389.28, 402.5-5;P, 294.30, 304.2-3). On this account the crux of historical-cultural nihilism is the correlativity—in fact, the direct proportionality—between the self-assertion of the technological self as worker-dominating-the-world and the "withdrawal of *Being*," (i.e., the apparent disappearance of the open as the source of all understanding of being).

But is this really so? Granted the correlativity of worker and product (i.e., of productive subjectivity and its realms of objectivity), why must the intensification of this correlativity stand in inverse proportion to awareness of the open? Why must there

be a zero-sum game between the growing power of the worker and the awareness of *Ereignis/Lichtung*? These are the questions we shall examine in what follows.

If the horizon of Heidegger's discourse on nihilism is the "question of *Being*," his usual μέθοδος for approaching nihilism is by *Seinsgeschichte*, the history of the ways that the open, along with the forms of being it makes possible, has been "given" from archaic Greece up to the epoch of planetary technology. Since that road is long and winding, I propose to follow not Heidegger's historical μέθοδος but a more analytical ἀτραπός, a "shortcut" that gets to the heart of the matter by raising the question of τέχνη and technology.

The shortcut consists of investigating τέχνη in light of the question of *Being* (the inquiry into the open), which means investigating it in conjunction with the notion of φύσις. Here I shall use Heidegger's reflections on Aristotle's *Physics* as a guide to understanding the alleged hegemony of the "Gestalt of the worker" in the present age (GA 9, 239-301;P, 183-230). The first step (Section III) will be to get clear on the three presuppositions that Heidegger thinks inform the text of *Physics*, B, 1. Those presuppositions, in turn, will lead us to the Greek vision of being and time as Heidegger understands that (Sections IV and V), and therefore to the fulfillment of that Greek vision in the finite infinity of the availability of things in the current epoch (Section VI). All of this will allow us to decide whether or not techno-nihilism can be overcome (Section VII).

### III. Three Presuppositions: φύσις, κίνησις, φαίνεσθαι

The first presupposition that governs Aristotle's text on φύσις (*Physics* B, 1) is what I call a thoroughgoing naturalism—but in the Greek rather than the modern sense of the word. This "Greek naturalism" entails that absolutely everything that is, insofar as it is, is in an essential sense a natural entity. It has its being from and because of φύσις and therefore is moved καθ' αὐτό, of and by itself. Before φύσις designates a determined region of entities (growing things as contrasted to artifacts), it refers to the whole of reality and names the in-itself-ness of every entity.<sup>7</sup>

But this characterization is still too formal. It begins to take on specificity and content only when we note a second presupposition that is intimately bound up with the first. Accompanying this thoroughgoing naturalism, and in fact defining it, is an equally thoroughgoing "kineticism." For Aristotle, as for the archaic Greeks, φύσις is the ἀρχὴ κινήσεως, the principle of intrinsic movement, its origin and ongoing ordering force, which I shall call "self-movement" (κίνησις καθ' αὐτό). To say that absolutely everything that is, insofar as it is, is a φύσει ὄν (an entity of-and-by-φύσις) is to assert: (1) that every entity as such is intrinsically in movement (*Physics*, A, 2, 185 a 12), where this "self-movement" means movement into appearance (see below); and (2) that every entity, to the degree that it is a φύσει ὄν, has within itself the origin and directing of its own movement.

It is true, of course, that from the very first sentence of *Physics* B, 1 (192 b 8–11) Aristotle divides all entities into “those that are of-and-by φύσις” and “those that are of-and-by other causes.” That is, he divides entities into (1) those that have been moved into their current shape and appearance from *within* themselves and (2) those that have been moved into their current form from *without*. These latter are ποιούμενα, or artifacts, things produced through the know-how of an artisan, the τέχνη of a τεχνίτης. Entities are divided, therefore, into φυσικά and ποιούμενα, according to whether they are intrinsically or extrinsically moved into their current appearance.

But even the artifact is made of a natural substrate. Thus even when we understand some entities as artifacts, we also co-understand them as artifacts made of some natural stuff and to that degree as self-moved entities, φύσει ὄντα. We evidence that co-understanding when, for example, we look at an old, beautifully crafted table and say, “Now *that* is wood!”—by which we mean something like, “This artifact shows us what wood really is and can be used for.” Or for a nonlinguistic example, there is Antiphon’s experiment: bury that same table in your backyard, wait a long time until it rots and germinates, and then check what comes up. The seedling will be the start not of a table but of wood.<sup>8</sup>

As Heidegger reads Aristotle, the self-movement of natural entities is not movement in any of the usual senses: locomotion, qualitative, or quantitative motion, or even coming-into-existence. Rather, the entity’s self-movement is its *self-presentation*, its appearing-at-all and its appearing-as-this-or-that.<sup>9</sup> Here we encounter yet a third presupposition that underlies *Physics* B, 1, one that ties φύσις and κίνησις into what may be called, at least provisionally, Greek “phenomenology.” Everything that is, to the degree that it is at all (and thus is natural and self-moving), is a process of *coming into appearance*, becoming accessible, engageable, intelligible. This is what the Greeks called φαίνεσθαι, the process of becoming a φαινόμενον.

As a unity, these three presuppositions—φύσις, κίνησις, and φαίνεσθαι, the natural movement of self-presentation—are the structure of what Heidegger calls the intrinsic disclosedness of entities, their ἀλήθεια. In Heidegger’s view, there are three levels of disclosure, ranging backward from the most derivative to the most fundamental. (The natural-kinetic-phenomenological presuppositions we have been discussing operate primarily on the *second* level of disclosedness.)

- |                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| ἀλήθεια <sub>3</sub> | truth in the usual sense of the correspondence or <i>adaequatio</i> of propositions and states of affairs   |
| ἀλήθεια <sub>2</sub> | truth as the intrinsic disclosedness or intelligibility of an entity, according to Aristotle’s dictum, “The degree of εἶναι a thing has is the degree of ἀλήθεια it has,” which finds a weak echo in the medieval <i>verum et esse convertuntur</i> <sup>10</sup> |
| ἀλήθεια <sub>1</sub> | truth in the fundamental sense of the “opened-up open” (the <i>Da</i> or <i>Lichtung</i> ) that allows for all significance and thus for both the   |

disclosedness of entities (ἀλήθεια<sub>2</sub>) and the correctness of statements (ἀλήθεια<sub>3</sub>)

Heidegger argues that for ancient Greek thinkers, and especially for the pre-Socratics, the words φύσις and ἀλήθεια did not name the being or οὐσία of entities, their stable and constant presence to human engagement. That would be the case with Plato and Aristotle, the philosophers of οὐσία par excellence. But if οὐσία in Plato and Aristotle is about the *presence* of entities to human engagement, φύσις and ἀλήθεια in the pre-Socratics hint at a prior *absence* (the open), which, compared to the presence of entities, is a unique kind of *nihil*. That is why, in Heidegger’s eyes, the archaic Greek thinkers rank a cut above the philosophers of οὐσία: they at least are aware of and name the *source* of οὐσία, even though they operate mostly on the level of ἀλήθεια<sub>2</sub>, without thematizing ἀλήθεια<sub>1</sub>. Hence the need for the explicit retrieval and thematic articulation of ἀλήθεια<sub>1</sub> (*die Sache selbst*, τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτό,<sup>11</sup> which Heidegger believed his thought provided.

All of this is commonplace in the Heideggerian literature today, as is the groundedness of the three levels of disclosure in temporality. *Sein und Zeit* argues that temporality makes possible all disclosure. The relation of temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) to ἀλήθεια<sub>2</sub>, and ἀλήθεια<sub>3</sub> is one of grounding to grounded, whereas, at the fundamental level of ἀλήθεια<sub>1</sub>, temporality is the very structure of the open.

But Heidegger speaks not simply of *Zeitlichkeit* but also of the *Zeitigung* of *Zeitlichkeit*, one of his earliest names for *Ereignis*, the opening of the open. Unfortunately, the English translations of *Sein und Zeit* miss this crucial connection. The Macquarrie-Robinson edition misleadingly renders *Zeitigung* as “temporalizing” (BTa, 278.17), and Professor Stambaugh’s version (BTb, 217.13 *et passim*) carries over this non-starter as “temporalization.”

1. *Zeitigung* (literally “maturation” or “blossoming”: γένεσις) would be more accurately translated as the “generation” or “coming-to-be” of *Zeitlichkeit*. Heidegger made the point in 1963: “*Zeitigung* as *Sich-zeitigen* means self-unfolding, emerging, and thus appearing. The Latin *natura* comes from *nasci*, ‘to be born.’ The Greek φύσις comes from φύειν and means ‘emerging’ in the sense of coming out of concealment into the unconcealed.”<sup>12</sup>
2. But the temporality thus generated—the difference, or *distentio*, within the essence of human being—constitutes the very openness of the open.<sup>13</sup>
3. Thus *Zeitigung* (the generation of temporality) = *Ereignis* (the opening up of the open). The resultant ἀλήθεια<sub>1</sub> is what makes possible both the self-presentation of entities in correlation with human powers of engagement (ἀλήθεια<sub>2</sub>) and the correct correspondence of propositions with states of affairs (ἀλήθεια<sub>3</sub>).

In other words, *Zeitigung* as the generation of *Zeitlichkeit* makes possible φαίνεσθαι, the appearing of a φαίνόμενον in correlation with the human powers of perception and action. Hence, what we have been calling the “phenomenological” presupposition of Greek thought (ἀλήθεια<sub>2</sub>) rests on a more fundamental “aletheiological” presupposition (ἀλήθεια<sub>1</sub>).

We may now take the next step. Heidegger finds the three presuppositions that underlie *Physics B*, 1—naturalism, kineticism, and phenomenology—packed into the single phrase that, for him, captures both the essence of Greek ontology and the origin of techno-nihilism. Plato and Aristotle, he says, understood reality in terms of οὐσία, *beständiges Anwesen*.<sup>14</sup> It is these two words, *Anwesen* and *beständig*, that we must carefully unpack if we are to get to the heart of Heidegger’s interpretation of nihilism.

In the usual interpretation, *das beständige Anwesen* is an entity’s “stable and constant presence,” where “presence” always means “presence-unto-possible-human-engagement” and, hence, “intelligibility” in the broad sense. As far as it goes, this translation is correct. But the English here misses the richness of the Greek phrase that underlies it: ἡ αἰδιη οὐσία. More important, the translation misses the interplay of being and time that is at work in the Greek phrase. In the next two sections, we shall consider the “Greek” relation of being and time, first by treating the being-aspect under the rubric of *Anwesen/οὐσία* (Section IV) and then the time-aspect under the rubric of *beständig/αἰεί* (Section V).

#### IV. *Anwesen/οὐσία*

*Anwesen* translates οὐσία and thus refers to the “self-presentation,” whereby entities become intelligible to human beings. Heidegger makes this clear in his 1955 letter when he argues against Jünger’s hope for a future “turning” (*Zuwendung*) of being toward human beings, as if this happened only occasionally. Heidegger makes it clear that being is *nothing but* turnedness-to-human-beings. “Presumably this turn to [human beings], even if it is still veiled, is the very thing we confusedly and vaguely call ‘being’” (GA 9, 407.3–5; P, 307.26–28). Indeed, “Presence (‘being’) as presence is always and in each case presence unto the human essence” (GA 9, 408.22–23; P, 308.35–36). Thus, “We always say *too little* about ‘being-itself’ when, in saying ‘being,’ we omit its presence *unto* the human *essence* and thereby fail to see that this [human] essence itself co-constitutes ‘being’” (GA 9, 407.22–25; P, 308.3–6).

We must take these assertions as straightforwardly as Heidegger puts them. Being occurs only in and with the essence of human beings, but being is the presence of entities as this or that. Therefore, all forms of the being-of-entities are forms of the presence of entities *to* and *for* human beings.

This presence-to-human-being is not something added on to entities; rather, to be an entity is to be always within the range of possible human engagement. For the

Greeks this is the source of the “wonder” that initiates philosophy: entities *can be engaged*, they are ontologically *κατ’ ἄνθρωπον*, “ad hominem.” This is what Heidegger means by saying that the essence of a phenomenon is “to come into unconcealment,” “to be disclosed,” “to stand forth in the open,” and other such ways of discussing ὄν ὡς ἀληθές. Entities are intrinsically open to what the Greeks called νοῦς/νοεῖν, and therefore are νοητά (intelligible), always already correlative to a possible human νόησις. The theme recurs frequently in Heidegger’s thought in the 1950s. In the spring of 1951, for instance, he told the students: “If the Greeks understand the presence [of entities] as εἶδος, and if εἶδος is thought of as an essential trait of φύσις, then this entails that presence is a relatedness to human beings.”<sup>15</sup>

And just as this ad-hominem status is essential to entities, so likewise openness to entities—the ability of human νοεῖν to engage and know them—is essential to human being. It is this correlativity and reciprocity that Heidegger finds named in Parmenides’ Fragment 5, in the τό αἶτό (the “gathered-together-ness”) of νοεῖν and εἶναι, a phrase echoed in Aristotle as the “sameness” that gathers together ἐπιστήμη and πρᾶγμα in actual knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

Recognizing the correlativity of ὄν ἢ ὄν with human praxis, production, and thinking (what Husserl calls the “phenomenological reduction”) is the first step toward asking what brings about that correlativity at all (the “transcendental reduction”). This is the question to which we now turn. How is the correlativity constituted?

The process whereby entities become humanly engageable—*Anwesung*—does not happen in entities themselves apart from human beings, nor is it superveniently ordained from beyond the human world. Rather, it occurs only with human beings and in the midst of their world. The opening of the open is precisely what brings about the “gathering-together” of εἶναι and νοεῖν. This is what Heidegger called “the wonder of all wonders,”<sup>17</sup> not transcendental consciousness, as in Husserl, but *Ereignis*, the intrinsic opening of the human essence so that entities can be seen as this or that and as engageable by a reciprocally disposed νοεῖν. By this intrinsic opening (*Zeitigung/Ereignis*, which happens only with human beings), entities are usable and knowable in praxis, discourse, and thought. *Ereignis* is what makes entities *innerweltlich*, or “innerworldly.”

At the “innocent” dawn of Greek-Western history, this correlativity between human beings and the being of entities is the basis for what is altogether too loosely called Greek “humanism.” Such humanism (if we may apply this much later term to archaic and classical Greece) is not first of all a celebration of the beauties of the human or a Promethean self-assertion, whereby humans take themselves as the measure of all things. Yes, such self-assertion is a possible element of Greek humanism, maybe an inevitable consequence of it, and arguably even one of its positive achievements—but not its basis.

Prior to such self-assertion there rules the fact that entities, insofar as they are, are open to human νοεῖν, are intrinsically accessible, engageable and (to take Heidegger’s term *innerweltlich* in its broad and proper sense) ultimately “humanizable.”

The grounds for Greek humanism are ontological, not anthropological, and they lie in the a priori correlativity that governs the openness of human beings and the “humanizability” of entities. And if Heidegger has any criticism of this Greek humanism, it is simply that it did not adequately thematize the *source* of this correlativity, the prior Ur-fact of the opening/*Ereignis*.

The human being is νοητικός (Latin: *intelligens*) in the sense of being-in-the-world and able to have access to something only mediately (i.e., *as* something). And entities are νοητά (Latin: *intelligibilia*) in the sense of falling within-world (i.e., within the province of νοῦς) and only thus able to be engaged *as* something. On the one hand, inasmuch as the open makes possible the presence of things to human beings, things themselves are “turned toward” possible human engagement. On the other hand, inasmuch as the human essence is the open and also “co-constitutes being,”<sup>18</sup> humans have access to everything that is insofar as it is. These two potentialities—the unlimited ability to know, and the unlimited ability to be known—are a priori correlative, and their correlativity is finally grounded in the Ur-fact of human finitude.

At the other end of Greek-Western history, where things are no longer so “innocent” (in this regard, Heidegger speaks of “an extraordinary danger”<sup>19</sup>), we see the historical outcome of this Greek humanism in the virtual inevitability of the current age of technology, rooted in that same τὸ αὐτό. Insofar as the essence of entities entails their presence to human engagement, it also entails that they are disposed to be picked up and used, to be reshaped as ποιούμενα—and endlessly so. The unlimited accessibility of the real lies at the core of the Greek-Western vision of being, which from the pre-Socratics up through Heidegger has affirmed the infinity of the intelligibility and transformability of τὸ ὄν, an infinity that is correlative to the infinite reach of νοῦς. Nor does this affirmation of infinite intelligibility necessarily depend on an entity (God) in which everything is already fully known.<sup>20</sup> A bad infinity will do.

Can we really include Heidegger in this vision? Yes, certainly. For if ἀλήθεια always entails the ad-hominem status and intrinsic accessibility of entities, the λήθη-dimension of ἀλήθεια most emphatically does not indicate a point where such accessibility supposedly runs out. Rather, to put it formally, the λήθη names the unsurpassable fact of such accessibility, or to put it materially, the λήθη names the lack-in-being or finitude that opens up the open. This finitude, by generating the openness wherein entities can appear *as* this or that, makes possible an infinity of significance. There is no end to the human reach into entities, even if this infinite reach is finally rooted in an unexplainable finitude. The λήθη entails the endless availability of the real, but “without [an ultimate] why.”

Thus we would be doing “being” no favors if we just let entities “be” in the sense of leaving them pristine and untouched, perhaps even unknown. The proper way to let entities *be* is to let them *be present*, that is, to let them be endlessly engageable. And we do that by endlessly *engaging* them, both scientifically and practically, and, yes, by letting them be submitted to the domination of the worker in the inevitable humanization of nature and naturalization of the human. If one follows Heidegger’s think-

ing consistently (not to mention the facts), there is no escape from this humanization/naturalization, no nostalgia for a time “before” humanity allegedly crossed the line into “too much” τέχνη, and no hope for a new age when the balance might shift back in favor of nature. Or better, if there is such nostalgia and hope, it has nothing to do with Heidegger’s philosophy. At its worst, it is a matter of bad faith, an index of inauthenticity and flight, a refusal to accept the historical fate of Greek-Western existence that is captured in Parmenides’ word τὸ αὐτό.

In Heidegger’s view, the current age of technology follows from the fact that the being of entities has always been experienced as *Anwesen*, their “presence-unto” human being, all the way from archaic Greek φύσις through classical Greek οὐσία, right down to Jünger’s notion of production (GA 9, 400.20–22;P, 302.35–36). Hence, planetary technology is not only inevitable but also unsurpassable—for it is empowered by the ontological *nihil* (the open), which cannot be overcome at all.

## V. Beständig/ἀεί

The adjective *beständig*—the other word in Heidegger’s key phrase “*das beständige Anwesen*”—points to the question of time. *Beständig* is usually translated as either “stable” or “constant,” neither of which, as we shall see, is adequate. What does the adjective *beständig* add to *Anwesen* as “presence-unto”? Is it only a chance addition to the noun, or does it contain the whole secret of the turn into essential nihilism?

Heidegger explains *beständig* by reflecting on the meaning of the Greek adverb ἀεί, “eternally,” and the adjective ἀίδιος, “eternal, everlasting.” This procedure appears logical enough, for do not stability and constancy necessarily point toward eternity? This has been the mainstream understanding in Western metaphysics. Compare St. Augustine’s “*Id enim vere est, quod incommutabiliter manet*” [“What truly is, is what remains unchanging”],<sup>21</sup> and Thomas Aquinas’ “*Esse autem est aliquid fixum et quietum in ente*” [“Being is something unmoving and at rest in an entity”].<sup>22</sup> But it does not work that way for Heidegger.

Heidegger’s explanation of ἀεί and *beständig* comes in his commentary on *Physics* B, 1 at the point<sup>23</sup> where Aristotle establishes the priority of μορφή over ὕλη by rejecting what Heidegger calls the “materialism” of the Sophist Antiphon, a materialism that, interestingly enough, was intimately bound up with Antiphon’s radical repudiation of τέχνη. In anticipation, we may say: Antiphon saw the constancy of presence as the hallmark of the “really real” and thus as the touchstone for discerning what is truly φύσις. In this way, Antiphon does offer an escape from τέχνη. He suggests that, yes, insofar as we are human, we must unfortunately live with τέχνη; however, insofar as we are philosophers, we must be ever in retreat from τέχνη toward φύσις. And is that not Heidegger’s program as well?

In his fragmentary work Ἀλήθεια,<sup>24</sup> Antiphon puts forth the thesis that what most deserves the name φύσις is the primary and least shaped elemental matter—

τὸ ἀρρῦθμιστον πρῶτον: earth, water, air, and fire—rather than (1) anything, such as iron or wood or flesh, that derives from, or is a reshaping of, those primary elements, and (2) a fortiori anything, such as an artifact, that is even further reshaped from those secondary reshapings. It would be hard to find a more absolute rejection of technology.

The reason Antiphon gives for claiming that only the most basic elements of matter are φύσις is that they are αἰδία: they do not change of and by themselves (οὐ γὰρ εἶναι μεταβολῆν αὐτοῖς ἐξ αὐτῶν).<sup>25</sup> From Antiphon's use of the word, which Aristotle apparently accepts, it would seem that αἰδίος must mean "eternal" or "everlasting." The most constant and stable would be the unchanging and eternal—ultimately, the divine. And even though Antiphon and Aristotle radically disagree on the content of that ultimate entity—"materialistic" in Antiphon's view, "idealistic" in Aristotle's—they would nonetheless agree on its form: eternal presence. Antiphon's retreat from human τέχνη in the direction of a chthonic φύσις is a negative mirroring of Aristotle's sublation of human τέχνη in the direction of an Olympian φύσις.

But Heidegger confounds those simple certainties. In showing how that is so, I will not go into the way that Aristotle incorporates Antiphon, as *Unwesen*, into his own interpretation of φύσις (at *Physics* B, 1, 193 a 21–31). (Briefly, we recall that Aristotle "wrests" from Antiphon's ἀρρῦθμιστον πρῶτον his own very different notion of πρώτη ὕλη, so-called "prime matter.") Rather, I will present only the gist of Heidegger's reinterpretation of the meaning of αἰεί in that same passage.

Heidegger begins by noting the astonishing ambivalence of the words αἰεί and αἰδίος. At one end of the spectrum, these two words can mean "forever," with all of the connotations of eternity and necessity that the word bears: "that which is *always* the case." But at the other end of the spectrum, these words can refer simply to "whatever happens to be the case at a given time," as in Herodotus' ὁ αἰεὶ βασιλεύων, "the currently ruling king,"<sup>26</sup> or Aeschylus' ὁ αἰεὶ κρατῶν, "whoever is ruler" (*Prometheus Bound*, 937f., a phrase that David Grene masterfully renders as "whatever king is king today").<sup>27</sup>

The same ambivalence is found in the English word "ever" that we use in translating αἰεί and αἰδίος. On the one hand, "ever" can mean "always" and "eternally," with overtones of necessity (like the Latin *ne-cesse*, "not yielding or withdrawing," from *ne* + *cedo*). On the other hand, the word can refer to any specific and non-perduring occasion: "Did you ever see so-in-so?" This latter meaning continues in the suffix of words such as "whoever," "whenever," and the adverb "however," where it has the sense of "any at all, from among infinite possibilities" (as in the aforementioned phrase from Herodotus), a meaning certainly quite removed from any notion of eternity or necessity.

Αἰδίος and "ever" can, of course, have the sense of "perpetual" or "eternal." Plato, for example, speaks of ἡ αἰδίη οὐσία, "eternal being," and Aristotle discusses αἰδίου βασιλεία, "perpetual monarchy."<sup>28</sup> However, the words αἰδίος and "ever" do not necessarily refer to time and, above all, need not indicate eternity or endless

duration. Heidegger overturns the presumptive meaning of αἰδίος when interpreting *das beständige Anwesen* not primarily as constant presence or stable and abiding self-identity but as "*autonomously initiated*" self-presentation. He writes:

The word αἰεί conveys the notion of "staying for a while," specifically in the sense of "being present." Something is αἰδίου if it is present of and by itself without further assistance—and for this reason, perhaps constantly present. . . . The decisive factor is that whatever properly is, is present of and by itself and therefore is encountered as what in each case is *already* there in front of you—ὑποκείμενον πρῶτον. (GA 9, 269.13–16, .30–33;P, 206.2–5, .17–20)

In this remarkable passage, we watch the meaning of *beständiges Anwesen* shift from (1) the temporally perduring ("something constantly present") to (2) the *autonomously and intrinsically present* ("present of and by itself without further assistance"), so that the entity is (3) always *priorly present* ("already there in front of you"). But this "intrinsic, prior presence" is (4) an "intrinsic, prior presence *unto*" human engagement. It is the same as what we saw in investigating *Anwesen/οὐσία*: the "ad-hominem" status of entities, ὄν ὡς ἀληθές. The factor of "alreadiness" in an entity's being "ever-already present and intelligible" indicates not some chronologically prior intelligibility (e.g., "it was intelligible even before human beings came on the scene"), but rather (5) the entity's *intrinsic* intelligibility, the a priori status of its availability for human engagement: *Das beständige Anwesen* = ἀλήθεια<sub>2</sub>.

Again, we ask where this apriority resides. In the text above, Heidegger argues that the autonomy and apriority (αἰδιότης, or *Beständigkeit*) of an entity's accessibility lie neither in the primacy of entities over human knowing, as in traditional, objectivist metaphysics, nor in the primacy of human knowing over entities, as in modern, subjectivist philosophy. The apriority that interests Heidegger is the correlation of νοεῖν and εἶναι over either of the two correlata. The correlation is grounded in the open, and the open is grounded in human finitude. If there is any necessity, constancy, and stability that "temporally" determines the intelligible presence of entities, it is nothing but the always-alreadiness of the open.

Therefore, the supposed constancy of presence-*unto*, the αἰεί-factor that serves as the touchstone of οὐσία in the Greek version of "being and time," in no way undoes the ad-hominem status of that presence. In fact, it reconfirms it with the weightiest of inevitabilities. We might have thought that in the φύσις-centered cosmos of Antiphon and Aristotle, the most real instance of reality would be what is most removed from human beings, the unchanging and eternal, in the form of either Antiphon's pretechnological "elemental" (τὸ ἀρρῦθμιστον πρῶτον) or Aristotle's meta-technological divine (ὁ θεός). But Heidegger argues that the ruling issue in the analogical structure of being-present is not eternity but the apriority of the correlation between thinking and being—which, at the other end of Greek-Western history, entails the virtual inevitability of the age of technology.

If I have spent so much time on Antiphon's response to the problem of technology, it is because his "solution" is both consonant with, and in fact prototypical of, the Right Heideggerian response to nihilism. The term "Right Heideggerian" goes back to the late 1970s, when it came to be applied to those who argued (1) that being is exhausted in presence, (2) that even the λήθη is an as-yet-hidden presence that might someday emerge from concealment in the "new dawn" of a secular parousia, and (3) that this as-yet-hidden presence could arguably be already present to itself in a transparent *Bei-sich-sein*, not unlike the God whom Thomas Aquinas allegedly experienced in a mystical ecstasy shortly before his death at Fossanova.<sup>29</sup>

In the intervening years, Right Heideggerians have assimilated some of the discourse about the lethic character of and accordingly shifted a bit to the left—while unfortunately continuing to metaphysicize that λήθη into an ultimately unintelligible "X." Having learned something from poststructuralism, and in the process having allegedly disabused themselves of the mythology of a hypostasized λήθη, they end up rewriting that λήθη as an untotizable (but historically empty) asymmetry bound up with a dehistoricized and an aleatory occurrence of postethical obligation.<sup>30</sup> This limp gesture may be a necessary—but is certainly an insufficient—half-step toward salvaging whatever potential remains in Heidegger's discourse: necessary insofar as it tries to take social obligation seriously, insufficient insofar as it has no demonstrable resources for confronting history, either for understanding it in theory or engaging it in practice. It remains only another and much thinner form of "German ideology."

In the final analysis, the Right Heideggerians have no resources for confronting the question of techno-nihilism. They are just a step away from Antiphon, whose response to τέχνη was to search for something untouched by human beings, a φύσις with as little overlay of τέχνη as possible. Antiphon's strategy was to deny intrinsic reality to ποιούμενα, to retreat from them in the direction of φύσει ὄντα as he searched for a world where being was defined not by history and human action but by unchanging stability. But in Heidegger's telling, Antiphon's strategy is self-contradictory.

First, the supposed eternity or unmovedness of Antiphon's underlying elemental stuff denies the very reality of the φύσις that Antiphon was trying to preserve. Φύσις means the movement of self-presentation, whereas Antiphon's elemental stuff does not move at all, least of all in the direction of engagement by human beings. For Antiphon, any shaping of φύσις into a ποιούμενον is a violation; and to follow this logic to its ultimate conclusions would mean abandoning history, becoming the mad ecologist who has to leave the earth in order to preserve it.

Second, the supposed eternal unmovedness of Antiphon's φύσις also is the guarantee of its pseudo-mysteriousness, its ultimate unknowability. Insofar as φύσις, in Antiphon's scheme of things, does not move at all and keeps entirely to itself, it resists all appearance and escapes behind any attempt to shape it into εἶδος. For Antiphon, the most real is the most unknowable, an "existent" prime matter without form, a "something" without appearance. It is unknowable and thus in effect a noth-

ing. Indeed, Antiphon's φύσις is the forerunner of the Right Heideggerians' λήθη: a something that is really nothing—or better, a nothing that has to be something insofar as it performs such mysterious acts as hiding and revealing itself, withdrawing and dispensing epochs of "being" or inspiring an impotent "obligationism-without-why."

## VI. Fulfilled Nihilism: θεολογία

We have considered both terms in the key phrase that, for Heidegger, captures the Greek notion of "being and time," and from either side of *das beständige Anwesen* the conclusion imposes itself: the humanization of the world is inevitable. If *Anwesen* points to the endless engageability of entities, *Beständigkeit* (once freed from its presumed reference to constancy and eternity) reinforces that endlessness by revealing its a priori status. The confluence of these two topics has raised the question of the source of this a priori accessibility and offered a hint of what it means to "turn into the essence" of nihilism. We may now take the last step in our ἀτραπός, by tracing the aforementioned three presuppositions back to their natural end, the theological.

We have argued that the classical Greek versions of naturalism, kineticism, and phenomenology entail one another in an intricate perichoresis. According to the first presupposition, everything that is—from the Unmoved Mover, if there is one, down to prime matter if *per impossibile* one could speak of it as existing—is, to one degree or another, φύσις. But this presupposition entails the other two: everything in the world is kinetically self-presentative (ἀληθές), or it is not at all. The degree of that self-presentation is measured by the entity's degree of φύσις, that is, its degree of movement, and specifically its degree of return unto itself.<sup>31</sup> All φύσις, including God, is a ὁδός . . . εἰς φύσιν (*Physics* B, 1, 193 b 12), a direct or an indirect, a perfect or an imperfect, *reditio in seipsum*. An imperfect natural entity makes an incomplete return to itself, and a perfect natural entity (if there is one) makes a complete return to itself. This thoroughgoing kineticism of Greek thought is not contradicted by, but rather fulfilled in, the notion of the divine as perfectly at rest in itself (cf. ἐνέργεια ἀκίνησις: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 14, 1154 b 27), insofar as "rest" is understood as the in-gatheredness of motion into its τέλος, and hence is not the opposite of motion but its highest instance.

Perfectly self-coincident in his return to himself, God is the perfection of φύσις/κίνησις/φαίνεσθαι, and as such sets the pattern that is imitated by all lower entities. Thus an entity of incomplete self-return is imperfectly self-presentative and only imperfectly able to know itself. The perfectly natural entity, on the other hand, is one that would be entirely self-present (to itself) and self-presentative (to others), precisely because of its complete return to itself. We may imagine this unity not as a circle as much as a point or dot: pure self-coincidence without remainder. The already achieved self-coincidence of such an entity is what makes it the most intelligible, τὸ μάλιστα ἐπιστητόν (*Metaphysics* A, 1, 982 a 31).

This analogical circumcession of nature, movement, and disclosure informs the exalted vision of human wisdom that is celebrated in the Prooemium to *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle prefaces that vision with a complex *videtur quod non* (nos. 1-7 below), followed by a weighty admonition (no. 7). In what follows, I paraphrase and summarize Aristotle's hypothetical objection (*Metaphysics* A, 1, 982 a 1 to 983 a 1).

1. If it is the case that "σοφία is knowledge of first principles and causes" (983 a 1-3),
2. and if "God is thought by everyone to be one of the causes and a first principle" (983 a 8-9)
3. so that σοφία must necessarily entail knowledge of God (θεολογική),<sup>32</sup>
4. it seems to follow that the transcendent *object* of such knowledge would require an equally transcendent *subject*—in other words, that "God alone would have this privilege" of knowing God (982 b 30-31).
5. Moreover, poets tell us that "the divine is by nature jealous" (982 b 32),
6. and if God is jealous of anything, He would be jealous of His privilege of being the only theologian, the only one to know God himself.
7. Therefore, it seems that human beings would do well to seek only the knowledge that befits their nature, not only because anything else would be unfitting (982 b 31-32), but also because, given God's jealousy, all who excelled in theological knowledge would be δυστυχεῖς, very unlucky indeed (983 a 1).

Thus the hypothetical objection. But Aristotle easily refutes it. Not only is God not jealous ("poets tell many a lie," as he reminds us at 983 a 4-5), but there are more important reasons, relating to φύσις, that should lead us to dismiss the objection. Precisely *when* human beings follow the knowledge that befits their nature, they find themselves on a path that leads toward the divine. In Aristotle's cosmos, where reality is diffused analogically and without rupture, wherever there is human being, there is a natural desire (cf. φύσει at 980 a 22 and 27) to see, know, and imitate God and thus, analogously, to *be* God. Can this desire be fulfilled? While Aristotle does not answer the question unambiguously, he does imply a human participation in the self-knowledge of God, as indeed he must, given the analogical nature of φύσις. He claims that σοφία (ἐπιστήμη θεολογική) is a knowledge that "either God alone can have, or God *above all others*" (983 a 9-10).

Aristotle's claim is momentous. He opened *Metaphysics* with the assertion, "All people by nature desire to know" (980 a 21), and by the second chapter of the Prooemium, we learn that the object of that unlimited desire is God. Human beings

can, to some degree, know God the way God knows Himself, because in fact they participate in the same reality as the Divine. But this means that, whether or not the project is ever actually fulfilled, Aristotle has opened up to human beings the *possibility* of the total knowledge (and along with that, the total control) of everything that is. Aristotle's theology is the first technology, and modern technology is only the last theology. The "death of God" begins with the first sentence of the *Metaphysics*, and after that, historical-cultural nihilism will be only a mopping-up exercise. Whether God exists or not, whether God is the object of faith, reason, denial, or indifference, henceforth in post-Aristotelian Western thought, θεός, the highest instance of φύσις, will be a symbol for the goal and scope of technology: the humanization of nature and the naturalization of man. "God" will be the symbol *par excellence* for "der unendlich ferne Mensch."

God as the "infinitely distant human being": with those words, the nihilism born in the theological technology of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* comes to its fullness. The phrase, published posthumously in 1954, had been jotted down sometime between 1934 and 1937 by Edmund Husserl. It is found in an extraordinary passage in his text on the crisis of Western science. There, in reflecting on the modern relation between God, mathematics, and philosophy, and on the grounding of the infinite knownness of the real in God, Husserl had characterized what Heidegger, at about the same time, was beginning to call the fulfilled condition of nihilism.

From its Greek beginnings, Husserl writes, philosophy has pursued the ideal of the complete rationality of the real, ideally expressible in a universal science. However, the fulfillment of that ideal became possible only with the discovery of modern mathematics. "Is not nature in itself thoroughly mathematical?" he asks. "Must it not also be thought of as a coherent mathematical system?"<sup>33</sup> The answer is yes, because in some way the complete mathematical rationality of the world, as a created universe, is grounded in God's achieved comprehension of everything:

One says to oneself: Compared to the absolute knowledge we ascribe to God the creator, our knowledge in pure mathematics has only one lack, namely, that while it is always absolutely self-evident, it does require a systematic process in order to bring to realization in cognition, i.e., as explicit mathematical knowledge, all the shapes that "exist" in spatiotemporal form. . . . Therefore, when conceived of as ideally complete, the universal science corresponding to the new idea [of rational, scientific philosophy] is nothing but—*omniscience*.<sup>34</sup>

And accompanying this progress in knowledge is a progress in technical mastery:

Along with our growing and always more perfect cognitive power over the universe, we also achieve an ever more perfect mastery over our practical environment, a mastery that expands in unending progression. . . . Thus we truly are the image and likeness of God. Just as mathematics speaks of infinitely distant

points, straight lines, etc., so analogously one can say metaphorically that God is the "infinitely distant human being."<sup>35</sup>

It would be difficult to find a clearer vision of the "theologian" as mathematicizing technician—or, in this case, as philosopher—marching shoulder to shoulder with Jünger's "worker" into the infinitely distant goal of the God-man. This vision had already begun to come into focus at least a century earlier. David Strauss understood himself to be merely drawing the inevitable conclusion from Hegel when he wrote at the end of *Das Leben Jesu*:

When we say that God is Geist and that humankind is Geist as well, it follows that the two are not *per se* distinct. . . . When we ascribe reality to the idea of the unity of divine and human natures, does it mean this unity had to come about only once, in a single individual, and never before or after? [ . . . ] Would not the idea of the unity of the divine and human natures be real in a far higher sense [than in traditional Christology] if I conceived the whole of humankind as its realization rather than just one individual man?<sup>36</sup>

And Feuerbach, in the first thesis of his *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft*, reduced the whole of metaphysics (and not merely, as he thought, the program of modernity) to an epigram that might serve as an epitaph: "The task of the modern era [indeed, of all Greek-Western history] was the realization and humanization of God—the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology."<sup>37</sup> It is this theological-technological project, which some call "nihilism," that comes to expression in the formula: "fulfilled naturalism is humanism; fulfilled humanism is naturalism."<sup>38</sup>

## VII. Some Conclusions

Heidegger's discussion of nihilism moves between two foci: techno-nihilism and the essential nihil. The latter refers to the intrinsic "withdrawnness" or "hiddenness" of the finitude that opens the open (φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ). This hiddenness is largely responsible for the widespread overlooking or "forgetting" of the open, which Heidegger identifies with historical-cultural nihilism. And allegedly the forgottenness of the opening is what aids and abets the spread of technology.

But important questions remain. If the open were not overlooked but recovered and embraced in recollective resolve, would that mark the end (or at least the beginning of the end) of the technological domination of the world by what Jünger calls "the worker"? Does Heidegger's thought entail a mandate to right the balance and restore nature to the place of honor it once held before the triumph of modern technology? What conclusions can we draw from Heidegger's reflections on nihilism?

1. The hiddenness intrinsic to the opening of the open is *what allows* for the endless accessibility of entities. Without the withdrawal intrinsic to *Ereignis*, entities would not be disclosed, and humans beings would not be human. But *with* this withdrawal, entities are endlessly available to human engagement and manipulation. The technological domination of the globe is the *gift* of the finite open. Far from having a philosophically negative valence, *die Technik* is the positive outcome of *Ereignis*.
2. In Heidegger's thought, "essential nihilism" in and of itself has nothing to do with a given ratio between φύσις and τέχνη, nature and technology. Ἀλήθεια as self-presentation is the intrinsic intelligibility of entities, not their exhibition of "natural" εἶδη. Essential nihilism is a matter of the hiddenness intrinsic to the open, and historical-cultural nihilism is a matter of overlooking that hiddenness. But neither essential nihilism nor historical-cultural nihilism has any necessary relation to the domination of nature by technology, nor does limiting the scope of technology and restoring the powers of nature have any necessary relation to overcoming the oblivion of the open. One can be a historical-cultural nihilist in φύσις-rich and τέχνη-poor ancient Greece as much as in today's φύσις-poor and τέχνη-rich North America—Antiphon is proof enough of that.
3. Historical-cultural nihilism is not proportionate to the degree of human control over entities; it is not a zero-sum game in which the advances of humanization entail oblivion of the open. One can promote and affirm a world that is, in principle, completely knowable and controllable by human beings, and still remain resolutely true to the open. And one can embrace mystical worldviews (as the dying Aquinas allegedly did) which, to the degree that they are oblivious of the open, are formally no different from the materialist worldviews of Antiphon or Stalin.
4. The self-coincident and all-knowing God, who lies far beyond the open, remains untouched by essential nihilism. But for human beings, who cannot escape the open, the essential nihil marks a certain death of God. *Moritur νόησις νοήσεως, incipit κένωσις κενώσεως*, the groundless self-emptying that makes possible the endless knowledge and manipulation of the world. The Heideggerian discourse on the gradual triumph of technology should change its lugubrious tones and become an Ambrosian *Exultet* to the *felix culpa* of a historical unfolding that at last opens our eyes to the nihil that is both the essence of being-itself and the fate of human beings.

5. The Ur-fact of *Ereignis* entails that everything is comprehensible, except the comprehensibility of everything. This formula might seem to raise the specter of closure and totalization, but it asserts the exact opposite. This view refuses to locate the open “behind” τέχνη, whether behind artifacts in some pristine φύσις, as Antiphon argues, or behind “the worker” in some transrational and transethical *Dasein*, as Right Heideggerians would have it. The point, rather, is to salvage the λήθη (the opening of the open) from all efforts to locate it, either over the edge of this world, where human νοεῖν supposedly runs out of steam, or in “its own proper dwelling place” (ἀεὶ..ἐν τῇ οἰκείᾳ ἔδρᾳ),<sup>39</sup> in an eternal Beyond whence it might intersect and interrupt history, or in an empty, aleatory obligationism. The task is to reinscribe the λήθη where it belongs: at the heart of human being, where it makes possible the endless, untotalizable project of the historical engagement with and humanization of the world. This “economizing” of the λήθη confirms the finitude both of humankind and of all forms of being, precisely by generating an infinity of possibilities for the reshaping of the world. It shows that the mystery of *Ereignis* inhabits and empowers planetary technology. Therefore, we live into the mystery of *Ereignis* not by being less nihilistic but more.
6. Just as the locus of the mystery shifts to the horizontal and historical, so too our engagement with nihilism must shift from the “what” to the “how,” from discourse about the essence of nihilism to decisions about how best to carry out the task of the endless humanization of the world. This was clearly not Heidegger’s move, but it should be our own.

From his early course on the phenomenology of religion (1920–1921) up through his last writings, Heidegger remained ever focused on the essence of “eschatology.” I do not mean the so-called “eschatology of being,”<sup>40</sup> according to which *Ereignis*, long overlooked, has allegedly dispensed to us, in these latter days, the most extreme possibility of being. Rather, I draw on the original sense found in Heidegger’s 1920–1921 course, where the eschaton, no longer a mythical supernatural event at the end of time, is understood as radical finitude, the always arriving but ever unfathomable enabling power by which humans are drawn into realms of significance, and in the face of which they live in utter uncertainty. The words “eschatology” and “eschatological” have to do with living into and out of the finitude of the open, the ultimate, unsurpassable *Ur-factum*. Eschatology means *Geschichtlichkeit*. But when it came to the question of “What is to be done?” the best Heidegger could offer was a redoubling of his eschatological vision. To his assertion that human being is pulled into the mystery of the open (ἦθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων) he adds a purely formal,

empty protreptic to *Gelassenheit*, that is, to letting oneself be pulled into that mystery: γένοιτο ὅσος ἐσσί μαθών. “*Werde wesentlich!*” [“Become what you already are”].<sup>41</sup>

This move is hardly sufficient to the claims made on us by thinking and acting, not only in terms of political responsibilities but first of all in terms of philosophical ones. Indeed, on its own terms, Heidegger’s reflections on the essence of nihilism demand the dismantling of the ahistorical, utopian obligationism to which Right Heideggerians abandon the eschatological. The task, rather, is to reinscribe the eschatological within the concrete order of power—economic, social, political, and ideological (including the philosophical)—where alone the future of “nihilism” (should we choose to use this unfortunate word) will be decided. Such a reinscription does not require in the first instance the elaboration of new political philosophies or schemata of moral obligation. Those either will or will not come in their own good time. The first step, rather, is to recognize that whereas the essence of nihilism can be worked out in the realm of thought, the actual course of the humanization of nature and naturalization of the human is decided not in classrooms or philosophy conferences and not in libraries or texts. Rather, it is being decided in the hills and the streets and in the boardrooms and the *maquilas*. Anything philosophy has to say must come as a reflection on that.

To return to Heidegger’s demand that he be read as a *homo philosophicus* rather than as a *homo politicus*: the present reflections suggest that what Heidegger has to say about the essence of nihilism—important though it might be—cannot realistically serve as a philosophical platform for grounding political options. One would no more want to take Heidegger’s reflections on the essence of nihilism as the basis for political decisions than one would want to take the apocalyptic discourses attributed to Jesus of Nazareth as a blueprint for running a revolution. You may not like technology and its products, the possibilities it opens up at the expense of the ones it closes off. You may not like the current constellation of the management of technology or the distribution of its effects. But Heidegger’s philosophy—for whatever light it may shed on the question of essential nihilism—will not help one bit with changing the real powers that drive τέχνη today. Taken strictly, Heidegger’s discourse does not even encourage you to work to change the direction of history. To motivate and to enact such a change require other strategies and other tactics, and they do not come from Heidegger.

This chapter has sought to be one thing only: a philosophical propaedeutic to understanding Heidegger’s political “error” of 1933—and the continuing possibility of such errors today. If we bracket for now the other and more interesting reasons that Heidegger had for joining the National Socialist German Workers Party, if we focus only on the philosophical justifications that he gave *ex eventu* for his choice, it seems that he joined the Nazis because he thought that they could help overcome nihilism. If we remain at the superstructural level of philosophical discourse, we conclude that his error was not that he picked the wrong party for overcoming nihilism but that he thought nihilism, could be overcome at all.

## Notes

1. Citations in these notes frequently refer to texts by page and line. The line count does not include the "header" or any empty lines on the page but does count the lines of section titles. Further documentation for the theses of this text can be found in the author's "Nihilism: Heidegger/Jünger/Aristotle," in *Phenomenology: Japanese and American Perspectives*, edited by Burt C. Hopkins (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 273–316.
2. Martin Heidegger, "Zur Seinsfrage," in GA 9, 385–462;P, 291–322.
3. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: The Modern Library, new edition, 1961), p. 377.
4. Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, translated by L. M. Palmer (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 45–46.
5. See *Martin Heidegger*, edited by Michel Haar (Paris: Cahiers de l'Herne, 1983), p. 149.
6. See Plato, *Republic*, VII, 509d.
7. GA 5, 324.4-9;EGT, 15.21–25.
8. See *Physics B*, 1, 193 a 12–15, and Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 2d. ed. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1907), p. 594.29–31.
9. In the latter case, μορφή/εἶδος: GA 9, 277.32/212.18.
10. *Metaphysics*, 1, 993 b 30–31; compare Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II 3, 7 c.: "Eadem est dispositio rerum in esse sicut in veritate."
11. Plato's Seventh Letter, 341c.
12. Martin Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare: Protokolle—Gespräche—Briefe*, edited by Medard Boss (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1987), p. 203.7–11.
13. GA 2, 539.15–17;SZ, 408.7–8;BTa, 460.20–21.
14. See GA 9, 266.24;P, 204.5.
15. *Übungen im Lesen*, winter semester (1950–51), April 18, 1951.
16. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, p. 117.7; Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, 5, 430 a 20, and III, 7, 431 a 1.
17. GA 9, 307.23–24;P, 234.17–18.
18. GA 9, p. 407.24–25;P, 308.6.

19. GA 9, p. 389.14–15;P, 294.18–19.
20. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12, 9, 1075 a 4–5.
21. *Confessions*, VII, 11 (17), *Patrologia Latina*, XXXII, p. 743.
22. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 20, quarta obiectio (24), in *Opera Omnia* (New York: Musurgia, 1948–1949), V, 17A.
23. Section X of Heidegger's commentary: GA 9, 336ff;P, 203ff.
24. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, pp. 591–97.
25. *Physics B*, 1, 193 a 26–27.
26. *Historiae*, 3rd. ed., edited by Charles Hude (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927, reprinted 1954), II.98 (vol. I) and IX.116 (vol. II).
27. *Prometheus Bound*, translated by David Grene, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), vol. I, p. 345.
28. *Timaeus* 37e, and *Politics* V, 1, 1301 b 27, respectively.
29. The Right Heideggerian position finds its classical expression in John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985). Compare Thomas Sheehan, "A Way Out of Metaphysics," *Research in Phenomenology* 15 (1985): 229–34.
30. See John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).
31. See Sheehan, "Nihilism: Heidegger/Jünger/Aristotle," pp. 291.5–292.4.
32. See *Metaphysics*, E 1, 1026 a 19 and K 3, 1064 b 3.
33. Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie, Ergänzungsband. Texte aus dem Nachlass 1934–1937*, edited by Reinhold N. Smid (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993), p. 67; *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, translated by David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 67. Hereafter cited as *Krisis*, followed by the German and English pagination and line numbers.
34. *Krisis*, p. 55.33–35/55.8–13; *Krisis*, p. 66.21–23/65.18–19.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 67.15–32/66.6–9, 16–19.
36. David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, Erster Band, 1835; Zweiter Band, 1836). Here, II, §146, p. 729.20–22; II, §147, p. 734.15–18, and p. 734.24–29, my translation. The English translation by

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) is taken from the significantly changed fourth edition (1839) of the work *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman Brothers, 1846; reissued: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

37. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Werner Schuffenhauer (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1970), vol. IX, p. 265.

38. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1968ff); Ergänzungsband, Erster Teil, 1968, p. 536 (manuscript 3); in MEGA, I/2, 263.

39. Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.8.6.

40. GA 5, 327.17-18; EGT, 18.15.

41. Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, II, 72; Martin Heidegger, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1999), p. 534.