

Richard Polt: The Emergency of Being: On Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy

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Martin Heidegger's *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, a work written between 1936 and 1938 but only published in 1989, is a complicated and problematic work. Although some have suggested it is his second major work after *Being and Time*, Heidegger knew that this was a text that was ripe for misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and suggested that it only be published in his collected edition, the *Gesamtausgabe*, after the lecture courses had all appeared. The lecture courses, which he saw as propaedeutics for this work, provide—among other things—a rereading of the tradition from the perspective of Heidegger's concern with being.

English language readers have had its difficulties compounded by the translation by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, which appeared in 1999 as *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. This translation has occasioned much criticism, since it makes a number of extremely tendentious choices for key terms, and over-translates to an alarming degree. In large parts the translation is unreadable, unfortunately something that has been carried over into some appropriations of the work. That said, although it is often referenced, there has been relatively little secondary work devoted to this book, and much of what there is seems content to speak like Heidegger in speaking about Heidegger. Although there have been several journal papers, there is, in English, only a single edited book of essays, and an introductory book by Daniela Vallega-Neu.

Richard Polt is certainly well-placed to correct this state of affairs. He is the author of the excellent and well-received *Heidegger: An Introduction*, and co-translator of the new version of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, and the forthcoming *Being and Truth*, volume 36/37 of the *Gesamtausgabe*, which includes two very important and politically charged lecture courses from the period 1933–34. He has also edited a couple of useful volumes of essays on Heidegger's work.

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Although his focus here is squarely on the *Beiträge*, this is obviously a reading grounded on a thorough analysis of Heidegger's works as a whole. This includes not just the already published materials from the *Gesamtausgabe*, but also a number of forthcoming works, read in manuscript. As such there are some tantalising hints of what is to come, and in particular how the *Beiträge* sits among the other posthumous texts.

Polt rightly characterises the English translation of the *Beiträge* as deeply flawed. He notes that “the existing translation is often peculiar, inconsistent, or misleading” (9), and plausibly suggests that the reaction of analytic philosophers has been shaped by this: their “mockery is all the more gleeful thanks to the sheer silliness of the available English translation” (3). More importantly, perhaps, this has led to serious problems in its interpretation: “their more bizarre constructions . . . have made the fog surrounding Heidegger's text nearly impenetrable” (9). Yet he is not adverse to challenging Heidegger's writing itself in this work, noting that “the style borrows from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and Hölderlin's hymns, without attaining the grace of either writer” (2).

Foremost among the difficulties facing an interpretation is the notion of *Ereignis* itself, with which the text is centrally concerned. This is a complicated term in Heidegger's thought, a complexity, which begins with its very translation. It has one sense of an event, and another that deals with the notion of owning or the proper, which has led some to translate it as ‘appropriation’ or ‘propriation’. Polt suggests ‘appropriating event’ or ‘event of appropriation’. Their length may be a problem, as he admits, but he suggests this is their worst fault (10). Chapter One is devoted to working through the issues that need to be thought through in order to approach this term in its philosophical complexity. Elsewhere he is willing to challenge orthodoxies in English scholarship, suggesting for instance that *Dasein* needs translation unless it is to become too easy a term, preferring the now largely abandoned ‘being-there’; or that authenticity and inauthenticity should be rethought through the notion of appropriation as ‘ownedness’ and ‘disownedness’. More prosaically, ‘appropriateness’ and ‘inappropriateness’ may be even better.

The general approach to language is to be applauded. Polt makes a distinction between a translator and a commentator. The translator is forced into plays on words in an attempt to mirror the German, to include German words in the English text, and to contend with the different ways of forming words between the languages. The commentator, on the other hand, can make use of the resources of the English language, especially its roots in both Anglo-Saxon and Latin. He suggests that “the result will not be a translation of Heidegger, but an approach to his issue from our own language. It is impossible to make Heidegger speak English, but it is not impossible for English to speak of be-ing” (19). In this it undoubtedly helps Polt the commentator that he is an accomplished translator, and we can but hope that one day he is able to provide an alternative translation to Emad and Maly for this text.

He is also a writer with a view to the clear and illuminating example, such as this one of the problems of calculative thinking: “a quantitative topography of the Grand Canyon is *precise*, but it would be wrong to see it as more *rigorous* than a poetic evocation of the canyon. The poem responds to the place as a whole, as it presents itself; the measurements simply ignore this experience. In this sense, the

quantitative account of the canyon is loose and careless" (113). He is also able to encapsulate complex ideas succinctly, and to render insights with a poetic turn of phrase. He notes that his first reading of the text occasioned the characterization of it as "a fertile and infected symphony" (22); and in the concluding pages, describes it as "a book saturated with emergency, drunk on apocalypse" (254).

Polt has undoubtedly a difficult task. The difficulties are in part due to the lack of an agreed vocabulary for reading the key terms within Heidegger's work of the 1930s and beyond, and the relative lack of careful work on Heidegger's thought of this period, compared to that of the 1920s. This book is a major contribution to that subfield of Heidegger studies. If it lacks the textual fidelity and contextual insights of the work of Theodore Kisiel, it is more philosophically, that is argumentatively, concerned. Polt suggests that three key themes of *Being and Time* are reinterpreted in the *Beiträge*: "temporality, the meaning of being, and the inquiry into our understanding of being as a *transcendental* inquiry" (45). The reading of each of these is extremely useful for those readers familiar with Heidegger's work, and I would particularly highlight the discussions of temporality and the shifts to thinking time-space, the event and the site, and the inconsistencies of even Heidegger's mature thought on these questions (cf., 181). However I would suggest that readers approaching this book would need a reasonable grounding in Heidegger's thought as a whole in order to approach it. Just as Heidegger thought his work should be read only after the lecture courses, so too with its interpretation. Chapter Two looks at questions of style in Heidegger's work, approaching the problems of the text through Heidegger's way of engaging with them. This is a powerful and useful mode of engagement, as is the discussion of the role the gods play in the text, which is one of the themes of Chapter three. Polt suggests that the *Beiträge* is not a fully unified work, but rather one that throws up a number of possibilities that readers are left to develop. Some are "dead ends", some are "embryonic insights that promise to deepen our thought, and perhaps our lives, if we find the right way to make them our own" (22).

This emphasis on what we should take from this text is one that runs through the work. Polt makes a distinction between the 'positive' ideas of the *Beiträge*, and the 'negative' ones, and does not discuss the latter at any length (6). This distinction between positive and negative is not entirely the same as that between the "dead ends" and the "insights", yet there is a relation. Polt wants to concentrate on Heidegger's contributions rather than his criticisms. While I have sympathy with the need to concentrate the focus and not attempt to provide a commentary on the entirety of the text, this does mean that the explicitly political focus of the *Beiträge* is largely neglected. Polt notes, rightly, that the text has an implicit critique of National Socialism, but how this is accomplished is rarely explicit. There are some revealing comments on the distance Heidegger now sees between philosophy and politics, particularly through a discussion of the notion of the *Volk* (178–179), but these are not fully elaborated. Polt notes that "the text is at odds not only with Nazism but with all current forms of political organization" (15), which is true as far as it goes. It gestures in the direction of those who have argued that this disillusion with Nazism followed an earlier hope that it might transcend modern politics, but Polt does not work through this claim in any detail. There are some

illuminating remarks on the choice Heidegger did not make, namely “liberal democracy” (228 ff), yet these are relegated to a closing section entitled “Afterthoughts”. Similarly, he argues that “the *Contributions* absolve Heidegger of any charges that he was an uncritical supporter of Nazism until the bitter end” (178). This is an understandable interpretation, and one with which I would broadly agree, but it tends to see Nazism as rather too much of a unified doctrine of thought. There were debates and disputes within National Socialism—a writer like Heidegger could be critical of key elements, as he was even in 1933–1934, without this meaning that this was a critique from the outside. In that sense, as with others, this interpretation needs to be balanced with those who have worked through the ‘negative’, a task I would suggest is equally in need of the careful argumentation, contextualisation, and interpretative rigour that is on display here.