
Weimar's Lost Existence:

Anachronism in Philosophy, Religion, and Heidegger's *Existence and Time (Sein und Zeit)*

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Weimar's Lost Existence: An Introduction to Heidegger

“It’s coming, believe me, and soon. Of course it will not ‘improve’ the world . . . But it won’t have been entirely in vain. It will reveal the bankruptcy of present-day ideals, there will be a sweeping away of Stone Age gods. The world, as it is now, wants to die, wants to perish—and it will.”

Hermann Hesse, *Demian*

The decaying of worlds, aching to be born or simply to die, captures the mood of the Weimar generation to which Martin Heidegger (b. 1889) belonged, and echoes the darkness of our own time. Hesse’s novel, *Demian*, was written in 1917, ten years before Heidegger published *Sein und Zeit*, and the same year Max Weber gave his famously pessimistic lecture, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Scholarship as a Vocation). Published in 1919, *Demian* became a sensation, and it propelled Hesse from a moderately successful novelist to a prophet of the times. Like Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*, *Demian* succeeds in giving voice to the anguish of an epoch conscious of its death. Even before the War began or was lost for the Germans, the sense of crisis, decay, and possibility was palpable, especially among artists and intellectuals. Near the end of *Demian*, Emil Sinclair, the narrator,

sees a bird, and tells his friend, Demian, who responds: “The bird has a significance. Do you know what?” “No. I only feel that it signifies some shattering event, a move on the part of destiny. I believe it concerns all of us.”

Martin Heidegger is the last philosopher to write a book that shaped a century and not just a discipline. Like Sinclair’s omen, Heidegger and *Sein und Zeit* concern us all. The branch of philosophy *Sein und Zeit* addresses is metaphysics. Metaphysics names the tradition of reflection on questions about fundamental identity, questions about the verb “to be,” such as: What does it mean to exist? What is most real? Metaphysics was historically seen as the apex of philosophy, for the most fundamental questions we need to ask, and answer, to live well are question about what it means *to be*. By the time Heidegger published *Sein und Zeit* in 1927, metaphysics was in crisis, a crisis it shared more broadly with European culture, science, and religion.

Sein und Zeit, which has previously been translated into English as “Being and Time,” is as much a work of literature as a novel by Hesse or Mann. A very different kind of literature, to be sure, but one that was and has remained a powerful force in altering the moods and sense of reality of its readers. *Sein und Zeit* makes converts; Heidegger had disciples; his aura as a teacher was that of a mystic or prophet. Among his students he was referred to as “the hidden king.” He was not the typical academic philosopher, even for Germany, where professors enjoyed authority unparalleled in the Anglophone world. As the students’ title to describe him indicates, Heidegger’s persona and his work’s effects evoke religious language. His philosophy has consistently been related to theology, and *Sein und Zeit* in particular has often been regarded as a kind of masked work of religious thought. This has only increased his odium to some (like the logical positivists), for it challenges the image of the philosopher as a paragon of secular rationality, instead conjuring the image of a dubious and dark figure, peddling superstitious nonsense under the guise of metaphysical profundity.

Sein und Zeit is part of a literature of crisis, analogous to a number of other works from Heidegger's own era and the past. It seeks to effect a sense of suspension and radical transformation. But like the man himself, Heidegger's major book remains a mystery. One can point to the cultural crisis of the Weimar era, as I have done, but that gesture, however evocative, does not offer conceptual illumination. As important as *feeling* something of the world Heidegger writes from is, it does not tell us what *Sein und Zeit* is really about. For the fact remains that it is a 437-page technical work of metaphysics about which there exists almost no interpretive consensus. Quite the opposite, for Heidegger scholarship itself is a welter of voices.

One of the most influential works of modern philosophical and religious thought, even people who dislike Heidegger or his ideas agree that *Sein und Zeit* is important. But there the agreement ends. Indeed, for a book of such remarkable influence, *Sein und Zeit* has a strange status, arising from an even more perplexing situation: No one seems to know what it means.

There is hardly any agreement on the most elementary questions about the book, including the meaning of its title or the nature of its argument. The English speaker, who reads *Sein und Zeit* as *Being and Time*, may be surprised to discover that no term is more contentious or unclear than that little word, *Sein* (the German nominal form of the verb "to be"). But is this really surprising or even significant?

After all, the history of philosophy and religion is riven by interpretive conflict. The seeming inability of readers to reach common conclusions about major texts characterizes not only the interpretation of sacred scriptures but also the major texts in the philosophical tradition.

It is hardly surprising, then, to discover that Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, widely regarded as one of the most important philosophical texts of modern philosophy, should be a site of such pervasive and profound conflicts. There are powerful reasons humans invest so much energy into disagreement. The more importance we ascribe to an idea,

argument, or book, the more the act of making sense of it is also an act of constituting our own identity. In the case of religious writings, for example, to determine the meaning of the sacred text is often to discover the meaning of some aspect of oneself, one's world or obligations. All important arguments are, in this sense, *arguments about who we are*.

While that explains why we should expect fierce rivalry about major books and ideas, it does not mean all disagreements are equally significant. To treat the conflicting interpretations of Heidegger, and particularly *Sein und Zeit*, as only one more instance of a general pattern is a mistake because the disagreement here is more fundamental. It is certainly true, as William James said, that “we find no proposition ever regarded by anyone as evidently certain that has not either been called a falsehood, or at least had its truth sincerely questioned by someone else,”¹ and that lack of consensus on philosophical issues applies as well to interpretations. Yet Plato scholars, for example, are not in disagreement that Plato's *Republic* outlines a view of the soul and the city, and in this there is a very basic agreement on what the *Republic* is about. Moreover, although there are plenty of arguments about how key terms should be translated in Plato, there is no widespread sense that, perhaps, no one has any good idea what these central terms mean, or that Plato scholars may just be talking nonsense. Yet this is precisely the situation in contemporary Heidegger scholarship, particularly in the Anglophone world.²

One of the leading Heidegger scholars, Thomas Sheehan, recently argued that Heidegger scholarship is in a major crisis and requires a radical shift in orientation.³ Sheehan focuses on what he calls the “Being paradigm,” which he says has dominated Heidegger scholarship since the publication of Richardson's *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*.⁴ According to this paradigm, Heidegger's work focuses on something called “Being,” and a proper understanding of this reality or concept is essential to an understanding of his work.

Sheehan argues with considerable plausibility that this paradigm has been a failure. His alternative is a shift away from the Being paradigm, meaning a shift away from the focus on “*Sein*” in Heidegger’s work, to a new center, a focus on the origins of meaning. Sheehan’s core claim, put generally, is that there is a fundamental crisis in Heidegger scholarship due to the failure to make sense of his apparently central concern, Being. A second claim is that because of this crisis—however characterized—a new paradigm is needed. Both of these claims, I will argue, are true, although sometimes for a different reason than those supplied by Sheehan.

The reason, however, is both simpler and more difficult than Sheehan’s profound argument. It’s simpler because “Being” is the wrong translation of *Sein*, more difficult because the proper translation of Heidegger’s book is actually *Existence and Time*, a fact that has not been recognized in translations or interpretations of Heidegger. The reason the title has not been accurately translated is mainly Heidegger’s fault combined with the immense and inherent difficulties of the subject. Heidegger resisted throughout his life an adequate acknowledgement or reckoning with his debts to Roman Catholicism, his early scholastic training, and his life-long interest in Christian theology. In short, Heidegger the philosopher was less than honest about his debts to Heidegger the theologian, the young prophet of Eternity against the evils of modernism (as in his pious Catholic youth, when he was aiming to becoming a priest) or the later mystic and critic of “onto-theology” (his own earlier views) as idolatry.

The clues to the translation are many, starting with Heidegger’s own repeated defense against the very structure he uses to advance his argument in *Sein und Zeit*: the traditional scholastic distinction between Essence and Existence. In a key passage, Heidegger says the “essence of Dasein lies in its existence,” a passage that is shocking to a reader who knows the work of Thomas Aquinas, as Heidegger did, having been trained in his thought from his early adolescence. Aquinas famously thought that all creatures owe both their essence, or eternal nature, and the fact or act of their existence, to God, the former arising

from God's mind, the latter from God's act of will that results in creation. God's own nature was radically different than all created beings. For God, the divine "essence" is the divine existence. For God, and God alone, essence is existence. Heidegger took this formula of God's unique nature, and adapted it to his presentation of Dasein, his word for the human in *Existence and Time*. He defined humans with a modified version of Thomas Aquinas' description of God. Why did he do this, and what in the world did it mean?

This monographic essay began life as an attempt to answer this question when I was at Yale, where I made the initial discovery in a seminar with Karsten Harries in 2014. The result of this venture was to discover that we are confused about Heidegger because we have been enchanted by a confounding spell. The spell, one Heidegger himself cast with great power, is the illusion that we can separate philosophy and religion and still make sense of our own history and identity. I call this spell the myth of secular philosophy, the idea that philosophy is essentially separate from and possibly even opposed to religious concerns, that is, concerns about divinity. Heidegger was part of a long stream of confused thinking, still with us today, in which certain evident yet awkward facts, above all, that metaphysics and theology form part of a single tradition in Western thought, are routinely ignored, suppressed, or denied.

To explain Heidegger's work and its significance, we have to see it as part of the story by which secular modernity makes itself immune to its own fundamentally religious origins. This attempt at immunity fails – we cannot change history – but in another sense it has had a tremendous if partial success. Even scholars of religion and philosophers tend to think their current separation in subject matter is not just a contemporary convenience but a truth about history. The myth of secular philosophy charms us by naturalizing our own assumptions as secular people, and particularly as academics. It lets us take our

personal and cultural beliefs for granted, then project them onto the past and non-Western cultures as if we are the norm by which others should be judged, rather than ourselves one contingent, curious situation in time.

Once the spell of secular philosophy was broken, I was able to read Heidegger historically, that is, in terms of what most made sense of his work, regardless of contemporary disciplinary divisions. In doing so, I discovered an angle from which Heidegger's book made sense not only in terms of his personal development and his immediate context, but also in terms of the broader traditions he was rigorously trained in, Christian theology and Western metaphysics. I came to realize how remarkable yet natural it was that many (not all) readers of Heidegger ignored his long study of Christian theology or regarded his religious background as philosophically unimportant, even though Heidegger knew theology backwards and forwards and had planned, well into his twenties, on becoming a Catholic priest. Real philosophy was secular, after all.

The cost of denying the myth of secular philosophy was academic heresy, I slowly realized. One could not simply challenge the relationship of philosophy and religion and then proceed with business as usual. Nothing was the same. Heidegger's book makes a great deal of sense when read in light of Western metaphysics *and* Christian theology, but only if one did not read the theology, the metaphysics, or Heidegger, in the orthodox manner – in short, as a normal academic philosopher or religious scholar would, treating each area as if it were actually separate, or separable, from the other.

So in solving one problem – what does Heidegger's major work mean, what is it really about? – I found myself outside of academic orthodoxy and became a reluctant heretic: in philosophy, theology, and in Heidegger scholarship. My training as a philosopher and scholar of religion provided one of the keys necessary to make sense of Heidegger. It revealed the deeper narrative in which his work not only

makes sense, but contributes to a reassessment of our own concepts of philosophy, religion, and secularity.

Through the major turn in recent decades towards critical scholarship on the concept of religion and the secular, as well as increasingly historical accounts of the philosophical tradition, the material for a new story is emerging, a story in which my heretical angle on Heidegger becomes intelligible if not orthodox. Heidegger made sense, I saw, as the last magician whose spell had yet to be broken by critical history. And thus a story about Heidegger transformed into the story in which Heidegger, to be understood, must become its final chapter, and, in a sense, the first of an emerging narrative of the new world, in and beyond Weimar, from which this monograph and its smaller story descends.

When the myth of secular philosophy is integrated into a broader narrative about philosophy and religion, it explains why Heidegger's work has proved so persistently problematic yet important. The answer, in brief, is ironically Heideggerian: It is because we have forgotten our origins – specifically, the origins of our own ideas and disciplines, and thus the meaning of *Sein und Zeit* conceals itself from us, just as Heidegger's philosophy conceals his theological vision. Generally, we have forgotten that while we may be atheists about the gods, history is a destiny we cannot escape, and it steals religion from us.

Religion is a concept distinctive to the modern West. Not present in the language or thought of non-Western or pre-modern cultures, our concept of religion is itself part of how the secular emerges. Once religion is only one segment of society, fully separate and separable from other spheres, it can be contrasted with a sphere in which it is absent, the secular-as-non-religious sphere, but the framework in which these two ideas are operative and contrastive – the world in which the religious/secular divide exists and makes sense – is profoundly novel and unintelligible apart from developments in the religious thought of the West. In other words, the secular is a theological idea. Once we grasp this counter-intuitive fact, much begins to make sense. “Secular” philosophy, for example, is a myth projected on the past by modern

philosophers who inherited liberal Christianity's assumptions but forgot their origins, and thus abandoned the traditional equation of divinity, rationality, and eternity – what one might call the essence of Platonism and orthodox Christianity.⁵

These modern philosophers include Heidegger, who was operating precisely at the interstitial space where metaphysics and theology were becoming untied, just as Christianity's Platonic theological core was collapsing along with the European world. This critical collapse began in the Middle Ages or Reformation era, but the Weimar era was when it went supernova, sucking eternity and its works into the abyss of time and history. Heidegger's philosophy attempts to destroy the legacy of Western metaphysics and theology (his own earlier life) by inverting its equation of divinity, eternity, and rationality. Just as these three categories could not be understood as distinct for much of Western history, so "philosophy" and "religion" are not separate and discrete historical objects, and the forced assumption that they are, as in Heidegger's work, reflects modernity's delusive attempt to outrun history and construct a world built on the abolition of its own foundation.

Such was the fate of metaphysics and theology. Once reason ceased being divine, metaphysics lost its obvious and self-evident religiosity and validity, while theology lost its apparently unquestionable rationality. Both tangled over eternity, which still animated the modern ideal of scientific knowledge – knowledge of unchanging principles, or self-evident and immutable premises leading to rationally necessary truths – and the modern idea of God. But by Heidegger's time, eternity was in eclipse, and thus God and reason and their institutional embodiment in the university were in danger of losing their last connection to each other and the history that gave them birth, the history that let them – the university, reason, and the divine – transcend time to touch something unchanging. Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* is an attempt to rewrite the nature of philosophy and religion by eliminating eternity, jettisoning rationality, and transforming divinity.

That's the short story – the story of how pulling the thread of *Sein* in Heidegger's masterwork led me to a novel conceptualization of Heidegger, his era, and our own, drawing on scholarship in history, philosophy, social science, and religious studies. Over the course of the Winter and Spring, part of that story – as it concerns Heidegger – will appear temporarily as a serially published monograph, at *Marginalia's* Forum, while major aspects of the broader argument will remain exclusive to the book project on Weimar and posthumanism, from which this material is drawn.

A new story is necessary if we are to discover a way of reading Heidegger that makes sense of his major work, opens new possibilities for the collaboration of philosophy, history, and religious studies, and reimagines our own relationship with the religious and the secular.

This monograph, the story in its most condensed form, can be read as a preliminary movement towards the fuller drama, taking us back to the world of Weimar and thus towards our own future. Achieving an historical understanding of philosophy, religion, and the secular will change how we interpret the past and present, and explain why the Weimar era, and its thinkers, lie far ahead of us, rather than a century behind. As Heidegger himself said, speaking of his theological training, “Our origins hold forever our future.”

END NOTES

1. William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *idem, The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1955), 15. James excepts from his claim “abstract propositions of comparison,” like $2+2=4$.
2. Thomas Sheehan, “A paradigm shift in Heidegger Research,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 34 (2002), 183-202.
3. Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).
4. William J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Nijhof, 1963).
5. Samuel Loncar, “Science and Religion: An Origins Story,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 56: 1 (2021), 275-296.