

Heidegger, Self And State: Doull, Nicholson And The Problem Of Postmodern Politics

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In the context of Heidegger's thought it is not easy to say what the state is.¹

I'd like to begin by expressing sincere appreciation to Eli Diamond for organizing this session and inviting me to be part of it. The philosophical life is at bottom, I think, a life of gratitude. As Heidegger himself said more than once, *denken ist danken*. But I am thankful, in particular, to have been touched by the legacy of James Doull before encountering it explicitly in the handsome volume David Peddle and Neil Robertson have now produced.² My parents were students at Dalhousie in the early 1950's when Doull and George Grant were developing, in classes and informal dialogue, the modes of intellectual engagement that would have such profound impact on Canadian philosophy in the decades to follow. Their recollections of those days shaped my earliest expectations of philosophy and university experience. Much later on, as a doctoral student trying to break into the job market, I made a presentation on Nietzsche and Heidegger at the 1989 meeting of the CPA. My commentator was F.L. Jackson. In a brief correspondence running up to the Congress he sent me a substantial paper he had written on the revolutionary nature of contemporary thought.³ I came back to it for years in trying to work out my own orientation in the history of philosophy. I am happy to acknowledge here the influence of that Doull-inspired piece. Finally, my Ph.D. supervisor at the University of Toronto was none other than Graeme Nicholson. In relation to some details of Doull's vision he seems to have taken very seriously the Nietzschean maxim that one repays one's teacher badly by remaining merely a student. But in a deeper sense, he displayed for me and many others over the years that Socratic commitment to the examined life, to philosophy as a dynamic conversation, that seems to

1 James Doull, "Heidegger and the State," in *Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull*, eds. David G. Peddle and Neil G. Robertson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 357.

2 *Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull*

3 F.L. Jackson, "The Revolutionary Origins of Contemporary Philosophy", *Dionysius*, ix (1985), 129-71.

me now the very heart of Doull's project and the secret of its enduring power. I'd like to preface closer discussion of the Doull/Nicholson chapter on Heidegger's politics with a more general remark on that power. It seems to me an important frame of reference for an approach to *Sein und Zeit* and other texts that ventures far beyond the borders of what we might call orthodox Heidegger scholarship.

Although Doull's philosophical interests span the entire history of the West, he is not a polymath of the kind Heraclitus criticizes—i.e. a tourist breezing through territories in which others have made a permanent home. On the contrary, his written works elaborate a single vision. To call that vision bold would be an understatement. It is nothing less than a narrative of human experience. On the evidence of *Philosophy and Freedom* this narrative lit a fire under the best students of five or six generations—engaging them, shaping their own scholarly labours, calling them back to certain points (sometimes over the course of an entire working life). The commentaries collected in the volume—their range of tone and approach notwithstanding—all bear its marks. In effect, the narrative itself is something like a country of origin. And so Doull's interlocutors have in them something of Plato's attitude toward the lore of Greece. They respond to him as if caring for a birthright, coming back to a series of foundational stories and celebrating their power of accommodation, their imaginative depth. In this respect, I have come to regard Doull's work as mythic in the best possible sense. There is, in its daring settlement of history, a kind of intellectual hospitality, an invitation to think for and against its detailed claims, to explore it precisely in order to establish one's own bearing.

In the Heidegger chapter especially, all of this is very much in evidence. Doull doesn't read Heidegger on his own terms. Instead, he assigns him a special role in the story of postmodern selfhood and its concomitant political possibilities. Nicholson returns to that story, acknowledging its fundamental insights, pushing its limits—and in the end—crafting in dialogue with it an orchestration of the problem of political engagement that sets the matter of Doull's critique of postmodernism before us in an optimally forceful way. I will review these developments now in more depth.

From the standpoint of Doull's narrative, the first and most important point to make is that the name 'Heidegger' designates a moment in the dialectic of selfhood that frames all significant social and political developments of the 19th and 20th centuries. This dialectic has its origins in the collapse of the vision of culture as the accommodation of reason in the world expressed most convincingly by Hegel and the German Idealists. Indeed, it is precisely the aftermath of that collapse. The kind of thinking at work in the aftermath—itself flattened, and so reductively unaware of its own poverty and limitation—Doull calls revolutionary. Its historical forms vary (each generation seems to produce new configurations). And it stretches across the political spectrum from extreme left to extreme right. But it always manifests, in one way or another, a divided or alienated self. That is to say, revolutionary thinking, in all of its forms, is grounded in the un-interrogated presumption that reason cannot be accommodated in the world, that we must choose—in the process of shaping and realizing a self-understanding—between ideality and nature. In other words, the post-Hegelian, postmodern world—the stage

upon which Heidegger makes his appearance, and so the most significant context of his thought—is defined by the rupture of the ideal and the natural self.

If he is not entirely convinced by this story, Nicholson seems to me profoundly sympathetic to it. The first section of his piece is dedicated largely to supplementing the abstractness of Doull's dialectic with a discussion of concrete historical forms and events. The ruptured self, he tells us, is already visible in "the individual Victorian" who "combined a stern personal morality with an unprecedented rapacity in business affairs", in the contradictory tendencies toward "national states and languages" and "world economic order", and in the simultaneous push toward the political ideals of socialism and the radically naturalist counter-movements of "buccaneer capitalism" and "Nietzschean will".⁴ In and through the First World War, this ruptured self

... pass(es) into the general culture, congealing shortly thereafter into the activist idealism of international Communism, which would enshrine the victory of universal man over nature, and ... Fascism, which celebrated the natural will and one's particular national heritage, denying the unity of mankind in the name of racial theories.⁵

Gathering up the historical result of 19th century revolutionary thought with a view to framing specifically the moment of Heidegger's arrival, Nicholson writes:

... with the rupture of the natural self from the ideal self, with the unprecedented violence of the First World War, there emerged new ideologies that made it the business of the state either to conduct revolutionary warfare worldwide in the name of the new Communist man or to guard the nation or Volk and breed it for the future. The rational, enlightened works of humane reform could wait. Reality was threatening and strong measures were needed.⁶

What could Heidegger himself have seen as possibilities of selfhood and statehood standing in that moment? On this question, with the frame of Doull's story about the postmodern world now clearly in view, Nicholson moves from commentary to dialogue.

Let's begin again with Doull's view. Heideggerian phenomenology comes on the scene at the crucial point of transit between 19th and 20th century revolutionary thinking. It arrives, we might say, in the quiet eye of the storm. Inasmuch as this eye opens as a

4 Graeme Nicholson, "Heidegger and the Dialectic of Modernity," in *Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull*, 378.

5 Ibid. 379.

6 Ibid. 380.

result of the crisis of the First World War, it affords Heidegger and others a certain critical perspective on the aspirations of the 19th century. Looking out on a world that has left natural man (especially the German) at the mercy of a punishingly indifferent global economy, he sees the futility of existential and political idealism. However, caught between cycles of revolution, he cannot aspire to criticism of the reductionism of revolutionary thinking itself. Accordingly, as a new and more terrifying cycle of that thinking begins, he stakes his claim in defense of natural man and the politics of the Volk. The definitive statement of this claim comes in the *Daseinsanalytik* of *Sein und Zeit*. There genuine selfhood is located in the heroic act of refusing the idle talk of unspecified and metaphysically indeterminate others (the mirage of an international community) and taking responsibility for possibilities handed down in the specific drama of a local (national) history. Authentic politics belongs to the natural man—ideality, globalism, internationalism, what Heidegger later famously calls *Technik*, is inauthentic.

I would like to make two observations before moving to Nicholson's nuanced response to this position. First, it seems to me that Heidegger is precisely the sort of monster for Doull that Nietzsche is for Heidegger, i.e. someone whose dissatisfaction with his own tradition makes its failure explicit but who, thrown back on the resources of that tradition, entrenches it at a deeper level. If this is indeed the case, then Heidegger is an indispensable character in the story of the postmodern world. Standing between the 19th and 20th century cycles of revolutionary thinking, he both speaks to and is entangled in the rupture of self we ought to take as philosophy's central concern. Whether in Doull's or some other terms, I cannot but think that this will be the judgment of history.

Second, it seems to me that Doull's contextualization of Heidegger, its lack of orthodoxy notwithstanding, resolves with challenging clarity a problem more sympathetic readers have found utterly vexing—viz. why, bracketing the polemical and tactical endorsement of National Socialism as Rector at Freiburg so much discussed in the past 15 years, Heidegger's philosophy seems so politically inscrutable. The assumption of such readers is that Heidegger must have had something new and enlightening to say on the question of the state—as on the questions of being, time, mood, understanding, death, anxiety, conscience, history and so on. If Doull is right, however, then Heidegger is inscrutable precisely because the dialectic of the ideal and the natural self reduces his political insight to the poverty of its age, to the blind repetition of an inherited 'either/or' (i.e. either naturalism or idealism, authentic nationalism or inauthentic globalism—ultimately either Fascism or Communism). If Doull is right, sympathetic commentators have found nothing new and enlightening in Heidegger on the question of the state because there's nothing new and enlightening to find.

Nicholson, whose own contributions to discussion of Heidegger's politics have been significant,⁷ is, not surprisingly, reticent about accepting this conclusion. He argues

⁷ See especially "The Politics of Heidegger's Rectoral Address," *Man and World* 20 (1987), 171-87.

persuasively that the *Daseinsanalytik* of *Sein und Zeit* stands in the service of a fundamental ontology, that departing from a tradition unjustifiably convinced that the self (whether ideal, natural, formal or existential) constitutes the inexhaustible material of thought, it tries to recover philosophy's original concern. This is pivotal to the conception of the problem. Doull appears to proceed on the assumption 1) that Heidegger's engagement of National Socialism (in the *Rektoratsrede* for example) is a fairly straightforward philosophical endorsement, and 2) that that endorsement expresses the politics latent in *Sein und Zeit*. That is to say, he reasons from what is admittedly the most obvious interpretation of Heidegger's behavior as a public figure to the re-reading of his phenomenology. Nicholson, conversely, here and elsewhere,⁸ insists on keeping things in order. His claim is 1) that *Sein und Zeit* comes first, prior to Hitler's rise to power—indeed oblivious of all that is coming and concerned only with what we might call the condition of the possibility of politics, and 2) that a nuanced reading of the public statements of '33 and '34 shows that they are not straightforward endorsements of National Socialism (certainly not its political science and racial policy) but “reciprocative rejoinders”—philosophical responses—to what Heidegger imagines (wrongly) as an authentic possibility handed down to Germany by its history. On Nicholson's view, in other words, we oughtn't consider Heidegger's phenomenology latently political in any determinate sense. Fidelity to chronology and sensitive interpretation of texts and circumstances suggest rather that his politics is latently phenomenological—that he sees in National Socialism's call for reformation of institutions, and of the university in particular, principally a chance to recover “[w]hat was in the beginning the awed perseverance of the Greeks in the face of what is”.⁹

The notion of a phenomenological politics, of the *Rektoratsrede* and its companion pieces as attempts to “inject the resolute questioning of academia into the midst of the state, sharpening the self-knowledge of the Volk”¹⁰ does not excuse Heidegger's blindness to the violence and intolerance of Hitler's regime (already manifest in 1933), nor his naivety in thinking that such a questioning might change its direction. But it undermines the interpretation of *Sein und Zeit* as a “classical exposition”¹¹ of contemporary naturalism and so the effortless reduction of Heidegger's political vision to the terms of Doull's dialectic. Its entanglement in the struggle between the ideal and the natural notwithstanding, there is a subtle remainder in what Heidegger says about the human community that must be addressed.

8 Ibid. 172-75.

9 Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University”, trans. K. Harries, *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1985), 474.

10 “Heidegger and the Dialectic of Modernity,” 385.

11 “Heidegger and the State”, 366.

Doull's conditioned acknowledgment of this remainder comes in discussion of the later Heidegger—in particular, assessing the alternatives of *Technik* and poetic dwelling. Here, the principal themes of his reading return in slightly different garb. The ideal self characterized in the early period in terms of an inauthentic, indeterminate, international public now returns, refined but essentially unchanged, as “global technology”¹²; the natural self, originally an aggressive, Promethean, German Dasein is the poetized community of thinkers and poets waiting for the epiphany of being, for what Heidegger sometimes calls *Ereignis*. Just as the existential analysis of inauthenticity provides a partial critique of the aspirations of the ideal self in the global economy of the 1920's, the metaphysics of *Technik* says something germane to the cultural situation of post-Second World War Europe and North America. But the later Heidegger, like the earlier, is compromised by his entanglement in the very dialectic he sees “through a glass darkly”. The thinkers and poets of the post-technological community renounce the revolutionary spirit of *Sein und Zeit*, and so differ from it, at the price of surrendering control of politics to *Technik* altogether. Consigning all institutions of government (and indeed the university itself) to the domain of commodifying bureaucracy, they become post-political, regarding philosophy and nurture of the state as antithetical. It would be quite wrong, on Doull's view, to see in this renunciation (its subtler quietude notwithstanding) an escape from the rupture of the self. On the contrary, it makes that rupture absolute. To give up on the institutions of government, on science and learning, on the spirit itself, is to make of *Technik* an ineluctable destiny, to condemn thinking and poetry to the status of perpetual (and perpetually unsuccessful) counter-movements. Heidegger might have known better. He observed often enough that you can't overcome metaphysics if overcoming is itself metaphysical. By the same token, in Doull's story, you can't escape the dialectic of the ideal and the natural if the terms of your release are set by that dialectic. “No one can jump over his own shadow.”¹³

I said at the outset of this talk that Nicholson crafts, in dialogue with the Doullian account of postmodernism, an orchestration of the problem of political engagement. It reaches a climax of sorts precisely in weighing his teacher's critique of the later Heidegger:

... the following challenge may be put to Doull: perhaps the current reality of the state really does not incarnate to any credible degree the true idea of the state as the great tradition of philosophy conceived it. We would need a fuller investigation to determine this question. But my appeal to Doull would be that, surely, one could not go so far as to claim that if post-modernity gives us nothing better than a government of administration, micro-management, etc. (i.e. the Heideggerian *Technik*), then our true and

12 Ibid. 368

13 Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 199.

universal interests would still lie more with that state than with a poetic life lived under a god-filled sky. If Heidegger were right in seeing the state as part of *Technik, das Ge-stell*, it would not be here that our true interests are found. I am in agreement with Doull, if I understand him correctly, that the Platonic-Aristotelian view, and the Hegelian view, are better than what came after them. But what if reality were in discord with Platonic, Aristotelian and Hegelian philosophy?¹⁴

The tone here is respectfully hypothetical. Nicholson asks with disarming directness: What if Heidegger is right? What if the possibility of an authentic state is indeed crushed by the advance of *Technik*? How will Doull deal with the evidence—plentiful in our daily lives—that the ideal will Heidegger sizes up, perhaps inadequately, in his talk about technology seems now in the grip of a logic of degeneration that makes genuine political engagement almost impossible to imagine? What will he say, for example, in the face of a pervasive “legislating for freedom”¹⁵ the sole motivation of which is obsession with private property and personal autonomy? Or a “legislating for justice”¹⁶ directed principally if not exclusively by the desire for litigation? Or a “legislating for welfare”¹⁷ that yields “a virtually infinite bureaucracy of social work, interventions, payments, redevelopments, redistribution, affirmative action, and employment equity”?¹⁸

To such penetrating and urgent questions, it would be best, of course, to have Doull himself respond. But my grasp of his narrative—and of the finer contours of the texts in *Philosophy and Freedom*—is too tentative, at this point, to orchestrate such a thing with any confidence. Instead, I’d like to conclude with a remark of my own prompted by consideration of Doull’s project at a very basic level.

At the beginning of my talk, I suggested that we might regard this project as mythic in the best possible sense, i.e. as having offered generations of students philosophical accommodation, giving them their labour and an original space for reflection on their own lives. I think mythic writing is prompted by a mythic vision of the world. If Doull didn’t already see the world as a home, if he didn’t already perceive in the cosmos spread out in front of him an invitation to know, he couldn’t and wouldn’t have reproduced this invitation for others. But the cosmos opens up to human beings out of culture and its institutions. For the mythic thinker, these things too are inviting—

14 “Heidegger and the Dialectic of Modernity,” 388.

15 Ibid. 389.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid. 390.

18 Ibid.

essentially, irresistibly. A great tragedy of modern and postmodern history—no doubt framed by the struggle of the ruptured self—is its progressive sanctioning of the view that the ideal or perfect institution is uninhabited, free of the idiosyncrasies of selves and subjects, anonymous and insensitive in its working, a warehouse of human resources. In spite of his penetrating criticism of modern metaphysics, of the modern ethos—or perhaps because of it—Heidegger too held this view. It is the issue, in the end, that separates him from Hegel and German Idealism. The later Heidegger’s flight from political engagement is conditioned by the modern/postmodern aesthetic of the empty institution. This, it seems to me, is ultimately why “in the context of [his] thought it is not easy to say what the state is.”

If having cast the problem in this light, we return to Nicholson’s hypothesis, what’s to be done? Could a defender of institutions, unconvinced by Heidegger, undeterred by the real degeneracy of the ideal will, produce respectable counterevidence? Probably. But mythic thinkers I have known have done something far better. They have simply made themselves at home in institutions, enlivened them, revealed their depth by insisting they be what they are, shaped and renovated them for their own good and the good of others.