

2011 Heidegger Circle Commentary

Babette Babich

*On Andrew Mitchell & Trish Glazebrook*

Concerning βίος



For the *Supplement to the 2011 Proceedings of the Heidegger Circle*,  
Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 5 May 2011.

## On Mitchell and on Glazebrook on βίος

Babette Babich  
*Fordham University*

“Es muß gegen sich selbst denken, was es nur selten vermag.”  
Heidegger, *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 1954<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Mitchell and Patricia Glazebrook have been talking to us about plants and agriculture, and it is this that leads me to a reflection on bees, for it is relevant that Heidegger also discusses these.<sup>2</sup>

In the present context, we may note that bees are attuned to the same things that captivate us when it comes to our wired electronic devices, our cell-phones in particular, leaving us as *benommen* as any of Heidegger’s animals.

We ‘behave’ as Andrew Mitchell says — and it turns out that this ‘behaving’ is in fact the *technical* term for dutifully attending to our cell-phones, even when there is no reason to do so: we check to ‘see’ if we have texts to respond to, voice messages, email, something, anything — and the ‘smarter’ the phone, the more captivated we are.

By contrast, this same resonant attunement is deadly for the bees and where cell phone radio transmissions do not kill them ‘immediately,’<sup>3</sup> research uniformly confirms that it ‘stresses’ them, i.e., and where ‘stress’ is science-speak for saying that cell phone radiation kills just the way radiation usually kills: slowly, disrupting the bees’ physiology, confusing their navigation, weakening their immune system, etc., etc., such that they die alone, one by one, of thirst and unable to find their way back to the hive, and

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<sup>1</sup> Rather than reading my epigraph, I began by quoting (from memory and in an unfortunate English translation) Wilhelm Müller’s *Der Lindenbaum*, a song well known from Schubert’s *Winterreise*. I return to this reference to the Linden tree below.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), § 59, 350-52, pp. 241ff.

<sup>3</sup> Nothing, as anyone holding a can of insecticide knows, delivers the immediate death of a science fiction death ray gun: vaporization. Instead, and horrifyingly, there is a lot of pain, plain to see in writhing, contortion, agonies of all kinds: some die at once, some struggle on, perhaps to die later, some stragglers (presumably) survive. For those who make insecticides, such results are good enough. For those testing the effects of cell phone radiation on insects, the **very** same results would be discounted as nugatory.

then, indeed the hive dies as well.<sup>4</sup> The mass die-off of bees is not in dispute and colonies all over the world have been diminishing by one-third, that is: progressively, that is: year by year. Indeed when cell phone towers are built in previously pristine areas, the bees follow the same pattern of perishing in response. But and although this has been known for quite some time, those who disseminate science news still tell us that no, no it's not the cell phones.<sup>5</sup> Cell phone science, it turns out, is like tobacco science, is like sugar science, oil-company science, fluoride science.<sup>6</sup> Corporate industrial interests pay scientists to insist on a bizarrely Heideggerian meaning of exigent 'correctness' — all exactitude and legalistic triviality.<sup>7</sup>

Such corporate interests tend to be a problem for life, that is for βίος, which as Trish has helpfully reminded us, the Greeks always heard in terms of an almost Heideggerian

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<sup>4</sup> Ved Parkash Sharma and Neelima R. Kumar, "Changes in honeybee behaviour and biology under the influence of cellphone radiations," *Current Science*, Vol. 98, No. 10 (25 MAY 2010): 1376-1378.

<sup>5</sup> Thus in a 2007 article (with the rather blatant title "Debunking a New Myth: Mobile Phones and Dying Bees," Holger Dambeck, science editor of *Der Spiegel*, cites the research of a team led by the physicist Jochen Kuhn on the influence of high-frequency radiation on bee populations for years. "In two pilot studies — the latest one came out in 2006 — the researchers just wanted to learn if there was any potentially bad effect at all. They arrived at a cautious conclusion, namely that bees exposed to strong radiation had a harder time flying back to their hives than unexposed bees." The problem of course is that (think back to 2006 and earlier years as such studies are conducted over time, the physicists did not test the influence of cell towers, high voltage stations, etc., Iphones which, like other smart phones, have the alarming ability to use any nearby cellphone (ah, that would be the one in your pocket) as a relay station to enhance transmission, but and much rather the sort of cordless phone common in household use. Such phones are, to be sure, nowhere near as pernicious, when it comes to radiation, as the new generation of cell phones. But on this technicality one can dismiss the research as a 'myth.' See Holger Dambeck, "Debunking a New Myth: Mobile Phones and Dying Bees," *Der Spiegel*, 04/18/2007. The original title is rather different and foregrounds neither myth or the related idea of "debunking" but speaks of a mystery and raises a question (the article itself is otherwise the same): "*Mysteriöses Massensterben. Werden Bienen tot telefoniert?*" *Der Spiegel*. 16.04.2007. I note in passing that has long been known that cell phones present a danger to human health but that this fact, and this is so even when acknowledged (and it *continues* to be 'disputed'), has had seemingly little practical influence on cell phone use. But see the World Health organization's *Electromagnetic Fields and Public Health: Mobile Phones*, Fact sheet N°193, May 2010 and note that this is only the latest result of an ongoing and project. See *Establishing a Dialogue on Risks from Electromagnetic Fields. a Handbook* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> For the broad context of this tendency, see Babich, "Towards a Critical Philosophy of Science: Continental Beginnings and Bugbears, Whigs and Waterbears," *International Journal of the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 2010): 343-391 and earlier still Paul Feyerabend, "How to Defend Society against Science," *Radical Philosophy*, 11 (Summer 1975): 3-8. For a contemporary historical analysis specifically oriented towards global warming and its associated debates, see Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> In their abstract, Sharma and Kumar offer this summary assessment of their research: "The behaviour of exposed foragers was negatively influenced by the exposure, there was neither honey nor pollen in the colony at the end of the experiment." Sharma and Kumar, "Changes in honeybee behaviour and biology under the influence of cellphone radiations," p. 1376.

dialectic: like the technological *Ge-fahr* and *das Rettende*, for the Greek, the term βίος echoes both violence and perishing, as we recall Heraclitus here: τῷ οὖν τόξῳ ὄνομα βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος, *The name of the bow is life, its work is death.*

And it seems to me that we still need to begin to think about life rather in the way that we are moving from our centuries-long preoccupation with ourselves, i.e., with humanism, to begin to consider, very limitedly and only for some of us, our fellow beings who build and who dwell and who dream, as we do, on this earth. Thus we may consider animals and we may indeed consider plants — just to the extent that we rarely think of the world trees have built, and we rarely think and can hardly imagine what trees are, even and although that forest world is all around us, even where those forests have vanished, in the life of the last three or four thousand years almost utterly at our hands, much more so if we count the last two centuries, but that forest is nothing less than the earth under our feet.

Some of us would even claim that, and to vary an ethnic prejudice, some of our best friends are animals, which hardly stops our colleagues in our own universities from submitting a range of species, dogs, cats, untold billions and billions of mice, fruit flies, sea urchins, horseshoe crabs, etc., to horrific experimentation, experimentation indeed including cetaceans whose cognitive capacities are both undeniably and uncannily unlike our own. But we also experiment on primates so like us we can teach them to sign, use computers, paint, even demonstrate to us their sense of justice, ethics, and compassion, all for the duration of the experiment, whereupon, as the project or the grant ends, we suddenly cease signing back, take away the computers and the paint, and teach them an ultimate and often all too final lesson (we just want to do a tissue analysis, which means we need to section their brains, which means killing them) about humanistic ethics and “humane” compassion.<sup>8</sup>

But Andrew, who lives in Atlanta (and be it known, as I have recently visited there, that Atlanta *is* a forest), is talking about plants and about trees in particular — although he

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<sup>8</sup> I refer to this in my contribution to the *Proceedings of the 2010 Heidegger Circle, SUNY Stony Brook, Manhattan*, convened by Robert Crease and Tim Hyde, Babich, “Heidegger’s Philosophy of Science: Towards a Phenomenology of Questioning as Critique of Calculation,” pp. 37-77, see especially pp. 41ff. and my reference there to the biologist turned ethicist, Catherine Roberts, *Science, Animals, and Evolution: Reflections on Some Unrealized Potentials of Biology and Medicine* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980).

keeps us on our toes by mentioning ‘*Boden*’ with all its complications or associations along with the name of Ernst Jünger. All worries are allayed with Trish who tells us about Vandana Shiva’s work on organizing at the literally grassroots level whilst theorizing at the very highest of levels with regard to traditional (and that means women’s) agriculture vs. the high tech corporate enterprises that constitute today’s industrial agriculture. More cybernetics, new gene types, presto chango, a new idea of the organic, and indeed a new idea of sustainability.

But sustainability is the most hijackable or co-optable notion around. It is about keeping on keeping on — to use the language of the folks I grew up with. Wind farms are sustainable— apart from, that is to say, *ignoring* their egregious impact on the mortality of raptors, hawks, eagles, falcons, owls, condors, etc. and bats as well. And then there are the health impacts and psychological stress that follows from exposure to low frequency noise for human beings living near the wind turbines (not to mention the effects on animals and plants).<sup>9</sup>

So too are farmed fish “sustainable,” provided we overlook the health problems of the practice for the fish themselves and for those, that would be us, who eat them and if you don’t count the fact that “farm” practice presupposes wild fish caught to be ground into feed for the farms. Ultimately one can imagine a complete, fungus-infested, lice-infested, antibiotic ridden circle of sick and sicker fish. Farmed salmon — farmed anything.

That, to me, just begins to hint at the problems connected with hitching one’s argument to the idea of sustainability.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, there is another issue at stake as Vandana Shiva’s point is impeccable — especially as we have just heard Trish present this same point with equally

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<sup>9</sup> Of course it is true, and this is the problem, that we simply do not consider them. We think nothing of using water containing living creatures, plants, larvae, fish, mollusks, etc., to cool our powerplants, as a backwash to flush the waste water produced at marine research centers, parks, aquariums.

<sup>10</sup> See for an introductory overview of some of these problems, Aidan Davison, *Technology and the Contested Meanings of Sustainability* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) and see further the final page of Babich, “Philosophy of Science” in: Constantin Boundas, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to the Twentieth Century Philosophies* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2007), pp. 545-558, p. 554, and especially the reference to the work of Shiv Visvanathan, “On the Annals of the Laboratory State” in: Ashis Nandy, ed., *Science, Hegemony, and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 257-88. For a recent discussion of Visvanathan, see further: S. Ravi Rajan, “Science, State, and Violence: An Indian Critique Considered,” *Science as Culture* 14, 3 (2005): 265-281.

commendable clarity — there is nothing ‘wrong’ with, there is nothing ‘broken’ about traditional agriculture in India. The theoretical tradition, that is to say, the aryurvedic tradition [*krsi sastra*], of this traditional agriculture is on a level with, that is to say, it is as *advanced*, as *efficient* as the Western tradition and we do well to open our minds to alternative cultures and not and always to insist on insisting upon importing our Western way of doing things. Western agriculture is based on killing — herbicides, pesticides but also petrochemical and other chemical fertilizers that do nothing so well as utterly deplete the soil as their substance contributes nothing to the earth. By contrast, the Indian method is a matter of cultivation in the older sense of what one once upon a time called ‘husbandry’ a word which — if we were to read our English words as Heidegger reads his German words — would also signify a very specific relation to the field, which the Indians often call *Ksetra*, the name for the human womb. So too the Greeks, so too the Romans from whom we have our word nature, from *natura* — she who bears, she who will bear. Indeed we still speak of ‘mother earth,’ though of course and Hannah Arendt already wrote about this we now tend to mean the planet itself, globally speaking, and not the soil, not the earth of Earth.

Heidegger already spoke of the monotony of globalization when he wrote that

The end of philosophy proves to be the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technological world and of the social order proper to this world. The end of philosophy means: the beginning of the world civilization based upon Western European thinking.<sup>11</sup>

But to go back to Andrew, when he affirms that “It is impossible for us to leave the plants and animals alone, because they have already reached out to us and we to them” it seems to me that he is making a very nicely Marxist or Hegelian point, but I am not persuaded that this is what Heidegger means — not even in his letter to Jünger. Nor am I sure, on a related note, that the *Garten der Wildnis* really entails that we are already in the ‘wild,’ travelling on the earth as so many Star Trek voyagers, however much our “Enterprise” mentality already assumes, just as Andrew seems to suggest that nothing ought to remain untouched by human hands just because we are a ‘relatedness,’ in the way that for Hölderlin we are a ‘conversation.’ Yet it seems to me, to make a connection with Trish’s

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<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (San Francisco: Harper, 1972), p. 59

talk here (and this is my role after all) that this is a terribly convenient way to think for Monsanto. And if I may mention in a friendly way one of the founding members of this circle as I find myself in Wisconsin, that is, thinking of John Bailiff and his bike, it is also *terribly* convenient for all of us, as most of us are not mindful of what we do and we certainly are not Jainists (and we laugh at the idea), we are automatically, *thoughtless* — that is to say, we are *all of us* and not just the scientists *still not thinking* — in the way that anyone who wants to ride a mountainbike has to be and must be thoughtless: riding on and above all down the mountain: the devil take the plants we destroy not just this season but forever. As it turns out, odd as this is to imagine, the mountain plants do not grow back after we take our bikes and go home, the next season does not bring them back, nor the season after that, and those furrows, those scars, mark the land henceforth.<sup>12</sup> Recovery is only in our blindness to the damage we have done to the health of the land.<sup>13</sup> I am not mentioning the critters we take out in the process, insects, worms, every kind of small thing. Of course, I know that, John himself keeps well to the beaten path (that is, at least in the pictures I have seen).

For me, the reason we cannot leave plants and animals alone, from mountain bikes to clear cutting forests and mountain topping, is not because we are a ‘relatedness’ but because we lack all restraint and we are without measure.

We *have* been everywhere, touched everything, and yet, and this is how I read Heidegger contra Heisenberg, at no point do we see that we have imposed ourselves everywhere, or that the image of the human face that vanishes under the waves, is one that we have traced, and that the waves that wash it away are often ones that we have raised?

Perhaps it is time we got over the free pass of the Socratic, Stoic, and thus Christian word: they know not what they do. For and by now, we all know very well what we are

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<sup>12</sup> See, and just for a start, Donald Wooster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1994; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), especially the chapters from the very beginning on the life of forests, in Europe but especially in New England.

<sup>13</sup> The concept is an ecological one that is often refused as anthropomorphizing. As if only human beings were healthy or not healthy. But the term health also includes, as Heidegger emphasizes, the holy, the hale and that is also to say the whole. Yet as soon as one enters into such etymological reflections one quickly loses the complex notion of health as Nietzsche has sought to underline that for us. See for one originator of such language with reference to the land (I emphasize just one because the metaphor goes back to Ovid and many others), Aldo Leopold, *For the Health of the Land: Previously Unpublished Essays And Other Writings*, J. Baird Callicott, Eric T. Freyfogle, eds. (Island Press: Washington, D.C., 1999).

doing as Žižek mocks us, taking a leaf from Sloterdijk, but we shrug or laugh and we do it anyway. And the Canadians just completed one of their horrific seal slaughters, once again, and next year they will do it again. For we want to be very sure that it is we alone who have the opportunity to fish all the fish out of the oceans, sparing nothing for other carnivores.

On my reading, the basis for a reflection upon this is already on hand in *Being and Time* (pretty and figuratively much from the beginning of the inquiry, that would be page 2 (BT Int 1, as well as BT Int. II, 17 and literally BT I.IV, 118, etc.) Or: to put it another way, just what do we think Heidegger means by the “flowers of the hedgerow”? (BT §15, 70) That Heidegger means the contrast he makes with botany in this locus is clear. Heidegger is too much the logician, too much the student of what it is to do science, to ignore the hermeneutic distinction to be made. Thus when it comes to talking of animals in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, what Heidegger calls inhibition/disinhibition — which can also be found in the tendrils of the roots, but also the tendrils of plant shoots and what we tellingly call runners, etc., corresponds to turning on and off of biological and physiological mechanisms not only on the genetic level that interests us so much these days or on the cellular level but along the margins, that is, the relatedness that is the organism itself in its world, that is the environment that is made by the dialogue of this on and off. This on/off is the language proper at the time and since to the sphere of the science of life, of biology, the life sciences. Thus telling us what “growing means,” Heidegger tells us that the “oak tree itself spoke, that in such growth alone is there grounded what lasts and fructifies” (GA 13: 88). Heidegger’s point has everything to with the ring that is also the ring of the supporting, succoring earth.

But what is the encircling ring? There is too much here to say in a comment but to keep close to biological meaning, the “ring” can also be expressed by the encircling advantage for the praying mantis, the circle that is not a circle for her prey. She can turn her head, this distinguishes the mantis from other ‘small animals’<sup>14</sup> of her kind, and this is the opening for her carnivorous niche. The same holds for chameleons, as they can even turn their eyes.

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<sup>14</sup> The Germans charmingly call insects ‘little animals’ *Kleintiere* where idiomatic English tends not to so designate them.



And our own ring corresponds to the powers we encompass as well as our limitations, where our limitations are, like those that circumscribe the animal in its own ring, those that we cannot see.

For plants, this ring is utterly outside our ken — although my beginning reference to Müller's *Lindenbaum* as Schubert has immortalized it suggests that we do indeed guess at it. And modern science continues our guessing, thus one does well to refer to recent work on forest structure and so-called “canopy architecture.”<sup>15</sup>

We use frogs for vision research as we do on the ground of the intersection between rings, that is, between what encircles us and what encircles the frog, but that also means our limitations and theirs, we can, because they are easy to catch, easy to raise, easy to kill — and even in the wild, frogs literally cannot see us as we creep up on them. The exultant boy who traps the frog celebrates an achievement over blindness.

But the point Heidegger makes about the limitations of the mantis is her lack of “relation,” recognition. And this is just what, as we recall, Jacques Lacan denies, there is he says, no sexual relation. But we seem sure that there is, at least on some face of it. For the thing about sexual behaviour in human beings as Desmond Morris once observed and as Andrew's colleague at Emory University Frans de Waal also observes, is that it is distinct to human beings as a *relationship* (think of all the agonizing discussions everyone here has had, under good and bad circumstances, regarding the same). But what Desmond Morris meant by that distinctive quality of the human ape is that the female of the species *can*, just in terms of potency or capacity, be in the mood for a sexual encounter at any time (and unlike animals subject to estrus), that is to say, at least when it comes to the sheer potential for the same<sup>16</sup> (*nota bene*, and of course: desire and inclination will always be a separate story).

In the case of Heidegger's fascination with insect sex (in the air at the time), if one only considers the rather particular physiological detail of mantid copulation it is not too difficult to understand why the much larger female would simply proceed to devour the

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Rebecca A. Montgomery and Robin L. Chazdon, “Forest Structure, Canopy Architecture, and Light Transmittance in Tropical Wet Forests,” *Ecology*, 82, 10, (2001): 2707–2718, earlier Clark and Clark, “Life History Diversity of Canopy, and Emergent Trees in Neo-Tropical rainforest,” *Ecological Monographs*, 62, 3 (1992): 315–344.

<sup>16</sup> A potentiality that is and to be sure, *not* true of the gentlemen of the species.

male after the consummation of the act, on the occasions when factually occurs.<sup>17</sup> For when it does take place one might well argue that it is an exemplification of what Hegelians and Marxists like to call species being (and might even help to explain, I think, the preponderance of dialectical materialists among biologists as they seem to be scarce in other natural scientific fields).

Prey is scarce and if the point of reproduction is indeed about reproduction, rather more than a few chromosomes are essential and if the female tends to devour the male post-copulation, the advantage goes to the next generation. For human beings, the male provides over the long term, generally speaking, and species being lurks behind our characterization of fathers who do not so provide as “dead-beat” one way or another; for mantids, the provision in kind would be more immediate. Heidegger, not surprisingly and given his personal sexual proclivities, takes a nicely anthropomorphic, but decidedly male point of view.

But by calling to mind the particularities of mantid love I am not going beyond Heidegger: the points I mention are sheerly and only ontic details. For Trish, apart from what I noted above regarding sustainability, I can only suggest that one attempt to bring Heidegger to Shiva herself for although Heidegger’s thinking (again from early to late) should be an urgent affair for environmental ethics across the board, it is common to exclude Heidegger or to argue that one needs to go beyond him, as has long been argued in the philosophy of technology, we recall Andrew Feenberg and Don Ihde on the old side, and Soren Riis on the young(er) side, unified in telling us that we need to go beyond Heidegger.

As for me, I am not so sure.

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<sup>17</sup> It does not always happen, that is to say: it is not, save indeed in one isolated species, a programmed consequence of copulation but is related to prey-availability — and, of course, to the male’s ability to fly away.