**The Inseparability of Life and Thought in Heidegger’s “Turn”:**

**Psychobiographical Reflections**

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It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has

heretofore been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of

involuntary and unconscious memoir.—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond*

*Good and Evil*, 1886/1966

Characteristically and unlike Nietzsche, academic philosophers have tended to shun psychobiographical accounts of philosophical ideas. Such shunning is understandable in view of the philosopher’s search for the Really Real and the Truly True. In the context of this search for the absolute, a psychobiographical account is misinterpreted as an invalidation rather than an intended particularization of scope—a common misunderstanding of Atwood’s and my early psychobiographical studies of the subjective roots of personality theories (Stolorow & Atwood, 1979).

In the introduction to his lecture course on Aristotle, Heidegger (1924/2009) confidently declared: “Regarding the personality of a philosopher, our only interest is that he was born at a certain time, that he worked and that he died” (p. 4). Here I argue to the contrary that an understanding of Heidegger’s personal emotional world is essential to an understanding of the controversial “turn” in his thinking from a hermeneutic phenomenology to a form of metaphysical mysticism.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In recent work I have been focusing on the role of metaphysical illusion and its dismantling in the genesis of emotional trauma (Stolorow, 2021). I suggest that this formulation applies exceedingly well to Heidegger’s embrace of Nazism and the impact on him of its collapse. He interpreted the Nazi takeover of Germany as a “Dasein controlling event,” an upsurge of “Being itself” manifesting in historical reality. What he saw as the reassertion of national power and pride brought by the Nazis thus became conflated with the “primal demand” of all Being “that it should retain and save its own essence” (Safranski, 1998, p. 260). Heidegger envisioned the possibility of an epochal second beginning in the history of humanity—the first having been that of the ancient Greeks—and, as rector of Freiburg University under Nazi rule, he pictured the role of the universities as one of constructing a new intellectual and spiritual world for the German nation and for all of humanity. Thomson (2005) has commented on the grandiose and authoritarian aspects of Heidegger’s call for university reform, embodying his ambitions to become the “spiritual leader of the university, and thus, the nation,” and “to restore philosophy to her throne as the queen of the sciences” (p. 116).

Little attention has been given to the impact on Heidegger and his work of the dismantling of his kingly ambitions. At the end of World War II Heidegger was brought before the “de-nazification committee,” which voted that he become stripped of his academic credentials and barred from university teaching. Soon after this meeting Heidegger suffered a “nervous breakdown.” His dream of spiritual leadership had been shattered.

Heidegger’s breakdown, hospitalization, and therapeutic treatment by Dr. Gebsattel have been chronicled by Mitchell (2016)[[2]](#endnote-2). According to Mitchell’s account, Gebsattel provided Heidegger with a form of *emotional dwelling*, my term for the comportment I have recommended for the therapeutic approach to emotional trauma (see Stolorow & Atwood, 2018, chapters 10 & 11). In this context, Heidegger was able to immerse himself in what he called *broken-down thinking*, a thinking freed of the historically-conditioned constraints of scientific rationalism and the quest for certain knowledge. Broken-down thinking is characterized as an attitude of waiting—waiting for what impends to reveal itself. It entails an openness to the expanse and mysteries of Being as such. Such waiting acknowledges the darkness of not yet knowing and savors the secrets not yet revealed. Such waiting in the darkness is facilitated by the presence of a receptive companion (e.g., Gebsattel). Heidegger’s immersion in broken-down thinking set the stage for the esotericism of his later philosophizing.

Tellingly, the first lecture course that Heidegger was permitted to give once his teaching credentials were restored has the title *What is Called Thinking* (Heidegger, 1954/2004). There thinking—I believe Heidegger meant philosophical thinking—is conceived as relatedness to Being as such, a relatedness that is close to poesy. Thinking ascends from particular beings (entities) to their Being—to what is unconcealed by their presence. It is the duality of beings and Being that gives food for philosophical thought.

I turn now to the essential features of Being as such as these took form in Heidegger’s later philosophy[[3]](#endnote-3). I want to show that these can be understood as features of the broken-down thinking disclosed in the context of Heidegger’s breakdown.

Like the experience of Being, also called *world*, in broken-down thinking, Being as such in Heidegger’s later philosophy is shrouded in mystery. It is concealed, hidden, having the structure of a *trace*, appearing only indirectly in beings or entities. It can be revealed through a receptive, meditative comportment that lets beings be, *Gelassenheit*, reminiscent of the attitude of waiting and openness characteristic of broken-down thinking. Such waiting and openness, which look to revelation and poetic thinking rather then science and logic, are in stark contrast to Nazis goose-stepping their way to a takeover of Europe. In poetizing, the inapparent world “leaps out” into visibility, an event of appearing or unconcealment (*Ereignis*). Through *Gelassenheit,* Being or world becomes unconcealed as a shining, or radiance.

Heidegger’s broken-down thinking restored the glorious, illusory world that had been dismantled at the end of the war—a devastating dismantling that was a source of world-shattering trauma for him. Heidegger’s turn to a mystical metaphysics reflected this restorative move on his part. From the dismantled to the eternally mysterious.

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1. I am grateful to George Atwood for encouraging me to pursue this project. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Peggy DuBois and Penelope Starr-Karlin each brought this illuminating essay to my attention. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. These features are well summarized in William McNeill’s book, *The Fate of Phenomenology*, from which I draw here. Recently the listserv of the *Heidegger Circle* became engrossed in a debate over the nature of Heidegger’s “turn” from his earlier to his later work. On one side, Thomas Sheehan argued that Heidegger’s approach remained phenomenological throughout its evolution. On the other, Richard Capobianco insisted that Heidegger turned away from phenomenology toward a form of metaphysical realism. I found both arguments to be well presented, scholarly, and plausible. How could this be? It occurred to me that perhaps the two conflicting arguments actually represented two conflicting trends appearing in varying degrees throughout Heidegger’s thinking. Which of these two trends would dominate Heidegger’s thinking would depend on the context of his life at any particular juncture. Mitchell’s account of Heidegger’s breakdown helped me make sense of this conflict and its vicissitudes in his later work. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)