Assessing the significance of Heidegger’s Black Notebooks

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Abstract. The publication of Heidegger’s Black Notebooks (Schwarze Hefte) has provoked a storm of controversy. Much of this has centred on the pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic comments the volumes contain. But these aspects of the Notebooks are perhaps the least surprising and important. This essay offers a summary overview of the issues to which the Notebooks give rise, at the same time as it also aims to provide a preliminary assessment of their overall significance, especially in relation to what they show about the nature and development of Heidegger’s thinking from the early 1930s to the late 1940s.

For much of his life, and certainly from the 1930s onwards, Martin Heidegger kept a series of black-bound notebooks in which he recorded ideas and observations. Known as the Black Notebooks (Schwarze Hefte), the material they contained was periodically edited by Heidegger, and he gave different titles to different volumes and sets of volumes. Of those so far published, the first three collected volumes are the Considerations (Überlegungen; see Heidegger, 2016, 2017), which run from 1931 to 1942 (though the first volume from 1931 is lost, destroyed by Heidegger himself), and the second are the Remarks (Anmerkungen), running from 1942 to 1949 (published in the Heidegger Gesamtausgabe as Heidegger, 2014a, b, c, 2015). Further volumes are to be published over the coming years (and the next volume is, in fact, already close to being ready for publication). The contents of the Notebooks are quite varied: they include philosophical ideas and commentary, but they also include personal observations and ruminations, and remarks on contemporary events. In contrast with public works from the same period, the Notebooks are relatively unrestrained, they contain many instances of dismissive irony or sarcasm, and, in the 1930s and early 1940s especially, they are frequently suffused with a degree of anger and even bitterness. The form of the Notebooks echoes that of Nietzsche’s Nachlass (see Babich, 2016; see also Krell, 2015), and clearly Heidegger treated the Notebooks not merely as a writing tool for his own personal use but as literary works of a certain type and character and as having a very particular role and position within the larger body of his work. They do not stand on their own, however, and it would be a serious mistake to suppose that one could read the Notebooks in any serious fashion independently of the rest of Heidegger’s writings.

Since the publication of the first of the Notebooks in 2014, the volumes have provoked a storm of controversy, with many readers taking them to prove what they assume to be already evident, namely Heidegger’s reprehensible moral and political character (see, for instance, Wolin, 2014). It is certainly true that the Notebooks contain many statements that, from a contemporary perspective, are beyond the pale. Not unsurprisingly, given what we know from other sources about Heidegger’s involvement in the Nazi Party in the early 1930s, the volumes from those years contain examples of Heidegger’s seeming intoxication with the National Socialist Revolution and his enthusiasm for its leader, Adolf Hitler. What the Notebooks also show, however, is the extent to which Heidegger’s support for National Social-
ism rapidly turned sour, and the strength of that initial support was transformed into an antagonism directed not only at the Nazis but also at Christianity, Catholicism, Bolshevism, Americanism, modernity, science, and what he calls “world Jewry” (Weltjudenentum). The passages from the Notebooks that have provoked most controversy are, in fact, those anti-Semitic passages which actually come from the period after Heidegger’s break with Nazism (no such passages are to be found in the volumes prior to around 1938) – passages in which Heidegger seems almost to repeat a fairly crude stereotypical-seeming contradiction of his own injunctions elsewhere against exactly such bigotry and racialism.

Although it does not diminish their distressing or reprehensible nature, the anti-Semitic passages in the Notebooks are concentrated in only a few places, all of them, as noted above, after 1939, and anti-Semitism is not itself a recurrent or major theme in the Notebooks overall (one might argue, in fact, that the manner of its appearance suggests that it is almost something taken for granted, so that it is treated as barely even worthy of comment either for or against). The most powerful strands in the Notebooks from the 1930s and into the 1940s are actually tied to the shifts in Heidegger’s thinking that occur after the “failure” of Being and Time (Heidegger’s own failure to complete the project originally envisaged there and the failure evident in the many misinterpretations the work engendered) (see Thomä, 2005) and after the failed political engagement of the early 1930s. It is these shifts that underlie what has often been referred to as the Kehre or Wendung, the “turning”, in Heidegger’s thought and are brought to a special focus in his major volume from the 1930s, withheld from publication at the time, the Contributions to Philosophy (Beiträge zur Philosophie), written between 1936 and 1938.

The reorientation in thinking that is associated with these shifts is complex, not always consistent, and takes place over more than a decade and a half – from 1930 until 1946; it is a reorientation that encompasses, but does not end with, Contributions, even though that volume plays a pivotal part in it. The fact that the Notebooks from the 1930s and 1940s do indeed belong to such a period of reorientation, and that they reflect the attempts at such reorientation, ought to be a simple and obvious point – one that is underscored by the fact that the Notebooks, as we have them, begin in 1931, in other words, at around the time that Heidegger himself identified as the starting point for the new direction in his thinking after Being and Time. Yet simple and obvious though it ought to be, it is a point to which attention is seldom ex-

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2 I leave to one side the issue as to whether these terms can both be used to refer to the shift in Heidegger’s thinking in the 1930s and 1940s. Thomas Sheehan, of course, has famously argued that they cannot (see, for instance, Sheehan, 2001).

great concealed event – the remoteness of everything of today. The proximity to the inmost voca-
tion of the people. (Heidegger, 2016:119)

In turning away from the political, Heidegger turns back to the absolute primacy of the philosophical, withdrawing into a form of philosophical solitariness and isolation (part of which is given physical expression in the rural seclusion of Todtnauberg; see Heidegger, 1981:27–30), even of philo-
sophical alienation (a standing apart from the superficial and the mundane), in which the concern with being is given pri-
ority over everything else, including the political.

One might say that the withdrawal at issue here almost takes the form of an enactment of the ontological difference itself – an enactment of the difference between being and mere “things” – but an enactment in which being is set so far apart from everything else that there is no room for any-
thing other than being. Consequently, the prioritisation that it enacts is both absolute and exclusive, resulting in an ef-
efective severing of the philosophical from the worldly and the human and from any ordinary form of politics. This is strongest in those works in which Heidegger’s personal voice is most directly in the fore – works like the Notebooks, but also Contributions – works in which Heidegger often speaks in a declamatory and almost oracular style. As a result, the Heidegger of the 1930s and early 1940s readily appears, in many passages from the Notebooks as well as other works such as Contributions, like the sole prophet of a new and apocalyptic religion in which being is the god (see Farin and Malpas, 2017). It is not merely the focus on being that is im-
portant here, of course, but the particular character of that focus and the larger context in which it is situated. In the shift from Being and Time to Contributions, the “there” of being (Da-sein) is reconceptualised in terms of the “event” of being (Ereignis) which is itself understood, at least during much of the 1930s and 1940s, in direct relation to the history of being, Seinsgeschichte. This “history” is in turn associated not only with Heidegger’s developing critique of modernity – the critique of what he calls, in the 1930s and 1940s, machination (Machenschaft) – but also with ideas of people (Volk) and nation, and especially of the German people. The focus on being – on the history of being, on the appropriations of being in the destinies of different peoples, and on the almost complete failure of everyone other than Heidegger himself to grasp what is at issue here – gives an extreme and almost obsessive cast to Heidegger’s thinking in this period. David Farrell Krell has thus said that the Note-
books from 1931 to 1941 are characterised by “the absence of Heidegger’s best qualities, namely, his ability to focus and to reflect self-critically, and the presence of his worst, to wit, his aggressive polemics against everything in the world ex-
ccept his own idée fixe” (Krell, 2015, p. 160).4

It is against the background of just such extreme thinking – thinking that has, in many respects, been pushed to the edge – that many of the anti-Semitic passages in the Note-
books have to be read. Peter Trawny and Donatella di Cesare have argued that the Notebooks show that anti-Semitism is actually at the centre of Heidegger’s thinking, at least in the 1930s and 1940s, and that Heidegger’s is therefore an anti-
Semitic philosophy. Although he accepts Heidegger’s rejection of any simple biologically based racism, Trawny argues that Heidegger nevertheless holds to an “onto-historical anti-
Semitism” (Trawny, 2014). Di Cesare sees Heidegger’s anti-
Semitism as expressive of a more pervasive rootedness of a metaphysical anti-Semitism thinking in German philoso-
phy in general (see, for instance, Di Cesare, 2016). The evidence provided by the Notebooks seems, however, to be in-
adequate to support either of these claims – too much of the argument of Trawny and di Cesare depends on supposition that is additional to, and even an exaggeration of, the rela-
tively sparse material contained in the Notebooks themselves (though di Cesare’s larger claims concerning the anti-Semitic strands within German philosophy undoubtedly bear further examination). However, Trawny and di Cesare are correct just inasmuch as Heidegger’s anti-Semitic comments are in-
deed not a reflection of some personal anti-Semitic leaning but rather have their contingent origins in Heidegger’s philo-
sophical thinking5 – they arise out of the obsessive attempt to think being, and only being, and to do so in a way that also reads the contemporary state of the world in the light of that obsession, as this is also coloured by Heidegger’s own personal-historical circumstances. In doing so, Heidegger is sometimes insightful, but at other times he also seems to fall victim to convenient caricatures and stereotypes – and not only those associated with the anti-Semitic.

In this respect, what the Notebooks make most evident is not any genuinely new element or aspect in Heidegger’s thinking – there are, for the most part, no significant philosophical ideas in the Notebooks that are not present, usually in more developed forms, in contemporaneous lectures and essays6 – but rather the underlying tone or tem-
per (Grundstimmung) of that thinking (as Heidegger him-

4In contrast, although writing before the publication of the Note-
books, Slavoj Žižek to some extent argues in favour of the “extrem-

5Although philosophical, there is nothing inevitable about Hei-
degger’s anti-Semitism – it does not follow necessarily from any of his basic philosophical commitments – hence the emphasis on its contingent origins.

6This is also a point to which Krell draws attention: “I myself find very little in these thousand pages that is thought provoking. They do present a dire view of Heidegger in a dire time, and it is important that they be made available to the public. Yet, to repeat, there is precious little here that adds to Heidegger’s more considered

as taking the form of a “topology of being”, but until the pub-
160). Heidegger comes to refer to the entirety of his thinking
Thinking” being a prime example, see Heidegger, 1971:141–
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just this claim; see Malpas, 2006), the focus on place seems
has also been an important theme in my own work. Place is
Schürmann, but also Julian Young and Stuart Elden, and it
is a claim that has been advanced by a number of thinkers,
Perhaps most notably Joseph Fell, Edward Casey, and Reiner
attitude to the absolute separation of the thinking
being from any other thinking that might be oriented to-
mere things, and the superiority and priority of the for-
over the latter (something closely tied, in addition, to the
The tone and temper of Heidegger’s thinking changes signif-
ificant, taking on a more subdued and reflective character
in the latter half of the 1940s (though occasionally there are
still outbursts that echo the earlier extremism) and shifting
away from the declamatory, almost oracular, style of the
previous decade or more. It is this different tone and temper, and
different style, that characterises not only the later volumes
of the Notebooks but also Heidegger’s more public writings
from around 1946 onwards – in essays like the “Letter on
‘Humanism’”, from 1946–47, and even more so in volumes like
What is Called Thinking from 1951–52.7 This shift is
itself connected with the emergence in Heidegger’s thinking
of a more explicit concern with place – in Greek topos and
in Heidegger’s German, Ort or Ortschaft.
That place occupies a central role in Heidegger’s thinking
is a claim that has been advanced by a number of thinkers,
perhaps most notably Joseph Fell, Edward Casey, and Reiner
Schürmann, but also Julian Young and Stuart Elden, and it
has also been an important theme in my own work. Place is
not, however, a concept that is explicit in Heidegger through-
out the entirety of his thought. Although it may be argued
to be implicit from the start (and I have myself argued for
just this claim; see Malpas, 2006), the focus on place seems
to become more evident in the period following Heidegger’s
departure from the rectorate in 1934, and to be at its clearest
and most explicit in the work after 1946 (“Building Dwelling
Thinking” being a prime example, see Heidegger, 1971:141–
160). Heidegger comes to refer to the entirety of his thinking
as taking the form of a “topology of being”, but until the pub-
llication of the Notebooks, there were only two clear instances
of that phrase in Heidegger’s published work, the first being
from “The Thinker as Poet” in 19478 and the second from
the Le Thor Seminar in 1969 (see Heidegger, 2004:47) (there

7See, once again, Krell’s comments after he has pointed to the
stylistic inadequacies of Heidegger’s writing from the 1930s and
1940s: “The situation improves in the 1950s, when Heidegger
develops a style all his own. Signs of an independent style doubt-
less appear already in his best writing and thinking of the
1930s, and it matures in the extraordinary essays of the 1950s, ‘Building
Dwelling Thinking’, ‘Poetically Man Dwells...’, and ‘The Thing’”
(Krell, 2015:160).

8“But poetry that thinks, is in truth the topology of being” (Hei-
degger, 1971:12).

9Most notably in the very brief comment on radio: “With the
‘radio’, for example, Dasein has so expanded its everyday environ-
ment that it has accomplished a de-severance of the ‘world’ – a
de-severance which, in its meaning for Dasein, cannot yet be visual-
ased” (Heidegger, 1962:140 [H105]).
books. Machenschaft, with its etymological connection to both machen, to make or to do, and to Macht (power), obviously carries echoes of the Nietzschean will to power (Wille zur Macht), and the use of the term also indicates how much of Heidegger’s thinking during the 1930s and early 1940s, including his opinion of modernity, is bound up with the attempt to come to terms with Nietzsche. However, just as Nietzsche largely disappears from Heidegger’s thinking after the mid-1940s, so too is Machenschaft not a term that is operative in any of Heidegger’s later discussions of technology and modernity. Instead, Machenschaft gives way to Gestell, and what is significant about this latter term is that it carries a clear topological connotation – as suggested by Andrew Mitchell’s translation of the term as “positionality” in the English edition of the Bremen Lectures of 1949 (see Heidegger, 2012).10 Gestell is essentially a mode of spatialised ordering and, as such, it is a mode of ordering that obscures the essential placedness of being, of things, and of the world.11 The shift to topology is thus itself an important element in Heidegger’s more developed post-war analysis of technology and modernity – something that should already be evident from the post-war essays themselves12 and is also demonstrated by the development of ideas in the pages of the Notebooks. The shift both from history to place and from Machenschaft to Gestell indicates the difference in temper and orientation that occurs over the course of the Notebooks and that the Notebooks to a large extent allow us to map out. It is a shift that opens out into the very different thinking that characterises the later Heidegger – a thinking that, even though it arises out of the earlier and is in some ways continuous with it, is also very different from it. The real significance of Heidegger’s Black Notebooks does not lie, then, in any new or unprecedented ideas that the Notebooks enunciate or even in the scandalous pronouncements they may be thought to contain. Instead the Notebooks are important precisely because of the way they better enable us to understand the development of Heidegger’s thinking, in terms of its overall direction, the dead ends into which it runs, and the dangers that it encounters. It enables us better to evaluate and position works like Contributions in relation to Heidegger’s thinking overall and to see why even Contributions, as with Being and Time, is a work that Heidegger had to move beyond.

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