

Graeme NICHOLSON, *Heidegger on Truth: Its Essence and Its Fate*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019, 15,5 × 23,1 cm, xi-181 p., ISBN 978-1-4875-0441-0

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The last chapter of KS is devoted to the bitter turn Kierkegaard took in his final years and final writings. They seem less a completion of his philosophy, than a sneering abandonment of it. Kierkegaard encumbers Christian life with such harsh demands that he can assure his reader that not a single Dane qualifies.

Evans calls the work of this final period “attack literature.” He is critical of it, but he shows his quality as a commentator in the tenderness of his critique. “I conclude,” he writes, “that the attack literature, rather than being the culmination of Kierkegaard’s authorship, should be viewed as an unfortunate aberration. It describes a form of spirituality that is really incompatible with the spirituality found in Kierkegaard’s authorship up to that point.”

It is hard to read Kierkegaard without an informative and careful guide. This book is such a guide.

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Graeme NICHOLSON, **Heidegger on Truth: Its Essence and Its Fate**. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019, 15,5 × 23,1 cm, xi-181 p., ISBN 978-1-4875-0441-0.

Nicholson’s *Heidegger on Truth* is best described as a detailed commentary on Heidegger’s *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* (hereafter *WW*), proceeding methodically, slowly, tracing the various *corners* and *arcs* (p. 14) in Heidegger’s thought. As is well known, following Heidegger’s pathways of thinking (*Denkwege*) is not always easy. To the untrained reader he appears to meander aimlessly, moving from one idea to the next and circling back as if lost. In order to get us thinking, or to think through a question with him, Heidegger offers us only signposts, *Wegmarken*, along the way, like the ones we might find along the trails surrounding his writing hut in the Black Forest. Nicholson enables the reader to navigate Heidegger’s path by leaving a more discernible trail of white pebbles.

The central notion that Nicholson attempts to develop in this book is that “truth is the *medium* in which all human experience occurs.” In Heideggerian fashion, he asks us to recall the analogy Plato offers in the *Republic* – “as light permits objects to be visible and the eye to see, so truth permits genuine beings to be intelligible and our *nous* to understand” (p. 3). When most readers think of Heidegger on truth, especially in connection with the Greeks, they will recall his account of truth as *alētheia* or unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*) – the “historical” essence of truth. As Nicholson explains in the Introduction, this is one of three themes regarding the essence of truth that we find in Heidegger’s writings. The others are truth as *correspondence* – the “usual” concept of truth – and *untruth*, which belongs to the essence of truth in the forms of concealment and error. Heidegger’s aim in *WW* is to show how these three themes are connected. Perhaps the most difficult turn to follow in his train of thought is the notion that “the essence of truth is freedom” (p. 39). It is here that Heidegger opens up the possibility to move from the correspondence

theory to truth as unconcealment, as well as the idea that the untrue is part of the essence of truth. In the 1949 text of *WW*, this idea of freedom is worked out more thoroughly in terms of *Ereignis*, which Nicholson renders as *en-owning*. If one does not follow this turn, then the shift from talking about the truth of statements and propositions to the coming into view of things, things coming forth into their own, the opening up for the experience or appearance of being, and so on, would appear to have no grounding.

Before guiding us through Heidegger's discussions of correspondence, unconcealment, and untruth, Nicholson begins by differentiating the myriad writings titled *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* that Heidegger authored from 1930 to 1949. *WW* began as a series of four separate addresses delivered in 1930 (now published in GA 80.1). The topic was then taken up in lecture courses in Freiburg in WS 1931/32 – *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit. Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet* (GA 34) – and WS 1933/34 – *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* (GA 36/37). The first print edition of *WW* was published by Klostermann in 1943, followed by a second edition in 1949 to which Heidegger added a concluding note (§9). As Nicholson notes, the 1943 edition of *WW* was one of the first works by Heidegger to be translated into English, included in *Existence and Being* (1949) along with his 1943 address on Hölderlin's poem "Homecoming," the 1936 address on "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," and the 1929 inaugural lecture "What is Metaphysics?" In 1958, Marvin Farber published a review of this English translation of *WW* that begins as follows:

To many readers of philosophical literature, Martin Heidegger appears to have made great contributions to philosophy. But to those who have taken the trouble to read his writings with logical standards in mind, he has very little to offer, and he rates primarily as a pretentious verbal philosopher. He has taken care to create severe linguistic barriers between himself and his readers, which serve to make plausible the claim to untold profundity and novelty. It will be instructive – and quite disillusioning to some – to examine a piece of Heidegger's more audacious writing carefully. Nothing could be better for this purpose than his essay on "The Essence of Truth."<sup>1</sup>

Readers of Nicholson's book will, I suspect, be left with little sympathy for Farber's rather superficial criticisms of Heidegger. Nicholson masterfully navigates the shift from a conceptual analysis of truth as correspondence to a description of the phenomena of truth more broadly that most readers should find accessible.

Part I of *Heidegger on Truth* is devoted to elucidating the 11 December 1930 version of *WW* (page numbers throughout Part I refer to the "3. Version" in GA 80.1), which Nicholson translates into English as needed for the reader. Nicholson compares the December 1930 address with the 1949 edition in Part II, focussing on key differences in Heidegger's approach to truth therein. These two versions of *WW* straddle not only Heidegger's "turn" but also a rather disgraceful period in Heidegger's life, which is taken up in Nicholson's Intermission. Heidegger begins *WW* with a discussion of the correspondence theory of truth, which takes statements to be the proper bearers of truth. Roughly speaking, statements are true insofar as

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1. Marvin FARBER, "Heidegger on the Essence of Truth," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 18 (1958), pp. 523-532 (quotation p. 523).

they correspond to, accurately track, or are in accordance with reality. Heidegger does not dispute the correctness of this account of truth but argues that it does not get at the *essence* of truth. Heidegger's distinction between the *true* and the merely *correct* that we find in the *Question Concerning Technology* will be familiar to many.

The correct always fixes upon something pertinent in whatever is under consideration. However, in order to be correct, this fixing by no means needs to uncover the thing in question in its essence. Only at the point where such an uncovering happens does the true come to pass. For that reason the merely correct is not yet the true. Only the true brings us into a free relationship with that which concerns us from out of its essence. (GA 7, p. 9)

The justification for this claim is found in *WW*. What makes statements true is their accordance with reality, but, Heidegger argues, we also speak of things as being true or false, genuine or fake, such as a genuine Hermès handbag or false gold (p. 24). These things are real, but they are not truly or actually what they appear to be. Propositional truth is rooted in a more original truth (p. 29). This leads into the discussions of truth as freedom, truth as *alētheia*, and the withdrawal of being into mystery and forgetting (*lanthanomai*). I will not attempt to rehearse the details of Nicholson's discussion here. Referring to *Heidegger on Truth* as a commentary is in no way meant to diminish the original philosophical insights Nicholson makes along this pathway of thinking. Take, for example, his insightful discussions of the revelatory power of conduct (*Verhalten*), letting-be (*Seinlassen*), and concealment (*Verborgenheit*). In what follows, I will resist the urge to write a lengthy commentary on a commentary. Instead, I will give a brief summary of Part II and then highlight a few aspects of Nicholson's book that call for thinking.

Rather than once again guiding us around the corners and arcs of *WW* that are carried over from the 1930 to the 1949 version, Part II of *Heidegger on Truth* focusses on key differences in Heidegger's thinking that are reflected in the 1949 text, specifically Heidegger's use of historical concepts of truth. In Part II (A), Nicholson highlights the deeper influence of Plato and the early Greeks on Heidegger's discussion of unconcealedness. He begins by noting that Heidegger now adds the notion of *correctness* (*Richtigkeit*) to his account of truth: "The essence of truth, as the correctness of a statement, is freedom" (p. 98). In this section, Nicholson draws on the WS 1931/32 and WS 1933/34 lecture courses on Plato to help explain this shift in Heidegger's thinking, specifically the more developed account of *alētheia* we find therein. Nicholson also notes the fact that Heidegger drops the use of the word *meinen* from *WW* to describe statements and our conduct being about something (p. 32-33) and replaces it with *Vor-stellen*, signifying something being presented or put before us (p. 107). This change in terminology allows Heidegger to speak of letting things stand over against us, emphasising the fact that we encounter being in experience.

Part II (B) is, I dare say, the least thought-provoking division of *Heidegger on Truth*. It is also the shortest. (B) contains of a discussion of Heidegger's excursus on medieval philosophy that is added to the 1943 and 1949 versions of *WW* in connect to the correspondence theory of truth. While this is perhaps important to point out as a substantial difference between the 1930 and 1949 texts, it is unclear to me exactly what precisely this excursus contributes to Heidegger's analysis. Nicholson then

segues into a discussion of concept of truth in modern philosophy, specifically the notion of *certainty*, but he all but admits that this is only tangentially related to *WW*. Part II (C) zeros in on a marginal note Heidegger inserted into the 1943 edition of *WW* just before chapter 6 on “Untruth and Concealment.” The note reads: “*Zwischen 5. und 6. der Sprung in die (im Ereignis wesende) Kehre*” (p. 142). Nicholson does a masterful job of contextualizing this note, explaining the introduction of Heidegger’s concept of *Ereignis* in relation to his concept of enframing (*Gestell*). For those who are at home in *The Question Concerning Technology*, the links drawn here between the account of truth in *WW* and the concealing essence of technology are of particular interest. However, this culminating division and its overview of Heidegger’s outlook on philosophy and the saving power of art and poetry is particularly dense.

There are three points concerning Nicholson’s book that I would like to briefly comment on. First, while I mentioned at the outset that Nicholson’s notion of truth as a medium appears to be his central thesis, this terminology is dropped midway through the book. I take it that this is still the notion being developed in Part II, but Nicholson makes no explicit reference to the “medium” past p. 62. It would have been nice to see him return to this concept explicitly in the Conclusion.

Second, one of the most interesting discussions we find in *Heidegger on Truth* is Nicholson’s confrontation with Thomas Sheehan’s “new paradigm” for interpreting Heidegger, as articulated in *Making Sense of Heidegger* (2015). According to Nicholson, the two key features of this new paradigm are (1) that when Heidegger speaks about “being” we should interpret this as “meaningful presence” (p. 119) and (2) that Heidegger’s phenomenology is not about being at all, but about sense or meaning (p. 120). Nicholson’s worry is that this new paradigm risks reducing being to presence, which seems incongruent with Heidegger’s own views. Sheehan’s revisionist reading of Heidegger puts him more in line with Husserlian phenomenology (cf. Sheehan 2015, p. 129) by reducing being to meaning. According to Nicholson, when Sheehan writes, for instance, that, “We live in meaningful contexts, worlds of meaning shaped by our interests and concerns, which confer meaning on the things that inhabit those contexts”<sup>2</sup>, this seems to miss the being-there of things that we encounter and that conditions our experience of things. How do we understand Heidegger’s account of truth, where the essence of truth consists in freely letting being reveal itself to us if there is no being apart from meaning given by subjects?

How we understand the Sheehan-Nicholson debate, might depend on what analogy we use to describe phenomenological analysis. A common one is the onion analogy, where phenomenology peels back and exposes the various layers of meaning that we find always already covering the objects of the world, that we impose on objects according to our practical aims, our social, cultural, and historical context, our theoretical conceptual frameworks, etc. This seems to have been introduced in Don Ihde’s *Sense and Significance* (1973) when comparing phenomenological analysis to Quine’s analysis of language.<sup>3</sup> The problem with such an analogy is that if we

2. Thomas SHEEHAN, *Making Sense of Heidegger. A Paradigm Shift*, London, Rowman and Littlefield, 2015, p. 131.

3. Don IHDE, *Sense and Significance*, Pittsburgh PA, Duquesne University Press, 1973, pp. 136-138.

peel back all the layers of the onion, *nothing* remains. This seems incompatible with Heidegger's views on being and truth.

Alternatively, one might see phenomenological analysis as a way of uncovering layers of meaning or sense, and to see meaning as nothing more than such layers – like bedsheets we throw over ghosts in order to make them cognizable. Perhaps there is nothing underneath – bedsheets all the way down, as it were; nothing but a pile of old cloaks. No specter lurking beneath other than the one in or minds – a phantasm, not a “real thing” or a thing-in-itself. Or it could be that there is some “real thing” apart from these layers of meaning, underlying them, conditioning their shape, but in-itself it is nothing *for us*, unperceivable, uncognizable, inconceivable, much like an otherworldly ghost. The question then is if Heidegger's views are consistent with this ghost analogy.

Finally, a comment on the Intermission. Since the publication of the *Black Notebooks* in 2014 (and even before that),<sup>4</sup> it has become impossible if not irresponsible to comment on Heidegger's work after 1931 without acknowledging his Nazism. In the case of the present book, doing so is all the more pressing given that Nicholson is comparing a version of *WW* penned before the period of Heidegger's Nazism with one edited and published longer after the fall of the Third Reich. This might act as an occasion to see ways in which Heidegger's philosophy was affected by his acceptance of the Nazi worldview.

We find the first mention of Heidegger's relationship to National Socialism on p. 21 of Nicholson's book. There, Nicholson briefly states that one source of Heidegger's support for the Nazi party was, at least initially, economic in nature. The allusion here is to the effects of the Treaty of Versailles on the German economy and the political options that were available in response to the ensuing crises. This is expanded upon more fully in the Intermission (pp. 83-94), where Nicholson cautiously and soberly provides some context for Heidegger's participation in the National Socialist movement. In approaching this topic, it is perhaps useful to attempt, at least as a point of departure and in accordance with a philosophical duty to charity, to distinguish Heidegger's nationalism from his anti-Semitism, his politics from his phenomenology, and his personal diaries and correspondence with family from his academic work. Nicholson does precisely this and does not shy away from being critical of how some commentators, particularly Peter Trawny, have handled this most serious topic. Doing so by no means *excuses* Heidegger's deeds. Nicholson does not attempt to defend or exonerate Heidegger by describing the facts surrounding his involvement with National Socialism. The facts speak for themselves.

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4. As Kisiel writes: “Every decade since the postwar forties has had its public airing of [...] ‘the Heidegger case,’ an international convention referring specifically to the philosopher's notorious public involvement with Nazism in the thirties.” [Theodore KISIEL, “Heidegger's Apology: Biography as Philosophy and Ideology,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 14:2/15:1 (1991), pp. 363-404 (363)] The topic of Heidegger's Nazism has been unavoidable since the publication of Victor Farias' *Heidegger et le nazisme* (Paris, Éditions Verdier, 1987).