

# Heidegger, philosophy, Nazism

Julian Young

*University of Auckland*



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# Introduction

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1 This work aims to provide what may be described as a ‘de-Nazification’ of Heidegger. Since this term is open to serious misunderstanding let me hasten to clarify it.

For many years it was widely accepted that Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism was a brief and reluctant response to the exigencies of the times. According to what Michael Zimmerman has dubbed ‘the official story’<sup>1</sup> – the account of things offered by Heidegger subsequent to 1945<sup>2</sup> – given the gravity of the cultural, social and economic crisis confronting Germany in 1933, given the real threat of a Bolshevik revolution and the manifest incapacity of the crumbling Weimar democracy to cope with the situation, he decided that there was no alternative but to support Hitler’s movement. He recognised that it contained primitive, even barbaric elements, but believed these could be neutralised once a new political order had been established. And so they might have been, had more figures of intellectual stature been willing to accept their responsibilities to society at large instead of fleeing into the ineffectuality of ‘inner’ or outer emigration.

Concurrent with this ambition, the story continues, it was vital to Heidegger that the German universities should be reformed so as to become capable of playing a revitalising role in the cultural life of the community at large. It was vital, too, that they should be protected from political control by the Nazi state. With these twin aims in view, Heidegger accepted the unanimous vote of his colleagues and became Rector of

<sup>1</sup> ‘The Thorn in Heidegger’s Side: The Question of National Socialism’, *Philosophical Forum* 20/4, 1989 pp. 326–65.

<sup>2</sup> The principal texts in which Heidegger seeks to justify his actions during the Nazi period are: (a) a submission to his de-Nazification hearing in 1946 (b) an account for his own files (c) a letter to the Rector of Freiburg University (d) ‘The Rectorate 1933–4: Facts and Thoughts’ (e) ‘Only a God Can save Us’. (a), (b) and (c) may be found in Karl A. Mochling, ‘Martin Heidegger and the Nazi Party: An Examination’, Ph.D. dissertation, Northern Illinois University, 1972. (c) may also be found in *WI* pp. 61–6. (d) may be found in *N & K* pp. 41–66. (e) was an interview given in 1966 to *Der Spiegel*, but on Heidegger’s instructions first published posthumously on 31 May 1976. It is reprinted in *WI* pp. 91–116 and *N & K* pp. 41–66.

Freiburg University in May 1933. With his Rectoral Address (*Rektorsrede*) appropriately entitled ‘The Self-Assertion of the German University’ he immediately incurred criticism from the Nazi authorities: the Education Minister for the state of Baden<sup>3</sup> complained of its independence of Party policy, calling it a ‘private National Socialism’. He objected, in particular, to the rejection of Nazi ‘political science’ and its failure even to mention the matter of race.

During his tenure as rector, the story proceeds, Heidegger sought to protect Jewish and anti-Nazi faculty from oppression by the new regime. He resigned after a mere ten months, having refused to dismiss two deans regarded as politically unacceptable by the authorities in the state capital at Karlsruhe. This was the end of his active engagement with the regime, and very soon, in fact, he became its open critic. His lectures on Nietzsche and Hölderlin from 1935 onwards constitute what was, in the circumstances, a daring critique of many aspects of Nazism, in particular of the racism of official Nazi philosophers such as Alfred Rosenberg. He was attacked by the semi-official philosopher Ernst Krieck in his journal *Volk im Werden*, while Rosenberg prevented him from publishing. His lectures were spied upon and eventually shut down by the Gestapo, he was forbidden to travel abroad and finally, in 1944, sent to work on the Rhine dykes as one of the university’s ‘most expendable’ professors.

During the past decade the official story has been exposed as sometimes untrue but, more significantly, as a great deal less than the whole truth. Due to the detective work of scholars – conspicuously and sensationally Victor Farias, less conspicuously but more substantially, Hugo Ott<sup>4</sup> – we now know that, along with many other stories told in Germany after 1945, Heidegger’s story offers an expurgated account of his life during the Nazi period, that, to some degree, constitutes a cover-up. We know, for example, that, far from reluctantly accepting a draft to become Rector, Heidegger actually manoeuvred beforehand to obtain the post and that the election was by no means truly unanimous: Jewish professors, for example, were no

<sup>3</sup> Today absorbed into the *Land of Baden-Württemberg*.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Farias, *Heidegger et le Nazisme* tr. Mynain Bernaroch and Jean-Baptiste Grasset (Paris: Verdier, 1987). This first incarnation was followed by a German version *Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus* tr. K. Laermann (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1989) and, finally, an English version *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1989), the version from which I shall quote. Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt-on-Main: Campus, 1988). The English version from which I shall quote is *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life* tr. A. Blunden (London: Fontana, 1994). Many of Farias’ disclosures were in fact drawn from articles previously published by Ott. It should be mentioned that, long before Farias and Ott, Guido Schneeberger published a number of compromising speeches from Heidegger’s time as Rector in *Nachlese zu Heidegger* (Bern: Suhr, 1962). The appearance of this volume, however, made little impact in the English-speaking world and, it seems, not much in Germany either.

longer allowed to vote. And, far from becoming a member of the Party in a reluctant, pro forma way, he actually joined in a magnificent public ceremony on, pregnantly, May Day, 1933. The Rectoral Address of the same year was another grand ceremony which he personally orchestrated to include the singing of the Horst-Wessel song. During his time as Rector, he sent a telegram to Hitler enthusiastically supporting the *Gleichschaltung* of the universities – their being ‘brought into line’ with the requirements of the state. And, whatever he meant by the ‘Self-Assertion’ of the university (see chapter 1, section 6), he certainly did not mean academic autonomy in any familiar sense, since, calling himself the ‘Führer’ of the university, he sought to acquire for himself all the authority that had previously belonged to the Senate. As Rector, Heidegger produced a large number of speeches and newspaper articles in support of the Nazi cause, speeches in which Hitler is referred to as, for example, ‘Germany’s only reality and its law’. He also used his position of power in attempts to destroy the academic careers of colleagues of whom he disapproved. In the case of the distinguished Freiburg chemist, Hermann Staudinger, for example, he initiated a Gestapo investigation with a view to forcing him into early retirement. (The basis of the investigation was the rumour that Staudinger had betrayed information about Germany’s chemical manufacturing processes during the First World War. It is unclear whether Heidegger genuinely believed this, but the rumour was, in any case, quite unsubstantiated.) Earlier he had sought to promote the career of another academic, Eduard Baumgarten, on the ground that, as a non-Jew, his advancement would help counter the ‘increasing jewification (*Verjudung*)’ of German academic life (see chapter 1, section 16). Heidegger’s philosophy lectures, in spite of later denials, were in fact always accompanied by the Nazi salute. He was never forbidden to travel abroad. In spite of his claim to have become an opponent of the regime in 1934, he appeared in Rome in 1936 wearing a swastika in his lapel and telling his erstwhile (Jewish) student Karl Löwith that National Socialism was the ‘right course’ for Germany. He remained a member of the Party until the end in 1945.

These and other facts that have come to light in the last ten years<sup>5</sup> make it

<sup>5</sup> One exceptionally discreditable fact is the report Heidegger sent in 1933 to the Bavarian Ministry of Education concerning the Jewish philosopher Richard Höningwald. Though some professors had argued for Höningwald’s retention, Heidegger demanded his sacking. Since this report has not, I think, yet come to light in the English-speaking world (neither Ott nor Farias mentions it) I quote from it at length: ‘Höningwald comes from the neo-Kantian school which stands for a philosophy that is tailor-made for liberalism. The essence of man is dissolved into a free-floating consciousness and this, in the end, is thinned down to a general, logical world-reason. On this path, on an apparently rigorous scientific basis, the path turns away from man in his historical rootedness and his national [*volkhaf*] belonging to his origin in earth and blood [*Boden und Blut*]. Together with this goes a conscious forcing back of all metaphysical questioning, and

clear that Heidegger's involvement with Nazism was much deeper and much less honourable than the official story makes out. Basically, two conclusions emerge from the exposé. First that Heidegger was, for at least two years, a real Nazi: his involvement was a matter of conviction rather than compromise, opportunism, or cowardice. (Many suggest that Heidegger's commitment lasted very much longer. I, however, will, in chapter 4, argue against this claim.) Second, if we allow the description 'honourable Nazi' to be non-selfcontradictory it is, none the less, not a description that fits Heidegger. He abused his position of power in human, all-too-human ways.

I have, of course, no intention of challenging any of these compromising results of recent research. I am concerned, on the contrary, particularly in chapter 1, to expand upon and add to them. I have thus no intention of presenting a 'de-Nazified' Heidegger in the sense of denying his serious and compromising involvement with the movement. The sense in which I do intend to 'de-Nazify' him I shall explain shortly.

2 The exposé of the last decade is, of course, perfectly legitimate in its own right. On the other hand, no one would have devoted much energy to it were it not for the fact of Heidegger's reputation as a great philosopher and his powerful and continuing influence on a great deal of contemporary, particularly postmodern, thought. Thus, for example, since they are philosophers of little international reputation or influence, no one has devoted a serious amount of energy to exposing the involvement with Nazism of, for instance, Jakob Barion, Heinrich Lützeler, Erich Rothacker, Vinzenz Rübner or Johannes Thyssen.<sup>6</sup> What fascinates is the conjunction of the high and the low, the conjunction of – in the solemn hype

man is counted as nothing more than a functionary [*Diener*] of an indifferent, general world-culture. This is the fundamental stance from which Höningwald's writings stem. Additionally, however, is to be mentioned that Höningwald, in particular, propogates the ideas of neo-Kantianism with a particularly dangerous sophistication and an empty mechanistic [*erlaufenden*] dialectic. The danger is above all that this kind of activity gives the impression of the highest objectivity and rigorous science and has already deceived many young people and led them astray. That still today this man continues to be employed at the University of Munich I am compelled to call a scandal. Its only explanation can be that the Catholic system prefers such people, people who are apparently neutral (*indifferent*) with respect to *Weltanschauung*, since they pose no danger to their own ends because they are, in the well known way, objective-liberal.' (Quoted in Claudia Schorcht's *Die Philosophie an den Bayerischen Universitäten 1933-45* (Erlangen: Harald Fischer, 1990) p. 161.)

The only thing to be said in favour of this deeply unpleasant piece of work is that Heidegger's hatred seems to be focused on liberalism, internationalism and Catholicism rather than Jewishness as such.

<sup>6</sup> See Hans Siegfried, 'Heidegger at the Nuremberg Trials: The "Letter on Humanism" revisited' in *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust* eds. A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg (Atlantic Heights: Humanities Press, 1996 pp. 189–214.)

of dust-jackets – possibly the greatest philosopher of our century with its paradigm of evil. But, of course, for the fascination to rise above the level of malicious and mind-numbing gossip (*Gerede*, central, as we will see, to *Being and Time*'s account of inauthenticity) there must be the prospect of more than conjunction, of a logical or explanatory connection between the philosophy and the politics. To give genuine importance to the discussion, it must be argued that Heidegger's philosophy demanded, culpably encouraged, or at least condoned, his commitment to fascist politics. Writers have not been slow to attribute to their discussion this dimension of seriousness.

The argument of this book is that none of these claims about the philosophy can, in fact, be sustained; that neither the early philosophy of *Being and Time*, nor the later, post-war philosophy, nor even the philosophy of the mid-1930s – works such as the *Introduction to Metaphysics* with respect to which critics often feel themselves to have an open-and-shut case – stand in any essential connection to Nazism. One may accept some, or all, of this philosophy without fear of being committed to, or moved into proximity with, fascism. More precisely, my claim is that one may accept any of Heidegger's philosophy, and, though Heidegger himself was far from any such commitment, preserve, without inconsistency, a commitment to orthodox liberal democracy. This is the sense in which the book seeks to present a 'de-Nazified' Heidegger: it is, above all, 'Heidegger' as the name of a body of philosophy which I shall argue to be free of the taint of Nazism.

Thoughtful readers will protest that my thesis proposes an a priori implausibility, the severance of man from work. They may even point out, as Herbert Marcuse did in 1947, in writing to his former teacher to ask him to recant his Nazi past,<sup>7</sup> that a separation between Heidegger the man and Heidegger the philosopher contradicts his own philosophy: his lifelong rejection of the distinction between the 'theoretical' and the 'practical'. My reply, however, is that I propose no such separation. Particularly in the case of someone so passionately and essentially a thinker as Heidegger, life and thought are one and the same. On the other hand, thinkerly men, human beings in general, are complex, richly inconsistent creatures, with a complexity which, unless we are very good novelists or therapists, we stand under an ever-increasing pressure not to see. In deciding whom to read, whom to attend to and whom to ignore, we search for headlines, one-word biographies – 'the homosexual', 'the president', 'the existentialist', 'the Nazi' – that tell us everything important about the person with whom we have to deal. What I wish to argue about Heidegger the man is that, though

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Heidegger of 28 August 1947 reprinted in *WI* pp. 160–2.

his involvement with Nazism was, during 1933-4, deep, sincere, nasty, as well as in a certain way thoughtful, it was, none the less, though absolutely disastrous, only an *episode* in his life, inconsistent with its overall character. Even more strongly, I shall argue that the character of Heidegger's political engagement was inconsistent with the deepest philosophical – that is, personal – commitments to which he subscribed *at the very time of his engagement*. I wish, in short, to present something not too far removed from the *opposite* of Rockmore's and Margolis' (if only for quite pedantic reasons) extraordinary assertion on page one of their collection, *The Heidegger Case (R & M)*, that Heidegger was a 'lifelong Nazi'.<sup>8</sup>

3 The first order of business is to establish just what National Socialism meant to Heidegger. Politics, as Hans Sluga emphasises in his brilliant book, is, in general, an indeterminate, symbol-centred business. 'Large groups of people can swear allegiance to the same flag even though, and indeed, precisely because, they are free to interpret the flag and their action in many different ways'.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Nazism, indeterminacy and symbolism are even more than usually present. During the early 1930s, there was a bewildering kaleidoscope of wildly inconsistent ideologies, all of which hitched their wagon to the swastika: traditionalists and radicals, socialists and capitalists, anti-Christians but Christians too. As Ernst Nolte points out,<sup>10</sup> one National Socialist faction consisted in a group of Catholics inspired by the vision of a Christian Germany, united under Hitler's leadership, that would come into being once the destructive influence of liberalism and Marxism had been abolished. Hitler, as Sluga emphasises, deliberately exploited indeterminate visual and verbal symbolism to create political unity out of ideological diversity. Given the multiply fractured political scene in Weimar Germany, no political organisation, he suggests, could have moved so rapidly from fringe status to total power without such exploitation (*Heidegger's Crisis* p. 62).

In the light of this, it is important to avoid the error of thinking of Nazism as consisting in some body of essential ideology which one simply endorsed or did not. It is important to avoid speaking as if there were some timeless 'essence' of Nazism, to avoid, in particular, identifying this essence

<sup>8</sup> At the end of their introduction – the book has a strongly anti-Heidegger character – the editors write that they had hoped 'for an even wider range of views', but unfortunately, 'we encountered resistance, suspicion, unwillingness on the part of a number of writers to accept our invitation [to contribute], particularly among those who could be expected to adopt a protective stance to Heidegger' (*R & M* p. 8). In view of the remark on page one, I find this disingenuous.

<sup>9</sup> *Heidegger's Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) p. 62. Though I am full of admiration for Sluga as a philosopher and intellectual historian I disagree, in chapter 4, with some of his political views.

<sup>10</sup> *Heidegger: Politik und Geschichte im Leben und Denken* (Berlin: Propläen, 1992) p. 141.

with what was most salient about Nazism after 1945 – the Holocaust. Heidegger's assertion, to Marcuse, that one should not 'judge the beginning of National Socialism from its end' (*WI* p. 162) is correct. (Surprisingly, essentialist talk about Nazism is particularly prevalent in the French Heidegger discussion – surprising since, in general, modern French philosophy seems committed to the deconstruction of all forms of essentialism.) The movement was, to be sure, characterised, from its early days, by anti-Semitic acts and slogans. And anti-Semitism was, of course, there for all to see in *Mein Kampf*. In 1933, however, many usually thoughtful people took Nazi anti-Semitism to be no more than populist propaganda, something which would disappear once power had been secured.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike, then, its most powerful rival, communism, Nazism was a body without a head. At its core lay an ideological and philosophical vacuum which each ideological faction aspired to fill with its own agenda.<sup>12</sup> Given this, given that, ideologically speaking, there were, in 1933, many varieties of National Socialism in play, the task in chapter 1 is to discover which of these was Heidegger's. We must discover what it was that he retrospectively referred to as the 'inner truth and greatness' of National Socialism (*IM* p. 199) and which, in 1933, he hoped would become embodied in its outer reality. In general terms I shall suggest that there are, as one would expect, unacceptable aspects to Heidegger's 1933 ideology – though the type of unacceptability is by no means that standardly attributed to Heidegger by critics like Victor Farias.

Chapters 2 to 6 inquire into the ties that have been proposed between Heidegger's philosophy, in its various phases, and his political ideology. (Notice that, following Habermas,<sup>13</sup> I make the difficult but, I believe, essential distinction between Heidegger's genuinely philosophical thought on the one hand and mere ideology on the other (see the *Afterword* for further elaboration of this distinction).) In chapters 2 and 3 I consider the

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer has stated that he was of this opinion, as, in conversation, has Leonard Forster, formerly Professor of German at Cambridge, and an *Assistant* in German universities through most of the thirties. Tragically, many Jews who were free to leave Germany in 1933 but elected to remain were of this opinion too. See John V. H. Dippel, *Bound upon a Wheel of Fire* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> In his book, Sluga shows how this vacuum constituted the context of philosophical debate during the 1930s. The old debate, for example, between the neo-Kantian 'value' theorists belonging to the DPG (the German Philosophical Society) and neo-Nietzschean figures such as Alfred Bäumler, who held that values were not objective, but rather the product of human choice, became, in the 1930s, a competition to fill the vacuum, to become the official philosophy – the philosophical correctness – of National Socialism. Heidegger, as we will see, represented a third position in this debate, rejecting, as he did, both the objectivist and voluntarist positions.

<sup>13</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective', reprinted in *DII* pp. 186–208, p. 191.

attempts that have been made to link Heidegger's most famous work, *Being and Time* (1927), to his politics: chapter 2 considers attempts to, as I call it, 'positively' implicate the work; chapter 3, attempts to negatively implicate it. In chapter 4 I turn to the rather different works of the mid-thirties, especially to the lectures on Hölderlin's 'Germanien' and 'der Rhein' and the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, works which even those on the whole sympathetic to Heidegger have generally taken to be indelibly fascist in character. In chapter 5 I focus mainly on the massive series of Nietzsche studies that runs from 1936 until 1946, and on, in particular, the charge that Heidegger's wartime philosophy amounts to a rationalisation of the Nazi war-effort. Finally, in chapter 6, I deal with Heidegger's post-war philosophy, attending in particular to the claim that, partly through his public 'silence' concerning the Holocaust and partly through allegedly compromising private or semi-private remarks on the topic, Heidegger displayed that, *qua* man and *qua* philosopher, he could not grasp that anything terrible had happened at Auschwitz.

4 In 1988, in a comprehensive survey of, as we may call it, 'the case for the prosecution', Thomas Sheehan advised that 'one would do well to read nothing of Heidegger's without raising political questions'.<sup>14</sup> Since the appearance of Farias' *Heidegger and Nazism* there has been a rush of English-speaking writers eager to follow this advice and to find Heidegger's philosophy guilty on the basis of such cross-examination: Richard Wolin, Thomas Rockmore, Joseph Margolis, Domenico Losurdo and Sheehan himself, to name but a few. In Germany, too, the tide has run strongly against Heidegger with recent writers such as Habermas, Tugendhat, Jonas, N. Tertulian, W. Franzen and C. F. Gethmann subjecting the foundations of his philosophy to sustained and hostile criticism. In France, the situation has been more nuanced due to the fact that many leading philosophers, Derrida, Lyotard, Lacoue-Labarthe, Levinas and Foucault, have a long-acknowledged debt to Heidegger. To philosophers such as these the appearance, in France, of the Farias book came as an embarrassment. The tendency of their response, as will appear in chapters 3 and 6, has been to condemn part of Heidegger's philosophy – typically that of the early-to-mid-1930s – while retaining other parts which they see as finding their completion in their own work of deconstruction.

There is an interesting question belonging to the sociology of knowledge as to why, since the appearance of Farias' book in 1987 made the facts of 1933-4 widely known, the trend has been so strongly towards discrediting part or all of Heidegger's philosophy on the basis of those facts. To my

<sup>14</sup> 'Heidegger and the Nazis', *New York Review of Books*, 16 June 1988, pp. 38-47, p. 47.

knowledge, there has been since then, in English at least, no systematically comprehensive attempt to exculpate Heidegger's philosophy from the charge of contamination.<sup>15</sup> This, on the face of things, is odd, since the attempt to discredit the philosophy on the basis of the politics has the *prima facie* appearance of being an *ad hominem* argument, something analytic philosophers, at least, are trained, from the cradle, to abhor.

The answer to this question is complex. At least four factors need to be mentioned. First and foremost, the horror of the Holocaust. In the face of the enormity of this crime, a defence of *any* aspect of the being of someone who had *any* kind of association with Nazism can readily be taken as a discounting of the horror, as evincing the defender's *own* moral blindness. So, at least at the often journalistic level at which the discussion is conducted, the defender is vulnerable to being represented. (Safer, by far, to produce questionable logic than questionable morals.) Second, there is the post-1945 orthodoxy that the events of the Second World War were entirely and uniquely a German responsibility. (One only has to recall the furore that greeted A. J. P. Taylor's suggestion in the sixties, that British policies might have played an important role in bringing about the war, to understand its strength.) In the black and white context of this more general debate, a would-be defender of Heidegger or of any aspect of the German cultural past can fear to find himself in conflict with this powerful orthodoxy.

Third, there is the fact that Heidegger was, always, but most conspicuously in his later philosophy, a fundamental critic of contemporary Western society. It is a human frailty to wish not to hear criticism of the here and now in which one is oneself emeshed. It is regrettably the case that Heidegger's political past has presented itself as an all-too-available ground for evading serious attention to his discomfiting critique of the present.

Finally there is the matter of the Cold War and of Heidegger's lifelong antipathy to democracy – in, at least, its modern form. So long as Western democracy experienced itself as embattled and under threat, intellectual work critical of democracy was difficult to produce, defend or publish – regardless of the angle from which such criticism came.

The Cold War is now, however, over. Democracy reigns, if not triumphant, at least (in a 'world-historical' sense) alone. The time is perhaps ripe, therefore, for a more objective look at the thought of this uncomfortable critic of our 'average everydayness'. The recent revival of

<sup>15</sup> An honourable, but brief, exception to this generalisation is Richard Rorty who suggests that the whole furore amounts to no more than an *ad hominem* fallacy. ('Taking Philosophy Seriously', *New Republic* 88, pp. 31–4.) Sluga (*Heidegger's Crisis*) argues trenchantly against finding direct links between Heidegger's philosophy and politics, but finds enough indirect links to end up in a position of considerable hostility to Heidegger.

the communitarian side of the communitarianism–individualism debate in both the Anglo-American and German contexts, suggests that this may be so. With some trepidation, therefore (in view of Heidegger and Nietzsche’s insistence that good philosophy is always ‘untimely’), I suggest that the ‘de-Nazification’ of Heidegger which I propose is a timely project.

5 To date, this introduction may have given rise to the impression that the work is an essay in Heidegger’s ‘political thought’. This, however, is not intended to be its fundamental character. My primary motive in writing the book has rather been to grasp and present, as clearly as possible, Heidegger’s philosophy as such. The work should thus be understood as, above all, an occasionally critical and inevitably broadly brushed presentation of Heidegger’s philosophy (or better, perhaps, *philosophies*) in its totality. I have stressed the political side to that philosophy partly because it is the noise surrounding the political question which remains the major obstruction to a clear-headed approach to this most important philosophy, but partly also because I have found the political perspective to be an extremely fruitful approach to the task of entering the inner recesses of the philosophy itself.