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Heidegger's Manichaeism

Comments on Peter Trawny's *Heidegger and the myth of a Jewish world conspiracy*

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ABSTRACT

Heidegger's Manichaeism: Comments on Peter Trawny's *Heidegger and the myth of a Jewish world conspiracy*. In the book *Heidegger and the myth of a Jewish world conspiracy*, Peter Trawny convincingly shows that anti-Semitism in Heidegger's thought does not have the shape of the Nazi call for racial discrimination, but rather is a stereotypical and unfortunate element of Heidegger's call for a transformation of thinking so that philosophy and the human attitude to life would be focused on Being itself (*Seyn selbst*) instead of beings (*Seiendes*). Despite the advantages of Trawny's book, I think that Trawny unlawfully tries to demonstrate that anti-Semitism is the main ethical and political problem of Heideggerian philosophy, while in my opinion the main problem is Heidegger's "being-historical Manichaeism" — a phenomenon which is only marginally evoked by Trawny. This Manichaeism brings Heidegger to criticize the values of human subjectivity, personality and social and economic self-security as the enemies of Being. These views not only can have severe political collectivist implications, but — to put it in the terminology of *Sein und Zeit* — they also make Heidegger speak in the manner of the conservative variant of "idle talk" (*Gerede*) of "the they" (*das Man*).

KEYWORDS

Manichaeism; anti-Semitism; ethics; political philosophy; Martin Heidegger; Peter Trawny

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BLACK NOTEBOOKS CONTROVERSY

The recent publication of so-called *Black notebooks* (*Schwarze Hefte*), Martin Heidegger's philosophical diaries filled with his metapolitical comments written during the turbulent era of Nazism in Germany, forced political thinkers to get interested in Heidegger's philosophy; and *vice versa* — Heidegger scholars were forced to discuss the questions of political philosophy. The main controversy linked to these private philosophical notes of Martin Heidegger is based on several fragments which reveal his more or less anti-Semitic assumptions which seem to confirm that Heidegger's episode of Nazi engagement was not only a mere opportunism — it was based on strong convictions of the thinker. It would be no exaggeration to say that the question of anti-Semitism dominated the debate on *Black Notebooks* and almost excluded consideration of other thoughts written in these diaries, for example Heidegger's comments of Ancient Greek idea of polis (note 210 in: Heidegger, 2014a). The most radical example of the *Black notebooks* controversy is Emmanuel Faye's call to remove all Heidegger's books from university courses and libraries — with an exception of those courses and libraries which are dedicated to the history of totalitarianism (Faye, 2007). This radical appeal, shared by some scholars and many journalists, met a huge criticism from distinguished Heidegger specialists such as Thomas Sheehan (editor of *Heidegger, the man and the thinker*; Sheehan, 2015) and Cezary Wodziński (author of *Heidegger and the problem of evil*; Wodziński, 2007). The Heidegger-panic is based on the view that given anti-Semitic ambiance of some of the entries of *Black notebooks*, all of Heidegger's philosophy — from *Phenomenology of religious life* (1921) to *Being and time* (1962) — is "contaminated" by anti-Semitism.

The similar assumption that Heidegger's thought of Being is subject to contamination by anti-Semitism is fundamental also for Peter Trawny's book *Heidegger and the myth of a Jewish world conspiracy* (Trawny, 2015). However, the analyses conducted by this well-experienced editor of Heidegger's collected works are much less radical and sensational than these of Emmanuel Faye. Trawny does not appeal to forget and not quote Heidegger's philosophy because of its, we might say, political incorrectness. "The term 'green bird' lets us conclude only that we see a bird with green feathers, not that everything green we see must be a bird. Similarly, the reference to a 'being-historical' anti-Semitism in Heidegger does not mean that the history of Being as such is anti-Semitic" (Trawny, 2015: 101) — this is the comment of Trawny in regard to the concept of the alleged presence of anti-Semitism in all of Heidegger's thoughts. The author carries out his interpretation of Heidegger's philosophical diary entries in the light of his deep knowledge of the thinker's philosophical works and correspondence.

BEING-HISTORICAL ANTI-SEMITISM

The mysterious term “being-historical anti-Semitism” is key to Trawny’s interpretation of the Jewish issues in *Black notebooks*. When one does hear that “Heidegger was an anti-Semite”, one might think that the philosopher called for extermination of Jews, their legal discrimination and other forms of aggression. Trawny, rather not for the purpose of sympathetically defending Heidegger, but because of the profound analysis of *Schwarze Hefte*, shows that the anti-Semitism of Heidegger does not express any call for physical and psychological aggression; similarly, during the time of Nazi engagement, Heidegger did not call publicly for racial discrimination despite the fact that he gave numerous political speeches: as Trawny stresses, “Heidegger kept his [anti-Semitic] statements secret. He played no role in the anti-Semitic milieu of the Third Reich” (Trawny, 2015: 100). Instead, the Heideggerian anti-Semitism is a philosophical view, drawn in the context of history of Being (*Seynsgeschichte*) — as Trawny puts it, “In these [*Black notebooks*], especially between 1938 and 1941, Heidegger comes to speak more or less directly of ‘the Jews’. They are transposed into a being-historical topography” (Trawny, 2015: 6).

What is this being-historical topography? In one of Heidegger’s main works, *Being and time* of 1927, Heidegger argues quite revolutionarily that we need to break up with the Western metaphysical tradition as it is focused on beings and ignores the most fundamental question of being of beings (*Sein des Seienden*) and, as Heidegger later added, Being itself (so-called Beyng — in German: *Seyn*) which had already been envisaged in *Being and time* (Heidegger, 1999: 58)¹. The true thinking should, according to the philosopher from the Hütte of Todtnauberg, deal primarily with the question of Being. In *Contributions to philosophy: From enowning*, written in 1936–1938, Heidegger calls this much-needed switch of philosophy “the other beginning”, focused on catching and voicing the always “sheltering-concealing” truth of Being (Heidegger, 1999: 245–250), while the earlier “first beginning”, the one focused on beings, was for him a sort of preparatory stage for the real philosophy, which means: *Seyn*-focused philosophy. It seems to me that the terms “the first” and “the other beginning of thinking”, which appeared in Heidegger’s thought in 1930s, may have been inspired by Hannah Arendt’s doctorate on Saint Augustine published in 1929, where she put a great emphasis on human capability to make the “beginning” (Arendt, 1996; also note 14 in: Heidegger, 2014b): “Since man can know, be conscious of, and remember his ‘beginning’ or his origin, he is able to act as a beginner and enact the story of mankind”

¹ Despite the English translation of Trawny’s book and of Heidegger’s *Contributions to philosophy*, I allow myself to change “beyng” into “Beyng” (and “being” — used as “being itself” — into Being). This is because I think that the importance of this term in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger requires the capital letter.

(Arendt, 1996: 55). For Heidegger, “the other beginning of thinking” consists of course on the fact that Being, as he stresses in every work, is radically other than beings, either if they are material things or immaterial ideas; animals or humans; thus the Being-focused philosophy has to be far from the anthropocentrism and the “machination” expressed in the priority of interests and values expressed by human beings. As Trawny interprets Heidegger, “‘machination’ blocks our entry to a place where the ‘truth of Beyng’ might be experienced” (Trawny, 2015: 12). Here comes Heideggerian “being-historical anti-Semitism”: Heidegger sees Jews as the representatives of this Western anthropocentric tradition; of this beings-focused “machination”.

By declaring such a view, Martin Heidegger, despite his philosophical mastery, takes for granted the non-sophisticated anti-Semitic stereotypes which present Jews as persons who think primarily about their business profits. Trawny offers a following quote from Heidegger’s *Black notebooks*:

With their marked gift for calculation, the Jews “live” according to the principle of race, and indeed have done so for the longest time, for which reason they themselves most vigorously resist its unrestricted application. The arrangement of racial breeding stems not from “life” itself, but from the hyperempowerment of life by machination (*Machenschaft*). What this brings about with such planning is a complete deracination of peoples by harnessing them in a uniformly constructed and streamlined arrangement of all entities. Along with deracination goes a self-alienation of peoples — the loss of history — i.e. of the regions of decision for Beyng (*Seyn*) (Trawny, 2015: 19).

While this quote shows that Heidegger employs the anti-Semitic stereotype about “Jews’ marked gift for calculation”, Trawny also argues convincingly that this passage at the same time is a proof that for Heidegger, the Nazi policies of racial discrimination and extermination were not the allegedly needed “final solution of the Jewish question” but only another symptoms of “machination” blocking our experiencing of Being itself. For Trawny, it is very likely that this entry in the *Black notebooks* was written in September 1935, when National Socialist German Workers’ Party introduced legal racial discrimination:

The background of this utterance is provided by, among other things, the Nuremberg racial laws, which were unanimously adopted by the Reichstag on September 15, 1935. A “Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor” as well as a “Law for the Protection of the Healthy Inheritance of the German People (Marriage Health Law)” used various criteria to discriminate among Jews, Gypsies, blacks, and half-breeds (incidentally, also women in general, even German women) (Trawny, 2015: 25).

Thus, in fact in *Black notebooks* Heidegger criticizes Jewish customs (expressed in their same-ethnicity marriage tradition and the partly true, partly stereotypical principle of acting alongside the interest of Jews) as well as Nazi Germany racial policy. Moreover, it seems to me that Heidegger’s criticism of

Nazi racial discrimination is stronger than the criticism of Jewish diaspora as Heidegger calls Nazi discrimination “an unrestricted application of the principle of race”. The philosopher from Todtnauberg clearly refuses discrimination and extermination as means to overcome the alleged “problem of Jews” because employing these means would still be a “machination” which closes us in the cage of the Western beings-focused metaphysics. For Heidegger, the adequate solution is only a complete transformation of thinking. Shortly, the solution is neither physical nor technical but philosophical. More precisely, the solution is human openness to the “regions of decision for Beyng” that will end any “machination”: that means, also alleged Jewish “machination”.

I think that Heidegger clearly describes this transformation of philosophy in his *Contributions to philosophy: From enowning*, written in 1936–1938 along with *Black notebooks*. We see that after the transformation, terms such as “decision” and “machination” would gain completely reversal meanings: they would be not anthropocentric but centered on Being:

Every saying of Be-ing is kept in words and namings which are understandable in the direction of everyday references to beings and are thought exclusively in this direction, but which are misconstruable as the utterance of Be-ing. [...] For example, “decision” can and should at first be meant as a human “act” — not of course in any moral sense but still in terms of enactment — until it suddenly means the essential sway of Be-ing. This does not mean that Be-ing is interpreted “anthropologically” but the reverse: that man is put back into the essential sway of Be-ing and cut off from the fetters of “anthropology”. In the same way, “machination” means a way of human comportment — and suddenly and properly the reverse: what is ownmost (or precisely not ownmost) to Be-ing, within which first of all the ground for the possibility of “operations” is rooted. The “reverse”, however, is not simply a “formal” trick to alter the meaning into mere words but rather transformation of man himself (Heidegger, 1999: 58).

Interestingly, this quote from *Contributions* shows that “machination” would not disappear after the transformation of thinking. The areas of trade, finance and entrepreneurship, stereotypically ascribed to Jews, would still exist but they would be centered on Being (however, Heidegger does not explain what it would mean in practice). This commentary on *Contributions* can be my humble addition to the essay of Trawny who does not focus so much on the issue of what kind of philosophical “revolution”, according to Heidegger, could end the problem of “machination”.

HEIDEGGER'S SPECIFIC UNDERSTANDING OF RACE

This cannot be nonetheless neglected that in *Schwarze Hefte*, Heidegger expresses his concern about “complete deracination of peoples by harnessing them in a uniformly constructed and streamlined arrangement of all entities”,

which will be brought by “applying the principle of race”. This is really paradoxical because in this note Heidegger — the philosopher who, as we should remember, was engaged in Nazi movement — criticized Nazi racist discrimination of Jews and other people while in the same note the thinker praised that people be “racinated”.

In the chapter *The being-historical concept of “race”*, Trawny shows that this paradox comes from the specificity of Heideggerian use of the term “race”. The philosopher from Todtnauberg clearly refuses the biological meaning of race (which is for him the base for the “machinational” “race principle” of Jews and Germans) but instead he employs his own understanding of “race”, which is based on “nobleness” [*Rassige*] and “rootedness” (Trawny, 2015: 39). This kind of “race” reveals again that not the racist violence and discrimination, but the philosophical transformation should be according to Heidegger the solution to end the “machinational” heritage of Western metaphysics. The end of, as Heidegger himself says, “uniformizing” people according to the racial policy of biological roots can eventually lead to adequate “racination of peoples”. With the feeling of rootedness, of a soil, independently of the biological features (and then, we might add, also of the question of being man or woman), every human being (or, to say it in a more Heideggerian way, every Dasein) can experience the openness to the truth of Beyng. As Heidegger puts it in *Black notebooks*:

All “blood” and all “race”, every “people” [*Volkstum*] is in vain and a blind course of action, if this has not already swung over into a risking of Being [and] as a risking [placed itself] freely before the lightning bolt [...] where its numbness [would necessarily] disintegrate for the sake of making room for that truth of Beyng (quoted in: Trawny, 2015: 42).

The Heideggerian notion of race and of the, as Heidegger notes in *Schwarze Hefte*, “incomparableness” of any (not only German) nation (Trawny, 2015: 50) is in fact not inspired by Nazism but by Hölderlin’s poetry, according to which the member of a nation should be like the Ister river: “Eager are we / To see the day. [...] / May someone sense the forest’s cry” (Heidegger, 1996: 4). As Heidegger commented on this kind of poetical message during the lecture on Hölderlin in 1942, “The river is the locality for dwelling. The river is the journeying of becoming homely. [...] The river is an enigma. We should not wish to ‘solve it’. Yet we must try to bring the enigma as enigma closer to us” (Heidegger, 1996: 31, 35). In fact, this “river” to dwell in is inexplicable Being itself, so as a member of a nation, one should care primarily about dwelling closely to Being in, we might say, a “national” way: “every ‘people’ [*Volkstum*] is in vain and a blind course of action, if this has not already swung over into a risking of Being”. This explains why Heidegger’s view that at some moment of history, “The German alone can newly and originally poetize and

say Being” (as quoted in: Trawny, 2015: 14) is not a call for killing members of other nations but a view — perhaps objectively incorrect but full of patriotism — that now only one nation has enough philosophical and poetical capabilities to express Being (as a Pole, I can say that this is Polish philosophy that discovered some special truth about Being...). The philosophical definition of being member of a nation tells why the philosopher from Todtnauberg, while still stressing a special mission of the German nation in creating “the other beginning” of thinking, became in fact quickly disappointed by the national-socialist movement as it represented a cult of warfare and biological policy instead of revolution in thinking. Trawny suggests that Nazi officials could have been bewildered and shocked by Heidegger's conception of national revolution as “saying the truth of Being”. The author comments Heidegger's words on race, nation and soil as follows: “He [Heidegger] recognized that actual National Socialism never had any interest in orienting itself on Hölderlin's poetry” (Trawny, 2015: 43). Interestingly, this non-biological interpretation of race allows, in my opinion — despite Heideggerian open criticism of “I”-centrism and subjectivity — for a very individualistic interpretation of belongingness to a people: that any biological roots do not prevent me from connecting to the tradition of some nation and, therefore, from becoming a member of a non-biological “race” which would form for me a ground for experiencing Beyng. For example, despite coming from Poland I can become rooted in the Icelandic national tradition and find there a room for the truth of Beyng. Thus, I find Trawny's observations on the notion of “race” in Heidegger's thought noteworthy and revelatory. This hidden, I may say, “Heideggerian individualism towards nationality” is even more confirmed by another comment of Trawny: “Heidegger says [...] that philosophy indeed arises ‘from factual life experience’. [...] Thus it is in keeping with Heidegger's life and thought that we regard [his] life «at the hut» as a philosophical act” (Trawny, 2015: 65).

But is Heidegger really free from the biological racism? In his book, Trawny shows that there indeed is also the dark, really Nazi-style side of Heidegger's notes. For example, if Heidegger really refuses the biological principle of race, and says that all nations can be “racinated” by the means of openness to Being, why does he insist that only Germans can effectuate the Being-centered “other beginning” of philosophy? Moreover, Trawny detects Heidegger's assumption that Jews themselves are responsible for the Holocaust. Trawny reveals the specific part of *Schwarze Hefte* which shows that shortly after the Second World War, namely in 1945–1947, Heidegger was convinced that Jews “over the last 12 years have co-organized that opportunity and done so consciously, so as to set this devastation in motion” (as quoted in: Trawny, 2015: 84). For Heidegger, the Third Reich was an effect of the Jewish conspiracy, so Germans deserve not accusation, but compassion instead. For Trawny this is thus

likely that Heidegger must have believed in the argumentation published in the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” that “If a non-Jewish state should hazard to proceed against the Jews («against us»), ‘then we would have to unleash world war’. Was it not the Jews who plunged the Germans into their ‘catastrophe’?” — asks Trawny ironically (Trawny, 2015: 84).

THE MAIN PROBLEM IS DIFFERENT

Despite the advantages of Trawny’s thorough analysis of *Black notebooks*, I think that Trawny unlawfully tries to demonstrate that anti-Semitism is the main ethical and political problem of Heideggerian philosophy, while in my opinion the main problem is the phenomenon evoked by Trawny only at the very beginning and at the very end of his book: Heidegger’s “being-historical Manichaeism”. As Trawny defines, “Manichaeism proclaims combative separation of two irreconcilable «principles» of darkness and light. At times, Heidegger analogously separates ‘Beyng’ from ‘beings’” (Trawny, 2015: 113). The author describes this specifically Heideggerian Manichaeism as follows:

It is the narrative of the “history of Beyng”, which Heidegger once summarized so: “First beginning: Departure, (Idea), Machination. Other beginning: Event of Appropriation [*Ereignis*]”. The whole would be “Beyng”. The narrative connects two beginnings and an end, which is characterized as “machination” (*Machenschaft*). This “machination” is the “metaphysics” that is coming to its end, which in the event of appropriation is overcome or, more precisely, converted. [...] As the end-formation of metaphysics, “machination” blocks our entry to a place where the “truth of Beyng” might be experienced not merely as refused, but instead as purely occurring. From here, it is only a short step to a way of thinking that we can characterize as a being-historical Manichaeism. This “machination”, *i.e.*, modern technology, becomes an enemy, so to speak, of the opening of that other place [*Ereignis*]. “Machination” must disappear, must destroy itself, so that this other — whether blocked or open — can occur (Trawny, 2015: 12–13).

Although Trawny himself notes that “he holds Heidegger’s being-historical anti-Semitism to be the consequence of a being-historical Manichaeism, which at the end of the 1930s came to a full outburst and drove his thinking into an ‘either/or’” (Trawny, 2015: 95), he is frequently willing to prove that this is the anti-Semitism which is the primary problem, and onto-historical Manichaeism is just a secondary issue. For example, Trawny notes quite strangely about Heidegger’s thought: “Hidden behind ‘Americanism’, was there not the ‘everywhere elusive’ world Judaism?” (Trawny, 2015: 34); “Was [for Heidegger] the triumph of technology not the final victory of ‘world Judaism’? [...] Often for Heidegger, these ‘foreigners’ are simply the Jews” (Trawny, 2015: 54) — while one page before the author writes, quoting *Black notebooks*, that

For the German it [a foreign] may be multiple: one of the figures of the foreign can be “world Judaism” or a “still more fundamentally practiced Americanism”. To the extent that world Judaism as mentioned above, is “everywhere elusive”, it can appear as the “rootless foreign” plain and simple. Heidegger never conceived that precisely in the experience of this foreign (Trawny, 2015: 53).

Again, a similar overinterpretation appears on the next pages:

He [Heidegger] says: “Marxism cannot be defeated once and for all unless we first confront the doctrine of ideas and its two-millennia-long history”. It is “Marxism” that is considered the enemy of essence. In the consciousness of the 1930s, Marx is the “Jew Marx”. Unmistakably, Marxism appears as a figure of metaphysics, that is, of the history of Being. Plato’s “doctrine of Ideas” is presented as the presupposition of Marxism. Unstated here is that Marxism, *i.e.*, Judaism, becomes subject to “total annihilation.” The enemy of essence, however, must itself be active. It must attack (Trawny, 2015: 73).

On the contrary, I think that from the fragment of *Black notebooks* on Marxism, there clearly comes a conclusion that the dark enemy conflicted with the lightness of Being is for Heidegger all Western metaphysics and way of life, which both, according to the thinker from Todtnauberg, began with Plato’s philosophy of ideas and, in the form of preoccupation with beings — either material (such as food or cars) or spiritual (such as God) — became incorporated by numerous realms such as Christianity, Judaism, Americanism, Bolshevism, industrialism, liberalism (Heidegger, 1999: 38, 127), “democratic bourgeoisie” (Heidegger, 1996: 70), and even Kantian philosophy: as Heidegger argues in *Contributions to philosophy*, “Kant saw that person is more than the ‘I’; it is grounded in self-legislation. Of course, this too remained Platonism” (Heidegger, 1999: 37). But still, for Trawny the main Heidegger’s “enemy” are Jews.

Nonetheless, I think that in Heideggerian philosophy, the Manichaeism as a whole is much more challenging and important politically and ethically than occasional anti-Semitic remarks. A switch from the analysis of anti-Semitism to the whole Heideggerian Manichaeism could be very useful in researching the metapolitical implications of Martin Heidegger’s philosophical views. Let me add a wider quotation from *Contributions to philosophy*, the one which reveals what is the “dark side” within his Manichaeist distinction:

Subjectivity [...] is most dangerously hidden in the cult of “personality”. [...] Whether one understands personality as the unity of “spirit-soul-body” or whether one turns this mix upside down, [...] this does not change anything in the dominating confusion of thinking that avoids every question. Spirit is thereby always taken to be “reason”, as the faculty of being able to say “I”. [...] Kant saw that person is more than the “I”; it is grounded in self-legislation. Of course, this too remained Platonism. [...] The principle there [in Western metaphysics] are no experiences that ever set man beyond

himself into an unentered domain from within which man as he is up to now could become questionable. That is — namely, that self-security — that innermost essence of “liberalism” which precisely for this reason has the appearance of being able to freely unfold and to subscribe to progress for all eternity. Thus “worldview”, “personality”, “genius”, and “culture” are decorations and “values” to be realized, in whatever way (Heidegger, 1999: 37–38).

It turned out that Heidegger’s sophisticated and poetic philosophy of Being brought him to simply moralistic, conservative-cliché narrative which condemns human subjectivity and economic well-being. In terms of political, law-making implications of Heideggerian thought, it is likely that Heidegger promotes the social and economic rule of rights of the collective over the rights of an individual who would like to act in accord with his or her personality. Moreover, Heidegger’s critique of personality, subjectivity, self-security, and liberalism not only can have severe political collectivist implications, but — to put it in the terminology of *Sein und Zeit* — they also make Heidegger speak in the manner of the conservative variant of “idle talk” (*Gerede*) of “the they” (*das Man*). Heideggerian thought is primarily “contaminated” by anti-subjectivist and anti-self-security Manichaeism, not by anti-Semitism.

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