Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935

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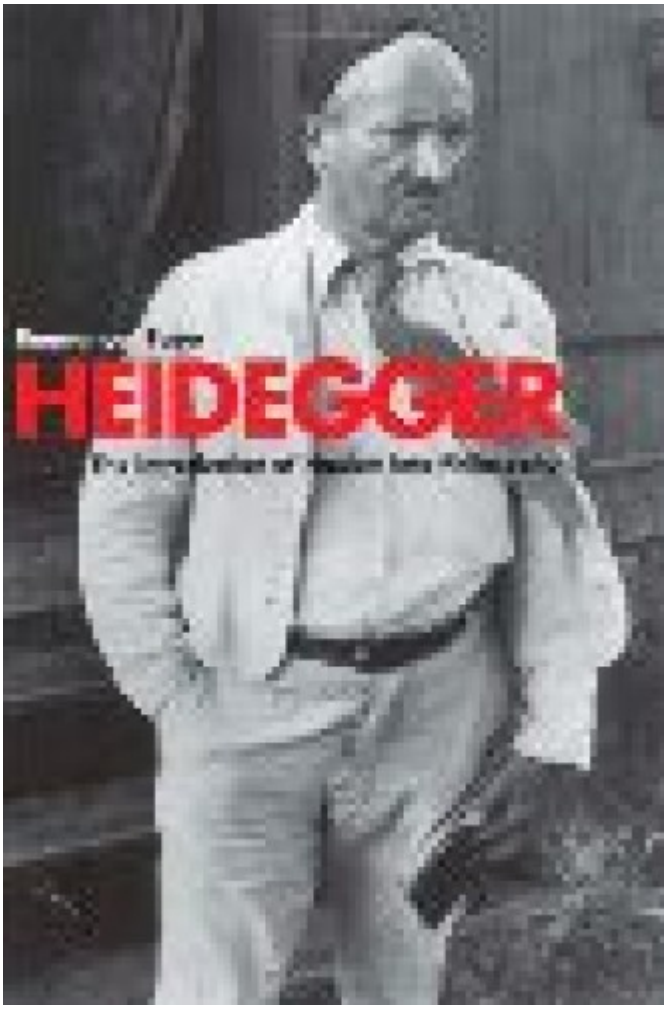

Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935

Emmanuel Faye; Michael B. Smith, trans.
Yale University Press

Over the past 25 years postmodernism has become a major if not dominant force in both popular culture and modern theology. Both liberal and evangelical Christians have embraced postmodern ideas as new ways of engaging society and presenting the gospel. Despite attempts by a few writers to discover an American postmodernism, the movement's roots are in France, where various disciples of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger have built their academic reputations on exporting their ideas to North America.

Now a major French philosopher, Emmanuel Faye, has set out to debunk Heidegger and, by implication, his enthusiastic followers. Faye, the son of the well-known philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye, is a professor of modern philosophy at the University of Rouen and the author of a number of important philosophical works. He serves on several editorial boards, including the board of the online German journal *theologie.geschichte*: *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kulturgeschichte*.

Faye brings an ethical passion to his work, and he has created considerable controversy because many people regard Martin Heidegger as the greatest 20th-century philosopher and one of the greatest thinkers of all time. It comes as a shock to read Faye's relentless assault on Heidegger's philosophical reputation—an assault that ends with this assertion: "With the work of Heidegger, it is the principles of Hitlerism and Nazism that have been introduced into the philosophy libraries of the planet."

Faye has marshaled an impressive array of facts to support his case. As he points out, documenting Heidegger's philosophical involvement with the Nazi movement is extraordinarily difficult, not least because Heidegger's literary remains are closely guarded by his surviving family. Therefore, readers who pick up a published copy of his collected works are not reading a critical edition, but rather a carefully edited text based on documents to which access is granted only "a few university professors with all the right credentials," as determined by Heidegger's son Hermann. "Almost three decades after Martin Heidegger's death, a large portion of his writings remains inaccessible not only to the public but to the best-informed

researchers.”

Given the impossibility of independent researchers gaining access to these documents, it might be asked how on earth Faye can be so confident in his negative judgment about Heidegger. The answer is that he has amassed a large amount of evidence from an incredibly wide variety of sources. For example, Faye uses students’ writings to demonstrate that as early as 1922 Heidegger and his wife were entertaining students at events where his wife sought to recruit them for the National Socialist movement. She was what the Nazis called *eine alte Kämpferin*, or “old warrior,” which means that she was far more deeply committed than earlier biographies suggest. It also means that Heidegger could not have been unaware of his wife’s activities—indeed, that he participated in them.

Heidegger, Faye points out, was careful not to identify himself as a National Socialist at this time. He did that only after 1933, when the National Socialists were in power. Faye argues there was a good reason for this that is often overlooked: it was illegal in the German states where the Heideggers lived for civil servants, teachers and academics to be members of the Nazi party. Nevertheless, Faye shows, it is clear that Heidegger did all he could within the limits of the law to recruit students to National Socialism.

Using evidence like this, Faye builds a strong case. He places Heidegger’s ideas in the context of work by other academics who were unquestionably Nazi, such as Alfred Rosenberg, Carl Schmitt and Alfred Baeumler, showing that Heideg ger’s work reflected the thinking of sophisticated National Socialists long before the party came to power. In this his conclusions are similar to those of Johannes Fritsche in *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger’s* “*Being and Time*.” Similarly, in *New Religions and the Nazis*, Karla Poewe demonstrates that veiled pro-Nazi activities were common among academics who, because they feared losing their jobs, sought to disguise their commitments until the Nazis were firmly in power.

At the end of this unrelenting work, Faye appeals to his readers to recognize “the vital necessity of seeing philosophy free itself from the work of Heidegger.” Then he throws down the challenge that Heidegger’s works ought to be removed from the philosophy sections of university libraries and housed, if they are housed at all, in the section on Nazism. This point, more than any other, is likely to outrage critics and discourage people from reading Faye’s book.

Faye forces us to ask whether some of today's cherished ideas about culture and society are rooted in a philosophy that is ultimately immoral and anti-Christian. In *The Aryan Jesus*: *Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*, Susannah Heschel demonstrates that once World War II was over, the process of rehabilitation for former Nazis was swift. As a result, ideologies tainted with Nazism entered into mainstream theology. In spite of Faye's shocking recommendation regarding libraries, we need to take him seriously when he argues: "We have not yet grasped the full significance of the propagation of Nazism and Hitlerism in the domain of thought and ideas."