

Book review

David Burke Griffiths

"Heidegger Case on Biographical, Historiographical and Philosophical Levels"

Edwin Mellen Press, 2009

Tim Cross*

Griffiths appropriates Heidegger's own use of the dialogue form, and extends that genre beyond Socratic modes, the 1713 exposition of Hume and Berkeley, and the more recent contributions to the dialogue as philosophical inquiry in volume 14 of *Comparative Criticism*. In the course of exploring how the nexus of action-thinking was constituted in Nazi Germany, Griffiths marshals resources that include a biography of Heidegger, a historiography of the Heidegger affair that distinguishes between 'essential' versus 'ideological' texts, and an interrogation of philosophical perspectives on how context and choice worked in the political ethics of Heidegger.

Griffiths presents a range of positions engaged in a disembodied discussion avoiding the simplistic binary of merely defending or attacking the views and character of Heidegger. The depth and expansive thrust of these conflicted understandings prevents any conclusive judgement from being made on the enigma of Heidegger's postwar silence in relation to the

* Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka University

interaction of his wartime thought and practice as the public intellectual appointed rector of Freiburg University in May 1933.

The fifteen dialogues record a symposium for characters whose names recall thinkers from the Greek tradition (Athens, Sparta and Cyrene) and the Pali Buddhist tradition but whose sensibilities are informed by contemporary concerns with philosophy, history, and social theory. It is testament to the scope of the compassionate scholarship of Griffiths that he empathetically employs Heidegger's own 1953 maxim that "questioning is the piety of thought" to drive these coffee shop debates towards their open-ended engagement with questions of how to ethically live the life of the mind.

Griffiths has adapted the "veil of ignorance" from the 1971 *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls to eliminate all personal, social and ideological affiliations from his characters. As purely philosophical positions, these characters are politely passionate as they enrich each other's positions with gentle rebuttals and partial concessions. The net outcome of this challenging reinterpretation of the recent philosophical past is to encourage readers to engage the standards of the present as we identify those positions that are the most reasonable.

These lively exchanges turning on the tensions between politics and philosophy are solidly anchored in extensive reference to primary German sources of the interwar years and the secondary literature that has defined and shaped the Heidegger controversy. The textures of those times is closely stitched into the content of the discussions as the rigorous scrutiny of documents is echoed by the documentation and qualifications Griffiths presents in footnotes, the Appendix, and the Bibliography.

This Griffiths monograph is a much anticipated consolidation of the insights of his 2006 *The Keywords of Martin Heidegger: A Philosophical-Lexical Analysis of Sein und Zeit*. The Heidegger interest was clarified by *Buddhist Discursive Formations: Keywords, Emotions, Ethics* (2004), and these latest dialogues about Heidegger include profound reflections on the earlier investigations of the Jaina, Buddhist and Jewish traditions by Griffiths. In that previous Heidegger book, the close reading of Griffiths identified shifts, limitations and contradictions in central items of the Heidegger lexicon that had been largely escaped the attention of the Heidegger industry. Attention to linguistic evidence brought a nuanced portrait of the various Heideggers into view.

With his latest book, Griffiths unpacks these central lexical elements of Heidegger's world and locates them in a dialectic of knowledge and power shaped by the force of enacted history. At a time when various forms of authority attempt to impose narrow definitions of what constitutes authentic conduct, Griffiths proposes that the best antidote to the past that will not go away is close reading that identifies what is most reasonable.