Race as Destiny

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Martin Heidegger, 1889–1976

Author’s Note:

The following excerpt is from a longer, footnoted article titled “Freedom’s Racial Imperative: A Heideggerian Argument for the Self-Assertion of Peoples of European Descent” that appeared in the fall 2006 issue of The Occidental Quarterly. Minor changes have been made for the sake of this format. Thanks to Dave Cooper for the idea.

Since the Cold War’s end, Martin Heidegger has been the target of an on-going campaign of stigmatization and quarantine, for it’s now clear that he was not only an ardent supporter of the National Revolution of 1933, but a convinced (though idiosyncratic) National Socialist.

Surprisingly, though, the inquisitors deconstructing the suspect forces animating Heidegger’s thought stress that there’s “no spoor of biological racism” (George Steiner) in his published works.

It is, in fact, a matter of record that Heidegger opposed what Julius Evola and Francis Parker Yockey, along with Leon Trotsky, called the “zoological materialism” associated with “Nazi racism.”

Like the Italian and American prophets of Europe’s imperium, Heidegger believed the philistine, positivist, even liberal modernist character of so-called “scientific racism” was symptomatic of all the Conservative Revolution of the 1920s (of which National Socialism was an offshoot) had fought against.

Is it contradictory, then, to argue that the Heideggerian concept of freedom has a racial imperative?

Against a good deal of contemporary commentary, it must be insisted that Heidegger’s “anti-biologism” was not that of a nationalist indifferent to race, but rather that of one who subsumed the nation’s spiritual and demographic aspects within a single notion of being — a notion that may have privileged the former at the latter’s expense, but nevertheless one that presupposed the spirit’s manifestation within a specific biocultural community or Volk.

Emphasizing the history, destiny, and line of descent that makes a people a nation, the nationalism latent in Heidegger’s thought is reminiscent of what Walker Connor calls “nationalism in its pristine sense,” in that it designates “a people who believe they are ancestrally [i.e., biologically] related.”

Though a man’s body is subjectable to a purely biological analysis, Heidegger argues that it is never simply biological, but “something essentially other than an animal organism.”

This “other” belongs to man’s Dasein [i.e., to his quality as a situated expression of Being in a particular world at a particular moment in time] and thus has “a fundamentally different way of Being to that of nature.”

“Living, our body bodies forth as a wave in the stream of chaos — it is what comes to know, grasp, and take over the world.”

Biology in this way enters history and becomes historically significant.

Man’s body as such is not equivalent to a plant or animal organism, but part of man’s being-in-the-world, situated in that web of meanings, relationships, and histories which make up his world and which no science can successfully or adequately reduce to an empirical representation or valuation.

Edward Burne-Jones, “Lancelot at the Chapel of the Holy Grail,” 1896

For the anti-scientistic Heidegger, the essence of a nation (or Volk) lies not in genetics, but in the destiny born of its collective experience of Being and time — or what in Contributions to Philosophy he describes as that belongingness to a god who commands a people to go beyond itself to become the being inscribed in its destiny.

A people’s essence lies thus less in its organic manifestations (life) than in the being that makes it what it is (living): It lies in the being that forges blood and spirit into an identity defined by a specific destiny.

A purely biological construal, by contrast, reduces a “race” of men to one of Descartes’ abstract, becomingless objects — to something understandable factually or empirically, as if human races were analogous to those of the lower life forms.

Heidegger doesn’t say so explicitly, but the turn of his thought suggests that though a people’s blood may be basic to its biological formation, its determinants as a people, even genetically, reside elsewhere, outside of biology, in that Being whose inexplicable force molds a body of kindred human beings into a destining entity.

To contemporize a bit, one might say that for Heidegger man’s biological constitution (heredity) disposes him to certain cultural and other potentialities, but the latter are never mere offshoots of nature.

History, he argues, is not biology and culture is not applied zoology — except to a scientistic consciousness oblivious to all that distinguishes man from animal.

An analogy here might help. One wouldn’t claim the essence of Breker’s The Torchbearer or Burne-Jones’ Dream of Lancelot is the material from which it was sculpted or painted.

The essence of the German Volk — or any of Europe’s nations — is likewise not the DNA constituent of its genotype.

Instead, it is the spirit animating it, making it a people with a history, an origin, and a destiny.

In compelling it to experience the world in a way all its own, this spirit is not the cultural superstructure familiar to the anthropologist or sociologist, but something akin to “the power that comes from preserving at the most profound level the forces that are rooted in the soil and blood of a Volk, the power to arouse most inwardly and to shake most extensively the Volk’s existence.”

It is this spirit that nourishes the soul of a people and infuses its blood with a will to destiny.

Heidegger’s ontological defense of European man may therefore reject the scientific racism of bourgeois materialism, with its abstract, deracinated concept of human being, but he’s hardly indifferent to Europe’s racial heritage, for though emphasizing a Volk’s spiritual or destining character, he also sees that this entails a specific bodily expression of being.

In the historical world of European man, human biology and human being are indeed one, with the biological, the ontic, subsumed to the ontological realm of self-assertion — like the material subsumed in the artist’s vision.

Together, they comprise the Dasein of man and Volk, the blood and heritage of a people. For like the “and” in Being and Time, the “and” in “blood and heritage” is not additive but unitary. The two differ as terms, standing for different things, but there’s no heritage outside a specific blood group and no blood group without a heritage.

“Everything merely ‘organic’ is foreign to the law of history, as foreign as what is ‘logical’ in reason.”

Human biology is consequently more ontological than zoological, more a product of Being than a facet of nature.

This is evident in such terms as “descent,” “lineage,” “heritage” — along with related notions of “breeding,” “upbringing,” “development,” “education,” “refinement,” and “culture” — terms evoking not animal instinct or even human consciousness, but rather a specific biocultural transmission of existence.

A people, in this Heideggerian sense, is not an autonomous, self-contained, ahistorical biological object, it’s not even specifically a gene pool, but a way of Being whose origin, history, and particular self-understanding is essential to what it is — even physiologically.

In order not to be misunderstood, let me stress that I’m not challenging the importance or even the primordiality of race as a zoological category, but rather subordinating our understanding of a race’s destining identity to philosophy’s larger ontological appreciation of its significance.

What Heidegger calls the “naturalist conception of human being” (i.e., the purely biological understanding of human race) has been integral to both liberal modernity and the history of the white man’s decline.

The roots of this conception are admittedly ancient. Aristotle was the first to see man as a special kind of animal — the rational animal (zoon logikon). With the 18th-century Enlightenment and the advent of liberal modernity, when “reason attained its full metaphysical rank,” this “humanist” concept became hegemonic, introducing an era which confused man, a being-outside-himself, with something “present-at-hand” (i.e., with the decontextualized substance of a quantifying science indifferent to a being’s specific qualities).

As Being in this scientistic conceptualization withdraws from human being, the latter is depleted, reduced to a one-dimensional ontology fit for an animal that moves about on all fours — not for an upright assertion of Being capable of producing Homer, the Greek temples, or the invincible Hoplites.

It’s pertinent here to point out that “scientific racism,” especially its Darwinian distillation, originated as an offshoot of liberal thought and that the zoological “metaphysics” of this racism (in understanding human existence at the animal level) played a not insignificant role in getting us into the predicament that threatens us today.

In this sense, it seems hardly coincidental that the liberals’ understanding of the “highest animal” excludes any understanding that humans differ from animals not just in their reason or consciousness, but in their caring for the Being of their being.

Relatedly, natural science, the inspiration for scientific racism, treats the body abstractly, objectifying, decontextualizing, and uprooting it from human being — for the sake of abstraction and objectification.

Against the naturalist conception, Heidegger holds that the human body is not simply a vehicle of drives and instincts, but something linked to the human assertion of Being.

Science may have the power to manipulate the world’s physical properties, but for Heidegger it ignores man’s “peculiar transposedness into the encompassing contextual ring of living beings.” It consequently misses what is most distinct and essential to him.

Accordingly, the Dasein of a Volk, like that of an individual, is not manifested in biology (at least not directly), but rather in the decisions it makes and the goals it sets for itself.

How it exists in the world in which it is thrown, how it appropriates the past it is bequeathed, the possibilities it pursues as it approaches the future, the call of destiny it heeds, the death it inevitably faces — these are what make a Volk what it is.

There is, moreover, nothing arbitrary or subjective in this. Dasein is not only being-there, but being-with (Mitsein). For the most radical individualization of Dasein is always situated within a larger collective context — of history and culture, to be sure, but also of kin, community, and Volk.

“Each man,” Heidegger writes, “is in each instance in dialogue with his forebears and perhaps even more, and in a more hidden manner, with those who come after him.”

Because an individual’s fate, like a nation’s destiny, is shaped by its specific heritage, individual Dasein is invariably a co-happening with a community or people, even if it should rebel against the dominant social trends or disavow its beliefs.

Unlike the quantitative, atomizing impulse of liberal modernity, which separates “I” from “we” and treats the former as if it were a monadic ego shorn of the history and heritage situating and defining it as a distinct way of Being, Heidegger’s approach dissolves individual boundaries.

The individualization of an individual consequently becomes a co-historicizing with a people.

Though potentially a force for conformity, Mitsein is a necessary condition for Dasein’s authentic realization.

Man and nation, Dasein and Mitsein, it follows, are free only to the degree they open themselves to what is inherent in their common heritage — to what constitutes the history of their related experience of Being — to what forms their destiny.

If a Volk exists as a Volk, then blood group, history, and destiny are one, for ontologically they constitute a single, encompassing experience of time and Being.

In this sense, a people’s essence transcends the purely “organic,” as it asserts its Dasein as a distinct destiny.

Otherwise, it ceases “to be” in any meaningful sense.