
I. HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

The Political Implications of Heidegger's Reading of the Allegory of the Cave

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Abstract

This paper draws a link between Heidegger's reading of Plato's allegory of the cave and his support for the National Socialist regime during the early 30's. Three interrelated suggestions are made: (1) That Heidegger's reading of the allegory of the cave is informed by his preoccupation with the imminent threat of nihilism. (2) That Heidegger's interpretation radicalizes his critique of the public sphere to the effect that it renders the latter irredeemable. (3) That the unbridgeable gap between philosophy and the public sphere commits Heidegger to the anticipation of a catastrophic event that will open up the possibility of genuine freedom.

Keywords: Heidegger; Plato; the allegory of the cave; National Socialism; twentieth-century German philosophy; nihilism; destiny of Being; existence; freedom; questioning; the public sphere

1. Introduction

The relationship between Heidegger and Plato is a topic that has attracted a fair amount of interest in philosophical scholarship. The earliest comment on such a relationship comes from Paul Friedländer's critique of Heidegger's assertion that Plato transformed the notion of truth from unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*) to correctness (*Richtigkeit*).¹ This last point, which constitutes the central claim of Heidegger's 1942 essay on *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, has been challenged by numerous

¹ Paul Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (New York: Harper, 1964).

scholars who have worked on the relationship between Plato and Heidegger. Notwithstanding their differences, Stanley Rosen,² Robert Dostal,³ and more recently Francesco Gonzalez,⁴ agree that Heidegger downgrades the ontological insights of Plato's philosophy and focuses only on the epistemological ones, which he happens to criticize.

Robert Dostal locates a tension between Heidegger's remarks about Plato's *epekeina tes ousias* in his early Marburg lectures and in his 1942 essay on *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*. Whereas in the Marburg lectures Plato's suggestion that Being is *epekeina tes ousias* is understood by Heidegger as pointing in the direction of a genuine encounter with Being as such, in his 1942 essay Plato's phrase is absent. According to Dostal, this absence is indicative of Heidegger's interpretation of Plato as the father of epistemology and the metaphysics of subjectivity.⁵ Dostal's argument for the downgrading of the ontological in Plato is correct as far as the 1942 essay goes. There is, however, an assumption underlying Dostal's account that does not do justice to the complexity of Heidegger's relation to Plato. Dostal assumes that the 1942 essay on *Plato's Doctrine of Truth* repeats and summarizes the main points made by Heidegger in his 1931-32 and 1933-34 lectures devoted in Plato's allegory of the cave.

This assumption has been rightfully challenged by Gonzalez who suggests that Heidegger's interpretation of Plato in the early 30's undermines the main thesis of the 1942 essay.⁶ Following Gonzalez's observation, this paper contends that Heidegger's texts from the early 30's are much more open to the ontological insights of Plato's philosophy than the 1942 essay. Contrary to Gonzalez, however, special attention is

² Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (London: Yale University Press, 1969), 144-145. See also *The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger* (Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 4 ff.

³ Robert Dostal, "Beyond Being: Heidegger's Plato." In *Martin Heidegger: Critical Assessments*, vol. 2, ed. Christopher E. Macann (New York: Routledge, 1992), 61-89.

⁴ Francisco Gonzalez, *Plato and Heidegger: A Question of Dialogue* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

⁵ Dostal, "Beyond Being: Heidegger's Plato," 73-74.

⁶ Gonzalez pays attention to the fact that in his 1931-32 and 1933-34 courses on Plato, Heidegger does not insist on the transformation of the essence of truth in the way that he insists on the 1942 essay on "Plato's Doctrine of Truth" (see Gonzalez, *Plato and Heidegger: A Question of Dialogue*, 112).

paid to Heidegger's ontological reading of the allegory of the cave and to how it serves the purpose of saying something about nihilism — the forgetfulness of Being — and the prospect of overcoming it.

The aim of this paper is to explore the political implications of Heidegger's determination to read the allegory of the cave as a story about the history of human essence. The Platonic resonance of Heidegger's political allegiance to National Socialism is neatly expressed in the "back from Syracuse?" greeting addressed to Heidegger by one of his Freiburg colleagues and quoted by Gadamer in his homonymous article.⁷ Nevertheless, not enough attention has been paid to the relationship between Heidegger's appropriation of Plato's allegory of the cave during the early 30's and his allegiance to National Socialism. This paper tries to make this relationship explicit by focusing on Heidegger's interpretation of the allegory as a story about human essence (*Wesen*) and the occurrence (*Geschehen*) of historical existence. Three interrelated suggestions are made: (1) That Heidegger's reading of the allegory of the cave is informed by his preoccupation with the imminent threat of nihilism, (2) that Heidegger's interpretation radicalizes his critique of the public sphere to the effect that it renders it irredeemable, and (3) that the unbridgeable gap between philosophy and the public sphere commits Heidegger to the anticipation of a catastrophic event that will open up the possibility of genuine freedom.

2. The Destiny of Being as Nihilism

In *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, Reiner Schürmann breaks down Heidegger's *œuvre* in three periods, each of which corresponds to a transformation of transcendental phenomenology. According to Schürmann's arrangement, the first stage of Heidegger's thought marks the transition from transcendental phenomenology to existential phenomenology. With this transition "the condition of our knowing and experiencing is no longer sought purely in man, but in his relation to the being of entities in their totality."⁸ The second transformation consists in the passage from the preeminence of *Dasein* to *Menschentum*, inaugurated

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Back from Syracuse?" trans. John McCumber, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 15, n. 2 (1989), 427-30.

⁸ Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 69.

by the “discovery” of destinal history. Such a transformation indicates that it is not *Dasein* that “opens up a clearing,” but that it is rather historical *aletheia* that constitutes human beings by situating them in a particular epoch of the *destiny of Being*.⁹ Finally, the third transformation is that from *humanity (Menschentum)* to *thinking (Denken)*. During this period, Heidegger suggests that the task of *thinking* is that of letting beings reveal themselves without manipulating them.¹⁰

In what follows, I argue that Heidegger’s reading of Plato’s allegory of the cave during the early 30’s constitutes an early expression of Heidegger’s shift from *Dasein* to the *destiny of Being*. Contrary to Schürmann, however, I suggest that the transition from *Dasein* to the *destiny of Being* — at least in its early formulation — reveals Heidegger’s preoccupation with an existential threat that Western humanity encounters, namely the threat of nihilism.¹¹ Heidegger’s first explicit reference to nihilism occurs in his 1935 lecture course published in 1953 under the title *Introduction to Metaphysics*. There, Heidegger describes nihilism as the cultivation of beings “in the forgetfulness of being.”¹² Although he will not use the word “nihilism” before 1935, Heidegger had already been developing a diagnosis of imminent nihilism since 1931. This becomes apparent, in the “preliminary considerations” of his 1931-32 lecture course *The Essence of Truth*. Notwithstanding the fact that the explicit aim of the course is to “consider the essence of truth” by going back to Plato’s allegory, Heidegger insists that the return to the originary Greek experience of truth as *aletheia* is prescribed to us by the *demands of the day*.¹³

⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰ Ibid., 76.

¹¹ Schürmann’s suggestion is that, with the transition from *Dasein* to *Menschentum*, Heidegger’s thought shatters linear time and touches upon a historical *a priori* that is radically discontinuous and anarchic. Although I am sympathetic to such a reading of Heidegger’s late writings, it seems to me that the transformation from *Dasein* to *Menschentum* is not as straightforward as Schürmann presents it to be. This is to say that during the early 30’s Heidegger develops a narrative that renders Being and/or its forgetfulness an ultimate principle of cohesion that determines all possible praxis.

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 217.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, trans. Ted Sadler (London, Continuum, 2009), 1-5.

Heidegger does not go on to work out in full detail what the *demands of the day* are. He does, however, indicate that the allegory of the cave is a story about the awakening of the historical essence of human existence, which is at the present suffocated.¹⁴ As it is well known, Heidegger has a peculiar understanding of the words “essence” and “existence.” Already in *Being and Time*, he suggests that “the ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in existence.”¹⁵ One has to be attentive to the fact that Heidegger puts the word “essence” in inverted commas, thus expressing his discomfort with this philosophically laden term. Heidegger’s determination to challenge the traditional understanding of essence as *essentia* becomes clearer when one focuses on his understanding of existence. Existence for Heidegger is irreducible to mere presence; it is not something that all beings share. “Existence” is a term that Heidegger reserves for human beings only, as it names an *ek-stasis*, i.e., the stepping out of oneself toward Being. When Heidegger suggests, therefore, that human essence is at the present suffocated, what he is tacitly saying is that human existence — *qua ek-stasis* — is under threat.

The underlying danger necessitating a return to Greek thinking comes to a sharper relief in Heidegger’s 1932 summer course *The Beginning of Western Philosophy*. In the second part of this course, entitled “Interposed Considerations,” he attempts to give a more elaborate justification of the need to go back to the Greeks. He does so by drawing an analogy between the current state of humanity and a wanderer in an arid land who is about to die from thirst due to her distance from the source that she last drew water from.¹⁶

To better understand the implications of Heidegger’s story of the wanderer, one must first examine what he means by the threat of dying from thirst. As we have indicated, the wanderer symbolizes humanity.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 45, 59.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 68.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 31 f.

¹⁷ Heidegger’s story of the wanderer deserves further examination, especially in relation to the contemptible comments that he makes about Judaism in his *Black Notebooks*. Is Heidegger appropriating here the stereotype of the wandering and rootless Jew? And how does this relate to his comments about the worldlessness of Judaism that we find in the *Black Notebooks*? (See Heidegger, *Ponderings*

But Heidegger is not saying that humanity — as a species — faces the threat of natural extinction. His suggestion rather amounts to the claim that humanity is in the process of forfeiting its transcendence toward Being and that, in this way, it is exhausting the resources of its freedom. By that time, Heidegger has developed a sense of freedom that goes hand in hand with the human openness to Being. Genuine “becoming free” amounts to a projective understanding of Being which nevertheless supposes a binding relationship to “what gives freedom,” namely the enigma that lies at the very heart of the question of Being.¹⁸ Freedom for Heidegger is a gift of Being to human beings. It is the mystery of Being that opens up the space for human freedom.

At this point, I should make clear that, according to my reading, during the early 30’s Heidegger’s thought takes the opposite path from the one suggested by Simon Critchley. Whereas Critchley calls for the need to focus on *Dasein*’s *thrownness* and *facticity*, I contend that during the early 30’s Heidegger prioritizes *Dasein*’s transcendence.¹⁹ “The

VII-XI, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017, 76). These are questions that I examine in another paper and cannot adequately develop here. For the purpose of this paper, it suffices to say that it is indeed highly possible that Heidegger appropriates the anti-Semitic stereotype of the rootless Jew with the purpose of alerting his audience to the disastrous implications of the increased distance from the question of Being. Having said this, however, it is important to note that the wanderer that he describes in the 1932 summer course symbolizes not a rootless and worldless wanderer — the type of existence that Heidegger ascribes to the Jewish figure in the *Black Notebooks* — but a wanderer who remains rooted to the source, even when he has lost his orientation (Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy*, 31). With the story of the wanderer, Heidegger seeks to say something about the predicament of Western *Dasein*. The closer Western *Dasein* comes to dying of thirst, the closer it comes to realizing its rootedness to the question of Being. The ostensible rootlessness of Western humanity derives from its originary relation to Being.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 43.

¹⁹ Critchley suggests that one should focus on Heidegger’s account of *thrownness* and *facticity*, so as to rescue Heidegger’s thought from a heroism that accentuates his disregard for the plurality of human-being together (see Simon Critchley and Reiner Schürmann, *On Heidegger’s Being and Time*, ed. Steven Levine, London: Routledge, 2018, 139 ff). By suggesting that Heidegger prioritizes transcendence, I am not claiming that he abandons his account of thrownness. As a matter of fact, the story of the wanderer indicates that the wanderer is thrown in his predicament — the forgetfulness of Being. What is rather being suggested here is that Heidegger-

essence [*die Essenz*] of humans consists in their existence. And this their essence is possible on the basis of transcendence."²⁰

If my reading is correct, Heidegger's reference to the peril of death relates to his sense of existence as a stepping out of oneself toward beings as a whole, which in turn implies a transcendence toward the question of Being as such. The peril of death marks, therefore, the peril of non-existence, provided, however, that we do not identify *existence* (*Existenz*) with *actuality* (*Wircklichkeit*).²¹ Heidegger links the danger of non-existence to the distance of Western *Dasein* from the spring that made this existence possible in the first place.²² The existence of Western *Dasein* is grounded in the occurrence of an understanding of Being, which in turn implies a transcendence toward the mystery of Being. Heidegger calls this process the *esteeming* (*das Würdigen*) of Being.²³ Without *Dasein*'s transcendence toward the mystery of Being, there is no understanding of Being and, without an understanding of Being, no comportment to beings, not even to ourselves as beings.²⁴ This esteeming of Being that, according to Heidegger, occurs for the first time in

ger's early thoughts on the destiny of Being are preoccupied with the danger of forfeiting transcendence. If transcendence is forfeited, then thrownness is forfeited, too. This is to say that with the suffocation of human existence, the thrown situatedness of Western humanity is not understood as the inevitable result of the self-withdrawal of Being, but rather transforms itself into reality and actuality. In other words, without transcendence thrownness is not understood as thrownness.

²⁰ Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy*, 69.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 62. In his eagerness to determine the peculiar nature of existence and how it is at stake in the era of nihilism, Heidegger feels the need to draw a distinction between mere *human actuality*, on the one hand, and *human existence* on the other. Existence, he says, "signifies the mode of Being of humans." He continues, however, to say that existence does not apply to humans in general and as such: "Not all humans who are actual, were actual, or will be actual do 'exist,' have existed, or will exist — *in the sense* we understand existence" (*ibid.*, 64).

²² The word that could best describe this danger is the word "nihilism." Heidegger does not use this word in his 1932 lecture, but he devotes a section of his seminar to "the determination of the current situation by Friedrich Nietzsche," thus introducing the idea that the true meaning of Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism relates to the danger of non-existence (*ibid.*, 35).

²³ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 122.

early Greek thinking, marks for him the transformation of human existence from mere actuality to being-in-a-world and historicity.²⁵ To put this last point differently, it is with the esteeming of Being that worldliness and historical existence happen. From this it follows that with the dis-esteeming/the forgetfulness of Being both of them are in danger.

Heidegger seems convinced that his time is one of high stakes, because Western *Dasein* has alienated itself from the questioning of Being to such an extent that it encounters the danger of plunging itself in a petrified reality (*status quo*) where there are no other possibilities apart from the ones available.²⁶ This is how Heidegger describes nihilism in *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

But where is the real nihilism at work? Where one clings to current beings and believes it is enough to take beings, as before, just as the beings that they are. But with this, one rejects the question of Being and treats Being as a nothing (*nihil*), which in a certain way it even “is,” insofar as it essentially unfolds. Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being — that is nihilism. Nihilism thus understood is the *ground* for the nihilism that Nietzsche exposed in the first book of *The Will to Power*.²⁷

The crucial elements of the above passage are: (1) Heidegger’s remark that nihilism is at work when thinking clings to the familiar and treats Being as such (the unfamiliar) as nothing at all, (2) Heidegger’s claim that Being in its essential unfolding “is” *nothing*, yet not nothing at all. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche’s claim that Being is the emptiest of all concepts and therefore nothing at all is quite informative in revealing the oblivion of Being in modern thinking. This oblivion, however, is for Heidegger the culminating point of the spiritual decline of the West.²⁸ Much like in his story of the wanderer, decline is the result of a distancing from the source of our history.

In front of such a danger, Heidegger appeals to an understanding of existence in terms of a transcendence from that which is most familiar

²⁵ It is in his 1930 essay “On the Essence of Truth,” that Heidegger explicitly draws a link between the beginning of Western *Dasein*’s historicity and the Greek understanding of Being as *physis* (see Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 145).

²⁶ Heidegger, *The Beginning of Western Philosophy*, 60.

²⁷ Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 217.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

(beings) to what is the most unfamiliar (Being). So, what is at stake here is not only a concealment of the essence of truth as unconcealment, but most importantly the concealment of human essence as existence. The threat of perishing signals the threat of plunging ourselves in an eternal *in-sistence*. Going back to his 1931-32 course on Plato, Heidegger explicitly states that, without experiencing this threat, the return to Plato's allegory of the cave is merely a façade.²⁹ If my reading is correct, it is the threat of nihilism that functions as the access point for understanding Heidegger's appropriation of the allegory. Having established that the *demands of the day* have something to do with the danger of non-existence, we can now move to the second part of this paper and examine how Heidegger molds Plato's allegory in a way that fits his account of nihilism.

3. The Four Stages of the Allegory of the Cave

Both in the lecture course of the winter semester of 1931-32 and that of the winter semester of 1933-34, Heidegger breaks down the allegory into four stages: (1) The situation of human beings in the cave; (2) the failed liberation within the cave; (3) the genuine liberation outside the cave; (4) the return of the liberated philosopher into the cave as a liberator. In the following, I provide a succinct reading of each stage, paying special attention to the transition from the first stage to the third one. I suggest that Heidegger appropriates the allegory of the cave in a way that raises to irreconcilable heights the tension between the first and the third stage. In doing so, I argue, Heidegger finds himself in need of a catastrophic event that will open up the possibility for genuine freedom.

3.1. The First Stage

Heidegger's interpretation of the first stage of the allegory resembles his account of *everydayness* (*Alltäglichkeit*), *fallenness* (*Verfallen*), and *inauthenticity* (*Uneigentlichkeit*) in *Being and Time*.³⁰ As Heidegger says, "the allegory depicts precisely the everyday situation of man, who, in so far as he does not possess any standard *other* than everydayness, cannot

²⁹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 13.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 219 ff.

see its strangeness.”³¹ The shackled prisoners of the allegory are immersed in a world, they comport themselves toward inner-worldly beings, but they are unaware of the world and of their *being-in-the-world* (*In-der-Welt-sein*). In other words, the prisoners are unaware of this modality of being that distinguishes human beings from stones, plants, and animals.³² Unawareness, however, does not imply complete absence of a world. This becomes clear in Heidegger’s claim that the cave dwellers relate to the essence of truth as *un-hiddenness* (*Unverborgenheit*), which means that the cave dwellers are already riveted to an un-hiddenness of Being — an implicit understanding of Being — that makes beings intelligible. It is the world that solicits their actions, and yet, they remain unaware of it. Like in *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s interpretation of the first stage of the allegory suggests that human beings have the tendency of becoming absorbed in the world, and “Being-lost in the publicness of the ‘they’.”³³ “The prisoners do not even know that they are in a ‘situation’.”³⁴

It is important, however, to remain alert to two important differences between Heidegger’s account of *everydayness* in *Being and Time* and its tacit re-examination in the early 30’s. One thing to bear in mind is that Heidegger’s later remarks about *everydayness* are informed by the first steps that his thinking takes toward the *history of Being* (*Seinsgeschichte*).³⁵ This means that the situation of the cave dwellers is not interpreted merely as a manifestation of the existential tendency of *Dasein* toward *falling*. The situation of the cave dwellers is rather interpreted as revealing something about the situatedness of human beings in a particular epoch of the *history of Being* — the era of imminent nihilism. The second point that demands our attention is that Heidegger’s focus shifts from *Dasein* (singular) to *Menschentum* and Western human-

³¹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 22.

³² For a discussion of the difference between stones, plants, animals, and human beings with regard to the world, see Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 178. See also Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 137.

³³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 220.

³⁴ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 23.

³⁵ Heidegger uses this term for the first time in *Contributions to Philosophy*. However, one already finds traces of it in his lecture courses of the early 30’s. One such example is the use of the archaic *Seyn* instead of *Sein*.

ity in general. Heidegger is no longer interested in highlighting *falling* as an existential characteristic of *Dasein*. He is rather determined to examine how this characteristic deploys itself in an era when Western humanity has been the furthest removed from the question of Being. As Michael Inwood puts it, the allegory of the cave is for Heidegger a story that helps us “comprehend ourselves in our ownmost *Geschichte*.”³⁶

The aforementioned differences set a different tone to Heidegger's reading of *everydayness*. In the context of his analysis of the allegory of the cave, Heidegger is not aiming at disclosing *Dasein* as *falling* and *thrown projection*, but rather at showing how humanity can regain its *ek-sistence* by re-appropriating the question of Being. In other words, existence and transcendence become more important than *thrownness* and *facticity*, which is not to say that the latter become irrelevant.³⁷ Seen from the perspective of imminent nihilism, the first stage of the allegory touches upon the issue of a collective *falling* of Western humanity. In such a forgetful *falling*, Western humanity treats the present as immediately and unquestionably true.

During the early 30's, Heidegger understands the task of thinking as that of excavating the hitherto unquestioned ground of the world that we live in. Although *Being and Time*, as Carman suggests, can be read as a work that explores the possibility of “taking up a new, distinctive

³⁶ Michael Inwood, “Truth and Untruth in Plato and Heidegger.” In *Heidegger and Plato: Toward Dialogue*, ed. Catalin Partenie and Tom Rockmore (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 87. In the introductory comments of his lecture course, Heidegger talks about the significance of a historical orientation to thinking, i.e., the significance of examining the buried tradition in which our present situation stands: “what is current today is confirmed as itself ancient” (Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 7).

³⁷ What Heidegger has in mind becomes clearer in his interpretation of Parmenides in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, wherein he draws a link between the Greek word *doxa* and the realm of *das Man*. Heidegger insists that the Greeks experienced the path of *doxa* as unavoidable. What is important, however, is that the Greeks recognized *doxa* as an unavoidable path on the grounds of their experience of “the sweeping storm on the way of Being” and “the terror of the second way to the abyss of Nothing” (Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 120). It is this experience that made the Greeks reluctant to take what appears as unquestionably true, and it is the distance from this experience that has transformed Western *Dasein* into a being that is satisfied with what is readily available and familiar.

relation to the social norms always already governing one's concrete possibilities,"³⁸ in the early 30's Heidegger's tone becomes increasingly alarmist. He finds no true liberating potential in the concrete possibilities of Western humanity. It is only by achieving a distance from what is unquestionably familiar that genuine historical thinking is enacted. And it is only in such an enactment that an authentic futurity opens up.³⁹

Going back to what was said above about Heidegger's peculiar understanding of existence, the prisoners at the first stage of the allegory are on the verge of non-existence, since they are alienated not only from their own *worldliness* (*Weltlichkeit*) but most importantly from their forgetfulness of the transcendence toward the *clearing* (*Lichtung*) of Being that grounds both their *Being-in-the-world* (ontological truth) and the availability of beings for ontic comportment (ontic truth).⁴⁰ If my reading is correct, the prisoners of the first stage symbolize Western *Dasein*, which is caught at the culminating point of nihilism, i.e., in an epoch in which Being reveals itself as irrelevant, void, not-question-worthy.

3.2. The Second Stage

The second stage of the allegory is the least commented by Heidegger. But, as I hope to show in this paper, it is far from being the least significant. The second stage of the allegory marks, for Heidegger, a sudden

³⁸ Taylor Carman, *Heidegger's Analytic: Interpretation, Discourse and Authenticity in Being and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 143.

³⁹ "For in *genuine* historical reflection we take just that distance from the present which allows us room to leap out beyond our own present, i.e. to treat it just as every present as present deserves to be treated, namely as something to be *overcome*. Genuine historical return is the decisive beginning of authentic *futurity*" (Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 7).

⁴⁰ The word *Lichtung* is used for the first time in the 1930 essay "On the Essence of Truth." The important element introduced by this essay is the claim that untruth (concealment) is not the result of human limitation, but rather stems from the concealing essence of truth as such. Heidegger uses the word "mystery" to describe the originary concealment that belongs to truth as such (see Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 146 ff). With such a claim, Heidegger anticipates his turn from the concealing unconcealment of *Dasein* to the concealing unconcealment of Being as such.

event whereby one or some of the prisoners turn away from what has been readily familiar. Two important things happen at the second stage. First, the realization that truth has gradations, i.e., that things can be more or less unconcealed.⁴¹ Second, an implicit announcement of the difference between Being and beings.⁴² This later announcement carries with it the possibility of coming to the realization of the distinctive essence of human existence, namely, that human beings are more beingful (*seiender*) beings, because they are exposed to *beings as a whole*.⁴³ It is, however, the failure of the liberated prisoners to dig deeper into the question of Being and *aletheia* that constitutes the missed chance and, thus, the failure of the second stage.

The liberation of the second stage is sudden and unsettling. It causes insecurity and confusion and it prompts the liberated prisoners to the security and complacency of their imprisoned state. The liberated prisoner wants to return to a place “where no exertion is required, where he is unhindered, where nothing recoils upon him, where there is no confusion, and where everyone is in agreement.”⁴⁴ In doing so, the prisoner flees from *decision* and fails “to stand in the ground of his essence.”⁴⁵ But what does it mean for someone to stand on the ground of their essence? Heidegger's answer is that it is to engage in an enactment of the ontological difference. This last point gives us a hint that Heidegger's concern is not reducible to a desire to reach an ontological clarification of the difference between Being and beings. The failure of the second stage resides precisely in this lack of enactment: “the difference occurs in the *enactment* of the differentiation. To bring the differentiation to enactment would be being-human [*Menschsein*], existing [*Existieren*].”⁴⁶ So, existence is not achieved in the second stage. The liberated prisoner turns a deaf ear to the implicit announcement of the ontological difference and goes back to her insistent comportment toward beings.

At this point, it is worth mentioning a new element introduced by

⁴¹ “Truth and truth is not simply the same” (Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 25).

⁴² With their release, the prisoners have the chance to see what is closer to Being (*ἐγγυτέρω τοῦ ὄντος*).

⁴³ See Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 25 and Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 137.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

Heidegger's 1933-34 reading of the allegory. Whereas both in the 1931-32 and the 1933-34 lecture course he insists that the prisoners of the second stage are not liberated to their true essence, in the latter he suggests that something happens in the second stage — "History [*Geschichte*] begins."⁴⁷ This is a crucial point to bear in mind, since it makes a significant difference on how we read the second stage of the allegory. If nothing but failure happens there, then the second stage is unnecessary for the occurrence of genuine liberation. If, nevertheless, history begins at the second stage, then notwithstanding the possibility of failure, the insecurity and confusion described at the second stage is not an arbitrary event, but rather a positive event toward the realization of existence proper.⁴⁸ I submit that, during the early 30's, Heidegger does indeed consider the confusion found at the second stage of the allegory as a necessary step toward genuine freedom. But I will develop this point in my discussion of the fourth stage of the allegory. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to say a few things about Heidegger's conception of true freedom, as deployed in his reading of the third stage of the allegory.

3.3. The Third Stage

Heidegger's understanding of genuine liberation is clarified in his discussion of the third stage of the allegory. Although his analysis of the third stage is quite elaborate and I cannot do justice to it in details, for the purpose of this paper I limit myself to highlighting three important features. First, Heidegger insists that the liberation that occurs at the third stage is not an easy one, since it requires a violent abandonment of what is readily familiar and an exposure to what is most unfamiliar.⁴⁹ Second, he makes clear that genuine freedom takes place in the act of *de-concealing* (*Ent-bergen*).⁵⁰ *Deconcealment* (*Entborgen*) is presented by Heidegger as a pre-modelling (*vorbildlich*) projection of Being that "first allows us to come closer to beings."⁵¹ Third, he claims that the

⁴⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 108

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 32.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁵¹ Ibid., 45. Deconcealment is a fundamental act of human beings in the sense that it grounds the manifestedness of beings (see, Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*,

most genuine modality of *de-concealing* — namely, the *de-concealing* that at once reveals and transforms human essence — is the *de-concealing* occurring within the questioning stance of philosophy.⁵²

During the early 30's, Heidegger presents Plato as a transitional thinker who is, on the one hand, riveted to the primordial experience of truth as the interplay of concealment and unconcealment and, on the other hand, expresses the forgetfulness of fundamental concealment in treating untruth as *pseudos*. Heidegger rejects those interpretations that treat Platonic ideas as objective beings or categories of thinking.⁵³ His interpretation aims to distance itself from an understanding of ideas as *quidditas*, i.e., as static concepts that reveal the “whatness” or “the essential nature” of a thing. To be more precise, Heidegger attempts to put forward an interpretation of the meaning of the word *idea* that links it to what he called *pre-ontological truth* in his essay *On the Essence of Ground*. This pre-ontological truth is the unconcealment of Being that is irreducible to categories of theoretical thinking.⁵⁴ In other words, Heidegger suggests that the Platonic term *idea* points to the pre-ontological understanding of Being that “guides and illuminates in advance all comportment toward beings.”⁵⁵

According to Heidegger, the Platonic *idea* reveals something essential about the Being of beings, namely, that beings in their Being come to presence by entering into a form — an *idea*: “The seeing of the idea, i.e. the understanding of what-being and how-being, in short of *being*, first allows beings to be recognized *as* the beings they are.”⁵⁶ The *idea* constitutes the Being of beings in the sense that it provides the implicit criterion for distinguishing between beings and non-beings.

As for the Platonic *Good* (*agathon*), Heidegger explicitly states that it has no moral significance for Plato and that it is thus not to be understood as value.⁵⁷ Here, it must be mentioned that Heidegger's reading of the Platonic *agathon* in the early 30's is much more generous than his

55, and *Being and Truth*, 136).

⁵² The *de-concealing* that reveals Being as the most question-worthy.

⁵³ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 52.

⁵⁴ Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 104.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* See also Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 42.

⁵⁶ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 38-39.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

reading of it in the 1942 essay *On Plato's Doctrine of Truth*. Although Heidegger thinks that Plato's description of the *agathon* as an *idea* is symptomatic of Plato's confusion, his interpretation is quite generous since it focuses on Socrates' saying that the *agathon* is beyond the Being of beings. In the latter remark, Heidegger finds an echo of the irreducibility of the *agathon* to presence; he detects a struggle between the tendency to reduce the *agathon* to an *idea* and a tendency to think of the *agathon* as a self-withdrawing source of presence. This is to say that Heidegger finds in Plato's *agathon* an implicit announcement of a primordial concealment that lies at the heart of truth; a concealment that is irreducible to the negative conception of concealment as distortion caused by human beings.⁵⁸ The *agathon* is the enabling power (*dunamis*) that is ungraspable and intangible, "almost like nothingness and the void."⁵⁹ He goes as far as to describe the Platonic *agathon* in terms of a clearing (*Lichtung*), thus allowing the *agathon* to be understood as the self-withdrawing empowering power that opens up the possibility for an understanding of Being.⁶⁰

Given the above, the freedom that transpires at the third stage of the allegory is exhausted neither in the thematization of the understanding of Being that underlies ontic comportment nor in the possibility of a new understanding of Being. Although Heidegger identifies genuine human freedom with the pre-modelling projection of Being, he nevertheless suggests that the possibility of pre-modelling projection is not a possibility that human beings derive from their own resources. Becoming free presupposes an exposure to the primordial concealment, the withdrawal of which allows for the occurrence of a pre-modelling projection of Being. Freedom — the possibility of a projective understand-

⁵⁸ The understanding of concealment strictly in terms of distortion is for Heidegger an indication that concealment has fallen into forgetfulness: "Wherever the concealment of beings as a whole is conceded only as a limit that occasionally announces itself, concealing as a fundamental occurrence has sunk into forgottenness" (Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 149).

⁵⁹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 39.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 43. According to Heidegger, the *agathon* is neither a being nor that which unconceals beings. Whereas the idea enables an orientation towards beings, the *agathon* is the space which grants the possibility of pre-ontological understanding. An inquiry into the *agathon* is an inquiry "into what grants being and unhidness" (*ibid.*, 79).

ing of Being — is a gift to human beings. In Heidegger's own words, freedom "receives its own essence from the more originary essence of uniquely essential truth."⁶¹ To be genuinely free, therefore, is to remain alert to that which gives freedom, namely the *agathon*, the *Lichtung*, the abysmal interplay of concealment and unconcealment that lies at the core of the truth of Being. Freedom, he says, is measured according to the depth of one's binding to what gives-free.⁶²

It is precisely this last point that distinguishes philosophy from other modalities of *de-concealing*/projective projection of Being. Heidegger gives the example of modern science as a case of pre-modelling projection of Being that does not sustain a binding relation to what gives-free. According to Heidegger, modern scientific practice is grounded on a projection that "*delineated* in advance what was henceforth to be *understood* as nature and natural process: a spatio-temporally determined totality of movement of masspoints."⁶³ But, although Heidegger takes modern science to be a case of human freedom, he claims that it remains unhinged from the source of freedom. Notwithstanding the fact that modern science is originally a case of freedom, its insistent preoccupation with beings signals the forgetting of "its original essential character of liberation."⁶⁴

Contrary to the pre-modelling projection of modern science, philosophy instantiates human existence in its fullest. In Heidegger's words: "Only by entering into the dangerous region of philosophy is it possible for man to realize his nature as transcending himself into the unhiddenness of beings. Man apart from philosophy is something else."⁶⁵ So, for Heidegger, true liberation occurs only from within the zone of philosophy. Genuine "becoming free" amounts to a projective understanding of Being which nevertheless supposes a binding relationship to that which gives freedom, and that which gives freedom is the mystery that lies at the very heart of the question of Being.

Already since 1930, Heidegger draws a link between the emergence of historical existence and the projective understanding of Being:

⁶¹ Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 144.

⁶² Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 45

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

History begins only when beings themselves are expressly drawn up into their unconcealment and conserved in it, only when this conservation is conceived on the basis of questioning regarding beings as such. The ordinary disclosure of beings as a whole, the question concerning beings as such, and the beginning of Western history are the same; they occur together in a “time” which, itself unmeasurable, first opens up the open region for every measure.⁶⁶

Heidegger suggests that Western history and the historical existence of humanity begin with the question: What are beings? Such a question is, according to Heidegger, not to be understood as a question about present beings. The question itself points to the surpassing of beings (*Dasein*'s transcendence) and the exposure to the mystery of Being as such. The simultaneity of the surpassing and the exposure to the mystery is what provokes the question about beings: *why are beings something instead of nothing?*

Heidegger's interpretation of the third stage of the allegory is concerned with the idea of historical existence and its inception in the questioning stance toward Being. His idiosyncratic interpretation of the allegory aims at drawing a link between the inception of historical existence and the fundamental stance toward Being, which nevertheless presupposes an exposure to the nothingness of Being, i.e., to the void that rages at the heart of the question of all questions. Such an exposure to the nothingness of Being is for Heidegger what marks the transformation from mere actuality to historical existence.⁶⁷ But this is not the only thing that Heidegger extracts from the allegory. The allegory tells us that it is only through the rekindling of a genuine confrontation with the mystery of Being that Western *Dasein* can overcome its destitution and

⁶⁶ Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 145.

⁶⁷ “This beginning [the beginning of our spiritual-historical *Dasein*] is the setting out [*Aufbruch*] of Greek philosophy. Here, for the first time, western man raises himself up from a popular base and, by virtue of his language, stands up to *the totality of what is*, which he questions and conceives as the being that it is” (Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University,” trans. Karsten Harries in *Review of Metaphysics*, 1985, vol. 38, n. 3, 467-502, 471-472). As it will become apparent in some of his later writings, the interpretation of *physis* as *upsurgent presencing* allows Heidegger to claim that in the Greek experience of *physis* one can find an awareness of the mystery of Being (see Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 121).

regain its proper existence.⁶⁸

The key point here is that the overcoming of destitution can be achieved only in the act of questioning as such. Liberation, he says, is a matter of doing and not of talking. It is a matter of taking a standpoint toward Being and its limit — nothingness.⁶⁹ The standpoint that Heidegger is talking about is, however, not a closed, dogmatic one. The standpoint of philosophy is one of incessant questioning and vigilance toward the self-withdrawal of Being. It is not a standpoint that guards itself against indeterminacy, but rather a standpoint that positively opens itself to indeterminacy and refuses to close off the enigma that gives freedom. The way I see things, philosophical questioning is for Heidegger a radical way of questioning, i.e., it is not a questioning that seeks an answer that would negate the act of questioning. On the contrary, genuine philosophical questioning aims at keeping the possibility of questioning open. In other words, philosophical questioning is the guardian of human freedom. Heidegger makes this goal explicit in his rectoral address when he claims that the world opened up by a return to the Greek experience of the impotence of our pre-modelling projection before the self-concealing totality of what is would be a world of *danger* and constant *decision*.⁷⁰ If my reading is correct, at that time Heidegger conceived of philosophy as the standpoint that will bring Western *Dasein* to its proper existence and historicity by alerting it to the Destiny of Being as self-withdrawal.

3.4. The Fourth Stage

Through my analysis of the third stage of the allegory, I have suggested that at that time Heidegger understands philosophical questioning as the pinnacle of human existence, i.e., as the standpoint that opens up Being without closing it off. But after raising philosophy to the highest of ranks in his interpretation of the third stage of the allegory, he makes some rather surprising claims in his discussion of the fourth stage. The most striking one is that, despite its liberating potential, philosophy is powerless when it comes to shaking the certainties of the cave-prisoners.

⁶⁸ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 7.

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 52.

⁷⁰ Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," 473-475.

Heidegger suggests that, in order for genuine philosophy to become relevant, i.e., in order for the possibility of genuine liberation to emerge, an occurrence that shakes the complacency and self-certainty of the prisoners must first take place. His admission, however, that philosophy is powerless in the ontic realm deserves our attention, because it brings under new light the second stage of the allegory, namely the failed liberation.

Heidegger lingers on Plato's claim that the philosopher liberator will be mocked by the prisoners and might even be killed when he returns to the cave. Furthermore, he draws an explicit link between the impotence of philosophy and the possibility of being killed: "That the philosopher is delivered over to death in the cave means that philosophy is powerless within the region of prevailing self-evidences. Only in so far as these themselves change can philosophy have its say."⁷¹ Heidegger suggests that the remark about the death of the philosopher should not be read as a reference to the physical death of Socrates, the historical figure. He rather claims that death marks the fatal compromise of philosophy when applied to the public realm. "The *killing* consists in the fact that the philosopher and his questioning are suddenly transferred into the language of the cave dwellers."⁷²

Heidegger's point is profoundly anti-Socratic. If Socrates is this thinker who took the risk of ridiculing himself and even of dying with the aim of bringing philosophical thinking to the public sphere, Heidegger expresses his complete disregard for it. If philosophy is to remain true to itself, it must resist the public sphere. As he says, "it belongs to the essence of the philosopher that he is *solitary* [...]. He is all the more solitary because in the cave he cannot retreat. Speaking out from solitude, he speaks at the decisive moment."⁷³

The portrait of the philosopher that Heidegger paints is that of a lonely figure that listens only to the silent call of Being, waits for the circumstances to change, and seizes such an opportunity in order to drag the cave-dwellers into the question of Being. The philosopher does not liberate by conversing with the cave dwellers; he "does not try to per-

⁷¹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 61.

⁷² Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 141.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

suade the cave-dwellers by reference to norms, grounds and proofs.”⁷⁴ What we encounter in Heidegger's description of the fourth stage of the allegory is an irreconcilable tension between the public realm as presented at the first stage of the allegory and genuine philosophical questioning as presented at the third one. Heidegger's account of the impotence of philosophy in shaking the certainties of the prisoners suggests that the role of philosophy is not to problematize the certainties of the public sphere, but rather to lead onto the path of genuine philosophical questioning those who have already challenged the certainties of their time and find themselves in limbo. Such a claim brings under new light the second stage of the allegory — the so-called failed liberation.⁷⁵

Although Heidegger is adamant in claiming that freedom is not achieved at the second stage, the tension between the first and the third stage of the allegory raises the question about the link between the two irreconcilable realms. Heidegger's insistence on the difference between the freedom achieved at the third stage and the liberation of the second stage does not preclude one from considering the liberation of the second stage as a necessary — albeit insufficient — requirement for true freedom. As a matter of fact, what I am suggesting here is that Heidegger's remarks about the impotence of philosophy to stir up the public sphere, combined with his conviction that Western *Dasein* is in risk of completely forfeiting its true existence, commits Heidegger to a catastrophic, apocalyptic view of the way to human freedom.

In order to better understand Heidegger's appeal to an event that shakes off self-evidence as a prerequisite for the revitalization of philosophy, we should return to the second stage of his interpretation of the allegory. At first sight, this stage merely informs us about a failed liberation of the prisoners, who lacking any guidance end up willing to go back to what was previously self-evident. Nevertheless, the fact that in Heidegger's interpretation the released prisoners find themselves encountering a gradation of truth indicates that at the second stage of the allegory, the self-certainties of the prisoners are to a certain extent shook. The prisoners want to return to the safety and the placidity of

⁷⁴ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 62.

⁷⁵ Heidegger himself suggests that only when we will have an overview of all the stages of the allegory, will we be capable of understanding the structural significance of each stage (Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 17).

their previous state precisely because they somehow find themselves liberated from it, albeit only temporarily.

The necessity of a moment of crisis (of unshackling) for the awakening of the question of Being is already apparent in Heidegger's discussion of *Angst* in *Being and Time*. Under the fundamental mood of anxiety, the *world* — on the ground of which *Dasein* performs its everyday activities — reveals itself as nothing and brings *Dasein* face to face with the question of its ownmost being and of Being in general. Nevertheless, in the early 30's Heidegger exhibits a desire to go a step further and interprets the moment of crisis in terms of a historical event that brings not merely one *Dasein*, but a whole nation in front of a *decision* that will determine the future of the West.

As we have already seen, Heidegger understands his time as a time of distress and confusion. Nevertheless, Heidegger is convinced that what is great in humans comes to fruition not in security and comfort but in such moments of distress and suffering. It is in such moments that we are called to think the depths of our historical existence. As the story of the wanderer indicates, the danger of dying from thirst is what makes us turn to the source of our historical existence. The significance that Heidegger ascribes to the experience of confusion, first for realizing the destitution of the present and then for finding a way out of destitution, reveals the unspoken significance of the second stage of Plato's allegory for the ascent out of the forgetfulness of Being.

In lectures given in 1934 after his resignation as Rector of Freiburg, Heidegger is still convinced of the significance of a historical crisis for the emergence of genuine questioning. Genuine questioning, he says, emerges out of the overpowering necessities of one's historical situation.⁷⁶ Although philosophy is responsible for liberating the prisoners toward genuine questioning, it remains hopeless with those prisoners that do not experience a historical crisis.

Notwithstanding the fact that Heidegger interprets the second stage of the allegory as a failed liberation, his claim that philosophy is powerless in shaking the self-evident tranquility of the prisoners indicates that the second stage of the allegory is not an indifferent and superfluous

⁷⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language*, trans. Wanda Torres Gregory and Yvonne Unna (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 41.

stage. On the contrary, the failed liberation is essential for Heidegger's story of an ascent toward transcendence and freedom.

4. Conclusion

Enough evidence emerged from the above analysis to claim the probability of a direct link between Heidegger's political engagement and his interpretation of Plato's allegory of the cave. The sharp distinction that Heidegger draws between the first and the third stage of the allegory, i.e., the sharp distinction that he draws between the public sphere, on the one hand, and genuine, solitary philosophical questioning, on the other, makes him susceptible to putting his hope in an event that cuts short all discussion in a violent gesture, an event that pretends to open a path toward a radically different future.

This is the point where we have to pose the question of Heidegger's engagement with National Socialism. What is the philosophical underpinning of Heidegger's decision to put his faith in a regime that was far remote from his own philosophical concerns? I think that an answer to this question can be given if we pay attention to the unbridgeable gap that Heidegger creates between the public sphere and philosophy. This gap reveals the violent and confusing dislocation of truth that takes place at the second stage as a necessary bridge between the two.

I am not suggesting that Heidegger was naive enough to believe that National Socialism was heading toward a genuine philosophical questioning. What I rather want to highlight is that Heidegger's reading of the allegory of the cave suggests that, in order for philosophy to regain its status, it is in need of a violent exodus from the public realm — an exodus that philosophy itself cannot inaugurate. In other words, Heidegger's perception of the public realm as irredeemably fallen together with his conviction that philosophy is powerless to inaugurate change at the ontic level commits him to the view that philosophical questioning is in need of an extra-philosophical thrust.

As far as I can see, one would not be off the mark in suggesting that Heidegger finds in National Socialism this thrust that supposedly signals the end of a long tradition that has mired itself in sterile, nihilistic, and rootless politics. His recently published *Notebooks* corroborate this point. On the grounds of his inner conviction that his time is a time of *danger*, Heidegger interprets Hitler's rise to power in terms of a struggle against a petrified status quo. But Heidegger considers such a struggle valuable

only to the extent that it shakes previous certainties and gives to thinking a new impetus. He is by no means willing to give his blessings to a new National Socialist status quo. On the contrary, he is rather critical toward the slogans and catchphrases of the national socialists.⁷⁷

It is important to keep in mind that, when Heidegger says that the prisoners will most likely want to return to their shackles, he does not mean that they would want to return to the exact same shadows that they perceived prior to their liberation. What he rather says is that the prisoners will want to return to the security and the immediacy of shadows — whatever these shadows might be. This becomes apparent if we consider some of his remarks in the *Black Notebooks* regarding the danger that National Socialism will become a new status quo.

National Socialism is a genuine nascent power only if it still has something to withhold behind all its activity and talk — and only if it operates as strongly holding back and in that way has effectivity into the future. But if the present were already that which is to be attained and striven for, then only a dread of the downfall would be left over.⁷⁸

The solidification of a national socialist actuality, with its own slogans and catchphrases, would mark for Heidegger the forfeiting of the great chance to reawaken the question of Being and with it the historical essence of Western *Dasein*. It seems that the above-quoted passage from the *Black Notebooks* should be read together with Heidegger's interpretation of the allegory of the cave. Heidegger clearly sees a prospect in National Socialism. Nevertheless, he also makes clear that this prospect could easily go down the drain. To be more precise, the prospect of National Socialism depends on whether it will realize the innermost danger of the time or not. Not to realize this danger is for Heidegger to forfeit the prospect of the movement. Heidegger understands National Socialism as a movement that emerges out of historical necessity (the destitution of the West) and has the potential to bring the German people in front of a *decision* that will either liberate them or plunge them into the most dreadful downfall.

National Socialism carries, according to Heidegger, both a promise

⁷⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings II-VI: Black Notebooks 1931-1938*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 89.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

and a threat. On the one hand, the promising prospect of National Socialism is that it may bring the German people back to their historical existence. The dangerous prospect, on the other hand, is that National Socialism may forfeit its liberating possibility and end up becoming a new certainty. But, if we go back to Heidegger's interpretation of the allegory of the cave, we are reminded that this dual possibility of *decision* and flight from *decision* opens up at the second stage of the allegory. As we have seen, the liberated prisoners of the second stage encounter the possibility of a *decision* from which they will most likely flee in search of the security of their imprisoned state. In doing so, they decide not to decide.⁷⁹

Given the above, one can securely say that Heidegger finds in National Socialism the embodiment of a struggle against the certainties of his time that prohibit genuine philosophical questioning. Heidegger's idiosyncratic National Socialism boils down to his attempt to reawaken a genuine philosophical questioning, which he links to the essence of human existence as transcendence. The struggle that National Socialism embodies in Heidegger's eyes could be transformed — provided that it does not lose its way — to a struggle against the oblivion of Being.

The emergence of National Socialism marks for Heidegger a sudden liberation accompanied by perplexity and insecurity. One way of proceeding from there is to attempt to create new certainties, i.e., to attempt to create a new status quo. Continuing with the analogy between Heidegger's National Socialism and his interpretation of the allegory, it can be said that the emergence of a new status quo would mark for Heidegger a return to the shackled state, where what appears is taken unquestionably as true. This way of proceeding constitutes for Heidegger a failed liberation since the possibility of posing the question of the essence of truth and the truth of Being is completely lost, and this is for Heidegger the innermost *danger* of his time. Another way of proceeding is that of engaging into questioning the essence of truth and thus intensifying uncertainty.⁸⁰

If my interpretation is correct, National Socialism marks for Heidegger the moment of a sudden liberation that nevertheless fails to guar-

⁷⁹ Even the flight from decision is for Heidegger a decision (see Heidegger, *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language*, 62).

⁸⁰ See Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," 474.

antee a genuine liberation. National Socialism is an event in history that, if it is to fulfill its mission, must bring the Germans in front of a crucial decision: either to return to a restrictive understanding of truth and Being or to engage in genuine questioning.⁸¹ It is important, however, not to take the above concession apologetically. As Tracy Strong insightfully notices, Heidegger's insistence on the violent path of liberation is not unrelated to the violence of the National Socialist regime.⁸² The violence of the new regime that shakes off the self-certainties of the cave-dwellers is tacitly preferable, for Heidegger, to standstill, equilibrium, mediocrity, harmlessness, etc., which he considers as symptoms of the oblivion of Being.⁸³ One cannot fail to notice that Heidegger's understanding of tranquility and harmlessness as symptoms of the oblivion of Being tells us something about his understanding of the events of his time. Since tranquility and harmlessness signal the oblivion of Being, tension, crisis, and even suffering can be understood as harbingers of a renewed relationship to Being.

It is quite interesting to notice that Heidegger's critique of the National Socialist regime — notwithstanding the fact that it is to be found quite early in his *Notebooks* — is limited only to these elements (Nazi dogmatism, spiritual apathy, mediocrity, etc.) that betray a perversion of the highest aim of renewing the question of Being.⁸⁴ The only thing that interests Heidegger is to guide the impetus of the new regime toward genuine philosophical questioning. All actual suffering seems to be, for him, nothing compared to the suffering that a complete oblivion of Being would bring.

⁸¹ The new truth that National Socialism is striving for is therefore relevant for Heidegger only to the extent that it shakes previous truths. The new truth is merely a step toward decision; the decision to either open up a radically other future or close off the future by insisting on the absoluteness of this new truth.

⁸² See Tracy B. Strong, *Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 311.

⁸³ Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 74.

⁸⁴ Heidegger, *Ponderings II-VI*, 94, 112, 119.