

## BOOK REVIEW

### Translating Contributions

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Martin Heidegger. *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*.  
Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu.  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. 433 pp.

Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu have done a major service in providing their translation of Heidegger's *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* to the Anglophone world. Heidegger's text – written between 1936 and 1938, but first published posthumously in 1989 (with a second edition in 1994) as volume 65 of Heidegger's "Complete Edition" (GA 65) – is of major importance both within Heidegger's corpus and in terms of philosophy in our time. The thinking here is exceptionally difficult. Also, the text is incomplete. It never reached the point where Heidegger would publish it as a fully formed text. The manuscript consists of eight divisions: "Prospect (*Vorblick*)," "The Resonating (*Der Anklang*)," "The Interplay (*das Zuspiel*)," "The Leap" (*der Sprung*), "The Grounding" (*die Gründung*), "The Future Ones" (*die Zu-künftigen*), "The Last God" (*der letzte Gott*), and "Beyng" (*das Seyn*). In accord with the German edition, the translation places "Beyng" last although it comes second in the manuscript. Friedrich Wilhelm von Hermann, who edited the German edition, explains in an "Editor's Afterword" that in placing "Beyng" last, he took his cue from a note by Heidegger

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in the manuscript to the effect that the placement of “Beyng” should be otherwise than where it was, which was second, and that its placement last in the published text reflects the distinct importance of “Beyng.” These eight divisions comprise a total of 281 sections, each with its own title. There is considerable repetition in the text and often it has the character of notes for further development and integration within the ongoing thinking. At times the reader finds lists of topics either with brief comments or none at all, and, occasionally, less than fully formed sentences. As elsewhere in Heidegger’s writings, the language often goes far beyond common or standard German usage.

In his *Der Denkweg Martin Heideggers* from 1963 (*Martin Heidegger’s Path of Thinking*, 1993), Otto Pöggeler first made widely known the existence of the manuscript of the *Beiträge* that was to be Heidegger’s second major book. Written a decade after the publication of the first, *Being and Time*, in 1927, the later text departs from the earlier one in quite significant ways. First, *das Seyn*, an earlier form of the word *das Sein*, is understood here by Heidegger as prior to the ontological difference, the difference between being and beings that is crucial in *Being and Time* and in the earlier work generally. *Das Seyn* is helpfully rendered in this translation as “beyng,” which is itself an earlier form of the English “being.” In *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, Heidegger is intent on thinking beyng in a way that does not begin from beings, or in other words, that is no longer metaphysical. While *Being and Time* carries out an extensive analysis of our Da-sein, our opening for being, in *Contributions* Heidegger repeatedly characterizes Da-sein as not yet, or rather, to come. “The gods” and “the last god,” who do not figure in the earlier work, are much in evidence in *Contributions*. While in the earlier text, time is more primordial than space, in *Contributions*, the two are co-primordial and what Heidegger calls “time-space” (*der Zeitraum*) is characterized as the site for *Being and Time*’s “the moment” (*der Augenblick*), the authentic present. Another factor that first makes its appearance in *Contributions* is earth, a self-concealing element that Heidegger associates with nature but does not reduce to nature in that earth, like just about all there is in *Contributions*, has an historical

inflection. Earth is in constant contention with “world.” This contention is central to Heidegger’s lecture “The Origin of the Work of Art” (GA 5: 1–74/1–56), which dates from the period of *Contributions*. It is crucial where the “confrontation” (*die Auseinandersetzung*) between gods and ourselves is concerned. Another point that appears here in contrast to the earlier text is the “denial” (*die Verweigerung*) of beyng, which Heidegger characterizes as beyng’s highest gift. Also central to the *Contributions* are the dynamics of “grounding” (*die Gründung*), which Heidegger had not addressed in *Being and Time* but which he had sought to think in the 1929 essay “On the Essence of Reasons” (GA 9: 123–175/97–135).

*Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* is crucial in regard to the emergence of major themes addressed in Heidegger’s later work. One such theme is “technicity” (*die Technik*) along with one of its essential features, “the networking” (*das Gestell*), which Heidegger here calls “machination” (*die Machenschaft*). Another such theme is art, and in particular, poetry. A third is language. While the emergence of these themes belonging to the later work is unmistakable here, a transition from *Being and Time* and the thought that generated that major text to *Contributions* is not as clear. Indeed, while *Being and Time* is characterized as a first foray into the thinking of beyng, and while the importance of the earlier text’s thinking of time as a clue to the thinking of beyng is sustained, Heidegger announces a willingness here to relinquish particulars of *Being and Time*. He writes, in the division called “The Leap”:

At issue in the question of being is nothing other than the carrying out of this preparation for our history. All “contents,” “opinions,” and “itineraries” within the particulars of the first attempt (*Being and Time*) are contingent and can disappear. (191)<sup>1</sup>

Given that the text was written in the second half of the decade of the 1930s, it is legitimate to ask about direct references to developments in Germany at the time. Two references to Jews are noteworthy in that regard. One comes from the opening division of the text, “Prospect”:

To ask the question of who we are is in fact *more dangerous* here than any other opposition encountered on the same level of certainty about the human being (the final form of Marxism, a form that has essentially nothing to do with Jewishness or even with Russianness; if an undeveloped spiritualism still lies dormant someplace, then that place is the Russian people; Bolshevism is originally Western, a European possibility: the rise of the masses, industry, technology, the dying out of Christianity; insofar, however, as the supremacy of reason, qua equalization of everyone is merely a consequence of Christianity, which is itself of Jewish origin {cf. Nietzsche's idea of the slave revolt in morals}, Bolshevism is in fact Jewish, but then Christianity is also basically Bolshevist! Which decisions thereby become necessary?). (44)

The other comes from the division called "Resonating":

*Sheer idiocy* to say that experimental research is Nordic-Germanic and that rational research, on the contrary, is of *foreign extraction!* We would then have to resolve to number Newton and Leibniz among the "Jews." It is precisely the projection of nature in the *mathematical* sense that constitutes the presupposition for the necessity and possibility of "*experimentation*" as measuring. (127)

The sarcasm in evidence in both passages is indicative of a reaction by Heidegger to the nonsensical character and sheer idiocy of what was being said in each case about the "Jews." While the intellectual character of the whole text is so far beyond anything one could imagine any average National Socialist enthusiast taking an interest in, and while both of the above passages are somewhat on the order of passing remarks, it is true that other passing remarks elsewhere get taken at

times as conclusive evidence of anti-Semitism and an ultimate dedication to National Socialism on Heidegger's part.

At the outset, Heidegger is explicit about the crucial importance of *das Ereignis*, which in standard German means "the event." In the title of the text, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, the "subtitle" is of paramount importance. The translators have rendered the title as *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*. This has the advantage of employing the recognizable standard meaning of *das Ereignis*. Furthermore, in rendering "vom" as "of," the translators have made use of a standard form for a title in such a way that "Of the Event" is in apposition, in effect, to "Contributions to Philosophy," elevating the importance of "Of the Event" in accord with Heidegger's specification. In addition, the "of" here can also be understood in a genitive sense. This translation of the title is preferable to the translation *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, the title for the first English translation of the text.<sup>2</sup> That translation of the crucial word *das Ereignis* is not helpful, to begin with, because it omits, altogether, "event." It resorts to a term, "enowning," which is not an English word. It relies on associations of *das Ereignis* with *eigen*, "own" or "proper," and *eignen*, "to be distinct to," which are suggestive, first of all, in so far as the event in question here, the occurrence of world, brings our selfhood with it, but which are probably linguistic associations after the fact. When Heidegger sought untapped possibilities within German the point was not to end up with forced coinages such as "enowning" used as an English word. What *Da-sein*, for example, says for Heidegger is most distinctive; nevertheless, the word is a German word. Heidegger did call attention elsewhere to the fact that an earlier form of the word *das Ereignis* was *das Eräugnis* and that this is associated with *eräugnen*, to bring before the eyes, or to bring to sight. This can be related to *lichten* and *die Lichtung*, both terms deployed by Heidegger, where the former ordinarily means a "lifting" of adverse conditions, particularly atmospheric, such as fog, and the latter means "the clearing." Here *die Lichtung* specifically means a clearing or an opening for a manifestation of what cannot be made present, intrinsic to the occurrence of world, whereby "being

lights up as the trace of the path of the last god” (181). The new translation renders *das Ereignis* simply as “the event” throughout the text. While it may not be possible to bring forward all of the above associations in English while using the basic “event,” the rendering throughout the text simply as “the event” could easily suggest to a reader who is not necessarily aware of these associations that “the event” is one among any number of events, or that one is dealing here with a version of “process philosophy” that offers a metaphysical alternative to “substance philosophy,” and neither of these is so. Heidegger characterized *das Ereignis* as a “singulare tantum.” Some means of indicating this utterly distinct status seems to be in order. While current practice, followed by the translators, has moved away from capitalizing crucial words, such as “Being” in particular (an earlier practice, complicated, of course, by the fact that all German nouns are capitalized), nonetheless, perhaps in this one case an exception might have been warranted. The word *das Ereignis* clearly does not have the history in the philosophical tradition that “Being” has, whereby capitalizing “Being” can lend itself rather easily to metaphysical thinking.

A somewhat similar difficulty attends the translation throughout of *das Wesen* as “the essence.” When Heidegger tells us that *das Ereignis* is *das Wesen* of beyng, a reader unaware of how Heidegger elsewhere (in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, for example) brings forward an early sense of the verb *wesen* as “to last,” “to remain,” “to endure,” “to abide,” or “to while,” can easily miss everything by virtue of the rendering of *das Wesen* as “the essence,” a term that is maximally ensconced in the metaphysical tradition. By virtue of a further association brought forward by Heidegger, namely, the association of *das Wesen* as “whiling” with *währen*, to endure, we also note the association of *das Wesen* with *die Wahrheit*, that is, with truth. This is to say that here we are very close to the heart of Heidegger’s thought.

Bringing forward these associations while retaining the English word “essence” looks to be impossible. One earlier attempt by translators, namely, “essencing,” adds a verbal sense, but adds it to “essence” with its own fortified metaphysical sense. Etymological dictionaries

show that the closest English relative is apparently the word “was,” from a “proto-English” verb, “wesanen,” which had the sense of “to remain” or “to endure.” Apparently, the development of imperfect tenses holds the key to the evolution of “was.” But again, bringing any of this forward while retaining the basic word “essence” would appear to be impossible. In the “Translators’ Introduction,” in distinguishing their practice from that of their predecessors in the initial English translation (where *das Wesen* is rendered as “the sway”), the translators write of both *das Wesen* and *das Ereignis*:

For Heidegger, the decisive junctures of the history of philosophy are marked not by the coining of new terms but by a new sense accruing to the old terms. Thus our translation aims to invite the reader into the task of disclosing the new sense and does not presumptuously impose that sense from the start through idiosyncratic terminological choices. For example, what “essence” and “event” come to mean in the course of these ponderings is up to the reader to decide. (xvi)

In regard to *das Wesen*, it is true that Heidegger complicates the matter by using the word at times in its rather common sense of what is crucial to that of which it is “the essence.” But given the associations brought forward elsewhere by Heidegger, and given how deeply this term resonates in Heidegger’s thought, one may well consider whether, like *Da-sein*, the term might, at this point, be left untranslated when used otherwise than in this common way. What is said here of *das Wesen* pertains as well to Heidegger’s sense of *die Wesung*, rendered in this translation as “essential occurrence.” Leaving the terms untranslated would undeniably not be optimum. In effect, it is a different way of throwing up one’s hands at the extreme difficulty. But it seems unfortunate to note a problem in leaving the terms throughout as “the essence” and “the essential occurrence” while offering nothing in return.

Beginning in the division “The Resonating” and continuing through the text, Heidegger calls attention to “the plight” (*die Not*)

of beyng. This pertains to the abandonment, in our time, of beings by beyng, as well as to how “[t]he truth of being (and thus being itself) essentially occurs only where and when Da-sein occurs” (205; GA 65: 261: “Die Wahrheit des Seins und so dieses selbst west nur, wo und wann Da-sein”). The lack of a sense of “the plight” in our time marks the extreme state of “the plight.” Almost without exception, the translators render *die Not* as “plight.” Otherwise, it is rendered as “need,” in keeping with Heidegger’s point to the effect that beyng needs (*bedürfen*) *Da-sein*. What remains uncaptured is the urgency and the danger that require attention without delay. One is reminded of the prospect of things “going downhill all the way,” noted by Heidegger in the interview “Only a God Can Save Us,” a prospect that would seem to have some degree of resonance at this historical juncture. In *Contributions*, the gods require beyng, and beyng in turn requires *Da-sein*. It might have been possible to add this factor simply by rendering *die Not* as “urgent plight,” which would appear to be both legitimate and helpful.

With regard to how the translators rendered the title of the division *das Zuspiel*, that is, as “The Interplay,” “interplay” between the first beginning of the philosophical tradition and the other beginning sought by Heidegger is definitely operative in the transition as understood here as well as in Heidegger’s readings of preeminent philosophers in the tradition. At the same time, the German word does suggest “playing to,” or “playing toward,” and in this case, playing toward the other beginning. In other words, this involves the direction or the trajectory of the dynamic. In the first English translation of the text, the translators saw fit to render *das Zuspiel* as “Playing Forth.” Despite the oddness of the phrase in English, this does convey that sense of the direction of the dynamic as indicated by the German term. Perhaps simply using “Play Toward” would have done the same.

Relatedly, there is the new translation’s rendering of *die Zu-künftigen* as “the future ones,” and of *zukünftig* as “to come.” Heidegger does tell us that some of *die Zukünftigen* are already here and this does suggest that ordinarily one is to think of them as “to come.” But the primary rendering throughout of *zukünftig* as “to come,” and of *die*

*Zukünftigen* as “the future ones,” rather than as “futural” and “the futural ones,” those who are toward a coming future, does run into difficulties. For example, Heidegger characterizes Hölderlin as the most *zukünftig* and it is difficult to understand how Hölderlin is “to come.” Perhaps one might suggest that Hölderlin’s day, so to speak, is yet to come. But the interpellation here does seem a bit of a stretch, and what is more, how is one to understand what it would mean to be the most yet-to-come?

Much the same issue would seem to be at play in sorting out a passage such as the following toward the end of the division “The Last God”:

Mit der Seynsfrage, die die Frage nach dem Seienden und somit alle “Metaphysik” überwunden hat, ist die Fackel entzündet und der erste Anlauf zum weiten Lauf gewagt. Wo ist der Läufer, der die Fackel aufnimmt und seinem Vor-gänger zuträgt? Die Läufer müssen alle, und je spätere sie sind, um so stärkere *Vor*-läufer sein, keine Nachläufer, die das Erstversuchte, wenn es hoch kommt, nur “verbessern” und widerlegen. Die *Vor*-läufer müssen je und je ursprünglicher als die “Vor” (d. h. hinter ihnen)-laufenden *anfängliche* sein, das Eine und Selbe des zu Fragenden noch einfacher, reicher und unbedingt einzig denken. (GA 65: 415)

The translators translate as follows:

With the question of being, which has overcome the question of beings and thereby all “metaphysics,” the torch is ignited and the first run-up to the long heat is ventured. Where is the runner who takes up the torch and carries it to his pre-cursor? The runners must all be *fore*-runners, and this holds all the more strictly for those who come later. They must not be re-runners, who at most only “improve” and rebut what was first attempted. The fore-runners must be *inceptual* in an ever more originary way than their “pre-cursors” (who

actually come after them) and must think still more simply, more richly, and altogether uniquely the one and the same issue that is to be questioned. (329)

But the runners in comparison with whom each runner must be more and more originarily inceptual are those who ran before (*die Vorlaufenden*) and who are actually behind (*hinter*) the more and more originarily inceptual ones, rather than those who run after they do. In other words, the more and more originarily inceptual ones are more and more futural, they reach further and further forth (*vor*) in regard to what is to be thought still more simply, more richly, and altogether uniquely, and are not simply “to come” at one point or another later down the course.

All this recalls the direction or the trajectory of the “play toward” (*das Zuspiel*), and more so, the urgency of the plight (*die Not*) of beyng and the thinking called for by beyng’s abandonment of beings. Also, the resonance here with the futural character of authenticity, brought forward by Heidegger in the discussion of historicity toward the end of *Being and Time*, is not insignificant.

As for the mode of thinking that Heidegger found necessary, he specifies an *Er-denken* of the truth of beyng. The translators render *Er-denken* as “inventive thinking.” This is suggestive in certain respects, and it might speak to more recent philosophical work (for example, one thinks of Derrida’s phrase *l’invention de l’autre*, “the invention of the other”<sup>3</sup>). Yet, while *er-denken* can stand for “inventing” in the sense of “thinking something up,” this meaning is arguably not the primary sense that Heidegger has in mind. One has to wonder whether, in this instance, the translators may have fallen victim to what they expressly did not want the translation to do, that is, “presumptuously impose [a] sense from the start through idiosyncratic terminological choices.”

What then? *Er-denken* is a mark of becoming *Da-sein*. It is a thinking that abyssally grounds the “da,” the “there,” or the “here.” It is no longer at all a “thinking about,” or a “re-flection.” This abyssal grounding is fully historical and itself can be thought only in terms of its primordial ground (*der Urgrund*), which is to say, “the event” (*das*

*Ereignis*). One might think here of a negative characterization, namely, “non-reflective thinking,” but “non-reflective” is not to be found in the word *Er-denken*, and, moreover, this loses the sense of the prefix “*er*.” The prefix “*er*” will often have the sense of “rendering” or “making,” but “making” not along the lines of “constructing,” rather, more closely, as an intensification that can suggest compulsion. Returning for a moment to those who “bear the torch,” Heidegger describes them as “those of abyssal origin who are among the compelled ones” (329). If “*er*” is to be understood along these lines, perhaps *das Er-denken* could be rendered as “compelling thinking,” where “compelling” could refer both to how the thinking comes about and, at the same time, no less importantly, how it takes hold.

One final term to note, one that does not turn up very often in *Contributions*, but that does figure importantly in a subsequent unfinished manuscript by Heidegger published in the *Gesamtausgabe* under the title *Besinnung* (GA 66), is the word *Auseinandersetzung*, which is rendered in the new translation of *Contributions* as “confrontation.” The sense of a setting “out of one another,” or “apart from one another” (*Auseinander*...) gets lost. It is the setting “out of one another” that opposes vis-à-vis one another. Here a somewhat longer locution may be needed: a setting apart that opposes.

All of the above having been noted, the very impressive strength of this translation, in regard to coming to terms with the exceptionally difficult thinking in Heidegger’s text, as well as in regard to the degree of accessibility of the translation, makes one think that the translators must have thought of much, if not all, of this. But this does lead one to ask why important decisions are not discussed here by the translators, either in the Introduction, as the earlier translators did in their Foreword, or in notes. It seems odd to make a critical remark where the exceptional fluidity of this translation is concerned, almost as though the specific intent were to turn a virtue into a vice. However, what can get lost is any sense of why native German speaking philosophers, even when familiar with other texts by Heidegger, can find the language in *Contributions* an exceptional challenge, and any sense of what, overall,

gives this text an unsettled character. After all, what we do not have here is “a philosophy.” What would, in fact, go a long way in helping in this regard is some discussion of important decisions that were made by the translators. One hesitates to ask the translators to do anything more than they have already done in providing this remarkable translation of this so very important and so very difficult text, but perhaps providing a supplement to the volume in some form, which could perhaps be based on the English-German and German-English glossaries provided (along with Greek-English and Latin-English glossaries) in the volume, would be in order. As is, the glossaries only tell the reader what German terms are translated by the English terms used, and what English terms are used for German terms being translated, but nothing about why the translators did so.

Having begun by noting the major service done by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu in providing *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* to the Anglophone world, all that remains for me is to express my congratulations and my gratitude for an exceptionally skillful translation.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Unless indicated otherwise, all numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers of the book under review.
- 2 *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: Invention de l'Autre, Tomes I et II* (Paris: Galilée, 1987/2007); *Psyché: Invention of the Other, Volume I and Volume II*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, 2008).