

The Catastrophic Essence of the Human Being in Heidegger's Readings of *Antigone*

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Outside of his two readings of *Antigone*, Heidegger makes few references to Greek tragedy, forcing commentators to cobble together a theory of tragedy in Heidegger's thought from dispersed citations ranging over many years. Even in the *Antigone* interpretations, from the *Introduction to Metaphysics* in 1935 and *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"* in 1942, Heidegger says little about what he thinks of tragedy, again prompting commentators to piece together a theory of tragedy from his detailed interpretations of the play's first choral ode. Interestingly, much of the work in this area has focused on Heidegger's philosophy in general as opposed to what he took to be the main effort of his reading of *Antigone*, namely, as a retrieval of how the ancient Greeks understood the essence of the human being. Both of his *Antigone* interpretations may be found during the turn in his thought, which we can say broadly involves a shift away from Dasein and toward Being, and yet he is focused in these readings on the essence of the human being as it is found in Sophoclean tragedy and, more broadly, in Greek thinking.

Both readings of *Antigone* are meditations on Sophocles' claim in the first choral ode that there is nothing stranger than the human being, which Heidegger takes as saying that the human being is the uncanniest of all creatures. Strangeness and uncanniness do not on their own make the human being tragic, but in a remarkable passage

in which Heidegger is discussing uncanniness, he says that “human beings themselves in their essence are a *katastrophe*,” preferring the Greek in order to emphasize the way in which the human being is a turning (*strophe*) down (*kata*). Instead of claiming that Heidegger’s philosophy is tragic, as many readers of these works have done, I want to argue that for Heidegger, the human being is essentially tragic, a catastrophe or, if we follow the Greek term, a turning down away from oneself. This is not a new development in his thought. We see it in some of the early lecture courses, and we see it, as well, in *Being and Time*, but Sophoclean tragedy provided Heidegger with a new way to think about this tragic human essence, namely, as an intrinsic propensity toward rise and fall residing within the human being.

As we ponder Heidegger’s future legacy, it will be important to keep this in mind, that he thought of the human being as being in essence a catastrophe. Students of Heidegger are familiar with what he says about inauthenticity in *Being and Time*, where the human being evades itself, becoming lost among beings. The sense of “empty and errant wandering” is retained in his later work on tragedy, but also deepened, for now human beings are inflicted with what he calls a “counterturning” in their very essence. The aim of this paper is to explore that counterturning and its catastrophic consequences. The first section traces the roots of this catastrophic essence back to the idea of alienation in the early lecture courses and *Being and Time*. The second section explores the notions of shattering and counterturning in his readings of *Antigone*. Concluding, I suggest that Heidegger thought of his own involvement with National Socialism through the lens of the Greek tragic hero, and in particular Antigone, who is caught within the catastrophic counterturning essence of human being.

I. ALIENATION

Fallenness and inauthenticity may be some of the most recognizable and frequently taught topics in Heidegger studies, so there is little need to rehearse the details of them. It is noteworthy, though, that the voluntarism that we find in *Being and Time* includes the possibility not

just of resoluteness but of alienation. Dasein can become alienated from itself while attempting to discover itself. Such alienation forces Dasein back upon itself, not away from itself, in its misguided and deluded attempts to understand itself better. He writes that

this alienation cannot mean that Dasein gets factually torn away from itself. On the contrary, this alienation drives it into a kind of Being which borders on the most exaggerated “self-dissection,” tempting itself with all possibilities of explanation, so that the very “characterologies” and “typologies” which it has brought about are themselves already becoming something that cannot be surveyed at a glance. This alienation *closes off* from Dasein its authenticity and possibility, even if only the possibility of genuinely foundering. It does not, however, surrender Dasein to an entity which Dasein itself is not, but forces it into its inauthenticity – into a possible kind of Being *of itself*. The alienation of falling – at once tempting and tranquillizing – leads by its own movement, to Dasein getting *entangled* [verfängt] in itself. (GA 2: 236/SZ 178)

Reading this passage may call to mind self-help books and personality tests that break down the human person into types (“characterologies” and “typologies”) and can often result in wildly distorted perceptions of ourselves. Considering the contemporary shift toward data-driven analytics of the human personality, Heidegger’s remarks here in 1927 are remarkably prescient. He saw a danger in conceiving the human person as an analytical subject, a mode of inauthenticity that stems not from the failure to explore one’s own Being but from a sincere, yet misguided, attempt to do so.

He adds that this kind of alienation closes off the possibility of “genuinely foundering,” a curious expression, for how can one founder in a genuine way? For Heidegger, falling apart was not the worst thing that can happen to a person. Indeed, it may be the most appropriate

thing to do, depending on the situation. If one's best friend commits suicide, it might be inappropriate not to fall apart, even though many school psychologists are called upon to prevent that very thing from happening. Maintaining one's composure in the face of extreme pain and loss may be inappropriate if not absurd, a kind of psychological calm that prevents one from "genuinely foundering." Heidegger does not mention Aristotle here, but his analysis hearkens back to Aristotle's claim in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that virtue depends on responding appropriately to the given situation.

In one of his early lecture courses, however, entitled *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, we see that it is precisely the difficulty in trying to do "the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way" that accounts for human ruination. Aristotle says that while vice is easy, virtue is difficult, which means that human beings spend most of their time in vice. Heidegger reads this as saying that the human person is always revolving around itself in what he calls an elliptical movement (GA 61: 80/108). Importantly, though, life's ruination and its attendant alienation do not separate us from ourselves. Rather, we find life itself precisely there where it is most alienated. He says, "In constantly new ways of looking away from itself, [life] always searches for itself and encounters itself precisely there where it does not suppose, in its masking" (GA 61: 80/107). In both this text and in *Being and Time*, human alienation is not a condition or state of Dasein's Being, but rather a movement. We can become lost, alienated from ourselves, while trying to find out who we are. Summing up the phenomenological features of fallenness in *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes, "This 'movement' of Dasein in its own Being, we call its 'downward plunge' [*Absturz*]" (GA 2: 237/SZ 178), employing language that hearkens back directly to GA 61 on *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, where he says that the movement of factual life is a crash through the nothingness. In his translation of this lecture course, Richard Rojcewicz uses the word "collapse" (as opposed to "crash") to translate the German term *Sturz*, writing, "the 'whereto' of the collapse [of factual life] is not something foreign to it

but is itself of the character of factual life and indeed is ‘*the nothingness of factual life*’” (GA 61: 108/145). In both texts, we see that human life involves falling, crashing, or collapsing into itself, that is, into the nullity of its own existence, for it is precisely its own existence which is at stake here. In *Being and Time*, Dasein becomes alienated, but not “factically torn away from itself” (GA 2: 236/SZ 178); Dasein can lose itself and live “*away from itself*,” but these phenomena do not speak against the existentiality of Dasein, rather they reinforce it: “falling, as a kind of Being of this Being-in, affords us rather the most elemental evidence *for* Dasein’s existentiality” (GA 2: 238/SZ 179).

Commentators who work on the early Heidegger have shown definitively that the categories of ruinance from 1921–22 develop into the categories of fallenness in *Being and Time*. What I am trying to emphasize here is that, first, in both texts, we see that alienation can result from self-exploration. It is not necessarily thoughtlessness or indifference that can lead to alienation, but rather a sincere and genuine attempt at self-understanding. Secondly, alienation is a movement, first an elliptical movement around oneself, and then in *Being and Time* a “downward plunge...out of itself into itself” (GA 2: 237/SZ 178). Thirdly, alienation does not draw the human being away from itself. Instead, it draws it into itself and manifests as a mode of Being. This elliptical, plunging movement of Dasein away from itself and yet at the same time toward and into itself becomes refined during his two lectures on *Antigone*.

II. COUNTERTURNING

Interpreting Greek tragedy gives Heidegger a way of thinking about human alienation that is deeper, and more troubling, than what he had previously described. In his two readings of *Antigone*, the alienation of the human being is no longer an elliptical movement around itself (1921–22), nor is it a downward plunge into and out of itself (1927). It becomes in 1935 a violent strife between *technē* and *dikē* that shatters against Being. In 1942, this alienation is still a movement, but now it is a counterturning movement within oneself that drives us away from

home, that is, it drives us out of what is homely. Both of his readings of *Antigone* focus on the first choral ode, in which Sophocles uses oppositional expressions when describing the essence of the human being.¹ Sophocles says in the first choral ode that the human being is both of the following:

- 1) *pantoporos-aporos*: “Everywhere venturing forth
underway, experienceless without any way out.”
- 2) *hypsipolis-apolis*: “Towering high above the site,
forfeiting the site.”

Interestingly, Heidegger ignores the division between both of these oppositional pairs, where editors have placed punctuation marks, which show that Sophocles is describing different people with each one, and yet they are also written right next to each other, and they are negated versions of the same word. There is warrant for Heidegger to interpret Sophocles as saying, poetically, that there is an oppositional, conflictual nature within the human being.

Central to this conflict is a violent relationship between *technē* and *dikē*, which is the same as the relationship between the human being and Being. *Technē* is a human power of knowing while “Being is fittingness that enjoins: *dikē*” (GA 40: 171/123). This is a violent relationship because it involves breaking out beyond beings and setting Being to work in them. In becoming aware of this relationship and engaging it, the human being becomes historical. In other words, humanity begins to unfold as history when we attempt to “know” or “understand” (*technē*) “the overwhelming sway of Being” (*dikē*) and set it to work in beings. We can see this relationship at work in Antigone’s own life and, in particular, in the difference between her and her sister Ismene. Both sisters value the gods and their family and the city, but honoring gods, family, and city means something different to Antigone than it does to her sister.² It is neither a quantitative nor a qualitative difference. Antigone seeks to know what it means to *be* a brother or sister; she wishes to understand what it means to *be* someone who honors the gods, and

she suffers for it. Heidegger writes, “the knower fares into the midst of fittingness, draws Being into beings [in the draft], and yet can never surmount the overwhelming. Thus the knower is thrown this way and that between fittingness and un-fittingness, between the wretched and the noble” (GA 40: 171–72/123).³

This violence is a relation between the human being as violence-doing (*technē*) and the overwhelming sway of Being (*dikē*), itself violent. “Doing violence,” he writes, “must shatter against the excessive violence of Being, as long as Being holds sway in its essence, as *phusis*, as emerging sway” (GA 40: 171/173). Heidegger equates thinking and knowing Being with trying to say the unsaid and think the unthought. He writes, “The one who is *violence-doing*, the creative one, who sets out into the un-said, who breaks into the un-thought, who compels what has never happened and makes appear what is unseen, this violence-doing one stands at all times in daring,” and the Greek term for daring is *tolma*, which appears in line 371 of the first choral ode (GA 40: 172/123).⁴

At the beginning of the play, when Antigone attempts to conscript Ismene into helping bury the body of Polyneices, she resists, telling Antigone that it is not their place to defy Creon’s decree. Immediately, Antigone is disdainful of her sister. She says, “I won’t press you any further. I wouldn’t even let / You help me if you had a change of heart. / Go on and be the way you choose to be” (*Antigone*, 69–71).⁵ What is at stake for Antigone is what kind of person she is and what kind of person her sister is. She cares about what it means to be a human being, and she is willing to dare, to take a risk, in order to become that. Ismene is concerned about the consequences of their action and the need to respect certain limits. Indeed, Ismene is unwilling to trespass limits of any kind, saying “My mind / Will never aim too high, too far” (*Antigone*, 67–68). Certainly, Antigone violates the law, but at a more fundamental level, her transgression is not a legal one. She transgresses because she asks about what it means to *be*: to be a sister, to be someone who believes in honor and the gods and the city, to be a human being.

In reading the play, one is tempted to find in Antigone’s decision a stubborn willfulness. Creon accuses her of being stubborn throughout

the play. Certainly, she refuses to capitulate to Creon's demands, and that comes across as stubborn. She is so committed in her beliefs that at times it seems as though she is motivated by a kind of righteous, moral indignation. But her actions are not an assertion of the will, and she is not morally righteous. Rather, she reveres the gods and she reveres her family, and so she is urged on in her actions by "pure reverence" (*Antigone*, 943). I think that in Heidegger's terms, Antigone is motivated by Being itself. Her tragic fate is to shatter against Being because she dared (*tolma*) to break into the un-said and the un-thought by trying to live a pure and reverent life. Antigone herself thus offers us a way of thinking about the human being as being urged by Being and then shattering against Being in an effort to break out beyond the familiar and the everyday. Heidegger writes, "this necessity of shattering can subsist only insofar as what must shatter is urged into such Being-here (*Da-sein*). But the human being is urged into such Being-here, thrown into the urgency of such Being, because the overwhelming as such, in order to appear in its sway, *requires* the site of openness for itself. The essence of Being-human opens itself up to us only when it is understood on the basis of this urgency that is necessitated by Being itself" (GA 40: 173–74/124). We find here described in stark and clear terms the tragic essence of the human being, to become violent by breaking out beyond the familiar and the everyday and, in doing so, to shatter against Being.

In his later reading of *Antigone* from 1942, he will focus on the counterturning essence within the human being. These interpretations provide more nuanced discussions of the oppositional pairs stated above (*pantoporos-aporos* and *hypsipolis-apolis*), and they are considerably less violent in tone than his course from 1935, but they affirm this tragic essence of the human being who, in trying to know what it means to *be* shatters against Being. He first finds the counterturning within those words that describe the human being. Sophocles claims that the human being is the *deinon*, the strange, which Heidegger interprets as "fearful," "powerful," and "inhabitual," but each word includes its own counteressence. The fearful is both the frightful and that which inspires admiration; it is both horror and awe. The powerful prevails,

and it is violent. The inhabital exceeds the habitual and stands within it as skillfulness regarding that which is habitual. For these reasons, Heidegger feels justified in translating *deinon* as uncanniness, which is meant to capture the “reciprocally counterturning belonging together” of all three terms (GA 53: 67–68/82–83).

The essence of uncanniness is its counterturning character, and this is what defines the human being. As *pantoporos-aporos*, human beings venture forth in all directions and, in doing so, may achieve great success, and yet in all their ventures they come to nothing. Humans come to nothing, in one way, because they die, but more importantly, they come to nothing because in spite of their success they do not have an insight into their own essence (GA 53: 75/91–93). So far, this treatment of uncanniness does not go much beyond *Being and Time*, where Dasein is thrown down amongst beings and lost amidst them. But within this same discussion of uncanniness, Heidegger claims that the most extreme form of uncanniness is “homelessness,” a plight reserved for human beings and no others. He says that “unhomeliness is not at all one form of the uncanny among others but is essentially ‘beyond’ these, something the poet expresses in calling the human being that which is most uncanny” (GA 53: 77/94). He then goes on to claim that the human being is a “catastrophe,” “a reversal that turns them away from their own essence”; even in their homeliness, they forget Being, and then being homely becomes “an empty and errant wandering for them” (GA 53: 77/94).

This account marks a decisive shift away from the uncanniness of *Being and Time*. There he says that in anxiety, “Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein has been individualized, but individualized as Being-in-the-world. Being-in enters into the existential ‘mode’ of the ‘not-at-home’. Nothing else is meant by our talk about ‘uncanniness’” (GA 2: 251/SZ 189). Thus, in *Being and Time*, uncanniness draws Dasein out of its empty and errant wandering whereas in his second reading of *Antigone*, uncanniness includes the catastrophic forgetting of Being. Here, human beings are a catastrophe precisely because they are uncanny.

It is tempting to cast the counterturning essence of the human being as consisting of both a positive and negative side, but for Heidegger this is a metaphysical temptation. Sophocles thought more deeply about the human being than we are able to today precisely because his thinking is not metaphysical. The inward counterturning of the human being is not a vacillation between positive and negative, good and bad, moral and immoral. Heidegger claims that the “un-” of the uncanny can be thought of as “evil,” so long as this sense of evil is not thought to be “morally bad.” He even says the idea that the human being is essentially a catastrophe is not pessimistic for catastrophic here does not mean disastrous. The counterturning is negative, but it is not lack, nor is it sin. It means that what “human beings attain in venturing forth is never sufficient to fulfill and sustain their essence” (GA 53: 84/103–4). The second of the oppositional pairs, which relates to the city (*hypsipolis-apolis*), makes the same point as the first pair, but it does so with respect to a particular realm of being. It is a more particular claim, and it is one that speaks directly to the unhomeliness of human beings because the city is the historical home of human beings (GA 53: 87/107–9).

Heidegger describes the counterturning human essence in terms of the homely/unhomely in order to rethink that essence in non-metaphysical language. It is also language that captures the sense of not-being-at-home that is there in the German term *Unheimlichkeit*. The human being is both *unheimlich* (uncanny) and *unheimisch* (unhomely). The human being is a catastrophe because “human beings in their innermost essence are those who are unhomely” (GA 53: 90/111–13). But the real key to thinking about the human being in a non-metaphysical way is to show that this counterturning essence is not a duality, where one is either homely or unhomely. This is a problem that we also find in *Being and Time*, where Heidegger seems to suggest at times that Dasein is either authentic or inauthentic. Here, in his reading of Greek tragedy, it becomes clear that the counterturning within the human being is a conflictual relationship. “Becoming homely,” he writes, “makes manifest the essential ambiguity of being unhomely” (GA 53: 115/143–44).⁶

At the end of his second reading of *Antigone*, we find Heidegger focusing more and more on the character of Antigone herself. Doing so allows him to make a critical distinction between two kinds of unhomeliness. One is the same that we find in *Being and Time* an aimless wandering among beings. The second one he calls proper unhomeliness.⁷ Veronique Fóti claims that Heidegger sees here in Antigone an “ontological passion” over and against “earthly concerns and attachments.”⁸ Fóti views proper unhomeliness as an “estrangement from familiar patterns of world-construal” that “puts one at risk of losing one’s home in the *polis*.” The term “ontological passion” captures the sense in which Antigone wishes to be a sister and one who honors the gods, and she risks greatly in doing so. But Antigone’s concerns are in great measure earthly ones relating to family, honor, and the city, and the loss of home is necessary. Focusing on Antigone herself, and echoing what he said about daring in 1935, Heidegger claims that she is the “supreme uncanny” precisely because she risked becoming this proper (authentic) unhomeliness: “To be this risk is her essence” (GA 53: 117/146–47). What she shows us then is “a becoming homely in being unhomely,” a phrase that Heidegger affirms is the fulfillment of our potentiality for being (GA 53: 120/149–51).

Richard Capobianco emphasizes the sense in which the human being becomes homely in the second of Heidegger’s readings of *Antigone*. He rightly points out that while there is no sense in which the human being is at home in the first of the two *Antigone* readings, the human being does achieve a sense of home in the second one. He then connects this sense of being at home to the notion of “releasement” in Heidegger’s later writings, and to his own theory that, eventually, Heidegger’s view of Being was a kind of celebration that we see in the shining forth or gleaming of objects. Capobianco sees a progression in Heidegger’s thinking about the human being, from being essentially “unsettled” (his translation of *Unheimlichkeit*) in *The History of the Concept of Time* (1925), *Being and Time* (1927), and *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), to a more nuanced and complex sense of homeliness that includes being not at home in Hölderlin’s *Hymn “The Ister”* (1942), to, ultimately, a “sanguine and

serene view of Dasein's 'return home' to Being" in the later works such as *Gelassenheit* (1955) and "Messkirch's Seventh Centennial" (1961).⁹ Capobianco's argument turns on Heidegger's unacknowledged reinterpretation of the last lines of the first choral ode, "May he who does such things never sit by my hearth or share my thoughts," which in the early reading (1935) says that the chorus, representing average everydayness, bears "contempt for the 'daring,' 'unsettled' one who upsets the familiar and customary."¹⁰ Focusing on the notion of the hearth, Capobianco points out that in the later reading, from 1942, the chorus is "pointing 'beyond' the human being's 'unsettledness' unto the *hearth* – unto Being, the 'place' where human beings primordially belong."¹¹ Noting Heidegger's claim that coming home requires a "passage through the foreign" (GA 53: 60/49), Capobianco calls this return home a "re-centring" of the self, back at home in Being, where one finds "*joy, calm, and rest* in meditatively wondering and marveling about its being in relation to Being, the temporal giving and flowing forth of all beings."¹² This shift toward home to which Capobianco calls our attention is extremely important, and he is the first to highlight it, but what should we make of Antigone's "becoming homely in being unhomely"? Heidegger calls Antigone the "supreme uncanny," emphasizing the risk she takes, and this does not seem to square with the meditative calmness of a re-centered self. Or perhaps it does, but only if that calmness reflects the composure of one who is sensitive to the ambiguity of unhomeliness and thus sensitive to the tragic alienation of human life. Heidegger's insistence that "proper" or "authentic unhomeliness" involves "becoming homely in being unhomely" indicates to me an acknowledgement of unhomeliness that is not forgetful and errant wandering, but which is also not a freedom from homelessness.

Distilling what has been said so far, we can say that the human being is a catastrophe because, whether in a proper and appropriate way or in an improper and inappropriate way, it is still unhomely. That unhomeliness can (improperly) involve aimless and errant wandering amidst beings, or, as in the case of Antigone, it can involve risk. To be properly unhomely is to risk an understanding of Being. Antigone

does so when she aims to *be* the sister of a fallen soldier. Heidegger insists that we cannot say what motivates Antigone. For both her and Sophocles, it goes “without name,” for it is “no mere human ordinance” and “yet it is something that pervasively attunes human beings as human beings” (GA 53: 116–17/144–47).¹⁵ Antigone knows what to do, not because she understands what is morally right or what she is obligated to do. Rather, what she knows takes the form of an intimation that comes, phronetically, from the heart (GA 53: 106–7/131–34). The play is a tragedy: Antigone commits suicide as does her fiancé and her aunt. But Heidegger saw proper unhomeliness in the risk she took, an unhomeliness that included a “belongingness to Being.”

III. CONCLUSION

Heidegger presents us with two alternatives: 1) aimless wandering amidst beings, and 2) a belongingness to Being, which in 1935 is a knowing (*technē*) that shatters against Being (*dikē*) and which in 1942 is an unhomeliness that, as we see in *Antigone*, ends in tragedy. This alternative is a catastrophic double bind because they both involve unhomeliness. Dennis Schmidt sees in Heidegger’s interpretations of *Antigone* the attempt to describe an originary ethics, one that goes beyond – or perhaps below – the categories of good and evil. In doing so, according to Schmidt, Heidegger grasps “an essential errancy at work in human life” as he attempts to understand “the nature which drives us into catastrophe.” Through the “profoundly solitary” figure of Antigone, Heidegger is trying to “think life radically.”¹⁴

We see this in what Heidegger says about moral calculation. Antigone’s actions cannot be considered moral. Heidegger makes a point of saying that it is a mistake to try to evaluate the human being using a “moral appraisal” (GA 40: 175/125). When this happens, the human being becomes a thing. “Such an appraisal,” he says, “posits the human being as something present at hand, deposits this thing into an empty space, and appraises it according to some table of values that is attached to it externally” (GA 40: 175/126). The essence of the human being is tragic because the human being is essentially homeless, lacking a site,

but that homelessness is not a kind of nihilistic emptiness. Heidegger contrasts the homelessness of uncanniness, which places the human being beyond the everyday world, with moral appraisals of the human being, which operate within the emptiness of values. For Heidegger, values belong to the register of calculative thinking, where one asks, “What is the best thing to do in this situation?” Antigone does not ask that question, nor does she appeal to a pre-existing set of standards that might help her make the decision to bury her brother. Rather, in Heidegger’s terms, she dares to venture into the un-said and un-thought, into a “place” that lacks familiar suggestions about how to act. To say that Antigone’s actions are moral would be to say that others ought to follow suit.

But no one would blame Antigone for obeying the law, especially in this case. It is not an unjust law to leave Polyneices’ body unburied. While it was bold, perhaps even arrogant, to leave the bodies of the enemy lying on the battlefield, it was not an entirely uncommon practice. Polyneices summoned an army and led them against his own city, so he was certainly an enemy. As Aristotle remarks in the *Poetics*, Creon is not an unjust ruler. He is committed to upholding the law during a time of great upheaval and uncertainty for Thebes. If Antigone had obeyed the law, she would be obeying a just law delivered by a just ruler. Her decision cannot be considered moral. But it can be considered heroic. Heidegger does not say much about the tragic hero, but he seems to view the human being that is described in the first choral ode as a heroic figure because the hero lives beyond morality. No one expects others to act as the hero does. The hero is a figure who defies moral categories and moral appraisals. Heidegger makes it possible for us to think of Antigone as a heroic figure, as a heroine, albeit a tragic one, and this was a mark of her humanity.

Did Heidegger think of himself in this way?¹⁵ Heinrich Wiegand Petzet recounts the story that in November of 1947 he told Heidegger a story about how he had been treated unfairly during the war. Then the lights went out, and Petzet writes, “For two hours or more we sat in total darkness and only heard each other’s voices.”¹⁶ Conversing in

total darkness, Heidegger opens up about how he was treated during the war: he was surrounded, he had difficulty publishing his writings, a seminar participant was a Gestapo agent. Petzet concludes that Heidegger was deeply wounded by how the university treated him, and then he says this: "Heidegger brought the conversation to an end in his inimitable way; he reached for a printed sheet and read to me his own translation of the great chorus song from Sophocles' *Antigone*. This is the song that deals with humanity and its destiny...When I departed two days later, Heidegger offered me the chorus song from *Antigone*, as a generous gift."¹⁷

NOTES

- 1 In reading the play, one will find numerous instances where things that should be unified are opposed to each other, or where things that should be opposed to each other are unified. For example, Polyneices and Eteocles are brothers and should be united, but they oppose and kill each other in battle. Polyneices is dead but left above ground. Antigone is alive but buried underground. It is the oppositional pairs in the first choral ode, however, that indicate to Heidegger the fundamental conflict defining the essence of the human being.

- 2 In this regard, Heidegger's reading of *Antigone*, and my own reading as well, differ markedly from that of many commentators. Heidegger sees Antigone herself as being conflicted. I view this conflict as arising from her commitments to her family, her city, and the gods. Many commentators view the play as a conflict between commitment to family and the law, or between the unwritten laws of the gods and the written laws of the state. Perhaps the most extreme view of this position is offered by Martha Nussbaum in the *Fragility of Goodness*, who writes: "I want to suggest that Antigone, like Creon, has engaged in a ruthless simplification of the world of value which effectively eliminates conflicting values" (63) and concludes that, "We have, then, two narrowly limited practical worlds, two strategies of avoidance and simplification" (66). Nussbaum accurately describes tragedy as the conflict between competing commitments, but she does not think that Antigone is facing this kind of conflict. Heidegger's reading of the play takes seriously the idea that the play is tragedy. For Nussbaum, it would not meet the requirement of being a tragedy. Moreover, Heidegger makes it possible to see Antigone as a heroine in a way that Nussbaum does not. I think it becomes clear that Antigone loves her city when, just before she goes to suffer her punishment, she says: "City of my fathers, Thebes! Gods of my people! They are taking me against my will. Look at me, O you lords of Thebes: I am the last remnant of kings. Look what these wretched men are doing to me, For my pure reverence" (42). See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 3 In the opposition between *technē* and *dikē*, Heidegger also finds a kind of unity. It is the *deinon* as "the overwhelming" (*dikē*) and the *deinon* as "the violence-doing" (*technē*) that "stand over against each other" (GA 40: 169/171). The unity of *deinon* is in conflict with itself, as the violence-doing shatters against the overwhelming. Here, though, what we see is that, "In the opposition between beings as a whole as overwhelming and the

human being as violence-doing Dasein, the possibility arises of plunging into what has no way out and has no site: perdition” (GA 40: 171/173). Perdition, eternal punishment and damnation, translates the German term *Verderb*. This perdition is not the result or outcome of the opposition between *technē* and *dikē*. Rather, “this perdition holds sway and lies in wait fundamentally in the opposition between the overwhelming and doing violence” (GA 40: 171/173).

- 4 It is often remarked that Heidegger’s rhetoric in the course is polemical because of Heidegger’s own complicity with violent Nazi extremism. It is also remarked that when he speaks of the “creative ones” he is referring to Hitler, himself and other remarkable but rare individuals who are capable of historical greatness. I do not doubt any of these interpretations, but in my judgment, the most immediate reference that Heidegger is making here is to Antigone herself, and it does make sense to talk about her in this way.
- 5 Citations of *Antigone*, when not from Heidegger’s own translation, are by line number from the Meineck and Woodruff translation: Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *Theban Plays*, trans. Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003).
- 6 In her account of the place of tragedy in Heidegger’s thinking, Karen Gover explains how he is trying to use tragedy to overcome metaphysical thinking. In a remarkable passage, she also seems to support the idea that for Heidegger, the human being is a catastrophe, at least insofar as human knowing and insight always comes too late. She writes, “Too late: Creon arrives at Antigone’s grave too late, Oedipus sees who he truly is too late, tragedy culminates in the hero’s discovery of the meaning of his own actions – too late. Heidegger calls us latecomers with respect to our own history, and he writes out of a sense of *Not*, distress or emergency.” See Karen Gover, “Tragedy and Metaphysics in

- Heidegger's "The Anaximander Fragment," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 40: 1 (2009), 37–53, 49.
- 7 The term "proper" translates the German *eigentlich*, and one may wonder how much Heidegger intended for this sense of *eigentlich* to resonate with the *Eigentlichkeit* of *Being and Time*. Is he suggesting an authentic unhomeliness? In her article "Heidegger's Antigones," Claire Pearson Geiman employs the terms "authentic" and "inauthentic" to describe homeliness in this text. She sees in Heidegger's use of the term *technē* an almost necessary connection to totalitarianism. She writes, "the potential for violence and totalitarian politics belongs inextricably to the attempt to conceive human knowing through the working of *technē*" (162). She highlights the shift in Heidegger's two readings of Antigone from knowing as "violent production" to knowing as "phronetic intimation," but she does not see the latter form of knowing as a deepened understanding of *technē*. She sees it rather as a qualitatively different form of poetic knowing, one that is carried over into his account of releasement in the later works. To be sure, the earlier reading of Antigone is more violent, but Heidegger's understanding of *technē* comes from Aristotle, and for Aristotle the activity of *technē* is *poiesis*. As we see from "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger is searching for a deeper meaning of *technē* and *poiesis*, so that it is not simply a matter of making and producing, as Geiman claims, but rather of poetic knowing, as we find it in his second interpretation of *Antigone*. I think that there are interpretive possibilities within *technē* that Geiman does not account for. See "Heidegger's Antigones," in Richard Polt and Gregory Fried, eds., *A Companion to Heidegger's "Introduction to Metaphysics"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
- 8 See Véronique Foti, "Heidegger, Hölderlin and Sophoclean Tragedy," in James Risser, ed., *Heidegger Toward the Turn: Essays on the Work of the 1930s* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 174.
- 9 See Richard Capobianco, *Engaging Heidegger* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010), 69.

- 10 Capobianco, *Engaging*, 57.
- 11 Capobianco, *Engaging*, 62.
- 12 Capobianco, *Engaging*, 69.
- 13 Both William Richardson and William McNeill discuss this mysterious source that motivates Antigone's decision. Richardson leaves it a mystery, affirming that it is not a being. McNeill also leaves that source a mystery, but he thinks of it temporally because it is in terms of this original and mysterious source that Antigone comes to be who she is. See William Richardson, "Heidegger and the Strangeness of Being," in Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch, eds., *Phenomenologies of the Stranger* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 155–67 and William McNeill, "A 'scarcely pondered word.' The Place of Tragedy: Heidegger, Aristotle, Sophocles," in Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks, eds., *Philosophy and Tragedy* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 169–89.
- 14 Dennis Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 259.
- 15 Heidegger seemed to view Germany as being caught in the kind of double bind that Antigone herself is caught in. In the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he says on a few occasions that Germany is "in the pincers," caught geographically in the middle of Europe and ideologically between Communism and Americanism. But there is another, more personal account, suggesting that Heidegger thought of himself through the lens of the Greek tragic hero and, in particular, Antigone.
- 16 See Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 45.
- 17 Petzet, *Encounters*, 47.