# An Open Letter to the Heidegger Circle: On Becoming Who We Are

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I am writing this letter to you, my friends and colleagues in the study of Heidegger, because I need to talk to people who have read what I have read, and people who have thought about these texts that I have thought about, to have any conversations at all. I am admittedly limited in my conversational circles. However, I also want us, who have read and discussed Heidegger's works, to have conversations with others who have not read what we have read. I am not just thinking of our college-age students; I am also thinking of those we call *das Man*. I am worried about having these conversations because I have realized that for many of my philosophy colleagues outside the Heidegger Circle, as well as for most people in the world, metaphysics is not a concern anymore. Despite what analytic philosophers might busy themselves with and call "metaphysics" – and they do seem to keep themselves quite busy with the alphabetically listed variables and premises about empty names – it is not something that anyone really *does* anymore. Even we who read Heidegger do not think we "do" metaphysics, do we? And I wonder, if metaphysics is not a "thing" anymore, what are we who read Heidegger concerned about as we try to think, and what are we trying to achieve? What is at stake for us? And how can we undertake the effort of translation so that we can speak about what we have thought to those who have not read what we have read? I know that when we read Heidegger, we have a profound, indeed even a transformative, experience of thinking. I will say that I think for decades we have made ourselves look foolish and self-serving to stay so devoted to our technical language and Heideggerize our experiences in Heidegger's works beyond all human comprehension.

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I will clarify what I mean by sharing two experiences, two moments/events at the beginning and end of my career, that I have had as someone who reads and thinks out of Heidegger's works and likes to talk to people, whether they have read Heidegger or not. These experiences show the changes that I have seen over my forty-year career in how metaphysics is treated in undergraduate and graduate curricula and in public conversation.

While I was a graduate student in the 1970s and '80s, my *Doktorvater*, Thomas Patrick McTighe, once told me a story about Etienne Gilson's visit to Georgetown in April of 1964 to give his lecture on the "The Spirit of Thomism." After a few days of squiring Gilson around D.C., McTighe was running out of topics for conversation, so he asked Gilson, in his perfect French I am sure, what the greatest highlight of his philosophical career was. Gilson responded that it was listening to Heidegger lecture. Gilson, the great interpreter of Thomas, said it moved him to tears; here was a philosopher so earnestly trying to do metaphysics. "Yes, John," McTighe said with a glint in his eye, "Heidegger is doing metaphysics." For Professor McTighe, that proved the point that metaphysics is perennial and a human need. I still recall the delight with which Professor McTighe directed me to read Pierre Hadot's article "Heidegger et Plotin" (*Critique* no. 143, 1959: 539–56), where Hadot references Joseph Moreau's book *La Conscience et L'Etre*, which argues that Neoplatonism is *la philosophia perennis* (543) and Heidegger is its latest manifestation.

The second event occurred about a year ago, which was a year before my retirement. It was the third or fourth meeting of my senior seminar on Nietzsche and Heidegger. The students had been talking to my post-deconstructivist, post-human, ecofeminist colleague, Margret Grebowicz, which was a very good thing for them to be doing. From the conversation, the students in my seminar were severely disappointed, I would say even to the point of being traumatized, when Margret told them that the metaphysics we were talking about overcoming was not really a "thing" anymore. "Nobody does that," she said, and "metaphysics does not need to be overcome *because* no one does it." The sense I got

from their reaction is that perhaps they had hoped to do metaphysics: Plato's, Aristotle's, maybe Descartes', certainly Hegel's. Metaphysics was something they had never heard of before, and they were excited about it. And then they found out metaphysics is not something they, or we, or anyone is ever going to get to do, much less overcome.

As Nietzsche said, it has finally become a fiction. The *True World* has become a fable. It is like teaching "God is dead" to children raised by atheists. If metaphysics isn't really a "thing," then what about the forgetting of the question of being? And what about the forgetting of the forgetting in the epoch of concealment and unconcealment? And do we, who concern ourselves with our Heideggerian/Nietzschean reading of this history, worry that our issue is a non-issue? Obviously, what we experience in Heidegger's questioning cannot just be dismissed by saying that he is concerned with something that isn't really a problem. But how do we motivate that project for anyone outside our group? At the time, I wrote to the Heidegger Circle Google Group about my students' interaction with my colleague. I received a few expressions of sympathy but no real consideration of this question was forthcoming. So, I am trying again.

For my part, metaphysics and thinking about overcoming metaphysics in my relation to it is very much a concern for me, and I find a great deal in this area to bring to my students' attention with some success. To get the students started on this path of thinking, I have evoked the Platonic Eros; I have asked the question that has always been asked – in ancient Greece – *What is being?*; I have pointed to Kant's dove cleaving the air that thinks it could rise higher if it did not have the air to impede it; I have pushed the limits of reason to the necessary fictions that lie underneath; and I have described under the *epochē* the experience of questioning the question. I have moved between Nietzsche and Heidegger. I have tried to reanimate metaphysics in the history of philosophy to understand the critique. Before I retired, I claimed that our departmental requirement of four courses in the history of philosophy was actually a requirement in the history of metaphysics.

After patiently studying the entire history of metaphysics, I love turning to Heidegger to bring alive the metaphysics in tandem with Nietzsche's critiques. The various phases of Heidegger's prose, as he moves from phenomenological description and textual exegesis to aphorisms and historical thinking, are wonderful preparation for reading Nietzsche's aphorisms. And Nietzsche's aphorisms and descriptions of history are wonderful preparation for Heidegger's beyng-historical thinking in its approach to philosophy. Both Heidegger and Nietzsche convey the task of wanting to explore what it means to destroy old tables of values – or metaphysics – and transition to a new beginning. Both are fascinated by how to transition from one epoch which has already begun and ended in its inception. And both wonder about our relation to the "last" and to the "next," and about how, in each epoch, to stand in relation to the entire ensemble of beings so as to undergo our thoughts about them and their ramifications for our experience of beings and ourselves. Both wonder how to step into the event of emergence, through thinking, as it happens. But does this curriculum work when we are now in the historical situation when metaphysics is no longer a "thing"?

We understand metaphysics in reference to Heidegger's beyng-historical thinking, and then put Nietzsche in relation to that history. From my point of view, each philosopher whom we would term a "metaphysician" presents a different relationship and a different event of inceptual thinking in the epoch of *aletheia*. At least, each philosopher was inceptual before his or her perspective lapsed over into sedimented, received historical thinking of what is true. We must develop our "historic sense," as Nietzsche calls it. We cannot treat them all in the mode of the deconstruction of Descartes, in *Being and Time*, however beautiful an example of Heidegger's combination of hermeneutics and deconstruction that is. Everyone already in the conversation about Heidegger knows where Heidegger would want to go with this claim. It remains imperative for Heidegger to see Nietzsche's philosophy as a metaphysics along with all the other metaphysics, and, further, to see it as a metaphysics that is fundamentally Platonic. The identification of

Nietzsche with Platonic metaphysics is essential for Heidegger's claim that the epoch of metaphysics, which is the epoch of the concealment of being in *aletheia*, is at an end. Having read the *Beiträge*, we cannot help but see a Nietzschean dimension in Heidegger's project. But do we, we who concern ourselves with the metaphysics that are really robust philosophical endeavors – Platonic, Aristotelian, Neoplatonic or otherwise – and its end, realize that many of our colleagues in what is still called SPEP (the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy), and most of our colleagues and the administrators in colleges and universities around the world, consider metaphysics a completely spurious project that no one has taken seriously since the early 1800s? Has the claim that one does metaphysics even retained its capacity to intimidate administrators?

The concern that metaphysics might not actually be a "thing" has a limit for us, but it has no limit for those who have not yet become interested in our texts. And we cannot simply say that those who question all of these issues do not understand, do not have enough training in our field. A former student, Arnelle Fonlon, who was a junior when I retired last year, wrote me recently about her philosophical questions since she was last in my class. I quote her letter to me with her permission, and it will be helpful to understand that her perspective is that of a young African American student who is studying chemistry in a liberal arts college and got caught up in philosophy, which led her in turn to attend the SPEP conference last year. She wrote:

> When I was at SPEP there was a race panel in which one philosopher drew on Heidegger and used him against himself in order to establish and explore the positionality of blackness as it functions ontologically. I thought that was very powerful stuff. But I also have some questions and qualms for you about Heidegger and Heideggerians. If Heidegger is who he is accused of being, how is his work not problematic? And to extend this question, how are philosophers dedicated to him not enriching white supremist ideology? Is there not an inextricable

> link between Heidegger and his political setting? And, if there is, how and why do Heideggerians conveniently escape it? It seems to me, as someone who has not read much Heidegger, that once one leaves the ontological realm in which he is seated and is functioning, his applicability is necessarily political and becomes racist. Through Afro-Pessimistic schools of thought, it has become clear to me how Heidegger's work is pivotal in maintaining minorities as such, as lesser than, in non-being. As a black woman invested in this field, it seems as though studying Heidegger, without rooting him in his political context, is a privilege. Maybe you can clarify some of this for me. I suppose this thought is not limited to Heidegger, but this is where my brain is taking me at the moment.

I would like us to have a longer conversation with this person. I would like us to be ready for a conversation with this person.

In a way, Nietzsche and Heidegger are both posthumous authors, addressing us, addressing her – well, perhaps not even us or her yet – in a future state with hesitation and anticipation from the guiding question about beings to the grounding question about the truth of being. Nietzsche and Heidegger both want to cross into a transformation via historical mindfulness. Heidegger's relationship to himself was transformed from his reflections on Nietzsche's texts. Our relationships to ourselves have been transformed when we read Heidegger and when we read Heidegger reading Nietzsche. But do we any longer have the capacity or the opportunity to convey the possibility of a transformative experience to others? Do we have an audience beyond ourselves? Do we only write and speak about what we find in the texts? Can we communicate what the texts are about? Can our translations of the text transform others as we ourselves were transformed?

My purpose is to emphasize these questions and promote them as a cause to rally around. Heidegger transformed something for each of us. He changed the way we see ourselves mirrored in the world *and* he

changes the way we see others see themselves mirrored in the world. In our contemporary political, cultural, educational, and economic world, I am concerned about the role we cast for ourselves, the part we take upon ourselves to play. When we read the philosopher who writes about "the danger" and "the saving," do we simply understand it as a critique of metaphysics, while ignoring Heidegger's politics, or separating the man from his politics? What political positions would we advocate for? The Heidegger Circle has published a statement on its website about free debate, but this strikes me a little bit like coming down solidly against land mines. Do we support anything else? Unfettered immigration? Wage equity? The dismantling of private educational institutions in favor of tuition-free public universities whose curricula will then be subject to legislators' funding? While we all think that Heidegger should be part of an education, what educational practices and content would we promote? Would we advocate studying metaphysics for three years so we can learn that we must overcome it? Can we radicalize ourselves to act and speak out against the horrific tragedy of the Neoliberal free market that is already happening? If we were to vote as a Heideggerian block, how would we vote? Would we vote? Do we keep silent because what we know is too great to speak of? "Sigetics" is a very Heideggerian theme, but again we have to undertake the effort of translation for those we find ourselves in conversation with.

Again, I am writing all of this to you, my friends, because I want colleagues who have read what I have read and taught these texts to have a conversation with me. There is our free debate. But I also want us to have conversations with others who have not read what we have read. How can we do that? Is the effort at translation too great?