

Thinking Ontological Difference in the Atomic Age

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that the “atomic age” was a central concern of Heidegger’s from 1945 to the late 1950s. It begins by presenting evidence that Heidegger may have been involved in the *Kampf dem Atomtod* movement, an anti-nuclear protest movement that gained wide public support in the German Federal Republic from 1957–58. The second part of the paper reexamines Heidegger’s writings on nuclear energy and technology, which it argues were paradigmatic examples of technology’s ontological structure that allowed him to make key distinctions between different modes of destruction and of futurelessness. In the final part of the paper, I argue that Heidegger’s own response to the challenge of the atomic age for thinking is ambivalent and that this ambivalence points to fundamental difficulties for Heidegger’s conception of thinking, ontological difference, and the essence of the human in this period.

KEYWORDS: ontological difference; atomic age; nuclear energy; biological life; *Ge-stell*

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Le monde va finir ; la seule raison pour laquelle il pourrait durer, c'est qu'il existe. Que cette raison est faible, comparée à toutes celles qui annoncent le contraire...Car, en supposant qu'il continuât à exister matériellement, serait-ce une existence digne de ce nom?

-Charles Baudelaire, *Fusées*¹

In May 1956, Martin Heidegger delivered the keynote lecture titled “Gespräch mit Hebel beim ‘Schatzkästlein’” at the annual *Hebeltag* (“Hebel-Day”) in Lörrach. At the end of this lecture, he claims that J. P. Hebel’s poetry can help us understand that “the human will not live through atomic energy but will, at most, perish through it” (GA 16: 545). This is not Heidegger’s only such warning against the utopian aspirations of the dawning “atomic age,” nor even his only scornful reference to Gerhard Löwenthal and Josef Hausen’s breathlessly titled manifesto, *Wir werden durch Atome Leben!* (1956).² In fact, Heidegger makes some mention of nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, or nuclear physics in a great many of the public talks and essays delivered and published from 1949 until 1960. They appear, for instance, in *Insight into that Which Is, What is Called Thinking?*, *The Principle of Reason, Fundamental Principles of Thinking*, “Gelassenheit,” “The Country Path,” and nearly all of the lectures on J. P. Hebel. These comments, frequent as they are in this period (especially in the mid- to late-1950s), have so far received scant attention in the secondary literature.³

This is perhaps because, at first glance, Heidegger’s most well-known comments – those about the bomb – appear scandalously dismissive of the horror of total nuclear annihilation (what is known as nuclear “omnicide,” or the murder of the human species).⁴ Take, for instance, Heidegger’s claim that the detonation of the atomic bomb “is only the crudest of all crude confirmations of the annihilation [*Vernichtung*] of the thing, which has long since occurred” (GA 79: 9/8; cf. GA 7: 172/PLT 168). In the blinding light of the bomb, Heidegger argues, we repeat the metaphysical gesture that led us here (fixating on beings at the expense of being) if we merely stare slack-jawed at the bomb instead of asking after the *ground* upon which such an invention

is even thinkable. To *think* nuclear weapons (and not merely to calculate with them) requires inquiring into their belonging to the same technological world (or perhaps “unworld”) in which the mechanization of agriculture, the massification of media, and the industrial killing of human beings also become possible (GA 79: 27/27). The bomb, in other words, does not *cause* the atomic age, much less the reign of technology’s essence, *Gestell* (positionality). Rather than being satisfied with tracing its origins to the discovery of the convertibility of matter and energy or of the radioactive decay of uranium, we must understand how these scientific breakthroughs presuppose the determination of truth as certainty, the specification of reality as actuality, and ultimately the decision of being as presence. What calls for thinking in the atomic age, Heidegger insists, is the fact that the availability of nuclear energy belongs to *Gestell* as the reigning mode of how beings appear to us, that is, as the definitive characteristic of our epoch in the history of being.

Günther Anders and Richard Rorty – the two most famous thinkers to address these comments – are decidedly unconvinced. Günther Anders retorts,

*The answer to fire is not Prometheus but water. There are situations in which it is immoral to insist upon origins ... Each thing has its time. Even mysticism. But to give the mystical prescription in the time of the atomic bomb is cynicism...It is indecent to speculate inside a burning house.*⁵

An exasperated Richard Rorty writes,

Passages such as these help to remind us what a self-infatuated blowhard Heidegger was. He is a perfect example of the idiot, the sort of person who has no sense of citizenship...The idea that we might gather together in public assemblies and agitate for a reform of the United Nations, one that would enable it to cope with nuclear proliferation, would have struck Heidegger as showing

a ludicrous failure to understand the priority of *Denken* (thinking) over mere politics.⁶

Rorty and Anders make essentially the same two interrelated arguments. First, they dismiss Heidegger's comments about the bomb as not to be taken seriously (since he himself did not take the bomb seriously), and second, they suggest that his nonchalance towards the very real issue of nuclear annihilation attests to his own hermetic abandonment of politics after the disaster of his involvement in the Third Reich.

There is, however, historical evidence to contradict the second point and significantly complicate the first. The 1956 Hebel address lecture in Lörrach mentioned above was later published as part of a collection of *Hebeltag* lectures titled *Hebeldank*. In the author biography appended to Heidegger's text, two brief sentences offer a summary of Heidegger's involvement in public life: "In 1933, he was rector of Freiburg University. Martin Heidegger is a member of the Working Committee 'Against Atomic Death.'" ⁷ While the first sentence delicately glosses over the most notorious period in Heidegger's life, the second sentence's claim is totally unheard of. If Heidegger *did* belong to one of the committees "against atomic death" that sprang up as part of the *Kampf dem Atomtod* ("struggle against atomic death") movement of the Federal Republic, then we not only need to reexamine the received narrative about his relation to the atomic age but also our historical understanding of his involvement in politics after the war.

In what follows, I will first lay out the historical evidence of Heidegger's involvement with the *Kampf dem Atomtod* movement, before returning to Heidegger's comments about the bomb and nuclear technology more generally. A central thread of these reflections, I will argue, is the distinction between the threat of ontic "annihilation" (*Vernichtung*) posed by the bomb and the more insidious or uncanny threat of ontological "ruin" (*Zerstörung*) or "devastation" (*Verwüstung*) posed by *Gestell*. In the earliest period of his reflections (roughly 1945-50), Heidegger makes this contrast by comparing the bomb to the threats posed by "mass media" or "publicity" (*Öffentlichkeit*). By the 1950s, however, Heidegger will come to place this distinction *within*

the ambit of nuclear technology, which he will also increasingly see as not simply one example of technology among others but a paradigmatic technology. Here, the question of ontic annihilation versus ontological destruction comes to a head in the distinction between two distinct forms of “futurelessness.” The task of thinking in the atomic age, for Heidegger, is to recover the power of thinking to free us from being bound to either the spectacular horror of the bomb or the utopianism of the “friendly atom.” By framing things this way, however, Heidegger sidesteps another issue that the threat of nuclear annihilation poses: the entanglement of the history of being and its truth with those ontic conditions that Heidegger otherwise figures as dependent upon it. The evasion of this question, I conclude, indicates that this entanglement touches upon what remains unthought of Heidegger’s mature thinking.

HEIDEGGER’S SECOND *VOLKSBEWEGUNG*?

Though protests against atomic weapons began almost immediately after their use in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, anti-nuclear protest in the German Federal Republic first began to gain broad popular support in 1957. On April 5th of that year, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer argued during a press conference that tactical nuclear weapons were simply “a further development of artillery” which the *Bundeswehr* could hardly afford to go without.⁸ Three days later, his defense secretary Franz Josef Strauss, who had served as “Minister of Atomic Questions” in 1955, argued that such weapons were necessary in order for West Germany to pull its weight within NATO.

On April 12th, in response to these “test balloons” from the Adenauer administration, 18 leading nuclear scientists (including Werner Heisenberg, Otto Hahn, Max Born, Wolfgang Paul, and Friedrich von Weizsäcker) published the “Göttingen Declaration” (which had been drafted by Weizsäcker). The declaration rejected as rhetorical any distinction between “tactical” and “strategic” nuclear weapons, expressed grave skepticism that lasting peace could be achieved through nuclear proliferation, and committed the signatories to non-participation in any West German nuclear weapons program.⁹ Several of the signatories,

including Heisenberg, Hahn, and Weizsäcker, had been key participants in the Third Reich's nuclear program (the "Uran-Projekt"), and, crucially, none of the signatories "could be accused of having communist or socialist sympathies" (though Adenauer certainly tried to portray them as unknowing dupes of the Soviets).¹⁰ The Göttingen Declaration is today widely recognized as the opening salvo of what came to be known as the movement *Kampf dem Atomtod* (Struggle Against Atomic Death), which moved mass opposition to nuclear armament from the left into the mainstream of German politics.¹¹

The Göttingen Declaration is also important to the question of Heidegger's relation to this movement, because if Heidegger was involved in the movement, Weizsäcker might have been his link to it. Weizsäcker was one of Heidegger's most valued interlocutors from the mid-1930s to the end of his life. The two men met in 1935 in Todtnauberg at a meeting that had been arranged for Heidegger, Werner Heisenberg, and Viktor von Weizsäcker (Carl Friedrich's uncle and an old acquaintance of Heidegger)¹² to discuss "the subject of natural science."¹³ Carl Friedrich went along as both a student of Heisenberg and the nephew of Viktor von Weizsäcker, and he and Heidegger became close, meeting, according to (C. F.) Weizsäcker's estimate, at least once every two years for the rest of Heidegger's life. When Weizsäcker was eventually named to a chair in philosophy in Hamburg, Heidegger gave several seminars for Weizsäcker's students and junior researchers at the Weizsäckers' home.¹⁴ At the celebration of Heidegger's work held in Freiburg after his death, Weizsäcker was one of three speakers, along with Gadamer and Werner Marx.

An examination of Heidegger and Weizsäcker's correspondence did not yield any confirmation of Heidegger's direct involvement with the movement, but there is an exchange of letters from 1957 that seems to hint that Heidegger may have been eager to discuss the Göttingen Declaration (or perhaps simply nuclear weapons more broadly) with Weizsäcker. On May 22, 1957, about five weeks after the publication of the declaration and in the heat of the uproar it caused, Heidegger and Weizsäcker met in Lindau with Martin Buber and Clemens von

Podewils (director of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts); the goal of the meeting was to plan a conference on language.¹⁵ Just before the meeting, on May 6, Heidegger sends Weizsäcker a letter congratulating him on being named to a chair in philosophy in Hamburg and asking to arrange a meeting to speak with him privately before the meeting with Buber and Podewils.¹⁶ He writes that “for many reasons, it is high time” to make good on the meeting they had been planning and rescheduling for the last two years. High time, above all, because, as Heidegger notes, “there will now be demands on you from all directions.” Accordingly, Heidegger insists again, he is eager to speak “thoroughly and calmly” with Weizsäcker about the plans for the conference in Munich “although clearly not *only* about this topic.” Weizsäcker should let him know as quickly as possible whether this will be possible, partly because, if so, Heidegger would like “prepare himself with regard to certain questions” beforehand.

We, of course, cannot know for certain what Heidegger is referring to when he speaks of the *multiple* reasons that he and Weizsäcker have to meet. Nevertheless, it seems likely for at least two reasons that Heidegger would be referring to the question of nuclear weapons and nuclear armament. First, the explicit references to the timing of the letter and to the increasing demand on Weizsäcker’s time and energy seem to indicate that Heidegger has Weizsäcker’s entry into the center of German politics in mind. It seems Heidegger was right to think that this would complicate future meetings between the two men: in a letter to Heidegger immediately following the meeting in Lindau, Weizsäcker makes passing reference to the fact that he has to decline an invitation to attend a session of Heidegger’s course on “The Principle of Reason” because he will be attending a meeting of the “Ecumenical Commission on Questions of Atomic War.”¹⁷ Second, the fact that Heidegger feels the need to do his own preparatory research before the conversation may indicate that what he wants to discuss with Weizsäcker has to do with Weizsäcker’s areas of expertise rather than his own. Without a record of the actual conversation, of course, we cannot know what Heidegger and Weizsäcker discussed in their

meetings during this period. Still, the correspondence confirms that Heidegger had a personal and intellectual link to a central figure of the non-leftist opposition to nuclear proliferation, with whom he was in regular contact during the movement's most active period.

There is a complication, however, with the thesis that Weizsäcker was Heidegger's link to the movement. While Weizsäcker's publication of the Declaration in 1957 helped to broaden and intensify the popular movement against nuclear armament, he was not himself a participant in the partisan "Kampf dem Atomtod" movement which followed, which was organized in 1958 by SPD politician Walter Menzel and others. Indeed, though he was asked to sign on to further declarations and actions by Menzel himself, Weizsäcker was one of several signatories to the Declaration who politely but firmly declined these invitations.¹⁸ Indeed, after the Göttingen Declaration, Weizsäcker's next high-profile intervention into the public debate around the question of nuclear strategy was a series of articles published in *Die Zeit* at the end of 1958 under the title, "Living with the Bomb [*Mit der Bombe leben*]." As the title suggests, these were of a far more "realist" bent, still advocating for the abolition of nuclear weapons but acknowledging the need for "graduated deterrence" while that aim was pursued through multiple strategies.¹⁹ This attitude put him firmly out of step with the more strident tone of the Atomtod movement.²⁰ Accordingly, even if Weizsäcker somehow put Heidegger into contact with activists who would later go on to form one of the "Working Committees" referred to in the author biography, he was not himself a part of any such committee.

Heidegger's friendship with Weizsäcker and the line in the author biography of *Hebeldank*, however, are not the only pieces of evidence. The Atomtod movement reached its peak in 1958,²¹ and two more pieces of epistolary evidence stem from that year. The first is a letter from Hannah Arendt to her husband Heinrich Blücher from June 1.²² Traveling in Switzerland and Germany, Arendt is reporting to Blücher about the political environment in Europe. Ever the Atlanticist, Arendt is concerned about what she sees as a rapprochement between France and the Soviet Union:

And this, together with the German Atomic-Death Movement, may well be the end of NATO. In Germany, the matter is not truly serious but still highly agitated. Günther [Anders] marches in the vanguard, and Heidegger, who simply can't miss out on any popular movement, has also already neatly fallen in line.²⁵

Arendt offers no further specification of what she means that Heidegger has “fallen in line,” but it is striking that she mentions Heidegger and Anders together. When Arendt writes to Anders himself that she has heard “by word of mouth” that Heidegger has joined the movement, and that it “does not surprise her in the least,”²⁴ Anders responds curtly that “Your remark, *Heidegger's joining the anti atom movement does not surprise you*, remains incomprehensible to me in its naked facticity.”²⁵ In contrast to Arendt's lack of surprise, the very thought is so unthinkable to Anders that he cannot even imagine what she might mean that Heidegger has attached himself to the movement. If Heidegger had any involvement, then, none of it overlapped with Anders's networks, and no news of it had reached him.

Nevertheless, Arendt was not the only one hearing rumors of Heidegger's participation in the movement that summer. On June 24, 1958, six-thousand protestors gathered in Munich's Königsplatz to protest the nuclear armament of the Bundeswehr. Among the writers, academics, and political and public figures who appeared during the week-long vigil that followed was Wolfgang Hildesheimer, a member of the Gruppe 47 and the Komitee gegen Atomrüstung (“Committee against Atomic Armament”), which Hans Werner Richter had established in March of that year. In May, while he was planning the vigil, Hildesheimer wrote to Günther Neske (the publisher he shared with Heidegger) that he (Hildesheimer) was going to be meeting with Richter and was “anxious” to know whether “[Richter] had succeeded in winning over Heidegger.”²⁶ Heidegger did not appear at the rally (based on his correspondence, he was most likely in Darmstadt at the time); nevertheless, the fact that Hildesheimer thought he *might*

speaks to the perception of Heidegger as, at least, a fellow-traveler of the movement.

Both these pieces of epistolary evidence are second-hand, and they speak primarily to perceptions about Heidegger's involvement or about his feelings towards nuclear weapons and German nuclear armament. Of course, it would be odd if the author biography in *Hebeldank* had been published without Heidegger's approval or knowledge, given how involved he was in the preparation of his writings for publication.

The only other link I have been able to find between Heidegger and the movement is indirect but tantalizing. The biography in the Hebel volume refers to Heidegger as belonging to the "Working Committee Against Atomic Death." There were several such committees across West Germany at the time, and though they were loosely coordinated as part of the movement, they were not strictly organized. Nevertheless, one of the largest and most consequential, the Berliner Arbeitsausschuss gegen den Atomtod ("Berlin Committee against Atomic Death") was run by Heidegger's former student, Margherita von Brentano.

Brentano studied with Heidegger in the 1940s, writing a dissertation on the concept of $\xi\nu$ in Aristotle's metaphysics, before moving to Berlin in 1956 to serve as an assistant to Wilhelm Weischedel at the Freie Universität Berlin. Heidegger described her as "extraordinarily gifted" and, because he didn't think much of Weischedel (who had also studied with Heidegger), told her friend Hertha Sturm that he was going to try to find her something more suited to her talents and philosophical promise in Freiburg.²⁷

At first glance, it would be strange if Brentano were Heidegger's connection to the movement. She was an avowed socialist and feminist who was lovingly referred to as "red Maggie,"²⁸ and she published in the leftist journal *Das Argument*. Moreover, according to interviews gathered in a volume to commemorate her, she shied away from talking about Heidegger's politics even with friends.²⁹ Nevertheless, it is striking that she was an organizing and active member of the Berlin "Working Committee Against Atomic Death," appearing on the masthead of the

organization's stationery and several times on the program of the student congress they organized in January 1959.⁵⁰

The author biography, the correspondence and meetings with Weizsäcker, the letters from Arendt and Hildesheimer, and the connection to Margherita von Brentano, even when taken together, are inconclusive, and the question of Heidegger's involvement remains an open question. Even the connection to Brentano does not guarantee that the Berlin committee is the committee referred to in the author biography. A plethora of such committees existed in the 1950s, and they were not organized under a single national umbrella committee or organization.⁵¹ *Kampf dem Atomtod* was a movement,⁵² and it consisted primarily of declarations, rallies, vigils, "committees," and working groups.

That being said, my aim is not to settle definitively the extent of Heidegger's involvement in the movement but rather to re-open the question of the philosophical importance of nuclear weapons and the "atomic age" for Heidegger. If Heidegger's participation in the anti-nuclear movement remains *fragwürdig* in the sense of "questionable," it also remains *fragwürdig* in the sense of "worthy of questioning." The evidence does show that our received picture of Heidegger's relationship to the bomb is, at best, oversimplified; the letters of Arendt and Hildesheimer alone are enough to demonstrate that his contemporaries did not all judge Heidegger's attitude towards the danger of the bomb as simplistically as Anders (and later Rorty) did. Let the open historical question, then, open a philosophical and interpretive one: what about the atomic age – and the atomic bomb in particular – calls for thinking?

ATOMTOD UND ATOMLEBEN

Let's begin by returning to Heidegger's earliest public comments on the bomb, which are to be found in the lecture "The Thing" (and which are the occasion of Anders and Rorty's indignation).⁵³ Delivered in 1949 as the first lecture of the Bremen lectures (*Insight into that Which Is*), "The Thing" was Heidegger's first public lecture after the war,⁵⁴ and it was later published in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* [*Lectures and Essays*] in

1954. Heidegger, however, also worked on a version in May 1950 which he never delivered. According to a marginal note in the manuscript, the 1950 version was meant to be more “didactic” (GA 80.2: 949). One telling deviation from the other two versions comes just after the passage about the bomb that outraged Anders and Rorty. The passage common to all three drafts begins,

The human today stares only at that which could come with the explosion of the atomic bomb. The human does not think what has long since arrived but which conceals itself in what is presencing.³⁵ The explosion of the atomic bomb is only the latest emission which the rule of the distance-less expels from itself, to say nothing of the hydrogen bomb, whose initial ignition, theoretically thought in its broadest possibility, could be enough to extinguish all life upon Earth. (GA 80.2: 952; GA 7: 168/PLT 164; GA 79: 4/4)

In the first two sentences, Heidegger puts forth a highly condensed argument he will make often about the relationship between the bomb and the history of being, namely that the bomb is not the *cause* of the atomic age but merely its “most obtrusive identifying sign” (GA 16: 522). Thought in terms of the history of being rather than the historiography of technoscience, the development of atomic technology became possible only because it had already become possible to view matter itself as nothing but a stock or “standing reserve” (*Bestand*) of energy (GA 79: 88/84; GA 11: 134). The third sentence brings this argument to a head in one of Heidegger’s more direct engagements with the specter of nuclear omnicide.

At this point, the other two versions go on to speak of the terrifying, the *Ent-setzende*, as the dislocation of things from their essence. In the unpublished 1950 version, however, Heidegger inserts a jarring comparison:

Uncannier than this vaporization of everything could ever be is the already looming violence of the addiction

to television. The television is the most extreme ruin [*Zerstörung*] of nearness. This ruin is for us the most annihilating [*vernichtendste*] thinkable because this ruin essences and *is*, whereas the extinguishing of all life decomposes [*verwest*] everything into a void nothing [*nichtige Nichts*] so that this annihilation snatches away even annihilation itself into the void. (GA 80.2: 95²-53)

The comparison seems flippant, to say the least. For Heidegger, however, the connection between the atomic bomb and the technologies of the public sphere or perhaps “publicity” (*Öffentlichkeit*) is as serious as the grave, and it will help us clarify the philosophical center of the passage, namely the distinction between “ruin” and “annihilation.”

A few years earlier, in two entries from *Anmerkungen II*,⁵⁶ Heidegger elaborates the distinction between the destructive power of the bomb and that of journalism and publicity:

The greatest power of ruination [*Zerstörungskraft*] to-day belongs to publicity. For it ruins by constructing the semblance that, within and through it, a world is built. The atomic bomb, on the other hand, just lets everything molder into dust [*in Staub zerfallen*], into which [dust] it [the atom bomb] itself enters into annihilation....

More devastating than the heatwave of the atomic bomb is “spirit” in the form of world-journalism. The former annihilates [*vernichtet*] by merely obliterating [*auslöscht*]; the latter annihilates by constructing the illusion [*Schein*] of being upon the illusory ground [*Scheingrund*] of unconditional rootlessness. (GA 97: 154)

The comparison is, as Peter Trawny puts it, “exorbitant,” but “the inordinateness of the comparison is meant to emphasize a problem that cannot be denied,” namely the problem that, “Publicity is not open [*Die*

Öffentlichkeit ist nicht offen]. It only lets appear what obeys and serves its conditions.”⁵⁷ “Publicity” (or “the public sphere”) and journalism are above all concerned with *information*, which, as Walter Benjamin perspicaciously observes, serves the ends of “explanation” or “clarification,” “lays claim to prompt verifiability,” takes “plausibility” as its ultimate truth condition, and “lives” only in the instant of its being “new.”⁵⁸ These conditions are, for Heidegger, anathema to thinking: “absolute journalism numbs the fear of thinking that has today become the style and thus ensures the most thorough extermination of thinking” (GA 97: 155). Thus, the “world” of “world journalism” is an “unworld” in which only what can be transmitted as “information” is actually real, circulating around the globe at tremendous speed, seamlessly translatable between languages, instantly understandable. It “ruins” or “destroys” the world not by blasting away the beings who dwell in the world *as* world but rather by offering the illusion that everything – or at least, knowledge of everything – is seamlessly and readily available, and that this alone is what is really real.

The scandalous comparison between mass media and the bomb, in other words, points up the distinction between these two forms of “annihilation” – the *ontic* annihilation of the bomb and the *ontological* ruin that *Gestell* inflicts upon thing and world. Heidegger argues that the latter, for which he usually reserves the term *Zerstörung*, is uncannier and far more insidious because it is not the mere absence or material destruction of beings but rather *a mode of their appearance* – worse, it is the way in which they appear as “really real,” as part of a shared world of “facts” established by “information.” The annihilation of the bomb is, seemingly, that of mere absence in a familiar sense: at one point there were human beings present on earth, but, after the nuclear war, they are gone.⁵⁹ Technological ruin, on the other hand, is that of the no-thing, of the absence of things in the full sense of Heidegger’s use of the term after World War Two. The devastated “unworld” or “misworld” of publicity is one of no-things rather than simply a planet on which nothing remains.

The comparison between nuclear war and global publicity, however, is mostly confined to the earliest period of Heidegger's reflections on the bomb – the 1950 draft of the “Thing” lecture is, to my knowledge, the last time it appears. Heidegger will retain the distinction between physical and ontological annihilation, but, by the early 1950s, he will re-inscribe it *within* the ambit of atomic energy itself and will come to take more seriously the problematic of the “atomic age,” even as he continues to downplay the bomb and to insist that the moniker “atomic age” itself is misleading if we take it to mean that nuclear technology is a *cause* rather than a “reflection (*Widerschein*)” of the technological age (GA 100: 153). As Heidegger puts it in the early 1960s, “The names ‘atomic age,’ ‘rocket age,’ and others like them each time name products of technology, but not [technology] itself” (GA 102: 174). In doing so, the name “atomic age” “affirms the rule of *Gestell* without really offering insight into it” (GA 100: 134).

Nevertheless, it becomes clear in this period that Heidegger thinks the atomic age is somehow exemplary of *Gestell*'s extremity such that the availability of nuclear energy cannot be understood as simply one example of *Gestell* among others. In a 1953 outline for “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger concludes by asking, “What is the productive unveiling of modern technology leading to? This is what the name of its newest and most recent phase tells us. It is called atomic technology” (GA 80.2: 1110). In the 1955 lecture course *Der Satz vom Grund*, Heidegger writes, “Today the withdrawal of the essence of being seems to consummate itself. We say ‘today,’ and we mean the dawning atomic age, through which modernity presumably consummates itself, insofar as the fundamental feature of this epoch, in its inception, unfolds without limit into its utmost” (GA 10: 83/56).

In what sense is the atomic age a consummation or a paradigmatic example of *Gestell*? First, it reduces all matter to a “standing reserve” of energy, or, as Heidegger provocatively puts it in the 1955 “Gelassenheit” address, “Nature becomes one enormous gas station, a source of energy for modern technology and industry” (GA 16: 523/DT 50). In the first lecture of the Freiburg cycle *Fundamental Principles of Thinking* (held

the same month as the Göttingen Declaration, April 1957), Heidegger writes that the “ultimate triumph” of *Ge-stell* “consists in the fact that this thinking has compelled nature into relinquishing atomic energy” (GA 79: 88/84). This applies not only to the actual release of atomic energy in fission and fusion technologies but to the very shift in modern physics towards viewing matter and energy as quantitatively convertible. As Andrew Mitchell explains, “The energy that is drawn out of everything is likewise the same energy – there is no qualitative distinction to be had here. The homogeneity of energy renders it without assignable location, place, or home.”⁴⁰ The “energy” that is the object of modern nuclear physics accelerates the drive towards “unconditional rootlessness” while shoring up the appearance that this alone is what is “actually real.”

Beyond this theoretical shift in physics, Heidegger sees the technological applications of nuclear energy as equally insidious: “The requisitionability [*Bestellbarkeit*] of nuclear energy – be it ‘peaceful’ or bellicose – is only the reflection of reigning *Gestell*” (GA 100: 153). Particularly insidious for Heidegger is the fact that atomic energy may well come to appear as the “provision for securing technical and industrial progress,” that is, as the unlimited source of energy that would “free” humanity from the limits on productivity imposed by the finite character of other fuel sources (GA 100: 184). In this case, nuclear energy would appear “in the form of far-sighted concern for the standard of living of mankind – as the most tangible and therefore convincing form of humanity.” Indeed, he worries that “modern nuclear technology ingratiates itself to humanity by offering the assurance that food supplies will be secured many times over and that the supply of raw materials of industry will be secured: *it can go on like this*” (GA 100: 182).⁴¹

Taken together, these two aspects of atomic energy – its revelation of nature as a *Bestand* of energy and its mobilization of this standing reserve in the service of securing the material conditions of human life and economic production – present, for Heidegger, a reality whose devastation will be far more uncanny and even more difficult to catch sight of than the “unworld” of mass media publicity: “in the dawning of the

atomic age lurks a far greater danger – precisely if and when the danger of a third world war is eliminated” (GA 16: 528/DT 56). Heidegger will repeat this admittedly “strange claim” continually throughout this period, arguing that the physical destruction of the bomb offers far less for thought than the horrifying realization that “*it can go on like this,*” that humanity, instead of asking after the grounds of the atomic age, will simply affirm it unconditionally, breathlessly exclaiming that “we will live through atoms!”

In an unpublished note from 1953 with the heading “das Gestell und die Atomenergie,” Heidegger ties these different forms of destruction into the question of humanity’s relation to history. Under the heading of “Atomenergie,” he lists out “annihilation [*Vernichtung*],” “ruination [*Zerstörung*],” and “desertification [*Verwüstung*],” while drawing a line from “Gestell” to the following thoughts:

The ontic end of the planet and its inhabitants / comes near. The human has nothing *more before it* / most already behind it / or? *on the contrary!* / and *before it?*
– but *no longer* future and history – but rather?⁴²

Mulling over the question of futurity in the atomic age, Heidegger here differentiates between two senses of futurelessness. The first part of the passage rehearses an ontic understanding of nuclear weapons as threatening humanity with the loss of its future. Haunted by the “ontic destruction of the planet and its inhabitants,” the atomic age is “futureless” because humanity now has fewer years left to live than it had up to this point.

Heidegger’s “on the contrary!” entertains that the opposite may just as well come true, that the nuclear optimists may be right after all, as we saw in the passage above from the *Black Notebooks*. In this case, the human species may well live on for many more years subsequent to the discovery of nuclear energy than it did prior to it, but our relation to what lies before us may no longer be worthy of the name “future”; indeed, we may lose contact with *history* in Heidegger’s strict sense. In this case, the ontological “ruin” (*Zerstörung*) becomes “devastation”

(*Verwüstung*), or, more literally, “desertification.” Heidegger’s cryptic comment seems to imply that, in this final intensification of destruction, the horizon of the possibility of a world beyond this desert-world of the friendly atom is lost. If the possibility of transformation – that is to say, the possibility of possibility itself – can be lost, then what is left? Whatever it is, it certainly isn’t “history” in any robust sense of the word. So what do we call it?

In the “Gelassenheit” address, Heidegger brings this argument to an almost unbearably fine point: “precisely if the hydrogen bombs *do not* explode and human life remains preserved upon the earth, there looms with the atomic age an uncanny alteration of the world” (GA 16: 525/DT 52). This is no one-off rhetorical flourish; it echoes a passage from the *Black Notebooks* that reflects on the occasion of the first hydrogen bomb test:

What is most uncanny is not the extreme threat to “human stock [*menschlichen Bestandes*]” but the beclouding of every possibility of a future within the world of *Gestell*. Not annihilation but *the desert of the future-less*, which buries every arrival and calling, driving the mortals into the unrestrained activity of activeness for its own sake. (GA 100: 131, em)

Heidegger’s nightmare, in other words, is not that human life will be wiped out in the deafening blasts of warheads but rather that we will become deaf to the call of being beneath the benevolent hum of nuclear reactors, that we will be reduced, as he puts it in the 1956 *Hebeltag* address, to “mere life” (GA 16: 545). It would seem that Heidegger’s true fear is not *Atomtod* but rather *Atomleben* – a life whose material preservation comes at the cost of any future beyond a bad infinity of the present. If we take Heidegger at his word in the most despairing of these passages, then what is threatened in the consummation of *Gestell* in nuclear technology is not only the ontic survival of the human species but the very possibility of stepping back from the circular drive of technological life.

WENN ICH STERBE?

What will you do, God, if I die?

I am your jug (if I shatter?)

I am your drink (if I spoil?)

[...]

After me you have no house, in which

Words, near and warm, greet you.⁴⁵

Here, however, we must bear in mind a crucial feature of Heidegger's thinking which is captured pithily in his oft-cited citation of Hölderlin, "Where however danger is, grows / what rescues also."⁴⁴ The key here lies in the relationship between the human being and the truth of being, that is to say, in the question of what it means to *think* the atomic age. At the close of the "Gelassenheit" address, just after his admittedly "strange assertion" that a far greater danger lurks in the atomic age, precisely if a third (presumably nuclear) world war is avoided, Heidegger clarifies that his assertion "holds insofar as the revolution of technology, rolling along in the atomic age, could shackle, bewitch, blind, and blindfold the human, that one day calculative thinking might remain *the only one* in validity and practice" (GA 16: 528/DT 56, tm). This would be the desert of the futureless, and it would mean that "the human would have disowned and discarded what is most proper to it, namely that it is a being [*Wesen*] that thinks contemplatively [*nachdenkt*]" (GA 16: 529/DT 56, tm).

It is thinking itself, the contemplative essence of the human, that is under threat in the atomic age, but this dire threat may be precisely the condition for understanding thinking in its essence. What calls for thinking, what might still draw thinking onto its path even in the din of the atomic age, is being itself in its withdrawal (GA 10: 83/56, tm). Or, to be more specific, what calls for thinking is the fact that technology is not something that befalls being from without but is rather "a wholly determinate manner of being's manifestness, a destiny of being through which the contemporary human must pass" (GA 15: 433). That technology has become the name of being itself is neither the product of human action nor the effect of any given invention (nor even of the

sum total of technological inventions, artifacts, processes, etc.). In a letter to Elisabeth Blochmann from 1946, he makes this clear with regard to the bomb itself:

Technology, in the broadest sense, is itself nothing “technical,” but rather “spirit” – and this means a manner in which beings as a whole are revealed and hold sway as the revealed. More simply, one could also say: we do not yet know what the technical is – it does not consist in the mechanism of the atomic bomb, nor in the fact that humans produce this mechanism and wrest it from nature. Rather, the technical conceals itself in the fact that nature allows such things and that humans engage with this possible “mastery” of natural forces and, through it, arrange the world.⁴⁵

Technology is *given to thought* as that which makes things like the harnessing of nuclear energy possible, not vice versa. “The meaning of the technological world conceals itself,” Heidegger writes in “Gelassenheit,” and only the comportment which remains “open to this mystery,” that is to say, which does not treat it as something calculable and directable, can be adequate to the challenge it poses (GA 16: 527–29/DT 55–56, tm). This comportment is thinking, or more specifically, contemplative thinking (*Nachdenken*).

A correlate of this realization is that technology cannot be addressed through regulation, asceticism, or luddism. Just as *Gestell* was not brought about by any particular invention, no human “action” directed at those particular inventions can address it. Hence why, in the “Gelassenheit” address, Heidegger declares quite clearly, “it would be foolish to blindly rush against the technological world,” even while he cautions against allowing technological artifacts to “exclusively lay claim to us and thus bend our essence out of shape, confuse it, and ultimately desolate it” (GA 16: 526/53–54, tm). Thinking allows this “step back,” this minimal displacement through which the human might inhabit the world of technological artifacts without losing sight of the

fact that its ground is not itself something manipulable, measurable, indeed “actual” by technology’s own measure. Thinking – precisely that “contemplative” thinking that is scorned as an *inaction* – holds open the space in which one can come to see the danger Heidegger is outlining *as a danger*; that is, seeing in nuclear energy the renewed need for the thinking of being. The ontological futurelessness that Heidegger fears in the peaceful application of nuclear technology does not answer or obviate the question of the meaning of being but rather harbors the possibility of making this question legible in a new way: how is it possible that the earth could come to appear as – *to be* – one single gas station? How did such a view of nature become *thinkable*?

Heidegger wagers that this question might reveal to us that being has a history – a history that we do not “make” but rather which addresses itself or “sends” itself (*shickt sich*) to us and is thus experienced as “destiny” (*Geschick*). This in turn, might perhaps help us situate ourselves within that history as the beings tasked with thinking the history of being, those beings who “shepherd” or “shelter” the truth of being by taking up its call. In *Vigilae II*, Heidegger writes,

The destinal provenance of Europe might harbor within itself a path of meditative reflection that could even outstrip the planetary character of the atomic age and open realms into which what has not yet been ventured might stream. Such reflection is no historical prognosis – but rather only an intimation into a possibility reserved for the dwelling of humans on this earth. (GA 100: 215)

Precisely because it drives the forgetting of being to its extreme, the atomic age presents an opportunity to reflect upon being, on its history and its truth, though Heidegger is clear that this is merely a possibility, one that may never be taken up – “such reflection is no historical prognosis.”

We arrive here at the complicated intersection of the ontic and ontological in the history of being, of the relationship between the

ontological possibility of transformation in the history of being and the ontic conditions for its uptake. If the task of thinking is merely to “prepare” for such a transformation, what happens if beings who are tasked with thinking abandon or are rendered incapable of this task? Does this possibility of a hint *remain* necessarily possible? Or is it possible that humans subsist so long in the desert of the futureless that they lose contact with this possibility, that their essence is so deformed over the course of ontic, measurable time that it becomes essentially transformed? To what extent do the ontological possibilities of human thinking and language – that is, the capacity of human thought to shelter being in its truth – depend upon the ontic conditions of that thinking’s practice, inscription, and transmission?

These questions are raised even more brutally by the bomb, that is, by the threat to the material survival of the human species. What is the relationship between the being-historical task of human, the mortal, or Dasein and the material life of the human animal? As we have seen, Heidegger’s dismissiveness about the bomb and suspicion towards atomic age optimism are meant to warn against trading the material life of the species for the being-historical task of the mortal, against securing “mere life” at the expense of “dwelling” (GA 16: 545). And yet, surely the material, animal life of the human species is in some sense a condition for the mortal’s shepherdship of being?

Heidegger might answer that this framing neglects precisely the possibility of a turn in thinking that the atomic age holds out, even with regard to nuclear omnicide: “We could, however, also even see the threat to the survival of human stock [*menschliches Bestand*] as a hint which calls into the transformation of the *essence* of the human” (GA 100: 134). In other words, Heidegger suggests that what calls for thinking in the threat to “human stock” is the strange fact that we not only understand humanity in terms of *Bestand*, i.e., as a stockpile of life that can be reduced, increased, or even eliminated, but, further, that we take this to be *what is really real* about human life, as opposed to the “abstractness” of Dasein. The power of thought is the power to see in

the threat to “human stock” an occasion to reflect on the strangeness and poverty of this conception of human life.

Indeed – but only so long as this threat remains just that. My questions are really about what happens if the threat is realized, and what this says about the relationship of the ontic and the ontological in this period more generally – do all ontic causes and intra-historical events presuppose the ontological grounds of being’s destiny? Or does nuclear omnicide reveal that ontic events can recoil onto their ontological grounds?

In “Fundamental Principles of Thinking,” Heidegger comes, to my knowledge, the closest to addressing these questions directly. Against the appearance that thinking is defenseless in the face of nuclear energy, Heidegger argues that a meditation on the fundamental principles of thinking may help us “feel, while there is yet time, the force [*Gewalt*] of thinking, which infinitely, i.e., according to its essence, surpasses every possible quantum of atomic energy” (GA 79: 89/84, tm). This is the argument we have seen above – thinking is concerned with being itself and thus with something that is not “the object of calculation and control which is directed by a scientific technology which calls itself nuclear physics.” Indeed, it is only because, in some concealed and unthematized way, thinking had already begun to take up nature technologically that nature could come to appear as a “stock of energy.” The development of physics into nuclear physics constitutes “a meta-physical occurrence [*meta-physischer Vorfall*],” that is to say, something that belongs squarely within the realm of *thinking*.

Here, Heidegger entertains the question raised above:

But if it now were to come to the point that the thinking beings [*Wesen*] are extinguished [*ausgelöscht*] by atomic energy, where would thinking then remain? What is then more powerful, natural energy in its technological-machinic form or thinking? Or does neither of the two, which belong together in this case, have primacy [*Vorrang*]? *Is there still anything at all when all mortal essencing of the human on the earth “is” extinguished?* (GA 79: 89/84, tm, em; cf. GA 11: 134).

Heidegger does not answer the last question directly but rather takes up the reframing suggested in the third, seemingly rhetorical question. It is not a question of the primacy of thinking over atomic energy – the task before us is to think the grounds of nature appearing as energy, and to understand that both thinking and science are responding to “the thought” (*der Gedanke*) that “that thinking followed in pursuing nature into atomic energy...It is not we, the humans, who come upon these thoughts; the thoughts come to us mortals whose essence is set upon thinking as its ground” (GA 79: 89/84, tm). In insisting that thoughts come *to us* rather than *from us*, Heidegger here not only fends off the collapse of his thinking into an idealism that would say that thought has its origin *in* the mind; he also raises the question, “are we so sure we know who ‘we’ are?” as a way of fending off the question that we “immediately ask,” namely, “but who thinks these thoughts which visit us?” (GA 79: 89/85, tm). That is, Heidegger dismisses the ontological question of nuclear omnicide – which is to say, the question of the relationship of being to the human’s material existence – by dismissing it as ill-formed, or at least, posed before we are ready to even ask it, much less answer it.

Here we can see more clearly why Heidegger’s meditations on thinking in the atomic age are so rich and strange: they cut to the very heart of the problem of ontological difference, the history of being, and the essence of the human. Heidegger thinks back into the grounds of the problem, and in doing so, pries apart what *Gestell* can only collapse: the mortal and the human animal; cause and ground; the nothingness of physical absence and the nothingness of ontological devastation; the futurelessness of a sudden end and the futurelessness of a bad infinity. And yet, in doing so, he “thinks past the issue” (*denkt an der Sache vorbei*), to employ a phrase he directs at the discourse of the atomic age (GA 100: 154). In order to take seriously the threat of nuclear omnicide, we needn’t collapse these distinctions, but, as I have been trying to show, we cannot avoid the question of their *entanglement*. The mortal may not be coterminous with “mere life,” but there is no mortality, no thinking, no shepherdship of the truth of being without it. Being and

its truth are not products of subjectivity or the human mind – they come to it from without, as a “gift” or a “destiny” – but they require that someone be there to receive them, to shelter them, in short, *to think them*. Just as Heidegger can both insist that we do not yet know the essence of technology while insisting that we *do* know, at least, that it is itself nothing “technical,” the problem of thinking the atomic age – of thinking the task of thinking in the age of nuclear omnicide – reveals the strange and aporetic way that thinking itself is both bound to and irreducible to the “mere life” of the human animal, that being’s history and truth are irreducible to and yet exposed to the ontic conditions of their inscription, reception, and transmission. The grounded recoils upon the ground.

This is perhaps why, in another unpublished note from 1953 on the relationship between nuclear physics and philosophy, Heidegger writes, “the relationship of ontic and ontology no longer essentially sufficient.”⁴⁶ Here, he seems to be repeating a claim made elsewhere that the distinction between physics as an ontic discourse and philosophy as an ontological one no longer suffices since nuclear and quantum physics now are increasingly taken as the measure of claims about being (GA 97: 484; GA 101: 79). But we might also sense here the more general hesitation that I have been trying to sketch, namely, that the atomic age (above all, the threat of nuclear omnicide) makes the ontic/ontological distinction tremble. For, the bomb is not simply one threat among others: it is the only product of *Gestell* that contains the possibility of eliminating – irreversibly – all those beings capable of experiencing the distinction between a thing – in its full sense of what gathers the fourfold – and a product of *Gestell*. Heidegger may be right that technology experiences the emptiness of the jug as nothing but a “hollow cavity [*Hohlraum*] filled with air” (GA 79: 10/9, tm; GA 7: 173/169, tm), and he may be right that, in this way, technology makes the “jug-thing” into an un-thing, a non-thing, “something negligible” (GA 79: 9/8). He may even be right that thought retains the power to see this making-negligible as such and thus to catch sight of the irreducibility of the ontological to the ontic, of being as what gives beings into

presence but is not itself something present at all. This may all well be true; and yet, in the *Hohlraum*⁴⁷ of the fusion bomb lurks a danger where no saving power grows.

The evidence of Heidegger's participation in the *Kampf dem Atomtod*, inconclusive as it is, might suggest that perhaps some part of Heidegger was aware of this, or, to put it another way, that perhaps there was something of disavowal rather than intellectual bravado in his apparent "Gelassenheit" towards the possibility of nuclear war. By way of conclusion, then, let me cite two final pieces of evidence that Heidegger took the nuclear threat more seriously than his most famous remarks about it would seem to imply. In a letter to Richard Mehring from 1990, Gadamer writes that Heidegger "reckoned in centuries" the time that would need to elapse before his thinking "could support a new beginning." "Accordingly," Gadamer continues, "the reason for housing his *Nachlass* at Marbach was not least because of its uncommonly bomb-proof warehouses, which could perhaps even survive a nuclear war."⁴⁸ Around the same time he was making decisions about storing his *Nachlass* at fortress Marbach, Heidegger was hesitating about the idea of authorizing a *Gesamtausgabe* of his works (a discomfort testified to in the GA's "motto," which admonishes readers to treat the writings as "ways – not works"). In April 1972, he told Vittorio Klostermann that he could not agree to the project of a *Gesamtausgabe*: "It would not correspond to the style of my thinking."⁴⁹ As we know, however, Heidegger eventually changed his mind. According to Hermann Heidegger, what changed it was "the possibility of a total loss of manuscripts in a nuclear war."⁵⁰

NOTES

- 1 “The world is going to end; the only reason it could last is that it exists. How weak is this reason compared to all those which announce the contrary. . . . For, supposing that it continued to exist materially, would it be an existence worthy of this name?”
- 2 Heidegger cites it directly in “Der Satz vom Grund,” which was also delivered in May 1956 (GA 10: 178/122, tm). The title translates to “We Will Live Through Atoms!”
- 3 Both Günther Anders and Richard Rorty have written polemically about Heidegger’s comments on the bomb (see below). More recently, Andrew Mitchell and Peter Trawny have each written about Heidegger’s comments exegetically (see Mitchell, *The Fourfold* [Northwestern UP, 2015] and Trawny, *Heidegger-Fragmente* [Fischer, 2018]). Jan Völker has taken Heidegger’s comments on nuclear omnicide as the basis for a reflection on the anthropocene (Jan Völker, “The End of Life Is Not the Worst: On Heidegger’s Notion of the World,” *Filozofski Vestnik* 42, no. 2 [December 31, 2021]: 113–32).
- 4 Though the term’s coinage is usually attributed to philosopher John Somerville in the 1980s (when he defined it as “the annihilation of all human beings by some human beings”), Kenneth Tynan used it as early as 1959 in *The New Yorker*, when he wrote “we have always had the ability to commit suicide and the skill to commit homicide; after many a chiliad, we mastered the art of genocide; and we are now equipped for a new crime, as yet untitled, though a good name for it would be omnicide—the murder of everyone.” Citations from Émile P. Torres, *Human Extinction: A History of the Science and Ethics of Annihilation* (Routledge, 2024), 88–89.
- 5 Günther Anders, *Frömmigkeitsphilosophie*, in *Über Heidegger*, ed. Gerhard Oberschlick (C. H. Beck, 2001), 365–66. Emphasis in original.
- 6 Richard Rorty, “Heidegger and the Atomic Bomb,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (MIT Press, 2005), 274–75.

- 7 “Martin Heidegger,” in *Hebeldank*, ed. Hanns Uhl (Verlag
Rombach, 1964), 65.
- 8 <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/zeitgenoerische-berichte-und-dokumente-ueber-konrad-adenauer-und-seine-politik-a-5517815d-0002-0001-0000-000046172288>
- 9 “Erklärung der achtzehn Atomwissenschaftler vom 12. April
1957,” in Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *Der Bedrohte Friede –
heute* (Carl Hanser, 1994), 25–26.
- 10 Mark Walker, *Hitler’s Atomic Bomb: History, Legend, and the Twin
Legacies of Auschwitz and Hiroshima* (Cambridge University Press,
2024), 231. Walker argues that the Göttingen declaration must also
be read, in part, in the context of efforts by members of the Nazi
Uran-Projekt to rehabilitate their images in the post-War period.
This is perhaps especially true of Weizsäcker, “who after the war
was associated much more closely with National Socialism than
either Hahn or Heisenberg” (Walker 239). This is not only because
Weizsäcker’s father was an undersecretary in the Foreign Ministry
during the Third Reich (a fact which Einstein mentions in his
famous letter of August 1939, in which he pleads with Roosevelt
to begin development of an atomic bomb), but also because of his
participation in drafting a number of declarations issued during
the Third Reich—most notoriously the “Seefeld” declaration,
which struck a compromise with the representatives of “Aryan
physics” by insisting on the importance of the theory of special
relativity but downplaying Einstein’s genius and casting doubt on
the theory of general relativity. The question of Weizsäcker’s per-
sonal belief in National Socialist ideology is a matter of contention.
Heisenberg, who defended Weizsäcker after the war, nevertheless
wrote a letter to his wife in October 1943 describing Weizsäcker
as “unbearable” in his constant musing that perhaps the utter
destruction wrought by the Allied bombing campaign would help
bring about the “final decision” in favor of “another way of think-
ing” (i.e. National Socialism) (Letter to Elisabeth Heisenberg from
October 14, 1943, in »*Meine Liebe Li!*« *Der Briefwechsel 1937–1946*,
ed. Anna Maria Hirsch-Heisenberg, ebook [Residenz Verlag, 2011]).

Wolf Schäfer has argued that Heidegger and Weizsäcker shared the hope for a National Socialism better than “really existing” National Socialism (“Der ‘utopische’ Nationalsozialismus – Ein gemeinsamer Fluchtpunkt im Denken von Martin Heidegger und Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker?” in *Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker: Physik, Philosophie, Friedensforschung*, ed. Klaus Hentschel und Dieter Hoffmann [Wissenschaftliche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2014], 503–24). See also, Klaus Hentschel, “Introduction,” in *Physics and National Socialism*, ed. Klaus Hentschel (Birkhäuser Basel, 1996), xxviii.

- 11 See Robert Lorenz, *Protest der Physiker: die “Göttinger Erklärung” von 1957* (Transcript Verlag, 2011).
- 12 When he was rector, for instance, Heidegger invited Viktor von Weizsäcker to give a lecture at the university, which Georg Picht describes as a puzzling choice, since “everyone knew” that (Viktor) von Weizsäcker was not a Nazi. Indeed, according to Picht’s account, when a student opened the event with a “programmatic speech about the National-Socialist revolution,” Heidegger interrupted him after a few minutes by stamping his feet and yelling sharply, “This gibberish ends right now!” (Georg Picht, “Die Macht des Denkens,” in *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*, ed. Günter Neske, [Neske, 1977], 198–99).
- 13 Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, “Begegnungen in vier Jahrzehnten,” in *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*, 239.
- 14 For a report on these seminars by one of the participants, see Ewald Richter, “Heideggers Seminar in Wellingsbüttel,” *Heidegger Studies* 16: 221–45.
- 15 This meeting is also important for questions about the post-war rehabilitation of Heidegger’s image, since the most notable attendee was not Weizsäcker but Martin Buber. For more on this aspect of the encounter, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger in Dialogue,” *The Journal of Religion* 94, no. 1 (January 2014): 2–25. The conference which the four men were meeting to plan took place in 1959. There, Heidegger delivered the lecture “Language,” while Weizsäcker spoke on “Language

- as Information,” an examination of the relationship between formal languages and natural languages that Heidegger cites three years later in “Traditional Language and Technical Language.”
- 16 Martin Heidegger to C.F. von Weizsäcker, May 6, 1957, Abteilung III, repository 111 (Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker Nachlass [CFWN]), Max-Planck-Gesellschaft Archiv, (MPGA) Berlin
- 17 Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker to Martin Heidegger, June 14, 1957, CFWN, MPGA.
- 18 Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker to Max Born, February 26, 1958, Abt. III, Repository 14 (Nachlass Otto Hahn [NOH]), number 2879, MPGA.
- 19 Mark Walker, *Hitler’s Bomb*, 237.
- 20 Hedwig Born (wife of fellow Göttingen signatory Max Born) seems to have taken the articles as an absolute betrayal of the spirit of the Göttingen Declaration (Walker, *Hitler’s Bomb*, 237), and Günther Anders, upon hearing of them, described the title as “appallingly ambiguous” (Anders, *Tagebuch aus Hiroshima und Nagasaki*, in *Hiroshima ist überall* [C. H. Beck, 1995], 25).
- 21 At its peak in 1958, a survey by the Bielefelder Emnid-Institutes found 83% of West Germans were against the nuclear armament of the *Bundeswehr* and 53% approved of the use of strikes to prevent it (“Kampf Dem Atomtod,” *Sendungen und Podcasts* [Deutschlandfunk Kultur, March 5, 2008]).
- 22 Daniel Morat and Dieter Thomä have each written about this letter, though they both mention it only in passing. Morat uses the letter to underline the difference between Anders’s activism and Heidegger’s quietism; Thomä mentions it to underline the proximity of Heidegger’s and Anders’s understanding of technology in spite of Anders’s criticisms of Heidegger. Daniel Morat, “Mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger: Intellektuelles Engagement und praktische Philosophie nach 1945,” in *Bürgersinn mit Weltgefühl: politische Moral und solidarischer Protest in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren*, ed. Habbo Knoch, Veröffentlichungen des Zeitgeschichtlichen Arbeitskreises Niedersachsen, Band 23

- (Wallstein Verlag, 2007), 71. Dieter Thomä, “Günther Anders,” in *Heidegger-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Dieter Thomä, 2nd ed (J. B. Metzler, 2013), 407.
- 23 Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, *Briefe 1936–1968*, ed. Lotte Köhler (Piper, 1996), 560. I am grateful to Ian Alexander Moore for drawing my attention to this letter when I first reached out to him for help tracking down information on Heidegger and the *Atomtod* movement. On the rupture between Heidegger and Arendt during this time, see Antonia Grunenberg, *Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger: History of a Love*, trans. Peg Birmingham, Kristina Lebedeva, and Elizabeth von Witzke Birmingham (Indiana UP, 2006), 247–81.
- 24 Hannah Arendt to Günther Anders, May 31, 1958, in *Schrieb doch mal hard facts über dich: Briefe 1937 bis 1975*, ed. Kerstin Putz (Piper, 2016), 74. It is worth noting that both these letters date from the five-year gap in Heidegger and Arendt’s correspondence from October 1954 to December 1959, which was itself part of a general rift that opened between them from the early 1950s until Heidegger sent her an “autumn letter” on the occasion of her 60th birthday in 1966. The only attested written correspondence during this gap is a birthday telegram Arendt sent Heidegger on his 70th birthday in 1959. Accordingly, Heidegger’s “involvement” cannot simply have been a position he expressed to her in correspondence or conversation but must have reached her, as she says to Anders, *mündlich*, by word of mouth.
- 25 Günther Anders to Hannah Arendt, June 3, 1958, *Schreib doch mal*, 75. The italicized phrase appears in English in Anders’s letter.
- 26 Wolfgang Hildesheimer to Günther Neske, May 24, 1958. Cited in Walter Kühn, *Vermischte Zustände: Heidegger im literarisch-Philosophischen Leben der fünfziger Jahre des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, (Königshausen & Neumann, 2015), 196.
- 27 Letter from Hertha Sturm to Margherita von Brentano, May 1, 1955, in *Das Politische und das Persönliche: eine Collage*, ed.

- Iris Nachum and Susan Neiman (Wallstein-Verlag, 2010), 65–67. Interestingly, the letter also mentions the broadcast of a “Hebel lecture” by Heidegger. Given the dates, however, this is not the Hebel lecture that was later published in *Hebeldank* but almost certainly the lecture simply titled “Johann Peter Hebel,” which Heidegger first delivered in Zähringen on September 5, 1954 (GA 16: 491–515). The letter dates from the end of Brentano’s time as the director of the educational programming of the Südwestfunk (which Sturm took over from her when she moved to Berlin). Melanie Fritscher-Fehr, *Demokratie im Ohr: Das Radio als geschichtskultureller Akteur in Westdeutschland, 1945–1963* (Transcript, 2019), 158.
- 28 “Philosophin mit Schnauze,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*,
 January 24, 2019. <https://www.fr.de/kultur/literatur/philosophin-schnauze-11470089.html>.
- 29 *Das Politische und das Persönliche*, 47.
- 30 Abteilung III, Repository 93, Nachlass Werner Heisenberg (NWH),
 nr. 340, AMPG.
- 31 In addition to the largest committee, which was based in Berlin,
 there was one based in Hamburg which sprang up around the
 time that Weizsäcker assumed a chair of philosophy there. Again,
 I have so far been unable to figure out which committee is refer-
 enced in the author biography.
- 32 It was associated with the political parties such as the SPD and
 the FDP, as well as extra-party institutions like the labor unions
 and the Catholic church, but it was never consolidated into an
 official party or institutional organ. See Holger Nehring, *Politics
 of Security: British and West German Protest Movements and the
 Early Cold War, 1945–1970*, (Oxford UP), 206.
- 33 He also discusses the bomb in a letter to Elisabeth Blochmann
 from March 3, 1947 and in several entries in the *Black Notebooks*
 before 1949.
- 34 Interestingly, in November 1949 American writer Eugene Jolas
 published a report about Bremen lectures based on the reports

- of attendees, which he titled “Heidegger in the Atomic Age” (in *Eugene Jolas: Critical Writings 1924-51*, ed. Klaus H. Kefer and Rainer Rumold [Northwestern University Press, 2009], 473-74.
- 35 This sentence is the only deviation in this passage from the other versions, which have “The human does not see what long since *has* arrived and indeed *has* occurred [*angekommen ist und zwar geschehen ist*].”
- 36 Peter Trawny dates them to fall 1945, but the first page of *Anmerkungen II* bears the parenthetical date “1946” (GA 97: 107). See Trawny, *Heidegger-Fragmente*, 57.
- 37 Trawny, *Heidegger-Fragmente*, 58.
- 38 Walter Benjamin, “Der Erzähler,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 2 (Suhrkamp, 1991), 444-45. Benjamin’s definition of information (from 1936) predates the technical definitions of information in terms of entropy that emerge a decade later in Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener. Heidegger, for his part, seems to have begun studying the cybernetic definition of information in the early 1950s, and his papers contain several convolutes of notes which include long passages copied out by hand from Gotthard Günther’s *Die Bewußtsein der Maschine: Eine Metaphysik der Kybernetik*. See also Erich Hörl, “Die Offene Maschine. Heidegger, Günther und Simondon über die Technologische Bedingung,” *MLN* 123, no. 3 (2008): 632-55.
- 39 I do not mean here to dismiss the considerable difficulties that attend such an imagination or thought experiment, as thinkers of nuclear war from Anders to Jonathan Schell to Jacques Derrida have observed. To address these, however, would mean taking up directly the debate about correlationism as it was posed by Quentin Meillassoux, a task which exceeds the purview of this paper.
- 40 Mitchell, *The Fourfold*, 67.
- 41 Heidegger’s fear of attempts at “ingratiating” nuclear technology to the public were not delusional – they were not even confined to nuclear power generation. In the 1950s, the United

States government had an initiative called “Project Plowshare” which sought peaceful applications for nuclear explosions in an attempt to reintroduce the public to the “friendly atom.” The name “plowshare” is a reference to Micah 4:3: “and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks” (the verse also appears at Isaiah 2:4). The Soviet Union had a similar project called “Nuclear Explosions for the National Economy.” Kazakhstan’s Lake Chagan, for instance, was formed as part of this project when the Soviets detonated a 140-kiloton bomb underground on January 15, 1965.

42 Reproduced at Helga Raulff, *Strahlungen: Atom und Literatur* (Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2008), 74–75.

43 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben*, in *Das Stunden-Buch*, in vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Manfred Engel, Ulrich Fülleborn, Horst Nalewski, August Stahl (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2003), 32.

44 Friedrich Hölderlin, “Patmos,” in *Sämtliche Werke, vol. 2: Gedichte nach 1800*, ed. Friedrich Beissner (Kohlhammer, 1953), 173. C.f. GA 79: 72/68, tm.

45 Martin Heidegger to Elisabeth Blochmann, March 3, 1946, in *Briefwechsel 1918–1969*, ed. Joachim W. Storck (Deutsche Literaturarchiv, 1989), 93. This argument is perhaps the most consistent thread of Heidegger’s engagement with the atomic age. See also, for instance, GA 79: 89/84; GA 11: 134; GA 8: 207–8/204–5, 238/234 etc.

46 Cited at Helga Raulff, *Strahlungen*, 78.

47 In English, the German word “Hohlraum” is used as a technical term in radiation thermodynamics, and, in the Teller-Ulam hydrogen fusion bomb, it designates the radiation casing that contains the energy released by the first fission explosion, which then powers the larger, fusion explosion. See “4.4 Elements of Thermonuclear Weapon Design,” *Nuclear Weapon Archive*, last modified March 13, 2019, <https://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Nwfaq/Nfaq4-4.html>.

- 48 Cited in Richard Mehring, *Heideggers "Große Politik": die semantische Revolution der Gesamtausgabe* (Siebeck, 2016), 241fn41.
- 49 Letter to Vittorio Klostermann from April 11, 1972, quoted at Peter Trawny, *Heidegger-Fragmente: eine philosophische Biographie* (Fischer, 2018), 25.
- 50 Arnulf Heidegger, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Gesamtausgabe von Martin Heidegger," *Seefahrten des Denkens*, ed. Alina Noveanu, Julia Pfefferkorn, Antonio Spinelli (Narr Francke Attempto, 2017), 149. See also Trawny, *Heidegger-Fragmente*, 25.

