

Thinking Against Humanism? Heidegger on the Human Essence, the Inhuman, and Evil

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Abstract

In his ‘Letter on “Humanism”’, Martin Heidegger advances a critique of humanism while insisting that this critique does not imply that he ‘advocates the inhuman’. There are two reasons why Heidegger might be concerned to rebut this accusation. First, one might worry that any rejection of humanism commits one to rejecting its central values, such as the idea that human beings have an essential worth. Second, Heidegger might be concerned to distance his critique from the inhuman policies of National Socialism, with which he was associated in the early 1930s.

In this paper, I offer an interpretation of Heidegger’s conception of ‘the inhuman’ to shed light on his critique’s normative implications. Through this examination of Heidegger’s views, I raise concerns about the political prospects of his anti-humanism, and, more tentatively, of anti-humanistic thought in general. First, I reconstruct Heidegger’s critique of humanism, his positive conception of the human essence, and his cryptic account of evil in the *Letter*. I argue that the view that emerges involves a problematic displacement of human responsibility for evil, which Heidegger interprets as symptomatic of the modern epoch in the ‘history of Being’. Moreover, while his account opposes ‘the inhuman’ in a ‘Being-historical’ sense, I argue that it disavows crucial normative resources for resisting ‘the inhuman’ in the ordinary moral sense.

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1 | HEIDEGGER CONTRA HUMANISM?

In one way or another, the question of the human being – of its ‘existence’ and ‘essence’, though not always in the familiar metaphysical senses of these terms – is of central concern to Martin Heidegger in both his early and later works. This theme is given sustained treatment in his ‘Letter on “Humanism”’, a text that is frequently referred to in passing, but whose argument has rarely been analysed in detail in recent literature on Heidegger.¹ This text’s broad nexus of preoccupations provides a starting point for considering the relation between humanity and ethics in Heidegger’s thought. My contention in this paper will be that Heidegger is unable to properly account for ‘evil’ and ‘the inhuman’ within the terms of his later philosophy. Consequently, I hope to raise a tentative concern about the political prospects of thought that renounces humanism. This concern will have to remain tentative in the absence of a more exhaustive survey of ‘anti-humanist’ positions; there can be no question of taking any particular philosopher as a straightforward representative of anti-humanism, since – their rejection of humanism notwithstanding – its proponents may have few shared positive commitments. Nonetheless, the case of Heidegger may serve to reinforce a *prima facie* wariness about this family of views, and to show that the onus is very much on the ‘anti-humanist’ to demonstrate that their position does not threaten to imperil actual human beings and our concern for them. No ‘anti-humanism’ that risks undercutting our responsiveness to the plight of real human beings can be tenable.

But in what sense is Heidegger an anti-humanist? What sense of ‘humanism’ does he have in mind in the title and discussions of the *Letter*? Unfortunately, these questions cannot be given a clear answer at the outset, since one of the issues Heidegger is concerned to address is precisely what sense ‘humanism’ still has – or whether it retains any sense at all (LH 241, 262).² Indeed, the idea that the sense of this term is in question is already signalled by the scare quotes in Heidegger’s title. As we shall see, Heidegger expresses ambivalence both about what importance the human being may have, and about the appropriateness of the label ‘humanism’ for his own philosophy. Situating him in terms of a general debate between ‘humanism’ and ‘anti-humanism’ is therefore not a straightforward matter.

One initial step would be to adopt a provisional definition of the former term. Adapting a phrase from Cora Diamond, we could understand ‘humanism’ in a broad sense to be “the view that ‘human being’ is a normatively relevant notion – that is, a notion that can appropriately be used to give a reason why some creature should or should not be treated in such-and-such a way.”³ In other words, humanism could be thought of as the view that our recognition of the humanity of some creature should have a bearing on our treatment of them. Such a characterisation would stand in need of much further refinement, but it has the virtue of being neutral between different accounts of the normative significance of being a human being. Thus, to try to situate Heidegger within the terms of the humanist/anti-humanist debate, we could ask whether – and in what sense – he takes ‘human being’ to be a normatively relevant notion. In one sense, he does seem to take this notion to be normatively relevant: as we shall see, the human is given the crucial task of becoming the “shepherd of Being” (LH 260). To this extent, it might be tempting to call Heidegger a ‘humanist’, albeit of a highly idiosyncratic sort. Indeed, Heidegger draws attention to this possibility, expecting his interlocutor Jean Beaufret – and the readers of the *Letter* – to recognise its appeal: “as you have no doubt been wanting to rejoin for quite a while now – does not such thinking think precisely the *humanitas* of *homo humanus*? [...] Is this not ‘humanism’ in the extreme sense?” (LH 261).

Nevertheless, the very idiosyncrasy of Heidegger’s apparent ‘humanism’ should give us pause. For he is equally eager to distance himself radically from other forms of humanism:

Should we still keep the name “humanism” for a “humanism” that contradicts all previous humanism – although it in no way advocates the inhuman? And keep it just so that by sharing in the use of the name we might perhaps swim in the predominant currents, stifled in metaphysical subjectivism and submerged in oblivion of Being? Or should thinking, by means of open resistance to “humanism,” risk a shock that could for the first time cause perplexity concerning the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* and its basis? (LH 263)

These questions are rhetorical, and it is clear what Heidegger's own answers would be. One of Heidegger's central concerns about 'all previous humanism' is its imbrication with what he calls 'metaphysical subjectivism'. Humanism, on Heidegger's view, is committed to an interpretation of the human being it inherits from the metaphysical tradition and leaves uninterrogated: the human is understood as the *animal rationale* and, in modernity, as the 'subject'. This conception of the human has, in turn, deep connections to the rise in late modernity of what Heidegger calls 'technology', and the ever-increasing objectification of beings that characterises its development. Heidegger's later writings constitute a sustained attempt to bring the 'danger' of technology to light, and thus stand in 'open resistance' to the tacitly metaphysical outlook of other forms of humanism.

Beyond Heidegger's own doubts about the aptness of the label 'humanism' for his later thinking, we may also wonder whether Heidegger takes the notion of the 'human being' to be normatively significant in anything like the usual sense – the sense indicated in the second part of the broad characterisation of 'humanism' canvassed above. It is far from clear whether Heidegger would take the mere fact that a creature is a human being to have an ethical bearing on our treatment of that creature. In general, there is a striking absence of specific moral prescriptions in his philosophical work, for reasons that I will try to articulate later.⁴ Thus, it is unclear what stand Heidegger takes on questions about what we owe to each other, or what is owed to us, simply in virtue of the kind of entities we are – if he takes a stand on such questions at all. Though Heidegger claims that he 'in no way advocates the inhuman', it would not follow that his philosophy gives us any robust grounds for resistance to it. Furthermore, as will become clear, there are reasons to think that the distinction Heidegger draws between the human and the inhuman in the *Letter*, despite initial appearances, does not directly track the familiar ethical distinction between the human(e) and the inhuman(e). This compounds the worry that Heidegger will be ill equipped to adequately distance himself from 'the inhuman' in the usual sense.

The foundation for this worry will become clearer in due course. First, a word about the context and concerns of the *Letter* itself. The proximate occasion for Heidegger's (1946) *Letter* was a series of questions from Jean Beaufret, some of which Heidegger quotes directly and others of which he only alludes to. These questions, which primarily concern the relationship between humanism, existentialism, ontology, and ethics, were in turn prompted by Jean-Paul Sartre's (1945) public lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Sartre's text, published the following year, paraphrased a Heideggerian formula from *Being and Time* – that for 'Man' "existence precedes essence" – and claimed it as the fundamental tenet of existentialism, arguing (as Sartre's title suggests) for a humanistic interpretation of the latter. In his *Letter*, Heidegger repudiates this reading, arguing instead for an interpretation of *Being and Time* that not only sets itself 'against humanism', but also begins to clear the way for a conception of the human essence that surpasses the possibilities of humanistic thought:

[T]he highest determinations of the essence of the human being in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of the human being. To that extent the thinking in *Being and Time* is against humanism. But this opposition does not mean that such thinking aligns itself against the humane and advocates the inhuman, that it promotes the inhumane and deprecates the dignity of the human being. Humanism is opposed because it does not set the *humanitas* of the human being high enough. (LH 251)

In opposing Sartre's humanist appropriation of *Being and Time*, Heidegger is thus concerned to show that it is possible – perhaps even necessary – to think 'against' humanism, understood as a fundamentally and unacceptably metaphysical view. But he nonetheless claims to recognise the "essential worth" of the human being (LH 252), and, further, to show that a rejection of humanism need not mean 'advocacy' and 'promotion' of the inhuman.⁵ Indeed, he suggests that it is humanism itself that represents the danger of deprecating the human by failing to 'set the *humanitas* of the human being high enough'. Heidegger thus seeks to provide us with an account of the human essence that succeeds in 'realizing its proper dignity'.

The task of providing a defence against accusations of 'advocating the inhuman' arises naturally enough from a discourse that explicitly opposes humanism. This is because thinking 'against humanism' may all too easily be

construed as thinking against the ‘values’ that humanism represents, chief among them the ‘essential worth’ of the human being. Heidegger himself acknowledges this potential objection, writing that “because we are speaking against ‘humanism’ people fear a defense of the inhuman and a glorification of barbaric brutality” (LH 263). The underlying thought seems to be that the opposite of humanism is a kind of barbarism, and that opposition to the former suggests a tacit endorsement of the latter. We could view Heidegger’s efforts to answer this charge, then, as responsive to an intrinsic demand of the subject matter.

However, there are also significant extrinsic reasons for concern here: Heidegger’s association with National Socialism in the early 1930s; the anti-Semitism expressed in some of his posthumous writings; and his failure to unequivocally denounce the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the 30s and 40s.⁶ Heidegger soon came to reject National Socialism as a viable alternative to modernity, coming to view it as one more devastating consequence of the present technological epoch of the history of Being. However, for the most part he remained disturbingly silent regarding the holocaust, and the character of his later critique of National Socialism threatens to minimize the responsibility of the human beings who perpetrated it.⁷ Heidegger’s proximity to these historical events makes a critical inquiry into his opposition to humanism essential, and it is incumbent on us to ask what relation there might be between his apparent unwillingness or inability to speak about the evil of the holocaust, and his own philosophical claims about evil and the inhuman.

Granting that Heidegger does not go so far as to ‘advocate the inhuman’, it still remains to be determined whether or not his position is politically and ethically adequate, for it is surely the case that a philosophy could avoid such advocacy while nonetheless failing to provide – or even obscuring or impoverishing – the normative resources needed to properly acknowledge, think through, and criticise the inhuman. We must therefore ask how Heidegger understands ‘the inhuman’ and ‘evil’ in relation to his original conception of the human essence, and consider whether this understanding can be adequate as a response to and account of the evil, horror, and inhumanity of the events of the past century.

Before outlining the argument of this paper, however, allow me to respond to two concerns regarding my initial framing of the inquiry. I have just suggested that I will be evaluating the adequacy of Heidegger’s account of the inhuman in terms of its relationship to certain ‘normative resources’. But Heidegger might well take issue with the fact that I employ both the term ‘normative’ and the term ‘resources’ unquestioningly here, effectively taking their legitimacy for granted.⁸ I am sympathetic to the thought – central to Heidegger’s philosophical practice – that one’s initial choice of terminology is by no means a neutral matter. Heidegger’s own distinctive vocabulary and his frequent use of neologisms is motivated in part by his sensitivity to the fact that the terms of the philosophical tradition are often freighted with unacknowledged metaphysical assumptions, which implicitly orient philosophical inquiry; thus, as Sacha Golob has nicely put it, “we need to be constantly on our guard against forcing the phenomena into preconceived boxes” (Golob 2014: 185). Might there be Heideggerian reasons to be concerned about uncritical use of the terms ‘normative’ and ‘resources’ along these lines? I shall briefly consider each term in turn.

The language of ‘norms’ and ‘the normative’ is certainly somewhat alien to Heidegger, and his explicit references to ‘norms’ are usually quite negative. In one of the few uses of the term ‘norm’ in *Being and Time*, for example, Heidegger associates our following of norms with the inauthentic perspective of *das Man*, the ‘one’, whose “common sense [...] knows only the satisfying of manipulable rules and public norms and the failure to satisfy them”; the one-self has thus “slunk away from its ownmost Being-guilty so as to be able to talk more loudly about making ‘mistakes’” (BT 334/H288). This critical attitude towards the role of public norms is also evident in Heidegger’s earlier analysis of “distantiality”, a term he uses to describe how Dasein, under the “dictatorship” of the ‘one’, obsessively compares itself to others, understanding its own comportment in terms of how ‘one’ ought to act (see BT 163-164/H126-127).

However, Heidegger’s critique of the domination of public norms and their levelling effect does not rule out the possibility that ‘normativity’ in a broader sense may still play a significant role in his work. On the contrary, Heidegger’s critique of the dictatorship of the ‘one’ itself draws on considerations that are *prima facie* normative: he complains that the ‘one’ “deprives the particular Dasein of its answerability” (BT 165/H127), preventing the

individual from taking responsibility for their own Being; claims that the 'one' closes off a more genuine understanding of entities, since "by publicness everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone" (BT 165/H127); and, in distinguishing between 'Lage' ('general situation') and 'Situation', suggests that authentic Dasein will have a more fine-grained view of the possibilities for action afforded in a situation than can be achieved by the 'one' (see e.g. 346/H300, 436/H384). This suggests that, at least in *Being and Time*, Heidegger's critical attitude towards our tendency to understand ourselves and to act on the basis of public norms is not only compatible with but indeed warrants an interest in the phenomena of 'normativity' more broadly.⁹

In his later work, while Heidegger continues to forego use of the language of norms, he frequently talks in terms of 'measure'. For instance, in his discussion of the historical separation of Being and 'the ought' in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he notes that Being has been "surpassed by the ought. What this means is that Being is no longer what is definitive, what provides the measure" (Ga40: 219). He then proceeds to trace this separation to the modern notion of 'values', arguing that "in the modern age [...] values provide the measure for all domains of beings" (Ga40: 220–221). In later texts, he subjects the notion of 'values' to sustained interrogation, writing in the *Letter* that "thinking in values is the greatest blasphemy imaginable against Being" (LH 265). While I do not have the space to reconstruct his critique here, it is worth noting that it is certainly not impossible that Heidegger would find thinking in terms of 'norms' to be as problematic as thinking in terms of 'values'. Nonetheless, the notion of a 'norm', taken in a broad sense, could plausibly encompass what Heidegger appears to mean by 'measure'. In speaking of 'normative resources', then, I intend not to beg any questions regarding the sources of normativity – or, in more Heideggerian language, regarding what 'provides the measure' for human comportment. Furthermore, talking broadly in terms of 'normativity' also leaves open the question of the relationship between recognisably moral standards and whatever standards or 'measures' are in play in Heidegger's work.¹⁰

As for the term 'resources', it is worth acknowledging that this term is sometimes used as an English translation of Heidegger's term *Bestand* – the 'standing-reserve' to which entities, made available for use and manipulation, are reduced in the age of technology.¹¹ My use of this term might therefore suggest a technological approach to ethics, to which Heidegger would presumably be squarely opposed. However, I think the English term 'resource' is flexible enough that it need not carry any such implication. Heidegger encourages us to associate a number of connotations with '*Bestand*': manipulability, replaceability, disposability, and so on. I do not intend my use of the term 'resources' to carry these connotations. Rather, I use this term because it is capacious enough to encompass both concepts – in particular 'thick' ethical concepts – and what one might call ethically charged 'ways of seeing'. The point of such 'resources' is not the endless orderability implied by Heidegger's notion of '*Bestand*', but rather to enable us to respond appropriately to moral catastrophe – to see 'the inhuman' in the right light. Note that I am not taking a firm stand on what normative resources might be necessary here or on whether such resources should be construed in (e.g.) realist or constructivist, naturalist or non-naturalist terms. There is, of course, little consensus on such issues. Nevertheless, I take it to be a criterion of the adequacy of any account of moral standards that it should at least not deprive us of concepts, distinctions, and ethical perspectives that allow us to respond to inhumanity.¹²

Despite my use of the term 'resources', then, I think it is fair to say that the forms of ethical responsiveness I have in mind are anything but technological in Heidegger's sense. What is at stake is our ability to respond to the plight of human beings in a fitting manner. The thought that our capacity to do so is related to the availability of a particular set of concepts and ways of seeing – or a "way of revealing" entities (see QCT *passim*) – need not, I think, be anathema to Heidegger. The question is whether his account of 'the inhuman' is suitably attuned to the significance of concrete instances of inhumanity to have any prospect of encouraging such ethical responsiveness.

Having provided some initial clarification of my approach here, I turn now to the task of reconstructing Heidegger's views. In what follows, I shall provide a reading of the *Letter* and related texts with the aim of shedding light on the issues raised above. Sections 2 and 3 will be primarily exegetical in their focus. In Section 2, I elucidate some of the central themes of the *Letter* itself. First, I explain Heidegger's critique of humanism, which he claims misunderstands the human essence, thereby occluding our relationship to Being. I also discuss some shifts in

Heidegger's use of the term 'Dasein' – or, as he sometimes puts it, 'Da-sein' – to illuminate his positive claims concerning the essence and proper dignity of the human being. Then, in Section 3, I introduce Heidegger's remarks on 'evil' to try to make sense of his normative aspirations and his conception of the inhuman. The remarks on evil in the *Letter* itself are brief and cryptic, so I turn to the fuller treatment in the third of Heidegger's *Country Path Conversations* in order to interpret them.¹³

Finally, in Section 4, I argue that the account that emerges from these texts involves a problematic displacement of human responsibility for evil, which is reinterpreted as merely symptomatic of a broader movement in the history of Being. This diagnosis of evil is coupled with a disavowal of moral critique, a claim that moral guilt is inappropriate, and a de-racialized but nonetheless suspect centring of the German people. The result is a disturbing quietism about evil in the ordinary 'ontic' sense, which perhaps goes some way toward explaining Heidegger's conspicuous silence regarding the atrocities of the Nazi regime. Although to some extent separable from other elements of his later philosophy, these ideas are nonetheless bound up with his conception of 'the abandonment of Being', and by extension with his critique of technology. The considerations developed here, then, cast a troubling light on key elements of Heidegger's later thought and his thinking 'against' humanism.

2 | THE ARGUMENT OF THE LETTER

In this section, I provide a close reading of some of the central contentions of Heidegger's *Letter* in order to shed light on his conception of the essence and proper dignity of the human being. First, I explain Heidegger's critique of 'all previous humanism', and how this relates to his new understanding of the human essence: 'ek-sistence'. Then, I turn to Heidegger's discussion of evil and the inhuman in the *Letter*, to clarify the sense in which Heidegger sees himself as opposed to the latter.

Heidegger's later conception of *humanitas*, the human essence, can be clarified by way of a contrast with his target in the *Letter*, which he identifies as "all previous humanism" (LH 263). What, in Heidegger's view, unites all previous forms of humanism, so as to allow him to group this apparently disparate set of historical positions together? How does he distance his new conception of the human essence from this earlier, supposedly unified tradition?

An answer to these questions can be found in the connection Heidegger draws between humanism and the metaphysical tradition. His argument for the sweeping claim that "every humanism is grounded in a metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one" (LH 245) is in some respects very simple. In the *Letter*, Heidegger characterises metaphysics in terms of its failure to raise the question of Being: it "does not think Being as such, does not think the difference between Being and beings" (LH 246). For that reason, metaphysics does not "ask in what way the essence of the human being belongs to the truth of Being" (LH 246); it cannot ask about the relationship between Being and the human being, because it does not ask about Being at all. However, for Heidegger, our "*humanitas*, the essence of the human being [...] lies in ek-sistence" (LH 262), which he glosses elsewhere as "standing in the clearing of Being" (LH 247). The essence of the human being can thus only be properly understood in terms of its relationship to Being. Humanistic understandings of the human being never so much as raise the question of Being, and so fail to locate the human being in relation to it. In this sense, they are one and all 'metaphysical'.

But why does Heidegger view ek-sistence as our essence? Because ek-sistence is a "way of being [...] proper only to the human being" (LH 247, emphasis added). Ek-sistence is the way of being that radically distinguishes us from other kinds of entity (including, so Heidegger claims, other animals), thus recalling his earlier conception of Dasein's existence.¹⁴ Heidegger writes that "the human being ek-sistently sustains" Da-sein, suggesting that he continues to associate these concepts with each other (LH 251; see also 249). Moreover, the language Heidegger uses to talk about 'Da-sein' in his *Contributions to Philosophy* echoes what he says in the *Letter* about ek-sistence: the human being is the entity "to whom alone Da-sein is proper", and Da-sein in turn is understood as "the mode of being that is distinctive of humans in their possibility." This final point, however, draws attention to a shift in Heidegger's

conception of Dasein. For he goes on to ask, “In which possibility?” and to answer: “In the highest one of humans, namely the possibility of grounding and preserving truth itself” (Ga65: 237, §176).

The fact that Heidegger identifies this as our *highest* possibility suggests that, although this possibility is the one most proper to us, we do not always actualise it. It would make little sense to talk of a way of being as the highest possibility if there were not various lower possibilities with which it could be contrasted. In the *Contributions*, Heidegger elaborates by distinguishing between Da-sein – literally, being-there – and ‘Weg-sein’ or ‘being-away’: “Da-sein: withstanding the openness of self-concealing. Being-away: pressing on with *the closedness of the mystery and of Being*; forgottenness of Being” (Ga65: 238, §177).¹⁵ This formulation presages claims Heidegger will make later, both in the *Letter* and in his essay on technology. For the danger of technology is to be understood in terms of the way it closes us off from other possible understandings of Being, from what the *Contributions* calls the ‘mystery’: “The actual threat has already affected man in his essence. The rule of Enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth” (QCT 28). In the same paragraph, Heidegger appears to allude to his claim from the *Letter* that humanism and metaphysics culminate in the view that man is the ‘lord of beings’: “man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. [...] It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself.” But on the contrary, insofar as we remain deaf to the ‘call’ of Being, “*precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence*” (QCT 27, emphasis in original). In ‘Weg-sein’, being-away, human beings remain alienated from their essence, unable to preserve the truth of Being.

This is why, from the very opening of the *Contributions*, Heidegger identifies the task of philosophy as “no longer to be ‘about’ something, to present something objective”, but rather to bring about “an essential transformation of the human being: from ‘rational animal’ (*animal rationale*) to Da-sein” (Ga65: 5 [Unnumbered Preface]). This suggests that the basic point of his later work is, in a broad sense, ethical. It is not (just) about analysing the human essence, but about transforming the human being. Such passages appear to undermine – or at least to complicate – Thomas Sheehan’s claim that “human beings are the *Da* [of *Da-sein*] not occasionally or by their own choice, but of *necessity*. We cannot *not* be the open” (2001: 194). While such a claim is certainly encouraged by the manner in which Heidegger talks about Dasein in *Being and Time*, it shows insufficient sensitivity to later shifts in his terminology. It is surely significant that Heidegger explicitly understands ‘Weg-sein’, the apparent opposite of Da-sein, in terms of the metaphor of ‘closedness’. Thus, as Richard Polt has put it, “what was presented in *Being and Time* as a phenomenology of Dasein – understood as the human way of being – should instead be conceived as projecting a new possibility for humanity” (2020a: 55). Da-sein is still viewed as a uniquely or distinctively human way of being – indeed, as the highest human possibility – but it is no longer viewed as the way humans are in general or necessarily.

Further support for this reading can be found in an illuminating discussion that Heidegger titles ‘Elucidation of the Concepts of Existence and Da-sein (Elucidations of “Being and Time”)’.¹⁶ Here, he makes the radical claim that no ‘historical humanity’ has yet been ‘delivered over’ or ‘assigned’ to Da-sein:

Da-sein [...] is called “human,” not because it is grounded in the being of the human and is something “human,” something measured according to the human, but because, at the most, “the” human is specifically assigned to Da-sein. “The human” – that is, a historical humanity {*Geschichtlichkeit*} [...] (from out of the persistent steadfastness taken over from the destinal {*geschicklichen*} experience of Being). But not every historical humanity is specifically assigned to the persistent steadfastness of Dasein; as a result of the forgetting of Being, which is to be thought in terms of the destiny of Being, *there has not yet been such a humanity in history up to this point*; for, all of Western History, and the modern history of the world in general, is grounded in metaphysics. But a humanity to come is delivered over to Da-sein. (Ga49: 47–8, final emphasis added; cf. Ga49: 27)

While I cannot hope to give a full account of the more opaque features of this passage here, Heidegger's remarks seem to suggest that 'Dasein' or 'Da-sein' is to be understood not as a basic determination of humanity's Being, but as a possible but as yet unfulfilled accomplishment of humanity. Though the connection between Dasein and the human remains intimate, it is no longer to be understood as a relation of identity.¹⁷ Rather, 'Da-sein' is something to which the human may or may not come to be 'assigned'. Moreover, this 'assignment' is related to a 'destinal experience of Being' – a phrase that suggests both an historical dimension to this experience and a certain passivity or receptivity on the part of the human being, further reinforced by the idea that humanity might be 'delivered over' to Dasein. Indeed, the idea that the history of Being is somehow prior to and enabling of the deeds of human beings is a recurring one in Heidegger's later work, to which I shall return.

In a similar vein, Heidegger talks in the *Contributions* of a "dislodging" of the human being, but cautions against the idea that this is something that humans could achieve of their own accord: "If human beings must carry out this dislodging by relying on their own resources, then is not the presumptuousness of giving the measure even *greater* than it is when the human being is simply put forth as the measure?" (Ga65: 22, §7) Nevertheless, we are told that "Being, in its uniqueness, *needs* Da-sein and also *needs* what is therein both grounded and grounding, namely, the human being. Truth does not essentially occur otherwise" (Ga65: 251, §194, emphasis added). The term 'needs' translates '*braucht*', which could also be translated as 'uses'. Thus, the suggestion is that Heidegger envisions 'a humanity to come' as in some sense in the service of Being.

This notion finally returns us to ideas about the human essence developed in the *Letter*. In a famous passage, Heidegger tells us that "the human being is not the lord of beings. The human being is the shepherd of Being [...] whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being's truth" (LH 260).¹⁸ This passage confirms the idea that we are somehow beholden to, 'called by' Being. And we are called to a specific task: the preservation of Being's truth. It is in this sense that "the essence of the human being is essential for the truth of Being" (LH 263). The passage also points to an inadequate interpretation of the human as the lord of beings – an idea appropriate to a technological age characterized by the ever-increasing mastery, manipulation, and objectification of beings – perhaps even ourselves – and the oblivion of Being.¹⁹

One complication, however, is that we are never *completely* closed off from Being. In the technology essay, Heidegger writes that under the spell of 'enframing' man "fails in every way to hear in what respect he ek-sists, from out of his essence, in the realm of an exhortation or address, and thus *can never* encounter only himself" (QCT 27). Even when we have forgotten – or as Heidegger sometimes puts it, been abandoned by – Being, the possibility of an openness to its 'address' or 'call' remains. In a sense, then, Being and the human being remain indissociable. Nonetheless, it seems clear that Heidegger wants to reserve the term 'Da-sein' for a specific way of being: one in which we heed our essence and 'ek-sist' by preserving the truth of Being.

Before we return to the question of humanism, allow me to briefly consider two critical questions that might be thought to arise naturally from this account, which has so far remained highly abstract. First, what does the 'essential transformation' of the human being that Heidegger calls for actually consist in? Second, how are we to understand Heidegger's use of the word 'Being'? In particular, how "metaphysically inflationary" is Heidegger's conception of Being in these later texts?²⁰

There are severe difficulties involved in answering the first question. It is hard to give a concrete account of what this transformation might amount to, not least because Heidegger himself sometimes claimed to be at a loss. In his final interview with *Der Spiegel*, he claims that his later writings can at best awaken a receptive mood in us, or begin to prepare us for another way of thinking. What he cannot give, however, is concrete moral direction.²¹ Indeed, he sometimes suggests that the transformation his philosophy is supposed to engender is not to be understood in moral or ethical terms at all: "In philosophical knowledge [...] the very first step sets in motion a transformation of the one who understands, and this not in the moral-'existentiell' sense, but rather with respect to Da-sein" (Ga65: 13, §5; see also 238, §177). One explanation for Heidegger's reticence here is the sheer variety of concrete ways of being – what he would earlier have called Dasein's 'existentiell' possibilities – that might count as ways of "sheltering the truth in some fashion or other": we can do this, he suggests, "thoughtfully or poetically, or by

building, leading, sacrificing, suffering, rejoicing” (Ga65: 238, §177). This strongly suggests that whether a ‘transformation’ has taken place is not so much a question of the content of our deeds, but of the manner in which they are (or fail to be) responsive to Being. Heidegger writes in the *Letter* that ek-sistence is a way of being “in which the essence of the human being preserves the source that determines him”, namely Being itself (LH 247). His language here suggests both an active and a passive or receptive moment: the ek-sisting human being both (actively) *preserves* or *shelters* and is (passively) *determined* by Being.

But this makes the second critical question all the more pressing. How are we to understand ‘Being’ in all of these claims? As Thomas Sheehan has pointed out, there is surely a danger of reifying ‘Being’ here, and many of Heidegger’s formulations appear to succumb to this danger by describing Being as an active and quasi-agential force – what Sheehan sardonically calls ‘Big Being’ – while downplaying the agency of human beings.²² In a representative passage from the *Letter*, Heidegger stresses that “human beings do not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being” (LH 252). It is the ‘destiny’ of Being that appears to determine what kind of understanding of Being human beings can have, and thus to determine the ways in which entities can appear to us.

I shall return to the questions this raises concerning human agency and responsibility in Section 3. For now, it will be sufficient to note that such passages do not necessarily settle the question of how ‘metaphysically inflationary’ Heidegger’s conception of Being is. While they do lend themselves to a hypostatisation of Being, they do not rule out a more deflationary reading.²³ Part of the point could simply be that human beings cannot in any straightforward sense choose their understanding of Being. They are, in the language of *Being and Time*, thrown into such an understanding. The question will then be whether modern human beings remain stuck in the conception of beings into which they find themselves thrown, or become receptive to other understandings of Being and thus to other ways in which entities can be. Rather than remaining within the confines of a one-sided interpretation of entities – for instance a technological conception of them as ‘standing-reserve’, mere resources for human manipulation (QCT 15–20) – an attitude of responsive thought might enable us to “guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are” (LH 252).

For my purposes, we can bracket the question of whether a more inflationary or deflationary reading makes the best sense of Heidegger’s claims. The important point is that Heidegger’s new conception of the human essence understands humanity primarily in terms of its relationship to Being. As he emphasises in the *Letter*, “the point is that in the determination of the humanity of the human being as ek-sistence what is essential is not the human being but Being” (LH 254). This point also allows us to see what Heidegger has in mind when he talks about the *inhuman*: for a human to be “inhuman” is for them to be “outside their essence” (LH 244). Our essence is ek-sistence: standing in the clearing of Being and preserving its truth. This suggests that in Heidegger’s sense of the term, ‘inhumanity’ is to be understood ontologically or Being-historically. To be inhuman, he implies, is to remain “stifled in metaphysical subjectivism and submerged in oblivion of Being” (LH 263). It is thus metaphysical humanism that perpetuates the inhuman in Heidegger’s sense. Inhumanity, like humanity, must be characterised in terms of the human being’s relationship to Being.

If we understand the inhuman in this sense, it is hardly surprising that Heidegger claims that he in no way advocates or defends the inhuman. But this does not yet settle the question of the relationship between this sense of the inhuman and its more familiar ontic sense, which relates to inhumane actions, deeds, policies, and institutions. Thus, although I have indicated a broad sense in which Heidegger’s later work is oriented toward a radical transformation, and thus has a pronounced normative impetus, it remains unclear how such a transformation relates to what we ordinarily understand by humanity in the ethical sense.

One promising starting point for further exploration of this issue would be Heidegger’s brief discussion of ‘evil’. ‘Evil’ is a paradigmatically ethical concept, whose use is closely related to that of ‘inhumanity’. Thus, I turn now to an analysis of Heidegger’s remarks about evil, in the hope that it will shed further light on his use of ‘the inhuman’ and help illuminate the relation of that usage to its ordinary moral sense.

3 | EVIL AND THE ABANDONMENT OF BEING IN THE *LETTER* AND THE ‘EVENING CONVERSATION’

Late in the *Letter*, Heidegger makes some brief and cryptic remarks about ‘the hale’ and ‘evil’:

And yet thinking never creates the house of Being. Thinking conducts historical eksistence, that is, the *humanitas* of *homo humanus*, into the realm of the upsurgence of the hale [*des Heilen*]. With the hale, evil appears all the more in the clearing of Being. The essence of evil does not consist in the mere baseness [*Schlechtigkeit*] of human action, but rather in the malice of rage. Both of these, however, the hale and the raging, can essentially occur in Being only insofar as Being itself is in strife. (LH 272, translation modified)

The passage begins with some ideas that should by now be familiar. The ‘house of Being’ is not a human creation; instead, thinking is a kind of conduit through which we first attain our essence, ‘*humanitas*’, through a renewal of our relationship to Being. However, from there, the questions multiply: What is the ‘upsurgence of the hale’? If – as seems quite natural – we are to hear salvific connotations in this phrase, how can it be that ‘with the hale, evil appears all the more’? What is the difference between ‘evil’ and ‘the essence of evil’? If the latter does not consist in the ‘mere’ baseness – and *Schlechtigkeit* might equally be rendered as ‘wickedness’ or ‘badness’ here – of human action, what does it consist in? ‘The malice of rage’ – but how are we to hear ‘malice’ and ‘rage’ in a way that does not refer back to human action?

Passing over the first question for the time being, let us consider the second question. There is an ambiguity here regarding the word ‘appears’. On one reading, it sounds as if Heidegger is saying that the hale somehow brings about the appearance of evil. If we understand Heidegger’s claim in this way, and preserve for the time being the ‘positive’ connotations of ‘the hale’ and the ‘negative’ connotations of ‘evil’ (and surely few words have more negative connotations than this one!), the claim seems deeply puzzling. However, on another interpretation of ‘appears’, perhaps the idea is rather that as our ‘historical eksistence’ is conducted into ‘the realm of the upsurgence of the hale’, ‘evil’ will appear in the sense of ‘becoming visible’; only when we enter into the hale can we first become aware of an evil that was already in some sense ‘raging’. This alternative reading provides a somewhat less counter-intuitive construal of Heidegger’s claim.

What of the third question? It is important to note that for Heidegger the word ‘essence’ has a rather different sense than it does in traditional metaphysics. We can first clarify it negatively by noting that what is not meant is ‘*essentia*’: essence in the sense of ‘what something is’, or that which is common to all entities of a particular kind, in virtue of which they are the entities they are. For later Heidegger, ‘essence’ is instead to be understood in dynamic or processal terms, as something that unfolds temporally. To convey this, Heidegger uses an unusual verb, *wesen*, which he relates to the German noun *das Wesen* (essence). This verb is often translated (as in the passage quoted above) as ‘to essentially occur’, and sometimes as ‘to essence’.²⁴ So the essence of evil is something that itself occurs, that is ‘in process’. Heidegger also frequently suggests that the ‘essence’ of something is in some way prior to it. For instance, in his discussion of the essence of technology, ‘technology’ in the everyday, modern sense is portrayed as a local manifestation or consequence of the essence of technology, understood as an event or epoch in the history of Being. Returning to the question of the relationship between evil and the essence of evil, then, we can surmise that Heidegger is here establishing something like a priority relation: the suggestion seems to be that it is not primarily through the ‘baseness’ of human actions that evil comes about, but, on the contrary, that ‘evil’ in the Heideggerian sense – ‘the malice of raging’ – is an event in the history of Being. It remains to be seen, then, how ‘human’ evil is related to this Being-historical evil.²⁵

Unfortunately, there are few other mentions of these notions in the *Letter* itself. On the following page, we are told that “to the hale Being first grants ascent into grace; to raging its compulsion to malignancy” (LH 273, translation modified). However, this appears to be not so much a clarification as a reiteration of the claim regarding the

provenance of the ‘essential occurrence’ (namely, Being), and a confirmation that in discussing ‘the raging’ Heidegger is no longer talking about any human deed, but rather about something ‘granted’ by Being itself. Finally, the reference to ‘malignancy’ here recalls an earlier passage, in which Heidegger suggests that “what is distinctive about this world-epoch consists in the closure of the dimension of the hale [*des Heilen*]. Perhaps that is the sole malignancy [*Unheil*]” (LH 267). This sentence occurs at the close of a discussion of the essence of the holy [*das Wesen des Heiligen*], and foregrounds an etymological connection between the holy [*das Heilige*], ‘the hale’ [*das Heile*], and the ‘malignancy’ or harm [*das Unheil*]. If this ‘sole’ malignancy is later connected to ‘the raging’ (and therefore the essence of evil), we can perhaps conclude further that there is a connection between the raging and the ‘closure’ of the dimension of the hale. But, in line with our conjecture above, we can only truly recognise this evil, the raging, for what it is when we have been granted access to ‘the upsurge of the hale’. This access is somehow to be brought about through ‘thinking’.

Having examined in a cursory manner the explicit statements about evil in the *Letter*, we can draw the following tentative – and surprising – conclusion: Heidegger connects ‘the essence of evil’ not so much with the inhuman(e), the evil actions of which humans are capable, but rather with Being. In the *Letter*, the essence of evil is said to ‘rest in the malice of rage’, which can only ‘essentially occur in Being’. However, it still remains unclear what connection, if any, Heidegger perceives between evil in this Being-historical sense and evil in the ordinary moral sense: the sense connected with human (all too human) ‘inhumanity’. To shed light on this connection, I turn now to a more extensive discussion of evil in the third of Heidegger’s *Country Path Conversations*, written at the close of the Second World War and titled ‘Evening Conversation: In a Prisoner of War Camp in Russia, between a Younger and an Older Man’. Given that the *Letter* (December 1946) was composed soon after the ‘Evening Conversation’ (May 1945), and given the close affinity in the phrasing of Heidegger’s remarks on evil in the two texts, the latter seems likely to offer clarification regarding the obscurities of the former.²⁶

Some common themes emerge in the conversation’s opening pages. To begin with, both texts connect evil rhetorically with health and healing. Recall my interpretative suggestion that, according to Heidegger, we gain insight into evil and its essence when we are ‘conducted into the realm of the hale [*des Heilen*]’. The movement of the ‘Evening Conversation’ lends support to this suggestion by illustrating precisely that process. The impetus of the conversation is the Younger Man’s experience of being “suddenly overcome by something healing [*etwas Heilsames*]” (Ga77: 132). The Older Man remarks that to understand the nature of “what heals [*das Heilende*]”, we “would have to know what is wounded in you” (Ga77: 133), and the attempt to express ‘what is wounded’ leads directly into a discussion of the surrounding destruction of the war, and the ‘devastation’ underlying it. The discussion of the essence of evil is set in motion by the Older Man’s claim that this “devastation of the earth and the annihilation of the human essence that goes with it are somehow evil itself” (Ga77: 133). What is suggested by the shape of the dialogue, then, is that an experience of genuine healing can lead to clarity regarding the nature of ‘the wound’ and of evil itself, both of which will turn out to be intimately connected with an event in the history of Being – namely, the abandonment of Being [*Seinsverlassenheit*].

A further resonance between the two discussions concerns the distinction I noted above between moral evil (‘baseness’) and the essence of evil, or evil understood in a Being-historical sense. Heidegger elaborates on this idea in the ‘Evening Conversation’, a recurring theme of which is the relation between the essence of evil and two sets of moral ‘phenomena’: instances of moral evil and possibilities of moral evaluation. Regarding the first set (we shall return to the second shortly), Heidegger introduces his discussion of the ‘devastation’ that he identifies with evil as follows:

The devastation [...] has not, after all, existed just since yesterday. And it is not exhausted by what is visible and tangible. It can also never be accounted for by an enumeration of instances of destruction and the obliteration of human lives, as if it were only the result of these. (Ga77: 133)

The ‘only’ in the final sentence need not be read as diminishing the significance of these ‘tangible’ events. Rather, Heidegger’s idea is that the devastation somehow exceeds them. Indeed, he argues that ‘devastation’ in his sense actually underlies them: “devastation is in no way a consequence of the World War, but rather the World War is for its part *only a consequence of the devastation* that has been eating away at the earth for centuries” (Ga77: 136, emphasis added; see also 142, and the postscript *in propria persona* at 157). But, anticipating the phrasing of the *Letter*, the Younger Man tells us that the evil of this underlying devastation is to be understood not as “what is morally bad, and not what is reprehensible, but rather [as] malice” (Ga77: 133). As the Older Man points out, this contrast is initially highly puzzling: how are we to understand malice in a way that is not correlated with the morally bad? The statement that ‘evil is malice’ is especially odd in German, where “as the name says, malice [*das Bösertige*] is of the nature [*Art*] of evil [*Bösen*], and is an outflow of it” (Ga77: 134).

Heidegger’s answer is that we can give a “profound sense” to this statement, if we “think of malice on the basis of something other than morality” (Ga77: 134). This ‘something other’ is connected, as it is in the *Letter*, with ‘rage’:

Malice is insurgency, which rests in furiousness, indeed such that this furiousness in a certain sense conceals its rage, but at the same time always threatens with it. The essence of evil is the rage of insurgency, which never entirely breaks out, and which, when it does break out, still disguises itself, and in its hidden threatening is often as if it were not. (Ga77: 134).

This elaboration on ‘malice’ may seem to replace one obscure term with several more, getting us no further. Nonetheless, connections can be perceived between this passage and those quoted above concerning devastation and destruction. In particular, the idea that devastation exceeds its tangible manifestations is alluded to again here: rage ‘never entirely breaks out’, that is, its expressions never exhaust it; it ‘disguises itself’, ‘is often as if it were not’, thus remaining hidden ‘for centuries’, unnoticed beyond its ‘visible and tangible’ signs. These ideas raise two further questions: what does this ‘rage’ consist in, and how does it disguise itself?

While the text is hardly transparent on these points, the Older Man speculates that the ‘rage’ of malice might be “something pertaining to the will”, leading the Younger Man to make the “audacious” suggestion that “the will itself is what is evil” (Ga77: 134). Part of the audacity of this claim is that we usually see evil as a possibility of the will – one that is contrasted with the good will and morality. To identify the will itself with evil seems to preclude the possibility of a ‘good will’ that is not somehow tainted by evil. Heidegger indeed hints at this possibility: “it could be the case that even morality [is] only a monstrous offspring [*Ausgeburt*] of evil” (Ga77: 135). This claim leads into a discussion that both acknowledges and disavows Nietzsche as a possible precedent. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche posited affirmation of the will to power as an alternative ‘beyond good and evil’. Such an affirmation is a futile attempt to escape this evaluative opposition, however: “Assuming [...] the will itself is what is evil, then the realm of pure will to power is least of all a ‘beyond good and evil’” (Ga77: 135). On the contrary, the affirmation of will to power – which in Heidegger’s view becomes dominant in modernity – only serves to entrench evil in the Heideggerian sense, feeding the devastation.

This discussion brings out once again Heidegger’s distinction between moral evil and the essence of evil. A parallel can be found in his essay on technology, where our usual anthropocentric understanding of modern technology that views it in essentially instrumental terms is supplanted by an understanding of the essence of technology as a mode of revealing or disclosing entities. Furthermore, in a claim that resonates with ideas in the ‘Evening Conversation’, Heidegger stresses that “The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology” (QCT 28). Rather, the ‘danger’ that technology represents is the annihilation of the human essence (cf. Ga77: 12–16, 21, 57, 103) – the possibility that we will be unable to “experience the call” of the truth of Being. This is not just a structural similarity between the arguments of the two texts; rather, technology and the devastation belong to the same epoch in the history of Being, rooted in what Heidegger terms the abandonment of Being: “The Being of an age of devastation would then consist precisely in the abandonment of Being” (Ga77: 138).

The sense Heidegger attaches to this phrase can be illuminated by a closer look at the meaning of ‘devastation’. For Heidegger, “‘Devastation’ [Verwüstung] means [...] that everything—the world, the human, and the earth—will be transformed into a desert [Wüste]” (Ga77: 136). This is a desert in a Being-historical sense, rather than a ‘geographical’ one; ‘world’ and ‘earth’ have what the early Heidegger would have referred to as an ‘ontological’ signification, so their ‘desertification’ is not merely a product of ‘ontic’ destruction. On the contrary, this desert “allows for nothing that emerges of itself, in its emergence unfolds itself, and in unfolding calls others into a co-emerging” (Ga77: 137). As the translator points out (Ga77: 137, fn. 2), these terms allude to Heidegger’s notion of *phusis*, the original Greek experience of Being. The suggestion, then, is that in the ‘age of devastation’ we can no longer have an experience of Being; we “remain abandoned by Being” (Ga77: 137). This does not, however, mean that in this epoch of abandonment beings ‘are not,’ or lose their Being: the abandonment “nonetheless still lets beings be” (Ga77: 138). What is lost is an experience of Being as such, what Heidegger sometimes terms ‘Beyng’ [*Seyn*], using an archaic spelling to mark the difference between ‘Beyng’ and the ‘Being of beings’. We can no longer experience what the *Contributions* calls Beyng’s “giving self-withdrawal” (Ga65: 196, §131). This is why the essence of technology is intimately connected with this ‘abandonment’: the totalising domination of the technological mode of revealing threatens to occlude both the possibility of other modes of ‘truth’, of other ‘gifts’ from Beyng, and the very fact that technology in the essential sense itself ‘comes from’ Beyng.²⁷

This feature of the abandonment of Being returns us to our original question regarding the relation between moral evil and the essence of evil. For Heidegger, human beings “instigate and sustain [...] consequential phenomena of the devastation, though never the devastation itself” (Ga77: 136, emphasis added). Devastation does not originate in human acts; on the contrary, “malice, as which the devastation occurs, may very well remain a basic trait of Being itself [because] the devastation rests in the abandonment of beings by Being, [which] comes forth from Being itself” (Ga77: 139).²⁸ In keeping with his rejection of anthropocentrism, Heidegger stresses that devastation, while it essentially concerns human beings, is not created by them, but rather has its provenance in Being; it is an occurrence in the history of Being. But for that reason, we are barred from “regarding this thought, that evil would dwell in the essence of Being, as ‘pessimistic’ or in any way evaluating it” (Ga77: 139). Indeed, Heidegger repeatedly stresses the inappropriateness of moral “indignation”, “superiority”, “haughtiness”, and “false passion”, and the mistake of “morally evaluating the devastation” (Ga77: 133–136). Nor are variations on this claim limited to the ‘Evening Conversation’. Heidegger makes a similar point in his interview with *Der Spiegel*, ‘Only a God Can Save Us’, when he suggests that it is not his place to “preach and to impose moral judgment.” Indeed, he claims that this would be “contrary to the meaning of the task of thought” (OAG 110).

Heidegger offers several reasons for this suspicion against a ‘moral’ response to the devastation, to ‘evil’ in the essential sense. The first is that it makes, if you like, a category mistake – it seeks to evaluate in moral terms something that is not the work of moral agents. The devastation is “an event that prevails outside of human guilt and atonement” (Ga77: 140). Beyng is not a being, and is certainly not a morally culpable human being. The second is that a moral response will be utterly ineffective: “moral superiority is not in a position to grasp, much less abolish or even mitigate, evil” (Ga77: 134). There is scope for a human response to evil, but it consists in preparing ourselves for a thoughtful relation to Being, in what Heidegger alternately characterises as thinking, ‘releasement’, and, in the ‘Evening Conversation’, ‘waiting’; it does not consist in “the setting up of a morally grounded world order” (Ga77: 139). On the contrary: Heidegger’s third – and perhaps most controversial – reason for resisting a ‘moral’ response is that moral programmes only serve to entrench the devastation further:

Older Man: [That] which inflicts the suffocating hides itself behind something insidious, something which announces itself in the form of the purportedly highest ideals of humanity: progress, unrestrained escalation of achievement in all areas of creating, equal employment opportunities for everyone, and above all the allegedly highest rationale—the uniform welfare of all workers.

Younger Man: What is really devastating, and that means what is malicious, consists here in the fact that these goals for humanity lead the various realms of humanity to become obsessed with devoting

everything to their realization, and so with unconditionally driving the devastation onward while increasingly reinforcing it in its own consequences. (Ga77: 136)

I shall raise some critical questions concerning this passage later. For now, I want to stress its relation to the aforementioned claim that evil ‘disguises itself, and in its hidden threatening is often as if it were not’. We can now see more clearly how this self-disguising takes place: precisely through the positing of ‘goals for humanity’ that are opposed to destruction and therefore apparently – but only apparently – to ‘devastation’. These goals, in Heidegger’s view, are just as much an expression of the ‘raging’ of the will as the moral evils of the war are. A passage from the *Contributions* puts this in stark terms. Heidegger writes that for Nietzsche, “*Nihilism* means [...] that we lack all goals.” However, “the genuine nihilism” is rather

the unwillingness to acknowledge the lack of goals. [...] Therefore precisely where one believes one again has goals [...] resides the greatest nihilism, the deliberate turning of a blind eye to human goallessness, the [...] avoidance of any goal-setting decision, the dread of all decisive domains and of their opening. The dread of Being was never as great as it is today. (Ga65: 109, §72)

A reference to *Volk* elsewhere in the quoted section suggests that Heidegger’s critique here is partly aimed at National Socialism, with which he grew increasingly disenchanted in the late 30s. But the critique clearly has implications that transcend the differences between political programmes.²⁹ For Heidegger, our very confidence in our goals, including ‘progressive’ ones, closes us off from an awareness of our genuine ‘goallessness’ – which, as the final sentence suggests, is intimately connected with the abandonment of Being. The end result of remaining within the moral sphere, driving towards the achievement of a ‘moral world order’ as our ‘highest ideal’, is that “the abandonment by Being is hidden away”, made “unassailable” (Ga65: 95, §57).

4 | THE HISTORY OF BEING, HISTORIOLOGY, AND MORALITY: TWO CRITICAL QUESTIONS

With this elaboration of Heidegger’s account of evil in hand, it is now possible to articulate two interrelated critical questions regarding his strategy and overall normative project. The first is a theoretical question concerning the account’s ‘explanatory power’, the second a normative question concerning its implications. I shall begin with the theoretical question: in what sense is it the case that “the destruction could not even begin” unless “the devastation was already at work” (Ga77: 142)? Put more generally, what precedence do events in the history of Being have over particular, ‘ontic’ historical phenomena, such that these phenomena can be ‘consequences’ of them (cf. Ga77: 136)?

Presumably, Heidegger’s answer will have to be given at a very general level, and in the case of moral evil it will be given in terms of the will; the ascension in modernity of what Heidegger elsewhere calls the “will to will” is somehow meant to underlie the catastrophic events of the 20th century (Ga5: 176).³⁰ But can such an abstract explanation suffice to account for historiological events in their specificity? This question is especially pressing given Heidegger’s view that phenomena that are apparently diametrically opposed at the ontic level may derive from the same Being-historical source. Not only morally evil acts, but morality itself, including attempts to institute a moral ‘world-order’, programmes of welfare, and human rights are alike suggested to be ‘monstrous offspring’ of evil (Ga77: 135–9). But since we surely cannot afford to remain neutral regarding which of these ‘opposites’ is to be preferred, Heidegger ought to make some suggestion as to why a Being-historical process that apparently makes both possible sometimes manifests as one and sometimes as the other.

It might be replied that this objection is misaimed: Heidegger owes us no explanations of this kind, for he is doing philosophy, rather than ordinary history (‘historiology’) or any ontic human or social science. Heidegger himself

maintains that he “in no way means to furnish an incidental contribution to sociology” (LH 242). While that comment concerns in particular the discussion of ‘*das Man*’ in *Being and Time*, it also applies quite generally. However, despite such warnings, it remains the case that as soon as Heidegger intimates a relationship between particular ‘historiological’ phenomena and his history of Being, it is difficult to see how he can avoid offering explanations that in some way compete with ordinary historiological ones. He therefore owes us an explanation of the relationships between the two ‘levels’.

This point can be clarified with an example from the *Letter*. There, Heidegger claims that “What Marx recognized in an essential and significant sense [...] as the alienation [*Entfremdung*] of the human being has its roots in the homelessness of modern human beings” (LH 258, translation modified). He suggests that what constitutes the ‘superiority’ of the Marxist account is that “Marx by experiencing alienation attains an essential dimension of history” (LH 259, translation modified), namely an intimation of the ‘homelessness’ of humanity. This latter must be understood “in terms of the history of Being” (LH 258). The homelessness of the human being in modernity consists at least partly in our alienation from language, properly understood as “the house of Being[,] in [whose] home human beings dwell” and consequently in our distance from our own essence (LH 239); it thus ultimately relates back to the abandonment of Being, though Heidegger does not use this phrase in the *Letter* itself or in the related discussion in the technology essay. The essential point here is that our ‘homelessness’ is intimately connected with the modern epoch in the history of Being.

Since Marx himself obviously did not understand *Entfremdung* in this manner, Heidegger’s comments on Marx are not to be read as an endorsement of Marxism as such – indeed, elsewhere Heidegger’s antipathy towards Marxism is explicit and vehement (see e.g. Ga40: 41, 51–2, 54). Rather, Heidegger is making a claim parallel to what he says concerning Nietzsche and nihilism. If Nietzsche “caught sight of the appearances of nihilism [but] did not yet grasp its essence” (Ga77: 138), then Marx caught sight of the appearances of homelessness (viz. alienation), but did not himself understand it in terms of the history of Being.³¹ However, if this is the claim, Heidegger’s understanding of alienation – a modern historiological phenomenon – as rooted in homelessness – a Being-historical notion – is in some sense meant to be an alternative to Marx’s explanation, and indeed a deeper one. The Marxist account, by remaining at the level of a materialist theory of economic history, is from Heidegger’s perspective only superficial.

This kind of critique can only be compelling if there is a demonstrable relation between the ‘deep’ history of Being and the historiological phenomena that other accounts supposedly comprehend only superficially.³² However, Heidegger’s account does not seem to have the resources to explain the specificity of the phenomena it claims are rooted in Being-historical developments. For instance, an account of alienation that tears it from its relation to capitalism’s development, modern working conditions, ownership of the means of production, and massive economic inequality is likely to efface important features of that phenomenon. An account that contains no discussion of these historical developments whatsoever will pass over aspects of alienation that are highly normatively significant. Heidegger’s history of Being is extraordinarily ambitious, attempting to show that all of Western history stands in the shadow of the metaphysical mode of questioning initiated by the Pre-Socratics and exhausting itself with Nietzsche, its last consequence modern technology and nihilism. But its very scope makes it hard to see how Heidegger’s history can be anything but merely suggestive and vague at the level of specific ‘ontic’ phenomena, rather than genuinely explanatory.

Returning to our original question, the same point can be raised in relation to Heidegger’s suggestions concerning the war. It is surely important that some consequences of ‘the devastation’ include “destruction and the obliteration of human lives” (Ga77: 133), even if these are not synonymous with or exhaustive of that event in the history of Being. But Heidegger seemingly has no interest in specifying how these events are made possible by the devastation, or in making any suggestions as to how what we might view as its more positive expressions are to be fostered. On the contrary, as we saw above, he suggests instead that “what is really devastating” is our obsession with apparently positive goals of ‘progress’ and welfare, which “unconditionally drive the devastation onward while increasingly reinforcing it in its own consequences” (Ga77: 136).

It is left ambiguous which consequences are ‘increasingly reinforced’ by this entrenchment. If the suggestion is that ontically destructive consequences are reinforced by our pursuit of progress, Heidegger owes us an explanation for why that should be. A partial answer is that this obsession covers up the danger to our essence that modernity represents. It mistakes the elimination of destruction and injustice for the elimination of devastation itself; thus, the “process of devastation will [...] not be warded off, much less ended with the setting up of a morally grounded world order” (Ga77: 139). Perhaps the idea is that if the ‘process of devastation’ continues, the destruction will too. But more would need to be said if that suggestion is to be compelling. Even if we granted the claim that devastation is a necessary enabling condition for specifically modern forms of destructiveness, it would not follow that it is a sufficient condition for them. Some actions – such as safeguarding human rights – that for Heidegger remain within the devastation’s scope might nonetheless make destructive moral evil much less likely.

A more radical possibility is that Heidegger views all the consequences of the devastation as problematic, because they all – whether ‘good’ or ‘evil’ – equally express the ‘annihilation of the human essence’. This possibility returns us to the second critical question Heidegger’s discussion invites: what are its normative implications, and where does Heidegger stand regarding our familiar moral resources? It does not directly follow from Heidegger’s dismissal of the efficacy and appropriateness of moral evaluation of the ‘devastation’ that we have no right to moral evaluation more generally. Nonetheless, a troubling aspect of his account is that it apparently leaves this question open. If for Heidegger the “supreme danger” is the essence of technology (QCT 26–8), and the attendant possibility that our essence will be ‘annihilated’, and if the genuine ‘wound’ is “the withdrawal of the human existence [*Dasein*] that rests on the ground of thinking” (Ga77: 142), how does the normative demand that we prepare ourselves for genuine thinking, thus attaining our essence, relate to the other claims placed on us? Are these latter simply subordinate to the former, and somehow less urgent? Does the claim that our familiar distinction between moral good and evil springs from evil in the Being-historical sense throw this distinction into question, so that we cannot rely on it until our proper relation to Being is restored?

Much of the initial sense of normative urgency in Heidegger’s later texts comes from the connotations of the terms he employs to describe our situation: ‘devastation’, ‘nihilism’, the ‘supreme danger’ of technology, and the language of woundedness and healing. But if it turns out that none of these terms have the significations we expect – if the ‘annihilation’ of the human essence is repeatedly distanced from the ‘obliteration’ of actual human lives, if the ‘devastation’ reigns as much where rights and welfare are promoted as it does where war and destruction are rife – it becomes less than clear why the ‘devastation’ is something we should want unequivocally to overcome.

At the very least, there is something disquieting in remarks such as Heidegger’s claim that “this waiting people” – soon identified as “the Germans” – is “endangered like no other” (Ga77: 152). Heidegger is quick to distance himself from a nationalistic interpretation of his view that “by becoming those who wait, we first become German” (Ga77: 153), in what the translator Bret Davis describes as a critique “obviously aimed at the racist nationalism of Hitler’s National Socialism” (Ga77: 153, fn. 13).³³ But this critique does not go far enough, and it is not developed in the right direction. There is no clear justification for retaining the goal or vocabulary of ‘becoming *German*’ if that latter term has no nationalistic basis. Speaking ‘Being-historically’ about ‘the German people’ is – at the very best – highly misleading. Moreover, the phrase ‘endangered like no other’, applied to any ‘people’ specified ‘Being-historically’, seems astonishingly inappropriate in an historical context where the National Socialists were committing systematic genocide. One may ask with some justification what right Heidegger has to the term ‘danger’ here, if he is intent on repeatedly distancing it from the atrocities taking place around him.

5 | CONCLUSION: TWO SENSES OF ‘INHUMAN’

In order to bring out this problem more sharply, let us return finally to the question of Heidegger’s view of ‘the inhuman’. If to be inhuman is to be outside the essence of the human (*LH* 244), then our understanding of the inhuman is

inextricable from our conception of the human essence. As we saw, Heidegger maintains that his thinking “in no way advocates the inhuman” (LH 263), and it should by now be clear that in one sense of that term, he stands absolutely opposed to it: the central and guiding aim of his later philosophy is to return us to our essence and to our relationship with Being through the cultivation of ‘thinking’. However, the relation of his normative claims to the ordinary moral sense of the ‘inhuman’ – call it the humanistic sense – ultimately remains ambiguous and troubled. Clearly Heidegger does not endorse the inhuman in this sense; the tone of the ‘Evening Conversation’ suggests an embittered, mournful awareness of the destruction wrought by the war. Nevertheless, by moving beyond moral good and evil, and questioning the efficacy of moral responses to the devastation of modernity, his account does seem to efface certain boundaries between the ‘inhuman’ and its opposite – for instance, between the inhumanity of the actions of the Nazi regime and the attempts elsewhere to secure and promote universal human rights.³⁴

It cannot be insignificant that both the ‘inhuman’ and the ‘human’ in the humanistic sense are understood as ‘inhuman’ in Heidegger’s ‘more essential’ sense – that for Heidegger “the devastation reigns also and indeed precisely there, where country and people have not been affected by the destruction of the war [...] where human rights are respected, where civil order is maintained” (Ga77: 139). The text of the ‘Evening Conversation’ indeed evinces more suspicion regarding the advance of humanistic goals than it does regarding overt acts of moral evil, insofar as for Heidegger the devastation is more insidious when it is covered over by apparent ‘progress’. But can we really regard this progress as merely apparent, or as awaiting validation by a renewed relationship to Being? At the very least, we must maintain an unequivocal recognition of the difference between Auschwitz and the ideals that Heidegger apparently finds so dangerous. This is what Heidegger does not ever explicitly provide, and it remains disquieting that in his opposition to the inhuman in a ‘higher’ sense, he directs his critique against resources that are a crucial safeguard against inhumanity – evil – in the ‘merely’ moral sense.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Malpas (2022) is a notable exception. While his analysis focuses primarily on the role of ‘place’ in the *Letter* and Heidegger’s later work more generally, Malpas also makes some suggestive remarks regarding the relationship between ‘subjectivism’ and humanism, and the centrality of Heidegger’s critique of humanism to his philosophy more generally (2022: 145–7). While much of the reading I offer below coheres well with Malpas’ interpretation, I am more concerned than he is about the potential connection between Heidegger’s anti-humanism and his political views. Even if the understanding of ‘ethics’ Heidegger comes to advocate in the *Letter* “cannot be taken to simply converge with any form of reactionary politics or with any refusal of ethical concerns” (2022: 145), the question of the extent of such convergence is still an important one.

² I use the following abbreviations for selected works by Martin Heidegger: *BT* for *Being and Time* (1962); *QCT* for ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ (1977); *LH* for ‘Letter on “Humanism”’, in his *Pathmarks* [Ga9] (1998); *OM* for ‘Overcoming Metaphysics’ (1993a); and *OAG* for ‘Only a God Can Save Us’ (1993b). In accordance with standard scholarly practice, when citing *Being and Time* I give the pagination of the English translation followed by the ‘H’ numbers, which are printed in the margins and correspond to the pagination of the seventh German edition of *Sein und Zeit* (see *BT*, ‘Translators’ Preface’, 13). Other references to volumes from Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe* are given by ‘Ga number’, followed by the page number of the English translations cited in the bibliography and, where relevant, by

section number. The one exception is Ga97, for which I give the pagination of the German edition; all translations of passages from this text are my own.

³ Diamond (2018: 381). I have substituted ‘normatively’ for ‘morally’ and ‘normative’ for ‘moral’ to make the formulation more general. I have also added the phrase ‘or should not’, primarily because human rights declarations – paradigmatically ‘humanistic’ documents on this conception – standardly frame many of our rights negatively.

⁴ See Golob (2017) for useful discussion.

⁵ Malpas (2022: 138) foregrounds this latter point, but does not discuss it in any detail. It may also be worth noting that although Heidegger repeatedly endeavors to distance himself from the notion of the ‘inhuman’ in the *Letter* (e.g. LH 244, 251, 265), in the posthumously published treatise *The History of Beyng* he appears to identify the kind of thinking he advocates as “in-human”, explaining the term as follows: “does not turn to standards or goals or motivations belonging to humankind hitherto” (Ga69: 23). In his review of the English translation, Mark Wrathall suggests that this gloss pertains not to Heidegger’s own ideal of thinking, but to our experience of “ourselves, our purpose in life, and the entities around us” when we find ourselves in a world organized by the imperative of the will to power; see Wrathall (2016). Wrathall thus views the retraction of recognizable human standards as a symptom of the ills of modernity, as diagnosed by Heidegger. In context, however, I do not think this can be the right reading, since Heidegger immediately goes on to identify such ‘in-human’ thinking with *Da-sein*, a term that by this point in Heidegger’s intellectual development has come to mean a mode of being that is the “highest one of humans, namely the possibility of grounding and preserving truth itself” (Ga65: 237, §176); see Section 2 below for discussion of this terminological shift. In other words, it is precisely the thinking that preserves the truth of Being that Heidegger is suggesting cannot be made answerable to standards ‘belonging to humankind hitherto’. Nonetheless, for my purposes here I will take Heidegger’s claims – or disclaimers – from the *Letter* at face value, and seek to determine what he means by ‘the inhuman’ in that text.

⁶ See Golob (2017: 624, 633) for some brief but trenchant comments on the anti-Semitism evident in Heidegger’s *Schwarze Hefte*; see also Wolin, ed. (1993) for an earlier collection of texts bearing on Heidegger’s relation to National Socialism.

In *Anmerkungen I–V*, the fourth of the *Schwarze Hefte* comprising private remarks dating from 1942 to 1948, Heidegger does appear to condemn Hitler’s regime in strikingly negative terms. He refers to the “atrocities [Greuel]” of National Socialism (Ga97: 85, 98) and to the “atrocities of the ‘gas chambers’ [Greuelhaften der »Gaskammern«]” (Ga97: 99). He also refers to “the criminal madness of Hitler [den verbrecherischen Wahnsinn Hitlers]” (Ga97: 444). Finally, he explicitly condemns anti-Semitism, describing it as “just as foolish and reprehensible as [so töricht und so verwerflich, wie] the bloody and especially the unbloody action of Christianity against ‘the heathens’” (Ga97: 159). The overall significance of these remarks is a controversial issue; see Polt (2020b: 141) and Kellerer (2020: 188–189) for two starkly opposed interpretations of Heidegger’s use of ‘Greuel’, for instance. However, in context Heidegger’s comments seem to me to fall far short of an unequivocal condemnation of the evils committed under National Socialism. On the contrary, Heidegger’s references to these atrocities seem instead to downplay their significance in relation to other events.

In the first passage cited, Heidegger suggests that the Germans stand in a “shading [Beschattung]” as a result of their betrayal of their own essence, a “comportment that is more blind with fury and more destructive than the widely visible devastation and the atrocities that can be made vivid on the posters [blindwütiger ist und zerstörerischer als die weithin sichtbare Verwüstung und die in Plakaten anschaulich zu machenden Greuel]” (Ga97: 84–85; the editor notes that Heidegger is likely referring to posters distributed by the Allied Powers, which reproduced photographs of liberated concentration camps with the caption: “These atrocities! Your guilt! [Diese Schandtaten! Eure Schuld!]”). He continues this line of thought a few pages later: “How pathetic is this clueless crawling under the shading by the planetary terror of a world-public, compared to which the massive brutality of history-less ‘National Socialism’ [die massive Brutalität des geschichtslosen »Nationalsozialismus«] is sheer harmlessness [reine Harmlosigkeit] – despite the glaring palpability of the devastation co-wreaked by it [der von ihm mitangerichteten Verwüstung]?” (Ga97: 87). In the second use of ‘Greuel’ cited above, Heidegger portrays a focus on these atrocities as one side of an “Either/Or [Entweder-Oder]” concerning the interpretation of the history of Germany from 1933 to 1945. However, he describes this ‘Either/Or’ as “the real error [der eigentliche Irrtum]”, since “something else too has taken place. But this stays veiled” (Ga97: 98). Heidegger’s mention of the gas chambers on the next page is embedded in a passage that is admittedly somewhat tentative and exploratory in tone. In it, Heidegger asks whether “the *misjudgment* of this destiny [Geschick]” would “not be a yet more essential ‘guilt’ and a ‘collective guilt’ whose magnitude could not at all, not even in essence be measured by the atrocities of the ‘gas chambers’ –; a guilt – uncannier than all public ‘pilloriable’ [»anprangerbaren«] ‘crimes’” (Ga97: 99; I have tried here to preserve Heidegger’s unusual punctuation). He then goes on to ask “does ‘one’ suspect [ahnt »man«] that by now the German people and country are already a single concentration camp – the like of which ‘the world’, however, has never before ‘seen’, and which the world also does not want to see” (Ga97: 100).

In a similar vein, the passage that mentions Hitler’s criminal madness is concerned not with the victims of the holocaust but rather with the situation of the Germans in the post-war period: “The German people [Volk] is ruined, politically,

militarily, economically, and in the best strength of the people [*Volkskraft*], both through the criminal madness of Hitler and through the will of destruction of the other countries [*Vernichtungswillen des Auslandes*]” (Ga97: 444). Later in the passage, Heidegger continues: “The task remains: to obliterate the Germans spiritually and historically [die Deutschen geistig und geschichtlich auszulöschen]. One should not fool oneself. An old spirit of revenge goes around the earth. The history of spirit [*Geistes-Geschichte*] of this revenge will never be written, the revenge itself prevents that; this history does not even come into public representation; the public is itself already revenge” (Ga97: 444, emphasis in the original). These remarks echo an earlier passage in which Heidegger suggests that public demands for justice function to conceal this alleged revenge: “‘Justice’ [»Gerechtigkeit«]? What is it that they so call and proclaim? Only the overstrained struggle of the poor concealment of a clueless revenge [*der überanstrengte Kampf der schlechten Verheimlichung einer ratlosen Rache*]” (Ga97: 117).

As for the passage regarding anti-Semitism, it is appended to a remark in which Heidegger claims that “‘prophecy’ [...] is an instrument of the will to power”, and insinuates that there is something significant about the fact that “the great prophets are Jewish [*die großen Propheten Juden sind*]” (Ga97: 159). Heidegger then adds a “Note for asses [*Anmerkung für Esel*]” claiming that this “remark has nothing to do with ‘anti-Semitism’” and describing the latter as reprehensible (Ga97: 159). Heidegger’s somewhat self-righteous and impatient tone does little to alleviate the natural concerns one might have regarding the anti-Semitic implications of the original remark, however. The most charitable interpretation one could offer is that Heidegger appears to have a stunningly narrow understanding of what ‘anti-Semitism’ might involve, and simply refuses to recognise that his persistent use of ‘*Juden*’ and cognate terms in ‘Being-historical’ contexts both echoes and contributes to a broader anti-Semitic discourse.

The cumulative impression left by these passages is that Heidegger takes the alleged ‘spirit of revenge’ against the German people, supposedly concealed by ‘the public’, to be much more significant and worthy of sustained thought than the murder of Jewish people in the gas chambers – not to mention the Roma, people with disabilities, homosexuals, and other targets of Nazi persecution. Although he uses the word ‘atrocious’, his remarks hardly amount to a genuine reckoning with these events. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing these passages from Ga97 to my attention and encouraging me to address them here.

⁷ In one of only a handful of mentions of the holocaust in Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe*, he appears to portray it as just one more effect of the depersonalised global domination of technology: “Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of countries, the same as the production of hydrogen bombs” (Ga79: 27). Now, ‘in essence the same’ does not mean ‘equal in moral significance’ for Heidegger; it means instead that these events all stem from the same essential process, the essence of technology. However, this does not amount to much of a defence, since – as I argue below – Heidegger seems to abjure the normative resources that might allow us to make important attributions of responsibility and judgments of relative moral significance.

⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to consider and address possible Heideggerian challenges to my framing here.

⁹ Some commentators would endorse a much stronger claim; Golob, for instance, concludes that “in so far as Heideggerian phenomenology can be said to have a single guiding light, it is not even being but rather normativity: it is that concept which binds together Heidegger’s treatment of intentionality, of authenticity, of finitude and of freedom” (Golob 2014: 254). See Golob (2014), especially Chapters 5 and 6, for a wide-ranging and subtle discussion of these issues. See also Crowell (2007) and Batho (2021) for two recent (and diverging) reconstructions of the early Heidegger’s account of normativity.

¹⁰ See Wrathall (2015) for a related discussion of the relationship between moral ideals and the ideal of authenticity in Heidegger’s early work.

¹¹ See e.g. QCT 29; see also Mulhall (2021: 259) for discussion and Kisiel (2021) for an overview of this notion.

¹² Although I cannot pursue an extended comparison between Heidegger and Adorno here, I am sympathetic to the latter’s view that while “we may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, [...] what the inhuman is we know very well indeed”, and that moral philosophy’s task is in part “the concrete denunciation of the inhuman” (Adorno 2000: 175). Adorno claims further that “a new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon human beings [...] to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (quoted in Freyenhagen 2013: 133); see Freyenhagen (2013), Chapter 5 for extended discussion. One way of reframing the point I am making in the main text would be to say that I think we should treat what Adorno describes as our knowledge of the inhuman as axiomatic – as a starting point for normative theorising that we cannot afford to question.

¹³ I am grateful to Mark Wrathall for pointing me to this text as a source for Heidegger’s views on evil. Robert Bernasconi rightly notes that the “‘Letter on “Humanism”” is often read without reference to the Second World War, but as soon as its close connection to [the posthumously published] ‘Evening Conversation’ becomes apparent, this is no longer

possible, and its highly problematic character becomes apparent” (2017: 167). I am in agreement that there is a close connection between the *Letter* and the ‘Evening Conversation’; that this connection sheds light on several of the obscure claims about ‘evil’ that Heidegger makes in the former text; and that this has ramifications for the moral and political import of that text. However, while Bernasconi provides an illuminating and suggestive discussion of ‘evil’ in Heidegger’s thought, especially regarding its relation to his interpretations of Schelling, I do not believe he makes it apparent enough why the *Letter* takes on a ‘highly problematic character’ as a result of his reading. This is because he does not explain the relationship between what I will call the ‘ontic’ and the ‘Being-historical’ senses of ‘evil’ in Heidegger’s work; nor does he address Heidegger’s discussions of ‘the inhuman’ and their relation to his rejection of humanism. I attempt to do both in Section 3.

- ¹⁴ Cf. Ga49: 29. In the *Letter*, Heidegger claims that other “living creatures” are “separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss” (LH 248). See Ga29/30, §§45–8 for an extended discussion of his claim that non-human animals are “poor in world”; see further Derrida (1989), Chapter VI, Mulhall (2008), Chapter 6, and Cykowski (2021). While the question of Heidegger’s treatment of non-human animals is relevant to broader concerns about humanism, I shall set it aside here.
- ¹⁵ He goes on to acknowledge this new concept’s proximity to *Being and Time*’s notion of inauthenticity, while at the same time expressing his dissatisfaction with his earlier terminology.
- ¹⁶ This discussion is part of a 1941 lecture course (Ga49), primarily concerning Schelling’s distinction between ground and existence. It is not entirely clear whether Heidegger’s ‘elucidations’ are supposed to provide what he takes to be a plausible reading of his earlier text or an attempt at an immanent critique of it. Heidegger later acknowledges that some of his formulations in *Being and Time* are liable to encourage what he later viewed as misinterpretations: “I have learned to see that these very terms were bound to lead immediately and inevitably into error” (LH 271). Thus, the ‘elucidation’ may be best understood as a ‘strong’ reading of his earlier work, albeit one that arises from some of the central ideas of that text, and which Heidegger suggests better captures its spirit: “we are now able to say certain things about the necessity of being and time more clearly than was possible in the first attempt of the treatise ‘Being and Time’” (Ga49: 27).
- ¹⁷ See BT 36/H15 and 75/H50 for Heidegger’s earlier identification of Dasein as “we ourselves.”
- ¹⁸ It is unclear whether human beings as such could be considered to have ‘dignity’ on this conception. ‘Dignity’ would seem to consist in a possibility – of ‘shepherding’ Being – that may or may not be realised. Heidegger’s account could thus perhaps be contrasted with accounts of human dignity such as Kant’s, according to which ‘dignity’ denotes our ‘inner worth’ and our status as ends in ourselves (4:435).
- ¹⁹ On the idea that modern technology has the potential to transform even human beings into mere resources, compare Malpas’ remark that “technological modernity seems to set the human at the center and yet at the same time it subjugates even the human, reduces the human to that which is inhuman” (2022: 150–1).
- ²⁰ I borrow the phrase ‘metaphysically inflationary’ from Golob (2022: 509). Golob is referring here to passages in Heidegger’s later writings – some of which I discuss later in the main text – that appear to “hypostatise [Being] into a quasi-mystical agent” (2022: 509). Thus, inflationary readings would be those that reify Being and attribute a special kind of agency to it. While Heidegger’s texts do sometimes encourage such a reification, one obvious reason to resist any such interpretation is Heidegger’s commitment to the ontological difference – to the view that Being is not itself a being (entity), and so *a fortiori* not an agent of any kind. But see fn. 23 for further discussion.
- ²¹ See e.g. OAG 107–110, 114–5.
- ²² See Sheehan (2001: 189). Sheehan provocatively – and in my view too hastily – cites this tendency as a reason for abandoning the word ‘Being’ as a label for the central subject matter of Heidegger’s philosophy. See also Golob (2017: 630–3) for illuminating discussion of these issues.
- ²³ One interesting interpretative suggestion in this regard is Miguel de Beistegui’s view that Heidegger understands Being in his later work as a ‘pure event’, an event without a subject; see de Beistegui (2003: 221–6). He argues that we can fruitfully understand ‘*es gibt*’, ‘there is’ (literally ‘it gives’), on the model of ‘*es regnet*’, ‘it is raining’; in both cases, it would be a misunderstanding to construe the ‘it’ as referring to a subject or entity. Thus, when Heidegger tells us that Being is itself the ‘It’ of *es gibt* (LH 252), we need not take him to be claiming that Being is a mysterious subject actively doing the ‘giving’. Furthermore, this conception coheres well with the later Heidegger’s pervasive use of the term ‘*Ereignis*’ (‘event’) and its cognates in relation to the truth of Being. Nonetheless, a great deal more would need to be said to fully unpack and evaluate this suggestion and the ontic metaphor on which it relies, and I do not have the space to do so here.
- ²⁴ The latter translation has the advantage of better matching the German syntax, though both translations sound awkward in English – as their original no doubt does in German.
- ²⁵ I use ‘Being-historical’ (*seinsgeschichtliche*) here, as Heidegger does, as an adjectival form of ‘history of Being’ (*Seinsgeschichte*). The ‘Being-historical’ sense of a term is, roughly, its sense insofar as it designates or pertains to an event in the history of Being.

- ²⁶ Drawing on a dialogue rather than an essay or lecture naturally raises methodological questions. Most pressingly, one may wonder which of the views expressed in it, if any, correspond to Heidegger's own. However, while some caution is warranted, in the case of the *Conversations* it is usually fairly obvious which of the views expressed by the archetypal 'characters' are endorsed by Heidegger himself. The conversations are couched in consummately Heideggerian vocabulary, mostly drawn from the *Contributions* and adjacent writings, and can be understood as part of Heidegger's continuing attempts to "bring [the] manifestation [of Being] to language and to preserve it in language through [his] saying" (LH 239).
- ²⁷ For an account of how this occlusion takes place, and why for Heidegger it represents the 'supreme danger', see Thomson (2011: 196–200, especially 199).
- ²⁸ For accounts of Heidegger's claim that evil might be conceived as a 'basic trait of Being itself' that explain its relation to German Idealism (especially Schelling), see Davis (2007: 289–98) and Bernasconi (2017).
- ²⁹ Compare here Heidegger's brief critical remarks regarding "the damage caused by all [...] '-isms'" in the *Letter* (LH 241).
- ³⁰ For an account of the development of Heidegger's views on the will and his critique of it, see Davis (2007), especially Chapter 7.
- ³¹ Elsewhere, Heidegger claims that "The essence of nihilism, which finds its ultimate consummation in the domination of the will to will, resides in the oblivion of Being" (Ga9: 319). Since for Heidegger the 'will to will' is the historical successor of the 'will to power' that Nietzsche championed – the consummate form taken by the will in the age of technology – the implication here is not just that Nietzsche failed to grasp the essence of nihilism, but that his philosophy was expressive of it, or even inadvertently fostered it or brought it to fruition.
- ³² Richard Wolin writes that "the dimension of ontic life or everyday concretion would seem to fall beneath the threshold of Heidegger's ontological vision. And consequently, his [ontological] category of 'historicity' would never be capable of accounting for the [ontic] events of 'real history'"; see Wolin (1993: 157). But so put, this criticism is not decisive. It relies on an overly simplistic understanding of the relationship – and the distinction – between the ontological and the ontic. It is not that ontic phenomena simply fall 'beneath the threshold' of Heidegger's interest; in fact, he constantly alludes to ontic phenomena as manifestations or particular modalities of the epochs he discerns in the history of Being. There is no general problem with wanting to uncover the ontological enabling conditions of ontic phenomena. The problem instead arises at the level of specific phenomena, whose exact relationship to the history of Being Heidegger often leaves mysterious.
- ³³ Compare the critical remarks concerning nationalism in the *Letter* (LH 260).
- ³⁴ As Malpas notes, some readers sympathetic to Heidegger's critique of humanism have emphasised that Nazism rejected 'universal humanism' but nonetheless advocated a 'biological humanism' or 'German political humanism' rooted in an alternative determination of *humanitas* (2022: 146–7 and 154, fn. 28). However, the fact that Nazism could appropriate – or better, pervert – the term 'humanism' in this manner in no way warrants acceptance of a blanket anti-humanism. Instead, it should perhaps prompt renewed reflection on how '*humanitas*' might be interpreted in a genuinely universal and egalitarian manner.

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