

Ronald Beiner. *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right.* University of Pennsylvania Press 2018. 176 pp. \$24.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780812250596).

For liberal democracy to know itself, it must read its critics carefully and seriously, and this means taking them at their word. The two preeminent critics of liberal bourgeois modernity in the 19th and 20th centuries were Nietzsche and Heidegger, but in a peculiar twist of fate, these two anti-egalitarian theorists, with their enchanting rhetoric and spell-binding poetry, migrated to the left and have become ensconced in the academy. As a result, it has become increasingly hard to see just how radical and just how politically dangerous these two bewitching geniuses really are. In *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*, Ronald Beiner aims to correct our habit of presenting sanitized versions of Nietzsche and Heidegger, as though they were easily compatible with our liberal political commitments. He thus aims at recovering the surface of things—recovering the unambiguously hierarchical and antiliberal political teaching of these two thinkers, for whom ‘liberalism, egalitarianism, and democracy are a recipe for absolute deracination and hence for a profound contraction of the human spirit’ (10). In short, Beiner wants us to acknowledge that at the heart of their teachings is the judgment that ‘democracy is ultimately nihilism’ (10).

Since Walter Kaufmann’s attempt to rescue Nietzsche from the use and abuse of Nazi propaganda, scholars have tended to avoid wrestling with Nietzsche’s explicitly political proclamations, preferring to interpret them metaphorically as pertinent to cultural, artistic, or spiritual matters. This is a gross error, according to Beiner. By accommodating Nietzsche’s texts to our preferred political sensibility, we fail, for example, ‘to think hardheadedly and concretely about exactly what Nietzsche may have intended when he spoke... about the coming age of *große Politik* and about himself as the prophet of *große Politik*’ (17). Such language, which suggests ‘a kind of imperial political project, gesturing back to glory-oriented empires of the past,’ is far from rare and forms the counterpart to Nietzsche’s praise for conquering heroes such as Julius Caesar, Frederick II, and Napoleon. Not only are Nietzsche’s works littered with martial pronouncements, but, as *Beyond Good and Evil* attests, Nietzsche thought the primary *political* problem confronting Europe in the late 19th century was the cultivation of a new ruling caste. Beiner’s message to his fellow academics is encapsulated in the proposal that we take seriously the idea that Nietzsche ‘really meant “caste” (*Kaste*), he really meant “rule” (*regierenden*), and he really meant “Europe”’ (18).

Why does Nietzsche propose something so radical? Beiner’s reply is similarly direct and to the point: according to Nietzsche, ‘Western Civilization is going down the toilet because of too much emphasis on truth and rationality and too much emphasis on equal human dignity’ (24). All of Nietzsche’s positive doctrines or teachings are expressions of desperation stemming from the true heart of his philosophy—his critical diagnosis of ‘the comprehensive malady of a sick civilization,’ the two components of which are: (1) ‘the “horizonlessness” of modernity’ and (2) the loss of the possibility for ‘a tragic experience of life and the universe’ (25, 27). Thus Nietzsche’s political rhetoric is the corollary of his cultural-civilizational diagnosis. The West is threatened by nihilism—the highest values have devalued themselves—and Nietzsche’s career is the attempt to formulate a response, to find a way out of the impasse at all costs.

For Nietzsche, nihilism or the ‘death of God’ means we lack the comprehensive moral-ethical guidance that religion once provided; we inhabit a world without a why. Human beings cannot, however, live without a purpose. The culture of liberal modernity is a universalizing, homogenizing enterprise that ‘entails the reduction of culture in its sacredness or holiness to what is utterly profane’ (31). Absent a robust cultural horizon, we risk becoming degraded ‘last men.’ For Nietzsche, ‘there

is no worse disaster for humanity' (31). Nietzsche must thus undertake a wholesale denunciation not only of post-French Revolution modernity, but of the Christian tradition and 19th century simulacra of that tradition that thwart the rebirth of an aristocratic culture governed by a tragic ethos. For Nietzsche, 'Nobility = life-affirmation = grappling with the tragic character of existence and not being defeated by it but, on the contrary, *affirming* it in all its harshness; hence without tragedy, there is no nobility' (45). Nobility, however, requires the 'pathos of distance.' We must therefore 'have *whole societies* that are comfortable with rank order, slavery, and oppression; that don't flinch from imposing their will with iron harshness; and that view their ultimate purpose as "an arrangement . . . for breeding"' (45). Only through such drastic means can nobility be restored and nihilistic self-contempt averted.

Beiner spies a similarly dire prognosis requiring wholesale socio-political change in Heidegger. Rejecting the thesis that Heidegger lacked a political philosophy or was politically naive, Beiner argues that Heidegger's philosophy provides a '*political* standard for judging the worth of different cultures or different civilizations by considering to what extent those cultures or civilizations measure up to the question of Being' (71). In light of such a standard, Heidegger judges liberal modernity to be radically deficient. In fact, no culture so thoroughly obscures the fundamental mystery of beings—namely, that there are beings at all rather than nothing—and, for Heidegger, this constitutes a 'cultural/political/metaphysical catastrophe' (72). The monumental effort required to escape this calamity is the central theme of Heidegger's work, both early and late. As Beiner's analysis of *Being and Time* and the 'Letter on "Humanism"' demonstrates, the continuity of Heidegger's teaching—both before and after *die Kehre*—far surpasses its discontinuity. If there was a change in orientation following the disaster of 1933–1945, it was that Heidegger believed the problems of modernity to be even more intractable and the requisite solution even more radical.

According to early Heidegger, human beings are prone to flee from the anxiety of thought, to anesthetize themselves in order not to face the awesome mystery of Being. The experience of death, however, provides a means of overcoming this somnolent comportment to the world. In confronting our ownmost possibility, we confront the nothingness that lies at the basis of our own existence, and insofar as we do this authentically, we can recover the profundity of the fundamental ontological question, thereby escaping the snares of rationalism and liberating ourselves from the stultifying air of modern liberalism with its 'self-stupifying routine (*sich selbst betäudenden Gewohnheit*)' (76). This is such a challenge precisely because modern man is deaf to the call of Being, unaware that he lives 'on the edge of the abyss of utter nothingness' (84). Oblivious to this abyss, we go about our business without reflecting on the contingency of existence, and for Heidegger, that constitutes 'the most profound existential condemnation of the modern/liberal/bourgeois mode of life' (84).

The same themes animate Heidegger's 'Letter on "Humanism."' Although the proximate target is the subjectivism of Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre is but the final iteration of the metaphysical tradition inaugurated by Plato that constituted 'a degeneration from the ontological domain to the ontic domain' (89). This falling away from Being, with all its theological overtones of man as one expelled from the Garden, is so thoroughly foregrounded that it is hard to see a political teaching in it. As Beiner demonstrates, the essay's principal message is just how profoundly 'life in liberal-egalitarian modernity [is] governed by alienation from, or oblivion in relation to, the meaning of what it means to be' (90). That is, although any positive prescriptions remain obscure, there is a profound and clear 'NO!' running through the text; negativity is the heart of the essay. Just as Nietzsche's rhetoric was intended to seduce readers to his cause (his 'party of life'), Heidegger at-

tempts to provoke a *metanoia* in his readers—a conversion away from the world as currently constituted. Heidegger’s tone at times sounds like the nostalgic lament of a conservative, but this is deceptive. This is no elegy for the ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of the old faith; for, as we learn in the course of the essay, there is simply nothing worth conserving in the Western tradition.

Dominated by ‘metaphysical humanism,’ which fatally ‘posits the human essence as *animal rationale*,’ ‘the history of the West is a process rendering our experience of the mystery of existence progressively more and more superficial,’ leading to utter homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*) in modernity (91, 104). The only philosopher or poet who thought the destiny of man in a more primordial (*anfänglicher*) manner is Hölderlin. Even Goethe is shallow—guilty of mere cosmopolitanism (*das bloße Weltbürgertum*). Heidegger’s condemnation of the past is the prelude to a radically new future. Far from being a conservative (not to mention a left-liberal egalitarian), Heidegger is a revolutionary prophet awaiting some wholly new beginning—a new revelation that might save us from the nihilism of our contemporary age. But, as Beiner reminds us, ‘for Being and “the gods” to return, one would have to somehow conjure away modernity in its totality and supplant it with a wholly new civilization founded on the *ethos* experienced by Heraclitus and captured in his *premetaphysical* thinking or the *ethos* experienced by Heidegger in his ski hut and captured in his *postmetaphysical* thinking’ (104).

Beiner concludes by exploring the urgent question: ‘How to Do Theory in Politically Treacherous Times?’ Taking aim at three representatives of ‘what John Gray has called “the liberal delusion” (the faith that history favors liberalism)’—John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Rorty—Beiner argues that most contemporary political philosophy fails to account for the enduring appeal of anti-liberal ideas (123). Assured that we have discovered the final truth of political life, we have become complacent, content with tinkering at the margins, and confident that history has progressed beyond Nietzsche and the appeal of ideas like the nobility of the tragic view of life. This is a fallacy. History cannot refute ideas. Nietzsche’s philosophy ‘can only be refuted by a more compelling account of the human good’ (125). Thus, the questions of the human good and man’s place in the cosmos are still very much on the table. Rather than repeating liberal nostrums, theory must take up the daunting task of asking about the best way of life: ‘we need to retain our commitment to an enterprise of grand theory that doesn’t presume that we’ve arrived, necessarily, at the final moral horizon’ (125). We must avoid mistaking consensus for conclusive proof, a temporary triumph in practice for a definitive conceptual victory.

Thus, metaphysical and existential questions of ultimate meaning must be put back on the agenda. As Kant pointed out long ago, the ‘peculiar fate’ of human beings is to forever ask such questions; pointing out that they cannot be answered (e.g., positivism) or bracketing them by focusing on procedural questions (e.g., Rawls) proves insufficient. Excessive confidence in the self-evident validity of liberal democracy and its ‘idea of justice has duped theorists into thinking that this enterprise of radical and comprehensive philosophical dialogue is no longer essential’ (128). Not only is this prudentially foolish—i.e., we risk being ‘sucker-punched’ or ‘blindsided’ by ‘some radically nonliberal view of life’—but it also diminishes our humanity, for, according to Beiner, serious philosophic reflection constitutes one of the highest human possibilities (128, 131). The liberal consensus, however, has ironically made such questioning harder, and this has political consequences, since ‘being open to the possibility of philosophical reflection and philosophical dialogue, in any time and in any place, is what allows us to remain fundamentally hopeful as human beings’ (127). For Beiner, absent philosophy, we succumb to despair.

Beiner’s commitment to theoretical probity precludes any easy answers. Hence, although a defender of liberalism and a champion of the post-French Revolution egalitarian order, the book closes with the following sober words: ‘I don’t rule out the possibility that Nietzsche and Heidegger

successfully articulate aspects of spiritual or cultural vacuity in the liberal-egalitarian dispensation that defines modernity. But what they offer by way of new dispensations to supplant spiritless modernity is *far worse*. One has to ask, 'Who ever gave us a guarantee that the problem of the human condition admits of a solution?' (133–134).

As the foregoing attests, this book is both timely and trenchant. It exhibits careful scholarship, deep learning, and impressive erudition. It should be read by political theorists, scholars of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and the punditry class that remains perplexed by contemporary geopolitical events. One hopes that it sparks renewed debate about the grounds of liberalism and a renewed sense of the urgency and importance of political philosophy, especially amongst those who herald Nietzsche as inaugurating 'an "anti-foundationalist" and "post-metaphysical" style of philosophizing' (40).

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