

**Andrew Haas**

*The Irony of Heidegger.*

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Some books are built like brick houses: each brick is put in its proper place, and gradually a coherent and stable structure emerges—one that can be explored in step-wise fashion, a room at a time. There is a certain beauty in such books. One at least knows what to expect, how to orient oneself, and where to look for what one seeks.

Haas' *The Irony of Heidegger* is not such a book. It is, I would like to say, a place of dwelling, not merely a structure to be explored, mapped, and then set aside. There are no rooms, only windows; no foundation, only ever-shifting ground. This is perhaps a strange way to describe a book, and a strange way to begin a book review. But Haas' is a strange book. '*Ein merkwürdiges Buch*' captures it perfectly, because it is a *remarkable* book *worthy* of remark. I will not rehearse Haas' lines of interpretation here, nor the many arguments utilized to articulate it. In fact, I am almost uncomfortable calling it a 'line of interpretation', as that presupposes there to be a coherent interpretive schema into which Haas will cajole Heidegger's work—from *Being and Time* to the *Spiegel* interview. Haas' book is not of this sort. If anything, it stands as a question mark to be put at the end of *every* line of interpretation.

But let me get on with it. The motivating thought of this work is given in its title: What if Heidegger is being *ironic*? What if we have been too serious in trying to understand what Heidegger's thinking involves? What if, in essence, Heidegger's work is self-undermining, even intentionally so? Haas begins his exploration of this possibility by noting that Heidegger chooses to begin *Being and Time* with a quotation from Plato's *Sophist*, of all places. This choice raises, at the very outset, the question of sophistry versus philosophy. As Haas remarks, 'once the very possibility of sophistry has been raised, can we ever be certain that everything that follows it is not sophistry?' (7). Haas proceeds to explore this interpretive possibility through an analysis of *Being and Time*, suggesting that the very idea of authenticity poses the problem of sophistry and philosophy—of what is *real* versus what is mere sham. As the book progresses, Haas turns to later writings, attempting to excavate the possibility of irony as a way of disrupting the orthodoxies of our readings of Heidegger. He provides suggestive explorations of Heidegger's 1933 *Rektoratsrede*, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', the 'Letter on Humanism', 'The Question Concerning Technology', and the *Spiegel* interview. In each case, Haas attempts to open up the interpretive possibility that Heidegger's work is threatened by irony—that we should not take Heidegger's claims at face-value; that we should read him in the aporetic tradition of the best Socratic ironists.

That is the book in a nutshell (the very idea!).

Is Haas successful? The answer to this question of course depends on what we take to be the measure of success. If the measure is ‘getting Heidegger right’, the book *cannot* be successful. If anything, the *point* of irony is to undermine the will-to-uncontested-seriousness; the drive to take things for what they present themselves to be at first glance. Haas’s writing itself is ironic, and hence not to be judged by the standards of those brick books I mentioned at the outset.

The deconstructive flavor of the book is apparent on nearly every page. Heidegger demands to be taken seriously. Everything about Heidegger’s demeanor—written and otherwise—suggests a seriousness of purpose. To show that this seriousness might only be apparent requires an examination of seemingly inessential elements of a text (like the quotation that begins *Being and Time*), and revealing the sense in which these elements are essential—and essential to *undermining* our initial expectations of a text.

Yet the worries about Heidegger’s phenomenology that Haas raises—that we cannot be certain of what counts as a thing revealing its being, on the one hand, and our *misperception* of a thing’s revealing its being, on the other—are worries permeating Haas’ book itself. Is Haas exposing the *real* Heidegger, or is his book a sham interpretation? Is Haas serious, or being ironic in his reading of Heidegger? Haas refuses such questions—or perhaps demands them. He presents Heidegger in a way fundamentally unlike the way ‘one’ reads Heidegger. Like a good phenomenologist, he allows Heidegger to show himself as ironic, but he does this in a text where phenomenology itself is called into question. We are thus led to call into question the very revealing of Heidegger that Haas engages in. For readers who have missed this in the body of the text, Haas offers explicit irony in the postscript: ‘Cross that out. Perhaps Heidegger wasn’t being ironic. Perhaps his texts shouldn’t be read in this way. Maybe it’s just perverse. Seriously.’ (167).

From a work of philosophy on a serious thinker we expect an interpretation that is itself serious—that is meant in earnest. Perhaps this is our problem. There isn’t any one ‘Heidegger’. There are texts and interpretations, translations, and appropriations. To dwell in a new interpretation is to inhabit a new world, where something *different* has been un-concealed, where truth ‘happens’. But how different is this world? Well, if Haas is ‘correct’, not very different at all. Haas is as ironic as he wants Heidegger to be. So, to use a form of argument Haas employs throughout, if Haas has revealed the ‘real’ Heidegger, then the real Heidegger has *not* been revealed, as Haas is being ironic. If, by contrast, Haas has *not* revealed the real Heidegger, then we *do* get a glimpse of the real Heidegger, and for the same reason.

But the playfulness of *The Irony of Heidegger* doesn’t end here. Haas’ writing itself is frequently very similar to Heidegger’s—not in terminology or obscurity, but in

syntax. There are entire pages where one can find only a series of questions, with no answers in sight. Paragraphs composed entirely of questions litter the book, just like in *Being and Time*. German abounds in Haas' book in the way that ancient Greek abounds in Heidegger's writings. Haas begins just as Heidegger begins *Being and Time*, but he notes that 'the question' has been forgotten (although, for Haas, the question is one of irony). Haas also occasionally 'verbizes' a noun (as I am doing in this very sentence), just like Heidegger. The nothing nothings? Well, the sham shams! Touché!

To add irony to irony, Haas ends his book with a quotation from Plato's *Theaetetus*, a dialogue that precedes the *Sophist*. This choice is nearly too rich to bear: the *Theaetetus* is a dialogue that concerns *knowledge*. Its conclusion is inconclusive. Are we meant to question whether or not knowledge of Heidegger has been attained? Similarly, the *Theaetetus* is part of a series of dialogues, and stands as a prelude to the *Sophist*. Should we understand this to mean that the question of irony is a prelude to all other questions? More suggestive still is the Socrates we find in *Theaetetus*. In this remarkable (*merkwürdig!*) dialogue, we have Socrates as written by Plato of course, but we also have the Socrates of *another* Socratic writer (Euclides), found in a dialogue *within* the *Theaetetus*, read by a slave to those present. Haas ends with a quotation in Socrates' mouth, but is this the 'real' Socrates? The very multiplicity—leave aside duplicity—of 'Socrates' calls into question anything we say about him; the same is true of Heidegger.

Haas' own ironic writing is, in my view, what makes this book a success. It is, I would insist, a book for rumination and exploration, as much about irony and interpretation in general as it is about Heidegger. Its aim is to raise questions more than to provide answers—something Heidegger himself would ironically advocate (and the ambiguity of this formulation is intentional, if my intentions can be trusted). For those looking to be convinced of a particular 'line' for reading Heidegger, this conviction will not be secured by reading Haas' book. But this is, I think, all the more reason to read it; because, if anything, it calls into question the very idea of 'the reading' of any text, and it does so with wit and playfulness. For those not needing convincing of anything in particular, I also recommend this book. It is incredibly suggestive, and certainly worth one's time (*your* time, not just 'one's time').

I'll end this review with what could be back-cover blurbage (I am trying, and failing, to be as playful as Haas is): *The Irony of Heidegger* is an important contribution to our philosophical ruminations on Heidegger, not because it sets out some comprehensive view of Heidegger, but because it problematizes the very idea of a comprehensive view. Ironically, it is a book that deserves to be taken seriously—at least, as seriously as anything ironic deserves to be taken.

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