

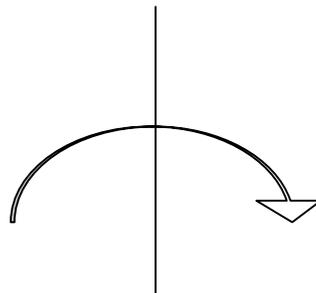
Lines and Figures

Abstract:

The paper discusses Heidegger's position on nihilism by following his line of thought against Jünger's and Nietzsche's philosophy. Whereas Heidegger's comments towards Jünger appear to successfully counter Jünger's advance, his identification of Nietzsche's philosophy with nihilism remains questionable. The paper argues, looking at some primary sources in Hölderlin, that Heidegger's use of Hölderlin against nihilism falls short of an understanding of Hölderlin's quest towards the singular that brings Hölderlin much closer to Nietzsche than Heidegger's analysis allows. Both thinkers show a perspective against nihilism that questions Heidegger's premise of a necessary relation to Being.

[The paper is intended for a spoken presentation. The graphics that introduce each section are to be drawn on a board/flip chart. At the end of each section a short summary in ordinary voice applies the concepts to the charts. The final section is to be accompanied by a video projection displaying art works at high speed (approx. 8 images/sec).]

Section 1: Twisting Nihilism



Ernst Jünger (1895 - 1998) was a German military officer, poet and philosopher (in that order) close to German fascism. In 1950, Jünger published a text "Über die Linie" ("Across the Line"), which he dedicated to Heidegger for Heidegger's 60th birthday. In return, Heidegger published a text entitled "Zur Seinsfrage" ("On the Question of Being", original title "About 'The Line'" (Heidegger 1976, pp. 385 - 426)) in 1955 in an anniversary publication for Jünger's 60th birthday, in which Heidegger 'answered' Jünger's attempt to step across the line.

Heidegger's original title "About 'The Line'" marks a distinct difference to Jünger's project. Although both titles read the same in German ("Über die Line") they point into very different directions, as Heidegger makes clear. In contrast to Jünger's 'Across the line' (trans lineam) Heidegger simply talks 'about the line' (de linea) emphasising that only by attempting to cross the line can the line be brought into view. But what is 'the line'? Jünger describes the line as the "null meridian", as nihilism's degree-zero, in which according to Heidegger nihilism completes itself. Stepping across the line indicates an attempt to finish off nihilism.

In order to better understand the term 'completed nihilism' it is helpful to discuss nihilism's genealogy, which can be derived from Heidegger's discussion of Nietzsche. According to this, nihilism's basis is pessimism. Pessimism is seen as the result of the insight into the falsehood of the everyday in comparison to the unobtainable true and eternal world beyond the grasp of human's hand. There are, however, two forms of pessimism: active and passive pessimism. Passive pessimism retires into the worthlessness of the world whereas active pessimism strives for an understanding of the reasons for such worthlessness. Nihilism is the result of active pessimism in so far as it stops questioning the world and starts doubting the existence of the higher values that were believed to be true. Disappointment is turned on its head: Were the reasons for dissatisfaction in pessimism seen as caused by the falseness of the everyday it is in nihilism that disappointment is seen as caused by the falseness of wrongly believed higher values. The abolition of such higher values does, however, not mean that new values are necessarily in place: this is why in its first stage nihilism is termed 'incomplete'. Incomplete nihilism can again be differentiated into active and passive, whereby the latter passively watches the de-valuation of values whereas the former actively destroys them. Nihilism in its completed stage appears when nihilism's active destruction is perceived as the basis for new values to appear, which according to Heidegger is nothing but Nietzsche's 'Will to Power'.

The new values prevent in such replacement of paradigms access to the old values. The new order instead of being explained by the old order now serves to excuse the previous set of values. Completed nihilism, with other words, has lost the ability to even understand what the 'nihil' in its name indicates. In its completion, nihilism's destructive core appears constructive as its being is hidden. Heidegger's objection against Jünger lies in the fact that for Heidegger Jünger's 'constructive' step across the line is, in effect, within the line since the possibility of stepping across the line and with it that of progress is the way in which completed nihilism is: completed nihilism is continuously completing nihilism; it is when its continuous completion has become normality. 'Completed nihilism'

does not mean that nihilism is at its end but that "the final phase of nihilism has begun" (Heidegger 1976, p. 393).

In contemplating the line (de linea), Heidegger discovers that the line is actually not a line but a zone. The human cannot just find himself within that zone because he *is* the zone. There is no outside that could serve as a point of departure on one side of the line just as there is no point of arrival on the other side of the line. The zone of completing nihilism is total. It occupies all the space and seizes all the time in which any attempt to flee the zone could be possible. Nihilism cannot be overcome; the line cannot be crossed (Heidegger 1976, p. 421).

What, then, is Heidegger's suggestion towards a life in the zone that is nihilism? Thought can confront nihilism insofar as nihilism's essence can be thought about. As stated before, completed nihilism is only insofar as its essence is hidden. Bringing nihilism's being to the fore allows a twisting (Verwindung) of nihilism that cannot, however, be its overcoming. Nihilism's continuous completion can thus be paired with its continuous twisting. Such twisting, and this is the second argument against Jünger, has to affect language. Jünger's language that did not change in crossing the line is, according to Heidegger, the primal indication for nihilism's prolonging. Language has to become "not the expression of thinking, but it itself, its course and chant." (my translation, Heidegger 1976, p. 424)

Section 2: No metaphysics



In 1961 Heidegger published a book on Nietzsche in two volumes, which brought together some of his lectures on Nietzsche from 1936 to 1940 as well as additional material from 1940 to 1946 (Heidegger 1989). Although the two volumes form a unity, many statements Heidegger made in support of Nietzsche's philosophy in volume one are overturned in volume two by a critical attitude towards Nietzsche's thinking. Over the course of the book Heidegger's understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy is turned on its head from being seen as offering a philosophical perspective onto Being (mainly through Nietzsche's 'Eternal Recurrence of the Same') to an understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy as *the* prime example for nihilism.

Within the book there is no explanation for such a move or for its reason. It can be argued that the shift in Heidegger's understanding of Nietzsche implicitly predates his later concept of the Turning (Kehre) as developed in the 'Letter on Humanism' (Heidegger 1976, pp. 313 - 364) of 1946, making the 'Letter' and with it the Turning the result of Heidegger's confrontation with Nietzsche's philosophy. What was at stake for Heidegger was Being itself as a question confronting thought. Ultimately, this question brought Heidegger to the insight that Being (Sein) had to be thought of apart from Entities (Seiendem) as he later proposed in 'Time and Being' (1962) (Heidegger 1988).

The guiding model that he used to position not only Nietzsche's or his own philosophy but philosophy in general is discussed in volume two and termed 'ontological difference' (Heidegger 1989, Vol. 2, p. 209). Ontological difference is the difference between Entities and Being. Heidegger's critique of occidental philosophy can be summarised as philosophy obscuring Being by placing it into a relationship to Entities, which renders philosophy incapable of thinking Being. This philosophical shortcoming has always formed the background of Heidegger's thinking and was given prominent status in the very first sentence of 'Being and Time' (1927) (Heidegger 2000) when he wrote that the question of Being "has today been forgotten." The relationship between Entities and Being has traditionally been termed 'metaphysical', since metaphysics have according to Heidegger replaced the question of Being with the question of the constitution of Entities. For Heidegger, the core of such a philosophy is, in fact, nihilism since Being is present only in its absence. Metaphysically, Being cannot be brought into view.

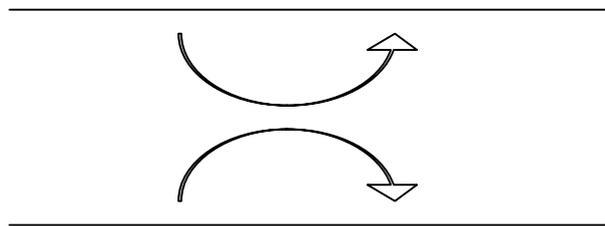
The struggle against nihilism was also at the heart of Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche developed a critique of Schopenhauer's metaphysics based on the fact that Schopenhauer, although registering something like 'the will' as a metaphysical principle, grounded the existence of Entities in his 'principium individuationis' (Schopenhauer 1986, Vol. 1, § 23, p. 173), which for Schopenhauer was highly dependent on a Platonic mould of ideas. Nietzsche radicalised Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will by what he called 'the will to power', which functions as a stabilising mechanism within the will itself.

The will to power as Nietzsche's 'principium individuationis' tries contrary to Heidegger's project to understand Entities only through themselves as becoming and not grounding them in anything *different* (including Being). The attempt to underlie becoming by Being is for Nietzsche the truly nihilistic move, against which Zarathustra most famously struggled. Nietzsche's metaphor for this struggle is the black snake of nihilism that crawls into Zarathustra's mouth while he is asleep and that he can only get rid of by the *active* decision to bite off its head (Nietzsche 1993, p. 270ff.). Nietzsche's strongest notion is the 'Eternal Recurrence of the Same'. This has to be thought of very instrumentally. The

Eternal Recurrence is the 'heaviest' thought *against* which a being has to become itself. The thought of finding no excuses and, worse even, of having to repeat one's destiny infinitively serves as an instrument to probe one's existence similarly to Nietzsche's dictum of 'philosophising with a hammer' (Subtitle of 'Twilight of the Idols') (Nietzsche 1977, p. 112).

Nietzsche and Heidegger are two philosophers striving towards similar goals (escaping nihilism) by different means (Being or Entities), which can both be expressed with the help of the ontological difference. First of all, it is a question of how to define the concept of metaphysics that has shown itself as nihilism. According to Heidegger, metaphysics is defined as the *necessary absence of Being* in the focus on Entities. According to Nietzsche, metaphysics is the constructed but *unnecessary supplementation of Entities by Being*. From this description it is clear that for Heidegger Nietzsche represents an extreme form of nihilism because Being is neglected. From Nietzsche's position, Heidegger is nihilistic because he is still trying to ground Beings in something other than themselves.

Section 3: Singularity



Hölderlin's 'The Death of Empedocles' (1799/1800) remains a fragment. He developed the tragedy through three versions none of which had satisfied him. It has been speculated that the reason for abandoning the project lies in the incapability of the antique form of the 'tragedy' to contain the material Hölderlin had developed. (Allemann 1954, p. 26)

In the first versions, the hero Empedocles kills himself by jumping into the Aetna as a sign of his frustration with the world. His death is seen as reuniting him with nature and a regained unity with the gods. Such a step is rated insofar a success as it manifests the *possible* return into a better and truer world. Empedocles's death as sketched in the first versions illustrates the early programme of romanticism according to which it was the artist's role to re-establish the link between nature and culture.

In the later modifications of the material, Hölderlin classified such return, and with it the possibility of artistic reconciliation of the conflict between culture and nature, as a bygone model. Empedocles is characterised as the final protagonist who with his death takes away the possibility of any future settlement.

Hölderlin produced this insight in a central scene where his Egyptian teacher Manes questions Empedocles about the validity of his death:

...Yet not unthinking
As now you are, would I have you go down,
I have a word, and, drunken man, that consider:
One only has the privilege, at this time,
One only your black sin serves to ennoble.
Greater he is than I. ... (Hölderlin 1966, p. 353)

And at the end Manes insistently asks:

Are you that man? The same? That very man? (Hölderlin 1966, p. 355)

Empedocles replies in a long speech describing his happy childhood and how he later became conscious of the reality of the world:

...More forcefully yet,
Like water, did the savage human wave
Beat on my breast, and the poor people's voice,
Humming in blind confusion, reach my ear.
And when, while silent in my room I sat,
At midnight tumult and revolt cry out,
And through the fields they rush, and weary of life
With their own hands break up their own good houses
And temples, long made odious, and forsaken,
When brothers fled each other, men hurried past
Those they loved most, and fathers no longer knew
Their sons, and human language had become
Incomprehensible, and human law,
The meaning of it, shivering me, struck home:
It was the departure of my people's god! (Hölderlin 1966, p. 357)

Manes has a short answer only to this:

Pain has inflamed your mind. I pity you. (Hölderlin 1966, p. 361)

Hölderlin by letting Empedocles die of his own hand despite Manes's doubt eradicates the messianic option for art. Who, after Empedocles's failure could believe to be the one to save the world regardless of the necessary doubt? Who beyond all doubt could claim such a role? The *thinking* individual can in the face of Empedocles's death only understand that salvation cannot lie in the sacrifice of one's own determination.

Now the underlying reason for the failure of the 'tragedy' as container for the Empedocles material becomes evident: the Greek 'tragedy' produces and assumes the possibility of an event that reconciles man with the gods, the very event Hölderlin has questioned by stigmatising Empedocles's death as failure.

During the development of 'The Death of Empedocles' Hölderlin's basic assumptions were overthrown. Instead of being fulfilled, the strive towards the gods has now turned against itself and towards one's own origin. What Hölderlin calls 'hesperian fate' (hesperian = occidental) is the insight into our fragmented world of knowledge as being in need of new artistic forms that have to be built on such fragmented reality and not on the borrowed ground of an imagined Greek ideal.

This, interestingly, corresponds to the decline of Greek culture itself that moved according to Hölderlin through the opposite problem: their desire towards knowledge and their inability to keep that knowledge grounded in their nature (and nature itself) resulted in the downfall of antiquity.

...Namely, they wanted to found
An empire of the arts. By which, however,
the native they failed
to remember and disgraceful
Greece, the beautifullest, went down. (My translation: (Allemann 1954, p. 30))

The future impossibility of an Empedocles-like death corresponds to, in Heidegger's words, today's impossibility of the festival, in whose event Being could be gathered. Instead, Being's arrival can only be waited for and prepared by the foundation of a new language.

Using the grand theme of Hölderlin's Empedocles it becomes apparent that our fragmented language of knowledge has to be the one to be developed *as a form of art*. Art, thus, cannot aspire anything beyond the fragment and cannot avoid the reality of the fragment by placing it into a larger context. The radical fragment is the singular, the solitary, the one that lives by its own credit and from whose depth *its* world has to be created.

The failure of the tragedy is the failure of any art that requires a public space or language. Wittgenstein's problem about the possibility of a private language has to be replaced by the problem of how to avoid a public one. The impossible private has to be made possible by an art that refuses to give publicly and whose enjoyment can never be shared. The singular impossibly starts affecting singulars: the condition for life.

Section 4: Erasure

[Video clip of fast succession of art works is projected.]

We have to grow to be able to think at a speed when seeing becomes blinding. Everything is ripped apart into pattern and fragments of meaning. It is no palimpsest and no film because nothing sticks. At that speed I don't stick. I am blind and I am lost. Noise is where I live and what I am. Memory is erased. Life reduced to its most primal form: embryonic. Developed backwards until nothing is. Faster and faster. Nothing more: my music, my heartbeat. Knowledge is felt. Erasure creates.

Thank you.

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