The Nazi’s Philosopher

Pastor K. E. Løgstrup, who a couple of years ago competed for the theological doctoral position with extraordinary honour,¹ and is currently studying in Germany, writes about the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger² and his philosophy, and thus gives a picture that offers more depth and essential background for the great struggle between Marxism and Nazism than the perspective one finds here at home.

Is National Socialism’s takeover of power in Germany the result of a ‘process’?² Could we not have previously calculated that things may come to an abrupt upheaval, as the country’s constitution was an imported article in the form of the Weimar Constitution, that was so poorly suited to German nature and only found a market under the abnormal and confused circumstances? When the Weimar Constitution, the Versailles Treaty, and the world crisis with its chronic unemployment were added together, could not a detached and historically experienced observer arrive at the result that things had to take a fateful turn? Yes, it was possible to foresee and predict that there would be an upheaval, but a German National Socialist would never say that the Third Reich came about as the interim result of a ‘process’. It was certain enough that something had to happen, but until the day itself it was uncertain whether it would be a communist catastrophe or the National Socialist thousand year Reich. Are the battle’s excitement, risk and pathos to just be rendered redundant as the outward trappings of an irreversible, steadily inexorable process! No, National Socialism was the result of struggle and decision, as none of the ‘old fighters’ are in doubt who experienced the thrill of the years and who knew that Germany’s fate depended on their perseverance and fighting spirit. Germany was not at all in a process, but came out of a decision.

This is a starting point for understanding why National Socialism crowned precisely Martin Heidegger as its philosopher. Heidegger, whose major work Being and Time already appeared in 1927, followed the call and put his philosophical ideas in the service of National Socialism.

The reader’s patience shall now be tested; but it can sometimes be useful to start seemingly far away; so that the perspective can become correspondingly bigger. – Heidegger lays down the basis for his philosophy through distancing it from the usual epistemological speculation. During the nineteenth century, German school philosophy concentrated more and more on the problem of knowledge understood as a relation between subject and object. ‘The subject’ is the human being in his knowing activity, and ‘object’ is the objects or things as known by us. And the problems are, how can the subject (the knowing human being) know the things or objects which indeed are outside the subject? How does there come to be contact between us and the things outside us, which we call knowledge? Or one gives up answering the question, and takes the knowledge as a fait accompli – what in this knowledge is due to the subject and what to the object? What is the contribution which we make to the fact of knowledge, and what is the contribution from things and objects – how shall we distribute this knowledge into the subjective and the objective element?
Heidegger does not try to give a solution to these problems, but breaks with the way the problem is put. There is no point in philosophy to beginning with a construction, in doing so we have immediately begun by imprisoning ourselves within insurmountable logical difficulties. The knowing subject is indeed free-floating, it is impossible to get hold of, it is without any features; briefly put, this attempt to isolate the pure knowing activity from the existing human being of flesh and blood is a construction. The theme of philosophy – as Heidegger understands philosophy – is not knowledge as detached from other human functions and activities, but philosophy’s theme is the whole human being – the existing human being. The first thing to be said concerning the human being in his full and whole existence, is that he is engaged. We live in engagements. Our knowledge is anything but a detached activity, which we can consider for itself as a relation between the subject and objects, but [on the contrary] our knowledge is bound up in our engagement with our surroundings. To take an illustrative example: What is ‘street’? Here the usual subject-object schema is entirely insufficient, as ‘street’ is certainly no ‘object’; it is no well-defined thing with fixed contours. ‘The street’ is the street, which I go along. Only because I can go along it, do I know what a street is at all. I know the street with my ‘on going engagement’. The knowledge of things is bound up in specific engagements with our surroundings. Chair, table, floor, wallpaper, oven, lamp – put briefly the whole area of use that we call ‘a room’, I know because I can ‘abide’. In the typical engagement with the surrounding world which we call ‘abiding’, I first know the ‘room’ and its individual parts. The approach of knowledge to the things in the surrounding world takes place in many different engagements. A knowledge outside the engagement, i.e. a detached knowledge realized in an isolated, free-floating subject, is a construction which philosophy must shed. It is the existing, which is to say the engaged, human being which in its various engagements knows the surrounding world. This is now the decisive starting point for the Heideggerian philosophy; it is so-called ‘existential philosophy’, and its technical, more cumbersome expression for what we here have called ‘engagements’ is ‘possibilities of existence’.

Now were these abstract and literally world-removed speculations concerning subject and object, which Heidegger distanced himself from, sheer ineptness? No, they are the immediate and even unwitting expression of a certain attitude of life and life ideal. The ideal is to pull out of engagement and just to observe. To be merely a knowing subject, to merely observe and entrench oneself in an absolute spectator position, to deny one’s engaged existence and live the observer’s mere semblance of life – this is the ideal of an abstract and powerless culture. And this ideal inevitably manifests itself in the constructed subject who is removed from the world, who realizes a pure knowledge, detached from the real, from the engaged human being.

For this world-removed subject which just observes and which avoids any decision, everything becomes a process. It is as if this attitude to life, which because of its sheer urge to knowledge has no time left for decision, finds itself an excuse in the concept of process. For everything is indeed a process! It is not in the power of human beings to change the course of history; the one epoch proceeds with unyielding necessity from the previous one. No human power can break the process and force events out of their predetermined course. This concept of process is most pithily crafted in Marxism. It is economic factors which determine the course of history, and human beings and their
leaders cannot do anything. The only task that remains left for human beings, is to know and understand the process – but it is vanity and again vanity to want to intervene – at most the human being, who understands, can expedite the process. As I said, to regard history as an irreversible process that we can do nothing about – and to understand the human being as just a knowing, unengaged subject, are just two sides of the same attitude to life and ideal of life. Marxism’s concept of process presupposes the human being of Hegelianism, who is a sheer disinterested knower.

It is in this connection that the philosopher of National Socialism says: it is not enough to fight Marxism politically, it must be overcome culturally. Philosophy as the exponent of culture must give the German human being another attitude to life. Philosophy must remind us that to be a human being is to be engaged. The moral side of engaged existence is decision. The human being precisely does not stand ‘over against’ the decision, but in the decision. The decision is a forced situation; here there is no possibility of refraining from a decision, here there is no possibility of being indifferent. The decision is the moral engagement. The decision comes over the human being and is stronger than him. A human being deceives himself if he thinks he can fail to make a decision. In the decision, the decision is the master and the pretended omission of the decision is itself a decision, since the failure [to make a decision] puts the human being in a new moral situation, and he thereby incurs guilt.

Marxism was more than a theoretical ballast for a political party; it was an illusion which said that the human being could withdraw from engagement and just see and observe the irreversible movement of the process. Marxism was the illusion that the human being could fail to make a decision without incurring any guilt, because everything goes on as it should, and the human being can do nothing about it. Therefore it is not enough to fight Marxism politically, it must be overcome as an outlook on life and as an attitude to life.

Marxism is overcome – by the National Socialist movement, which had sufficient fighting spirit and engagement with reality [Virkelighedsmod] to risk the decision. The Führer of National Socialism forced the ‘unyielding’ movement of process, so that the communist catastrophe that ‘had to’ be the process’s pre-ordained result, was averted. Marxism was not theoretically refuted, what would be the good of that? Life is not a theoretical question, but what we make it. And Hitler made German life into a struggle in the decision and overcame the Marxist human being, who in passivity handed himself over to the overpowering forces. National Socialism is not a political invention, but a new culture – Heidegger says.

In opposition to this Heideggerian interpretation of National Socialism someone might object: Is it viable to preach life in the decision as the new era brought about by the National Socialist dictator, who deprives the citizen of his freedom – and with this, it would seem, also the bare possibility of deciding anything? To such an objection, Heidegger will know how to give an answer. National Socialism is no dictatorship, but Führership. Who is the real dictator? Public opinion – ‘one [das man]’! We all ride the public trams and we all read the same newspapers. We amuse ourselves as ‘one’ amuses oneself; we read the literature ‘one’ reads – and judge literature and art as ‘one’ judges [them]. The life of the individual dissolves itself and disappears in the life of ‘the others’.
And ‘the others’ too have no determinate or distinctive life. ‘One’ is ‘no-one’. But this ‘one’ or ‘none’ or (less philosophically expressed) ‘public opinion’, rules over all. We have all bound our existence to public opinion. It is the true dictator. It levels everything, and so radically that we become wholly unrecognizable, so that one could simply not be distinguished from another, had things not been so fortunate that in terms of outward appearance we have different looks. Under the tyranny of public opinion, human life has become diversions and curiosity and without the ability to make a personal decision. It is scattered and without any unity; it has handed itself over.

From this bondage to public opinion, the philosopher and Führer rescues us; he frees us from the dictatorship of public opinion. He can do this, because his life has not lost itself and dissolved itself in ‘what one does’ and ‘what one thinks’; he is not chronically diverted in the common curiosity, and he has not lost his personal life. To lose one’s life, is to hand it over to public opinion and with that to waive any possibility of deciding something. The Führer and the philosopher has in spiritual unity renounced diversions and curiosity, and taken life into his own hands in the decision.

What is it then, that the philosopher decides for? Well, in the unification through the decision he seeks to get to the bottom of events and conditions and seize their essence and idea, in the struggle against their imagined and distorted appearance in public opinion. But then one had better not enquire further, from where does he get the idea of the events which he decides upon? Because it is precisely first created by the Führer; the idea arises first in the understanding. Like when we understand the everyday things around us! To know the plant that is seen in front of us, then we must have a pre-given understanding of what a ‘plant’ even is. It is this pre-given idea ‘plant’ that first gives our understanding its access to the plants that we see here and there. And then it is useless to enquire further where we get the idea ‘plant’ from. The idea is created by the human being, the idea arises first in the understanding. Strange – puzzling, we might say. Heidegger says that every idea in its ‘uniqueness’ [Einmaligkeit] is something monstrous, which we can only bear by forgetting it. And public opinion has put forgetfulness into a system.

What has been dictated to us by public opinion is then an image of current events, distorted in utter mediocrity. In the battle with this distortion – which is a distortion just because it is mediocre and average – the Führer seeks their idea, which idea he first creates. Because now this idea is not acquired from somewhere, where it is already, but created by the Führer in his own understanding through a battle with distortion, what we have here is a decision. The Führer assumes his responsibility and anticipates the idea of the events. The Führer and the philosopher are therefore ahead of their time; he creates the idea and thus the future.

Things are now becoming so portentous that ‘one’ could become totally overawed by it all. But ‘we’ and ‘one’ still have to ask: ‘The Führer creates the idea of the events’, so it says rather mystically – does that not mean, to put it in a far simpler way, that he makes something or other up, which no one has made up before him and which he now decides for? Is there really no criterion for which idea is true for contemporary events? There is a criterion! The true idea is the most steadfast [standhaftigste], the one that can keep
standing [der kan holde Stand]. The truth is power! Indeed, the more power that resides in the idea, which the Führer ‘creates’ or makes up, the more true it is. This is Nietzsche’s view, which is repeated here.

Who then was the philosopher? The wise person, who has understood the circumstances and the events to the bottom and created an idea, that can keep standing. In this he has taken the decision and lead the events. Is Heidegger thus the philosopher? No, strictly speaking Hitler is the philosopher and Heidegger his prophet. The Führer and the philosopher are one and the same person. But democracy has neither Führer nor philosopher, but only politicians and professors of philosophy.

Whatever is the case, the circle is closed. Through the analysis of ‘one’ and ‘no-one’, there is a forceful lashing out at democracy. – National Socialism has become Marxism’s counterpart. In Marxism ‘one’ observes how the economic factors direct the process without ‘one’ being able to do anything. In National Socialism, the Führer and the philosopher create the idea of events and leads the process by the idea’s power. This is philosophy with plenty of ceremony and mysticism and where shoulder width is not the least important thing, and which therefore corresponds to the power, pathos and fight of the National Socialist years of struggle, as now Heidegger’s philosophical reflection and Goebbels’s talent for staging shall sustain the proclaimed third and final Reich. For a democratic ‘one’ it appears to be a mystical atmosphere, that is worked up for people with a disposition to be spiritual and have pathos – in the end they sense what it really is all about, even though it in foreboding still slips away. Otherwise there would be nothing to it. It can be fascinating enough, for most of us retain something of the schoolchild where it is amusing to read something one does not really understand. So, it can be comforting that one probably wasn’t supposed to understand it, or it would be neither mystical nor portentous.

Translated by Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern

Translators’ notes

i The ‘docenturkonkurrence’ was a now abandoned practice for some positions, where candidates competed against each other with public lectures on certain various topics. Løgstrup’s lectures are in the archive, and he received very high praise in the newspapers and from his peers. However, he lost the competition to N. H. Søe because he had no publications and hadn’t completed his doctoral dissertation.

ii This might be considered a mistake by the editor, as Løgstrup makes clear later that in his view it is Hitler who is the Nazi’s philosopher, not Heidegger, who is rather Hitler’s ‘prophet’. Løgstrup no doubt wanted the reader to think of Heidegger as the Nazi philosopher, and he sets out by suggesting that, only to reveal the error of doing so at the end of the article, that Hitler is the true Nazi philosopher.

iii The Danish term here is ‘udvikling’, which can mean development as well as process, where doubtless Løgstrup has both ideas in mind, particularly the idea of development as
a sort of inevitable unfolding. We will translate the term as ‘process’ throughout, but this other meaning should be born in mind.

iv ‘benovet’, a sarcastic term implying that one is actually naïve and easily impressed.