

TAINTED THOUGHT.  
HEIDEGGER AND ANTI-SEMITISM

**Peter Trawny, *Heidegger i mit spisku żydowskiego (Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung)*, trans. W. Warkocki, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2017, pp. 254; ISBN 978-83-01-19259-4.**

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**Abstract:** The text reviews the first evaluation of Martin Heidegger’s philosophical project in light of the *Black Notebooks* by Peter Trawny, the editor of those notebooks. Trawny poses questions about the status of the *Black Notebooks* and their place within the entire body of Heidegger’s works. The book deserves the attention of ordinary readers and specialists, offering a platform for further discussion.

On the pages of his *Philosophical Autobiography (Philosophische Autobiographie, 1977)* Karl Jaspers gives the following account of one of his conversations with Heidegger: ‘I spoke about the Jewish question, about the malicious nonsense of the “Elders of Zion”. The author of *Time and Being* responded with firm conviction: “But there is a dangerous, international alliance of Jews”’.

Despite such occasional remarks (found for instance in his correspondence), until the resounding publication of the *Black Notebooks* there was a widely shared, apologetic belief that although Heidegger did engage in National Socialism, he himself was not an anti-Semite. Such a claim was stubbornly maintained, for example, by his biographer, Rüdiger Safranski. His opinion was further supported by the fact that the circle of people around the philosopher included such figures as Hannah Arendt, Emanuel Levinas, Paul Celan, Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas and Elisabeth Blochmann, for whom the author of *On the Way to Language* was a teacher, an idolised thinker and a lover. Now we know that the black, cloth-bound volumes – 34 books in all (covering the material written

prior to the year 1948) – call on us to reconsider, or perhaps even to revise this notion altogether. In his interpretation, Trawny suggests going beyond the apology<sup>1</sup> (p. 53).

The notes in question come from the period between 1938 and 1941; statements which were not made public, and hence neither did they involve Heidegger openly in the anti-Semitic circles of the Nazi regime. Trawny's reflection focuses on the part entitled *Überlegungen*, and in particular, on *Überlegungen VII–XI* (1938–1939) and *Überlegungen XII–XV* (1939–1941).

It is worth remembering that the *Schwarze Hefte* (for many years considered lost) were not meant to be hidden from their readership. As we know today, Heidegger ordered publishing them as the last segment of his collected works (it should be added that in the end his request was not honoured; the secret documents proved too significant for their publication to depend on the pace of editing of his other writings). And perhaps this decision is not without significance. Heidegger's command – according to Trawny – may suggest that he attached a higher degree of importance to the material.

The *Notebooks*, which were to be published as the last segment of Heidegger's collected works, bear an irrefutable mark of anti-Semitism. And this triggers a number of questions, even before one delves into reading: what is the status of the writings and their place within the entire body of Heidegger's works? Could these dubious (or quite simply shameful) passages be excused as a sign of momentary blindness, an accident at philosophical work? Or perhaps is it no longer possible to remove these dark pages from Heidegger's philosophy and there is no alternative but to reject his thought as irrecoverably corrupted? In his commentary immediately preceding the release of successive volumes of the *Notebooks*, Trawny attempts to provide answers to these questions.

According to the philosopher and editor of Heidegger's work, the anti-Semitism which characterises the disclosed material is contagious in that it affects his other writings as well. This contamination, as Trawny puts it, 'attacks the edge of thought, blurring it and deconstructing at the same time.' The purpose behind the book is to trace this process and to show the extent to which anti-Semitism taints Heidegger's thought.

In an attempt to defend the author of *Time and Being* it is often said that his anti-Semitism was not biological, as was that exuded by vulgar Nazism. Yet trying to find its philosophical explanation may be much worse (such was for instance an observation made by Agata Bielik-Robson<sup>2</sup>). Trawny states that its ontohistorical structure (as he puts it) is far more dangerous, since it may lead to contaminating the totality of Heidegger's philosophy. Is then anti-Semitism encroaching on the entire history of being, that is on ontohistorical thought? According to Trawny, there is certainly no such thing as an 'anti-Semitic philosophy' of Heidegger. It is nonetheless impossible to avoid

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible, however, to come across opposing views, also among the Polish scholars. Joachim Piecuch – to give an example – did not ascribe much significance to the passages described by Trawny as unequivocally anti-Semitic. The Polish philosopher and Catholic priest expressly defends Heidegger, suggesting that the *Black Notebooks* appear to have an anti-Semitic status only for German readers, for whom the condemnation of anti-Semitism, together with an open dissent from the Nazi ideology, constitute one of the basic elements of national identity. That is why their reaction to the *Notebooks* should be taken 'with some degree of caution' (Piecuch 2015).

<sup>2</sup> A discussion around Cezary Wodziński's *Metafizyka i metapolityka (Metaphysics and Metapolitics)* including, among others, Agata Bielik-Robson. The Palace on the Isle, Warsaw, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2016.

juxtaposing the desire to ‘purify being’ with for example the Nuremberg laws, infamously riddled with phantasms about purity. It becomes clear that nowadays those who want to follow Heidegger’s thought must also realise the anti-Semitic implications of some of his remarks.

At this point one more thing has to be remembered. The *Notebooks* elaborate extensively on the suffering of Germans, while not a word is said with regard to the suffering of Jews. This silence, mentioned also by Trawny, should always reverberate whenever we want to philosophise together with the one who penned *The Age of the World Picture* and the captivating passages of *Time and Being*.

By providing a critical insight into the notebooks of the philosopher, and – at the same time – trying to put them together with the whole work of Heidegger, Trawny’s reflections deserve the attention of ordinary readers and specialists, offering a platform for further discussion.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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### **Public lecture**

A discussion around Cezary Wodziński’s *Metafizyka i metapolityka (Metaphysics and metapolitics)* including, among others, Agata Bielik-Robson. The Palace on the Isle, Warsaw, 15 October 2016.