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Review

Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and the Politics of Dwelling

David J. Gauthier. Lexington Books: Lanham, Maryland, 2011.
230pp.

Joseph Bien^{*}

Books on Heidegger and books on Levinas are plentiful in English, French and German. Books dealing with a comparison of both authors, especially in terms of the politics of dwelling, are not at all common and certainly should demand our attention.

This work appears to be a reworked version of a dissertation with all the standard problems that go with such an undertaking. That said, this is a useful introduction to the question of dwelling in the writings of two extremely important philosophers.

The opening chapter is a helpful general introduction to the question. After a brief reference to Hegel's discussion of the homeless spirit Gauthier contrasts Heidegger's stress on being with his now well-known, sometimes sympathetic rendering of certain aspects of Nazism. In contrast there is a strong recording of Levinas' critique of his former teacher's actions. Is this true? Yes. Is it new information? No. What is overkill here is the loading on of references from Dallmayr and Adorno to Strauss and Derrida (all individually fully respectable). It appears that what is most important here and often else where in the work is quantity. While this may be satisfactory in political science

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circles, I would suggest that some understanding of quality should be given at least equal standing here and throughout this otherwise helpful treatment of the two eminent twentieth century thinkers.

Chapter 2 analyzes Heidegger's attempt to confront Cartesian subjectivism. This understanding of "the groundless nature of human existence" reveals itself in terms of 'flight' or 'resoluteness' which for Heidegger requires that being merge with the identity of its people or its community. Here one should see Heidegger as part of a greater Germanic tradition that extends through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. There was a certain nationalism that ran unchecked throughout much of Western and Central Europe pausing with the defeat of Germany and Austria at the end of World War I and then with the regrettable rise of Nazism in the 1930s and Germany's second defeat in World War II. Gauthier here gives the reader a clear and rather enlightening presentation of Heidegger's early struggles with the question. How then is modern man to overcome this dilemma, which always seems to leave one in exile from one's home in the world?

Chapter 3 which deals with Germany's destiny, Heidegger's discussion of the "The Origin of the Work of Art" and the founding of the *polis* reveal a careful and quite serious if, from this reader's viewpoint, questionable shaping of this central issue. Gauthier's discussion of the *polis* and how Heidegger understands it is clear, well presented and very helpful. He concludes "The *polis* is political because it is the site of history." This may be understood in terms of the *polis* founder who in turn has Nietzschean overtones. The founding of a political state might be compared to the creation of a work of art. The founding of a *polis* in a given historical moment did have Nazi implications. Being as base may be threatened. It may be in jeopardy. The answer may not be for Da-sein to merge with its community or people, or certainly not for Heidegger to have accepted the position of Rector.

Chapter 4 takes up the postwar concern with the crisis of homelessness that Heidegger in large part traces to the uprooting effect of modern technology. It is here that the author mounts a major attack on Heidegger's postwar apolitical position that he somehow (possibly thinking of Levinas) claims is also amoral. How this is supposed to be so is never carefully laid out and does weaken the otherwise careful presentation of this issue. While it is true that Heidegger questioned postwar attempts to solve the crisis in the West by "attempting to posit an ethics and a politics" and so doing may be seen as

naïve or a natural development of this the more recent German developments, it does not appear to in and of itself be wrong morally or theoretically.

Chapters 5 and 6 present us with Levinas' critique of Heidegger's stances. Allow me to preface my remarks by saying that I have the great respect for both men, having attended some of Levinas' courses and being a continuing struggler with Heidegger's *Being and Time*. This may be in part why I am so interested in Gauthier's book. Near the end of Chapter 5 one comes to understand Levinas' major objections to Heidegger's homecoming suggestions. They can be summarized by claiming Heidegger to be an anti-humanist and a pagan. It is Gauthier who in large part attempts to defend these assertions. Both it is asserted diminish the value of human being and the lack of a Judo-Christian tradition somehow does not permit of a "compassion ethic." I must object. What happened to the Enlightenment? The very notion of human freedom as being place related? The very notion of humanism that it engendered and is still going strong after nearly four hundred years? As to the question of paganism, I give just two ancient pagan authors: Boethius and Marcus Aurelius. Are we all to be inheritors of Christianity or Judaism? I think not, that would make us far too limited in our scope and direction. I simply do not understand how Heidegger's project as seen by Levinas is 'inherently cruel'. At best I struggle with this assertion. Chapter 6 deals with Levinas' understanding of hospitality that allows for a welcoming of the other, in a way almost a celebration of the other, something that Heidegger's fixed position does not support. Gauthier concludes this chapter with an interesting and somewhat critical assessment of Levinas' views on such matters as Israel, the Holocaust, Palestinians, and Zionism.

In the final chapter Gauthier tries and to a large extent succeeds in a critically summing up the similarities and differences in the works of these two giants of modern philosophy. This book is at the very least a good introduction to both the issues discussed and criticized. At its best it raises new views on long standing issues as seen by two of the twentieth century's most important thinkers. While dealing with the two men's positions Gauthier is as balanced as one might be. It will be of interest to read where the author next takes us. The book also profits from an excellent bibliography.