

## Introduction

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In an exchange of letters dating from 1972, Max Horkheimer replied to Hermann Mörchen's request for background information on Adorno's critique of Heidegger by writing: "As I recall, Adorno's judgment related not least to Heidegger's style of thinking and expression, which was distant from ours. For that reason, it is with difficulty that I can imagine a productive debate taking place between the two schools. I cannot even give you the name of anyone today who would be competent in this regard."<sup>1</sup> He goes on to express polite regret that he himself is unable to take up this "highly important problem," though he says he would be interested in meeting someone who would be ready to defend the Heideggerian position in a debate. Of course, that no such debate ever took place only reflects the deeply entrenched view that Horkheimer expresses in his correspondence with Mörchen. This is the view that still prevails in many quarters today. Indeed, it is this view that informs the nearly universal "refusal of communication" that Mörchen laments in his central contribution to the literature on the Adorno-Heidegger dispute.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, there is more to this dispute than is obvious at first blush. For one thing, it is fairly well known that the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers were not opposed *en bloc* to Heidegger's thought, at least not initially. Herbert Marcuse is the figure most often cited in this connection, because of his belief (in the late 1920s) that Heidegger's thought represented a necessary move toward a more concrete philosophy. Horkheimer himself seems to have held the same belief at one time; as a student

of Heidegger's in the early 1920s, he too was clearly struck by Heidegger's emphasis on facticity.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while neither Marcuse nor Horkheimer was ever unambiguously in favor of Heidegger's approach, there was nevertheless something in his thought that fascinated them, something at once inspiring and dangerous.

Nowhere is this blend of fascination and critique more evident than in Adorno's sustained engagement with Heidegger. In 1931, Adorno, soon to become one of the leading intellectual lights of the Frankfurt School, launched a polemical attack on his philosophy;<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, for his part, never responded to Adorno's criticisms, claiming not to have read him. Over the decades, their respective philosophies followed quite different paths: on the one hand, Adorno strove to critique metaphysics and the distorted social relations of late capitalism; on the other hand, Heidegger concentrated on rethinking truth, history, and Being as part of an effort to turn away from metaphysics. In terms of their respective philosophical interests and especially their motivations (broadly construed: social emancipation vs. thinking an "other beginning" in the history of Being), they seem to be situated at opposite ends of the intellectual spectrum. Yet despite their differences, a preoccupation with Heidegger's thought remains in Adorno's writings and some pressing questions remain without satisfactory answers. Why should he have spent almost forty years on Heidegger if his intention were simply to dismiss him? What is it about Heidegger's approach that merits this prolonged treatment? Or, conversely, what is it in Adorno's own thought that makes the critique of Heidegger so persistent and continually pertinent?

The answer to these questions may not be the one that is most often given, namely, that it is simply Adorno's total opposition to Heidegger's philosophy that informs the polemic. Critical examination of the material leads in a rather different direction, suggesting that the terms of the critique sharpen because there are undeniable points of proximity between Adorno and Heidegger. There are certainly intersecting concerns in their critiques of technology, positivism, and the vapidness of contemporary social existence—not to mention the difficulties they each saw in developing an ethics suited to the condition of modern humanity. But such resemblances, often superficial, rest on a deeper commonality: the imperative that philosophy should serve history and experience, that it should

be concerned with “relevant things.”<sup>5</sup> This was precisely what Heidegger’s thought promised, and what initially appealed to Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Adorno himself: it set out to deal with facticity and history, with concrete existence. Could it be then that Adorno took Heidegger so severely to task because of what he saw as a broken promise? Adorno provides us with several reasons for posing the question in this way, not the least of which is the “ontological need” (*ontologische Bedürfnis*) for concrete content. As Adorno puts it, the success of Heidegger’s thought “would be unintelligible if it did not meet an emphatic need, a sign of something missed, a longing that Kant’s verdict regarding knowledge of the Absolute should not be the end of the matter.”<sup>6</sup> If the terms of Adorno’s critique are so harsh, then, it is first and foremost because Adorno thinks that Heidegger recognizes this need but fails to meet it adequately, because the “treatment of relevant things relapsed into abstraction.”<sup>7</sup> Insofar as the need for content relapses into abstraction, it is false.<sup>8</sup> So while Adorno accepts the ontological need understood as a desire for content, he ruthlessly attacks the ways in which it is betrayed by forms of thought that only purport to meet it. It is the betrayal of this need for content that largely explain both the virulence and the scope of Adorno’s critique: Heidegger promises us bread, but gives us stones.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, his critique finds its starting point in a desire for content, which they both share.

This proximity is marked in other ways in Adorno’s corpus, and not always in the virulent form that we most often associate with the polemic. For both Heidegger and Adorno, philosophical experience consists in probing, provisional gestures that cut ‘occasional’ paths into the landscape of experience. It is in part in this way that thought attempts to do justice to the content that it works and transforms. Thus, shortly after Heidegger’s *Holzwege* was published, Adorno wrote to Horkheimer saying that Heidegger was “*in favour* of occasional paths [*Holzwege*] in a way that’s not very different from our own.”<sup>10</sup> Once again, it is precisely such self-avowed points of contact that need to be taken up and interpreted if we are to understand what is at stake in the Adorno-Heidegger dispute.

Much more could be said, but this short introduction is not the place to reply to the questions posed to us by the debate. Until relatively recently, however, the problem has been that few researchers have questioned the decades-long standoff between the two thinkers and their supporters,

or explored the details of Adorno's polemic in order to understand why it was so sustained. This volume of essays hopes to contribute to reorienting the terms of the debate by bringing together essays that evidence an (often qualified or cautious) openness to dialogue between these two thinkers' works and their respective philosophical traditions. Thus, the aim in assembling this collection was not to dismiss as unfounded the oppositional character of the dispute. Rather, more modestly, the aim was simply to inquire into the validity of, and the real justifications for, the barriers that kept Adorno and Heidegger separate from the early 1930s on. Within the purview of this aim, we target the main areas of tension: aesthetics, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, nature, and modernity. By choosing to focus on these topics, the contributors have been able to explore specific points of contact and conflict between the traditions of Adornian critical theory and Heideggerian thinking, while at the same time leaving room for more general reflections on how this dispute is to be understood in the history of philosophy and in terms of broader critiques of modernity.

In our view, there is much to be gained from working through and reassessing the differences that have kept these two thinkers' works quarantined from each other for more than seven decades. At this juncture, it seems more than a little outmoded to continue to keep them apart, for the reasons already mentioned and for others that come out in the essays in this volume—but also because it seems clear now just how rich this terrain is. Adorno's research in the 1930s into phenomenological method remains largely unexplored, as does Heidegger's struggle with the Hegelian-Marxian tradition that was so important to the critical theorists. Moreover, the need for renewed reflection on the framework and aims of the dispute, which we hope will open up new avenues of thought, has become even more evident with the recent publication of many previously unknown works by Heidegger. These manuscripts, especially those dating from the late 1930s and early 1940s, manifest the extent to which Heidegger, not unlike Adorno, was centrally preoccupied with rethinking the technological determination of human relations and experience in modernity and with preparing for the possibility of a decisive transformation in these determinations.<sup>11</sup> These texts repay careful study and help to refine certain resemblances and differences that commentators have remarked upon. They also contribute a great deal to understanding Heidegger's relation to dialecti-

cal reason. Similarly, Adorno's recently published lecture course on *Ontology and Dialectics*, the still-untranslated *Philosophical Terminology*, and other lecture courses require us to reconsider the ways in which the Adorno-Heidegger dispute has generally been characterized.<sup>12</sup> More specifically, much of this material prompts us to consider the parallels that exist between their respective approaches—*parallels*, that is, not necessarily or always convergences or divergences.

Building upon these parallels involves going beyond both the dismissively critical tenor of (post-) Adornian dialectics and the customary silence on the side of (post-) Heideggerian thinking. At the same time, of course, these explorations point beyond the confines of the Adorno-Heidegger debate precisely because of the pivotal role that these thinkers play in contemporary European thought. In this context, we hope that this volume will not only help advance the state of research about Adorno and Heidegger, but also highlight the significance of the debate for the direction of future reflections on the predicament of modernity.