HEIDEGGER ON HUMANISM AND ACTION

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I.

With the appearance of Victor Farías' *Heidegger and Nazism*,[1] it became immediately clear that the proponents of Heideggerian thought would need to marshal new strategies to account for Heidegger's infamous complicity with Germany's National Socialist regime. Although Farías' study fails to draw a clear connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his political choices of the 1930's, its revelation of the duration and depth of Heidegger's commitment to the Nazis effectively precluded Heideggerians from utilizing a previously familiar defense of Heidegger, which argued that his Nazi involvement was due to a merely temporary blindness to the defects of National Socialism. As a result, any attempts to sever Heidegger's thought from his political partisanship were rendered highly suspect, if not completely untenable. The most influential responses to this situation were set forth in Jacques Derrida's *Of Spirit* and Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Heidegger, Art and Politics*.[2] Both maintained that Heidegger's allegiance to Nazism was indeed philosophically determined, but that it was due to an inadequacy which was characteristic of Heidegger's early thought alone. And this inadequacy, which was remedied by the *Kehre* that inaugurated Heidegger's later position, was allegedly constituted by the early Heidegger's failure to overcome *humanism*. Lacoue-Labarthe makes the point in emphatic, and provocative, fashion, when he asserts that "Nazism is a humanism."[3]

Heidegger's critics have reacted strongly to the above strategy, arguing that, in fact, Heidegger's Nazism resulted from his failure to *embrace* humanism both in his early and later work. He supported Nazism not because he was too much of a humanist, but because he was not humanist enough.[4] Heidegger's rejection of humanism, it is alleged, led him to Nazism because it is modern humanism's valorization of human will and autonomy that underlies the institution of democracy and the ideal of active political engagement that are characteristic of modernity. As Richard Bernstein puts it, in the wake of Heideggerian antihumanism, "it would *seem* all talk of humanism—*human* freedom, happiness, emancipation—has become a mockery."[5] Stripped of its rightful place in the shaping of world-history, which was bequeathed to it by modern thought, Heidegger reduces humanity to a passive spectator thereof. And the political quietism implicit

in this view of humanity leads Heidegger to Nazism because it views all political engagement, any critical stance in the face of authority, as *hybris*. Thus, Heidegger's antihumanism opens the door to the authoritarian traditionalism embodied by National Socialism.

My intention, here, is not to defend the assessment of Heidegger's Nazism offered by Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, but to show that the response to this assessment, outlined in the preceding paragraph, is faulty since it misconstrues the nature of Heidegger's antihumanism. Heidegger's critique of humanism does not relegate humanity to the status of a purely passive subject, bereft of autonomy, of free self-determination, and thereby reduced to politically quietistic impotence. Instead, the notion of humanity that issues from Heideggerian antihumanism is one whose very essence is action. Heidegger's opposition to humanism is not to its notion of the human subject as active. Rather, Heidegger reproaches the humanist tradition for misinterpreting the precise character of active subjectivity. Specifically, this tradition overemphasizes the active dimension of the human subject. And this is a misinterpretation of subjectivity that, in Heidegger's opinion, has had serious consequences for Western humanity.

II.

Heidegger's reasons for opposing humanism are well-known. Humanism's valorization of human autonomy, its conception of the human being as free to create itself and its world, unfettered by the limitations of tradition, has wrought a humanity which believes that the world exists only to be fashioned to our liking. The legacy of modern humanism is the world of technology, a world dominated by human, calculative rationality. This world view is problematic because it fails to recognize that there is more to existence than the merely calculable. Technological humanity sees nothing but a world designed for, and submitted to, human rationality; "even God," Heidegger tells us, "lose[s] all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance."[6] Briefly put, the world of technology, divested of any transcendent significance, is a completely rationalized, completely humanized, world, passively submitted to the control of the active human subject.

Heidegger's critics certainly recognize the dangers of the technological view of subjectivity that Heidegger labels "humanism." As Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut point out, humanism's recognition of the human subject's active dimension, of humanity's distinctive "ability to wrench [itself] free of codes"[7], and thereby create new standards, is dangerous because this position rejects any reliance on tradition for providing ethico-political standards.[8] Locating the very essence of the human being in its autonomy,

humanism's denial of the authority of tradition runs the risk of overestimating the power of human autonomy and espousing normless anarchy. In the words of Ferry and Renaut, "in their desire for autonomy...individuals come to identify their freedom with making up their own rules and laws."[9] Still, Heidegger's alleged response to this characteristically modern dilemma is clearly inadequate.

According to Ferry and Renaut, Heidegger reacts to the dangers inherent in the recognition of human subjectivity's active dimension with a complete denial of that dimension. By reacting against humanism so radically, Heidegger loses the positive aspect of humanism—its call to democracy. For Ferry and Renaut, the proper response to the incipient lawlessness intrinsic to humanism's valorization of human autonomy is not to reject that autonomy through a reactionary return to pre-democratic traditions, but to seek a solution from within modern humanism. That is, we must retain humanism's demand that the subject's active dimension be recognized, as well as the felicitous political consequences of this demand. From this point of view, the problem for modern humanism becomes "the imposition of limits."[10] Due to the threat of anarchy that haunts humanism's active subject, we must discover a way to conceive of the subject as active, as engaged in the constitution of world-history, and yet as held within certain limits despite its active character. Thus, the challenge of modernity is "to rethink the question of the subject"[11] in such a way that subjectivity is understood neither as completely active nor as completely passive, the former position being that of the anarchist, and the latter being that of the supposedly Heideggerian quietist. And although Ferry and Renaut do not offer an account of this reinterpretation of subjectivity that they suggest, Richard Bernstein's critique of Heidegger yields such an account.

Bernstein's critique of Heidegger closely resembles that of Ferry and Renaut. Heidegger's "rage against Humanism,"[12] Bernstein claims, issues from his uncritical acceptance of the "fateful dichotomy between man as 'lord of beings' or 'shepherd of Being'."[13] With this dichotomy, Bernstein refers to the distinction between the human being as purely active and the human being as purely passive, respectively. And it is by accepting the adequacy of this division that Heidegger finds himself on the horns of an apparent, but, according to Bernstein, false, dilemma.[14] Believing that he is required to choose between espousing a purely active subject and a purely passive subject, Heidegger recoils from the consequences that have resulted from the former view—anarchistic, technological humanity, the "lord of beings," driven to the brink of self-destruction. And so he opts for a rejection of the active subject by issuing a call to a passive form of human activity.

That is, a call to what Bernstein names a "meditative, poetic, original thinking,"[15] through which we assume our proper vocation as the "shepherd of Being."

Like Ferry and Renaut, Bernstein sees Heidegger's reaction against humanism's interpretation of subjectivity as politically dangerous insofar as it villainizes "all human activity (other than the activity of thinking)"[16] by equating them all with "*Gestell*, manipulation, control, will to will, nihilism."[17] For once all active human pursuits are so denigrated, so is any form of political engagement, leaving a quietistic passivity in its wake. The shepherd of being is a passive, impotent spectator, who does not act in order to influence world history, but passively submits itself to the vicissitudes of that history.

National Socialism's authoritarian traditionalism is not far behind.

As we have seen, Ferry and Renaut counter Heidegger's alleged relegation of the human subject to a position of passivity by claiming that the positive aspects of the subject's possession of an active dimension must not be abandoned despite the dangers inherent in this dimension of subjectivity. Instead, the structure of subjectivity must be reinterpreted in order to acknowledge the subject's active dimension without allowing that this active dimension divests the subject of all limitations, i.e. without falling into political anarchy. The subject must be conceived as both autonomous and constrained, as active and yet passive. Bernstein clearly agrees with this assessment of the problem that besets modernity.[18] And he believes that we, today, can take guidance from Aristotle in addressing this problem.

According to Bernstein, Heidegger's acceptance of the false dilemma between a purely active and a purely passive subject reveals his failure to recognize that the Aristotelian notion of *praxis* offers a way between this dilemma's horns. In Heidegger's thought, Bernstein tells us, "what seems to pass into shadows of the background is what Aristotle called '*praxis*'."[19] *Praxis* is important because it is a type of action, an active comportment of the subject, that cannot be equated with the unconstrained, anarchistic interpretation of active subjectivity endorsed by modern technology—the "technical sense of action."[20] That is, the praxical subject is active and yet limited; it has both active and passive dimensions. The task of modernity, for Bernstein, is to reexamine Aristotelian *praxis* since this notion furnishes us with an understanding of human subjectivity as neither purely active nor purely passive. *Praxis* provides the key to the rethinking of the question of the subject which Ferry and Renaut demand. And Heidegger's rejection of humanism, yielding a merely passive subject, is not equal to this task.

III.

I believe that the critique of Heidegger offered by Bernstein, and by Ferry and Renaut, would be problematic for Heidegger if his critique of humanism had, in fact, overlooked the promise of Aristotelian *praxis* as a vehicle for re- interpreting subjectivity, and thus for properly coming to terms with the dangers of modern humanism. However, Heidegger's critique of humanism does not bypass the praxical subject, thereby stripping subjectivity of its active dimension. Instead, Heidegger thematizes *praxis*, or "action," in order to explicate the nature of the limitations with which active, practical subjectivity is saddled. From Heidegger's point of view, it is the humanist tradition that has failed to properly understand *praxis*. This is clear from the opening sentence of the "Letter on Humanism," which contains Heidegger's explicit confrontation with humanism. The opening of the "Letter" reads: "We are far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough."[21] Humanism, according to Heidegger, cannot properly understand *praxis* because it harbors an inadequate conception of subjectivity.

Although it is not always obvious, action is the underlying and controlling theme of the "Letter," and hence of Heidegger's assessment of humanism. We can best understand how the problem of action controls Heidegger's discussion of humanism by first placing the "Letter" within its philosophical context. Heidegger's essay responds to Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism." Sartre's essay is important to Heidegger because it represents a view that had often been attributed to Heidegger's early thought, i.e. the 'existentialist' reading of *Being and Time* that was formative of Sartre's own thought. This reading of *Being and Time* interprets beings as constituted by Dasein, the human subject, insofar as beings are essentially significant and it is Dasein that makes this significance possible since significance is always significance *for* a subject. That which is, then, is dependent upon human subjectivity; Dasein constitutes the field of significance within which beings can possess their essential significance, and thus be what they are. This is the view of human subjectivity that Sartre espouses in "Existentialism is a Humanism," although he emphasizes the subject's value-constituting power rather than its ontologically constitutive dimension. So, in accordance with this subjectivistic reading of *Being and Time*, Sartre views the human subject as radically active, unconstrained.

For Sartre, the human subject arbitrarily creates ethical values in free, unrestricted acts of will.[22] And here the danger inherent to humanism comes to the fore. Sartre's position represents the anarchistic extreme to which humanism's valorization of human autonomy can be pushed. Heidegger's

aim in the "Letter" is to dissociate *Being and Time* from this radically humanistic position in a way that distances himself not only from Sartre's existentialist version of humanism, but from humanism itself since, according to Heidegger, it is humanism's misunderstanding of human subjectivity that makes the Sartrean excess possible. And he believes that humanism's misinterpretation of subjectivity can be remedied by focusing on the problem of action.

Already in *Being and Time*, action, and its connection with the structure of human subjectivity, was of central concern for Heidegger. The centrality of action in *Being and Time* is immediately apparent in that work's methodologically fundamental analysis of everyday circumspective concern. There, Heidegger examines the nature of subjectivity and of objectivity by focusing on the way that objects appear to us in our immediate experience. This turn to immediate experience yields the phenomenological clue for interpreting the structure of human subjectivity. And Heidegger tells us that the mode of activity in terms of which subjectivity can be understood is circumspective concern, which, he says, is equivalent to the Greek notion of *praxis*.[23] Although the Greeks' allegiance to a faulty ontology precludes them from coming fully to terms with the nature of *praxis*,[24] and thus with the fundamental structure of subjectivity, it is *praxis* that holds the key to understanding this structure. The specific notion of *praxis* that Heidegger seems to have in mind is Aristotle's.

Before writing *Being and Time*, Heidegger was engaged in an intensive study of Aristotle—most importantly, for our purposes, Book Z of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which thematizes *praxis*.[25] In this text, Aristotle unfolds his notion of *praxis* by contrasting it with *poiesis*, or production. There, he tells us that *poiesis* "aims at an end distinct from the act of making, whereas in doing (*praxis*) the end cannot be other than the act itself: doing well (*eupraxia*) is in itself the end."[26] *Praxis* is distinctive in that it is not engaged in for the sake of some further end, but is engaged in for its own sake; *praxis* is its own end.

Heidegger's use of practical activity as his model for reinterpreting the structure of subjectivity reveals that subjectivity, like Aristotelian *praxis*, is distinctive insofar as it is its own end. His reinterpretation of subjectivity is essentially a reinterpretation of what, exactly, it is to be one's own end, and his exposure of humanism's inadequate conception of subjectivity is contained in his analysis of the practical subject, the being that is its own end. Heidegger arrives at this notion of subjectivity by examining our immediate, circumspective mode of activity, which is fundamentally practical, and finding that the subject of such circumspective activities is its own end. So,

by examining Heidegger's analysis of circumspective concern, we will see how the problem of action leads to his reinterpretation of subjectivity, a reinterpretation that undermines humanism.

IV.[27]

Circumspective concern is important for Heidegger because it is from this mode of behavior—the mode of behavior by which we immediately encounter objects—that he derives the basic ontological structures of subjectivity, objectivity, and their relation. Heidegger's analysis of circumspective concern shows that the objects of our immediate experience are objects of use, objects of a practical encounter. In Heideggerian terms, they are "ready-to-hand" entities. And these objects display a curious, bi-dimensional structure.

On the one hand, ready-to-hand objects are useful, and thus are *for* Dasein since Dasein, in its immediate mode of behavior, plays the role of the user of the ready-to-hand; without a user, ready-to-hand entities could not be the useful objects that they essentially are. Hence, as the ready-to-hand's user, it is Dasein that lends such useful objects their usefulness; Dasein constitutes the ready-to-hand by determining the usefulness that make it what it is. It is from this aspect of the object of immediate, practical encounters that Heidegger reads off the first structural characteristic of objectivity itself. That is, since the ready-to-hand entity is fundamentally *for* Dasein, to be an object is to be ontologically *dependent upon* subjectivity. Yet, despite the ready-to-hand's Dasein-dependence, these objects exhibit an equally essential *independence from* subjectivity.

The Dasein-independence of the practical object is indicated by the fact that such objects can be misused. Although ready-to-hand entities require a user in order to be the useful objects that they are, and so are constituted by Dasein insofar as Dasein determines their fundamental usefulness, Dasein cannot arbitrarily assign use-determinations to the ready-to-hand. Instead, the useful entity only admits a limited, predetermined range of uses; to try to use it otherwise is to misuse it, or simply to fail to use it at all. The ready-to-hand's capacity to be misused, its intrinsic recalcitrance to Dasein's practical activities, follows from the predetermination of the ready-to-hand's usefulness, its being what it is *prior to* Dasein's assuming the role of its user. And here we find the second fundamental aspect of the object of immediate, practical encounters, from which Heidegger reads off the second structural characteristic of objectivity itself. As misusable, the ready-to-hand object is what it is *without Dasein*. For the ready-to- hand's uses, which make the ready-to-hand what it is, precede Dasein. Since the ready-to-hand

entity, then, is fundamentally without Dasein, to be an object is to be ontologically independent of subjectivity.

To summarize, Heidegger's analysis of immediate experience reveals that objects possess two equally essential, but apparently incompatible, dimensions. They are both *for* and *without* Dasein; the basic ontological structure of objects is to be both Dasein-dependent and Dasein-independent.

But what must be the structure of Dasein in order for objects to be both dependent upon it and independent from it? With this question, we approach Heidegger's re-interpretation of active subjectivity, which he offers as a corrective to the notion of active subjectivity endorsed by humanism. Beginning again at the level of immediate experience, Heidegger examines the way that Dasein experiences itself in its everyday circumspective mode. And he finds that Dasein exhibits a bi-dimensional structure which parallels that of the ready-to-hand. Heidegger discerns Dasein's bi-dimensional structure by noting that "[t]he Self of everyday Dasein is the 'they'-Self."[28]

Heidegger's characterization of everyday Dasein as 'they'-Self refers to the fact that Dasein immediately experiences itself as a member of the public: "the 'they'." The 'they' are the others among which Dasein always finds itself, i.e., other Daseins. Others are implicated in immediate experience since ready-to-hand entities are not only useful for oneself but for others as well. The experience of others correlates with the misusability of the ready-to-hand object. That is, the usefulness of the ready-to-hand is applicable to the practical activities of others because this usefulness is not arbitrarily determined by Dasein, but precedes, and so is independent of, Dasein. Thus, others appear with the public character of the ready-to-hand's usefulness. And they appear as those for whom the ready-to-hand possesses this public dimension; they *are* the public, the 'they.'

Since the 'they' is correlated with the independence of the everyday, ready-to-hand entity, with the pre-determination of its usefulness, the 'they' appears as an alien force restricting Dasein's use of the ready-to-hand. The 'they' restricts what Dasein can do without failing to be the user of the ready-to-hand, without failing to be itself. In this sense, the 'they' is essentially other than Dasein, an alien agency imposing restrictions on Dasein. Still, the 'they' is not completely alien to Dasein since, in immediate experience, Dasein finds itself not only subjected to the restrictions of the 'they,' but it also finds itself obeying these restrictions, i.e., behaving as 'they,' the public, do. Dasein is one of 'them': the 'they'-Self.

Notice how the structure of the everyday subject parallels the bi-dimensional structure of the everyday object. Insofar as the ready-to-hand entity is useful, and thus Dasein-dependent, Dasein is the 'they' that

determines the proper uses of objects, thereby constituting the ready-to-hand as such. But insofar as these use-determinations are pre-determined, and so are Dasein-independent, Dasein is that upon which the 'they' imposes restrictions for object-use. Just as the object of immediate experience possesses the apparently incompatible aspects of being what it is both for and without Dasein, so the subject of immediate experience possesses the apparently incompatible aspects of being determinative of the ready-to-hand and of having these determinations imposed on it. And it is from these aspects of the everyday subject that Heidegger derives the basic ontological structure of subjectivity. Specifically, everyday Dasein's being both the 'they' and subjected to the 'they' reveals Dasein to be ontologically *self-restrictive*. The subject correlated with objects that are both dependent upon and independent from subjectivity is a subject that imposes restrictions on itself.

V.

Now we are prepared to see how Heidegger's notion of subjectivity as self-restrictive is equivalent to Aristotle's notion of *praxis*, thereby situating the problem of action at the forefront of Heidegger's thought. Recall that Aristotle distinguishes *praxis* from other modes of activity by noting that practical activity is its own end. This is also the distinguishing characteristic of Heidegger's self-restrictive subject. For Dasein is self-restrictive insofar as it imposes laws of object-use, laws of object-constitution, on itself. And this self-subjection is simultaneously a self-*achievement* because it is by properly using objects, by obeying the self-imposed laws of object-use, that Dasein becomes what it is: the user of the ready-to-hand, the agent of object-constitution. That is, by properly using the ready-to-hand, Dasein assumes its role as that which constitutes the ready-to-hand as such. Allowing laws of object-use to guide it, Dasein achieves itself as the imposer of these very laws. Thus, Dasein's self-imposition of laws of object-use is equally Dasein's self-achievement since it is by subjecting itself to this imposition that it becomes itself.

In view of the above, Heidegger concludes that everyday Dasein is its own end.[29] Specifically, Dasein *qua* performer of object-constitutive acts is the end for Dasein *qua* subjected to these acts. And since the analysis of everyday Dasein serves as Heidegger's methodological clue to the ontological structure of Dasein, everyday Dasein's being the end of its own immediate, circumspective activities shows Dasein to be ontologically distinctive in that it is its own end.

The importance of action in Heidegger's thought should now be clear.

His turn to immediate experience yields a conception of subjectivity as self-subjective, or as its own end, which is precisely the structure of Aristotelian *praxis*. Human subjectivity is intrinsically practical, and so all human activity is ultimately a form of action. With this in mind, let us revisit the critique of Heidegger's anti-humanism put forth by Bernstein and by Ferry and Renaut.

Ferry and Renaut argue that Heidegger's rejection of the humanistic valorization of active subjectivity takes the form of a reactionary return to pre-democratic, authoritarian traditions because Heidegger fails to recognize the possibility of a notion of human subjectivity as possessing equally essential active and passive dimensions. Lacking such a conception of subjectivity, Heidegger cannot adequately confront the basic problem of modernity, which demands a way of acknowledging the subject's active dimension without concluding that this active dimension divests the subject of all limitations. Bernstein agrees with this diagnosis, and he adds that such a conception of subjectivity is found in Aristotle's notion of *praxis*, a notion that Heidegger overlooked.

At this point in our analysis, we can see that Heidegger did not overlook the importance of *praxis*, as Bernstein alleges. In fact, Heidegger's interpretation of subjectivity as self-subjective is rooted in his phenomenological discovery of the fact that the human subject is essentially a practical agent. This is why he derives the fundamental structure of subjectivity from his analysis of practical comportment. Not only does Heidegger invoke *praxis* in order to address the problem of subjectivity, but the conception of subjectivity yielded by his turn to *praxis* possesses the key characteristics that Bernstein, along with Ferry and Renaut, claim is needed to solve the basic problem of modernity. Heidegger's practical subject is both autonomous and constrained, active yet passive.

Dasein is *active* insofar as objects are what they are *for* Dasein, and so are constituted by Dasein. In immediate practical experience, this active dimension of Dasein is revealed by the fact that everyday Dasein is the 'they' that determines the uses of ready-to-hand entities. However, the ready-to-hand object only permits a limited range of possible uses; its use-determinations precede Dasein, and so are imposed on Dasein. Hence, Dasein's passive dimension. Dasein is *passive* insofar as objects are what they are prior to, and thus *without*, Dasein.

Before examining how humanist thought is incapable of grasping the fundamental structure of this self-restrictive, passive/active subject—this incapacity being the reason that humanism misinterprets subjectivity, leaving humanism unable to solve what we referred to above as the problem

of modernity—we must look more closely at the nature of the Heideggerian subject. Most importantly, we need to draw out the implications of the fact that this subject is its own end. By doing so, we will find that the self-achievement of the subject that is its own end, the eclipsing of the end that it itself is, is completely inconceivable. It is upon the realization that Dasein is not simply its own end, but is, more precisely, its own *in principle unachievable* end, that Heidegger's critique of humanism turns.

VI.

As we have seen, Dasein *qua* performer of object-constitutive acts is the end for Dasein *qua* subjected to these acts. But the achievement of this end, Dasein's self-achievement, is inconceivable because if Dasein were to actualize itself as the performer of object-constitutive acts, then it would no longer be subjected to them. If that were to occur, the ready-to-hand's proper use-determinations would cease to be an imposition. As the fully actualized performer of object-constitutive acts, Dasein would be able to whimsically assign uses to objects. They would passively yield to any use that Dasein might arbitrarily choose to put them. Objects, then, would cease to be objects at all since their fundamental Dasein-independence would be completely compromised. And Dasein would no longer be Dasein since its fundamental passivity in the face of objects, its being subjected to the 'they' and thus to itself as 'they'-Self, would disappear. Dasein would cease to be the self-restrictive subject that it is; its acts of object-constitution would become radically unrestricted.

Notice the implications of Dasein's unachievability. Dasein is unachievable insofar as its ontological structure precludes it from ever becoming what it properly is. Not only is Dasein's self-achievement factually impossible, then, but it is inconceivable, and so is impossible in principle. The very idea of Dasein's self-actualization, of its reaching a fully *determined* state, is meaningless. Therefore, Dasein is *indeterminate* in its very essence. And humanistic thought lacks the resources for understanding this ontological indeterminacy that is characteristic of Dasein's fundamental structure.

Heidegger believes that humanism cannot come to terms with the indeterminacy of human subjectivity because humanistic thought is a form of "metaphysical" thinking.[30] That is, it accepts the "ontology of the present-at-hand", which presupposes that whatever is is a determinate thing. This is not to say that this ontology maintains that all things are already fully determined, or achieved, but that all things are either already determined or are not yet fully determined but are at least determinable, or achievable, in

principle. The human subject, according to the humanist, falls into the latter category. Since the human being is yet to be achieved, the humanist's concern is that humanity achieve itself. As Heidegger puts it, humanism is concerned that "man be human and not inhumane, 'inhuman'; that is, outside his essence."[31] And this is accomplished by the subject's asserting its ability to determine itself. Thus, humanism's emphasis on the human subject's active dimension, which culminates in Sartre's existentialist humanism, and the misinterpretation of Heidegger's *Being and Time* espoused by Sartre.

But, according to Heidegger, the humanist program fails to recognize "the proper dignity of man."[32] By conceiving the human being as present-at-hand, humanism misunderstands the human being's unique ontological structure. This unique structure is the human being's practical structure: its being its own end. The ontology of the present-at-hand cannot account for this practical structure because this ontology's basic principle is that all that is is determinate, and thus achievable in principle, while the practically structured being that is its own end is ontologically indeterminate, and thus unachievable in principle.[33] And this is why humanism has no remedy to the problem of modernity. Inextricably wedded to the ontology of the present-at-hand, humanism cannot find its way between the horns of the false dilemma which asserts that the human being is either purely active or purely passive. Heidegger's position, *pace* Bernstein, is that humanism is stuck with this "fateful dichotomy," and that only a properly conceived anti-humanism can undermine it.

Humanism's acceptance of the ontology of the present-at-hand saddles it with the above dichotomy because this dichotomy follows from the belief that all that is is determinate. For if this were the case, then the human being's self-achievement would be conceivable as a determinate state-of-affairs; the figure of human self-achievement would not be fashioned by the human sub-ject, but would be pre-determined. The human being would not actively determine its end, would not actively determine itself, but would have its proper end imposed upon it. Humanism reacts to this incipient loss of autonomy by investing the subject with the power of self-determination; the antidemocratic dangers of a purely passive notion of subjectivity are countered by conceiving the subject as active. But humanism's adoption of the ontology of the present-at-hand precludes it from conceiving the active subject as beset by limitations since the ontology of the present-at-hand can only conceive active subjectivity as *purely* active. For if all that is is determinate, and if a conception of the human subject as determinate renders the subject unacceptably passive, then the only acceptable notion of subjec-

tivity is one that denies the very existence of a human essence. Only in this way does the human subject gain an active dimension since the determinate is the passive, and anything that exists must be determinate.

So, its faulty ontological presuppositions blind humanism to the possibility of according humanity an active dimension in any way other than by stripping human subjectivity of all content. From within the strictures of the ontology of the present-at-hand, the subject is either purely passive or purely active; it either has a pre-determined essence, or it is nothing at all. As a result, humanism can never conceive an active subject that also possesses a passive dimension. It cannot conceive the practical subject that is its own end. Politically, it must choose between anarchy and quietism. This ineluctable logic culminates in Sartre's denial of a human essence, and the extreme normative subjectivism entailed by this denial.[34]

VII.

So, it is only through the Heideggerian rejection of humanism, the rejection of humanism's assumption of the ontology of the present-at-hand, that the active subject can be provided with restrictions on its autonomy. And it does this without simply denying the subject's autonomy, thereby circumventing the political dangers of both anarchy and quietism. In this way, Heidegger's position yields a solution to the problem of modernity. But what sort of a politics issues from the Heideggerian position? We can answer this question by considering the precise nature of the restrictions that limit the autonomy of the Heideggerian subject.

The activities of the everyday practical subject are limited by self-imposed laws of proper object-use, of proper object-constitution. For Dasein to act in accordance with these restrictions would be equivalent to its achieving itself. But the idea of Dasein's so acting, the idea of its self-achievement, is inconceivable on pain of absurdity; it would be the idea of a subject whose self-imposed laws are not an imposition, a self-restrictive subject without restrictions. Since it is impossible in principle to conceive of a subject that exhibits full obedience to the laws of proper object-constitution, these laws themselves cannot be articulated in any determinate, conceivable formula. If they could be so articulated, then we would be able to conceive of a state of affairs in which these laws are fully obeyed. The self-imposed restrictions that guide Dasein's pursuit of self-achievement, then, are inarticulable, indeterminate laws.

The indeterminacy of Dasein's self-imposed laws for proper behavior may seem to leave Heidegger in the same anarchistic quandry as Sartre. After all, it seems, *prima facie*, that in- determinate restrictions cannot be

breached since they do not determinately designate which actions are to count as violations of these restrictions. And restrictions that cannot be violated are no restrictions at all. But the indeterminate restrictions that set limits on the behavior of the Heideggerian subject are far from inviolable. Quite to the contrary, they are always violated since the type of indeterminacy that characterizes them prevents Dasein from fully achieving itself; their indeterminacy precludes Dasein from meeting their demands.

Still, although the indeterminacy of the restrictions limiting Dasein's behavior renders those restrictions unsatisfiable, thereby allowing Heidegger to avoid an anarchic politics, it may seem that this very indeterminacy condemns Heidegger to quietism. For Dasein's inability to satisfy the laws restricting its behavior is equivalent to its inability to be itself as that which actively constitutes objects. Unable to fulfill its ontological role, Dasein seems to be reduced to a passive spectator, condemned to political quietism, as the critics of Heidegger's anti-humanism charge. That this is, in fact, not the case can be seen from the following considerations.

Dasein is not purely active insofar as its self-restrictive structure does not permit it to be successful in its attempts to achieve itself, to successfully assume the role of that which constitutes objects. Therefore, Dasein's necessary failure to become itself reveals its passive dimension. But the fact that Dasein cannot attain self-achievement does not render it *purely* passive because this failure is never a *complete* failure. Dasein's inability to achieve itself is manifested by its inability to fully obey laws of object-use, or object-constitution. But Dasein does, indeed, necessarily obey such laws to a certain extent. Were this not the case, then we could not use the ready-to-hand at all but would always be completely misusing practical objects. Objects would offer nothing but resistance to our practical activities. But such a situation is inconceivable: objects would cease to be objects at all since their fundamental Dasein-dependence, revealed by the usefulness of the ready-to-hand, would be completely compromised. And Dasein would no longer be Dasein since its fundamental object-constituting dimension, revealed by its being the 'they'-Self that determines the proper uses of the ready-to-hand, would disappear. Dasein, then, is not purely passive, but possesses passive and active dimensions.

So, just as Dasein's passive aspect is manifested by the fact that objects do not passively yield to any use that Dasein might arbitrarily choose to put them, but rather resist Dasein's practical activities, Dasein's active aspect is manifested by the fact that objects do yield, to a degree, to such practical activities. Therefore, Dasein's passivity is not a pure passivity, as Bernstein, as well as Ferry and Renaut, claim, but is tempered by an active, object-

constituting dimension. As the being that imposes laws of object-constitution on itself, Dasein is never fully successful at achieving itself, but it never completely fails.

We can now draw some basic, admittedly tentative, political conclusions from Heidegger's active/passive, antihumanistic, notion of human subjectivity. On the one hand, Dasein's inability to achieve itself, to act properly, which is rooted in its passive dimension, implies that Dasein cannot create political norms by fiat. Therefore, it is Dasein's passive dimension that disallows a Heideggerian form of anarchy. On the other hand, Dasein's active dimension implies that it must play a positive role in the constitution of political norms. It is this active dimension that precludes a Heideggerian form of quietism.

Neither anarchistic nor quietistic, Heidegger's position implies that although our political decisions will always fail to meet the indeterminate standard of self-achievement by which the propriety of Dasein's behavior is measured, we must continue to pursue self-achievement. Humanity is never fully in the right, but this must not dissuade us from constantly attempting to eclipse the indeterminate, and thus inconceivable, goal of acting properly, of achieving our humanity, in the political arena.

Notes

[1] Victor Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism* (trans. Paul Burrell and Gabriel R. Ricci, Philadelphia: Temple, 1989).

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit* (trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Chicago: Chicago, 1989); Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics* (trans. Chris Turner, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

[3] Lacoue-Labarthe 95.

[4] This thesis is admirably argued by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut in their book *Heidegger and Modernity* (trans. Franklin Philip, Chicago: Chicago, 1990). The essential contours of Ferry and Renaut's position had been previously articulated by Richard J. Bernstein in his article "Heidegger and Humanism" (*Praxis International*, 5 (July 1985), 95-114). For a similar stance, see also Richard Wolin's *The Politics of Being* (New York: Columbia, 1990), 132-142; Jürgen Habermas' *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: MIT, 1987), 152; and Habermas' "Work and *Weltanschauung*" (trans. J. McCumber, *Heidegger: A Critical Reader*, eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Harrison Hall, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, 186-208), 193, 198.

[5] Richard Bernstein, "The Rage Against Reason" (*Philosophy and Literature*, 10 (October 1986), 186-210), 199.

[6] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" (trans. William Lovitt, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 287-317), 307.

[7] Ferry & Renaut 4.

[8] Ferry & Renaut 81-82.

[9] Ferry & Renaut 81.

[10] Ferry & Renaut 82. See also Ferry & Renaut 8: "the problem facing the individual in the democratic world is that of limi-tation."

[11] Ferry & Renaut 8.

[12] Bernstein, "Heidegger and Humanism" 96.

[13] Bernstein, "Heidegger and Humanism" 98.

[14] In his *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983), Bernstein refers to this false dilemma as "Cartesian Anxiety." That is, the belief that if there is no "fixed foundation of knowledge...[then] intellectual and moral chaos"(18) will necessarily ensue. In other words, either there are permanent evaluative standards by which actions are measured, in which case the human being is passively submit-ted to such standards, or else we willfully create evaluative standards, in which case we are condemned to an "arbitrary acceptance of one set of standards or practices over against its rival"(68). The former is the position of the quietist, while the latter is that of the anarchist.

[15] Bernstein, "Heidegger and Humanism" 101.

[16] Bernstein, "Heidegger and Humanism" 102.

[17] Bernstein, "Heidegger and Humanism" 102.

[18] See his discussion of the importance of moving beyond the "Cartesian Anxiety" (*Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 1-20).

[19] Bernstein, "Heidegger and Humanism" 98.

[20] Bernstein, "Heidegger and Humanism" 101. In *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, he makes the point by saying that *praxis* requires a type of *rationality* that cannot be reduced to technical rationality (38-49).

[21] Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" (trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, *Basic Writings*, 193-242), 193.

[22] See Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" (trans. Philip Mairet, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Meridian, 1975, 345-369), 350-352, 364.

[23] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 96-97.

[24] See Heidegger, *Being and Time* 97, and "Letter on Humanism" 193-195.

[25] Jacques Taminiaux's article "Heidegger and *Praxis*" (*The Heidegger Case*, eds. Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis, Philadelphia: Temple, 1992, 188-207) argues for the importance of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Z (as well as *Metaphysics*, Theta) to *Being and Time* insofar as Heidegger used Aristotelian *praxis* as his model for understanding subjectivity, although, Taminiaux claims, Heidegger significantly re-interprets this Aristotelian notion (See esp. 193f.). In his article "*Being and Time*: A 'Translation' of the *Nicomachean Ethics*?"(*Reading Heidegger from the Start*, eds. Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren, Albany: SUNY, 1994, 195-211), Franco Volpi, too, argues that *Nicomachean Ethics*, Z was a formative influence on *Being and Time*'s interpretation of subjectivity. As Volpi puts it, Book Z's notion of *praxis*

"is enlisted...to serve as the distinguishing mark of the manner of being belonging to Dasein" (201). In "The Place of Aristotle in the Development of Heidegger's Phenomenology" (*Reading Heidegger from the Start*, 213-227), Walter Brogan shows that Heidegger had already drawn a close connection between *praxis* and subjectivity in the 1922 essay entitled "Phenomenological Interpretations with Regard to Aristotle" (trans. Michael Baur, *Man and World*, 25 (1992), 358- 393). See Brogan 218-219.

[26] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. H. Rackham, Cambridge: Harvard, 1934), 1140b4-6.

[27] For a full analysis of the issues treated in this section, see my "Heidegger on Realism and Idealism" (*Journal of Philosophical Research*, vol.xiii, 1998, 95-111).

[28] Heidegger, *Being and Time* 167.

[29] In his *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (trans. Albert Hofstadter, Bloomington: Indiana, 1982), Heidegger critiques Kant for interpreting the subject as its own end. Still, it is not this formulation of the human essence that Heidegger objects to. Rather, he maintains that Kant's allegiance to a faulty ontology precluded him from fully understanding the ontological structure of that which is its own end.

[30] Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" 202.

[31] Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" 200.

[32] Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" 210.

[33] Here, we can understand the connection between Aristotelian *phronesis* and Heidegger's own notion of the "call of conscience." That Heidegger himself drew this connection is seen in a story related by Gadamer in which Heidegger answered a student's question regarding the interpretation of *phronesis* by saying, "That is the conscience!" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Marburg Theology," *Heidegger's Ways*, trans. John W. Stanley, Albany: SUNY, 1994, 32). The call of conscience, according to Heidegger, reveals Dasein's unachievability by announcing that Dasein is ontologically deficient, or "guilty" (*Being and Time* 326). Hence, Heidegger's notion of Dasein's becoming itself, or authenticity, is one in which Dasein recognizes its own unachievability and behaves accordingly. As a result, Heidegger can reinterpret Aristotelian *phronesis*, or the excellence of the praxical subject, as that recognition of the impossibility of self-achievement which occurs when Dasein responds to the call of conscience, or properly *has* a conscience. The Aristotelian *phronimos* is, from the Heideggerian point of view, Dasein insofar as it has a conscience.

[34] Ferry and Renaut note the affinity between humanism and existentialism, when they say that "authentic humanism is also necessarily an existentialism" (4).