



Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil

By Rüdiger Safranski

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One of the century's greatest philosophers, without whom there would be no Sartre, no Foucault, no Frankfurt School, Martin Heidegger was also a man of great failures and flaws, a Faustus who made a pact with the devil of his time, Adolf Hitler. The story of Heidegger's life and philosophy, a quintessentially German story in which good and evil, brilliance and blindness are inextricably entwined and the passions and disasters of a whole century come into play, is told in this brilliant biography.

Heidegger grew up in Catholic Germany where, for a chance at pursuing a life of learning, he pledged himself to the priesthood. Soon he turned apostate and sought a university position, which set him on the path to becoming the star of German philosophy in the 1920s. Rüdiger Safranski chronicles Heidegger's rise along with the thought he honed on the way, with its debt to Heraclitus, Plato, and Kant, and its tragic susceptibility to the conservatism that emerged out of the nightmare of Germany's loss in World War I. A chronicle of ideas and of personal commitments and betrayals, Safranski's biography combines clear accounts of the philosophy that won Heidegger eternal renown with the fascinating details of the loves and lapses that tripped up this powerful intellectual.

The best intellectual biography of Heidegger ever written and a best-seller in Germany, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil* does not shy away from full coverage of Heidegger's shameful transformation into a propagandist for the National Socialist regime; nor does it allow this aspect of his career to obscure his accomplishments. Written by a master of Heidegger's philosophy, the book is one of the best introductions to the thought and to the life and times of the greatest German philosopher of the century.

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Editorial Review

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Heidegger towers above this century as a thinker able to wrest insights from ancient texts (Plato, Heraclitus, and Parmenides) while simultaneously opening distinctively modern perspectives for contemporaries (Sartre, Tillich, and Arendt). With admirable erudition and sophistication, Safranski recounts the evolution of this giant from a cautious Catholic seminarian to a daring explorer of the depths of anxiety and alienation. A different kind of subtlety--more psychological than philosophical--comes into play in the analysis of why Heidegger veered from his quest for truth to serve Adolf Hitler. While refusing to exculpate him for supporting an evil movement, Safranski shows how philosophical reasoning belatedly helped Heidegger distance himself from Nazism, so opening the way to a fruitful postwar investigation of the human place in a technological world. As the well-told story of a life that combined, as few have, a heroic rage for truth with a tragic vulnerability to error, this biography will make a valuable addition to larger public libraries. *Bryce Christensen*

From Kirkus Reviews

The author sheds light on the varieties of darkness that shade the life and thought of, arguably, Germany's most influential 20th-century philosopher. Safranski (Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy, not reviewed) presents Heidegger in the context of what Osers, the book's translator, so brilliantly calls "that German specialty for extravagant wretchedness." More than most German philosophers, Heidegger, in quest of Being, pushes to the brink of incomprehensibility. The author comforts us with the knowledge that even so distinguished a friend of Heidegger's as Karl Jaspers, missed what Heidegger meant by "Being." But the darkness of incomprehension was itself a principle of Heidegger's thought. Instead of the active, determining mind that Kant had posited, Heidegger found an intractable resistance to human reason--Being itself--of which we first become aware in amazement over the sheer fact that anything exists at all. We do not so much shape the world as find ourselves "being there," or in German, Dasein. Against this cognitive darkness, Safranski sets the moral obscurity of Heidegger's Nazi involvement and tries to unravel the connections there between the philosopher's thought and life. The picture that emerges is, appropriately, darkly unfocused. When Safranski observes at the end of his book that Heidegger's "brusqueness and severity" mellowed with age, readers will wonder whether they've missed something: Brusqueness is already too defined a quality for what Hannah Arendt called Heidegger's "lack of character, in the sense that he literally has none, certainly not a particularly bad one." Safranski suggests that the real Heidegger hovers between two self-portraits: modern tower of philosophy and modest attendant in the museum of philosophy's history, taking care that the works on display there are properly illuminated. Safranski's own take--both critical and appreciative--on Heidegger mirrors the complexity of his subject, and provides a welcome entre to a difficult thought world. - *Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

Rüdiger Safranski's evenhanded study, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, is equally successful at illustrating its subject's pettiness and at displaying the vast power of his imagination. It is the first comprehensive biography of the man, and supersedes both Victor Farías's *Heidegger and Nazism* and Hugo Ott's *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*. It reports many facts that these books did not, and it offers a detailed account of Heidegger's intellectual development?relating his twists and turns, with great skill and remarkable concision, to German intellectual and political life in the first half of this century. (Richard Rorty *New York Times Book Review*)

[A] thoughtful, sensitive and sympathetic biography. (Ray Monk *Times Literary Supplement*)

A superb work of synthesis, the book places Heidegger's thought and life in the volatile context of 20th-century German and European politics and philosophy... Although Safranski sees Heidegger as a towering figure in 20th-century philosophy, this is a 'warts and all' biography. The author leaves no doubt about Heidegger's self-centeredness, his intellectual arrogance, and his convenient lapses of memory about his role in the Nazi years. But the book's primary merit is a superb explication of Heidegger's thought, its antecedents, and its place in the context of his political and philosophical times. For an English-speaking audience, Safranski's treatment is easily the best introduction to Heidegger's complex philosophy... This [is] an important book, highly recommended for anyone interested in the history of 20th-century Continental philosophy and Martin Heidegger's place in it. (Dietrich Orlow *Boston Sunday Globe*)

This biography of Martin Heidegger is an impressive achievement, and English-speaking readers are fortunate that it is now available to them... *Martin Heidegger* is the first comprehensive biography of one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. It offers a detailed view of Heidegger's intellectual development provided by no previous book, and it gives new information on his involvement with the Nazis. Given the importance of Heidegger's thought for many celebrated left-wing thinkers, including Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Safranski's careful consideration of the relation between Heidegger's right-wing politics and his thought can help readers struggle with the much-debated question of whether the contemporary leftists of the postmodern movement are really cultural reactionaries in disguise... Safranski's biography is both the most authoritative and the most approachable of the recent Heidegger books. (Carl L. Bankston III *Magill's Literary Annual*)

Users Review

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Eugene Flowers:

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