

## JUSTIFYING YOUR NATION

Graeme Nicholson (University of Toronto)

*This article examines Heidegger's account of existence by proceeding through one of his early accounts of our historical being and then looking at two of his later treatments of our historical being. Throughout his whole work, Heidegger seeks to show that destiny, das Geschick, is the essential constituent of history, die Geschichte. My own argument—which is intended as an extension and application of Heidegger's, not merely an exegesis—is to formulate a still broader concept derived from das Geschick, which I call civilisation. I conclude with the claim that civilisation is a normative principle as well as a descriptive one, and can take on the role of justifying the laws and institutions of our communities.*

Political philosophy, especially in the modern period, has been concerned with the problem of the justification of law in general and the justification of particular laws. That means that it has also had to approach the question of the right, or justification, of the state and its institutions. The mainstream philosophical project has been to show, in this way or that, that state and law are justified by being the embodiment of reason (Aristotle, Hegel and the entire tradition of Natural Law), though modern thought often tended to opt for a different grounding, no less rationalistic, a grounding through rational deliberation (Rawls and the whole social contract tradition). But there is another possibility that appears in thinkers who have stressed the historical conditions that permitted laws and states to emerge, a less rationalistic form of thought that I might see embodied in figures such as Machiavelli, Hobbes and Marx. In general, the realism of this latter group has led them away from any principle of “justification,” led them to reject its idealistic associations and to diverge from the apologetic program of showing the justification of state and law. But we may put to any of them in turn the question how they conceptualise history itself, this domain of the “real,” with its determining “material factors.” And in that connection I have been led to explore Heidegger's account of history. I would not claim that the philosophy of existence of Heidegger could replace the main streams of modern political philosophy, but it

might be able to offer a corrective to them, drawing on an orientation toward history and its constitution. My intent is to argue here that particular laws, rulings and measures, undertaken in the framework of a state and judiciary, can derive their justification from ancient and informal provisions of civilisation, a key principle that I discern in the constitution of history.

My argument arises partly through paying closer attention to what justification itself implies. In my longer manuscript,<sup>1</sup> I show in the first place that the singular self can find both destructive and creative ways of justifying itself and its existence. Then, we are to see that a similar situation holds at the level of the community. We all try to justify those communities to which we belong, and while this can give rise to chauvinism, it can also have a positive character. A very different phenomenon is at work when we recognise that our own community is not automatically right and stands in need of some kind of justification. Typically, in our Western tradition, this has been sought through a higher principle of justice or natural right. But the present argument is intended for those who have not been satisfied by classical statements of natural law. I take my start from Heidegger's account of existence, and proceed through one of his early accounts of our historical being, and then look at two of his later treatments of our historical being. Throughout his whole work, Heidegger seeks to show that destiny, *das Geschick*, is the essential constituent of history, *die Geschichte*. My own argument—which is intended as an extension and application of Heidegger's, not merely an exegesis—is to formulate a still broader concept derived from *das Geschick*, which I call civilisation. I conclude with the claim that civilisation is a normative principle as well as a descriptive one, and can take on the role of justifying the laws and institutions of our communities.

The community that I assume here is the nation. This is partly because Heidegger was usually talking about it, though he commonly called it the “people,” *das Volk*, or the “community,” *die Gemeinschaft*, only occasionally the “nation,” *die Nation*. But my further reason is that I

---

<sup>1</sup>This paper is extracted from my book, *Justifying Our Existence: An Essay in Applied Phenomenology*, due to appear in 2009 in the series *New Studies in Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* with the University of Toronto Press, although the material has been augmented for the present article-format.

think philosophy needs to address this entity. The nation is obviously not the same as the state or the law, which have been the chosen focus of philosophy. It is sometimes introduced into discussion in the form of the manifold of “cultures” and “peoples,” but in their fullest form these are realised as nations. For Heidegger, nations are the principal subjects of history. So I’ll be considering the question how the institutions of a nation receive their justification.

### Heidegger on History

The account of existence in *Being and Time (SZ)*<sup>2</sup> has as one of its decisive and primordial constituents the treatment of our being-with, *Mit-sein*. Existence is the ability to be, but this ability cannot be realised in separation: it must incorporate others as well, i.e., incorporate an ability to be with others, incorporate an understanding of that ability, and thus incorporate an understanding of the others themselves. The thesis of chapter IV of the first division of *SZ*, sections 25 to 27, is expressed in the chapter title: “Being-in-the-World as Being-with and Being-a-Self,” a double structure bringing together into one account two equal aspects of being-in-the-world. So being-with is not a contingent circumstance: the presence of other people in the world is anticipated in the constitution of our being, and in our understanding of that constitution. It is not by agreement or convention or contract that we form an association with them—belonging structurally together with them is inscribed in our constitution: it is ontological, not conventional. With readers like Philipse, the very idea of authenticity has been misinterpreted to imply an ideal of solitude and heroic aloofness.<sup>3</sup> Such readings err in failing to see that *Mitsein* is ontologically constitutive and irremovable. In fact, the idea of authenticity is realised both in being a self and in being with others. Sections 25–27 discuss our being-with-others in the inauthentic mode and in the authentic mode, as well as our being-a-self in the authentic mode and in the inauthentic mode: being yourself authentically is accompanied by authentic being-with-others, and inauthentic selfhood is accompanied by an inauthentic collectivity. It is a constant error in Heidegger readings to

---

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1998). See, e.g., 26–7, 346 ff.

suppose that authentic existence necessarily implies solitude, so that inauthenticity arises from our social being or is equivalent to that.<sup>4</sup> It is not only our understanding that is given over to being with others; the others belong to our facticity as well: that is, the social world is an a priori condition for the self's projecting of itself, a condition for its existence.

Because of the formal character of Heidegger's treatments in *SZ*, there was little or no opportunity in the treatise to investigate the different forms which being-with can take in actual life, such as collegiality, friendship, joint ventures, marriage, parenthood, community organisations, nationality, statehood, internationalism, and so on.<sup>5</sup> But, given that the question of existence pertains to fundamental ontology, i.e., belongs to the preparatory inquiry that is to lead to the question of being in general, we might ask if there is truly a lacuna in *SZ*. What ought to have been added? Certainly there are many types of community, but it does not seem that it was necessary for Heidegger to differentiate them or appraise them. But, of course, we can do so, and are going to do so, extending the discussion in that direction. Heidegger's account always speaks of "others" in the plural: this is not that magnified Other, spelled with a capital letter, that we read of in Levinas<sup>6</sup> and his followers. Rather these others are those among whom we exist (*unter ihnen*), among whom each of us is also reciprocally one among others; it is not that we confront them over against us or above us.

An essential supplement to Heidegger's account of being-with is the treatment of communication in sections 33 and 34. It is evident that all understanding, interpretation and utterance have been realised within a

---

<sup>4</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, *Being in the World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), in chapter 4, taxes Heidegger with this error, although he adds that Heidegger is confused over this point, mixing up the ontologically inevitable *Mitsein* with the kind of social conformism that is by no means inevitable.

<sup>5</sup>It is lacunas of this sort that David Carr had in mind in his critical article, "Die fehlende Sozialphilosophie Heideggers" in *Zur philosophischen Aktualität Heideggers, I, Philosophie und Politik*, (eds.) D. Papenfuss and O. Pöggeler (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1991), 234–46.

<sup>6</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, (tr.) A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969).

social framework, and should be taken from the start as an articulation of our being-with. Understanding and communication are obviously conditions for any communal history.

To consider the application of the philosophy of existence to social and national life, we need to absorb the main contents of Heidegger's chapter on temporality and history (second division, chapter V), treating the historical determinants of our life. History is certainly the venture of countless millions of people, but to approach the very constitution of what is historical, Heidegger begins, in section 72, with some reflections on the temporal being of the singular self. In our resolute being-towards our own end, death, we bring into play the other marker of our finitude, our birth, because of the ecstatic constitution of death, our ultimate futurity. It reaches back into our past in the sense that every initiative and project that we have undertaken since our birth finds its nullification here. The shadow that falls backward on our life discloses that life as a forward stretching into the shadow, a tensile stretch in which everything we did and experienced shows itself as the mere Between: between birth and death. The self that is mortal must also be natal. (374) Existing, i.e., the ability to be, is precisely this stretching. (373) Conceived ecstatically, neither birth nor death is an event; rather, they concern us. Just as we are always enroute to death, we perpetually retrieve our birth (374), and in this way we run our life's race. I use the latter phrase to render Heidegger's difficult phrase: *das Dasein geschieht*, literally "*Dasein* happens." For an ontological comprehension of our life, then, we need to grasp this race more fully, i.e., the course of the race, which is the structure of *Geschehen*. This alone will open up a view of the broad currents that appear in the course of every life's race. The very coursing of these essential currents constitutes the vastness of temporality itself in its totality. This is what we usually call history (*die Geschichte*). German differentiates *die Historie*, a narration, from *die Geschichte*, the happenings that become narrated (the latter term is related to *geschehen*, "to happen"). Heidegger's phenomenology is not a study of *Geschichte* as such, but rather of what constitutes it, its essence, *die Geschichtlichkeit*. This term is often translated as "historicity" or "historicality," but since our present usage renders *Geschichte* as the currents that course in every life's race, we understand *Geschichtlichkeit* as the very coursing of the great currents, never detached from the race run in everyone's life.

We are looking at the running of life's race to find how the course

of it defines our existence. (382) The race consists of our choosing and acting, but we do not derive our possible choices from the death toward which we race. Others have preceded us in the race, still others accompany us now, and someone got us first started in some direction: our finitude also means that we are surrounded by all these others. (383) Their lives are patterns among which we choose. And the choices we make will determine our fate (*Schicksal*), i.e., how we fare in the race, what fate we are capable of. (384) Thus, our historical life is one dramatic instance of our being-with. And, of course, fate does not only befall each of us individually. Those with whom we run (*Mitgeschehen*, 384), those who ran before us, those we followed and those who follow us, all share with us in a common outcome (*Geschick*). A *Geschick*, such as a defeat in war, is the crucial component in the coursing of the great currents in *der Geschichte*. “By *Geschick* we mean the course taken by the life-current of a whole community, a people. It is not merely a product of the fates of singular individuals.”<sup>7</sup> Whether we are referring to the fate of an individual, or the destiny of a people, the essential mark of this category is that it confirms our finitude. What we attain is not simply the goal or *telos* of action postulated by ourselves in our autonomy, but a counter-*telos* or anti-*telos*, that stands in the place where we had installed our *telos* but rebukes our assumption of power and determination. We are overpowered.

Now we must see that fate, whether singular or collective, is essentially a possibility, and must be comprehended phenomenologically primarily out of the future. This basic structure of everything historical is determined by the future, and not the past. The possible choice that I can retrieve from a past hero’s life is futural, for it is a past that is understood as something possible. It is something to be retrieved, or repeated (*wiederholt*). That structure makes possible our different relations to the community, i.e., our forerunners, our contemporaries, and those yet to come. It makes possible our loyalty (*Treue*) to the community, and also our possible opposition to it or to some of its members, a struggle (*Kampf*) for them or against them. (385) That is what constitutes historical existence.

---

<sup>7</sup> “[Mit] *Geschick*...bezeichnen wir das Geschehen der Gemeinschaft, des Volkes. Das *Geschick* setzt sich nicht aus einzelnen *Schicksalen* zusammen.” (384)

We can examine phenomenologically the manner in which the self confronts its own historical *Schicksal* and also confronts the *Geschick* of the nation (for that is what Heidegger's *Volk* or *Gemeinschaft*, or later *Volksgemeinschaft* is). Looking more closely at *SZ*, section 74, we discern that while *Schicksal*, fate, expresses what is historical in each one's life, it is *Geschick*—which we may translate “destiny”—that constitutes history proper, what lies in the coursing of the greatest currents of all, those of peoples or nations. How then does the individual's fate come into connection with the communal destiny?

First, there is the possibility of identification. The self is projecting itself into its possible future. In doing so, it will continue in a confluence with the historical movement of the entire nation. But it reaches back, in the life of the nation, for a prototype or hero for repetition. It draws this out for itself, and then, as Heidegger says, it hands it down to itself; it does not merely “receive” a message, but takes it over and gives it to itself. This possibility, drawn out of the life of the nation, it now projects as its own futural possibility, making its own project possible by way of this “heritage” it has taken. It faces the world, draping itself in a project that it has inherited but made now to live a second time. This is what I call identification, and here I see the philosophical ground of Heidegger's nationalism in the 1930's. But we shall examine a second possibility in another section below.

### **Heidegger in 1933: The *Geschick* of the *Volk***

The ontological analyses of *SZ* were formal, and in the case of *Volk* or *Gemeinschaft*, that means that no particular *Volk* or *Gemeinschaft* is ever under discussion, not even any particular kind of *Volk* or *Gemeinschaft*. But these matters can be de-formalised, and many later texts of Heidegger did so. He can talk about one particular people, or about more than one. In the speech he gave on being installed as Rector at the University of Freiburg in May 1933<sup>8</sup>, he invokes the German people in the opening paragraph and in seventeen other contexts; he also calls it *die deutsche*

---

<sup>8</sup>*Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1983); translated by K. Harries, “The Self-assertion of the German University” in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 38 (1985), 467–80.

*Nation* in paragraph 24, and uses the compound term *Volksgemeinschaft* in paragraph 23. And the opening lines affirmed that the destiny of the German people was what formed their history, *Geschichte*.

The rhetorical performance of this speech is thoroughly imbued with identification—Heidegger is announcing that in his work as Rector he will be guided by the destiny of the German people, and is appealing to all the students and faculty of Freiburg to identify with that destiny in their pedagogical work. He is announcing a *Gleichschaltung*.

No matter whether we call Germany a people, a state, a nation, or a community, we see in this text that destiny marks it at every level (see paragraphs 1, 6, 24, 25, 26, 27). But even in the midst of his nationalist passion, Heidegger preserves a genuinely historical concept of destiny, *Geschick* (sometimes *Schicksal*), for he clarifies that while a nation moves forward into the darkness, it will meet with the *Geschick* that is waiting for it: it does not have the power, through its own will, of determining what that *Geschick* is to be. The people can work on their destiny, but it is the heart of this concept that they do not have the power to determine it: it befalls them. We see in the reference to Nietzsche's atheism one expression of this: though Nietzsche had sought God, he found that God was dead, and so, Heidegger infers, there is no mediator who could arbitrate between the people's will to struggle and the destiny that it will meet (paragraphs 17–18).

### Multiple *Geschicke*

We said that there was a different kind of possibility implicit in *SZ*, not an identification with the nation or a celebration of it and its past heroes. In the other possible posture, there is a broadening of the very conception of history, whereby we look into the possibility of many destinies, many *Geschicke*. Certainly, this will also be tied to a different way of opening to the future.

We can pursue this further by referring to later writings of Heidegger (composed some years after the rectoral episode) that give more clarity and depth to the *Geschick*—*Geschichte* connection. Particularly salient here is the 1946 article, “Anaximander's Saying.”<sup>9</sup> One crucial

---

<sup>9</sup>“*Der Spruch des Anaximander*” in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950). English translation by Julian Young in *Off the Beaten Track*, (eds.) J. Young and K. Haynes



difference between this treatment and the 1933 address is that Heidegger is dealing here with two peoples, separated by a lengthy historical interval, for he is engaged in interpreting and translating a text of ancient Greek philosophy, and confronts the relation (or lack of relation) between remote Greek antiquity and his present German reality, including the gulf between the two languages.

Near the start of the essay, Heidegger is commenting on the essence of history, *Wesen der Geschichte* (300/245), because he wants to preface his discussion of this famous fragment with reflections on the very difficulty of interpreting something separated from us by a 2500-year interval. What is our own current situation in history? And what should we say about the early history of the Greeks? He disputes the common representation that history runs its course in a continuity of time, marked by “chronological distance and causal sequence,” *die chronologischen Abstände und die kausalen Aufreihungen*. (311/254) He shows that an epoch of history is constituted by its closure against both prior epochs and later ones, applying the term “epoch” in the sense of the ancient Stoics and Skeptics, the *epoché* that is a withdrawal or a withholding (311/254) that also yields a concealment. There is an *epoché* of being operative in each period of history. Thus, what was given to Anaximander, or rather sent to him (*geschickt*), was a decisive but finite disclosure that revealed the dawning of the destiny (*Geschick*) of the Greeks, that which governed their existence in history (*Geschichte*). “What is Greek is that dawn of destiny as which being itself lights itself up in beings, and lays claim to an essence of humanity, a humanity which, as destined, receives its historical path, a path sometimes preserved in, sometimes released from, but never separated from being.”<sup>10</sup> What is essential to history, then, is not at all its continuity or perdurance, for beginnings and endings are the stuff of history, and so are surprises. This idea opposes any view of “history” as a hyper-entity. Though the Greeks lived out their destiny, much of their

---

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). I’ll cite the page number of the German text first, then, after a stroke, the English page number. Many of the thoughts of this essay recur in the famous late text that echoes back upon *SZ: Time and Being (Zeit und Sein)* in *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1969).

<sup>10</sup> “[G]riechisch ist die Frühe des Geschickes, als welches das Sein selbst sich im Seienden lichtet und ein Wesen des Menschen in seinen Anspruch nimmt, das als geschickliches darin seinen Geschichtsgang hat, wie es im Sein gewahrt und wie es aus ihm entlassen, aber gleichwohl nie von ihm getrennt wird.” (310/253)

destiny was concealed from them, and even more of that was concealed from later epochs of history. Thus erring or errancy—*die Irre*—is the rule in history (310–11/254) both within one epoch and between epochs. “Each time that being keeps to itself in its destiny, suddenly and unexpectedly, world happens. Every epoch of world-history is an epoch of errancy.”<sup>11</sup> The manifold *Geschicke* do nonetheless accumulate though they do not constitute an order or a story, and so we too in our time are fated to fall within the destiny of the Greeks, even as we confront our future, our “coming, more primordially destined, history,” *der kommenden anfänglicher geschickten Geschichte*. (300/245)

A people that lives in history, moves in it, are utterly committed to it, given over to it—so much so that we must say they course, they run—but not that they are. We should not attribute existence to a people. *Existenz* is in each case my own, but peoples and nations run, move, course. (Perhaps in Heidegger’s later diction we could say that *sie sich ereignen*, they eventuate themselves.) We must not conceive them as substantial or ontic. This is just as important as avoiding the substantial view of the self. The historical conjunction, the *Gegeneinander* of the many nations, is the entire vastness in which each nation has its time and place, each one constituted by its *Geschick*. We cannot substantialise either *die Geschichte* or *das Geschick*.

I do believe that this carries the discussion of *SZ* forward<sup>12</sup>, forming a stable conceptual whole in Heidegger. It constitutes a formal treatment of the structure of history, which may invite a more concrete application, a deformalisation that leaves to one side Heidegger’s particular preoccupation with the interpretation of pre-Socratic texts.

---

<sup>11</sup>“*Jedesmal, wenn das Sein in seinem Geschick an sich hält, ereignet sich jäh und unversehens Welt. Jede Epoche der Weltgeschichte ist eine Epoche der Irre.*” (311/254)

<sup>12</sup>Jeffrey Barash’s book, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff Publishers: 1988) succeeds in showing in Part I how the *SZ* doctrine of *Geschichtlichkeit* was rooted in German debates almost a century old. And he shows in Part II how the thoughts in Heidegger’s later period about *Seinsgeschichte* are not just a break from *SZ* but a continuation of it on a wider scale.

### The Long Interval: *das Abendland* (Western History)

Though the *Geschick* is limited, shadowed, by the *epoché* that belongs to it, it does bequeath a heritage. The disclosure of being to Anaximander lives on in its way, though modified by epochal concealment, to constitute the civilisation of the West. Heidegger thinks in an eschatological fashion about the West, *das Abendland*, (301–2/246–7), stressing that it is the land of the evening, of the setting sun. What the West experiences as its destiny was ordained in the primordial disclosure and the heritage that lasted over two thousand years. In philosophy, this *Geschick* set the agenda for Heraclitus and Parmenides (323–5/264–6)—and we have further parallel texts in Heidegger that deal with these two and the reigning *Geschick* in both of them<sup>13</sup>—and Plato and Aristotle and the whole later tradition followed in their train.

Heidegger seems to see in the philosophy of Nietzsche our modern *Geschick* or destiny. Nietzsche formulates a counter-utterance to the Saying of Anaximander: “To stamp becoming with the character of being—that is the highest will to power.” (306/250) So we are able to see that *das Abendland*, that huge interval between these two *Geschicke*, is guided by them both. (A) It is guided by the first *Geschick*, embodied as it is especially in the negative form of the concealed *Geschick*; and (B) it is guided by the eschatological readiness for the destiny (and its *epoché*) that pertains to our own modernity and that is expressed by Nietzsche.

What then shall we say about this long interval itself? It is the time of metaphysics (336/275) and by this Heidegger means precisely the predominance of the *epoché*, oblivion both to the destiny and to what has been destined or sent in it. A central aspect of his reading of the fragment of Anaximander is that it has, as it were, a prophetic character corresponding to its eschatological character: Heidegger is able to read in the fragment itself the true diagnosis of the long history to which the thought

---

<sup>13</sup>On Parmenides, see “Moirā (Parmenides, Fragment VIII, 34–41)” and on Heraclitus see “Logos (Heraklit, Fragment 50)”, both in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954); translations in *Early Greek Thinking*, by D. F. Krell and F. A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

of Anaximander would be exposed in the “epoch” of metaphysics. What the fragment says is that a disorder, *adikia*, is committed, where a reckless disregard prevails, and yet there must be a *tisis*, a compensation—for that is demanded according to the ordaining order, *to chreōn*.<sup>14</sup> Central to Heidegger’s reading is that this authentic *Geschick*, obscured during the 2500-year history of metaphysics, included the forecast of that very oblivion, for therein lies the most reckless disregard of all, the disregard of being in favour of a field of beings that we could master both in our thought and our practice. Still, metaphysics is that by which we lived. Our *adikia* was no mere whim; that is expressed, for instance, in the counter-discourse of Nietzsche. So can we acquire a more complete and relevant conception of the epoch of metaphysics?

### **Nation and Civilisation**

My thought is that one concrete embodiment of the relation of *Geschicke* to *Geschichte* is the relation of the nation to civilisation. In applying Heidegger’s text in this way, I am not, of course, attributing the application to him.

As for the nation, it is particularly clear that individuals find themselves cast, thrown, fated, into a national community. From the individual’s standpoint, the national community has the character of facticity and heritage, a point captured by the lexical link of *natio* to “natal.” It, least of all, could be derived from some sort of compact or social contract. And this is not a merely a subjective feeling of individuals about the nation. The nation was never an intentional community, a product of some “making.” It always pre-existed any intention to give directions to it. There is an obscurity about the origination of any nation. Myths of origin circulate throughout its lifetime, and perhaps no form of scientific history or anthropology could give exact information on the origination of any nation. Important as that fact is, there is an even greater import in the passing away of nations, an event that cannot be foreseen during the life-

---

<sup>14</sup>Let us print here the minimal text of Anaximander along with the translation published in *Off the Beaten Track*: κατὰ τὸ χρεῶν · δίδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἄλλήλοισι τῆς ἁδικίας.; “along the line of usage; for they let order and reck belong to one another in the surmounting of disorder.” (280)

time of a nation, and that would often be dismissed during that lifetime as “inconceivable” (a form of death the thought of which is more thoroughly repressed than that of the individual). Likewise, the terrestrial borders of a given nationality are vague. Philosophy has not even any criterion for “Nation,” and our best thought is that nationality is a matter of degree (the French are more of a nation than the British). This vagueness does not generally apply to states, and in much of our practical thinking we focus on nation-states, not looking beneath the well-defined constitutional states to the nations that underlie them. Tempting though it might be for some philosophers to dismiss a matter so indeterminate, the truth is that nationality is as powerful a force in history as the economy or war or statecraft or science-and-technology.

So it is appropriate to think of the nation as arising by fate or destiny (*Geschick*), passing away by fate, and experiencing fate in the course of all the currents that run through its life, especially victory and defeat. Human intentions do not rule here. The members of a nation are likewise aware of their *Geschick* when they think of a mission proper to their nation: a mission or assignment is what Heidegger was thinking of in his comments on the early Greeks. Indeed, the literal meaning of *Geschick* is something destined or sent, which becomes the sending or the obligation of the people. Myths of founding will often personalise the national mission: it was destined by a god or a primordial founder. It is in the destined mission that the people of a nation represent the justification of their nation. This does not need to be foreign missions or exploration, but can be accomplished within the nation itself, if the nation feeds and educates all its members, and confers on them the cultural acquisitions of the nation, which vary of course from nation to nation (opera, mountain-climbing, worship, development of agriculture, commerce, sexual liberation, military arts, athletics, and so on). One highly important mission of a nation is to accomplish some reign of justice among its people, and some form in which the nation may govern itself. The study of the nation’s destiny thus leads into questions of law and the state. Philosophy has rightly recognised that being a nation is not a necessary condition for state and law, but in actual fact, the nation has been more often than not the mediator that has brought the state and law to a certain people. Heidegger’s idea of the *Geschick* foregrounds the multiple offerings of the *Geschick*. In the case of the Greeks, their *Geschick* brought them the craft of sailing, the taming of the land, the management of horses, capture of all the creatures of land and

sea, military virtue, medicine, the understanding of the justice of gods and of men, the arts of speech, drama and persuasion, the life of the *polis*—and philosophical thought.<sup>15</sup> A key implication of the idea of the *Geschick*, then, is that some political form, some form of government and law, is given, but not separately from a kind of culture, a kind of economy, and other concrete forces in the life of the nation: all these things belong together.

Heidegger's idea is that to every *Geschick* there belongs an *epoché*, a withholding, that brings some limitation and some concealment or erring. The nation has, therefore, a beginning and an ending, and a bias in its institutions that closes off any view of possibilities that were not given it. The *Geschick* delimits and confines a nation, in such a way that a nation is the very confinement ordained through its *Geschick*. But what is it then that becomes confined or delimited in the national *Geschick*? It is civilisation. Rival nations all hover within that encompassing whole, and in particular their codes of law and government are delimitations of it.

The concept of civilisation can bear a sense that is inherently plural: Eastern and Western civilisations; Arab and Chinese civilisations. In this usage, it has a logic similar to that of nations with their *Geschicke*. These civilisations can be thought of as families of nations, or, more commonly perhaps, as prototypes and ancestors of nations that then became states, such as Saudi Arabia. But there is another concept that is inherently singular, referring to a process that has occurred all over the globe, the transition of human groups to a form of life marked by agriculture, property, the regularising of relations between the sexes, between parents and children, and much else. Philosophers from antiquity to modernity (Plato, *Republic*, Book II; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, book I, chapters 13–15; Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*) have represented the transition from barbarism to civilisation. This is at once a descriptive and a normative concept, resembling in this way other

---

<sup>15</sup>A brief summary drawn from an ode from Sophocles' *Antigone*, lovingly translated by Heidegger in *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953)112–3; *Introduction to Metaphysics*, (tr.) G. Fried and R. Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 156–8.

concepts such as culture, learning, *Bildung*, *paideia*, and so on. Not the “transition” but the state of being civilised is what I intend here: each nation’s *Geschick* has brought a specialisation and delimitation of civilisation. This enables us to differentiate two factors in history: on the one hand, civilisation, on the other hand, the nation. Civilisation itself does not bring forth a state, but through the *Geschick* of an historical nation, some kind of law and state emerge, always given in connection with a certain economy, culture, and so on. The concept of civilisation is resolutely impersonal; nobody here is an author or hero.

Civilisation has always pre-existed each historical nation, but it does not cease to be alive after nations form. It is thus both “pre-historical” and “historical,” continuing to influence each national life, even though not confined to the limits of each, each *epoché*. As one expression of the temporality proper to civilisation itself, acting within nations and their states, I shall pick out movements. Currents in historical life that call for this name are different from state and national institutions but act upon them in many different nations. Great movements in modern times are the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, Romanticism, the Democratic movement, socialism, conservatism, feminism, the civil rights movement (especially in the U.S.A., but not confined to it), the Protestant Reformation. There are movements in the arts such as Cubism, Surrealism, and Post-modernism. There are movements in philosophy such as Positivism, Existentialism, and any number of others. Some of these movements may have become institutionalised (the Protestant Reformation generated many churches) but others have not. In general, movements carry individuals along in their current, but did not originate with the self-conscious reason of those individuals. They were not mandated by decisions of the state. They are not identifiable with the genius of one particular prophet. Thus movements have the character of fate and destiny too, though not in quite the same way as nations. They pertain in a different way to history. I have mentioned movements in order to give some profile to the kind of currents in history that can be marked off from the currents we call national. Movements too are historical in the sense of *Geschick*, but now as a *Geschick* of civilisation.

### **Canada**

The duality of nation and civilisation, two kinds of current in *Geschichte*,

helps us to think about the beginning and endings of nations, as well as the patterns of justification that we see within the lives of nation. Take Canada. What is clear to everyone is that it is a state with a federal constitution. But its national status remains unsettled. The idea that Canada was a “Dominion,” i.e., a branch of the British Empire, is vanished beyond recall. Its citizens usually call it a “country,” *pays*, less often a nation. The older idea that it was or contained two nations, *deux nations*, has been abandoned, because, on the one hand, the country also contains a group of First Nations, (of indeterminate number), and, on the other hand, nobody outside Quebec identifies with such an entity as “English Canada,” an English nation within Canada. Canadian history was often presented in the past as the conquest of New France by the British Empire, that—after long, painful, intervening years—was succeeded by a compact or contract: Confederation in 1867. But those are only military and political representations. With a view to the existence or life or being of Canadians, a more adequate appraisal grasps Canada as the prolongation of the civilisation of Europe and the civilisation of Native North Americans. Agreements and conquests do not reach deep enough into the matter. Canada is the historical prolongation of a number of nations who are, for their part, limited crystallisations of civilisation itself. Whether its *Geschick* will ever be to become a nation unto itself is unclear, but the country is well aware of the demands of civilisation. Perhaps fate will make it a nation, but, if not, it can still be a confederation that is attentive to civilisation. Social contract ideas have even less relevance to Canada than to India, a country that is a civilisation.

One of the deepest studies of the Canadian constitution is that of Doull.<sup>16</sup> He shows that Canadian reality is not to be grasped on the contractarian principles that hold sway in the U.S.A., nor on the European model of a “post-modern” federation of national states. Canada is not a nation, in any classic sense, nor is it a federation of *deux nations*. Its federal division of sovereignty—between federal and provincial enti-

---

<sup>16</sup>James Doull, “The Philosophical Basis of Constitutional Discussion in Canada” in *Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull*, (eds.) D. G. Peddle and N. G. Robertson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 392–465.



ties—does not diminish the common spirit of Western freedom that actuates the common life of both French and English populations in Canada. “To know how the common polity of these peoples which now exists, if imperfectly, came to be, one must attend not only to the events of their common and special histories, but to the spirit moving in them.” (436–7) Doull is confident that preoccupation with the constitution will not in the long run stand in the way of the recognition, on the part of the whole people, of this philosophical or spiritual principle which he has articulated so well in this article. It may be that my concept of civilisation is not so articulated, from a legal point of view, as Doull’s concept of Western freedom, but I do think that the two are akin.

### History and Reason

Can we show through the historical argument that the state or the nation derives its justification from civilisation, precisely as the *epoché* brought by a *Geschick*? Socrates’ care for the *polis*, as reported in Plato’s *Apology*, was a search for its justification. What we have traced now in the Heideggerian account of *Geschichte* and *Geschick* is a modern alternative to Socrates and to the Platonic account of justice. The nation’s *Geschick* is a finite embodiment of the universal civilisation. The latter constitutes a grounding for a nation’s laws and practices that justifies them. In the *Apology of Socrates*, the self that participates in a community through political practice can find there a justification for its being. It is not merely the self but its being that finds justification through all the constructive and critical interventions whereby the self investigates the laws and institutions. But does this apply to the *Geschick* of a nation as against the older backdrop of civilisation?

Socrates introduces an important parallel. He says that “I went to each of you privately...” because he is concerned that his fellow citizens should “not care for the city’s possessions more than for the city itself.” There is no idea that the city could be disentangled utterly and exist separately from all that belongs to it, all its affairs. Socrates is voicing the corrective to bad politics and management, for which Athens is nothing but its walls, its navy, its treasury, and so on. What belongs to the city itself? I believe that the further study of “the city itself,” as distinct from its paraphernalia, is above all pre-occupied with the laws of the city. The text of the *Apology*, in recounting Socrates’ justification of his own life, fo-

cuses on his extreme, scrupulous regard for the laws, in contrast to the casual lawlessness of the main political “clubs and factions” in the city. The same thing is apparent from the literary context of the *Apology*. After the close of this text, Plato opens his next work, *Crito*, in the prison where Socrates is being held in anticipation of his execution. Urged by his friends to make an escape, Socrates replies with a stout and inflexible vindication of the rule of law, expressed as an imagined dialogue between himself and the personified Laws. The laws stand in the same relation to the city that the soul does to each of us, both taken as the object of a philosopher’s care and contemplation. It is law that bestows justification upon the political undertakings of the city, and the highest undertaking of philosophy is to probe into the further justification of the law itself, a matter Plato undertook again and again, right up to his final work, *The Laws*.

I would see in this an anticipation of the whole Platonic philosophy that searches for what things truly are, for their Ideas: the Ideas of all the virtues, for instance. The elaborate doctrine of the *Republic* is not, of course, implied by the speech of Socrates in the *Apology*, but something of that nature would be the outcome of his insistence, here and in the *Crito*, on the rule of law. To take the city into his care means finding that principle whereby its life and actions are justified: law. And if we do allow ourselves a reference to Plato at this point, we see that the Idea of justice, and laws that are appropriate to it, are precisely what justifies a *polis* or any type of regime, separating it from corrupt regimes. To care for “the city itself” would also be to care for the gods of the city, as Socrates had discussed with Euthyphro in the dialogue that usually precedes the *Apology*. It would include care for its history, so notably narrated in *Menexenus*, *Timaeus*, *Critias* and other works. It would include a care for the future of the city: a theme of the *Republic*. What is contained in the *Apology* is the double movement of care. We take the city into our care by seeking the law of justice by which its life becomes justified. And a care for the self will see how it belongs in this city. So it is able to find a possible justification for its being by a participation in the city that is finding its own justification. Socrates shows us how a single citizen has a responsibility, not only to the *polis* but for the *polis*. What has become justified is actually the being of the self, understood as its membership in such a community. In caring for the city’s own justification, the self may discover a justification not only for itself but for its being as both par-

ticipant and guardian, for the city's laws permit the self to become a guardian. This justification is in principle capable of being shared by all the citizens together.

Civilisation, on the other hand, is a grounding for a given community and especially for its law or laws. We think of the foundation of marriage laws in the ancient historic observation of marriage, the incest-prohibition, and the rules of kinship. We think of the ancient observance of respect for human life as a foundation for legislation respecting murder, rules of war, and so on. It is an historical grounding, not one merely envisaged in the transcending thought of a philosopher. So it constitutes an alternative to the Platonic Ideas, e.g., the Idea of Justice. In that respect, it constitutes an alternative to the entire tradition of philosophy that vindicated the measures of the state or the nation by reference to a natural law. This is a resolutely historical conception.