

HEIDEGGER'S "PHENOMENOLOGY OF FAILURE"
IN SEIN UND ZEIT

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Failure speaks, in its own way—as an ad-man and therefore with little importance—the crucial logic, or rather it inscribes discourse in that logic.

Jean-Luc Marion,
The Idol and Distance: Five Studies

Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* is replete with silent keywords that underwrite the unfolding of the existential analytic of Dasein in particular and the project of fundamental ontology in general. One such keyword is "failure" that organizes, among other things, the phenomenality of conscience in a crucial second chapter of Division II—"Dasein's attestation of an authentic potentiality-for-being, and resoluteness"—but also the transition from *Zuhandenheit* to *Vorhandenheit* and the practical-methodological orientation of phenomenology as an impossible praxis standing "above" actuality.

And yet, when it comes to Heidegger's "failure," even the most sympathetic of Heidegger's commentators cannot resist the temptation to convert it, without hesitation, into the failure or, rather, the failures of Heidegger. Besides the more substantial failures to account for the body and for the life of Dasein within the boundaries of fundamental ontology, the conversion to which I am alluding hardly needs to be explained two decades after the noisy Heidegger controversy. Suffice it to say that another keyword that never fails to surface next to "the failure of Heidegger" is "silence." Two general, though closely linked, variations on the theme are exemplified, on one hand, in the debate between Dominique Janicaud and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and, on the other, in the work of David Farrell Krell. While I do not intend to follow the path of the conversion of "failure," I will merely catalogue the least futile of its outcomes.

What drives the first debate is the question of the ground for something like a "moral failing" in Heidegger's case. In *Heidegger, Art and Politics* Lacoue-Labarthe writes: "To

speak of moral failing [*faute*] presupposes that there exists an ethics, or at least an ethics is possible. Now, it is probably the case today that neither of these conditions is fulfilled."¹ He further justifies his doubts regarding the actual existence and even the possibility of ethics within the Heideggerian problematic itself, referring to "the general exhaustion of philosophical possibilities" that must affect the ethical, the "delimitation of ethics and humanism," etc. It is this very justification that Janicaud finds difficult to accept, despite praising Lacoue-Labarthe's "prudence" and acknowledging the historical "caesura" that governs his theoretical position. For Janicaud, "the only politics liable to unmask Nazism as profoundly criminal is a politics that demands that one 'bend a knee' in front of ethical principles."² Rejecting such politics in the name of Heidegger, we deepen the closure of metaphysics, but also augment the thinker's concrete moral failure, repeating it.

In the spirit of Lacoue-Labarthe's approach, David Krell undertakes an immanent critique of Heidegger, which is rather refreshing, notwithstanding Janicaud's justifiable rejoinder:

I shall say what I believe would hurt Heidegger most—that his silence concerning the fate of European Jewry between 1933 and 1945 is a failure of thinking, *ein Versagen des Denkens*. ... I still believe that in Heidegger's texts *there is thinking*, and that when the *thinking* fails an abyss opens right there on the page.³

It turns out that the "failure of thinking," for Krell, is simultaneously narrower and broader than the moral failure. It is narrower than the latter because (assuming that the hermeneutical violence and the physical violence are still radically discontinuous, though this assumption may not be entirely warranted in Krell's case) the abyss he spots opens only "on the page," in the internal contradictions of thought, such as the inclusion of human beings in the category of a "standing reserve"—the

inclusion that challenges the tenets of the existential analytic of Dasein. And it is broader than a moral failure because this abyss translates directly and devastatingly into "a failure of life, a *daimonic* failure."⁴ A failure of life involves infinitely more than an occasional mistake or misfire in moral judgment, especially given the task Krell sets before himself, namely, to show that "life" is not just an ontic determination of Dasein, as Heidegger might have thought, but is essential for its existential analysis.

None of the commentators, however, raises the most obvious Heideggerian questions: What is failure? What is the "being" of failure? How does failure fail? How should we understand failure philosophically, or—this amounts almost to the same thing—phenomenologically? And what are the implications of this term for praxis and for judgment? At the very least, to raise these questions serves not to delegitimize but to ground and to support the immanent criticism of Heidegger by following his re-coding of "failure" that can no longer be taken either in its ordinary-everyday sense (signifying absence and lack of success), or in its etymological sense (*failen* in Old English means "coming to an end," "cessation of functioning or of existence").⁵ As such, "failure" furnishes one of the examples of the Heideggerian catachresis: an operation that uses words wrested from their common, as well as their traditional philosophical usage.

A systematic examination of "the phenomenology of failure" will disclose that the authenticity of Dasein hinges on (a) identifying the existentially significant failure to hear the silent call of conscience and (b) distinguishing it from the failure to follow a norm, a rule, or a law in the public world of the "they." Taking this distinction into consideration, can we think failure not as a privation, as a lack, or as the cessation of existence, but as one of its modes, indeed, as the most abundant mode of our involvement in the world that absorbs and fascinates us? Further, I will inquire into the possibility of tackling the redefined, positive notion of failure by "breaking" it, in accordance with Heidegger's suggestion. Does "breaking the failure" involve breaking *with* it, or is the break bound to repeat that which it purportedly breaks? Finally, moving back from the existential to the categorial analytic, I

will read the failure of equipment (*Zeug*), the cessation of its functioning, and the gap it opens in the referential context of involvement, on the model of positivity translated into the category of presence-at-hand.

Positivity of Failure: A Preliminary Outline

The a priori failure to distinguish two types of failure—the positive and the negative, the ordinary and the phenomenological—not only creates a few insurmountable obstacles in the path of authenticity. It also potentially forecloses our understanding of the whole thrust of Heidegger's argument and forces us to read his text "proximally and for the most part"—blindly.

Three core motifs traversing *Sein und Zeit* guide the hypothesis that, for Heidegger, failure is something positive: (1) "the plentitude of existence," (2) "the deflation of actuality," and (3) "the positivity of falling." First, if existence is incompatible with lack, and if failure is to be included in the list of the existentials, then failure is determined as an integral part of the positive order of existence. Second, when the practice of phenomenology and the futural comportment of Dasein are divorced from the ideals of actuality and actualization, when they derive their *raison d'être* from pure possibility, failure is rid of its negative undertones. As such, it comes to be associated with the realm of possibility, if not the very possibility of possibility. Third, to align failure with the movement of falling is to argue that it belongs to a definite kind of Dasein's being in its everydayness. Proximally and for the most part, Dasein fails to be what it is, but this failure is inalienable from the specific kind of Dasein's being.

Let us sharpen the phenomenological notion of failure by taking a closer look at the three motifs that sustain it. In a familiar refrain, Heidegger will assert that existential plentitude cannot be understood in terms of everything that is present at hand, just as the obverse of *Vorhandenheit*, its deficiency or lack (in a word, *Nichtvorhandensein*) has no place in the midst of existence: "In this sense, it is essential that in existence there can be nothing lacking, not because it would then be perfect,

but because its character of being remains distinct from any presence-at-hand" (SZ, 283).⁶ The ambiguous definition of that which is not present at hand implies in addition and in contrast to the absence of an object posited over and against me—the same absence that, for Hegel, awakens the subject's desire—a categorial shift, or rather, a shift from the categorial to the existential analytic of Dasein. What is not present at hand is either already/still not present at hand (that is, "present at hand" in a privative mode: "present at hand" elsewhere in the succession of the "nows"), or absolutely incongruous with the parameters set by the categorial analytic.

If the plentitude of existence is, indeed, incompatible both with presence-at-hand and with its deficient modality, if it is meaningful in and as the massive displacement of the presence/absence dualism, then it can accommodate a certain negativity without losing or sacrificing itself in the process. The second inflection of the definition allows Heidegger to retain what may be called "non-privative lacunae" in the plentitude of existence and to write that "existential nullity [*die existenziale Nichtigkeit*] has by no means the character of a privation [*den Charakter einer Privation*], where something is lacking in comparison with an ideal" (SZ, 285). It is in this existential nullity welcoming anxiety, conscience, thrownness, and projection that I want to situate the existential conception of failure.

In the public world of the "they," however, the definition of *Nichtvorhandensein* is not at all ambiguous. The nullity and silence marking, for instance, the discourse of conscience are taken as evidence "held against the conscience on the subterfuge that it is 'dumb' and manifestly not present-at-hand. With this kind of interpretation the 'they' merely covers up its own failure to hear the call [*verdeckt das Man nur das ihm eigene Überhören des Rufes*] and the fact that its 'hearing' does not reach very far" (SZ, 296). For *das Man*, what is not present at hand is merely absent, negligible, and ineffectual and, conversely, what is present at hand is fascinating, engrossing, and potent—a subject for the interminable idle talk. But the failure to hear the call of conscience covered up by this interpretation derives from the plentitude of our absorption in the world. It follows that in its own practice, ontologically

interpreted, *das Man* denies the premises that underpin it. One can fail most profoundly and spectacularly (for the world of the "they" is a spectacle) solely in the plentitude of existence that manifests itself in idle talk, curiosity, fascination, etc. The existential conception of failure must depart from and keep returning, tirelessly, to this plentitude.⁷

It should be clear by now that the plentitude of existence does not stand for the abundance of things, for the suturing of the intervals that things fail to occupy in the totality of equipment, or for the absolute actualization of Dasein in the "now." In fact, quite the opposite is true: while existence eschews any articulations with lack, it is necessarily finite. The finitude of existence does not mean that it has "an end at which it just stops" (SZ, 329). Were it to have an end, finite existence would be absurdly actualized, would become what it always already has been in the moment of death: a lifeless material Thing. It means, rather, that insofar as Dasein is, it is possible, that "the 'not yet' which belongs to Dasein . . . is not something which is provisionally and occasionally inaccessible to one's own experience or even to that of a stranger; it 'is' not yet 'actual' at all [*es 'ist' überhaupt noch nicht 'wirklich'*]" (SZ, 243). Thought together with the demand Heidegger imposes on phenomenology as an impossible praxis that maintains fidelity to pure possibility—"Higher than actuality stands *possibility*. We can understand phenomenology only by seizing it as a possibility [*im Ergreifen ihrer als Möglichkeit*]" (SZ, 38)—the relentless emphasis on the "possibilization of Dasein" further problematizes the "vulgar" notion of failure.

How to conceive "failure" in the praxis and in the existential comportment that do not stand in the shadow of actuality and actualization? In the order of actuality, failure appears to be negative because it is taken as a sign of our projects' non-fruit and our desires' non-satisfaction. Failure resonates with negativity only if something has been prevented from being actualized. But in the realm of pure possibilities, failure sheds this negative character and participates, quasi-transcendentally, in their formation, as the very possibility of possibility.

It is true that divorcing failure from actuality, we do not deny the other forms of the

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efficaciousness of possibility, such as “accomplishment”; to do so would be to acquiesce to the logic of the “they.” As Jean-Luc Marion writes in *Reduction and Givenness*, “that being should appear—this ultimate accomplishment befalls phenomenology only in the mode of possibility. But can this possibility be accomplished in fact?”⁸ Though indisputably important, the question of the accomplishment of being “in fact,” *de facto*, or even factually is perhaps too impatient in its urge, first, to postulate that there are different “levels of analysis” and, second, to leap from one such level to another. Before heedlessly replicating the Kantian divide between the transcendental and the empirical domains, it would be worthwhile to follow Heidegger on the path of what he calls the “existential” or the “ontological” conditions of possibility, such as “being-guilty.”

Apropos of guilt, Heidegger advises us that “not only can entities whose being is care load themselves with factual guilt, but they *are* guilty in the very basis of their being; and this being-guilty is what provides, above all, the ontological condition for Dasein’s ability to come to owe anything in factually existing” (SZ, 286). In other words, existential guilt is the ontological condition of possibility for the everyday notion of guilt equated with Dasein’s debt to others. It is, at once, the ground for the translation of ontological “being-guilty” into the formal definition of guilt and the precondition for the failure of this translation. The founded is based on the founding in a particularly unfounded, tenuous fashion. Here, in the possibility of mistranslation that is inseparable from the act or the task of translation itself,⁹ I detect the second theoretical locus for the revised notion of failure, which resides both in existential nullity and in the ontological conditions of possibility of existence.

Finally, the positivity of failure points out the definite kind of Dasein’s being. Still dealing with the paradigmatic case of conscience, Heidegger concludes:

If in each case the caller and he to whom the appeal is made are *at the same time* one’s own Dasein *themselves*, then in any failure to hear the call or any incorrect hearing of *oneself*, there lies a *definite kind* of Dasein’s being [*dann liegt in jedem Überhören des Rufes, in jedem Sich-*

verhören eine bestimmte Seinsart des Daseins]. . . . With regard to Dasein, “that nothing ensues” [*daß nichts erfolgt*] signifies something positive. (SZ, 279)

This mode of being that crystallizes in the failure to hear the silent call is one of falling or everydayness, marking our concerned involvement in the world in the mode of inauthenticity. Heidegger repeats, on the subject of conscience, what he has already made clear in Paragraph 38 of *Sein und Zeit*, namely, that “not-being-its-self [*das Nicht-es-selbst-sein*] functions as a positive possibility of that entity which, in its essential concern, is absorbed in the world” (SZ, 176). Yet, the twist added in the paragraph on conscience is that, as the caller and the one called, Dasein is simultaneously “not-being-its-self” (as the latter) and “being-its-self” (as the former). Differently stated, in this structure we glimpse nothing less than the main idea of the book—Dasein is ecstatic; ecstasis is its “definite kind of being” and its phenomenal unity—that informs Heidegger’s understanding of failure. The ecstatic constitution of Dasein renders failure itself ecstatic, given that the failure of hearing the call of conscience is measured against the “success” of placing the call by “one’s own Dasein” who fails. Failure fails ecstatically.

But what about the cryptic, “With regard to Dasein, ‘that nothing ensues [or succeeds]’ signifies something positive”? Does “that nothing ensues or succeeds” stand for a failure in the eventalization of the event? An event uncoupled from the order of actuality? A break in the causal attribution of something that may ensue or issue from something else? The latter two alternatives carry some weight: the first, in light of everything that conditions the primacy of possibility over actuality in Heidegger’s text, and the second, due to the fact that the determination of Dasein’s kind of being as falling is not causal: “If a lack, such as failure to fulfill some requirement, has been ‘caused’ in a manner characteristic of Dasein, we cannot simply reckon back to there being something lacking in the ‘cause’” (SZ, 283–84).

There is no lack in the “cause” (of lack), which is Dasein itself. Even if the failure-effect harbors a lack, in the “cause” the same failure does not require that something be lack-

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ing. "That nothing ensues or succeeds" betokens the fullness of that which may cause a certain lack, in falling as a definite mode of being, divorced from the order of actuality. Thus, this statement gathers together the three motifs of the positivity of failure: "With regard to Dasein . . . [it] signifies something positive."

Deafening Talk / Silent Talk: The Break

The intricate structure of failure comes to the fore most explicitly in the phenomenon of conscience. And, since conscience attests to the "authentic potentiality-for-being" of Dasein, the irreducibility of this structure suggests that, as such, authenticity is the modalization of failure. The analysis that follows is intended as nothing but an elaboration of this claim.

In *Reduction and Givenness*, Marion is on the verge of recognizing the structural necessity of failure in the way we access being. According to him, "if being makes itself accessible only through the claim it exerts, if that claim can demand a response only by exposing itself to a deaf denial of 'gratitude,' then the ontological hermeneutic of the nothing *can* fail, since in order to be carried out, it *must* be able to fail."¹⁰ In the medium of conscience, the claim that being exerts is silent, and this silence should not be identified with the privation but with the existential condition of possibility of discourse. The hubbub of idle talk is possible thanks to—though without the extension of "gratitude," as Marion observes—the silent appeal of Dasein to itself, the appeal that drowns in the very phenomenon to which it gives rise. "Losing itself in the publicness and the idle talk of the 'they'," Heidegger writes, "it [Dasein] *fails to hear* [*überhört*] its own self in listening to the they-self. . . . It *listens away* to the 'they' [*und überhört im Hinhören auf das Man*]" (SZ, 271). Dasein fails to hear itself because it hears too much, because it overhears everything in the deafening plenitude of a fascinated listening to the "they" first made possible by the silent hearing of oneself.

But "listening away" (*Hinhören*) presupposes a "turning away from," a break in the initial "listening to." Phenomenologically speaking, the failure of hearing is the effect of a modification in the broader intentionality of

Dasein, or in the way Dasein directs-itself-toward something, someone, or itself. In rhetorical terms, we could recall the figures of *aversio* or *apostrophe*, that is, the breaks in the discourse intended to address someone else, either present or absent. Tacitly debating with the Husserlian phenomenology, Heidegger seems to imply that intentionality is, in fact, never direct; that it is always already affected by the originary sociality of Dasein as *Mitsein*; and that it is, therefore, always already inflected or convoluted. The failure of Dasein to hear itself is not an accident but a result of its necessary factual predicament of falling with which it must start as with a given. Although no idle talk could take place outside of the pregnant silence from which discourse is born, factual Dasein must start from *aversio*, from the convolution of sociality, from a break in silence. "Silence once broken, will never be whole," says Beckett in *The Unnamable*. For factual Dasein, failure, the break in silence, and hence the loss of wholeness are originary; in publicness, "one's way of being is that of inauthenticity and failure to stand by one's self" (SZ, 128).

Observe, in this context, the ambiguity of Heidegger's statements such as, "the 'whence' of the calling is the 'whither' to which we are called back [*Das Woher des Rufens im Vorrufen auf . . . ist das Wohin des Zurückrufens*]" (SZ 280). On one hand, failure would appear here, in the guise of a difference between the "point" of departure and the "point" of destination, where the "whence" and the "whither" do not coincide. On the other hand, this difference, this non-coincidence of departure and destination, is what opens up the space for projection and thrownness—the very space in which Dasein can exist as a stretch, or as a temporalizing stretching out. Everything hinges on the status or the being of the copula. How close must one "stand by one's self" in order to avoid failing? Is it possible to diminish this distance *ad infinitum* by repeating the call? Is there something like the "optimal ecstatic constitution of Dasein," for Heidegger? Even if what we are called back to comes to us from the future, this missive will not transpire without a detour of the difference between the caller and the called, the split "between" Dasein and itself, embodying inauthenticity "in the mode of its genuineness [*uneigent-*

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lichen Verstehen . . . im Modus seiner Echtheit]" (SZ, 148).

The point is that authenticity cannot amount to the recovery of the "original" direction and directedness, or rather the self-directedness, of Dasein. In order for it to work at all, authenticity is obliged to work with failure as a given. Breaking with the habit of listening away to the "they," Dasein must listen away from listening away and resort to the *aversio* of *aversio*, the break of the break: "If Dasein is to be able to get brought back from this lostness of failing to hear itself, and if this is to be done through itself, then it must first be able to find itself—to find itself as something which has failed to hear itself" (SZ, 271).

Is the cognizance of failure, Dasein's understanding of failure as such and its self-interpretation as a failed existent, a necessary and sufficient condition for overcoming it? Doesn't failure continue to linger as that which is acknowledged and, indeed, that which must be acknowledged repeatedly, if Dasein attempts to keep standing by its self? In other words, assuming that this "*aversio* of *aversio*" is a strange negation of the negation, can one imagine something like a clear break with Dasein's failure and inauthenticity? And would authenticity be able to dodge the need to negotiate with and "modalize" failure, thereby, immanently transforming it from within?

Heidegger dreams up a clear break with—not a sublation of—the failure of Dasein. Quite literally,

this listening-away must be broken-off [*Dieses Hinhören muß gebrochen*]; in other words, the possibility of another kind of hearing which will interrupt it, must be given by Dasein itself. The possibility of its thus getting broken off lies in its being appealed to without mediation. (SZ, 271)

The mechanism of the break is not mysterious. Because conscience calls us in a way stripped of curiosity or fascination, its silent call arouses another kind of hearing, from which the plentitude of the "world" is evacuated by means of the lucidity of anxiety. In this existential nullity, Dasein faces itself naked, without mediation either by the things in the world, or by the others, or by Hegelian dialectics.

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But notwithstanding Heidegger's desperate anti-dialectical footwork, several problems with the "break" remain. First, what is the fate of the "unity of the phenomenon" that Heidegger endeavors to re-establish throughout *Sein und Zeit*? It appears that "after the break," the qualitative difference between authenticity and inauthenticity would be so great that no unity could be restored. Moreover, no phenomenon could appear there where *Logos* remains silent before and beyond anything that might be said. The silent call of conscience is the limit of the inheritance of language or discourse—the limit of all inheritance, save for the one Dasein gives to and receives exclusively from its self.

Second, and more importantly, the appeal of Dasein to itself "without mediation" forgets not only the irreducible distance that defines its ecstatic constitution, but also the parameters in which any decision is made. There can be no doubt that Heidegger equates the break with a decision, or better yet, a meta-decision: a choice to make a choice "from one's own self" in order to "make up' for not choosing" and for getting carried away by the Nobody (SZ, 268). That is to say, what Dasein chooses is intentionality itself, the specific directedness of Dasein, the direction in which it will turn or turn away.

Does "choosing to choose" break with failure decisively? Of course, a decision is not a one-time occasion; its maintenance or confirmation requires repetition. But Heidegger wants to go a step further and cut meta-decision free from the subject matter on which it decides. Provocatively, he locates freedom "only in the choice of one possibility—that is, in tolerating one's not having chosen the others and one's not being able to choose them" (SZ, 285). The dash in this sentence betrays the slippage between a choice that manages to free itself from the inauthentic possibilities that present themselves on the equal footing with the one authentic term *and* the same choice that ineluctably falls back into the reactive mode of deciding against the inauthentic possibilities, the possibilities of failure that have not been and cannot be chosen. Freedom is, therefore, incapable of freeing itself from the nightmare of failure that overshadows and inscribes choice in its logic.

Failure and "Law-Breaking"

In the spirit of Heidegger's method, the "vulgar," negative, non-productive notion of failure must not be overlooked by anyone who still hopes to glimpse a fuller sense of the phenomenon. More specifically, two kinds of failure lend themselves to the following schematization: (1) the failure to hear the silent call of conscience, to stand by oneself, and to be or to remain resolute, and (2) the failure to follow the norms, the law, and the rules containing a certain pre-fabricated, publicly interpreted meaning. In the latter case, failure is established, measured, and judged over and against the ideal of the "they" and the inevitable conclusion that Dasein lacks the wherewithal to live up to this public ideal. It is transposed onto the existential arena from the thingly "world" of reckoning and manipulability, that is, from the world of concern.

In its treatment of the "vulgar" kind of failure, Heidegger's language becomes richer and more nuanced. We come across *Verfehlungen*—failures indicating that something is missing or absent—and *Unterlassungen*—the omissions and defaults of acting: "Does it [conscience] not rather speak definitely and concretely in relation to failures and omissions [*Verfehlungen und Unterlassungen*] which have already befallen or which we still have before us?" (SZ, 279). But the mere definiteness and concretion of conscience, spelling out how one must act and when one has acted "badly," reveal that this phenomenon is approached in a vulgar, functional, and failed way, "stick[ing] to what 'they' know as conscience, and how 'they' follow or fail to follow it" (SZ, 289).

The vulgar framing of conscience confines this phenomenon to what we formally receive from others and what we follow without making the first meta-choice, that is, without the intention to follow it. At this point, it is necessary to invoke Derrida's reading, in *Of Spirit*, of the problematic of "guidance" and "following" in Heidegger's *Rectorship Address* and *Sein und Zeit*. While, authentically, conscience guides us and, just like a question, demands and commands "without being followed, obeyed, or listened to in any way,"¹¹ inauthentically, we follow it without any guid-

ance. Between and within each of these possibilities, failure weaves its web.

Two other manifestations of the vulgar notion of conscience entail the transformation of its principles into a set of "manipulable rules" and its derivation from the world of concern. Those who construe conscience as "having debts" make it conditional upon Dasein's concerned dealing with others. Henceforth, the voice of conscience announces one's "failing to satisfy [*nicht genügen*], in some way or another, the claims which others have made as to their possession. This kind of being-guilty is related to *that with which one can concern oneself*" (SZ, 281–82). What sort of a "satisfaction" is lacking in the judgment of conscience? "The common sense of the 'they' knows only the satisfying of manipulable rules [*handlichen Regel*] and public norms and the failure to satisfy them" (SZ, 288). The "manipulable rules," *handlichen Regel*, are ready-to-hand, *Zuhanden*, in a regularized, technical, or technological manner. Shunning such a notion of morality and conscience, Heidegger again exhibits a desire for what Derrida calls the "rigorous non-contamination . . . of the thought of essence by technology."¹² To the extent that he complicates this claim, Stiegler notes that the later Heidegger is no longer allergic to "the questions that technics addresses to us."¹³ But for the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* in any case, the failure to satisfy this or that public rule or norm is secondary to the failure of thought, or to its fall into "the common sense" that regularizes and technologizes the criteria for success and for failure.

The four features of the vulgar notion of conscience feed into a legalistic conception that forms the ever-present background for Heidegger's critique. Following this critical argumentative vein, law may be characterized as a set of definite and concrete manipulable rules that are followed "without guidance" and that protect the property of others in the mode of concern. Law, then, is the principle and the mechanism, the principled mechanism and the mechanized principle, whereby the boundaries between Dasein's comportment toward things and its comportment toward itself and others are constantly transgressed, contaminating the purity of the two analytics. With an eye to securing the distinction between them, Heidegger recommends that "the idea of guilt

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must not only be raised above the domain of that concern in which we reckon things up, but it must also be detached from relationship to any law and "ought" [*ein Sollen und Gesetz*] such that by failing to comply with it [*wogegen sich verfehlend*] one loads himself with guilt" (SZ, 283). But the difference between the ontic and the ontological notion of guilt, as well as between the failure to hear the silent call of conscience and the failure to comply with the legally posited "ought," adumbrates, in the last instance, the scope of "authenticity."

In the aftermath of the identification of two kinds of failure, the vulgar idea of failure is tied to "law-breaking":

Yet, the requirement which one fails to satisfy need not necessarily be related to anyone's possessions; it can regulate the very manner in which we are with one another publicly. . . . This does not happen merely through law-breaking as such, but rather through my having the responsibility for the other's becoming endangered in his existence, led astray, or even ruined. (SZ, 282)

While, structurally, law-breaking is the ostensible analog of the existential "break," it only intensifies the failure (indeed, it stands for the failure of failure) because a transgressor of the law remains confined to the world of concern in a privative mode. Law-breaking is not enough to effectuate a break with law not so much as an institution, but as the mechanized principle of one's transactions with others. In the depths of Heideggerian sociality lies the pre-legal, anachronistically Levinasian sense of responsibility for the endangerment of the other "in his existence"—the sense of responsibility that is inaccessible to those who search for alibis, on one hand, and criminal motives, on the other. And yet, to descend to the depths of sociality, Dasein must be first rendered radically alone: "What is it that so radically deprives Dasein of the possibility of misunderstanding itself by any sort of alibi and failing to recognize itself, if not the forsakenness [*Verlassenheit*] with which it has been abandoned [*Überlassenheit*] to itself?" (SZ, 277). A break or a malfunction within the legal mechanism is not tantamount to the break with the mechanism itself, to the break with this mechanism as the quintessence of the failure to

formalize "guilt" and to provide an existential basis for sociality.

Surprisingly enough, Heidegger's dissatisfaction with law moves in the direction opposite to the Hegelian critique of Kant's formal and abstract legality. In Heidegger's view, the fault of law is that it is inadequately formal insofar as it specifies a definite, concrete, and technical notion of guilt. Therefore, "the idea of 'Guilty!' must be sufficiently *formalized* so that those ordinary phenomena of 'guilt,' which are related to our concerned being with others, will *drop out*" (SZ, 283). But how does this demand for formalization stand with his earlier strong insistence on a de-formalized (*entformalisiert*) concept of phenomenology (SZ, 35)?¹⁴ Where does the failure of formalization begin and where does it end? And, to paraphrase John Sallis, where does phenomenology begin and end in *Sein und Zeit*?

When Equipment Fails . . .

The philosophical link between failure and the realm of concern, where the "technological theme" finds its proper place, exceeds *Sein und Zeit*. Roughly in the same period that Heidegger gave a course on Plato's *Sophist* in Marburg, he discussed the possibility of failure as "constitutive for the development of *techne*" and postulated that *techne* "will move securely" only "if it risks producing a failed attempt": "*Die τέχνη wird um so sicherer gehen, wenn sie einen Fehlversuch riskiert.*"¹⁵ The failed experimental attempts translate themselves into positivity, driving the success of technological progress.

But what exactly transpires when equipment fails to function in everyday life? The tool, in this case, is no longer silent and proximate to us, "when, for instance a tool definitely refuses to work, it can be conspicuous only in and for dealings in which something is manipulated" (SZ, 354). The conspicuous tool merely drops out [*nur affallen*] of the logic of technicity but not in the same way that the ontologically guilty conscience exits this logic. In addition to the other two instances of breakage—breaking the failure and law-breaking—a conspicuous tool creates a break [*ein Bruch*] in the referential context of circumspection (SZ, 75). The break attributed to malfunctioning equipment disrupts the routines of manipu-

lation but does not ally itself with the non-technicity of conscience. Instead, an unusable, present-at-hand object appears in the place where something functional is missing.

When equipment fails, failure comes close to exhibiting the character of "lack," but even here it is twice reinscribed back into the schema of positivity. First, in circumspective use, failure denotes the unsuitability of equipment. According to Heidegger's example, "when we are using a tool circumspectively, we can say . . . that the hammer is too heavy or too light" (SZ, 360). The emphasis on unsuitability harkens back to the categorial intuition, to "that-toward-which" equipment is directed and, hence, it does not preclude its suitability for something else. That the hammer is too heavy for driving a nail into the wall does not imply that it is too light for breaking the wall. It, therefore, retains the possibility of being ready to hand in a different context of circumspective concern.

Second, even if a piece of equipment fails so that it becomes absolutely unusable, it is illuminated "in itself" as something present at hand. The breakage of a thing does not produce a sort of vacuum in the world of Dasein, and much less so in the "world" of things. It does not drop out of the world but only effectuates a failure in understanding, "when we merely stare at something, our just-having-it-before-us lies before us as a failure to understand it anymore" (SZ, 149). The positive moment of the double failure—in use and in understanding—of the thing consists in the categorial shift from ready-to-hand to present-at-hand.

A less dramatic, watered-down version of Dasein's forsakenness and abandonment arises from the instances where equipment fails: "That with which one's concerned dealings fail to cope reveals itself in its insurmountability [*in seiner Unüberwindlichkeit*]" (SZ, 355). Instead of disappearing in anxiety, reducing the forlorn Dasein to itself, the "world" of failed concerned dealings asserts itself ever more strongly in all of its material resistance to our projects. Concernful resignation predicated upon Dasein's "understand[ing of] itself in its abandonment to a 'world' of which it never becomes master" (SZ, 356) mirrors the forsakenness of Dasein to itself in care and its individualization that

precludes any possibilities of misunderstanding itself. Besides belonging to the two poles of the categorial and the existential analytics, the differences between the two phenomena—of resignation and forsakenness—amount to the disappearance of the "world" in the latter and its affirmation by means of introducing a break into a region of this "world" in the former. The "world" becomes mastered and masterable through its disappearance as a whole; a rupture in its part only serves to increase the pressure it exerts on us.

In the order of actuality to which the "world" of things belongs, "everyday concern understands itself in terms of that potentiality-for-being which confronts it as coming from its possible success or failure [*möglichem Erfolg und Mißerfolg*] with regard to whatever its object of concern may be" (SZ, 337). More precisely, concern admits only one modalized possibility of success and un-success, *Erfolg und Mißerfolg*, measured against the present object of concern. Strictly speaking, equipment cannot fail; it can only be unsuccessfully actualized, or improperly employed. We can, however, appeal to a term like "failure" under the limit conditions when the "object" of Dasein is Dasein itself, that is to say, when Dasein is the "object" of care and when it understands itself or fails to understand itself in terms of its own potentiality-for-being. But when equipment fails, all that is left for us is a hope that un-success will turn into success: that the break in the context of signification will be filled, its promise fulfilled.

Conclusion: The Productivity of Failure

A re-reading of Heidegger's text reconfigures failure as a non-negative, productive phenomenon that deserves to be included in the (inexhaustible, to say the least) list of *existentials*. It reveals that failure works, but what does its work produce or generate? What springs forth from failure? Both too much and too little: not things in their actuality, but being in its possibility, in the futurity of its future, in the impossibility of the possible. At the same time, failure describes the mode of being of Dasein in falling and adumbrates its authenticity; gives birth to the category of presence-at-hand and constitutes the developmental procession of technology; introduces a fold or

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convolution into the directness of intentionality and peppers the positivity of existence with non-privative lacunae from which the world may be “evacuated,” opening the space for the worldhood of the world.

But returning to Heidegger—to Heidegger himself—we should note that before passing judgment on his “moral failings” expressed in a certain silence, it is incumbent on us, in the mode of immanent criticism, to situate this term in his philosophical scheme.

Reconceived philosophically, failure loses its inherent sense of critical negativity, to the extent that the limit between authenticity and inauthenticity—the very modalization of authenticity—transpires within, not outside of, it. And, therefore, to invoke the failure of Heidegger at the expense of Heidegger’s “failure” is to render indeterminate the boundary between the praise-worthiness and the blame-worthiness of the object of criticism.

ENDNOTES

1. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 31. Translation modified.
2. Dominique Janicaud, *The Shadow of that Thought: Heidegger and the Question of Politics*, trans. Michael Gendre (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 87–88.
3. David Farrell Krell, *Daimon Life: Heidegger and Life-Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 138.
4. *Ibid.*, 140.
5. “Fail v. Probably before 1200 *failen* [meant] cease to exist or function, come to an end, be unsuccessful, in *Ancrene Riwe*; borrowed from Old French *failir* be lacking, miss, not succeed, from Vulgar Latin *fallire*, corresponding to Latin *fallere* deceive, be lacking, or defective.” Robert Barnhart, “Fail,” in *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (Chicago: H.W. Wilson, 1988), 365.
6. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, (Tübingen: Niemeyer Verlag, 1993); *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962). All further references to this text will be made parenthetically using the title abbreviation “SZ” and the pagination of the original German work.
7. The existential background of failure needs to be conceptually uncoupled from the plentitude resulting from the correction of failure in time understood as the succession of “now-times.” In this vulgar temporal scheme, failure may be rectified in the present, the way that a lacuna is filled: “what has failed or eluded us ‘on that former occasion’ is something that we must ‘now’ make up for” (*Sein und Zeit*, 406). What is at stake in this uncoupling is nothing less than the possibility or the impossibility of “redemption.”
8. Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 76.
9. Cf. the contributions of Benjamin, Derrida, and de Man on this topic: Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); Jacques Derrida, “Des Tour de Babel,” in *Difference in Translation*, ed. J. F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Paul de Man *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
10. Marion, *Reduction and Givenness*, 188.
11. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 44.
12. Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 10. Although *Handlichen Regel* are still close or ready to hand, they diverge from a kind of *Handwerk* or “manual” crafting of law which Heidegger might have approved. See also Jacques Derrida, “Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand,” trans. John P. Leavy Jr., in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. by John Sallis (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).
13. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, I: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 88.
14. See also Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), esp. 135–38.
15. Martin Heidegger, *Platon: Sophistes*. Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 19 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992), 54.

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