

Book Review

Thompson, T. (2017). *Heidegger and Executive Education: The Management of Time*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. ISBN: 9781138211896

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When the editors of *Management Learning* sought a reviewer for this book, I leapt at the opportunity. I identified instantly with the book for two reasons. First, as an undergraduate many years ago, I studied quite a lot of German philosophy: Hegel, Schlegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, Fichte, Nietzsche, Husserl. The course concluded with a nod to Heidegger. *Too difficult*, the professor said. *Come back to this later*. Now was that “later”.

Second, after 15 years or so in business, I was invited to undertake just the sort of executive education that motivated Toby Thompson to write this book. It was a two-week residential course, run by professors at an eminent business school and designed as the cornerstone of a large corporation’s global leadership development. The exercise was illuminating. It led me to undertake an MBA a few years later, which led me a decade or so after that to teach at a business school and to pursue a PhD so I might teach the type of executive education I had experienced.

To me, reviewing this book held out the promise of killing two philosophical bugbears with one philosopher’s stone. I could use issues familiar from critical studies of higher education (Alvesson, 2013; Davies & Petersen, 2005; Jones, 2015) to get into Heidegger, and Heidegger to contemplate my profession.

I wanted to follow the advice of all the philosophers I’ve met and the many followers of Heidegger thinking and suspend disbelief, as Thompson does, that his support of the Nazis was anything more than an aberration. So much good thinking has followed Heidegger’s. Among those who build upon his foundations are Foucault (1972), de Certeau (1984), Bourdieu (1990), Gadamer (1975/2013), and Rorty (1989), not to mention scholars of management studies (Chia & Holt, 2006; Holt & Mueller, 2011; Ladkin, 2006; Lounsbury, 2008; Painter-Morland, 2008).

Thompson, a specialist in executive education at the Cranfield School of Management in England, writes not for participants on such courses, but instead for those of us who provide it. The book derives from his doctorate at University College London.

Throughout its pages rings a motivation grounded in a lament. The global financial crisis has exposed the failings of neo-liberal capitalism, he writes, the assumptions of which underpin the entire business school curriculum. For executive education, by which he means the sort of residential experience I had undertaken, the problem is worse. Here the corporation helps to design the learning required, which exposes the first of two contradictions in its purpose. Corporate human resources department do not seek *education* for their executives. Instead they want higher productivity. “Execution”, which aims at achievement of targets, cannot be “education”, with its open-ended inquiry.

The second contradiction is subtler, more philosophical. It is what Thompson calls the “false necessity of executive orders”. Executives think of themselves as decision-makers, but the term itself recalls someone who executes, someone who does, not someone who decides. The executive

executes orders from someone else. Even CEOs execute according to a paradigm of unspoken and unchallenged assumptions, ones that led the global economy to the cliff-edge in 2008, and ones that suggest lessons the HR department hasn't specified for the course. This "order-execution cognate", as Thompson calls it, demands philosophical inquiry. Enter Heidegger.

Heidegger's writings range from *Being and Time*, first published in 1927, to his essays written in the 1930s called *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, and his 1954 paper on "The Question Concerning Technology". Heidegger solved the puzzle left by Husserl's dismissal of the necessity of a world "out there" by turning the puzzle upside down. At the risk of gross oversimplification, in Heidegger there is no "subject" (we) apprehending the "object" (what is "out there"). Instead, "we" are "out there".

His argument is couched in a special language, replete with neologisms that confound translators and make reading in the original difficult for native German speakers. Thompson explores Heidegger's view of "death", "anxiety" and "boredom", and attempts to clarify these concepts for the uninitiated, non-German speaker, but he does so in ways that risk bringing the book to a shuddering halt.

Thompson offers respite in brief vignettes concerning the development of "Sanjay", an archetypal participant in executive development. The young Indian of low birth but high talent rises through personal crises and executive opportunities to lead the global HR strategy of a major corporation. But using these vignettes as windows onto Heidegger's complexities is like looking through a glass darkly, never quite face-to-face. Still, they tug the reader back from the abstract and abstruse language into phenomena more familiar, before the next plunge into Heideggerian depths.

The effort to illuminate the darkness in this book draws on a variety of secondary sources, interpreters of Heidegger who disagree about whether Heidegger is a realist, an idealist or a transcendentalist, before Thompson explores how he might have been a Romanticist of the Germanic persuasion. These interludes leave us far removed from the goal of understanding executive education, however, as they make a reader – or, made *this* reader – reach for other works. Indeed, Thompson's discussion of these debates pointed me to Hubert Dreyfus (1929-2017), a philosophy professor at the University of California at Berkeley whose various YouTube contributions lifted many of the clouds that I found obscuring Heidegger's ideas. The uninitiated might try starting there.

Gradually, and reading Thompson's book slowly, I felt the door open to the lessons in philosophy I had sought at the outset. While tedious and sometimes painful (some of his sentences are 90 to 100 words long), Thompson's accounts gradually unfold an understanding of the concept of time. People in Heidegger – like executives for Thompson – experience time in two fundamentally different ways: the steady tick-tock of the clock, ordinary, chronological time, and *kairotic* time, a term used by ancient Greek philosophers to signify the opportune moment. The latter becomes the *Augenblick* in Heidegger's ontology, the blink of the eye, when much is revealed. Together these inform an event (*Ereignis*), or "enowning" in the tortuous if more precise translation, that leads to "mindfulness", a translation of Heidegger's *Besinnung* that may misdirect. The German of these expressions contain keys to the rest of Heidegger's understanding that translations miss. Thompson makes an effort here, noting that *Ereignis* has its root in the term *eigen*, which calls attention to the sense of

ownership people feel when a mere phenomenon takes on importance. The *Sinn* in *Besinnung* reminds us of the “sense” we make of such events as we “appropriate” or come to own them.

More difficult still is the chapter on history, where the plodding of chronological time collapses and the past, present and future are revealed in events/enowning. As that occurs, the everyday yields to the ecstasy of the sense of self, of existence, that Heidegger calls *Dasein* and that translators have given up trying to translate.

What does this excursion in metaphysics – itself a term many philosophers have sought to jettison – have to do with the mundane tick-tock of life in the real world, where orders need to be executed? This is the problem at the heart of Thompson’s exploits, and it evades what seems to be the obvious answer.

Reading his book, I became convinced early on that Thompson’s felt executive education offered the opportunity for a Heideggerian event, the sensemaking of *Besinnung* that builds one’s “own”, “owned” sense of self, what is *eigen* in the *Ereignis*. The task of the teacher in executive education must be a subversive one, showing the executives – the executors, that is – the path from mere chronology to *kairotic* time, punctuating the everyday with the sense of the eternal within the ordinary that lies at the heart of German Romantic writings.

That reading is an oversimplification of Heidegger, but it is one that Thompson seems to invite. And yet Thompson walks away from it. His concluding chapter, “Considerations”, begins with an allusion to Camus’ *The Rebel*, a book inspired, as other existentialists were, by Heidegger’s invocation of *Dasein* as the being-out-there (or being-in-here; the *da* in *Dasein* encourages both understandings).

That leads to a discussion of the role of master and slave, order-giver and order-taker, where, drawing on an irony in Hegelian thought, the slaves’ acceptance of their condition defines the existence of the master. This sets up executive education courses as the work of rebels. But the 80 “considerations” that follow steer wide of that direct implication. Instead we find much discussion of the circularity of the process of commissioning and executing executive education courses, which echoes the oscillation of time between the chronological and the *kairotic*. Concerning the demand side in executive education, we learn in Consideration 5:

The assumption is that it is possible to specify what a programme of executive education should serve, [sic] serves merely to register an index of local interest, e.g. leadership or organisational change, which has intrinsic merit in terms of articulating that organisation’s espoused intentions, but which should not be mistaken for a unique vision or direction justifying education in the first place (Thompson, 2017, p. 200).

Consideration 9 then suggests:

On the supply side, it is possible to gain sufficient knowledge to proficiency in operating with this circularity, as a model for continuous improvement, provided that the consequences of embracing the expectation of “continuity” are manifest (Thompson, 2017, p. 200).

Then Consideration 69:

The temporally educated executive will be the person who can resist the easy and preferred answer, not as a result of obstinacy, but because they can argue the toss. The purpose of progressive executive education is not to make scholars out of executives, but to provide them with an inspiration that there are alternatives, to equip them to defang the status quo (Thompson, 2017, p. 206).

Thompson concludes the sequence with Consideration 80:

There is a virtue in the incompleteness of a picture. When the beholder shares in the reading of the incomplete picture, who is made to account for the sketchiness of your incomplete grasp of time? You (Thompson, 2017, p. 207).

Even in a book that draws its inspiration from the writings of one of the most difficult philosophers of the 20th Century, these pieces of a manifesto for a “progressive” form of executive education show how the rallying to action slips away, becoming an honorific to the works of a master whose work I have still to master. I’m left uncertain whether these “considerations” can be seen as orders I am to execute, or if they should be. Instead they tell me what I already know and practise. As a teacher, I try, always, to provide the *Augenblick* of insight and illumination. I strive to oscillate from the chronology of the workshop start-and-stop times into *kairotic* time in the classroom. I seek to find the question that enervates the *Dasein* of the executive and leads to the *Besinnung* that comes with appreciating the connectedness of all ideas.

But let’s recall the author’s motivations. This book started as a protest against neo-liberal capitalism and the blindness of the executive who executes without question. It concludes with a plea for a “mode of study and practice” that “manifests most readily into a type of formation, in German, *Bildung*, which by definition is never complete” (Thompson, 2017, p. 200). The fire in his belly may not be extinguished, but Thompson acknowledges, somewhat grudgingly, the complexity of working between the real and abstract worlds that Heidegger seeks to describe.

So, what of my motivations in reviewing it? Have they been fulfilled? Some of the diction may jar (e.g. the “jackbooted executive”, p. 6; the “sugar-free diet for executive education”, p. 23; “Not for any love of the man: yikes!”, p. 155). But this is not a simplistic account of a complex set of ideas. It led me to think, long and hard, about executive education as Thompson uses the term, but also about the work of business schools and universities. I thought, long and hard, thoughts not limited to the hasty conclusions that the book’s protests about capitalism or the complicity of business education in the financial crisis might inspire. So, yes, I have achieved the second of my objectives. But this book concentrates far less on executive education than on Heidegger.

Did I come to understand Heidegger? Here the answer is more nuanced. Yes, in the sense that I am less afraid to open the copies of *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927/2010) and *Basic Writings* (Heidegger, 1993) that I have had on my desk for years. Thompson’s book, with its secondary source debates and guide to commentators has given me some of the language to get started in earnest.

I read it long and hard. It is not a long book, but it is hard to read. If there is a chance for a revised edition, I would recommend close attention, by the author and the copy editor, to the grammatical and punctuation errors that deflected my reading. Among the problems, “principle” and “principal” are often confused. The author’s decision to equate “chronological” and “chronic” time may support

the discourse of his critical stance towards executive education, but I am less convinced it is true to Heidegger's texts or the Greek. And I would make more of how language matters. The inspiring collection of different German words for "order" (pp. 15-16, drawn from 42 in all) promises a richer deconstruction of the "order-execution cognate" than the book provides.

Still, this is a book worth reading, worth persisting through the difficulties of Heidegger and the difficulties presented in seeking to relate the abstractions in Heidegger to any field of practice. It's a book I might read again, too, and with the same two objectives: to think differently about the work I do, and to understand Heidegger more fully.

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