

**The Self-Assertion of
the German University***
Martin Heidegger
(1933)

The assumption of the rectorate is the commitment to the *spiritual* leadership of this institution of higher learning.* The following of teachers and students only awakens and strengthens through a true and common rootedness in the essence of the German university. This essence, however, only gains clarity, rank, and power if the leaders, first and foremost and at any time, are themselves led – led by the relentlessness of that spiritual mission that forces the destiny of the German people into the shape of its history.

[* Translator's note. Here Heidegger uses *hohe Schule*. Like the more common word *Hochschule*, *hohe Schule* means "institution of higher education." However, the word has a special aura, especially in the way Heidegger uses it. I have thus chosen to translate it later in the text as "'high' school."]

Do we know about this spiritual mission? Whether we do or not, the question must inevitably be faced: *are* we, teachers and students of this "high" school, truly and commonly rooted in the essence of the German university? Does this essence have genuine strength to shape our existence [*Dasein*]?* Only if we fundamentally *will* this essence. But who would want to doubt this? The dominant characteristic of the university's essence is generally thought to be its "self-administration"; it is to be preserved. However – have we really fully considered what this claim to self-administration demands of us?

[*Translator's note. Throughout Heidegger's rectorial address, I have translated *Dasein* as "existence." I have interpreted Heidegger's use of *Dasein* here to mean just that and have decided not to use the untranslatable technical term *Dasein*.]

Self-administration means that we set ourselves our own task and determine the way and manner of its realization ourselves, so that in doing so we ourselves will be what we ought to be. But do we know *who we ourselves* are, this body of teachers and students of the highest school of the German people? Can we know this at all without the most constant and unsparing *self examination*?

Neither awareness of the present state of the university nor acquaintance with its previous history are enough to guarantee sufficient knowledge of its essence – unless we first, with clarity and severity, delimit this essence for the future, and in such self-limitation, *will* it, and in such willing, *assert* ourselves.

Self-administration can only exist when it is grounded in self-examination. Self-examination, however, can only take place in the strength of the German university's *self-assertion*. Will we carry it out? And how?

The self-assertion of the German university is the primordial, common will to its essence. We regard the German university as the "high" school that, grounded in science and by means of science, educates and disciplines the leaders and guardians of the destiny of the German people. The will to the essence of the German university is the will to science as will to the historical spiritual mission of the German people as a people that knows itself in its state [*Staat*]. *Together*, science and German destiny must come to power in the will to essence. And they will do so and *only* will do so, if we – teachers and students – on *the one hand*, expose science to its innermost necessity and, on

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the other hand, are able to stand our ground while German destiny is in its most extreme distress.

However, we will not experience the essence of science in its innermost necessity as long as we – when speaking of the "new concept of science" – only contest the self-sufficiency and lack of presuppositions of an all-too-contemporary science. Such action is merely negative. Hardly looking back beyond the past decades, it becomes a mere semblance of a true struggle for the essence of science.

If we want to grasp the essence of science, we must first face the decisive question: Should there still be science for us in the future, or should we let it drift toward a rapid end? It is never unconditionally necessary that science should be at all. But if there should be science and if it should be for us and through us, then under what condition can it truly exist?

Only if we again place ourselves under the power of the beginning of our spiritual-historical existence. This beginning is the departure, the setting out, of Greek philosophy.

Here, for the first time, Western man rises up, from a base in a popular culture [Volkstum] and by means of his language, against the totality of what is and questions and comprehends it as the being that it is. All science is philosophy, whether it knows and wills it – or not. All science remains bound to that beginning of philosophy. From it science draws the strength of its essence, assuming that it still remains at all equal to this beginning.

Here we want to regain two distinguishing properties of the original Greek essence of science for our existence.

An old story was told among the Greeks that Prometheus had been the first philosopher. Aeschylus has this Prometheus utter a saying that expresses the essence of knowing:

τέχνη δ'ἀνάγκης ἄσθενεστέρα μακρῶ

(Prom. 514, ed. Wil).

“Knowing, however, is far weaker than necessity.” That means that all knowing about things has always already been surrendered to the predominance of destiny and fails before it.

Precisely because of this, knowing must unfold its highest defiance. Only then will the entire power of the concealedness [Verborgenheit] of what is rise up and knowing will really fail. In this way, what is opens itself in its unfathomable inalterability and lends knowing its truth. In this Greek saying on the creative impotence of knowledge, one all too readily hopes to find a prototype for a knowing that is based purely on itself, when actually such knowing has forgotten its own essence. This knowing is interpreted for us as the “theoretical” attitude. But what does *θεωρία* mean to the Greeks? It is said: pure contemplation, which only remains bound to the matter in question and all that it is and demands. This contemplative behavior is said, with reference to the Greeks, to be pursued for its own sake. But this reference is mistaken. For on the one hand, “theory” is not pursued for its own sake, but only in the passion to remain close to and under the pressure of what is. On the other, the Greeks fought precisely to comprehend and carry out this contemplative questioning as one, indeed as the highest, mode of human *ἐνέργεια*, of human “being-at-work.” They were not concerned with aligning practice with theory. Rather, the reverse was true: theory was to be understood as the highest realization of genuine practice. For the Greeks, science is not a “cultural asset” but the innermost determining center of all of popular [volklich] and national [stoat/Wit] existence. The Greeks thought science not merely a means of bringing the unconscious to consciousness, but the power that hones and encompasses all of existence.

Science is the questioning standing of one’s ground in the midst of the constantly self-concealing totality of what is. This active perseverance knows about its impotence in the face of destiny.

This is the initial essence of science. But does this beginning not already lie two and half millennia behind us? Has not the progress of human actions changed science as well? Certainly! The Christian-theological interpretation of the world that followed and the later mathematical-technological thinking of the modern age have distanced science, both in time and in its concerns, from its beginning. But this does not mean that the beginning has been overcome, let alone that it has been negated. Assuming that the primordial Greek science is indeed something great, then the beginning of this greatness remains

what is greatest. The essence of science could not even be emptied out or used up, as is happening today despite all the results and “international organizations,” if the greatness of the beginning did not still endure. The beginning still is. It does not lie behind us, as something that was long ago, but stands before us. As what is greatest, the beginning has passed in advance over all that is to come and thus already over us as well. The beginning has invaded our future. There it stands as the distant command to us to catch up with its greatness.

Only if we resolutely submit to this distant command to regain the greatness of this beginning, only then will science become the innermost necessity of our existence. Otherwise it will remain an accident into which we fall or the dispassionate contentment of a safe occupation, serving to further a mere progress of information.

But if we submit to the distant command of the beginning, science must become the fundamental happening of our spiritual and popular [volklich] existence.

And if our most authentic existence itself stands before a great transformation, and if it is true what that passionate seeker of God and last German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, said: “God is dead” – and if we must be serious about this forsakeness of modern human beings in the midst of what is, then what is the situation of science?

Then, the initial, awed perseverance of the Greeks in the face of what is transforms itself into a completely uncovered exposure to the hidden and uncertain; that is, the questionable. Questioning is then no longer merely a preliminary step that is surmounted on the way to the answer and thus to knowing; rather, questioning itself becomes the highest form of knowing. Questioning then unfolds its most authentic strength to unlock the essential in all things. Questioning then forces our vision to focus, with the utmost simplicity, on the inevitable.

Such questioning shatters the encapsulation of the sciences in separate specialities, brings them back from their boundless and aimless dispersal in individual fields and corners, and directly exposes science once again to the productivity and blessing of all world-shaping powers of human-historical existence, such as nature, history, language; people, custom, state; poetry, thought, faith; disease, madness, death; law, economy, technology.

If we will the essence of science understood as the questioning, uncovered standing one’s ground in the midst of the uncertainty of the totality of what is, then this will to essence will create for our people its world of innermost and most extreme danger, i.e. its truly spiritual world. For “spirit” is not empty cleverness, nor the noncommittal play of wit, nor the boundless drift of rational dissection, let alone world reason; spirit is the primordially attuned, knowing resoluteness toward the essence of Being. And the spiritual world of a people is not the superstructure of a culture any more than it is an armory filled with useful information and values; it is the power that most deeply preserves the people’s earth- and blood-bound strengths as the power that most deeply arouses and most profoundly shakes the people’s existence. Only a spiritual

world guarantees the people greatness. For it forces the constant decision between the will to greatness and the acceptance of decline to become the law for each step of the march that our people has begun into its future history.

If we will this essence of science, then the teachers of this university must really advance to the outermost post, endangered by constant uncertainty about the world. If they stand their ground there; that is to say, if a common questioning and a communally

tuned saying arises from there – in essential nearness to the pressing insistence of all things – then they will gain the strength for leadership. For what is decisive in leading is not just walking ahead of others but the strength to be able to walk alone, not from obstinacy or a craving for power, but empowered by the deepest purpose and the broadest obligation. Such strength binds to what is essential, selects the best, and awakens the genuine following of those who have new courage. But we do not need to first awaken this following. German students are on the march. And whom they are seeking are those leaders through whom they want to elevate their own purpose so that it becomes a grounded, knowing truth, and to place it into the clarity of interpretive and effective word and work.

Out of the resoluteness of the German students to stand their ground while German destiny is in its most extreme distress comes a will to the essence of the university. This will is a true will, provided that German students, through the new Student Law,³ place themselves under the law of their essence and thereby first define this essence. To give oneself the law is the highest freedom. The much-lauded “academic freedom” will be expelled from the German university; for this freedom was not genuine because it was only negative. It primarily meant lack of concern, arbitrariness of intentions and inclinations, lack of restraint in what was done and left undone. The concept of the freedom of the German student is now brought back to its truth. In future, the bond and service of German students will unfold from this truth.

[*Translator’s note. Proclaimed on 1 May 1933, the neue Studentenrecht sought to organize students according to the Führerprinzip in an effort to integrate the universities into the National Socialist state.]

The first bond binds to the national community [Volksgemeinschaft]. It obligates to help carry the burden of and to participate actively in the struggles, strivings, and skills of all the estates and members of the people. From now on, this bond will be fixed and rooted in the existence of the student by means of Labor Service [Arbeitsdienst].

The second bond binds to the honor and the destiny of the nation in the midst of all the other peoples. It demands the readiness, secured by knowledge and skill and tightened by discipline, to give the utmost in action. In future, this bond will encompass and penetrate the entire existence of the student as Military Service [Wehrdienst].

The third bond of the students binds them to the spiritual mission of the German people. This people works at its fate by opening its history to all the overwhelming world-shaping powers of human existence and by continually fighting for its spiritual world anew. Thus exposed to the most extreme questionableness of its own existence, this people wills to be a spiritual people. It demands of itself and for itself that its leaders and guardians possess the strictest clarity of the highest, broadest, and richest knowledge. Young students, who at an early age have dared to act as men and have extended their willing to the future destiny of the nation, force themselves, from the very ground of their being, to serve this knowledge. These students will no longer permit Knowledge Service [Wissensdienst] to be a dull and rushed training for a “distinguished” profession. Because the statesman and the teacher, the doctor and the judge, the minister and the architect lead the existence of people and

state, because they guard and hone it in its fundamental relations to the world-shaping powers of human being, these professions and the education for them are

entrusted to Knowledge Service. Knowledge does not serve the professions but the reverse: the professions effect and administer that highest and essential knowledge of the people concerning its entire existence. But for us this knowledge is not the dispassionate taking note of essences and values as such, but the most severe endangerment of existence in the midst of the overwhelming power of what is. The very questionableness of Being forces the people to work and fight and forces it into its state [Staat], to which the professions belong.

The three bonds – by the people, to the destiny of the state, in spiritual mission – are equally primordial to the German essence. The three services that arise from it – Labor Service, Military Service, and Knowledge Service – are equally necessary and of equal rank.

The primordial and full essence of science, whose realization is our task, provided we submit to the distant command of the beginning of our spiritual-historical existence, is only created by knowledge about the people that actively participates and by knowledge about the state's destiny that always keeps itself prepared, both at one with knowledge about the spiritual mission.

It is this science that is meant when the essence of the German university is delimited as the “high” school that, grounded in science and through science, educates and disciplines the leaders and guardians of the German people.

This primordial concept of science obligates us not only to “objectivity,” but, above all, to make our questioning in the midst of the historical-spiritual world of the people essential and simple. Indeed, it is only then that objectivity can truly ground itself – i.e., discover its nature and its limit.

Science, in this sense, must become the power that shapes the body of the German university. This contains a twofold task: Teachers and students, each in their own way, must become seized and remain seized by the concept of science. At the same time, however, this concept of science must intervene in and rearrange the basic forms in which the teachers and students each act in a scientific community: in the faculties and as student bodies of specific departments [Fachschaften].

The faculty is a faculty only if it becomes capable of spiritual legislation, and, rooted in the essence of its science, able to shape the powers of existence that pressure it into the one spiritual world of the people.

The student body of a certain department is a student body only if it places itself in the realm of this spiritual legislation from the start and thus tears down departmental barriers and overcomes the staleness and falseness of superficial professional training.

At the moment when faculties and departmental student bodies set the essential and simple questions of their science into motion, teachers and students are already encompassed by the same final necessities and pressing concerns of the existence of people and state.

The unfolding of the primordial essence of science, however, demands such a degree of rigor, responsibility, and superior patience that, in comparison, the conscientious adherence to or the eager alteration of established procedures hardly matter.

But if the Greeks needed three centuries just to put the question of what knowledge is onto the right ground and on a secure track, we have no right to assume that the elucidation and unfolding of the essence of the German university will occur in the current or coming semester.

But there is one thing we do know from the indicated essence of science: The German university will only gain shape and power if the three services primordially coalesce to become one formative force. That is to say:

The teachers' will to essence must awaken to the simplicity and breadth of knowledge about the essence of science and thus grow strong. The students' will to essence must force itself to rise to the highest clarity and discipline of knowing and integrate, demanding and determining, engaged knowledge [Mitwissenschaft] about the people and its state into the essence of science. The two wills must confront one another, ready for battle. All abilities of will and thought, all strengths of the heart, and all capabilities of the body must be unfolded through battle, heightened in battle, and preserved as battle.

We choose the knowing battle of those who question, and we profess with Carl von Clausewitz:⁴ "I renounce the frivolous hope of salvation by the hand of accident."

[*Translator's note. Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), for many years head of the Prussian War College, was the author of the influential *Vom Krieg* (On War).]

This battle community of teachers and students, however, will only recreate the German university into a place of spiritual legislation and establish in it the center of the most disciplined preparation for the highest service to the people in its state if teachers and students arrange their existence more simply, more unsparingly, and more frugally than all the other members of their people [Volksgenossen]. All leading must concede its following its own strength. All following, however, bears resistance in itself. This essential opposition of leading and following must not be blurred let alone eliminated.

Battle alone keeps this opposition open and implants in the entire body of teachers and students that basic attitude that allows self-limiting self-assertion empower resolute self-examination to come to genuine self-administration.

Do we, or do we not, will the essence of the German university? It is up to us whether, and to what extent, we concern ourselves with self-examination and self-assertion, not just in passing, but starting from its foundations, or whether we – with the best of intentions – merely change old institutions and add new ones. No one will keep us from doing this.

But no one will even ask us whether we do or do not will, when the spiritual strength of the West fails and its joints crack, when this moribund semblance of a culture caves in and drags all forces into confusion and lets them suffocate in madness.

Whether this will or will not happen depends solely on whether we, as a historical-spiritual people, still and once again will ourselves – or whether we no longer will ourselves. Each individual participates in this decision even when, and especially when, he evades it.

But we do will that our people fulfill its historical mission.

We do will ourselves. For the young and the youngest strength of the people, which is already reaching beyond us, has already decided the matter.

But we will only fully understand the magnificence and greatness of this new departure when we carry within us that profound and far-reaching thoughtfulness that gave ancient Greek wisdom the saying:

τά ... μεγλα πάντα ἐπιφαλη ...
[All that is great stands in the storm ...]

(Plato, Republic, 497 d. 9).

* Scanned from Gunther Neske & Emil Kettering (eds), *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, New York: Paragon House, 1990, pp. 5-13.