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Prejudice and Possibility. How to Philosophize after *The Culmination*

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Overcoming metaphysics in Heidegger's sense requires that we experience 'the ground out of which the history of being first reveals its nature (*Wesen*)' (Heidegger 2000: 67). What overcoming metaphysics means for Heidegger is not just doing *without* metaphysics, but getting at the source of our understanding of and relation to what is, to being. He does this by studying the history of Western philosophy and by asking 'why is it that being lets itself be thought as metaphysics?' Heidegger finds that the history of philosophy is not a history of a progressively better conceptual grasp of what is, but a history of a prejudice, a story about an oversight and a forgetting, and the philosophy of Hegel is its culmination. Heidegger thinks of his own philosophy as working in the aftermath of metaphysics, and his project has clear affinities with both Hegel's and Pippin's projects, in that a central philosophical task is to figure out what has happened to us.

In his new book *The Culmination. Heidegger, German Idealism and the Fate of Philosophy*, Robert Pippin shows Heidegger's reading of the works of Hegel and Kant to be both illuminating, relevant and posing a serious challenge, not just to the kind of thinking to which Pippin himself has devoted most of his career, but to philosophy as such. Briefly put, the Heideggerian challenge is this: all of Western philosophy works with the implicit assumption that what is, being, is available to discursive thinking, but this is an assumption that cannot be justified. This does not mean that Heidegger accuses all Western philosophers of being closeted Parmenidean monists—who assume that thinking and being are one—but that the aspiration of philosophy to give a *logos* of being unfolds throughout the history of philosophy and culminates with Hegel's identification of logic (pure thinking) and metaphysics (an account of being). Most of *The Culmination* is devoted to Pippin reading Heidegger reading Kant and Hegel, and to seeing how Heidegger's perspective represents both insightful interpretation of and a challenge to those philosophical projects. The larger question of the fate of philosophy looms in the background, but seems the most pressing issue to reflect on after reading this book.

Hence, I will focus my comments on two main questions: first, what has happened to us, as inheritors of the legacy of idealism? and second, the question that follows from the Heideggerian challenge, how should philosophy respond? Pippin does not provide us with definitive answers to these questions, but they seem crucial to pursue.

I. What has happened to us?

‘Heidegger is right. There is no Absolute. There cannot be an Absolute’ (C: 181).¹ This is somewhat shocking to read, and we might very well wonder how Pippin has ended up here. There are two paths leading up to this admission: one is the book’s explicit engagement with and endorsement (with some reservations) of Heidegger’s analyses, the other is found in comments made in passing and in the footnotes, which reveal a deeper problem and disillusionment with the idealist project.

In order to understand the project of Pippin’s new book, I found it helpful to compare the current manuscript with *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* from three decades ago. In that work, Pippin also takes up the challenges to and disappointment with the Kantian-Hegelian project, including Heidegger’s critique, but draws very different conclusions. ‘If there is to be a great confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*, to use the Heideggerian word) with the modern aspirations for a free existence, the most ambitious and challenging philosophical case made for such an ideal ought at least to be on the table’, he writes (Pippin 1999: xvi). In the decades since, Pippin has tried to make that case and put it on the table, through his work on Hegel in particular. And as seen in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, the Heideggerian objections have not been perceived as threatening enough to abandon those aspirations.

Kant and Hegel were presented there as thinkers who are responding to ‘what has happened to us’, but that ‘us’ is the subject of modernity and ‘what has happened’ are the enormous changes to our societies in modernity (including reformation, discoveries in science, global trade and colonialization, developing nation states, new forms of life). Pippin anno 1999 writes that modernity is not merely a *philosophical* problem and the philosophical reaction to what has happened to us is not ‘merely ideological or *post facto*’ (Pippin 1999: xvii). Instead, when we (with Hegel) come to understand ‘what happened’ to us in modernity then

we have made a philosophical claim about the meaning and significance of these altered ways of living, the authority of the new normative constraints at issue [...]. And whether or not it [our philosophical interpretation of what has happened to us—I.T.] is satisfying must itself inevitably play some mediated social role in the sustainability and vitality of the society itself,

especially modern societies, oriented as they are so explicitly from philosophical (not traditional or religious) claims about what there is and what there ought to be. (Pippin 1999: xvii)

In other words, this kind of philosophy—the Kantian-Hegelian project of self-knowledge and freedom—is not a philosophy detached from or merely reacting to its world and its history. It is a philosophy that is intrinsic to what it is to have a world for a late modern subject; understanding the sources of normativity is partly what it means to be an autonomous, self-legislating individual, for example, which is the kind of individual the Enlightenment promise needs in order to realize its aspirations. But this also implies that if that late modern world we live in now is importantly unhospitable to human beings, then that would be not just an unfortunate situation, but a reason to question the legitimacy of the philosophical project that is essential to this world. Three decades ago, Pippin came across as pretty optimistic about the contemporary situation, and hence it did not provide an occasion to call this philosophy into question.

Now, in 2024, we are still trying to understand what has happened to us, but Pippin's focus is more contemporary and less the enlightenment situation and its immediate aftermath. He seems to assume that things are not going very well, and part of the reason is that the modern self-understanding is not satisfying and has not achieved what we hoped for. There are too many signs in the contemporary world (cf. 'alienation, reification, domination instead of mutuality of recognitive status, the humiliating conditions of the modern organization of labor, anomie, deracination' (C: 219 n17)) that the Kant-Hegel interpretation of what has happened to us has failed to play that 'mediated social role in the sustainability and vitality of the society itself' that Pippin assigns it in his earlier work (quoted above). Pippin does not put it this way, but I think the following is implicit in the project of the current book and necessary to understand why the Heideggerian challenge gets the kind of hold that it does: The pathologies of modernity are too entrenched and show no signs of developing or being overcome. In other words, what has happened to us is that we are stuck in a rut, with problems we cannot solve. This might be a symptom that we've got the wrong interpretation of the problems facing us, and with that, of ourselves. In the book's final footnote Pippin writes that it is still the case that we need a good interpretation of 'what we need to understand—what has happened to us', which suggests that Hegel does *not* give us good enough an interpretation and, ultimately, that the projects of self-knowledge and autonomy are ill-conceived (C: 219 n17).

Here is the closing passage from the current book that I take to support the point I have been trying to make, where the gap between the self-understanding offered by the Hegelian project and the current conditions for leading a meaningful life is strikingly visible:

It is to Hegel's enormous credit that he realized that in the emerging modern world of market capitalism and competitive economies a critical source of meaningfulness would have to be one's ethical standing among others, the sources of self-respect in a world (or mutuality of recognition), but given that global capitalism has effectively destroyed the possibility of any such standing, how could he possibly think that it just must be the case that such a deficiency and the system responsible for it would determinately negate and transform itself? Why would not the world of Hegelian ethical life resemble nothing so much as the decayed remnants of Malte's building, redolent of what might have been but without hope for what could be? (C: 219)

It is with such an experience of the current situation that Heidegger's criticism gets the kind of hold that it does.²

2. Heidegger's critique

The projects of Kant and Hegel offer ways of making oneself at home in the world. Thinking makes being habitable, hospitable to understanding, and thus freedom is achievable in this life, in this world. The Heideggerian reading reveals this home as built on a shaky foundation, but anyone fond of philosophy is going to want some alternative.

Central to the Heideggerian critique is the notion of the logical prejudice, a phrase Pippin borrows from Daniel Dahlstrom, which could be glossed as the unwarranted assumption about the suitability for any logic or conception of truth to capture being, without the necessary reflection and questioning about the assumptions of being built into that logic (Dahlstrom 2001: xvii). Kant famously restricts the legitimate use of reason, and with that the scope of metaphysics. In that sense, he questions his assumptions about being and recognizes human finitude, and there are parallels between the first *Critique's* transcendental analytic and Heidegger's existential analytic as developed in *Being and Time*. Still, Pippin follows Heidegger's interpretation of Kant as a thinker who is committed to understanding being as the object of 'judgmental positing' (C: 85), and as not sufficiently taking on the consequences of acknowledging that this positing is *finite* (C: 87). Hence the restriction of metaphysics and the ambitions of reason in Kant's theoretical philosophy (Heidegger's focus) is a restriction that is at the same time reducing or abstracting human finitude to the conditions that follow from taking the transcendental unity of apperception as a kind of ontological ground for philosophy ('Kant is a major, if ultimately timid, thinker of finitude', to use Pippin's phrase (C: 155)).

In the case of Hegel, there is a long history of critique from the ‘radical finitude camp’ (stretching from Friedrich Schelling via Heidegger and Theodor Adorno to the present). A lot of that criticism can be dismissed as based on misreadings of Hegel, according to Pippin (this was already the case in the mentioned 1991/1999 book; see his essay on Adorno in Pippin 2021 for a more recent defence of Hegel). One might think that one reason why Pippin has been able to dismiss this tradition of criticism is that Pippin has been the proponent of what seems a minimally metaphysically committed reading of Hegel, emphasizing a developing and ongoing, historically anchored project of self-knowledge as the core of his Hegel. Here in *The Culmination*, however, the focus is on *The Science of Logic* (the topic of Pippin’s 2019 monograph) and the Heideggerian critique is shown to get a grip on a ‘real problem’ that even Pippin’s Hegel cannot avoid. When Heidegger turns his attention to Hegel, his interest is, as always, the understanding of being, that is, the metaphysics. The *Logic* is Hegel’s attempt at thinking Heidegger’s question; it is about ‘the Being of beings’, which in Hegel’s case becomes ‘the ground that gives itself ground and accounts for itself’ as Heidegger writes in *Identity and Difference* (quoted approvingly by Pippin on 162). Pippin commends Heidegger for recognizing that the being that is thought in Hegel’s *Logic* is not *a* being, like a substance, but something achieved (contra more traditional metaphysical readings). The problem that remains for Heidegger is the underlying assumption that being is such that it could be determinable as ground (and thus metaphysics could be the topic of a logic). This amounts to a version of the logical prejudice, because being as ‘intelligibility itself’ is not something we can offer an independent theory of. For Hegel, ‘logic itself, or the question “what is logic?” is not a possible moment [of the *Logic*], hence it is ‘always unasked, unthought, presupposed, even if manifested or enacted’ (C: 169).

It is less clear at the end of the Hegel section what is salvageable or what remains of Pippin’s Hegel. The challenge for philosophy ‘post culmination’ is to find a way to think that is neither dogmatic in the sense that it ascribes to some version of the ‘logical prejudice’, but also not irrationalism or obscurantism. Pippin faults Heidegger’s Hegel-interpretation for being overly formal, for not recognizing how Hegel’s understanding of apperception in thought is dynamic and practical, achieved in a social, historical world. It is symptomatic that Heidegger’s most thorough treatment of the *Phenomenology* is restricted to the opening chapters, as Pippin notes, whereas the ‘existential dynamic’ introduced in the later is absent (C: 163 n19). Pippin suggests that a Hegelian answer to the Heideggerian challenge could be that thinkability ‘can only be *shown*, not *said*’ (C: 171). Thus Pippin asks, ‘has it been shown in Hegel’s works?’ and devotes the last chapter on Hegel to nuancing the way to understand Hegel’s version of the logical prejudice, but without giving his readers a clear answer to this question. Instead, he turns the tables, so to speak, by claiming that Heidegger’s critique only

has weight ‘if it does not remain a kind of black box of chaotic indeterminate, unsayable revelations across historical time’, that is, if Heidegger’s focus on the meaning of being does not leave us with just ‘a very general notion of dependence’ (C: 188).

3. Heidegger’s alternative

Heidegger is a philosopher who to a great extent thinks by thinking through the history of philosophy and he returns to Kant and Hegel repeatedly throughout his career. The motivation for Heidegger’s storytelling is both diagnostic—figuring out what has happened to us, or rather our relationship to being—and aspirational, in that he is also looking for clues for a new beginning for philosophy. Can this historical thinking itself be an alternative to metaphysics? From the thirties, Heidegger’s concern is explicitly with what he calls the history of being (*Seinsgeschichte*) as a whole: we learn not from the different individual attempts at metaphysics, but from the history of metaphysics itself, Heidegger writes in the *Beiträge* (Heidegger 1989: 175).

However, taken as a whole, Heidegger’s history of philosophy is sweeping, painted with broad brushstrokes, and surprisingly monotone: it is in a sense always the same old story, about a prejudiced way of relating to being, which is there already from the very beginning with Plato and Aristotle. As a consequence, many interesting differences are smoothed out, and Plato, Descartes, modern physics and ‘Americanism’ are all part of the same narrative, which develops into a history of decline and which in the contemporary moment reveals itself in human beings’ domineering and exploitative relationship to being, best known from Heidegger’s later writings on technology and ‘enframing’ (*Gestell*). Contrast this history of decline with Pippin’s desideratum for what he calls a resolute reading of Heidegger: ‘any retrieval of the question (of Being) *must be a path towards a renewed meaningfulness of being*’ (C: 34, my italics). In other words, there ought to be some positive outcome from engaging with Heidegger other than the destructive project of the ‘culmination’. I think *The Culmination* is less clear when it comes to putting us on such a path; in fact, I am not sure whether Pippin thinks he has found such a path in this book, with or without Heidegger.

Pippin’s Heidegger is described as someone who wants to ‘renew metaphysics on a proper footing’ (C: 12 n18), who offers a new metaphysics, ‘a metaphysics of finitude’ (C: 29, 99). But is the right way to characterize what follows from Heidegger’s questioning as a metaphysics or a new first philosophy at all? When Heidegger *does* try to do something like a ‘first philosophy’ of being that is not guilty of relying on the principle of sufficient reason or the logical prejudice, he uses expressions like nothing, abyss, origin (understood as *Ur-sprung*, an originary

leap), strife and event. These are topics that he tries to develop, especially in the *Beiträge*, as a response to the history of being, but that are largely absent from Pippin's book. Pippin instead chooses to focus on affectivity, attunement, the non-discursive availability of significance, and propositional articulation as a derived form of engagement with being. While important to the Dasein-analytic of the early Heidegger, these are strictly speaking not Heidegger's 'answer' or counterpart to the project of Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

There isn't much 'meaningfulness' to get out of Heidegger's *Seinsgeschichte*, for reasons that reveal a very important difference from Kant and Hegel: there is no expectation on Heidegger's part that being is such that its history has any logic or reason that could move it onwards in a positive manner. Rather, the movement of Heidegger's history of being is the consequence of an oversight, at times expressed as the logical prejudice, other times as the conflation of the ontological difference. However, that this is the true source of our historical situation is not easily established and Heidegger's antisemitism provides a further reason to question this narrative. It is in the context of the being-historical thinking that Heidegger's antisemitism seems most philosophically relevant: Domination, instrumental rationality or calculative thinking are all expressions of 'Jewishness' (*Judentum*), we read in his private notebooks, which makes one wonder if the conclusion to the history of being as told by Heidegger is motivated by antisemitism rather than the history of Western metaphysics.³ The problems of late modern life are supposed to be the final consequences of a *logical* prejudice, and not the philosophical expression of an antisemitic prejudice, but such remarks might lead one to question both Heidegger's description of his contemporary situation and the actual reasons that led him there. When turning to Heidegger and a resolute reading, it is striking that the reflection on this problematic aspect of the history of being is not more explicitly addressed by Pippin. Focusing on the critical interpretations of Kant and Hegel in isolation from the larger project of the *Seinsgeschichte* and its relation to new possibilities for philosophy amounts to a missed opportunity, in the sense that it could bring out the difference in resources available to a Hegelian versus a Heideggerian history of philosophy.

Another way of conceiving a Heideggerian alternative, which entails downplaying the importance of the being-historical project, is to interpret Heidegger's repeated insistence that the meaning of being is forgotten or overlooked as performative: Heidegger's recurring focus on this most primary question is best understood as a kind of *showing*. And the responses the repetitions invite and evoke are awe, wonder, attention and care. On such an interpretation, a 'resolute' Heideggerian alternative is then best understood as a kind of plea to return to the practice of phenomenology, understood as a practice that lets us experience the meaningfulness of being. Heidegger's path, or rather his many crisscrossing paths and dead ends (*Holzwege*) are attempts at renewing this sense of

meaningfulness, but *not* in a way that can count as metaphysics, and perhaps not even philosophy, but rather as a kind of living and thinking.

Being attentive to the happening of truth, the clearing, and living with and caring for what is, Heidegger will in his later writings call dwelling (*wohnen*).⁴ This amounts to a different way of making the world one's home than that of the rationalist projects of Kant and Hegel. Making a place or a home in the aftermath of metaphysics is not achieved through a new metaphysics of being. It seems rather that Heidegger's alternatives are letting the place open around the thing; noticing how building or creating—some of Heidegger's examples are the bridge, the word, the artwork—are events that open up and anchor the world around themselves. Staying with the metaphor of the home, one could say that Heidegger is trying to bring out a way of living that allows for human finitude. Some of us grow slightly impatient with the late Heidegger's meditations on dwelling, with its heeding, protective freeing up of what is, and letting beings be. But most of us recognize that a realm that quite intuitively lets us experience meaning making itself manifest is art. It is to this that I now turn.

4. Poetic thinking and philosophical criticism

A possible consequence of accepting Heidegger's challenge, is that one has to do philosophy by other means. *Philosophy by Other Means* is also the title of the last collection of Pippin's essays on art and philosophical criticism. For Heidegger, art and poetry turn out to be of lasting importance for working out a new philosophy (more so, one can argue, than the focus on the history of being). That this will be the case for Pippin, when taking the Heideggerian challenge seriously, is also anticipated in a comment he makes in the preface of this book, about the potential charge of irrationalism: 'The deeper contrast' he writes, is not between enlightenment rationalism and 'irrationalism', but rather 'between rational explicability and the complexities of interpretative struggles with meaningfulness. The latter is no more "irrational" than invoking an insight about the sources or failure of meaningfulness from poetry and film' (C: xi n6). Engaging with art is a way of practising such a 'struggle' with meaningfulness that recognizes that interpretation is not the same as making all there is explicit or articulable.

Pippin is interested in how Heidegger recognizes the potential for a kind of philosophical criticism. In Heidegger's reading of Friedrich Hölderlin and R.M. Rilke, poetry is able to *show* the ailments of late modern life so that we experience these in ways that are deeper than his own, overly general proclamations of decline. Still, Pippin clearly finds Heidegger's readings to be lacking—while Heidegger does credibly suggest that poetry should be considered a form of philosophical thought, it also has to be said that he rather opens a door than shows us how to

enter or what we might find when we do' (C: 214).⁵ I want to end by suggesting that Pippin has already shown us how to enter that door.

Here is Pippin's relatively recent description of philosophical criticism: Engaging with an artwork, we sense that it 'knows something', he writes in 'Philosophical Criticism' (Pippin 2021). The critic attempts to capture and describe the process of coming to understand what the work intends, but they do that by showing rather than saying:

That deeply felt and often deeply gratifying moment of insight when it becomes clear *what* it is we know but could not say is not something we can offer to another simply by formulating and saying it. We have to help another see it, feel that moment as well in the experience of the work (Pippin 2021: 10).

And further:

For the interpreter *not* to be able to say what he carries away, even as he carries something substantive away that has something to do with knowledge, is the achievement of the work of the most important art and great criticism together. (ibid.: 13)

In these descriptions we recognize an admission that meaning goes beyond discursivity; we experience that this is so in our engagement with art, but this does not imply that this meaning is 'irrational' or something in principle ineffable.

At the same time, the philosophical reflections that Pippin's artworks typically invite, in the recent collection as well as in earlier work, are so thoroughly Hegelian. Recurring questions are whether freedom is attainable; whether we can be confused about who we are; whether an individual's life or a form of (social) life can fully be understood or made one's own. What would the status of these philosophical questions be, after *The Culmination*? Would it not be the case that the tools Pippin has used for thinking about what it is to be human are now compromised by the fact that they are part of a philosophical project that rests on an oversight and that for this reason is distorting? Would they not, in the language of the current book, be questions raised from within metaphysics, indebted to a philosophical outlook that has failed us? To settle these questions, we would need a clearer articulation of how Pippin understands the legitimacy of Hegel's philosophical project after this confrontation with Heidegger.

One philosophical possibility Pippin leaves us with is a kind of hybrid, where the Heideggerian attentiveness to the sources of meaningfulness comes together with Hegelian-inspired reflexivity in the project of philosophical criticism. I want to end by suggesting that this kind of hybrid thinking is something Pippin has been developing for quite a while, and which is shown in, for example, his essay on Terrence Malick (Pippin 2013).⁶ In this essay, Pippin offers an interpretation of a striking feature of Malick's film: the juxtaposition of the self-manifestation

of things, beings, captured by the cinematography and the many philosophical reflections in the voice-overs that accompany these images. 'Neither the narrative nor the character development bears the meaning of the film in the significant way that the visual compositions and their related voiced reflections do' (Pippin 2013: 250), Pippin claims, and goes on to argue that there is no metaphysics (Heideggerian, Hegelian or other) in the film that one somehow could construct out of the reflections of the world depicted. The film instead *shows* us how, we could say with the words of this present book, the attempts at grasping the world, or our time, in thought, are just that—*attempts*—and that these always happen within and together with the bestowal of meaningfulness, in the clearing, that goes beyond what is grasped, or in this example, said. The human beings of Malick's film all attempt to think being, by determining it and making sense of it—they are 'doing metaphysics'—as a response to the situations they find themselves in. In the film their different 'vernacular metaphysics' are expressed in the different voice overs, juxtaposed with the abundance of being, life and light, but also violence and terror, that is presented visually. The film hence shows how the attempts at making being intelligible are nowhere close to exhausting what is, being, the source of any temporary, partial, 'vernacular' meaningfulness. Pippin ends his essay on Malick's film thus:

Appropriately, the film closes with three silent images of life (more accurately it ends with three photographs), no voice-over, no music; whatever is to be intelligible will be so (if it is) primarily visually: human, animal, plant [...] Or, the film ends with the question of what it is that we 'see' or can see; what it is that we have seen (Pippin 2013: 275).

In this sense, the film could be said to realize, and perhaps realize better than Heidegger's text, what Pippin wants from a resolute reading—an experience that offers a renewed sense of the meaningfulness of being, that raises lots of questions for thinking, but that thinking cannot exhaust.

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Notes

¹ Abbreviations used:

C = Pippin, R., *The Culmination: Heidegger, German Idealism, and the Fate of Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024).

² The motif of Malte's building is from a passage from Rainer Maria Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* that Heidegger discusses in *Basic Problems*; in this context it means that the Hegelian project is experienced as something that once suggested a possible future, but which is now uncanny in its pastness.

³ The connection is most explicit in the *Black Notebooks* published over the last decade, but some of this sentiment is also visible in Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, a text Pippin turns to repeatedly in *The Culmination*. For a discussion of whether the antisemitism informs, and is not merely compatible with, Heidegger's history of being, see Peter Trawny 2015.

⁴ See several of the later essays in Heidegger 2000.

⁵ A further claim about the shortcoming of Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin: 'The general remarks soon become repetitious, and at that level of generality the promises about the potential weightiness and depth of thought in poetic thinking [...] cannot be persuasive' (C: 208).

⁶ That it is exemplified in an essay on Malick, who is often considered a 'Heideggerian' filmmaker, is probably no accident. Stanley Cavell has written about Malick that he manages to visually realize Heidegger's thoughts about the presence of the meaningfulness of being. Viewing Malick's *Days of Heaven*, we experience something akin to a Heideggerian sense of home: 'one has never quite seen the scene of human existence—call it the arena between earth (or days) and heaven—quite realized this way on film before' Cavell, writes (Cavell 1979: xiv–xv).

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