

Review essay

Finitude and the Possibility of Philosophy

Thinking After Heidegger, by David Wood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002). 224 pp. ISBN 0-7456-1622-4 (cloth), US \$69.95, 0-7456-1623-2 (paper), US \$29.95.

David Wood's rich and provocative discussion of contemporary thought covers a lot of ground. But its central contribution, I think, involves the question of the very possibility of philosophy. In modernity, the first level of this question concerns the possibility of a productive differentiation between philosophy and science. In the analytic tradition, such a differentiation is generally not conceived as a radical questioning of scientific orientations, an interrogation often pursued in continental thought. The latter tradition has even gone as far as questioning the status of philosophy in any of its traditional forms: witness accounts of philosophy's "end," its inseparability from a metaphysics of presence, its conflation with literature, or the diagnosis of its subliminal mastery of otherness. The most compelling part of Wood's book is his call for the continuing possibility of philosophy, although I will soon pose a question about an apparent ambiguity in the text regarding the distinction between "philosophy" and "thinking." At any rate, in the first chapter, Wood argues for the possibility of a philosophical thinking that, while post-metaphysical, can still perform its traditional function of addressing the deepest issues of thought and culture, what he calls an "ultimate context of significance" (p.15), something that is or should be of concern to other disciplines as well. As post-metaphysical, philosophy must be attentive to the "abyss of being," and be able to think the "limits of determination" (p.16), a constraint articulated in this chapter by three basic areas of abyssal limit: language, finitude, and otherness.

Language is a limit because of its intrinsic incompleteness and excess (p. 16). Disciplinary idealizations are illuminating yet restrictive in their selective regions. And the possibilities of language always exceed any current or established actualities. Finitude names the fundamental limit of our "mortal worldly embodiment" (p. 18). And otherness presents limits on my selfhood posed by other selves; here philosophy itself can be ethical in opening up a primal responsiveness to others as a basis for responsibility (pp. 18–19).

While Wood pays due regard to thinkers such as Levinas and Derrida with respect to the force of otherness, it is the work of Heidegger that provides the main orientation for the present study, owing to Heidegger's insistence on the abyssal nature of being and the radical finitude of thinking. Despite attempts by Levinas and Derrida (among others) to tag Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* as continuous with a metaphysics of presence, Wood is right to stress and defend the radical finitude of Heidegger's thought. Finitude, for Heidegger, is not simply an indication of various limits; it names an indigenous negativity in being, where absence or otherness is always part of the meaning of being. For human beings, finitude involves a sense of absence in the midst of presence, an awareness of the pervasive possibility of loss, privation, and death; finitude is also given as the limits on selfhood and dreams of mastery in modern subjectivity, since Dasein's being-in-the-world presents intrinsic elements of thrownness, contingency, encumbrance, and social relations.

In the light of post-metaphysical finitude, Wood, as I read him, argues for the possibility of philosophy that is (1) *self-limiting*, in its awareness of abyssal constraints, (2) *self-confident*, in its affirmation of typical philosophical matters while yet refusing the conflation of philosophy and metaphysics (whether the traditional equation or the post-traditional charge of inescapable complicity), and (3) *self-extending*, in its openness to other disciplines and rejection of privileged status or insulation from wider audiences and different discourses.

Since I find myself sympathetic to Wood's overall analysis, this review will highlight the core question of finitude as it bears on the possibility of philosophy, particularly in view of Wood's defense of Heidegger against charges of complicity with metaphysics. Then I will pose some questions concerning Heidegger's distinction between philosophy and thinking, questions that turn on a feature of Heidegger's early thought not explicitly mentioned by Wood, namely formal indication. In effect, I suggest that Wood's project could have been more clear about whether philosophy, thinking, and concept-formation can travel the same path with a shared means of passage.

Given the abyssal finitude of being, where any determination of form runs up against a de-formation of structure and foundations, the question arises of how to speak of the limit posed by indeterminacy. Given the alterity of finitude, the otherness that limits being, is it simply an extension of the articulation of finitude to talk of in-finity as the abyssal "other" of determinate form? Wood apparently thinks not, and I share his concerns about the problematic language of infinity in some currents of contemporary thought. Regarding Blanchot and Derrida, Wood disputes a tendency to name or intimate an "abyss" at the limit of thought and being. He argues that there can be no abyssal realm as such because it emerges only when attempts at closure are

shown their limitations (pp. 29ff). Perhaps the issue here turns on innocent semantic differences, but I don't think so. There is an important difference between finitude and infinity, and any comfort with the latter term should arouse Nietzschean suspicions about a latent nihilism. When Heidegger speaks of the finitude of being, it is always in terms of the finite being of beings, their *presence* permeated by an absence. Naming the "other" of beings gives us a word like *das Nichts* rather than infinity, and not simply because of a refusal of traditional metaphysical designations of infinity. In my view, "infinity" cannot help but give an elicit "presence" to the absence limiting finite being. Only if "finite" means a *determinate* limit can in-finity sound like the "other" of presence. But since finitude, for Heidegger, is an indivisible mix of presence and absence, an abyssal in-finity can be seen as a flight from finite being rather than an intrinsic limit of and *in* presence. So little is *das Nichts* something apart from beings as something to be thought, it itself is an abyss that *repels*, and through this repulsion, its only significance is that it "nihirates" itself and opens up the being of beings, in that beings are *not* nothing (cf. *What is Metaphysics?*). Yet such language is very abstract, and David's focused discussion of Derrida, Levinas, and Lacan specifies the relevant concerns in an illuminating way.

Early in his book, Wood brings up Derrida's recent deployment of words like "infinite," "absolute," and "impossibility" in ethical discussion inspired by Levinas (pp. 35–36). Wood is troubled by such usage, and with good reason. With his talk of an absolute Other and infinite obligation, Derrida worries about how he can justify feeding his cat while allowing all other cats to starve. Wood wonders why such talk would arise in ethical situations and offers, to my mind, a much more sensible and plausible expression of the finite contexts of ethical concern: "the Good Samaritan of cats does not go looking for starving cats . . . he would feed *any* cat that comes along" (p. 35). Wood is right to notice in Derrida and Levinas a peculiar repetition of a universal obligatory command that has marked a good deal of moral philosophy in the West. Although Derrida and Levinas are working within a post-metaphysical rupture of fixed universals, an infinite alterity can have a comparable effect of bypassing concrete finitude. For Wood, "the ethical bearing of experience" is not "an infinite exposure but a way of comporting ourselves in our necessarily finite engagements" (p. 36).

Later in the book, Wood takes up this theme again (pp. 128–130). While agreeing with Derrida that responsibility "must exceed any prescribable algorithm," he nevertheless persuasively detects in Derrida's appropriation of a Levinasian infinite responsibility the specter of traditional metaphysical sources: the radical impossibility of justification is parasitic on standard criteria of justification as the only "measure" of ethical life; the laudable suspicion

about “good conscience” seems to morph into a disposition duly exposed by Nietzsche, an ethical limit perceived as a guilt that can never be relieved. Wood is right to notice a deep problem here that ironically invites a deconstructive analysis: an ethical humility that masks the hubris of bearing an infinite burden; an account of ethical living that denies situatedness by way of an absent “anywhere” that can never be inhabited (or even rented) – here infinite responsibility echoes the infamous View from Nowhere; and an impossible responsibility that amounts to “deactualizing obligation” (p. 128), when concrete instances of responsibility seem to be deanimated and stained by a truly impossible measure. As Wood says, hospitality would self-destruct if it were “infinite” (p. 128).

When Wood declares that obligation should not be infinite, but rather “indeterminable” (p. 134), I hear an articulation of what I would call *finite* obligation, which is always situated yet *open*, which would not convert the “otherness” in being into a distinct (negative) reference. In effect, Wood has opened up a significant challenge to Levinasian ethics. Despite the importance of Levinas’ thought, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust, its acute sense of the Self-Other confrontation seems, in my view, to harbor a domination in reverse, and to fail the test of Nietzsche’s critique of guilt, resentment, and life denial. Infinite obligation and being “hostage” to the Other seem to be the most elusive, because reversed, version of the psychology of asceticism diagnosed by Nietzsche. The face of the Other is an infinite force that is not exhausted by existing others, a kind of religious claim that exceeds the world and my possibilities, before which I can never measure up. Beyond Levinas’ profound analysis of ethics as the refusal of sameness, what does infinity add? Why this rhetoric?

A Levinasian infinity, which is defined as “otherwise than being,” poses significant ethical problems that can be resolved with a sense of finitude that names an intrinsic otherness *within* being. The difference between infinity and finitude is important, especially for ethics, because finitude, though ever open, never exceeds phenomena. It is hard to understand how the Other as an absolute “enigma” can ever be an issue for me, ever matter to me, unless the Other were in some sense with me and like me. The “situated openness” of finitude allows a dwelling with the Other without consuming it, and without the haunt of religious excess.

With Wood, I think that finite responsibility is preferable to infinite responsibility; the former is responsive yet open, while the latter is “closed” in the sense that the Other, utterly beyond me, presses upon me an *in-capacity* that haunts and demoralizes my responsiveness. With infinity, an otherness *to* presence becomes an absent presence that can never be addressed and that therefore turns humility into a disabling guilt. With finitude, an otherness *in*

presence can never be isolated from addressive relations and so would not countenance a radical guilt that calls my ethical responsiveness *as such* into question.

As I have suggested, infinity can amount to back-door mastery, while Heidegger's sense of finitude rules out mastery in its very structure. When Derrida detects in Heidegger's focus on being a repetition of traditional "master names," Heidegger's reflections are utterly distorted. In this regard, the third and sixth chapters of Wood's book perform an exemplary deconstruction of the charge (in Lacan, Levinas, and Derrida) that philosophy is intrinsically a form of mastery. Despite attempts to locate in Heidegger's philosophy of being a disguised metaphysics of presence or a return of the Same, Wood ably shows how Heidegger is immune to such charges – given, for instance, the function of thrownness in *Being and Time* and especially Heidegger's meditations on language as the disclosive site of the event of being, permeated by concealment, *within* which humans dwell and which therefore cannot be objectified as a target of control. Wood wisely suggests that philosophy is "a discourse that can stage our recognition of the limits of mastery" (p. 36), which is different from blanket condemnations of mastery.

Despite the important and indispensable contributions of deconstruction to contemporary thought, too often in practice it amounts to a hyper-critical reverse-mastery of texts and their presumed projects of closure. The power to disturb any seemingly positive moment in a text can be thrilling (and instructive), but Wood is right to worry about excessive dismissals of positive possibilities in philosophy, especially when philosophical texts have exchanged metaphysical for finite presence. Inspired by Derrida, Levinas, and others, a laudable critique of metaphysical presence can turn into a fixation on *any* intimations of presence in a text, whether in terms of content or form. There arises a fetish about "textuality," where language as such is presumed to be contaminated by presence, and to avoid the traps of presence, a constant vigilance must be practiced with regard to texts *as* texts, in order to expose their dangers.

Such vigilance was certainly a mark of Heidegger's thinking, but it is also true that for Heidegger philosophical language can be world-disclosive, even and especially when language can give voice to the limits of presentative language and thus to the intrinsic finitude of *being* (in the world). I believe that Heidegger's texts, while duly attentive to their performance as texts, were meant to have a world-disclosive force, which can be missed, or suppressed, when texts are read *as* texts or when texts are written about "texts," or when authors feel pressed to apologize for writing in a propositional or treatise form or to play with techniques of ironic self-consumption.

Wood shares some of these concerns and he defends well Heidegger's textual practices from "abyssal" or performative critiques that themselves would have to fall prey to their own complicity with disclosive presence (pp. 102–105). Wood even wonders if Heidegger himself got too caught up in reflexive worries about "representational" hauntings in *BT* and other early writings. Wood asks:

But is Heidegger's worry here justified? If I write a poem about a flower, it need not have the shape of a flower on the page. It need not be made of ink made from flower extracts, etc. Those who treat drug addiction need not be on drugs. The man who drives oxen need not be fat. Why should a philosophical exposition not deploy a similar distance between its own form and the content it describes?

What Wood addresses here is sometimes called the fallacy of the imitative form, the unwarranted notion that a text must somehow mimic or perform according to the matter addressed by the text, especially if the matter involves a manner of presentation. Thus we can be suspicious of the worry that a critique of representational propositions presented in propositional form would undermine itself, and thus would require not simply an apology but playful techniques of self-destabilization, lest the text be called to the carpet for a performative contradiction. Much of current performative criticism amounts to an academic conceit that does little to advance philosophy (but much to advance the production of texts). An obsession with *how* texts perform can disable the force of *what* texts disclose when writing and reading can open up something about the *world*.

Is it possible for philosophy to be productive, to affirmatively pursue disclosive or critical projects and still avoid the traps of naïve representation and essentialist language? Wood seems to think so and this involves a self-transformation of philosophy that embraces finitude and performativity (pp. 166–171). But if performativity is to escape the trap of hyper-textual reflexivity, much needs to be said about how philosophy can be conceived and function in this transformed way. Wood's book has well prepared us for such a discussion, and I want to engage it further by taking up the early Heidegger's manner of addressing this problem by way of formal indication, which Wood's book does not examine but which I think is one of Heidegger's greatest contributions to philosophy. The crux of my questions can be focused in terms of Heidegger's development, which began with a confidence in a revised deployment of philosophical concepts, but which later seemed to renounce conceptual philosophy in favor of a poetical thinking that ventured beyond philosophical language and methods to explore in very different ways the questions animating Heidegger's thought. Given the word "thinking" in

his title, it is not clear if Wood shares in some way Heidegger's eventual differentiation of thinking and philosophy. There are times in the book (pp. 15, 58) when thinking and philosophy, even if distinct, seem to be on a common footing. It is not clear if Wood conceives of thinking and philosophy in more or less the same way; or as different but complementary; or if he follows the later Heidegger's differentiation and yet sees more viable possibilities for a post-metaphysical philosophy than Heidegger did.

Wood indicates (pp. 170–71) that philosophy should be transformed as a performative enactment, as opposed to metaphysics and conceptual representation, which subordinate human comportment toward finitude. He claims that *Being and Time* was working within conceptual representation, but it did show transformative moments with conscience, resoluteness, and being-toward-death. This implies that *BT* was still caught up with traditional models of concepts, but I think that Heidegger's model of formal indication was specifically aiming for a transformation of philosophical concepts along the lines of Wood's analysis.

In *BT*, Heidegger does not offer much discussion of formal indication, yet the implicit importance of this notion for his phenomenology has been made clear by the explicit accounts in lecture courses surrounding the publication of *BT* (relevant discussions can be found in *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, and *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*). For Heidegger, all philosophical concepts are formal indications: formal (*formale*) in being notional gatherings of concrete experiences, and indications (*Anzeige*) in the sense of “pointing-to” factual conditions of life and action that cannot be fully captured in, or exhausted by, formal concepts. Philosophical concepts themselves arise out of factual life experience and then point back to the task of factual enactment. Formal indications are therefore shot through with the finitude of existence and so philosophical concepts cannot be construed as a priori necessary structures or fixed universals that can ground thinking for demonstrative techniques.

It is important to recognize that Heidegger's early phenomenology insists upon both the necessity and the limitations of philosophical concept formation. For Heidegger, “philosophy is something living only where it comes to language and expresses itself,” and the language of concepts is the “essence and power of philosophy.” Yet once expressed, concepts are prone to a fundamental misunderstanding. Because of the reflective “idleness” of philosophy, concepts can be taken as something *vorhanden*, as ascertainable entities in and of themselves, rather than formal gatherings of a “specifically determined and directed questioning” having to do with a “transformation of human Dasein” (FCM, pp. 291–94). The remedy for this problem is to understand formal

concepts as *indications* of the *task* of philosophy that can only be exhibited and played out in life. Traditional philosophy can be diagnosed as fixing on the formal content of concepts without their indicative character.

At any rate, since the essence of philosophy is conceptual language, questions about the possibility of philosophy will include the problem of language in relation to being. Heidegger is at pains to delimit propositional language because it conceals deeper elements of finitude in factual experience – for example, the play of concealment and disclosure at the heart of truth, and the compelling encounters of experience (*Erfahrung*) at the heart of philosophical questions and of being itself. I note Wood's reference to Heidegger's remarks about a powerful, transformative experience animating the question on language (p. 31); also Wood's insistence that even (and especially) with the "alterity" of post-metaphysical thinking, we must be aware of the tension between the *terms* of alterity and the complex dispositions and modes of dwelling that are intrinsically connected with these terms (p. 34). In this way Wood challenges a tendency in post-metaphysical discourse to critique references to "experience" as a perpetuation of subjective or objective foundations (e.g., Derrida). But a turn to "textuality" as a liberation from experiential "grounds" may be casting out the proverbial baby-laden bath water by stripping philosophy of its very life.

The understanding of being is already given to us in ordinary life, and such understanding can certainly do without philosophical ontology. But Heidegger insists that the conceptual articulation of being is possible, even necessary, as the *actualization* of tacit meanings that are implied in common questions arising all the time (What is that? Is that so?) and that are covered up by the heedless familiarity and unquestionable character of everyday understanding. The absence of philosophy is thus the *concealment* of the explicit significance of ordinary life's own deepest matters of meaning. Such is the early Heidegger's confidence in the possibilities of philosophy (duly modified as formal indication), which can give finite illumination of the meaning of being through the *disorienting reorientation* of formal concepts.

Heidegger clearly takes *BT* to be a philosophical work that aims for a *conceptual* grasp of the meaning of being, and yet the difficulty is that such concept formation cannot be restricted to determinations of beings, and so it is to be distinguished from both ordinary concepts and mythological narratives. The famous *Kehre* announcement in "Letter on Humanism" can be understood in the context of my discussion. The "failure" of *BT* is attributed to its *language* and not its underlying project; and the failure was not exactly its language but its participation in the language of metaphysics. He says that the conceptual language of *BT* was attempting a thinking "more rigorous than

the conceptual.” But he came to think that his conceptual language would lead “inevitably into error,” yet not on its own terms but because the concepts were not “rethought” by *readers* according to the particular *Sache* of the work; the concepts were read only “according to the established terminology in its customary meaning.”

Although Heidegger does not say so specifically, it seems clear to me that the *Kehre* in some respects had to do with the failure, not of his early philosophical concepts, but of his effort to have these concepts read as formal indications (as a conceptual language pointing to a “more rigorous” phenomenological apprehension of non-conceptual factual life). Accordingly, one way to understand Heidegger’s account of the “end of philosophy” is his capitulation on the project of formally indicative concepts.

In this light perhaps we can better understand Heidegger’s subsequent path that shifted in the direction of “poetical thinking.” Although poetry and thinking are not identical, they belong together as a reciprocal “Saying” that tries to bring to language the pre-theoretical meaning of human dwelling in a finite world, as well as that which withdraws and conceals itself in the finite advent of being. Even though there is much to be said for the later Heidegger’s turn from philosophy to poetical thinking – especially if, as I think, the later tropes continue in some way on a phenomenological path with a formal-indicative function – nevertheless I see no reason to turn away from philosophical concept-formation and the “logic” of conceptual relations that shape a philosophical “argument.” This is not to countenance what analytic philosophers would be looking for; a typical response to *BT* has been: “Where’s the argument?” Well, *BT* is a beautifully structured and compelling case for a phenomenological interrogation that undermines the primacy of typical argumentative standards, whether they be deductive proof, inductive generalization, or abductive inference to the best explanation. *BT* shows how such standards emerge out of a care-laden life-world pervaded by finitude and incommensurable with determinate starting-points or end-points. Heidegger (like Wittgenstein) performs the difficult task of gathering phenomenological intimations of the non-formalizable background that makes formal philosophy possible. In the end, the answer concerning the possibility of philosophy is that philosophy *is* its possibility, an excess that makes it possible and an interrogative finitude that persists in any of its actualizations. The question that persists regarding Wood’s book involves the ambiguity in his text regarding the relationship between thinking and philosophy. Perhaps I can put my cards on the table in this way: for me, Heidegger’s early philosophical works, roughly ending with *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, lack *nothing* fundamental that would require radical surgery or healing by a transformational path of poetical thinking or especially the epochal dramas portrayed in

Heidegger's later writings. The question, then, is can philosophy survive the critique of metaphysics and still be faithful to finitude in its own specific form of thinking?

Lawrence J. Hatab
Old Dominion University
USA
(E-mail: lhatab@odu.edu)