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The Meaningfulness of Being: What Remains Unthought in German Idealism

Review of: R. Pippin, *The Culmination. Heidegger, German Idealism, and the Fate of Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 2024). 978-0-226-83000-1 (hardback)

FINAL DRAFT

It is striking that Immanuel Kant's views on the mediating role of the imagination in cognition inspired two major opposite strands in the development of post-Kantian philosophy. G.W.F. Hegel, who represents one strand, saw early on in Kant's idea of the productive imagination the seeds for absolute idealism. In *Faith and Knowledge* (1802), Hegel zeroed in on how, for Kant, the imagination acted as the intermediary between our capacities for sensibility and the understanding, and praised Kant for recognizing that the imagination is what connects both at the ground level. According to Hegel, Kant showed that the apparent gap between the givenness of our intuitions of objects in sensibility and the acts of the understanding in our cognitive judgments about those same objects is in fact not indicative of an absolute distinction but is revealed to be what Hegel calls an "absolute identity." This absolute identity is established by the imagination.

The idea of absolute identity comes to play a major role in Hegel's later thought, where he often simply refers to it as the Absolute or the Concept. Already in *Faith and Knowledge* Hegel associates this absolute identity, and the productive imagination that exhibits it, with reason itself and with Being. There is no discrepancy between what we understand something to be and what that something is in itself. Hegel credits Kant with this original insight into the unity of cognition and object, which is conveyed by the role of the imagination in the grounding of cognition. However, at the same time he criticizes Kant for squandering this genuine "speculative" thought by relegating the imagination to merely being the adjutant of the understanding. The imagination becomes a

function of the understanding and mediates between the deliverances of sensibility and our intellectual cognition only insofar as we take these deliverances of sensibility to be subject to the conditions of our intellectual cognition. The understanding thus determines the constraints under which something can be known. The imagination is the means by which something is known, but it is not an independent means. It appears that for Kant – and this is a correct interpretation by Hegel – there can be said to be an identity between our intuitional access to beings and our intellectual cognition only from the perspective of the latter, that is, only subjectively, or only insofar as *we humans* have knowledge of objects. Hence, Hegel's criticism that Kant's idealism remains a subjective idealism. Kant does argue that our cognition is genuinely objectively valid but it is also clear that he stops short of identifying our cognition of objects, and thus how things are for us, with how things are in themselves. For Hegel, Kant relativizes his original insight into the a priori unity of thought and Being to a dependency on the understanding. This is why Hegel thinks Kant's critical idealism is not radical enough, and rather unnecessarily limits reason to the subjective constraints of *human* cognition.

Nevertheless, for both Kant and Hegel there is a close bond between thought and Being to the extent that both take the world of beings to be available in principle for our intelligibility. Hegel goes so far as to think that Being itself is intelligible. As Martin Heidegger aptly puts it in a comment on Hegel's *Logic* in *Pathmarks*, for Hegel the "movement of principles circling within themselves" is "itself the absoluteness of Being" (*Wegmarken*, 465).[1] While he does argue that this idea of the system of principles as Being originates in Kant, Heidegger shows that for Kant, contrary to Hegel, Being can be addressed or determined only to the extent that a necessary distinction between possibility and actuality is made: our understanding can only "*think* an object in its possibility" (*Wegmarken*, 470, emphasis added). To be able to *know* the object "in its actuality" we need to be affected through the senses. Being is determinable only "from positing [*vom Setzen her*] as [an] act of human subjectivity" (*Wegmarken*, 471). In Hegel, this limitation is lifted. Being's intelligibility is no longer relativized to merely human subjects. Hegel in fact radicalizes Kant's insight into the necessary reciprocal relation between thought and object by identifying the absolute identity that lies at the heart of this

[1] *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 9, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976. Translations are mine.

reciprocal relation, Kant's productive imagination, as Being itself – not in any pre-critical, substantivist sense, but in the sense of Being as reason, as pure intelligibility.

Noticeably, as the main protagonist of that other strand of post-Kantianism, Heidegger sees Kant's idea of the productive imagination as a source that might point in the direction of a view that addresses Being as neither relativized to a subject nor identified with pure intelligibility. Unlike Hegel, Heidegger does not have a problem with Kant's approach not being radically "rationalist" enough, as Hegel argued, but rather with it being still *too* "intellectualist," in the sense of relativized to the human understanding. Being is considered by Kant only in the relation "Being and thought," not as such. For Heidegger, Hegel only exacerbates this by *identifying* Being and thought. In his early reading of Kant, Heidegger makes much of the fact that in the A-version of the Transcendental Deduction in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant has not yet identified the power of the imagination with the understanding. It brings to light a way in which Kant can be seen as a thinker who considers our human cognition to be fundamentally dependent on an "attunement," a "disclosure" towards what is given, what is made available to us as cognizers, rather than us being the sole agents that posit Being from within our determinative judgments. For Heidegger, Kant's cognitive finitism is significant, not a systematic flaw, as it is for Hegel. The function of the imagination in the A-Deduction as a self-standing principle of sensibility or intuition provides a possible avenue to opening up a less intellectualist address to Being, or at least that is how Heidegger reads Kant.

These two contrary perspectives originate both in Kant's position in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, more specifically in the Transcendental Deduction, but with each focusing on a different version of that famous argument. Both represent radically divergent developments of a lingering ambiguity in Kant, which is conveyed by the different foci of the A- and B-versions of the Deduction. Nevertheless, for Heidegger, both Kant and Hegel represent a similar metaphysical position in that both their philosophical outlooks are marked by what Daniel Dahlstrom has called the "logical prejudice" in German Idealism (cited by Pippin, 48), not in the sense that they are beholden to a merely formal logic, but in the sense that conceptual thought is considered the paragon of philosophical thinking.

In his rich new book, *The Culmination*, Robert Pippin paints an engrossing and, in my view, convincing picture of Heidegger's reading of German Idealism – mainly Kant and Hegel, and a bit of Schelling, who is sometimes said to be a precursor to Heidegger (Fichte is mentioned only occasionally) – as the "culmination" of a "rationalist" or "logicist" understanding of metaphysics that started with Plato and Aristotle. In Heidegger's view, in this understanding of metaphysics the question of Being, central to Heidegger's own thought, is addressed solely or chiefly in terms of the question of logical or conceptual intelligibility, not in its own right.

In his previous work that focused on Hegel, first in his classic *Hegel's Idealism* from 1989 and most elaborately in his recent captivating account of the *Science of Logic* in *Hegel's Realm of Shadows* (2019), Pippin argued – and, as he shows in his new book, Heidegger concurs with this view – that Hegel is merely the most radical of all the rationalists in claiming an absolute identity of Being and thought insofar as all that can be thought in principle is all that Being can possibly be. To be is to be intelligible, to be knowable (16). Being itself is logos, spirit, or a self-knowing (8). The meaning of Being is taken to be "discursive intelligibility" (9). But this view is based on the Kantian idea that there is a strict reciprocity between the necessary conditions that determine what I can know and the necessary conditions for something *being* the possible object of my cognition. In essence, it is the paradigmatic Kantian adage that "we can cognize of things a priori only what we ourselves have put into them" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxviii). Hegel merely brings this fundamental Kantian principle to its logical conclusion. To put it in Heidegger's terms: what characterizes the Kantian turn encapsulates the "logical prejudice" par excellence, since it shows the completion of a "logocentric" approach to Being in metaphysics, where what is central is what we *can say about* Being.

Heidegger's critique of philosophy, in particular of idealism, is not that of those who argue that there cannot be "pure" thinking, or that there is something else determining pure thinking. Heidegger's thinking is itself in a way a form of "pure" thinking, "in the sense of not empirically guided." Rather, traditional philosophy is "blind" towards itself as thinking and what philosophical thinking "requires" (13). This blindness is not a "simple mistake, a philosophical error that can be corrected by some clarification" (13). Heidegger often talks about "forgetfulness" as a chief characteristic of Western

philosophy, a forgetting of its own requirements. This forgetfulness is central to the question that occupies Heidegger throughout his work, namely the question of the meaningfulness of Being. This question pivots around the idea that the most crucial issue in metaphysics should be the question how Being itself makes itself available, "manifests," or "presences" itself to us and how we care about our being primordially "attuned" to this "presencing" of Being in ways that are not, or at least not primarily, cognitive or conceptual.

In this context, it is interesting to note that, contrary to the standard reading, Pippin emphasizes also the continuity of Heidegger's core idea about the meaning of Being through the so-called *Kehre*: Heidegger does not abandon the analysis of Dasein after *Being and Time*, presumably in favor of an account that centers the history of Being as such. Rather, Dasein's meaningfulness continues to be "mutually" implicated in the meaningfulness of Being as such. Dasein thus remains the focal point of the question of the meaning of Being, for "being's manifestness requires a being *to whom* it is manifest, to whom it can mean something" (27). Things "only matter for Dasein, as uniquely a thrown being-in-the-world" (120).

Pippin dedicates two large chapters to Heidegger's work on the theoretical Kant, and a shorter chapter to Kant's practical philosophy in relation to the theme of finitude. The three main works by Heidegger that are dedicated to Kant, the famed *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* from 1929, the later more critical *The Question Concerning the Thing* based on lectures from the 30s, and the late 1961 essay 'Kant's Thesis About Being' are all analyzed in some detail. Heidegger reads Kant in the light of his own interest in the question of the meaning of Being, and thus he interprets Kant's a priori synthesis as the meaning of Being. The original unity of apperception, "the ego," as Heidegger says in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, is the "fundamental ontological condition of all being" (quoted by Pippin at 82.n2). "The significance of any being ... is its availability as the object of judgments, or positings" (84).

Though Heidegger is right that "objectness in Kant's sense is the primordial meaningfulness of Being" (91), Pippin rightfully brings to light a few oddities in Heidegger's reading of Kant. The unity of apperception is not merely subjective, as Heidegger seems to suggest, but genuinely objective, and Pippin also criticizes an impositionist reading of Kant in that "the deduction is not

about 'stamping' [the forms of the understanding on intuitional content] but about demonstrating that there cannot *be* any intuited content (i.e., any cognitively relevant content) that is incongruent with the required a priori conditions of experience, of empirical knowledge, or, generally cognitive intelligibility" (90). Heidegger tends to equate Kant's view of Being with what is cognitively available for judgment, but, as Pippin points out, for Kant, *cognitive* intelligibility is not even primary. Rather practical intelligibility, what concerns the moral noumenal self, is what is primary. But as Pippin writes referring to his *Basics Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger also understands that "true sense of significance in being human does not for Kant reside in being a knowing subject" (122).

We should be aware that Heidegger is not so much interested in the correct interpretation of Kant (98–100) as in centering the discussion around certain themes that he thinks are foregrounded in Kant, such as an appreciation for the finitude of our cognition. Heidegger frames the Kantian project in such a way that it tallies with his own idea about the "availability of the meaningfulness of being" (99). For one thing, Heidegger insists, controversially, that the *Critique of Pure Reason* has nothing to do with epistemology. While he disputes Kant's core idea that all thinking is judging, he also claims that all thinking is merely in the service of intuition. Heidegger sees the "originary thinking in the uptake of intuitions as the work of the imagination," and not judgment as the primary form of thinking (102). He thereby draws on the account of synthesis in the A-Deduction, where it seems that the synthesis of the imagination, or more precisely the so-called threefold synthesis, is a synthesis that is prior to and independent of the intellectual synthesis on the level of judgment. Heidegger wants to clearly separate out the synthetic activity in the manifold in intuition and any judgmental, conceptually determinate activity. He views the faculty of the imagination as "pre-ontological" since "it is an exercise of a non-discursive nonconceptual imagining" (109). This interpretation makes sense as such an emphasis on the pre-discursive role of the imagination in intuition fits with "Heidegger's own view on our dependence on an original manifestation or meaningful disclosure that cannot itself be the product of thinking" (105). It is however not the case that Heidegger thinks that there is just some sensible intuiting, for "both intuition and understanding

are *derivative* functions, distinguished within an original unity, which is the activity of the imagination" (111).

This is just like the early Hegel's interpretation of Kant's a priori synthesis, with the crucial difference that for Hegel this activity points to reason itself, not to some pre-conceptual meaningfulness or "attunement" to the availability of beings. There is "no role to play for the understanding and intuition conceived as distinct capacities," but in contrast to Hegel, who sees the interdependency between the two as having to do with our fundamentally *conceptual* capacity to take up sensible content as significant, their interdependency rests on "an original imaginative projection of a horizon of possible encounterable beings" (111). The imagination "forms the horizon of availability as such in advance" (114).

As Pippin notes, Heidegger's "emphasis on the imagination in the first edition is a kind of stalking horse for his own claim that a laying of the foundation for a genuine metaphysics must be a '*Daseinsanalytic*'" (115). It is clear that Kant cannot fully fulfill the role, since he "'shrank back' from the implications of his own claim about the imagination" (116), especially with respect to finitude and the question of time. Heidegger also questions the purity of the categories, for if they "can play a role only in the projection of a horizon of 'really possible' objects as modes of time consciousness, then they are dependent on how time is possible, rather than vice versa" (117). Time is paramount, so much so that Heidegger thinks that time "already lies within pure apperception," and so time "first makes the mind into a mind" (quoted at 118). In conclusion, Heidegger thinks that Kant does not carry through the broad metaphysical implication of his own views, and thus in the end remains trapped in traditional metaphysics.

Pippin devotes two long chapters to Hegel, in Section Three of the book. He first rehearses, in a clear and succinct manner, his well-known reading of Hegel. It is here where the central claim of the book comes to the fore most clearly, that Heidegger challenges the "founding principle of Greek metaphysics ... thought through to its culmination in Hegel," namely the idea that "to be is to be rationally intelligible," that "there can *be* nothing alogos, or unintelligible" (141). It is the idea that what matters most to us is the fact that the world "as it matters to us is available *because* of our conceptual and explanatory capacities" (141), that "nothing is in principle unknowable" (143), and the form

under which we know beings in the world is fully determinable. This is what Heidegger criticizes as the priority of logic in traditional metaphysics. For Heidegger, the idealist claim that it is pure thinking which defines the determinability of anything shows an errancy, namely the "unthought" question of "how it is" that anything is at all available for discursive thought (143-4). It is not that Heidegger disagrees with the particular content of Hegel's claims. He rather challenges the idea that the meaningfulness of Being is "originally its knowability," that Being is identical to its cognitive intelligibility, whereby 'cognitive,' in Hegel's case, should be understood as rational, not just intellectual as with Kant (144-5).

Pippin points out that, despite his at times "tendentious" and "quite limited" assessment of Hegel (169), Heidegger's reading of Hegel's is in fact, in its centrality, very accurate in that he faithfully – at least on Pippin's reading of the Hegel of the *Science of Logic*, and I think it is the proper reading, rather than a lot of so-called "objectivist" readings of the *Logic* – characterizes Hegel's main premise that the Concept is giving itself its own content and thus accounts for Being's ground, and that basically this Concept is apperception (163), "thinking thinking thinking" (169), that is, that metaphysics is "everywhere logic" (163). Heidegger and Hegel are in some important sense on the same wavelength: both are concerned with "pure thinking's reflection on its own possibility" (166). The key difference is that, as Heidegger points out, "pure thinkability" cannot be "one of the determinate moments of the Logic." "The 'science of pure thinking' does not and cannot count pure thinking itself as one of its moments" (168-9). The Concept as the intelligibility of *any being* is not something like "Being as intelligibility itself." Put succinctly, the *Logic* cannot itself be included inside the Concept Logic (169). And it is this inescapable fact of logic, this fundamental *difference*, that Heidegger tries to cash in on, a fact that Hegel just assumes for the project of the *Science of Logic*. The question "What is logic?," which for Heidegger is closely intertwined with the question of the meaningfulness of Being, "remains unasked, even unthought" (169).

More concretely, Heidegger claims that Hegel's *Logic* is not "presuppositionless" (177). Hegel has assumed, in the very first move of the *Logic*, that the meaning of beings is our "care" about their discursive determinability: it is an unwarranted assumption about what the meaningfulness of Being amounts to, and it limits the notion of meaningfulness

to "determinate conceptual content" (177). But one could wonder, as Pippin points out, "So what?" Why ask a question that is "irrelevant to [the *Logic*'s] purpose" (178), namely to elaborate the determinate moments of any claim about any being, which completely specify what it could mean for anything to be? Hegel's project is just different from Heidegger's, one could say.

In his essay 'Hegel and the Greeks,' published in *Pathmarks*, Heidegger puts the finger on the central issue in the *Logic*'s first step: supposedly, Hegel "is not able to release *einai*, being in the Greek sense, from the relation to the subject, and set it free into its own essence. This essence ... is presencing, ... an enduring coming forth from concealment into unconcealment. In coming to presence, disclosure is at play" (quoted at 187). By contrast, Hegel argues in the first few paragraphs of the Being section of the *Logic* that pure Being is unavailable for discursive determinability, and hence it is completely identical to Nothing for the generality of Being is such that it dissolves into something that is determinately unavailable, and this is the first step from immediate indeterminacy on the long methodological road of developing all the moments of determinacy of the Concept. But, as Pippin dramatically points out, Hegel "draws exactly the wrong lesson from the unthinkability of Being as such," for, as Heidegger claims, Being's "unavailability *to discourse*" is "precisely the point" (187). The beginning in Hegel's *Logic* is not in fact Being, but already a "discursive differentiation" (187). Hegel cannot properly *think* Being and its "original manifestation" (188) without subjecting it to this principle of discursive thinking.

For Heidegger, we must attempt "a new understanding of thinking – not ratiocinative, discursive or propositional," and avoid thinking of the meaning of Being as having to do with the standing presence of determinable beings which are supposedly "originally available" to discursive cognition (206), the dogmatic assumption of traditional metaphysics to which Kant and Hegel too, despite their revolutionary new way of thinking, are beholden. Such a "new thinking" must be conceived of on the basis of an early Greek notion of truth as *aletheia*, as "unconcealment," rather than as "correspondence" between subject and object (206–7). It is unclear what form such new thinking should in effect take, and in a last chapter entitled "Poetic Thinking?," Pippin considers various attempts by Heidegger in his later work to engage poetry and art as a way of making clear that such a question about the form of a new thinking *ex hypothesi*

cannot demand clear and definite answers. As Pippin notes, making sure that he is clarifying the Heideggerian position, not stating his own, it is "worth taking" Heidegger's claim that "metaphysics as unconditioned thinking on thinking", as Hegel and *mutatis mutandis* Kant conceive of it, is an illusion, "more seriously than it has been" (219).

The Culmination is in many ways also the culmination of Pippin's own development as a thinker in the tradition of German Idealism and beyond. His major monograph from the late 1980s, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, laid the groundwork for his well-known central thesis that Hegel's absolute idealism was not in some way a return to a substantivist metaphysics in the vein of Spinoza, but rather built on Kant's revolutionary change in the way of thinking in metaphysics. The basic Kantian idea is that all our thinking about what there is must be accounted for in terms of our conceptuality as there is no way in which we can point to something presumably more basic outside it for verification. Hegel's contribution to this was that, properly thought through, Being *is* nothing but the set of its conceptually developed determinations. In numerous essays in the years following, some of which were compiled in important paper collections such as *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (1997), *The Persistence of Subjectivity: The Kantian Aftermath* (2005), *Interanimations: Receiving Modern German Philosophy* (2015) and *Die Aktualität des Deutschen Idealismus* (2016), Pippin expanded on this idea and its aftermath and brought it to bear on other thinkers in the German tradition, in particular Heidegger. The latter's relation to Hegel was already the topic of two of these earlier articles, even presented under the section title of "the Culmination." But in a 2005 essay "The Necessary Conditions for the Possibility of What Isn't. Heidegger on Failed Meaning" Pippin presented the outline of a more sustained reading of Heidegger's problematic of the meaningfulness of Being that now finds its expanded, definitive version in *The Culmination.*

However, I think it would be a mistake to read the book as Pippin's own *adieu* to German Idealism, or to Hegel in particular. Heidegger's philosophy is not a competitor to German Idealism. Nor is it a question of an exclusionary choice of either subscribing to the one or the other. Such a reading betrays a much too simplistic approach to philosophy. What Pippin has amply shown in *The Culmination* is that there is an almost necessarily conceptually or

reflectively uncapturable aspect of German Idealism, of rational metaphysics or philosophy in general for that matter – hence "the fate of philosophy" in the subtitle – that Heidegger attempts to disclose in his account of the question of the meaning of Being. This question is not the traditional philosophical question about what there is, or what kinds there are, or what the necessary conditions of knowledge are, etc. It concerns rather the question about intelligibility as such, how it is the case that sense is made of anything in the first place, or why sense-making matters or indeed that there is the concrete possibility of radical failure of meaning. Unlike the German Idealists, Heidegger's thought is not concerned with mapping out a priori transcendental or conceptual conditions for such sense-making or its failure. Rather, the sense making happens, and it is *this* that cannot in its turn be made sense of in a conceptual *logic* of sense. The happening of sense making can be reflected upon in such a logic, but the happening itself is not reflectively grounded. The fact of the mattering of the logic is not itself part of the logic.

In his critique of Hegel, Heidegger draws attention to an ineradicable limit of absolute idealism, not because of any inherent *logical* flaw, or failure of conceptual account-taking, but because it presupposes its own significance that must remain unthought. With *The Culmination* Pippin has impressively shown what this limit entails for our understanding of German Idealism and indeed for philosophy in general.[2]

[2] Thanks are due to Gabe Gottlieb, as editor for *Marginalia Review of Books*, and Christian Onof for their helpful suggestions for improvement.