

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# CHRONICLING THE POST-KANTIAN EROSION OF NOUMENA

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**Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World. A History of Continental Antirealism*, Evanston (IL), Northwestern University Press, 2007, ISBN 0-8101-2380-0.**

What makes Lee Braver's *A Thing of This World* a truly impressive achievement is its rare ability to perform many different roles and to succeed in fulfilling its many goals. In the first place, it is a detailed reconstruction of the evolution of anti-realism through the last three centuries of continental philosophy. Secondly, it is aimed at bridging the gap of incomprehension between analytic and continental philosophers by offering a lucid, meticulous reconstruction of the thought of major figures of the continental tradition, namely Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida. Braver facilitates the access to their texts by explaining jargon and elucidating background assumptions, seeking to demonstrate 'to analytic philosophers that, once the context has been clarified and the vocabularies explained, continental philosophers have been working on topics that they can easily recognize as philosophical and of great concern to them' (6). Third, and regardless of its explicit aims, this book is a paradigmatic example of how to compose a text on the history of philosophy: Braver's exposition is constantly and painstakingly accompanied by an impressive amount of textual references (and he often addresses the reader to more relevant passages not quoted). Such a heavy reliance on citation does not distract from the quality of the exposition, for they are never employed as explanatory shortcuts; on the contrary, the scrupulous attention given to the textual sources reveals the careful (and intellectually honest) exegetical method that Braver employs throughout. Indeed, his mastery of both major and minor works of the philosophers he analyses is impressive, the more so if paired with his familiarity with the

most influential works of secondary literature and with his frequent reference to texts from the analytic tradition.

In order to facilitate his or her path across the examined texts, Braver furnishes the reader, in the first pages of the book, with a point-by point breakdown of the two ‘matrices’, realist and antirealist. Braver singles out six central tenets which characterize a ‘realist’ matrix (from R1 to R6) and another six to sketch an antirealist one (from A1 to A6).<sup>1</sup> To give the reader an idea of this taxonomy, R1 entails the existence of mind-independent entities and A1 argues for the necessary correlation of entities and thought while R6 entails a realism of the subject, the belief in a singular and identifiable locus of subjectivity and A6 plurality of the subject points to ways in which such a subject gets disseminated, historically constituted or downright erased. Some brief comments on these matrices are necessary. The idea of codifying a certain number of precepts which any ‘realist’ or ‘antirealist’ follows might at first seem to present problems: such a generalization might make it problematic to assert that a ‘realist’ has to accept all the six tenets to be a card-carrying realist, some of the six positions could be argued to be redundant, or—on the other extreme—it could be argued that they do not adequately cover all the possible nuances of a realist position. However, these objections would miss the point: Braver, consistent with his respectful method of interpretation, does not simply formulate the various ‘Rs’ and ‘As’ in arbitrary fashion, in order to then impose them on the selected authors, constraining their positions and simplifying the nuances of their thought into pre-fabricated categories. On the contrary, these lists were populated through careful examination of the texts (Braver indeed offers a brief ‘sample quote’ for each of the various points of the matrices) as a way of offering a quick blueprint to the fundamental nodes of their argumentation which a close reading of their work will unveil.<sup>2</sup>

Before directly approaching the history of continental antirealism, Braver dedicates the opening chapter to an exposition of realism, anchoring his explanation in the major, foundational figures of the analytic tradition. He therefore refers to Russell’s innovative integration of logico-mathematical reasoning with classical empiricist epistemology in the pursuit of pure, impersonal observations of logical relations and to G.E. Moore’s rejection of any form of idealism as part of that ‘revival of realism’ which will create

1. The full list is, for the Realism Matrix, R1 Independence, R2 Correspondence, R3 Uniqueness, R4 Bivalence, R5 Passive Knower, R6 Realism of the Subject; while for the Anti-Realism Matrix, A1 Mind-Dependence, A2 Rejection of Correspondence Truth, A3 Ontological Pluralism, A4 Rejection of Bivalence, A5 Active Knower, A6 Plural Subject.

2. It could be noted that the two matrices are, necessarily, slightly asymmetrical. A realist might require more or less points to do justice to his or her position, but in general an agreement can be easily reached regarding each *single* point (say a standard definition of what R2 correspondence truth, or R1 ‘mind-independence’ precisely entail). On the other hand the points of the anti-realist matrix can be more loosely defined: there can be different degrees of A1 mind-dependence, different conceptions of truth all A2 rejecting correspondence and so on. Indeed, some of them are only negatively named by Braver (as ‘rejection of’ a realist point) and he succinctly notes that ‘anti-realism is *not* whatever realism *is*’ (13). Such an ‘intrinsic looseness’ of the antirealist points is of great consequence for the philosophies of the authors Braver examines, which will often find their *differend* on slight but crucial modifications of the same antirealist tenets.

the foundation of analytic philosophy. Notably, in this section Braver identifies one key characteristic capable of exemplifying the different comportment towards philosophy of analytics and continentals: the ‘differing attitude to history and the history of philosophy in particular’ (29). Contrary to many of the stereotypical representations of the split (such as that of clear and commonsensical analytic philosophy versus obscure and irrationalistic continental philosophy) the divergent views on history can be reasonably grounded. The ‘scientific’ mould within which early analytic philosophy was modeled, with its emphasis on progress and the separation of the necessary and true from the contingent produced an hostility towards history and its unjustified introduction into matters of metaphysics and epistemology. On the other hand, since Hegel’s approach to philosophy, the continental tradition has always placed special emphasis on both history and on the historical developments of the tradition itself. This created a gap in both content and language: not only will an analysis and recognition of history always be part of continental thought, but

[s]ince continental philosophers incorporate others’ thought so deeply into their own, reading one without the background knowledge of the other figures he or she is responding to can be baffling, like eavesdropping on the middle of an extended conversation (30).

It is such a conversation which Braver intends to introduce the reader to, following the specific thread of antirealism.

Indeed, the central idea which guides the book as a whole could be thus stated: to reconstruct the history of continental antirealism amounts to tracing the fundamental concern of the tradition as a whole, and the very issue over which the continental and analytic division occurred in the first place, emerging through a close reading of continental texts. Braver’s aim, however, is more than the historical reconstruction of a schism, but an attempt at showing how the contemporary fundamental concerns of the two fields can be traced back to a common origin: only by doing so can the necessary terrain for a dialogue be identified. Braver is explicit in his advocacy of a *rapprochement*:

Having studied both traditions and found genuine wisdom in both, I consider this contemporary split detrimental to philosophy as a whole...The idea that one must choose between analytic and continental philosophy should and I think will become as obsolete as what were once regarded as the urgent and inescapable decisions between rationalism or empiricism, Augustine or Aquinas, Plato or Aristotle. The better resolution of the situation is not mutual ignoring and ignorance, but a dialogue between the two branches in which each sifts through the resources of the other to find elements that address issues of interest as well as add new topics, and each deploys its own strengths to highlight and criticize the other’s unnoticed presuppositions and biases (4-5).

In order to proceed towards such a dialogue, Braver locates a common origin in the revolutionary work of Immanuel Kant. In Braver’s narrative, Kant’s philosophy informs the first of the two great ‘paradigms’—a term loosely interpretable in a Kuhnian sense, as representing a set of fundamental assumptions guiding the work of all philosophers—

of continental anti-realism (overturned only by Heidegger's late work and the inauguration of a new paradigm), and was the source of the analytic-continental divide.

### THE KANTIAN PARADIGM

Kant's revolutionary move, the radical break with the previous tradition of metaphysical realism, is the founding gesture of continental philosophy. Kant's critical enterprise, aimed at reconciling the contemporary split between rationalism and empiricism and at re-grounding philosophy on a new understanding of the relationship between subject and object, takes the shape of a denial of the knowability of the external world (via a split between phenomena and noumena) and a turn of focus to the active role of the knowing subject (via the constitutive role of transcendental subjectivity). Kant's position therefore implies that '[w]e do not find the order of (phenomenal) nature; we make it' (35). Kant overturned the commonplace acceptance that our cognitive faculties have an influence on the perception of the external world: if to the pre-critical realist this was an impediment to perfect knowledge, Kant makes it the only condition of possibility for any knowledge whatsoever. No more a contemplator of the order of Nature the subject was now the source and manufacturer of that order, while the *dinges-an-sich* became exiled out of the sphere of knowledge, in a rarefied metaphysical world where human reason could not legitimately dare to tread. Braver argues that: '[t]he subject is ontologically primary in that it constitutes the form of the phenomenal realm; Kant's adherence to what I am calling A5 Active Knower is the linchpin of his revolution' (38). Offering the first 'systematic alternative to realism' the Kantian Paradigm 'consists in a single type of transcendental subject forming components of reality which are then known in the same way by everyone' (57).

Braver's narrative (one that I can sketch here only at the price of substantial simplification) follows the evolution of this paradigm, an evolution of increasing abandonment of its realist vestiges: in the first place the mind-independent (yet inaccessible) noumenal realm. So Hegel's philosophy is presented by Braver as precisely 'one enormous *Aufhebung*' (60) of Kantian thought, the first step in what Braver defines the 'erosion of noumena' (79) accompanied by his casting of subjectivity into the flow of historical change and his complete formulation of objective idealism by erasing any distinction between objective knowledge and subjective knower. At the other end of the antirealist matrix, Nietzsche's main contribution and modification to the Kantian Paradigm is identified by Braver in his dissolution of subjectivity into multiple subjects and battling wills to power and in his tenacious vouching for a creative freedom from a correspondence theory of truth.

### THE HEIDEGGERIAN PARADIGM

The part of the book dedicated to Martin Heidegger is divided into two chapters, dealing with the early Heidegger and the later Heidegger in turn.<sup>3</sup> Braver justifies this choice

3. I should note that, counting 178 pages, these two chapters make up an incredibly detailed reconstruction of the trajectory of Heidegger's thought, one which could be easily be published as a stand-

by individuating in Heidegger's *Kehre* a crucial distancing from what remains of the Kantian paradigm and the creation of a new, Heideggerian paradigm, still at work today. The thought of the early Heidegger represents a transitional phase, still battling with the remnants of the Kantian paradigm: Heideggerian *Dasein* still betrays a 'realist conception of the subject' and presents a structure that is still 'permanent and universal'. Part two of the book however presents a Heidegger now genuinely articulating 'the first genuinely non-Kantian position in the continental tradition' (253): the previous thinkers, and early Heidegger himself, were able differently to dispense with noumena, but remained burdened with some sort of 'functional identity which remains constant throughout external historical change' (258). It is only via a profound meditation on his idea of *aletheia* (already present in embryo in *Being and Time*) that Heidegger manages to break free of the Kantian paradigm and of dispatching with any stability—of noumena and of subjectivity—via the discovery of the epochality of being. According to Braver '[i]n his later work, Heidegger places everything within history; there is nothing essential and self-same that transcends historical change' (260). The omnipresence of history, '[p]erhaps the single most important difference between Heidegger's two phases' (261), informs his tracing the 'destiny' of being and, together with his understanding of man and Being as mutually interdependent, allows Heidegger to envision a new kind of subject as 'wholly constituted...in so various ways by...different historical conceptual schemes' schemes of which the subject cannot be 'their constitutor...they derive upon man and world alike' (340-341). Such is the core feature of the new Heideggerian paradigm. It is in this second part of the book that Braver starts to put forward more forcefully his more speculative side and where his interpretative choices are more ambitious.

Braver pursues the post-Heideggerian development of this new paradigm in two major figures of continental antirealism: Foucault and Derrida.<sup>4</sup> Braver claims that Foucault is 'best read as a disciple of Heidegger' (427) and therefore presents his project of the genealogical reconstruction of the history of truth (culminating in his diagnosis that truth is 'a thing of this world', a sentence that Braver borrows for titling the book), and the effects that this evolution of truth had on historical constitutions of subjectivity, as taking place within the Heideggerian paradigm. A final section titled 'Post' is dedicated to Derrida to indicate the French thinker's liminal position (justified both by his radically non-systematic philosophical production and his being still temporally too close to us to fully judge the long-term influence of his work). Derrida is presented as still under the powerful influence of Heidegger and yet representing a simultaneous closure and

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alone monograph on Heidegger and antirealism. Indeed, if the long shadow of Kant serves as a solid background to Braver's work, it is the late Heidegger who is the real protagonist of his narration, given that, according to Braver, the absolutely crucial and powerful influence of his paradigm still conditions contemporary continental philosophy.

4. I would like to stress the formula I just used '*major figures of continental antirealism*'. By no means are these two philosophers the only figures of post-Heideggerian antirealism, nor are they the only major figures of continental philosophy. The impressive breadth of the book, and Braver's insistence that its theme is the central concern of continental philosophy might mislead the reader: *A Thing of This World* remains a history of antirealism, but this is by no means the *only* position in this tradition.

overcoming of his paradigm, rejecting (*contra* both Heidegger and Foucault) the existence of both diachronic *and* synchronic conceptual schemes and ‘grounding’ his philosophy on the inescapable free play of these schemes and on the quasi-transcendental role of *différance*.<sup>5</sup>

In the conclusion, Braver returns to Kant, presenting once again the guiding hypothesis of the book: Kant as the common ground between the analytic and continental tradition. His most interestingly speculative claim is that the two traditions emerge from an internal dichotomy within Kant’s system:

My claim is that continental thought follows the spirit of his epistemology, while analytic thought follows the practical (which is rather ironic, given analytic philosophy’s emphasis on epistemology and continental’s insistence on the ubiquity of the ethical). Continental thought embodies the spirit of Kant’s theoretical work: we are essentially finite beings conditioned by forces beyond our control, and the job of philosophy is to help us understand these, not overcome them; there is nothing beyond them. Analytic philosophy takes up the ethical ethos: although we may be conditioned by accidental features, philosophy uses reason to pierce these conditions so that we can find truth which escapes their influence. (501-502)

Ultimately, Braver presents continental philosophy as a constant struggle with human finitude and the way contingent factors therefore influence subjectivity and the practice of philosophy itself. On the other hand, the analytic tradition was begotten by the ambition of pure rational thought to escape existential finitude and grasp truth- and things- ‘in themselves’.

Concluding, I must stress that so far I have been able to delineate only the bare bones of Braver’s argumentation. The historical reconstruction of the thought of the five philosophers herein analyzed and the textual analysis of their work operated in the five hundred plus pages of *A Thing of This World* are able to put an outstanding amount of flesh on these bones. If pushed to find an avenue for criticism (for no review is complete without one, or so our academic *mores* impose us to find) I would argue that Braver’s goal to uncover a common ground on which the two philosophical traditions to meet remains unsettled. Braver’s brilliant presentation of continental antirealism, carried forward with constant parallels drawn with exponents of the analytic tradition,<sup>6</sup> is surely able to construct a ‘commensurable vocabulary’<sup>(5)</sup>, but I would question how much this channel of communication will foster interchange and reconciliation rather than laying down, even more clearly, reasons for radical disagreement.

5. The chapter dedicated to Derrida has the particular value of being able to present a philosopher notoriously disparaged by the analytic tradition as being a virtual charlatan in an extremely clear and relevant way. Importantly, Braver repeatedly insists on the extremely strict standards of exegetical rigor which Derrida meant his deconstructive project to follow, in a close, intimate conversation with the entire history of continental philosophy.

6. Particularly noteworthy examples of this practice are a long section dedicated to a Heideggerian critique of Davidson’s positions on meaning and interpretation and an opposition between Frege’s project of creating an ideal logical language and the Derridean iterability of signs. More than this, Austin, Dummett, Goodman, Putnam, Quine and Wittgenstein all make regular appearances, employed as explicatory counter-examples.

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*A Thing of This World* is quite simply a magisterial piece of scholarship. The analytical depth and clarity of Braver's discussion of single philosophers allows the relevant chapters to be employed as both precious resources for research (and Braver hand-picked an authentic goldmine of vital quotations) and an excellent introduction for students.<sup>7</sup> On top of everything, Braver's narrative of the evolution of continental antirealism should be welcomed as an overdue and clear exposition of often enigmatic positions on the analytic side and a never redundant exercise in self-understanding by that of continental philosophy.

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7. Having to pick one, I believe that the chapter on Foucault would probably be the best single place for a student to start understanding Foucault's relationship with Heidegger and the organic evolution of his own thought throughout the decades, something especially necessary for a thinker like Foucault who is largely employed as a theoretical resource outside of philosophy departments.