

1999

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Recommended Citation

Schalow, Frank. "Inheriting the Earth: The Memory of Tradition," *Research in Phenomenology*, 29 (1999): 226-232.

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Inheriting the Earth: The Memory of Tradition

Stephen H. Watson. *Tradition(s). Refiguring Community and Virtue in Classical German Thought*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. xiv + 311 pp. Index.

Heidegger once remarked that “strife among thinkers is a ‘lover’s quarrel’ concerning the matter itself.”¹ Perhaps this is the best way of characterizing a praise whose deepest tribute lies in criticism. Indeed, I have the highest praise for the project that Stephen Watson undertakes in *Tradition(s)*. If I have occasional doubts about its execution, they do not lie either in disputing Watson’s scholarly precision (which is quite remarkable) or his mastery of key texts. On the contrary, my goal is to trace a matrix of issues that might otherwise be lost to the reader in the author’s inordinate attention to detail.

I

In simplest terms, Watson explores the origin of tradition, its emergence as a theme of philosophical interest. There is, however, an important presupposition that guides his inquiry. For Watson already lives within a tradition that can address its possibility, its historical genesis according to an inherited *logos* from “continental philosophy” (xi). Given that we are alert to the many permutations of our tradition, we might ask: what are its constitutive elements? This question presupposes the inquirer’s facticity, which orients each of us toward our historical situation.

As the preceding indicates, we cannot detach ourselves from tradition in order to examine it; the very thrust of philosophizing in behalf of tradition—from Dilthey to Heidegger, from Hegel to Gadamer—lies in resisting this move toward objectification and instead emphasizing the radical historicity of philosophy as such. Nevertheless, we must still select the mode of discourse that allows us to undertake a critical encounter (*Auseinandersetzung*) with the past. In this spirit, Watson attempts to recollect tradition, where a revival of the Greeks (*Mnemosyne*) provides a clue to the discourse in play. No doubt there is an ironic meaning to the subtitle of Watson’s book: “Refiguring Community and Virtue in Classical German Thought.” Classical German thought includes not only the golden age of German culture—from Hegel to

Hölderlin, Kant to Goethe, Schelling to Schlegel. For Watson also acknowledges that those who have reached the pinnacle of German philosophy have done so by renewing a dialogue with the greatest sources of Greek culture—from Sophocles to Socrates, Anaximander to Aristotle, Parmenides to Plato.

Whatever strategy we employ to describe tradition, we must characterize it in dynamic terms. Tradition is never simply the claim of the past or its by-product, the sediment of convention. As Watson suggests, there is a “twofold gesture” by which the “destruction” of what has been permits its future appropriation and the criticism of the past facilitates its subsequent rediscovery in new possibilities (3). He employs Heidegger’s locution “reciprocal rejoinder” (*Erwidern*) to describe the inheritance of a legacy that we transform (83), an endowment that we preserve only by transmitting it to successive generations. We may think of tradition as imposing constraints upon us. But because it recalls us to our origins, which harbor the fecundity of all that is possible, tradition also implies innovation. Echoing Gadamer, Watson argues that tradition survives only by reconfiguring its wealth of meanings, nurturing allegory, and symbol in order to reinscribe the significance of our origins in increasingly innovative and provocative ways (61).

Are we then to conceive tradition polyvalently as the gathering together of diverse individuals who share a common heritage, or monolithically as the priority of the group over the individuals participating in it? Herein lies the question that marks the ambiguity pervading Heidegger’s account of historicity in *Being and Time*. For Watson, the inquiry into tradition must uphold its plural expressions, the manifold avenues of its appropriation. The bonds that join human beings together and give them a common identity must be infused by a regard for diversity. A community’s search for a “common good” must inculcate what ancient philosophers originally described as the excellence of character or “virtue.” The crossing of these two axes for determining the good—the personal and the communal—marks the turning point of contemporary thought. Watson outlines this *chiasmus* in the first part of his book.

In the second part, Watson considers Kant’s attempt to redefine the tension between theory and praxis, to reestablish reason’s role in articulating the presuppositions of ethical and political governance. Kant’s thought becomes pivotal in providing a method for addressing the individual’s relation to community, the balance between freedom and law, and the possibility of political judgment. “Doubtless, moreover, nothing was more problematic for theoretical modernity, as Arendt realized, than [Kant’s] combining the inheritance of Augustinian free will, the ancient narratives of human origin and foundations, and the determinate certainties of the new sciences” (91). Yet despite his commitment to the Enlightenment program of reason, Kant is not simply a rationalist. As Watson emphasizes, the genius of Kant’s methodology, of his “Copernican turn,” lies in introducing a hermeneutic element into the critique

of reason. The trace of this hermeneutic movement becomes most evident in Kant's appeal to schematism, to the creative power of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), as well as the centrality of reflective judgment in the third *Critique*. As is well known, Kant places a premium on human finitude. Hermeneutics points to the process of transcribing the meaning of formal principles of reason—most notably those defining a concept of the good—within the cultural and temporal, factual and historical nexus of human experience.

In Kant's emphasis on the temporal schema of the cognitive self in theoretical reason, and in his appeal to the unconditioned character of moral self-consciousness in practical reason, there arises a tension that vibrates across every aspect of Critical philosophy. This tension "de-stabilizes" the Kantian text, so as to create the opportunity for Heidegger to undertake a radical retrieval of transcendental philosophy. As Watson indicates, Kant reconciled the split theoretical and practical reason by developing a "typic" of moral judgment for the latter to parallel the schema of cognitive judgments found in the former. Just as cognitive concepts must be fleshed out through a corresponding empirical intuition, so moral concepts require the introduction of a "symbolical" content to specify their application to the domain of factual decisions. Because the "schematizing" of moral principles can only be indirect, their content becomes determinate through a reciprocal implication between the author of the moral law (i.e., reason) and the historical embodiment of the moral agent as a member of a community and culture. This self-implicatory relation entails the curvature of hermeneutic thinking, which alone can reconnect formal principles with their exemplification in concrete instances. As Watson shows with great lucidity, "the problem of significance" cannot "be excluded from the concept of morality" (120).

Like all hermeneutics, here too the presumptions of rational obligation need not be vicious. It is precisely this possibility which is at stake in the claim which radically broke with Western thought that "Pure reason of itself (*für sich*) can be and really is practical," privy to a domain to which it alone has access and which it justifies "otherwise"—again, not by abandoning either law or nation, but precisely in this hermeneutic venture that, conjoining principles, interpretation, and narrative, refigures them in the retrieval Kant marks in the "schematism" of analogy itself. (120)

To retrieve the problem of schematism within a hermeneutic context is itself an illustration of the "reciprocal rejoinder" that Watson identifies as the crux of tradition.

In Part 3, Watson examines German idealism's attempt to rejoin the realms of freedom and nature, given their separation in Kant's Critical philosophy. But just as Kant saw that how one delimits these realms holds the key to morality, so subsequent German idealists rediscovered the self-animating facet of nature as symbolic of the dynamism of moral character. As modern thinkers, Fichte and Schelling refer back to the Greek concept of virtue as the fruition

of those qualities that make us human, the transcribing of human potentiality in accord with the movement of the universe—the harmony of the spheres. “Doubtless in this regard the speculative legacies of German Idealism remained divided between the ‘excess’ of nature upon which it relied and the allegories through which freedom might ultimately be liberated. But it did so perhaps in venturing a virtue through which the jointure of freedom and nature need not be dissolved, precisely in the recognition that their appropriations remains always at risk, always expropriated” (204). For example, because of his orientation to the Greeks, Schelling could reconcile the transcendent power of divine love with the immanent power of human freedom. Love arises to breach the chasm created by its opposite, or hate, in an analogous way that good does for evil. Just as the brilliance of light illuminates the darkness, so freedom as the self-legislation of law supplants the personal craving of the will. Love reemerges as the factual embodiment of the *logos*, the gathering together of individuals into a community, the birth of a communal spirit that redefines the self through its reciprocity for the other.

In Part 4, Watson considers the philosophical challenge posed by the rise of the individual in modern thought, the “refiguring” of the self insofar as its social identity comes into question. Where the ancients sought a balance between self and society, the modern age creates an imbalance that requires doubling the question of “who am I?”: an individual existing within a social network, a *polis* that must reserve a place for the ex-centricity of the self. According to Watson, Hegel occupies the forefront of this quandary, insofar as his thought chronicles the history of human consciousness as well as develops a dialectical method to address the two-pronged identity of the self. Hegel views the self in tragic terms, where tragedy in the modern world resets the boundaries of character and virtue in accord with the ebbs and flows of human history. “Thus by articulating modern individuality as a world-play of conflicts between individuals rather than eternal forces, Shakespeare becomes for Hegel the tragedian of the everyday, of civil society or ‘the system of the ethical order, split into its extremes and lost’—and thereby, the passage between the ancients and the moderns” (226). Given his archaeology of the Western tradition, I applaud Watson for recovering the importance of “classical German thought.” For he shows how the contemporary turn to the priority of the “other” arises from a previous skepticism about the identity of the self. Indeed, we can rediscover the roots of our ethical situation only by preserving the question of the self even while addressing the uniqueness of the other.

II

In raising questions about Watson’s work, I must temper my remarks by the possibility that they might be answered in his sequel. For the preceding only constitutes “the first of two books that comprise a series of studies organized

around the theme of the origin and significance of the concept of tradition in recent continental philosophy" (xi). Whenever we consider the concept of tradition and matters political, we eventually confront the issue of law, the precepts of social governance. What is the origin of law? Does it emerge exclusively in time, or does it have an eternal ground? Is the law governing the interaction among human beings within a *polis* purely a product of convention, or is some other factor beyond that of culture operative, whether from nature or even from a divine providence? The more explicitly the concept of tradition comes to the forefront, the more history establishes the parameters of the *polis* as exemplified in the transition from Hegel to Heidegger, the more vexing the preceding questions become.

The radical historicity of our age unfolds along two distinct axes: 1) nihilism, which eclipses our relation to an "origin" and hence overshadows any attempt to uncover the birth of community and virtue from tradition, and 2) technology, whose adverse effects reveal our vulnerability in such a way that the more we try to control them the more enslaved we become. In this destitute time, the nomenclature for determining the law becomes twisted, because the appeal to goodness is disguised in a semantics of power. The more the law protects specific power interests among groups and individuals, the greater is the risk that lawlessness will prevail. As the law of convention fails, a sense of uprootedness predominates. But to counter this uprootedness, we cannot seek comfort in divine intervention, in the stability of norms based on eternal providence. For the thrust of nihilism, its untimely timeliness, is that once the "old gods have fled" there must be a period of incubation before the "new gods arrive." The paradox of radical historicity is this: the growing awareness of the importance of tradition that history provides simultaneously challenges our acceptance of perennial beliefs and guidelines. Ironically, the concern for tradition that would bestow upon us a sense of rootedness also alerts us to a vision of history that points to our current uprootedness. In this regard, Watson's portrait of tradition may be, to paraphrase Nietzsche, too "domesticated," too bound to the constancy of the present versus the strife of *Augenblick*.

Insofar as German idealism reconfigures the present in an eschatological form, whether as the fulfillment of a divine plan or the advance of human history, a clash between the ideal and the real becomes inevitable. Hegel chastised Kant for relegating the "ought" to an ideal kingdom of ends, and countered by maintaining that the content of the good must be exhibited within the historical context of a *Realpolitik*. But it was Nietzsche who saw that Hegel's way of reconciling the ideal and the real still upholds the promise of history's consummation, the complete presence of Absolute Spirit that reflects anthropocentric desires—the glorification of a "true world." The more we pattern our sense of justice on such anthropocentric paradigms, the more the political regimes based upon them yield to the power interests of technology. And the more uprooted civilization becomes despite its rational principles, the

greater is the need for another determination of law that can foster a sense of rootedness and yet safeguard the pluralistic appropriation of tradition that Watson seeks (249).

How to characterize such a law, as well as its jurisdiction, remains rather indefinite. Such a law is not simply inherent in nature, although it would sanctify our way of "belonging to the earth." Nor is the law only cultural, although it upholds the transmission of heritage(s) from one generation to the next. German idealism establishes its own economy of lawfulness by seeking in the presence of Absolute Spirit the simultaneous harmonization of all juridical realms—of nature and spirit, necessity and freedom, subterranean and Divine, pagan and Christian. But the events of the twentieth century, at least from a political standpoint, suggest the fracturing of that economy.

Toward the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel remarks that the field for the self-externalization of Absolute Spirit or nature is space, while history provides the occasion for Spirit's "kenosis" or its emptying itself into time.² But how does the self-unfolding of time redistribute space according to its configuration as a locale, which allows for the possibility of dwelling or inhabitation? How can the *polis*, given its historical genesis and development, provide for the allocation of space in a way that instills a sense of dwelling and restores our way of belonging the earth (197)? For the Greeks, the *polis* includes this dynamic of spatiality as conjoined with temporality in a manner which still speaks to humanity's earthly inhabitation. But with the uprootedness of the modern era, space and time configure different realms of beings, nature and culture, necessity and freedom. Though Kant and Fichte, Hegel and Schelling, seek to restore the unity of these domains, they leave unthought the reciprocity between space and time.

In his later writings, Heidegger coordinates time and space (*Zeit-Raum*) in such a way as to acknowledge the contribution of each in unfolding the ecstatic realm of being's unconcealment. In criticizing technology's drive "to use the earth," he emphasized our need "to receive the blessing of the earth [in order] to become at home in the *law* of this reception."³ If we are to understand tradition anew as well as the law prevailing within it, we must "step back" from the idealistic tendency to divorce space and time and seek instead their reciprocal determination. Heidegger teaches us that we must continue to question being if we are to make headway in addressing ethical and political matters. Just as he may be criticized for underestimating the importance of these inquiries, so we cannot ignore the topography of thought in reexamining the issue of praxis. Accordingly, a sharper demarcation of the relation of theory and praxis remains an open possibility as Watson continues to crystallize the themes of his provocative investigation (240).

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