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Review of Lee Braver: A Thing of this World

A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism. Northwestern University Press. 2008. 590+xxi pp.

It was in 1963 that Michael Dummett first formulated the jointly epistemological and semantic terminology of "realism" and "anti-realism." With it, he sought to bring into focus the issue of whether truths in a particular domain are to be understood as exceeding, and in principle independent of, the means actually used to establish or demonstrate them (the "realist" position) or whether such truths could only be conceived as correlative to, and extending no further than, those means (the "anti-realist" one).¹ Although Dummett had in mind the application of the framework only to specific problems and regions, analytic philosophers such as Devitt, Davidson, and Putnam subsequently expanded the terminology to larger and more domain-independent questions of general ontology, epistemology, and truth. This provided for a rich, if inconclusive, discussion during the last decades of the twentieth century among certain recognizably "analytic" philosophers of large-scale positional and metaphysical issues of a kind more usually associated with "continental" texts and thinkers.

Lee Braver's book *A Thing of This World* argues, on the whole convincingly, that this "analytic" framework of realism and anti-realism can usefully be applied to several of the thinkers usually discussed under the heading of "continental" philosophy, and indeed that many, if not all, of these thinkers can indeed be characterized as anti-realists. If Braver's book finds its intended audience, by far its most salutary benefit will be to show that the "continental" figures can indeed be usefully read as participating in a dispute familiar to, and worked out among, analytic philosophers. In the context of the contemporary practice of academic philosophy, where the "divide" between analytic and continental thinkers, methods, and languages continues to vitiate the pursuit of unified problems and helpful communication, this kind of work is extremely important. In particular, if there is to be a continuance of twentieth-century philosophy that takes account of, and carries forward, the common problems and concerns of both traditions, works like Braver's will clearly be indispensible in overcoming the prejudices and obstacles that still preclude this continuance from occurring in a unified way. Additionally, in light of the contemporary development of "realist" readings of key continental figures (such as Heidegger and Derrida) as well as a series of works that purport to a methodology of "speculative realism," it seems to be high time for continental philosophers themselves to revisit the issue of what exactly is

¹ Dummett: "Realism" in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978).

involved in the adoption of a philosophical stance (pro or con) toward "reality," and Braver's book can certainly be expected to contribute importantly to this discussion.²

Braver's voluminous work is uniformly very clearly written, even when explaining the texts of thinkers whose own ingrown projects resist quick comprehension, and is massively detailed and compendious in its treatment of the (often vast and both thematically and methodologically) complicated systems of the thinkers it discusses. As such, though there may be some reasons (see below) to think that Braver's specific framework is neither as inherently motivated nor as widely and unproblematically applicable as he sometimes assumes, his book provides an immensely helpful guide to the issues and will surely advance the kind of discussions that analytic and continental philosophers should jointly be having.

Braver's book begins with two lists or "matrices" comprising the commitments claims (proceeding ecumenically across issues of ontology, epistemology, semantics, and the theory of truth) that he takes to be distinctive of realism and anti-realism, respectively. In addition to these tabulations of the distinctive commitments of realism and anti-realism, Braver stipulates four additional components of what he calls the "Heideggerian Paradigm." These commitments capture the project of Heidegger's "being-historical" thinking after the notorious *Kehre* or "turn," and as Braver notes, one of the most significant intended outcomes of the analysis is to make this project more accessible and comprehensible to analytic as well as continental readers.

Following these prefatory statements, Braver introduces the contemporary situation of philosophy as split between continental and analytic thinkers and methods in a way somewhat reminiscent of the split between rationalism and empiricism in the century and a half leading up to Kant's synthesis and overcoming of these positions with his own critical system. In fact, Braver suggests, the contemporary split might also be overcome by recognizing the importance to both traditions of the anti-realism inaugurated by Kant, who in undertaking his famous Copernican Revolution was the first to argue that "the mind actively organizes experience" (p. 5).

Braver proceeds, in the first chapter, to explain and flesh out the main commitments of "realism" and argue for its foundational role in the analytic tradition. These commitments, which he develops largely by examining the critical statements of Hilary Putnam (an erstwhile "metaphysical realist" who, on his own telling, later came to abandon this position for an anti-, or at any rate less, realist one), include: an ontological commitment to "mind-independent" objects; a "correspondence" theory of truth according to which it consists in agreement between "thoughts, ideas, beliefs, words, propositions, sentences, or languages" on one hand and "things, objects, states of affairs, configurations, reality, or experience" on

² For recent works in a "speculative realist" mold, see, e.g., Quentin Meillasoux: *After Finitude: An Essay* on the Necessity of Contingency (Trans. Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008) and Ray Brassier: Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction. (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007). For the reading of Heidegger as an "ontic" realist, see Taylor Carman: *Heidegger's Analytic: Interpretation, Discourse, and Authenticity in Being and Time* (Cambridge U. Press, 2003). For partially "realist" readings of Derrida, see, e.g., Martin Hägglund: *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008) and Michael Marder: *The Event of the Thing: Derrida's Post-Deconstructive Realism* (U. of Toronto Press, 2009).

the other (p. 15); the view that there is a "single definite totality" of true knowledge claims; a bivalent logic; and finally the claim that the knowing subject is passive with respect to claims or truths known. The widespread adherence to these commitments within the analytic tradition has its proximate roots, Braver suggests, in the founding commitments of that tradition itself, most importantly in Russell and Moore's "realist" rejection of Hegel's idealism and in Frege's arguments, endorsed by other early analytic philosophers, against psychologistic treatments of logic. In the seven chapters that follow, Braver exhaustively and penetratingly traces the articulation and development of anti-realist themes in the work of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, the early and the late Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. Although there is no chapter explicitly devoted to him, the later Wittgenstein figures throughout as a partial parallel to several of these thinkers; and in the chapter on the early Heidegger, there is an extended critique of Davidson's "radical interpretation" project.

On Braver's narrative, Kant's Copernican revolution inaugurates anti-realism by allowing him to conceive of phenomena as dependent upon the structuring activity of the mind; this provides the basis, as well, for Kant's rejection of correspondence truth. On the other hand, Kant still retains a realist view of the "transcendental" subject responsible for this structuring work, as well as the notorious "realist" commitment to the reality of noumena or things-in-themselves. It is Hegel's critique of the latter commitment in particular, according to Braver, that produces the more thoroughgoing anti-realism of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and substantially leads to the decisive Hegelian claim (essential to all varieties of continental anti-realism that follow) for the necessarily *historical* character of all philosophical inquiry. The rejection of realism about noumena also leads Hegel, according to Braver, to see reality as "mind-dependent" in another, and more radical, way than Kant had. In particular, relying rather heavily on contemporary "social pragmatist" interpretations, Braver suggests that Hegel ultimately sees Spirit as a kind of "communal intelligence" coming about through the intersubjectivity of a speech community and that the culmination of the system of the *Phenomenology* in "Absolute Knowledge" expresses the deeply anti-realist claim that "there is no higher court of appeal for our beliefs than our community" (p. 86).

Though he starts with somewhat different assumptions, Nietzsche, too, can be interpreted as defending a deep anti-realism, marked most clearly in his damning critique of the very value of truth. The claim here is not (or not only) that our knowledge of reality can go no further than our experience of it, but also the Heraclitean one that reality itself is "fluctuating chaos" (p. 131) about which no stable knowledge is apparently possible. In fact, as Braver notes, there is a tension between Nietzsche's claims about the necessary limitation of our knowledge to subjective experience or appearances (what Braver calls Nietzsche's "subjective idealism") and his more radical claim that with our recognition of this limitation, the very distinction between appearance and reality tends to lapse. Although Nietzsche is probably inconsistent here, though, it is clear that the issue that is beginning to come to a head in the ongoing pursuit of "continental" anti-realism is that of the "reality" of the activity of the *subject* in structuring the world of experience itself.

This provides a segue to the two chapters on Heidegger, who Braver places at the center of the book and sees as responsible for the most significant transformation of continental anti-realism over the whole 200-year course of its development. This is the final abandonment of the "realism of the subject" which had demanded the existence of an active, constructive subject of experience, in favor of the wholly impersonal and historically variable "epochs" of the disclosure of Being in the late Heidegger's "being-historical" project. Braver sees this development from the early Heidegger to the late Heidegger as a consequence, primarily, of Heidegger's development of his radical conception of truth as aletheia or disclosedness (p. 259). In Being and Time, this conception of truth is deployed within the framework of what remains, according to Braver, a version (if an "ontologically radicalized" one) of Kant's transcendental idealism (p. 177); for the Heidegger of Being and Time, the world remains, if not "minddependent," at any rate "Dasein-dependent." (p. 185). The conception of truth as aletheia allows Heidegger to reject correspondence truth and bivalence, and as Braver argues, Heidegger is here already strongly anti-realist in the sense that he vehemently criticizes the neutral assumption of Vorhandenheit or "presence-at-hand" which characterizes all beings as objectively present and theoretically describable, without regard to their varying ways of presencing or being disclosed. More specifically, Braver understands Heidegger's position on the truth of propositions as akin to at least a weak form of "verificationism" (p. 202) in that it denies the possibility of describing the truth or falsity of a proposition wholly independently of its "truth conditions or means of verification" (p. 202). Here, according to Braver, Heidegger is "examin[ing] propositions in their actual use or real-life context" rather than submitting them to a "detached contemplation;" most centrally, he is insisting that assertion and demonstration have truth only as "moments in a ... process of unconcealing." (p. 203).

This conception of propositional truth as logically dependent upon events of unconcealing, presencing, or disclosure was classically criticized by Ernst Tugendhat, himself a student of Heidegger's. According to Tugendhat, Heidegger's conception of truth as disclosure ultimately prevents us from being able to draw any well-grounded distinction, on the level of propositions, between truth and falsehood at all: since disclosure is an even that either occurs or does not, it is seemingly impossible to find grounds within Heidegger's theory for considering a proposition which is *about* an actually disclosed entity to be false at all.³ Braver discusses Tugendhat's criticisms briefly but dismisses them; and rather surprisingly, in fact, at the beginning of the second Heidegger chapter (this one on the "later Heidegger" of the epochal history of being), Braver celebrates exactly the feature of Heidegger's conception of truth that Tugendhat finds so problematic:

...Heidegger defines truth as unconcealment (A2), revelation, appearance. As discussed in the previous chapter, this conception eliminates the distinction between correct and incorrect unconcealment. I see this radically new conception of truth as the culmination of a long development of thought – the final nail in the metaphysical coffin and a new beginning in the history of Western thought ... (p. 259)

³ Ernst Tugendhat, *Der Wahrheitsbegriff bei Husserl und Heidegger*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967. Thus, on Tugendhat's view, Heidegger's vision of truth as aletheia forces him to deny bivalence, not only in the relatively anodyne sense (familiar to anti-realists of Dummett's stripe) of affirming a third truth-value for certain unverified and thus "indeterminate" propositions, but in the much more radical and problematic sense of allowing any motivated criteria for distinguishing between true and false propositions at all.

According to Braver, it is this denial of the possibility of criteria for the distinction between truth and falsehood that "places everything within history" and verifies that "there is nothing essential ... that transcends historical change" (p. 260). This leads Heidegger to affirm an irreducible historical multiplicity of "clearings" or ways of disclosing beings and even to a "historical relativism" whereby "all historical appearings" are "real or true." (p. 268) On this picture, Being (or at any rate its disclosure) is always relative to the history of people or "a people" (p. 271).

For Heidegger as Braver reads him, the historically relative practices of our lives (which include the disclosure of Being) gain meaning through their rooting in "traditions" and "communities." According to Braver, for instance, traditions such as eating turkey on Thanksgiving or using a particular kind of tree for Christmas, though largely "arbitrary" in themselves, nevertheless operate as a solution to the problem of nihilism and even yield a positive "ethical ... destiny" (p. 338) that "gives us a way of dwelling, of being at home on this earth." In particular, evidencing once again a tendency to communitarian and social-pragmatist analyses that occurs throughout the book, Braver sees this Heideggerian picture of tradition as a generalization of what he claims to be Hegel's idea that we can and must "derive values and guidance for conduct" ultimately "from our community" (p. 339).

This conception of values (including the value of "truth" itself) as deriving from communal practices is closely allied with currently popular pragmatist readings of Heidegger that emphasize his insistence on "pre-theoretical" relationships of use and disclosure as the foundation for "explicitly formulated" theoretical judgments. At the end of the first Heidegger chapter, Braver develops a critique of Davidson's "radical interpretation" theory of meaning that develops from this purportedly Heideggerian understanding of the basis of explicit meaning and understanding as practical and pre-theoretical. For Davidson as Braver interprets him, all interpretation demands that we move from a limited (and, Braver suggests, artificially impoverished) evidentiary base consisting in the observed sounds and gestures of our interlocutors to a maximally determinate sense of their meaning. But this is misleading, according to Braver, since communication (at least with speakers of the same language) does not generally involve anything like an evidentiary process of making *explicit* inferences of meaning, and more generally, it is a mistake to model linguistic competence as consisting in "theoretical knowledge" at all (p. 234). From the Heideggerian perspective that Braver endorses, by contrast, "grasping language" does not depend on the interpretation of otherwise uninterpreted perceptual or observational data; rather, such grasping "encounters significance right from the start." (p. 235).

If we can accept without further ado this Heideggerian claim for the unproblematic phenomenological "givenness" of meaning in ordinary ("pre-theoretic") intersubjective discourse, then we might well, as Braver suggests, see the position he *attributes* to Davidson as embodying a characteristic error of philosophers, who tend to assume that practical problems demand general, theoretical solutions. However, this position is not Davdison's actual one, and the argument Braver levels against it appears to betray a blind spot on his part for the usefulness of the kind of (avowedly theoretical) investigation into language and meaning that Davidson actually undertakes. This investigation is grounded in a generalization of Tarski's disquotational criterion for truth, which itself draws closely upon Frege's truth-conditional conception of meaning. The Davidsonian project specifically amounts to a systematic inquiry into how truth and meaning are interrelated in the practice of a language, what we *must* (Davidson is

surely correct in holding) be able to be inducted into if we are able to learn or speak a language at all. The point here, as Braver in fact quotes Davidson saying, is not that one must actually perform explicit "theoretical" acts of interpretation in understanding everyday discourse, but that such interpretation must be possible in principle as a constraint on the structure of anything intelligible as a language. As Davidson has often made clear, this is a claim about the necessary constraints on any possible theory of linguistic competence whatsoever; the Heideggerian position that Braver endorses resists this claim, in fact, only by refusing to give any such theory at all. This resistance appears to be tenable (and indeed maintained in the Heideggerian context) only if the linguistic competence to understand another's utterances is simply *assumed* as phenomenologically "given" and hence unproblematic; what goes missing, then, is any possibility of systematically accounting for linguistic meaning in terms of general reasoning about its structure.

There are indications here of a larger issue that may adversely affect the comprehensiveness of Braver's entire discussion of the realism/anti-realism question, as well as the plausibility of his general advocacy for the anti-realist question itself. This is the issue of how the distinctively twentieth-century turn to language as a philosophical object of investigation and source of insight affects the metaphysical and epistemological dimensions of realism, which Braver treats as having a unified sense across theorists writing prior to and after the linguistic turn. An example that can surely be marshaled against Braver's pervasive sense of an unproblematically unified field of problems here is Frege himself, who is on any accounting responsible for many of the distinctive methods and commitments of the analytic tradition. At various places in the text (e.g. p. 17, p. 298) Braver argues that a commitment to correspondence theories of truth is the most, or at any rate one of the most, decisive factors in producing a commitment to metaphysical realism. Yet Frege, on Braver's own account a paradigmatic realist, in fact repeatedly gives powerful and even decisive arguments *against* correspondence truth.⁴ These arguments are grounded in Frege's methodology of logical analysis, which yielded many of the distinctive methods of linguistic analysis and reflection in the subsequent "analytic" tradition, and reach the conclusion that truth is in fact indefinable in language, since any possible linguistic definition would beg further questions about the truth of this definition itself. This claim for the indefinability of truth suggests another very prominent deflationary strand of analytic thought which develops from Frege, namely the linguistically based resistance to "metaphysics" itself. From this perspective, it may be that philosophy after the linguistic turn in at least one of its distinctive modes (and this may apply to "continental" versions of the linguistic turn such as deconstruction and hermeneutics as well as to the "analytic" versions) is not "realist" or "anti-realist," but rather has finally gained the requisite methods to show the emptiness of this dispute as well. Braver, however, gives rather short shrift to the distinctive issue of language and its structure, and thus fails to formulate the possibility of the kind of interpretation this suggests.⁵

⁴ See, eg., Frege, "Thought" Trans. Peter Geach and R. H. Stoothoff. In *The Frege Reader*, ed. M. Beaney. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

⁵ For a different reading of some of these texts and figures which emphasizes the implications of the linguistic turn, see Paul M. Livingston, *Philosophy and the Vision of Language* (Routledge, 2008).

Given the assumption, which Braver appears to endorse on behalf of both Heidegger and anti-realism itself, that there can be no criteria for truth and falsehood other than those that define the wholly contingent practices of historically situated communities, it can easily seem that appeals to reason and logic as criteria for the establishment of truths can only actually amount to the imposition of a kind of violence on those who resist them. As Braver rightly notes, the later Heidegger already suggests this through his use of "violent imagery" to describe the application of abstract standards of reason (p. 309); this imagery has its context in Heidegger's critique of modern subjectivity as allied with technology in a relentless quest to measure and control beings by abstract and generalizing means. These implications of reason as inherently connected with drives to power and mastery come even more to the fore with the analyses of the next figure that Braver considers, Michel Foucault. As Braver demonstrates, Foucault's historical and archeological analyses throughout his career remain deeply rooted in the "paradigm" defined by Heidegger's epochal history of Being; like Heidegger's, Foucault's project is a documentation of irreducibly historical and yet impersonal "conceptual schemes" and structures. This means, Braver suggests, that "every 'truth' is the result of a Nietzschean struggle of interpretations" (p. 400) and that, by consequence, "knowledge is inherently political, including and especially the claim of legitimation by correspondence truth and independent reality." The task of the analysis of truth-claims and the contingent practices in which they take place then becomes that of a relentless critique of the "congealing of power relations."

The last thinker that Braver substantively analyzes is Derrida. Derrida's project of deconstruction is seen as continuous with, but also in certain ways problematizing, the legacy of critical anti-realism discussed throughout the book so far. Here, the anti-realism primarily takes the form of Derrida's rigorous critique of what he calls the "metaphysics of presence," which generalizes and adapts Heidegger's own critique of objective presence or presence-at-hand. In Derrida's work, as Braver explains, this critique takes the form of an analysis of the relationship between speech and writing as it has figured in the western tradition, where it has played, according to Derrida, a central role in the structuring of such key oppositions as those between the sensible and the intelligible and the present and the absent. After ably dismissing some rather superficial criticisms from analytic philosophers of Derrida's account of the importance of the speech/writing distinction, Braver argues that the real target of Derrida's critique is the assumption of the possibility of an ideal kind or level of language that is universally translatable and has "no effect on meaning" (p. 440).

Braver here interpolates a brief criticism of Frege, who (he supposes) embodies this assumption of an ideal character of language with his distinction between sense and reference. This criticism is problematic, however, for at least two reasons. First, since Derrida himself almost never discusses Frege, it is uncertain whether the commitments of the latter can really be presented as a *paradigmatic* instance of the position that Derrida is criticizing under the heading of the "metaphysics of presence." Second, and more importantly, however, it is far from clear that Derrida wishes *simply* to criticize the "ideal" dimension of language that we may see as figuring in Frege's conception of a determinate realm of sense at all. For as Derrida repeatedly emphasized, beginning with his first published writings (for instance on Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*), the ideality of repeatable or iterable meanings, as problematic as it may be, is the very life of language, and it is not clear that we can even so much as

conceive of something *as* a language that does not bear this ideal structure within itself. When Braver discusses iterability, on the other hand, he takes Derrida to be according with an "empirical directive" which here establishes that in thinking about language "all we have are tokens" whose functioning in the practice of language cannot be regulated by ideal "types" (p. 456). Even if, as Braver suggests, such types can "emerge," in a sense, "from actual linguistic use" (p. 456), it remains unclear how Derrida's repeated insistence on the *ideal* dimension of such use coheres with Braver's claim that it remains, for Derrida, "wholly dependent" on the empirically describable and non-normative level of tokens.

Is Derrida really the kind of programmatic anti-realist that Braver takes him to be? There is some reason to doubt that he is. For instance, in establishing Derrida's supposed anti-realism, Braver repeatedly (on p. 443, 447, 453, and 456 just to name a few) cites Derrida's notorious and problematic motto "il n'y a pas de hors-texte." This is often interpreted to mean that "there is nothing outside the text," and Braver suggests that it represents Derrida's anti-realist view of meaning as an "effect of the network of mutually differing elements" (p. 456). However, against currently popular accusations of "textualism," it has been urged that this might as well have been translated as "there is nothing outside the context" (and in fact was so translated by the first English translator of Derrida's essay "Différance," David Allison); Derrida himself suggested in 1988 that it should be read this way.⁶ Read the latter way, of course, the motto does not at all affirm in anti-realist fashion an irreducibly textual definition or construction of reality, meaning, or truth; rather, it affirms the problematic reality and irreducibility of the value of context for any meaningful situation of life or practice. Although Braver does rightly emphasize at several places Derrida's insistence on context, and disputes (p. 446) the characterization of Derrida as a "textual idealist," there remains a real question here as to whether Derrida's emphases here (which extend, as Braver quotes Derrida saying on p. 447, to "all the structures called 'real'") are consistent with the broadly anti-realist reading Braver gives him.

In the final chapter of the book, Braver returns explicitly to the analytic/continental divide and the prospects for reconciliation that might emerge from a broader recognition of its Kantian roots. This is once again a plausible and helpful way to bring into light some real divergences and points of contrast. Nevertheless, by this point in the book, one may certainly feel as if Braver's substantial *advocacy* of continental anti-realism occasionally backfires, especially in its more extreme expressions; what Braver cites as important discoveries and recognitions of anti-realist thought, hard fought and won over two hundred years of contested discussion, may seem less than satisfying in a developing comparative context where relativism, radical historicism, and the reduction of "ahistorical" reason to power and violence may be taken more as problems than as positive achievements.⁷

⁶ See Gayatari Spivak, "Class Individual: On Jacques Derrida," *Artforum*, March, 2005; and Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion" in *Limited, Inc.*, Northwestern U. Press, 1988.

⁷ This context includes thinkers such as Hilary Putnam, who Braver draws upon for many of his characterizations of anti-realism; for instance, in his 1981 paper "Beyond Historicism," (collected in *Realism and Reason*, Cambridge U. Press, 1983), Putnam argues vehemently against the historicism and (what he takes to be) the relativism of Rorty.

This kind of backfiring is apparent when Braver once more ventures to characterize the analytic tradition as a whole in terms of its supposedly definitive "realist" commitments:

This captures a common ethos of analytic thought. Rather than incorporating the contingent features that condition our beliefs, we judge them by the higher standard of Truth itself, which transcends us. Reason, and especially for early analytic philosophy, logic, enables us to achieve genuine knowledge, something fundamentally different from what our culture or species tends to or even must believe. (p. 506).

Here as elsewhere in Braver's book, analytic philosophers and others who think of human inquiry into mathematics as well as morals, science as well as meaning, as aiming, among other things, to discover truths (if not Truths) may be at a loss to recognize themselves in this somewhat hyperbolic portrait; and when Braver on the next page poses the (evidently rhetorical) question "from the continental ... perspective" of "what business... finite creatures like us have laying claim to timeless truth that transcends all human conditions," one must wonder once again whether the metaphysical "realist" who figures in Braver's advocacy of anti-realism as a hard-fought and -won accomplishment is not in many ways, in the comparative context of the discussion between analytic and continental philosophy that is now shaping up, a straw man position. But these are relatively minor points, and it is beyond doubt that Braver has succeeded, with his careful analyses, exhaustive consideration of texts, and breathtaking scope, in capturing some of the most important issues that will surely affect the inheritance and practice of philosophy well into the future.