

## Speaking Truth to Being *An Interview with Lee Braver*

By the Editors of Interstitial Journal

**Lee Braver** will be Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Florida beginning in Fall of 2013. Braver's research interests include nineteenth and twentieth century continental philosophy, history of philosophy, connections between analytic and continental philosophy, and the work of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Foucault. His books include *Heidegger's Later Writings: A Reader's Guide*, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism*, and *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger*.

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*To begin with a broad, but foundational, question, you've written at length on the schism separating continental and analytic philosophy. How did this rift begin and in what ways has it impacted modern philosophy, in terms of both theoretical trajectories and disciplinary concerns?*

I've always found Whitehead's famous comment about Plato to be a bit of an exaggeration, but fully appropriate when applied to Kant: the last two centuries really have been footnotes to Kant. He laid out the main issues and some of the main options for addressing them, which then created many of the problems philosophers have been wrestling with ever since. This influence is fairly obvious in continental philosophy, where we spend a great deal of time directly and explicitly engaging with our predecessors, but I think that it has also affected the history of analytic philosophy as well. According to one popular and plausible telling, analytic philosophy arose from Frege, Russell, and Moore's rejection of idealism, and although it was primarily the British variety they focused on, this strain can be traced back to Hegel, who repeatedly admits that he developed his ideas from Kant. And sometimes the disagreement is much more direct: Russell, for example, said that his views on mathematics were point-for-point disagreements with Kant. This is why I used Kant in my first book, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism*<sup>1</sup>, to provide a common ground between analytic and continental thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007, hereinafter referred to as *A Thing*.

Like species that, springing from a shared genetic root, go on to evolve in different directions when isolated from each other, the two traditions have followed considerably different trajectories since their separation. The founders of analytic philosophy rejected idealism's involvement of the subject in questions of truth and reality, what Frege labeled "psychologism." They wanted to purify thought of all influence from the thinker, which is one reason why logic held such appeal for the early analytics. Logic promised to turn messy everyday language into an impersonal procedure which can be mechanically computed, purified of all the vagueness and vagaries of the world and the messy mind of man. The same goes for the various litmus tests that have had their fifteen minutes of fame, e.g., the logical positivists' principle of verificationism, Popper's demarcation by falsifiability, the *Tractarian* division between sense and nonsense, and so on. While these projects have failed, or at least been severely qualified, something of their ethos remains in the analytic view of reason as that which escapes the influence of all merely local, contingent factors to track truth itself. It doesn't matter who you are, what race or gender you are, your class or nation—logic is logic, itself instantiating its own Principle of Identity.

Continental philosophy, on the other hand, emphasized and expanded the unavoidable influence of contingent and variable features: historical period, race, gender, language, etc. For continental thinkers, these factors are not obstacles to a reason that would be pure and true, but necessary conditions for and factors in any kind of thinking or truth. They don't bar us from thinking properly; they are what enable us to think at all. This is one reason why continental philosophers take the history of philosophy so much more seriously than analytic thinkers do. If the way one forms ideas and approaches problems is inescapably informed by one's context, then I can only understand ideas in general by taking their historical origins into account. As in Kuhn's conception of science, the factors we tend to treat as external to an idealized notion of purified reason turn out to be internal to the way thought actually does and must take place. Whereas logic tries to lay out an ahistoric way of arguing that is open to all rational beings in all places and at all times, according to this view, a post-Heideggerian thinker, for example, is capable of certain thoughts that are simply unavailable to a pre-Heideggerian one. This perhaps helps account for the greater "hero-worship" in continental thought. As Hegel argued, logic and history cannot be cleanly separated, for our very minds bear the mark of time.

I argued in the conclusion to *A Thing* that even this divergence can be traced back to Kant. The analytic ethos comes from the second *Critique*, where Kant insists on using reason to remove all empirical influences from our decision making, to identify ourselves wholly with the noumenal self who remains outside the empirical

world, staying above it like an untouched white lotus flower floating on a muddy stream. The first *Critique*, on the other hand, says that the particular ways we have of organizing experience—the forms of intuition and concepts of understanding—have no deep justification; they are ultimately contingent in that other rational beings may very well have different ones (he clearly says this of the forms of intuition, but waffles about the concepts). However, these are the ways we humans think and we should embrace them as producing genuine knowledge, albeit knowledge of a more humble, human-sized form than traditional epistemological aspirations to Truth Itself. This critical alignment is rather ironic given that continental philosophers tend to see ethics as implicit and complicit in most topics, whereas analytic philosophers tend to separate out ethical concerns from metaphysical and epistemological ones. However, I am talking about the general ethos or approach of the two *Critiques*, rather than their content.

*You find Kant's thesis of experience organized by the mind to be resonant for both analytic and continental philosophy, a starting point for bridging the gap between the two. In what ways do the two traditions differ in their approach to our access to noumena and, in turn, description of methodological vectors used to investigate the link between reality and the mind?*

The notion of the mind as actively organizing experience rather than passively reflecting or recording it was an important intellectual landmark and inspiration for both branches, but analytic philosophers initially rejected it, whereas continental philosophers have largely accepted it, albeit with considerable adaptations that I trace in *A Thing*. Very few philosophers since Kant have accepted his understanding of noumena, although I find realism in general far more popular among analytic thinkers than continentals. There is a much greater faith in the notion that a world entirely independent of us exists and that we can know things about it, principally by using reason, although science is also a popular candidate for the discipline that tracks reality as it really is.

In general, continental thinkers don't deny the truth of this idea so much as its coherence. They challenge the idea that we can meaningfully talk about how the world really is wholly independent of us. Since it is always *us* talking or thinking about it, we necessarily bring along our ways of talking and thinking, making any world in-itself that we describe actually in-itself-for-us. And we cannot, even in principle, separate out the world's contributions from ours, as Kant did, in order to strain out the latter and leave just the former because all attempts to do so will still involve our contributions. The strainer itself, so to speak, bears the stain of what it is trying to remove, imparting it to everything that moves through it.

As many have pointed out, some analytic philosophers take science to be the paradigm of human thought and model their own philosophical work on the way scientists work and write. Hence the approach of breaking issues down into small components to work on in isolation of other aspects, writing short papers, embracing the ideal of clarity (though I think this is a red herring—clarity is largely a matter of what you're familiar with, rather than an objective quality), striving for objectivity, etc. Continental philosophers favor literature or the humanities as their models since they are talking about the human world. We are inextricably bound up in what we're trying to understand, so we should examine disciplines that acknowledge and work with that.

*In "A Thing of This World," you discuss the development of Heideggerian disclosure as key to understanding the German thinker's escape from Kantian subjectivity. How does Heidegger's recasting of truth in terms of concealment and unconcealment rehistoricize being? Did this move generate new conditions of possibility, or perhaps intelligibility, for Western philosophy writ large?*

I see Heidegger, especially his later work, as the next great milestone in the history of continental philosophy after Kant. There are other brilliant thinkers of course, such as Hegel and Nietzsche, but I see them as still working within Kant's framework rather than breaking out of it. Kant argued that we can only know the world insofar as it affects us, which means that we can, in principle, know nothing of what it is that is exerting this effect on us independently of these interactions. Moreover, our concepts and words were formed to talk about the world that we encounter—phenomena—leaving us bereft of any way to think or talk about noumena. The only thing we can know about them is that they exist and are the source of the sensory data bombarding us.

To generalize greatly, much of the nineteenth century was taken up with exploring and developing these ideas in such a way that they lead to their own overcoming, the way Hegel thinks all ideas do. I focus on two key features of Kant's system that came under attack: 1) the idea that all humans everywhere and at all times have the same transcendental faculties that structure experience the same way; and 2) the intelligibility of even the meager claims Kant makes about noumena: 1) all the evidence seems to point to considerable variation in the way people experience and conceptualize the world at different times and in different cultures; and 2) if we cannot apply our concepts to noumenal reality, then what business have we talking about it even just as something that exists? As abstract as the concepts of "something" and "exist" may seem, they still operate within the context of human thought (Kant admitted as such, making substance and existence two of the twelve

concepts), and so should not be treated as if we could apply them to reality wholly independent of us.

So, the nineteenth century sees an ongoing erosion of the two vestigial remnants of realism in Kant's system: 1) a realism of the mind's unchanging transcendental faculties; and 2) a realism of an underlying mind-independent reality. These nineteenth century thinkers argue that: 1) the way we organize experience varies widely, either according to historical period (Hegel) or inner strength of the person (Nietzsche); and 2) that the only reality we can talk about is the one we encounter. These moves are really not so much Kant rejected as Kant fulfilled, his ideas developed to where Kant himself should have brought them, Kant cancelled but also purified, improved, and preserved as Hegel's "*Aufhebung*" has it. Without the contrast of reality-in-itself, the various forms of subjectivity simply are our true nature and what we find in the world simply is reality, even if we had a hand in its character.

Now, your question is, what does this change do to truth? And the answer is that we need an entirely new conception of truth, since the traditional notion of correspondence to the world in itself is no longer feasible. I think that Heidegger gives us the best answer: if reality is that which appears and if it is as it appears, then truth should be thought of as this event of appearing itself. The idea of comparing appearances with the reality behind them is off the table, since the only way we have of making such a comparison is by checking one experience against another. In other words, all we can do is compare appearances with appearances without ever getting outside of these. There is no way to get behind them to something deeper or realer, so we shouldn't even say that there is an outside or that these are "mere" appearances. What we need is a rigorous philosophical analysis of appearances and appearing, and this is just what phenomenology becomes in Heidegger's hands.

In Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, being is what and as it appears to us or, as he sometimes puts it, as it appears in the clearing. Hence, what we might call his phenomenological epistemology (he would hate this characterization) is that what appears is true and appearance is truth. This only sounds paradoxical if you retain the distinction between appearance and true reality, the distinction that Heidegger says inaugurated metaphysics when Plato first formulated it. But now, due to our place in history (specifically as coming after Nietzsche), we can dispense with it, thereby overcoming metaphysics and moving on to an entirely new way of philosophizing he sometimes calls "thinking."

One of the first things we realize about the way being manifests itself if we focus on how it actually does so, rather than assuming a timeless transcendent realm, is that it has done so in profoundly different ways throughout history. The Greeks simply saw the world in a fundamentally different way than the Medievals, or the Moderns, or us, which means, given phenomenological ontology, that being *was* different at different times. Hence being—not just our apprehension of it, but being itself—is historical. This is Heidegger’s later, more concrete version of his early thesis that being is temporal because it manifests itself to Dasein, who is, at her deepest level, temporality.

This move also completes his divorce from the Kantian framework. According to what I call The Law of Transcendental Transitivity, a transcendental idealist argues that whatever features the subject uses to organize experience will therefore be found in experience, so we can talk about them as empirically real. Kant’s subject organizes external experience spatially, for instance, so the phenomenal world is spatial. Heidegger holds to this model in *Being and Time*, although he sees the scientific experience that Kant focuses on as only one mode of experience, and a very limited one at that. Heidegger broadens his examination to our mundane lives, which employ very different concepts than scientific contemplation, but he’s following the same strategy as Kant at this point in his career. This is why studying Dasein’s way of being—the existential analytic—forms the basis for the study of being—fundamental ontology. We find out how being must be by studying the way Dasein must experience it. Since the latter is temporality, then being is fundamentally temporal and the various modes of being are to be understood as different forms of time (I think this would have been the topic of the unpublished Division Three of Part One).

In his later work, Heidegger comes to find this model problematic. For one thing, it cannot explain the massive shifts in the experience of being, what he calls epochal understandings of being. For another, it makes us far too responsible for what the world is like. Although we are thrown into this particular form of existence, it is still us who are making the world the way it is and we can even exert some control over this: disengaging from actively using tools to stare at them changes their way of being from ready-to-hand to present-at-hand. His later work emphasizes the passivity of our thrownness far more, which he comes to see as the way out of nihilism. Being has “sent” us ways of understanding it and we find our meaning both within these ways and as the being who enables being to manifest itself.

*Your ideas about the history of anti-realism have had a profound influence on emerging philosophical movements, especially speculative realism. What do you make of the turn toward realism in twenty-first century metaphysics and the use of*

*your work in bringing such movements to fruition? To your mind, do any of the variants of speculative realism—speculative materialism, object-oriented ontology, transcendental materialism, and transcendental nihilism—hold promise for responding to and re-ontologizing contemporary ethical concerns?*

Authors can never control what happens to their work. Once it's out there, people are free to take it and use it however they wish. I'm very gratified that people have found it valuable. In fact, I'm happy that anyone's read the damn thing at all.

It was good fortune—or perhaps reverberations in the ether of the *Zeitgeist* if you're a Hegelian—that *A Thing* came out at such an opportune time. Unbeknownst to me, quite a few young philosophers, as well as some more established ones like Badiou and Latour, were getting tired of continental philosophy's anti-realism and were looking to break out of it. My book aided their cause by showing in some detail that continental thought was dominated by this idea, as they believed, thus facilitating their attempts to turn the page on this movement. As I understand it, my book serves as kind of a historical preface to their work.

This wasn't my intention, though neither does it go against anything I said there. *A Thing* does not advocate anti-realism; it just tries to show it as a reasonable position by explaining how it developed out of earlier problems and problematic solutions to those problems. I don't know these new movements as well as I should—I'm starting to study them more seriously now for a chapter in my next book—but my general outlook is not sympathetic with them. They want to talk about reality as it is completely independently of us and our experience of it, which just doesn't seem possible to me. As I said above, every attempt to think and talk about reality is always *us* thinking and talking about it, using our concepts and words.

However, they have moved me away from traditional versions of anti-realism to some degree, or at least modified my views on it. I'm now developing a position I call Transgressive Realism (to add one more Realism into the pot) which tries to capture the best of both realism and anti-realism. Although I don't want to go as far as the Speculative Realists to entertain talking about a completely mind-independent reality, nor must we remain confined within the conceptual limits of our present ways of thinking the way some versions of anti-realism seem to imply. According to this idea, our most vivid and important encounters with reality are those in which it violates our expectations and concepts, either leading us to forge new ones or perpetually evading all attempts to capture them. Levinas' descriptions of the other

would be a prime example of this kind of experience, as I explain in my paper, “A Brief History of Continental Realism” in *Continental Philosophy Review*.<sup>2</sup>

*In recent inquiries into the reasoning of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, you argue that the two thinkers craft an account of finitude that isn't premised on a contrast with the infinity of the divine. Can you explain this concept of 'original finitude' and its impact upon epistemological models of human experience?*

Well, traditionally when philosophers have called us finite they mean something like limited, which presupposes that of which we are a limited form. The most obvious example is God: to say that we are finite in our understanding means that we don't know as much as He does, i.e., everything. Thus, infinity or totality wears the trousers in the pair, in Austin's phrase: it is the positive term and finitude derives its significance by being a part of it.

But do we really have the right to talk about things like knowing everything? Do we really grasp what that means; or is it, as Wittgenstein has it, just a picture that seems to mean something, but with which we can do nothing; or, as Heidegger has it, is it just a leftover from earlier times when we thought we could understand such ideas? Ironically, to claim that we are finite in this sense presupposes that we can intelligibly deal with unlimited totalities, which doesn't respect our finitude enough.

One of the guiding ideas of my third book, *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger*<sup>3</sup>, is that both of these philosophers are trying to talk about us as deeply finite, but without relying on the contrast. This is what I call 'original finitude'. For example, let's take Dummett's account of realism, largely derived from the later Wittgenstein. Realism, for Dummett, subscribes to the notion of universal bivalence: for every possible fact, either it's true or it isn't. Our limitation would consist in the fact that we cannot know the specific value of lots of these facts, yet they exist nonetheless, twinkling to themselves out there in the never-to-be-seen void. Now this is an attractive picture, but is it anything more than this? Does positing these already-settled but never-to-be-known answers affect our actual practices of knowing in any way? If not, we should dispense with them, just as we got rid of noumena. Then, we need a new way of understanding things like knowledge and truth. So, for example, the later Wittgenstein rejects the notion of a rule already pre-determining its own applications in any interesting metaphysical (queer) way independently of how we apply it.

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2 Braver, “A Brief History of Continental Realism,” in *Continental Philosophy Review*, June 2012, Vol. 45, Iss. 2, pp. 261-289.

3 Braver, *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012.

It's a little like the move made by Einstein (who was a great fan of Kant). Einstein rebuked physicists for just helping themselves to things like absolute simultaneity or speeds or measurements of time and space. If we are to work with these ideas, we must have a way to work them out: time is what clocks measure, while space is what measuring sticks determine. If time as measured by clocks acts funny, we cannot simply dismiss this as the interference of our devices, since we have no other access to Time Itself except through them. We cannot separate clocks from time by looking at the two "sideways-on" in McDowell's phrase; Time Itself is the time we can measure. A notion like 'absolute simultaneity' presupposes a God's-eye view of events, in Putnam's phrase. Since we lack this and the ordering of events differs depending on different perspectives, simultaneity itself varies.<sup>4</sup>

*Finally, dialogue between differing philosophical camps seems to consciously undergird your thought, in which you've read prominent representatives of the analytic tradition (Frege, for example) in conjunction with continental masters (Derrida, to complete the analogy) almost as counterparts. Do you view your work as unique in its dialogical focus? What barriers inhibit fruitful interdisciplinary exchange within—and for that matter outside—of today's academia?*

Yes, that Derridean deconstruction of Frege was rather fun, I must say. I don't think that my focus on the dialogue between the traditions is unique by any means—other people are doing it too. It's just rather uncommon—there aren't too many of us. The way I see it, the only way I could have made myself even less marketable than by claiming an area of specialization (AOS) in continental philosophy was to make analytic-continental dialogue my AOS!

I think the primary barrier is just the amount of work involved. It's very hard to become knowledgeable about an area of philosophy, and most of us are justifiably proud of accomplishing this in our dissertations. Then, we have to publish to get a job and tenure, which requires a mastery of a field, so we typically stick with the one we already have under our belts. If philosophy is a long conversation, it's impossible to start eavesdropping on it in the middle. To understand what someone today is writing, you have to understand the figures and problems they're responding to, and to understand those you have to know what gave rise to them, and so on. So it's a rather daunting task. And while I am suspicious of the idea of clarity of writing, it is true that most great continental figures like to create their own vocabulary, which increases the difficulty of approach. I tried in my first book

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<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Einstein balked at this approach when Quantum Mechanics applied it to independently determinate states of electrons. Along with his failed search for a Theory of Everything, his insistence on Realism in the face of Niels Bohr's Anti-Realist approach made Einstein increasingly marginal to the course of twentieth century physics.

to show one lengthy conversation running through continental thought and to use a common vocabulary to both bring analytic and continental thinkers together to talk, and to clarify the conversation among the continental thinkers themselves.

But I subscribe to Gadamer's view of philosophy not only as a conversation, but also as a way of challenging one's own presuppositions. If this is the case, then the divide is as much an opportunity as it is a problem. The fact that there is a whole slew of thinkers operating on different assumptions, with different approaches, intellectual landmarks, etc., means that dialogue between the two can expose their own unnoticed assumptions and offer each other new ideas and potential objections and solutions that haven't arisen within their own tradition. I believe that this is one of the great growth areas in philosophy in the near future.