

Book Review

## **Braver, Lee, *Heidegger's Later Writings: A Reader's Guide*<sup>1</sup>**

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**H**eidegger's *Later Writings* is a reader's handbook belonging to the Continuum Reader's Guide series. Tellingly it is the only book in the series that is not dedicated to the explication of a single major work. It covers Heidegger's output after the publication of *Being and Time* (1927) beginning with the lecture known in English as 'What is Metaphysics.' *Being and Time* is covered in the same series by William Blattner (Heidegger's *Being and Time*, 2007). Braver's book covers a total of eight essays including the aforementioned 'What is Metaphysics' and concludes with one of Heidegger's last important works 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking (1964).' It includes commentaries on the most famous essays produced by Heidegger in the later period such as 'The Origin of the Work of Art (1935-6),' 'Letter on Humanism (1946),' and 'The Question Concerning Technology (1949).' Alongside the commentaries there is also a short section dealing with context which is essentially an explanation of the *Kehre* or the turn in Heidegger's thinking, an overview of the significant themes that preoccupied Heidegger during this period, and a short section on the reception and influence of Heidegger's ideas upon Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, the Frankfurt School, Gadamer, Foucault, and Derrida. The book also includes a detailed set of notes that will appeal to readers already grounded in Heidegger's work. The section on further reading will prove useful to students seeking to explore the main currents in Heidegger scholarship and finally the bibliography is concise but it is clear that Braver has assembled the bibliography with some care.

The reader who is familiar with Braver's 2007 publication *A Thing of this World: a History of Continental Anti-Realism* will be aware that Braver's influence is starting to influence the realist-antirealist debate in contemporary continental philosophy. In that book Braver managed to translate the difficult jargon-laden classics of continental thinking into a format that allowed Anglo-American philosophers to see a reflection of their own concerns in the debates of continental philosophy. The book notably gave a prominent position to Heidegger; Braver devoted two chapters to Heidegger's work signalling that Heidegger represents an important shift in the realism-antirealism debate. By devoting a considerable amount of space in that book to the later Heidegger, Braver showed that there is an equal amount of interesting insights in

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<sup>1</sup> New York: Continuum, 2009. 157 pp.

Heidegger's later work as there is in *Being and Time*. In many respects Heidegger's *Later Writings* is an extended treatment of that argument. Yet there are obvious barriers to Braver's hopes that people will begin to take up the later Heidegger. The plain fact of the matter is that the later Heidegger is among some of the most complicated work in the entire Western philosophical tradition. It is littered with tortuous Heideggerian jargon and the translation of the later Heidegger has been a mixed-affair. It is also notoriously inward looking requiring that the reader has followed Heidegger's own path up until this point and this is before one factors in Heidegger's discussions of other thinkers—often themselves notoriously difficult writers. Faced with this difficult task of conveying Heidegger's later concerns Braver comes up with a novel solution.

Rather than provide a broad analysis of the later Heidegger, Braver opts to provide selected readings of key texts from Heidegger's later work. The texts are derived from Krell's *Basic Writings* (1993) which manages to pull together a representative overview of Heidegger's vast corpus. According to Braver, Krell's collection does a "terrific job of providing important and representative essays from across his [Heidegger's] career . . ."<sup>2</sup> The choice of Krell's text also has some pragmatic potential since it is, as Braver notes, ". . . the most frequently used text for classes in English on the later Heidegger."<sup>3</sup> By choosing to discuss Krell's selection the reader can get an overview of the later Heidegger at a relatively cheap price but it also means that one could conceivably set out a core syllabus on the later Heidegger that has Krell's collection and Braver's introduction as set texts. This simple move manages to solve a major problem in teaching the later Heidegger by limiting the sprawling scope of Heidegger's later interests. The reader can then follow the essays in Krell's edition and supplement their own reading with Braver's introductions. The reason this works in practise is that Braver's voice acts as a faithful companion by explaining the core concerns that preoccupied the later Heidegger. In this sense there is something quite sympathetic about Braver's style and his enthusiasm for the later Heidegger draws in the reader rather than, as happens all too often in Heidegger scholarship, scares them away. The danger of all introductory texts is that the reader will substitute a reading of the actual text for the introduction but it seems likely that the reader will be intrigued enough by Braver's enthusiasm to avoid the easy path.

It is worth devoting some space here to Braver's style. For one it is immensely difficult to discuss Heidegger in a clear style and without lapsing into Heideggerian jargon. The ability to render Heidegger's concerns concisely, but without subtracting from the power of Heidegger's ideas, is the key strength of this book. This strength is closely tailed by a sense of fairness to the subject matter and an 'off-handedness' that does not attempt to provide the reader with the author's own interpretation. Although this would be an achievement in any work, it is an immense achievement in a work on the later

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Heidegger and I do not think that is a superlative claim—as anybody exposed to the later work can attest. Before looking at a representative commentary from this book there are a few small points worth mentioning. The first is the way that Braver structures the book. Braver hopes that his book can act as a “roadmap” rather than a simple translation of Heidegger from obscure to clear.<sup>4</sup> The hope is that once the reader has been impelled to read the essays they can throw away the “ladder” and I will judge the book on whether this is the result.<sup>5</sup> Something that might easily be missed in this book is Braver’s footnotes which delve into the matters at hand in detail. The reason they are worth mentioning again is that although the book is clearly aimed at introducing new readers to the later Heidegger there is a lot that can be gained by the experienced reader via the footnotes and, of course, the book is also useful as a way to refresh one’s memory of the later Heidegger.

Since the structure of Braver’s commentaries all follow a similar pattern it is possible to provide an overview through a close analysis of one such commentary. I have chosen his commentary on ‘What is Metaphysics?’ It deals, famously, with the difficult concept of nothingness or the Nothing [das Nichts] and has served as ammunition for Heidegger’s critics for generations. If Braver manages to tease out the importance of this essay for readers then he will have managed something that has eluded many Heidegger scholars: a clear and concise introduction into perhaps the most difficult theme in Heidegger’s corpus (the Nothing). Braver argues that in ‘What is Metaphysics’ Heidegger’s emphasis is shifting from the ahistorical understanding of Dasein’s existential structures toward a broader, historically informed picture: “Whereas the earlier work tried to uncover the permanent and universal features of all Dasein’s understanding, now our specific historical situation plays a role.”<sup>6</sup> Braver explains how Heidegger can discuss nothingness by highlighting how Heidegger lets the phenomena of nothingness to emerge through an engagement with science itself: “. . . Heidegger points out that in order to reject nothingness, science must employ it.”<sup>7</sup> Turning to the next section of Heidegger’s essay Braver lists the possible objections to Heidegger’s chosen theme by providing a visually clear understanding of Heidegger’s more condensed arguments and Braver thoughtfully includes a quick review half way through this elaboration at precisely the point where most readers will be struggling—with Heidegger’s introduction of moods.<sup>8</sup> Braver summarizes Heidegger’s position on moods in philosophy as follows:

Whereas philosophers have traditionally considered reason and emotion distinct faculties and sought to preserve the purity of the former from contamination by

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

the latter, Heidegger views our grasp of the world as a holistic blend.<sup>9</sup>

In the final section, Heidegger's 'response' to the question of what is metaphysics, Braver assures the reader that Heidegger's introduction of nothingness, and moods (especially anxiety), is designed to reveal that all along Dasein is what it is precisely because it is we who engage in wonder—including wonder about such obscure topics as nothingness:

Wondering why there are beings is one way to become aware *that* there are being (which means that there is Being) and that we are aware of them; it helps us to become who we are, Da-Sein.<sup>10</sup>

Braver manages to convey the famously difficult discussion of nothingness to the reader without losing the import of what Heidegger is hoping to achieve and also manages to avoid making the discussion seem incoherent: "We have to be careful not to caricature Heidegger; he is not *rejecting* rationality or logic as genuine and important modes of access to beings."<sup>11</sup> Braver successfully manages to show the reader how 'What is Metaphysics?' can be considered as a development, rather than a simple repetition of, the fundamental themes of *Being and Time*. Braver, I think, manages to repeat the trick another seven times.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. [Lee's italics]

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. [Lee's italics]