

2003

Review of *Tradition(s) II: Hermeneutics, Ethics and the Dispensation of the Good*, by Stephen H. Watson

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#### Custom Citation

Dostal, Robert J. Review of *Tradition(s) II: Hermeneutics, Ethics and the Dispensation of the Good*, by Stephen H. Watson. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2003): 476-478.

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*Tradition(s)II: Hermeneutics, Ethics and the Dispensation of the Good.* By Stephen H. Watson. Indiana University Press, 2001. 301 pages. \$35.00.

This book completes the ambitious project begun with Tradition(s): Refiguring Community and Virtue in Classical German Thought (1997). Its narrow objective is to assess “the origin and significance of the concept of tradition in recent continental philosophy.”(Preface to I, xi) But the broader objective is the large and important task of re-appropriating the humanistic tradition, from Greek classical thought until today, and to articulate “the dispensation of the Good,” that is, to articulate the basis for a contemporary ethics and politics.

The first volume took up this theme in Kant and German Idealism. This second volume moves on to consider themes relevant to the concept of tradition in 20<sup>th</sup> century continental philosophy, particularly in French post-structuralism and especially in the work of Levinas. The book, however, is not a chronological history of the concept of tradition in contemporary European thought. Rather, it is a thematic treatment of the concept of tradition in conjunction with questions about its relation to law, politics, and community, to ethics and the sublime, to personhood and friendship, and to the Good and conceptions of humanism. Both books place the question of tradition quite usefully in the context of the larger history of Western philosophy, ancient, medieval and modern. Watson pays important attention to 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such as Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Ludwig Wittgenstein—something useful and yet unusual in work that pays so much attention to contemporary French thought.

From its point of departure with the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer. there is a kind of doubleness in the consideration of tradition: first, the account of “tradition” in the thought of various philosophers who paid the concept important attention, and second, the self-conscious awareness that “the tradition” is at an end or in ruins. The hermeneutics of both

Heidegger and Gadamer understand humans to be historical beings for whom tradition is importantly constitutive. At the same time, particularly for Heidegger, the theme of “ruin” (*Ruinanz*) is important at the early stages of his thought, especially in his phenomenological interpretation of Aristotle. In fact, as Watson shows us, modernity is itself very much defined by its hostility to tradition. Its founders sought to put an end to “the” tradition. Kant, who lays the stage for the developments of German Idealism and 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy, places his own project, based on “pure reason” amidst “the ruins of the ancient systems.” (A835/B863) Furthermore, Kant understands tradition to be an aspect of the “tutelage” which Enlightenment assists us in putting aside. Watson’s term for this central feature of modern thought is “detraditionalization.”

It is not clear to this reader where Watson leads us in his discussion of tradition and detradditionalization in 20<sup>th</sup> century continental thought. He tells us that he is leading us into the breach. He means to show how the question of “traditionality” bears on the basic questions of ethics and the Good, for, according to Watson following Heidegger and Levinas, the Good appears out of the breach.(19) This articulation is inevitably, on his account, both fragmentary and in a state “between”—between nature and history, between freedom and nature, between the universal and the singular, between the interpretation and the horizon, between the ontic and the ontological, between past and future. The list could go on. Watson wishes to restore meaning to humanism, to ethics, and to the idea of the Good. Yet there is a good deal of bafflement and paradox that goes on in his discussion of these themes. We readers find ourselves having to deal with remainders, traces, supplements and fragments. Watson plays with a large set of distinctions and dichotomies. Typically he neither denies the legitimacy of the distinction nor attempts to overcome the distinction from some larger perspective.

Watson's prose is dense and he qualifies too many claims by a "perhaps."

In addition, the connection of the chapters is not readily apparent. This may be due, in part, to the fact that several of these chapters had earlier lives. Of his method, Watson, at one point, says he follows a logic of "juxtaposition." The thread which leads the reader through the book is Heideggerian and Gadamerian hermeneutics which Watson confronts somewhat obliquely with the approaches of Levinas and deconstruction as well as critical theory. The first chapter discusses community in conjunction with Gadamer's retrieval of the Aristotelian conception of friendship. The second chapter, "The Respect for Law," takes us back to Dante's *humana civilitas* (and an interesting discussion of analogy and allegory), reminds us via Gadamer that there is such a thing as the friendship of citizens in Aristotle's account and that this is a hermeneutic virtue. The third and fourth chapters raise the questions of otherness and personhood. The fourth chapter includes a brief account of the history of the concept of the person. Acknowledging the force of Levinas' consideration of these issues, Watson importantly criticizes Levinas on behalf of hermeneutics. And in the fifth and final chapter, "The Dispensation of the Good," Watson returns to the opening theme of the place of the Good in the breach. Here he takes his lead from Wittgenstein and, especially, Heidegger. Acknowledging various criticisms of Heidegger's thought in this regard, Watson affirms what he calls Gadamer's "posttraditional phronesis" and Heidegger's ethics of care, for it is the supplement of care that enables us to retrieve humanism.

The center of the book is the consideration of Levinas. Following Francis Jacques (author of Difference and Subjectivity), Watson finds Levinas' self "held hostage in its relation to the other." Levinas has lost the Aristotelian notion of reciprocity in friendship.(150) Watson finds Levinas bound to a subjectivist antinomy and to Kantian obligationism.(196) This, for Watson,

goes back to Levinas' commitments to the 'foundation' of the separated ego and to abstract anonymous universality. Watson argues against the view that reciprocity is impossible and suggests that generosity (*philia*) can take us beyond the antinomies of egoism and alterity.

Thus, in the end, the thread of Watson's text leads us to a complicated, qualified, somewhat vague recovery of humanism that rests on an appreciation of the accomplishments of Heidegger and Gadamer and their furtherance of the Aristotelian and Stoic traditions. As a dialectical thinker, Watson is a both/and philosopher. He rejects the either/or. He writes: "In the end we require both: both the discernments of conscience and convention, civility and law, the 'saying' and the said, friendship and justice." (237) In the same vein, at the conclusion of the chapter on law, he writes that "incompleteness need not prevent the legitimacy of law and indeterminacy need not prevent the just rule of law," adding the qualifier "if both will always venture and require the supplement of recognition and care." (122)

I am very much sympathetic with the "both/and" conclusions of Stephen Watson's book and with his insights into Heidegger's and Gadamer's hermeneutics of empathy (as Watson refers to it). Yet I wonder if Watson does not bring to his analysis too much the generosity he praises as essential to friendship and civic virtue. That is, sometimes the differences among the views he considers are insufficiently attended to. For example, though Watson recognizes differences between Gadamer and Heidegger, important differences are understated—most importantly with regard to the concepts of beginning and origin. Though Heidegger has a much richer regard for and account of human historicality and traditionality than many of the Enlightenment figures that Watson considers, such as Hobbes, Descartes, and Kant, Heidegger is importantly aligned with them inasmuch as he sees tradition as blocking our access to our origins and beginnings. Like Hobbes and much of Enlightenment thought, Heidegger calls for the destruction of the tradition.

And like the genealogists Nietzsche and Husserl, Heidegger time and again looks to uncover the origins—of the artwork, for example—or he seeks another beginning. Gadamer thinks it a mistake to pursue the origin or to look for a new beginning. We always find ourselves in the middle of things. Watson writes of his account of Heideggerian and Gadamerian hermeneutics: “Hermeneutics so construed is less the return to origins than it is to the critical venture of their possibility.(53) I am not sure what this sentence means. If Watson means to carry forward a Gadamerian hermeneutics with its Aristotelian antecedents by consideration and accommodation of the critiques of critical theory and deconstruction, I ask how far can one accommodate these critiques. Similarly I wonder if Watson does not overstate his view of interpretation when he writes that it is anarchical and ateleological.(57) What does it mean to say that care is a supplement, while at the same time making it the center of one’s hermeneutical and ethical position? On the face of it, care is, by definition, teleological. And a hermeneutics of empathy and care would be similarly teleological.

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