
Immanence, Difference, and the Overcoming of Metaphysics

An Encounter with:
Leonard Lawlor. *Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*. Indiana
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In *Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, Leonard Lawlor has crafted a genuine encounter with the past and the future of continental thought. The book is invaluable for many reasons, not least of which is Lawlor's patient elaboration of the consequences of continental philosophy's discovery of "immanence" as much more than merely inner subjective experience. Beginning from Bergson's recognition that immanence is fundamentally openness to an outside, Lawlor systematically tells the story of continental philosophy as a relatively unified "research agenda" that culminates in nothing short of a transformation of humanity itself. Thus, this book is less a history of early twentieth-century continental philosophy than a genuine encounter with continental thought as a living trajectory with neither origin nor end, as a movement with a style and a *sense*. To read this book is to encounter a thinking at grips with its own past, and to catch sight of the directions and future of a field that has "overcome" metaphysics through the establishment of a paradoxically liberating experience of powerlessness. Lawlor's voice takes up its own multivocality in a self-conscious attempt to craft the "we" that is always past and yet "to come," and we (his readers) are fortunate to have his voice as a guide through a field that often resembles a tangled garden. Lawlor may hold to the side some of the richness of this tangled garden through his narrowing of the story to a single thread of an

unfolding research agenda, but what he gains is an inspiring foundation for thinking that sustains this richness and makes it possible for us to go further.

To establish his reading, Lawlor offers close studies of representative texts from Bergson, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Foucault. Each chapter begins with a short introduction, followed by a detailed “summary/commentary” where Lawlor provides invaluable insight into some of the iconic moments of the tradition. These insights are then reworked through “interpretation” sections that extend and explicate Lawlor’s unfolding narrative of continental philosophy. Finally, each chapter ends with a “transition” reflection that sets up the work to be done in the next phase of the project. This structure (which I will loosely mimic in this book encounter) is surely a happy artifact of the origin of this research. As Lawlor mentions in the acknowledgements to the text, the book has developed out of a graduate seminar he gave several times between 1999 and 2009 (first at the University of Memphis, then at Penn State University). The structure of each chapter indeed has the feel of a lecture, a fresh and engaged *reading*. The results are an engrossing and convincing pathway through more than half a century of discovery in continental thought.

I. *Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy as Introduction, Initiation, and Argument*

Lawlor suggests that his book aims to offer a general “introduction” to early twentieth-century continental philosophy, yet perhaps a better word for what he accomplishes is an *initiation*. Resisting the mode of a pure history of philosophy, Lawlor takes up a living, self-conscious engagement with a thought that remains underway. Indeed, the *history* of early twentieth-century continental philosophy (as he readily admits) is much more varied than the six

thinkers he takes as his focus. Yet his book marvelously *initiates* the reader into the trajectory of a movement and thereby does just what a genuine lecture course should do—it “enables one to study, with insight” (vii). Moreover, for the already-initiated reader, the text is perhaps even more valuable in its performance of multivocality. Even as Lawlor limits himself to phenomenology, Bergsonism, psychoanalysis, and certain strands of (post-)structuralism, other thinkers find voice in the silent way in which they structure his reading. Throughout, the trained ear will detect the absent voices shaping this text—Lacan, Levinas, Gadamer, Irigaray, Kristeva, Adorno, Sartre, etc. Above all, initiated readers cannot help but hear Derrida’s and Deleuze’s voices—sometimes breaking through, but always constantly murmuring just below the surface of Lawlor’s text. Lawlor is importantly committed to leaving aside a purely “negative” reading of the tradition that would aim to show where each step is insufficient to the aspirations of continental philosophy. His positive reading draws the texts in question into a creative relation that reveals an unfolding story and sets the stage for a future of continental thought.

Beyond an introduction and an initiation, Lawlor’s book is also an argument. He wants to establish that four interconnected “features” of continental philosophy structure the terrain of the “great French philosophy of the Sixties” (viii) and are indispensable moments for the future of continental thinking. These features are: 1) a focus on *immanence* as the development from Cartesian subjective experience to an encounter with “ungrounded experience”; 2) an engagement with *difference*, particularly in the form of multiplicity freed from origins and ends; 3) a recognition of *thought* in the non-reductive exploration of language as that which possesses us, rather than the reverse; and 4) a commitment to the *overcoming of metaphysics* of “presence,” which calls for a new thinking and a new humanity. This final feature is certainly an indication of Heidegger’s influence on Lawlor, and it also characterizes the ethical and political promise

motivating this “research agenda.” Lawlor calls us to think of continental philosophy not as a structure of names and theories, but as a project characterized by Heidegger’s question: “what is called or what calls for thinking?” Continental philosophy seeks to make thought new again, and therefore it is a struggle against the traditional image of thought (as common sense and good sense). In order to reach a genuine thinking, argues Lawlor, we must recognize that time is “at the heart of thinking” (5). The tradition, mesmerized by its image of thought, had failed to recognize the possibility of a thinking that is not bound up with an eternal presence. What calls for thinking is that which is normally unavailable to thought: non-presence, past and future, invisibility.

And yet the approach to thinking in continental philosophy differs from transcendental philosophy in a second way as well. Thought is, for the continental philosopher, not something I, as an ego, am capable of doing. Thought is not *accomplished* as the unfolding of an ability that preexists its expression. Thinking is, according to a prejudice that underlies traditional metaphysics, something accessible to all, a natural capacity for common sense and good sense (3). This image of thought prioritizes recognition, views truth as a correspondence, and assumes a form of questioning in which the answer is known by the questioner in advance. For continental philosophy, thought *happens*; thought is a paradoxical self-arrival. Closely following Deleuze, Lawlor emphasizes a thinking that is not the “good will,” but rather is violence and “*para-doxa*,” literally “against-opinion.” Continental philosophy aims (always, and after Deleuze, explicitly) to undo the traditional image of thought, to become thought without image, and to create concepts and encounters with an ungrounded experience. There is no second world behind thought of which thought is an image, and thought is not a faculty held in reserve waiting to be deployed by a self. Thought must forge itself in the face of its own groundlessness. To

reverse Platonism is to “overcome metaphysics,” and this is what happens in the moment, in the *Augenblick*, which is not the instant of presence. Much of continental philosophy is about exploring the moment, and is transcendental insofar as it is committed to the preparation for an *experience of the conditions of experience*.

Thus, suspending the natural attitude (as the experience of common sense and good sense) is the first step in any thinking, which suggests that continental philosophy is forever under the guiding star of the *epoché* as a disruption of common experience in order to establish an experience of the conditions of that experience. But the *epoché* is no more a natural human faculty than thinking was. If the guiding question of continental philosophy is “what is called or what calls for thinking?”, then the burning question must be “how is the *epoché* possible? How is it possible to change the natural way we think about thinking and being, that is, the natural way of conceiving everything in terms of the present?” (7). The *epoché* happens in a moment defined by *difference* (between past and future, beings and Being, words and things, self and Other). The experience of the moment thus is not a discovery of the preexisting conditions for it; it is a *conversion*. Humanity is not discovered through the *epoché*; it is created and is forever *becoming*. Experience of the moment also calls for language, which is older than any origin I can know, and which also remains open toward a future as never complete and fully spoken.

These structures lead Lawlor to the conclusion that “all continental philosophy is ethical or political” (10). As a questioning structured by difference, one is immediately asked to think about sexual difference, racial difference, and the difference between humans and animals. Yet this quick move to the political or the ethical does not provide “norms,” for norms are precisely the freezing of thinking. For Lawlor, continental philosophy amounts to “the movement from time to justice and politics, the movement from the question to responsibility and ethics” (11).

Continental philosophy is the attempt to hold open the ethical and political encounter in the mode of responsibility.

II. Summary/Commentary

As mentioned above, Lawlor explores continental philosophy through several iconic texts that capture key moments or steps in the research agenda named “continental philosophy.” All of the essays Lawlor chooses to explore are relatively manageable for his detailed engagement, and all of them both epitomize the thinking of the philosopher in question and illustrate key moments in their own development. It is worth mentioning how each thinker and selected text furthers Lawlor’s project of creating the narrative of continental philosophy from immanence to the overcoming of metaphysics.

(a) *Bergson’s “Introduction to Metaphysics” (1903)*

Lawlor’s reading of Bergson begins with an inescapable theme of continental philosophy not yet mentioned: the relation between philosophy and science. For Bergson, metaphysics has stalled because philosophers cannot make contact with “a science already much too scattered” (15). Science, argues Bergson, amounts to the work of the intellect or the understanding by way of *analysis*, a process through which knowledge is gained by taking external viewpoints upon things. But this merely sets up a system of symbolization by which thought becomes calculation and a genuine metaphysics becomes impossible. Bergson considers another type of knowing: *intuition*. Through intuition we gain not partial and finite knowledge, but an experience that is at once immediate and absolute. Because intuition gives us access to a certain form of immanence (self-affection), it involves opening us up to the non-present; it lets us gear into (the) *duration*. Thus, intuition discovers a “certain inside” or interiority, but one that (unlike Descartes’s and

Kant's versions of interiority) "does not enclose me, but opens me to the *outside*" (16). This structure requires nothing less than a thinking that takes up non-presence, and for this Bergson explores the possibilities of a language that includes "fluid concepts." The regular concept is a universal into which experience must fit; the fluid concept is singular and concrete, and signifies only insofar as this "*concept does not contain the complete experience*" (Lawlor quoting Bergson, 31). With this new concept of the concept, we can begin to speak of the non-presence of experience and the possibility of how we, as finite beings, have access to Bergson's famous "heterogeneous multiplicity," since "the whole is never given" (Lawlor quoting Bergson, 36). In short, Bergson establishes the question of difference (through "multiplicity") and the requirements of a new approach to language (through the "fluid concept").

(b) Freud's "The Unconscious" (1915)

If consciousness is open to a certain "outside" beyond the conscious present, this naturally leads one to ask about the "unconscious." In Freud, we learn to debunk the prejudice that places so much importance upon present conscious experience. "Being conscious" is re-conceived as a "symptom of the unconscious" (38). The study of the unconscious is a practice in correcting naive inner perception, but the problem for Freud is to account for how we can *recognize* the unconscious when in fact we only ever have access to it through its "derivatives." A second problem again raises the question of language, since the unconscious must be *translated* into consciousness. For Freud, then, the study of the schizophrenic's use of language reveals a language freed from the constraints of the conscious present. For Lawlor, this is the discovery of "schizophrenic thought" in which language is broken apart from a preexisting original text in the same way that desire is shown to have no original moment of object-possession. Given that it emerges from the unconscious, language is not something *possessed* by

the speaker, but rather the inverse. Like Bergson's "fluid concepts," the schizophrenic image shows how the "sense" of the image does not contain "the whole of the experience" (61). Overall, Lawlor attributes to Freud two key contributions to the research agenda: 1) the recognition that consciousness must be understood as "within a larger system, that of the unconscious" (63); and 2) the raising of the question of the being of language.

(c) Husserl's *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry "Phenomenology" (1929)

As Lawlor rightly notes, some of the key insights of Bergson and Freud seem to remain far from the spirit and direction of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Indeed, the heart of phenomenology is to be found in the Cartesian inspired *epoché*—"the suspension of belief in transcendent reality" which results in a reduction of experience to the realm of phenomenologically reduced subjective experience (63). But the key is that the immanence reached by phenomenological reduction is not "merely psychological." Unlike Kant, Husserl insists that the conditions of experience sought by a transcendental method can themselves be experienced. The key for phenomenology is not the gulf between experience and the conditions of possibility of that experience, but rather a difference within experience itself. Phenomenology is (despite any appearances) a philosophy of difference.

Husserl's *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry explores the attitude or approach of transcendental phenomenology as a "not-natural," "strange and unfamiliar kind of thinking" (65). Phenomenological investigations quickly lead Husserl toward a purification of psychology and the recognition that subjectivity is always already intersubjectivity (since the pure phenomenological psychology will have to be "for everyone") (67). But beyond this abstract generality, phenomenology finds that "already the self-experience of the psychologist is everywhere *intertwined* with external experience, with that of extra-psychical real things"

(Lawlor quoting Husserl, 68). Through a fascinating study of the word *Schein* (semblance and shining through), Lawlor argues that Husserl is instituting a sort of ontological difference between the present as an appearance and the apperception that makes an absence present. In short, this encyclopedia entry (under the influence of Heidegger) shows cracks in Husserl's philosophy of consciousness (metaphysics of presence) such that something like an unconscious and non-presence necessarily "shines through." The immediate givens of consciousness give way to a consciousness that harbours a "latency" or a "distance" (84). This reveals that phenomenology is a transformation of lived experience since genetic phenomenology destroys the immediate by laying bare its sources in habits and passivities (84). The *epoché* is indispensable and universal, and is perhaps our only means of going *beyond* metaphysics. Yet a genuine thinking requires a new language, which leads us to Lawlor's discussion of Heidegger.

(d) Early Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?"

Bergson, Freud, and Husserl have moved us along the first three stages of what Lawlor calls the research agenda of continental philosophy: 1) the development of a thinking that begins from immanence; 2) the recognition that immanence properly understood leads to multiplicity and difference; and 3) the understanding that multiplicity and difference will require a language that is freed from the structures of logic, traditionally understood. This leads to something like an "overcoming of metaphysics," the fourth stage in the research agenda. Heidegger offers, for Lawlor, the most clear statement of this overcoming and he is the one who recognizes that such an overcoming is in fact a "transformation of humanity" (89). The transformation is accomplished if we can bring ourselves to dwell in an understanding of human existence in "the difference between Being and beings" (89), or what Heidegger later calls the "event of

appropriation” or *Ereignis*. The chapter on early Heidegger explores the essay “What is Metaphysics?,” which asks the question: “how is it with the nothing?”

A guiding theme of this chapter is again the role of science. According to Heidegger, scientific thinking—which importantly characterizes contemporary *Dasein*—is uninterested in the question of the nothing. Science asks about beings, and wants to know nothing of the nothing. This, however, is a recognition of the nothing as that of which we would like to know nothing. Science thus defines its borders and its essence with reference to the nothing (94). For Heidegger, much is at stake in uncovering how the nothing is not the result of a specific act or capacity for negation (which is the only way in which a thinking governed by science can understand it). Rather, despite the objections of logic and science, we are able to *encounter* the nothing. We are familiar with the nothing, and we can dethrone the dominion of the intellect “on the basis of a fundamental experience of the nothing” (Lawlor quoting Heidegger, 97). This is possible because *Dasein* is forever moody, and two moods in particular lead us to an experience of the nothing. First, in profound boredom we experience the totality of beings as detached from any sense of worthy projects. Boredom reveals beings as a whole. The nothing appears when this totality is nihilated in the fundamental mood of anxiety. In anxiety, we become “not at home” in the world of beings; we are even “not ourselves.” The nothing haunts us in anxiety, but not such that it shows itself. We experience the nothing as the slipping away of the whole, and this establishes a key theme for Lawlor: *powerlessness* (100). The experience of the nothing is something that happens to us, not something we accomplish. *Dasein* exists as that which is “held out into the nothing,” held out over the “ground of concealed anxiety,” and thus is that which is “transcendence” from within immanence. The engine that makes it such that we are thus held out is the “peculiar insertion of our own existence into the fundamental *possibilities* of *Dasein* as a

whole,” in short, our being toward death as the outside or as the possibility of our own impossibility (Lawlor quoting Heidegger, 108).

(e) *Later Heidegger’s “Language” (1950)*

The feeling of powerlessness in the face of the nothing opens, for Lawlor, the question of how the overcoming of metaphysics is a transformation of humanity. Indeed, calculation or scientific thinking wants to know nothing of the nothing, or at least it wants to reduce the experience of the nothing to the intellectual activity of negation, thereby preserving the power of the understanding at the heart of human existence. Yet “the nothing itself nothings” (114). This powerlessness is repeated in the question of dwelling within a language that speaks, where “speech itself speaks” (114). Indeed, language is not our possession, but rather we are possessed by language. Language is what calls forth the things and the world, and the event of appropriation, *Ereignis*, is the place of this calling forth. Humanity is transformed when it endeavours to dwell in the place of this difference (115-16). As Lawlor writes: “Language speaks by calling world and thing into the advent of the difference” and “[b]eing enough, the world and thing allow for silence” (130; 131). Listening is not a pure passivity, but an anticipation of what is about to arrive and an openness to the surprise of the event.

(f) *Merleau-Ponty’s “Eye and Mind” (1961)*

If Heidegger teaches us to dwell within language, then Merleau-Ponty teaches us the importance of dwelling within the “texture of the visible” (141). For Lawlor, Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished late thinking embodies all of the components of continental philosophy’s research agenda. In Merleau-Ponty, the first step of “immanence” is epitomized by the description of the seer-seen relation as intertwining and encroachment. The second step of recognizing multiplicity/difference happens insofar as auto-affection (self-touching) forever involves an *écart*

or a spacing that institutes a depth or invisibility (in short: auto-affection for Merleau-Ponty is always already hetero-affection). Third, Merleau-Ponty's account of language through expression resists the classical models of speaking and logic such that language can be seen as "the advent of being." Finally, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the overcoming of traditional metaphysics requires a transformation of humanity from the operational thinking of modernity and science into a thinking that can "dwell in the texture of the visible" (143). Through painting, humans are the place of difference, the locus where the invisible is the lining of the visible, and hence the ontology of painting makes way for an encounter with Being from within immanence. The "silent science" of depth, line, color, and movement—explored in "Eye and Mind" as revealed through painting—places human existence back into touch with vision as the fundamental "reversibility of seeing and Being" (161).

(g) Foucault's "The Thought of the Outside" (1966)

Lawlor does an excellent job in this chapter placing Foucault into the research agenda named "continental philosophy," particularly in light of Foucault's ambiguous relationship with phenomenology. There is, of course, no doubt that Foucault sought an "overcoming of metaphysics" as well, and his reform of Kantian critique is explicitly aimed at separating "out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, thinking what we are, do, or think" (Lawlor quoting Foucault, 175). Reason must be rethought, re-invented, so as to renew metaphysics beyond the static place traditional logic has led it. Through a study of contemporary literature, Foucault seeks "a thought of the murmur," a "thought of the outside." In contemporary literature, language speaks. Language becomes what Foucault calls "the always undone form of the outside," and thus is what situates us forever within an incomplete contact with both origin and death. For Lawlor, this reveals the importance

of a language as a certain “nameless voice” that speaks through me within the experience of immanence. Language structures the outside and thus precedes both subjectivity and objectivity (197). Language forever remains outside, as the murmur that initiates the difference that is the place of human existence and sense.

III. Interpretation

In the “Conclusion/Further Questions” section of the book, Lawlor suggests that the research agenda named “continental philosophy” can be summed up by a single sentence: the attempt “to construct a discourse that leads us to an experience that puts ourselves in question” (203). Such a discourse is meant to transform how we think of humanity, and thereby to transform humanity itself. This amounts to a return to immanence and to a critique of presence. Because we are never transcendent (in the traditional sense), we are essentially related to that which is past or invisible, and so the illusions of auto-affection as simple self-presence must, above all, be critiqued.

This leads Lawlor to the concluding discussion of the experience of *hearing oneself speak*, an experience at the heart of traditional metaphysics of presence since Plato. The experience epitomizes the illusion of power (since *I* seem to speak) and the illusion of presence (since *I* seem to hear in immediacy). As continental philosophy has shown, any experience (such that it can be experience) must include more than pure presence. It must be *duration* as a trajectory that carries forward the past. In addition, I do not invent the language I speak. My speech, and even my silent inner monologue, must be constructed of “repeatable traits” (205), and thus each speaking is in some way a response to the past of the spoken. Following the remarkable work of Fred Evans (see *The Multivoiced Body*), Lawlor writes: “when I speak to

myself, I speak with the sounds of others. In other words, it means that I find in myself other voices, which come from the past; the many voices are in me. ... [I]t is impossible for me to hear myself speak all alone. There is a multivocality” (205). The always-already-contaminated-by-the-outside nature of experience is indeed at the heart of what contemporary continental philosophy continues to try to think. The conclusions Lawlor draws about the complexity and incomplete nature of the experience of the present thus show that our condition is necessarily without origin and without end, and that deconstruction leads to a new metaphysical thinking of powerlessness, violence, and injustice (207).

Lawlor’s ultimate aim in *Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy* is to offer—in light of the necessity of powerlessness, of violence, and of the injustice revealed through the deconstruction of metaphysics—what he takes to be the promise of an ethics. He suggests that rather than trying to remove the violence of existence through the even worse violence of the reification of presence, we ought to work toward a form of listening and obedience to the necessary violence of repetition and powerlessness. This, it seems, sets humanity up as a task rather than as a community, as an open future and an open place by which “a people” and “a land” may come to safeguard the opening of Being.

Transition/Conclusion

The final line of Lawlor’s book suggests that if we hold fast to the insights of immanence, difference, and the overcoming of metaphysics, “then perhaps continental philosophy has a future” (210). And indeed, perhaps nowhere is the future of continental philosophy expressed better than in these fascinating final pages of Lawlor’s book. Although continental philosophy is arguably broader than just the research agenda presented in Lawlor’s

book, the unfolding story of continental philosophy thus conceived offers us a key to reading the subsequent developments in this “research agenda” as well as the chance to join with a project with such urgent aspirations. Lawlor’s book is an invaluable initiation for those who will continue this research project named continental philosophy.

Work Cited

Evans, Fred. *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.