

BOOK REVIEW

Vincent Blok's

*Heidegger's Concept of Philosophical Method:
Innovating Philosophy in the
Age of Global Warming*

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Vincent Blok, *Heidegger's Concept of Philosophical Method: Innovating Philosophy in the Age of Global Warming*. Routledge, 2020. 322 pages.

Heidegger's Philosophical Concept of Method: Innovating Philosophy in the Age of Global Warming stands as an ambitious and perspicacious study that succeeds in combining careful scholarship with a surplus of independent thought. Through a sensitivity to the numerous upheavals and switchbacks along Heidegger's philosophical way, Blok brings to life several of Heidegger's key themes in order to reignite the question of the possibility and place of method in contemporary philosophy. In his introduction, Blok argues that the true crisis of twenty-first century philosophy is not the dominance of subjectivity problematized by Meillassoux, nor the scientific objectivism problematized by Husserl and Heidegger, but our "indifference towards philosophical method" (10). This renewal of the question of philosophical method is developed by Blok, not only in response to the lack of concern with method displayed

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by twentieth-century postmodernism and twenty-first-century speculative realism, but with equal importance to serve as an invaluable beginning to the question of our place on Earth. The goal of this book is not solely to explicate a Heideggerian concept of philosophical method, but, on the basis of these methodological reflections, to develop “a post-Heideggerian concept of the Earth as uncorrelated being” (21) that can better address the philosophical problems engendered by global warming. Blok achieves these two goals through a balance of far-reaching analysis spanning almost the entire range of the Heidegger corpus and inventive criticism that stretches and transforms the Heideggerian concepts of will, poetry, religion, and Earth, to name only a few.

Blok’s book is divided into seven chapters. The first four chapters provide an in-depth analysis of Heidegger’s philosophical methodology with a primary, but not exclusive focus on Heidegger’s writings of the 1930s. The final three chapters provide a substantial critique of Heidegger’s thought in light of the author’s own novel contributions to how we can think of Earth in a post-Heideggerian age with the existential threat of climate catastrophe looming on the horizon. I will begin with an outline of the seven chapters.

Chapter One: Philosophical Method as Hermeneutic Phenomenology

In this chapter, Blok delineates Heidegger’s “unique phenomenological method” through an immanent critique of Husserl and the theoretical attitude. Instead of taking a position in front of the phenomenon, hermeneutical phenomenology is “rooted in our understanding of a meaningful world which always already surrounds us and in which we are always already at home” (45). Yet, since our everyday interpretations of this meaningful world are always already “pre-structured and guided by the metaphysical tradition” (45), Heidegger’s phenomenology is oriented through patiently questioning and de-structuring the meaning of the philosophical concepts that determine our everydayness. Furthermore, it seeks to grasp the constituting *relation* and *enactment* (the “how” of the object’s relation as well as the “how” in which philosophy reflects on this relation) that are a part of the

original meaning of the concept. Blok outlines three meanings of the enactment of hermeneutical phenomenology that must be kept in mind. The first is that hermeneutical phenomenology pushes for a *decision* between either focusing on the objective world or inquiring toward the grounding relation that constitutes being as object and thinking as subject. Secondly, it means acknowledging the circular relation between “our being at home in a pre-structured meaning of the world, our destruction of this meaning and our exploration of new meanings” (50). Thirdly, it means that philosophical concepts are “not only destructed but also explored and stretched in order to enable them to articulate the reaction between being and thinking” (51).

Chapter Two: Philosophical Method as Questioning

Blok begins this chapter by differentiating Heidegger’s mode of questioning from metaphysical questioning. In contrast to the metaphysical guiding question that seeks answers to what something is, Heidegger’s grounding question consists in “opening up beings in their question-worthiness” (59). This radical form of questioning has four essential characteristics that distinguish it from metaphysical questioning. The first is human Dasein’s inclusion within the exploration of questioning itself. Secondly, the relation of being (concealment) and thinking (unconcealment) is primary. Thirdly, this questioning requires the emergence of being to disrupt or displace our questioning of the guiding question and lead us to the event of its original enactment. Lastly, this questioning “requires the actual interrogative *intention* and creativity to explore the whole of being” (81; my emphasis). This last characteristic is one Blok says that, “Heidegger would reject.” For Blok, however, questioning cannot simply be a receptive listening to the call of being in its emergence, but demands the ability to be creatively responsive to this call, and this requires a post-Heideggerian concept of willing that can do justice to the interrogative intention and creativity required to inquisitively explore the “whole of being” (81).

Chapter Three: Philosophical Method as “Religionized” Reason

In this chapter, Blok proposes a destructed concept of religion pertinent to Heidegger’s methodology. It has three identifiable moments, each derived from the etymology of the word “religion” itself. The first is that the “exploration of questioning is a retrieval of questioning – *relegere* – as a careful going through and rereading of the questioning – *relegere*” (92). This sense of religion plays off the Latin word *relegere*, which means to diligently pursue and practice over again. The second is that an exploration of questioning by *relegere* results in the need to experience a religious de-cision, or a *re-eligere*. This sense of religion as *re-eligere* is derived from Augustine in so far as we must repeatedly make the decision to choose God. This de-cision in Heidegger’s destructed concept of religion “demands a separation” (93) between the guiding question and the grounding question of being as such, which requires a leap of human being into Dasein where authentic questioning can begin. The third sense of religion is that the religious de-cision can be also considered a *relinquere*, the “abandonment of ourselves as representing subjects in order to become opened for the whole of being by this whole, and to devote ourselves to the whole of being” (95).

Chapter Four: Philosophical Method as Explorative Confrontation

Blok argues in this chapter that the exploration of questioning in Heidegger’s philosophical method, outlined in the previous two chapters, has to be understood as an explorative confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*). Explorative confrontation attempts to think from within the difference between the guiding question and the grounding question and thus operates through a “logic of difference” (136). Similarly to the third sense of religion as *relinquere*, in explorative confrontation we also have to “bid farewell to ourselves as interpretive subjects in favor of being exposed (Dasein) to the meaning of being” (137). Explorative confrontation then, in conjunction with the raising of the grounding question, allows us to begin to “differentiate a new meaning of our being-in-the-world” (137). Following Heidegger’s first lecture course on Nietzsche from 1937, Blok explicates a destructed concept of willing

formed by Heidegger that is a “being-beyond-oneself” (142). In this being lifted beyond oneself, the will exposes itself to the “Da,” “the openness and concealment of beings” (142).

Chapter Five: Philosophical Method as Creative Voluntarism

Now turning to the critical portion of his book, Blok raises the critical question towards Heidegger of whether this method of confrontation actually “achieves its pretension of a logic of difference, or whether this difference is in the end abolished by a logic of unity” (151). He argues that there is a persistent circularity in Heidegger’s thought between his philosophical “method of confrontation and its object of research” (166). For Blok, a possible strategy for moving forward from this undecidedness in Heidegger’s philosophical method between a logic of unity and a logic of difference requires the development of a post-Heideggerian concept of willing. Does the will have to will itself? Is the self-interest of the will as self-evident as Heidegger took it to be? Blok argues that the phenomenon of willing possesses five characteristics overlooked or deemphasized by Heidegger’s analysis of the will from the 1930s: the interconnectedness of the one who wills and that which is willed, the transcendence of that which is willed, the attentive responsiveness of the one who wills, the world-interest (as opposed to self-interest) of willing, and willing as performative amplification of the affordance of that which is willed. These five characteristics, argues Blok, constitute a destructed concept of the will that supports a logic of difference, prevents a circularity in method, and introduces world-interest as the determining feature of willing.

Chapter Six: Philosophical Method as Poetry

In this chapter, Blok questions the extent to which Heidegger can maintain in his philosophy a strict distinction between willing and poetic creativity. This strict distinction is questionable, for Blok, on the grounds that since both willing projection and artistic creation are variations of *technē*, the difference between them must be “found in their different orientations, that is, external to them, namely as machination and lived experience and as the truth of being” (211). In rejecting Heidegger’s

strict distinction between willing and art, Blok seeks to keep open the possibility of a “non-metaphysical willing projection of the truth of being” (211) that builds upon his destructed concept of world-interested willing developed in the previous chapter. Blok then proceeds to question another important distinction within Heidegger’s thought: that of poetry and philosophy. He argues that poetry and philosophy merge in Heidegger’s thought more than they diverge. With this being the case, philosophy does not require poetry to implant the need of the other beginning. Instead, the existential threat of climate change can be the creative impetus for a new conceptualization of philosophical method. This method, based in a destructed, world-interested concept of willing, would no longer be “confined to a strategy that connects the world of machination with the truth of being, but is extended to a strategy that delineates a different or possible but distant world” (251). Blok envisions philosophy extending beyond its roles of commenting upon and conceptualizing the present and, instead, beginning a “continuous experimentation with the delineation of a new but distant world” (251), similar to how Heidegger envisioned poetry trailblazing for the other beginning.

Chapter Seven: Philosophical Method as Earthbound Confrontation

In the final chapter of his book, Blok proposes the hypothesis that the Earth remains in Heidegger’s thinking “unconceptualized” (264). This is not to reject Heidegger’s notion of Earth as developed in the 1930s; rather he argues that Heidegger’s concept of Earth gives only a negative characterization of Earth, one that depends on thinking the Earth (uncorrelated being) through the characteristics of world (correlated being). In order to give what Blok calls a more “*positive* characterization of Earth” (272), he turns to Meillassoux as someone who conceives of Earth as not just the counterpart to world in a constitutive strife, but as the very “ontic-ontological origin of Heidegger’s concept of the strife between Earth and world” (274). This helps in reflecting upon how an ontic phenomenon such as global warming can have ontological effects. In the second half of the chapter, Blok outlines five principles of a positive ontic-ontological concept of the materiality of the Earth: Earth’s conativity, non-identity,

responsiveness, performativity, and eventuality. His primary inspiration for these principles is Spinoza, and he enters into brief dialogue with neo-Spinozists like Deleuze, Jonathan Bennett, and Timothy Morton in order to clarify his position. This Spinozist turn helps to clarify Blok's conception of Earth as inexhaustibly productive, ontologically distinct from material entities, and beyond human understanding.

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It is thought-provoking to write a book on philosophical method with Heidegger as the primary interlocutor. Is not Heidegger a thinker of hermeneutics, the art of interpretation guided not by a set of rules or steps to follow, but by our tacit, pre-ontological understanding of being? If this book is written in response to the methodological untidiness of thinkers like Meillassoux, why not choose a thinker like Deleuze to be the primary interlocutor, someone who, in numerous texts, including his Bergson book, openly embraces the need for methodological rigor in philosophy? The place to begin a critical engagement with this book is the question of whether Heidegger's philosophy is compatible with a study on method. At what point can we say that Heidegger is a methodological thinker, given that he explicitly ties the use of method with a theoretical comportment toward beings? (GA 2: 94/SZ 69). In *Being and Time*, what Heidegger understands as method is not the way toward investigating the engaged, circum-spective vision that discloses being-in-the-world. Method pertains to non-circumspect, theoretical vision, as its rules best serve to guide an inquiry into beings that are present-at-hand. The very theoretical attitude that Blok follows Heidegger in criticizing seems to be precisely what an adherence to method signifies. As his philosophy matured, Heidegger consistently moved further and further away from the question of the possibility of a methodological approach to the question of being. The late Heidegger wrote, "In philosophy there are only ways; in the sciences, by contrast, methods, that is, modes of procedure [*Verfahrensweisen*]" (GA 15: 399/FS 80). Method is procedure, a planning out in advance such that the steps of the procedure can be duplicated by others who follow its steps. Philosophical thinking, by

contrast, is intensely singular. Ways of thinking are not foreseeable in advance but must emerge from out of a temporally finite situation. A way of thinking then must be more sensitive to the moment (*Augenblick*) of eventuation than to any generalizable rules of procedure. By the period of Heidegger's later thought, it becomes pronounced that method is a mode of access tied essentially together with a scientific, or objective, revealing of beings, and philosophical thought must walk another path.

But this is not the whole story of Heidegger on method. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes that "the expression 'phenomenology' signifies primarily a concept of method" (GA 2: 37/27). For the early Heidegger, phenomenology is methodological. Yet, as was mentioned above, he also acknowledges that method pertains, usually, to the theoretical vision characteristic of the sciences. What follows after he declares phenomenology as his method is telling. Phenomenology as method does not, as Heidegger writes, "characterize the what of the objects... but the how of such research" (GA 2: 37/27). There is here the possibility that the right method cannot only access the what of beings (their scientifically verifiable, objective content), but can also access the being of beings (their how). Heidegger also writes that if a genuinely effective concept of method is rooted in "confrontation with the things themselves," there is the possibility that it may avoid the fate of becoming a "technical device, of which there are many in the theoretical disciplines" (GA 2: 37/27). These two claims speak to an expanded sense of method such that it does not exclude the possibility that a questioning into being can be undertaken in a methodological fashion. This also lends support to Blok's characterization of Heideggerian method as being one of explorative confrontation. There is no denying that philosophy requires a certain rigor if it is not to fall into an interpretation of phenomena in terms of everydayness. Can that rigor be upheld through an adherence to phenomenology as a method? Or is an adherence to method what drives our interpretations into that everydayness?

While the early Heidegger, with a few caveats, embraces the use of method to describe philosophical thought, the later Heidegger clearly departs from the language of method and its insuperable relationship

to scientific knowledge and the theoretical attitude. The question that could be understood to underlie this turn in Heidegger's thinking is this one: Is it possible for method to divest itself of the theoretical attitude and still be considered methodological? One of the difficulties in gaining clarity on this question through Blok's study is that he does not inquire into the history and etymology of the word "method" before assigning it a central role in his study, leaving the reader at times to wonder what exactly the author assumes method to mean. What history is he informed by, and why *must* philosophy, for Blok, have a method, since his criticism of the twenty-first century realists (Meillassoux, Harman) is centered around their not having achieved sufficient methodological clarity? We can agree, along with Blok, that the twenty-first century speculative realists have perhaps lost touch with "the matter itself" (GA 29/30: 3/3). We can also agree that philosophy, if it is to resist unraveling into sophistry, must demonstrate some commitment to being rigorous in its questioning and cautious in its conclusions. A reevaluation of the use of method may be one key to philosophy's constitutive struggle with non-philosophy. But until we are better able to understand the relationship between method and theoretical objectivity, the demand for a reengagement of philosophy with method is unconvincing and supremely questionable.

In conclusion, this is a book that grapples with two distinct issues: the question of philosophic method and the need for reflection about our place on Earth. Blok claims that these two issues are "intertwined" (21), but this interrelation is proposed without being sufficiently argued for and made convincing to the reader. This book succeeds as a thought-provoking development of the philosophical method of explorative confrontation *and* as a foray into a conception of Earth as uncorrelated being, yet the necessity to include the latter in a book that primarily deals with the former is unclear. Regardless of its cohesion, Blok's book is a welcome challenge to the status quo of many contemporary variations of philosophical realism and their indifference toward method.