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Review Of "After The Beautiful: Hegel And The Philosophy Of Pictorial Modernism" By R. B. Pippin

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After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism, by Robert B. Pippin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. x, 159pp. H/b £21.00

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In *After the Beautiful*, Robert Pippin articulates and defends a modified version of Hegelian philosophy of art. The “after” in his title indicates both “in the spirit and style of” and “since,” so that we are offered a recognizably Hegelian story that is also distinctively adapted to modern life and art in surprising, non-Hegelian ways. He then undertakes to put this Hegelian philosophy of art to work to investigate and elucidate the achievements of pictorial modernism, principally those of Manet and Cezanne, “the grandfather and father of modernism in painting,” as Pippin puts it (p. 2). The articulation, defense, investigation, and elucidation are organized around two sets of large, important claims that Pippin makes about Hegel.

1) Hegel is right that art, or at least important art that is responsive to the highest ambitions and possibilities of artmaking, is a socially inflected, affective-sensuous presentation that serves as a critical vehicle of self-knowledge in relation to possibilities (and inhibitions) of free and meaningful life, individual and joint. This way of thinking about art puts Hegel importantly at odds with the two main streams of philosophy of art in the Anglo-American tradition of the last four hundred or so years: taste theory, with its obsession with whether identifications of works of art are objective, subjective, or

something in between, and forms of modernist theory that emphasize the autonomy of artistic works and forms from cognitive and social content. (Hegelian and neo-Hegelian views have had more life within the German tradition in the philosophy of art; in the English-speaking world, there are echoes of Hegel in Collingwood, Dewey, and Danto.) As Pippin sees things, that some major works of art conspicuously matter to and for us by presenting important human content sensuously and affectively is pretty much obviously true, and it is a significant virtue of the Hegelian stance that it articulates this fact.

2) But Hegel is wrong to hold, as he did most conspicuously in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, that full or even generally satisfactory 'binding' to modern life is available to effectively all individuals and groups under the mediating structures of modern social institutions. That modern life is "a world of freedom realized, or reconciled social relations of persons who are free because they actually stand in relations of at least institutionally secured mutuality of recognition" is, as Pippin puts it contra Hegel, "clearly false as a claim about European modernity in the first third of the nineteenth century" and after (p. 37).

The consequence of these two sets of claims is that we are to see "artworks as elements in ...a collective attempt at self-knowledge across historical time, and to see such self-knowledge as essential elements [sic] in the struggle for the realization of freedom, where freedom is understood in [an] identificatory, expressivist sense" as a matter of a "nonalienated relation to [one's] deeds" (p. 25). (It would be pertinent to compare this understanding of freedom with the account of "expressive freedom" as "the achievement of further understanding coupled with strengthened and purified affections then discharged in a dense, medium-specific performance of working through, in which a

point of view is made manifest and recognition and like-mindedness are successfully solicited” that is present in Richard Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity* [Columbia, 2008], p. 109.)

Pippin fills in the relevant identificatory, expressivist sense of freedom by noting that coming to have and to sustain what he calls a “practical identity” is a practical problem for us. “For Hegel, what we take ourselves to be is an avowal or commitment, a pledge about what we shall keep faith with, and is not a simple self-observation” (p. 41). Nor is a practical identity something that one can simply will on one’s own, since the available act descriptions for what one is doing are significantly socially afforded, and since one must be recognized by others to be doing what one takes oneself to do, under a description, if that characterization is to be sustainable (p. 19).

Given the widely ramified and often significantly divergent and mutually opaque social roles that are available within a modern industrial-technological economy, it will frequently enough be difficult to work out and sustain a practical identity that is widely endorsable under shared act-descriptions. Achieving and sustaining an endorsable practical identity is, moreover, a specially pressing problem for artists within such an economy, when art no longer has core religious-ritual functions and when a patronage system has given way to a market system for art’s production and distribution. Hegel in fact registers this fact in noting the increasing subjectivization of art in modernity: the ability of artists to choose any subject matters and media. The price of this freedom is then a pervasive and standing anxiety, at least for artists of major ambition, about how to make such choices so as to manifest an endorsable practical identity in one’s work. As Hegel puts it, what is to be done in a work in order to accomplish this must be worked out

(*herausgearbeitet*). (Compare the account of working through, *durcharbeiten*, in Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity*, pp. 18-19, 111.) As Pippin puts it in commenting on this crucial word, “We don’t know, in any determinate or ‘living’ detail, who we actually take ourselves to be except *in* such externalization, either in action or in such material production as artworks” (p. 41). Hence the struggles of artists to achieve practical identity in an artistic work that in its materials and organization embodies fullness of attention to difficult modern life—struggles that are sometimes successfully enough concluded—become significant models of human struggles to achieve practical identity as such.

Drawing on and developing this background story, Pippin then turns to the details of how Manet and Cezanne exemplarily address the problem of artistic practical identity and of fullness of attention in specific paintings. In doing this he turns to the art historians Michael Fried, especially his *Absorption and Theatricality* and *Manet’s Modernism*, and T. J. Clark, especially his *The Painting of Modern Life*. Roughly and schematically, Fried emphasizes the pictorial achievement of absorptiveness—what Kant called our being moved to linger in (*verweilen*) the painting’s working of thematically charged forms and materials. Clark emphasizes the motivation of painting by (the artist’s sense of) difficult social circumstances and painting’s address to these circumstances. In bringing these two figures together, Pippin argues effectively that their modes of attention to art are more complementary than they are often taken to be, and this in virtue of the fact—as the neo-Hegelian story makes manifest—that art has both a cognitive-social content and a compelling sensuous-affective mode of presenting it. This complementarity and its

relation to the neo-Hegelian story are important, major results for art historians and philosophers of art.

It is impossible to do justice in a short review to the detailed readings of specific paintings that Pippin develops by drawing on Fried and Clark. Especially striking and insightful to me were the readings of Manet's *Arguenteuil* (1874) and *Boating* (1874), where Pippin focuses on the "'weakened presence' of animated subjectivity" in the expressions of the principal figures. In Cezanne's *Large Bathers* series (1894-1905, 1895-1906, 1906), Pippin sees objects, including people, simply coming into being, as if from vibrations within them, as brute presences, and in doing so as registering an absence of available social meaning for human subjects. To my eye, this reading underplays the air of oneiric, infantile sexuality in these paintings upon which, as Pippin notes (p. 128n.4), Clark has remarked. These will be matters for readers and viewers to consider for themselves. Pippin's larger argument that modern paintings at the hands of Manet and Cezanne present such *kinds* of meanings visually, affectively, and sensuously, in ways that Hegel *redevivus* helps us to understand, is unimpeachable.

Outside the philosophy of art alone, one broader significance of this kind of work is its drawing of connections between topics in the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of art, and social philosophy. If meaning can be embodied in art in those ways, in relation to socially situated possibilities of practical identity, then there are more varieties of meaning, thought, and value for the philosophy of mind, ethics, and social philosophy to consider than they sometimes do. This, too, is an important result.

In describing the affective-sensuous presence of some successful major paintings, Pippin sometimes displays a certain awkwardness about the aesthetic. "After" in "after

the beautiful” sometimes indicates art that does not strive for beauty, with the airs of decorativeness and entertainment that “the beautiful” may suggest (p. 133). Yet Pippin also describes the artistic achievement of these paintings as the achievement of “aesthetic intelligibility” understood as “a distinct-sensible affective modality of intelligibility” (p. 135). Sorting out the difference between the merely sensuously pleasant (the agreeable in Kantian terms) and the beautiful with its distinct aesthetic intelligibility would take more theoretical labor than Pippin undertakes here directly. Arguably, however, Pippin’s indirectness about this issue might be the path of wisdom, since anyone who is unable to see that something like aesthetic intelligibility is what is on offer in Manet and Cezanne is unlikely to be brought to this thought by a general theory of the aesthetic.

Finally, one might wonder whether “freedom in an identificatory-expressivist sense” really matters very much to very many people other than a few major obsessive artists and those who fall under their sways. Is it really possible to achieve this kind of freedom, this kind of expressive practical identity in fullness of artistic attention to difficult life? Is it really something of central value to very many? There are no simple, straightforward answers to these questions. One might suppose that while the answers are “no, not absolutely” (so that artistic achievements have less than perfect absoluteness and stability), and “for many people, not so much of the time” (so that the production and experience of major art are less pressing matters than, say, earning a living wage, politics, or the pursuit of theoretical knowledge). But then one might also suppose that some kind of art matters intensely to almost all people at some moments in their lives, perhaps crucial ones, and that developing and sustaining a practical identity, in Pippin’s sense,

however imperfect such a thing may turn out to be, is an ambition in the absence of which human life in culture would be unrecognizable.