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Book Review

World in the Rear-View Mirror

A review of
*Worldlessness After Heidegger:
Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction*

Roland Végső
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020)

Reviewed by Rok Benčín

Even though the notion of world obviously plays an important role in the history of philosophy, its proper conceptualisations often get lost among its functioning simply as a synonym for reality, objectivity or totality. Just as the concept of dog does not bark, “world” as concept is not as big as the world itself. Roland Végső’s book *Worldlessness After Heidegger* shows us that the world is not enough: What the concept of world brings to light is neither real nor is it everything.

While many studies indeed exist on how certain philosophers and philosophies (e.g., Husserl and Heidegger, possible worlds in analytic philosophy) have made world one of their central concepts, comparative studies that follow the transformations of the concept of world through different epochs or traditions of thought remain rare.¹ Végső’s book contributes to filling this gap by devoting its five chapters to Heidegger, Arendt, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derrida (and through his reading, Husserl), and Badiou. Such a “Comparative” reading of different authors and traditions of thought is only possible, however, if one manages to identify a problem that can be shown to be common to them all, even if their various solutions differ greatly. This common problem

is the problem of worldlessness that, according to Végő, in one way or another underpins the way the notion of world is conceptualised in the work of these thinkers. *Worldlessness After Heidegger* thus presents the concept of world in the rear-view mirror, from the perspective of moving past it towards the realms of worldlessness.

Worldlessness, for Végő, is not a post-apocalyptic condition.² In fact, the book's main objective is to argue against the conception that the world is somehow on the verge of being lost and the task at hand is to save or restore it. The point is rather to present the concept of world as a philosophical delusion that we should move beyond. Instead of seeing worldlessness as a privative state or a return to some primordial chaos, Végő suggests to explore various forms of ontological, phenomenological and political worldlessness. This is the major project the book announces, although its aim is not to realise it. Rather, its ambition is to lay the ground for it by exposing worldlessness as the truth of 20th century continental thought's struggles with the concept of world.

Végő identifies worldlessness as "the continuous undercurrent" and even "the disavowed center of contemporary thought."³ The paradoxical problem that has affected much of the post-war continental philosophy is that worldlessness is constitutive of any construction of a world, both ontologically (being cannot be reduced to the world) and phenomenologically (what conditions our experience as the experience of a world is not itself "worldly"). Beyond the concept of world, there is thus the structural necessity of worldlessness. On the other hand, however, worldlessness is also perceived as a historical crisis that comes with modernity (in the guise of modern science and/or capitalism) and threatens to undermine the world as the framework of genuine experience. There is thus a tension between the structural and the historical worldlessness, whereby the historical threat overshadows the structural dimension, even though the latter clearly points to worldlessness as the real beyond our construction of experience. Faced with the structural "abyss" of worldlessness, the philosophers analysed by Végő decided not to explore it but rather to cling to the world as an ethical and political task.

As the title of Végő's book suggests, phenomenology is at the origin of this problem that gets its paradigmatic elaboration with Heidegger, but extends even to those who have been critical towards his philosophy. The book's strongest trait is the detailed and precise analysis of how the paradoxical conundrum of world and worldlessness plays out in the phenomenological tradition, including not only the different stages of Heidegger's work, but also Arendt and her more political exposition of the problem, and the way Derrida deconstructs the Husserlian and the Heideggerian concept of world only to himself insist on the imperative to act *as if* the world existed.

Végő's endeavour is not, however, limited to the path from phenomenology to deconstruction. On the one hand, it moves outside philosophy to include psychoanalysis, while on the other, it leaves behind phenomenology in the strict sense to inspect the role of the concept of world in Badiou's philosophical system.

Psychoanalysis fits Végő's trajectory perfectly, since, as he demonstrates, the discovery of the unconscious "is a discovery of the primacy of worldlessness."⁴ The existence of the unconscious challenges the phenomenological assumption of the worldly nature of experience, the evidence of being-in-the-world. Even though psychoanalysis may pathologise certain forms of worldlessness (the loss of reality), it also shows that what is really pathological is the assuredness of world-constructions

which in fact make up for this loss. What Végő has in mind here is not only Freud's critique of the *Weltanschauung* but also his and Lacan's discussions of psychotic world-construction. Psychoanalysis is important for Végő because it shows that what is beyond the world (the unconscious) is immanently structured and that these structures are what determines the formation of worlds. The primacy of worldlessness has far reaching implications for thought itself. Both Freud and Lacan draw parallels between psychotic constructions and speculative thinking. As Lacan often points out, the concept of world is an obsolete philosophical phantasy, which modern science discarded a long time ago.

Things get more complicated when Végő turns his attention to Badiou. As he rightly emphasises, Badiou's central work *Being and Event* is one of the prime examples of the philosophy of worldlessness.⁵ Both being (in its presentation as inconsistent multiplicity) and event (as that which breaks with any consistency this multiplicity might form) are essentially worldless. Végő does not mention this, but Badiou is here clearly under the influence of Lacan, as when he states: "Philosophy begins by destroying the very concept of the world; it knows, as does Lacan, that there only is a fantasy of the world, and that it is only in its defection, or its defeat, that one can subtractively think some real."⁶ Why, then, does Badiou return to the concept of world in spectacular fashion in *Logics of Worlds, Being and Event's* sequel?⁷

Végő, of course, provides a solid account of the reasoning Badiou provides and which we cannot enter here in detail. Simply put, worlds are transcendental structures according to which the ontological multiples appear. Thus, Badiou's rehabilitation of the concept of world does not simply discard worldlessness. Being is still worldless while the event remains that which pierces through the consistency of the world and gives rise to "transworldly" truths. The way worldlessness both conditions and makes impossible any coherence of a world is not disavowed by Badiou as it is by phenomenology. On the contrary, it is something that his philosophy openly builds on.

However, Végő can still use the book's central critical argument against Badiou's denunciations of the worldlessness of capitalism and the political imperative to act as if we all live in the same world, which Badiou proclaims in his other works. The political motivation Végő himself gives for preferring worldlessness over "saving the world" is that today, the "neoliberal finance capital appears to run on the very values of phenomenological world-formation," promising an infinity of possible worlds.⁸ The opposition to this, on the contrary, proceeds through "the invention of new forms of worldlessness."⁹ In *Logics of Worlds*, nevertheless, the multitude of worlds is where Badiou places the event and the subjective procedure of truth. Could we thus say, instead, that the resistance to capitalist world-formation could also proceed through the invention of new forms of world-formation?

Végő cannot condone Badiou's return to the concept of world although he is sympathetic to the way Badiou defines the logics of worlds as transcendental indexing of the ontological multiplicity. Since Badiou's concept of world does not disavow worldlessness, it is, according to Végő, already worldless in all but name. In fact, transcendental indexing could be used to describe the structures of worldlessness themselves (which might even be more consistent with Badiou's worldless ontology), which would turn the logics of worlds into the logics of worldlessness. As I have already mentioned, Végő does not attempt here to produce a

positive ontology (or phenomenology) of worldlessness, which is why his seeming endorsement of Badiou's concept of the transcendental is all the more telling (he also points to the new realisms of Marcus Gabriel, Levi R. Bryant and Timothy Morton to give an indication of where this might lead us).

But if the analysis of Badiou shows that "it is the fiction of the world that reveals the real immanent organisational structures of worldlessness,"¹⁰ then we may reverse Végső's question to Badiou and direct it back at him: Why do we need to call worldlessness something that is perfectly well described as world? Végső does not provide a precise definition of the world which is apparently in opposition with worldlessness, which allows him to compare various conceptualisations of the notion in different thinkers, but this approach also excludes the possibility of a radically different concept of world, one that would no longer be subject to the same form of criticism. Is the concept of world the same when it refers to the cosmological totality or the phenomenological framework of experience as it is within the Badiouian coexistent multiplicity of worlds? Due to the focus on worldlessness, the problem of the multiplicity of worlds and the different types of world-formation that it might suggest remains largely unexplored, which is not *per se* a critique of Végső, who carries his project out with impressive coherence, but more a suggestion for another way to explore the concept of world in contemporary philosophy.

¹ To the best of my knowledge, the book that gets closest to a systematic study on the concept of world in modern (continental) philosophy in English before Végső's effort is Sean Gaston's *The Concept of World from Kant to Derrida* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). Gaston's detailed study on the concept of world in Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida is a remarkable effort that Végső himself references. Végső's strong focus on worldlessness, however, brings out new insights even when discussing the same passages as Gaston does. It is important to note that Végső references Gaston.

² The book does not address issues related to environmental threats, climate change or the notion of the Anthropocene. This is consistent with its focus on world as concept, which is precisely not identical with the planet Earth or the natural environment. On the other hand, though, a discussion on how the modern obsession with the concept of world that the book argues against is related to our treatment of the natural environment and what forms of worldlessness do we encounter faced with climate change would be an interesting direction in which to examine further the topics discussed in the book.

³ Végső, *Worldlessness After Heidegger*, 3, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005).

⁶ The quote is from Badiou's 1996 review of Barbara Cassin's book *L'Effet sophistique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995). Alain Badiou, "Logology Against Ontology," in *The Adventure of French Philosophy* (London: Verso, 2012), 317.

⁷ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009).

⁸ Végső, *Worldlessness After Heidegger*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.