# The "Inversion" of Life

## Book Review: Hongjian Wang, *Ontologie der Praxis bei Martin Heidegger*, LIT Verlag 2020

Although the book focuses mainly on the early Heideggerian discourse in the 1920s, the author's problematic is close to our present time: how to overcome the metaphysicalization and technologicalization of modern life and the resulting nihilistic crisis. To this end, the author expounds on the early Heideggerian "ontology of practice" and in this way leads to a reflection on the post-Heideggerian philosophy of practice.

In the first part, the author outlines Heidegger's ontology of life in two ways. Thematically, Heidegger criticizes the tendency to theorize life and emphasizes the pre-theoretical character of life, with its core concept evolving from "factical life" to "facticity" and finally to "being-there" (Dasein) in *Being and Time*. In terms of method, in order to present this pre-theoretical and historical life, Heidegger invented the methods of "formal indication" and "destruction", both of which are crucial for Heidegger's practical philosophy and for Heidegger's philosophy as a whole.

Having clarified these two main contexts, the author examines in the second part Heidegger's interpretation of the concept of "practice" in the Marburg period. Here the theme of "ontology of practice" is presented to us in an articulated way: while discussing Aristotle's concept of "practice" (πρᾶξις), Heidegger begins to "ontologize"

it; and while constantly delving into life itself, Heidegger also found ways to explore the question of Being. What Heidegger does is "the ontologization of practice and the concretization of Being" (Wang 2020, 161) that is discussed in this book. It is true that the advancement of Heidegger's thought cannot be separated from the reinterpretation of Aristotle, and the author, following in his footsteps, points out that what Aristotle calls "theory" (θεωρία) and "production" (ποίησις), although located at two extremes respectively, are both objectifications or objectified activities, while the opposite of this "mode of production" (Herstellen-Modell) is the "mode of practice" (Praxis-Modell).

The "mode of production" represents the sinking tendency of life that Heidegger talked about before: it tends to theorize and objectify, to dissipate in the world around and thus to forget the self-world. The "mode of practice", on the other hand, implies an authentic life. In a broader sense, these two modes can be said to be the double meaning of "practice" itself. This double meaning is also expressed in the opposition between potentiality and actuality. In other words, the actuality conceals the potentiality in the way that "presence" conceals "absence".

Thus, the author clearly and forcefully argues to us how the ontology of practice is simultaneously a critique of metaphysics

and technology: "theory" and "production" are based on the "mode of production", while "ontology of practice" is a presentation of the "mode of practice" as such. By analyzing the concept of "presence-absence", the author also suggests the complementarity of "practice" and "ontology". Only by "ontologizing" practice can we break the bonds of theories and concepts and reveal how "practice" is life itself. Thus we can see how traditional ontology is grounded in the "mode of production", which also inspires us to conceive a new ontology from the "mode of practice" that has "absence" rather than "presence" as its source.

The author does not stop here; in the third part of the book, he discusses Gadamer's inheritance and development on Heidegger's ontology of practice. Although Gadamer's starting point is also the distinction between practice and technology, unlike Heidegger, he focuses on the question of good and custom. On the basis of Heidegger, Gadamer elaborates the historical dimension and the dimension of others of the practice, thus presenting a more comprehensive picture of practice. Here we can also see that the author's discussion of "ontology of practice" ultimately aims not at a particular text, but at life itself and the problem itself. This is of course an early Heideggerian concern, and in this sense the book follows the path started by Heidegger and continued by Gadamer and other authors.

As far as the relationship between philosophy and life is concerned, the author has demonstrated in the book how philosophy grasps life and how philosophy is again grounded in life; nevertheless, the connection between the two modes of life itself remains to be clarified. For the purposes of this book, the author accepts in many places the dichotomy of "mode of production" and "mode of practice". Whereas in the early Heidegger this opposition was still buffered, in *Being and Time* this structure is intensified into a tension between inauthenticity and authenticity. It is true that life is both "produced" and "practiced", but the understanding of existence based on different activities takes life as a whole in different directions, toward inauthenticity and authenticity respectively. In this sense, we cannot say that these two models can co-exist in one life. This book deals with this problem by reducing the two opposites to two possible tendencies of life itself, thus avoiding giving either one of them a more original status.

However, the word "tendency" is ambiguous here: in the case of inauthentic tendency, it is the inevitable "thrownness" (Geworfenheit) of life itself, out of its own control and inclined to forget itself; while in the case of authentic tendency, it is the free "projection" (Entwurf) of life to choose what it can be. If we speak of "tendency" in the sense of necessity, then life has always been in the inauthenticity; if we speak of "tendency" in the sense of freedom, then life has been able to choose its authenticity from the beginning, and the ability to choose itself implies authenticity. We cannot understand these two "tendencies" as two divergent directions on the same axis, and in that case, life can only go in one of them. However, life is never unidirectional, and certainly the two tendencies do not appear "alternately", more precisely, as Heraclitus said, ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὠυτή (the path of ascent and descent are the same path).

Of course, we can still sense the author's attempt to "save everyday life", which is at the same time Gadamer's intention to reinterpret

"custom": although everyday life needs to be critically examined, it still has a meaning and dignity as a tendency of life itself. Likewise, Heidegger himself does not deny inauthentic life altogether; he only shows that it does not provide a complete and original field of vision for his ontology, but even so, *Being and Time* devotes half of its pages to the model of inauthentic life, for it is only on this basis that an analysis of authenticity is possible. Here we find the opportunity to loosen the binary framework of "mode of production" and "mode of practice" or inauthenticity and authenticity: the two are not united in life itself as unrelated links, but at the same time have a continuity. It is the inauthentic mode of production that makes the authentic mode of practice possible. This point also has its line of thought in the early Heidegger, who wrote in his lecture notes for the winter semester of 1920-1921:

> The starting point of the way to philosophy is the factual life experience. But it seems as if philosophy leads out of the factual life experience again. In fact, that way leads, so to speak, only in front of philosophy, not up to it. Philosophy itself is to be reached only by an inversion of that path; but not by a simple inversion, so that cognition would thereby be directed merely to other objects; but, more radically, by an authentic transformation. [Der Ausgangspunkt des Weges zur Philosophie ist die faktische Lebenserfahrung. Aber es scheint, als ob die Philosophie aus der faktischen Lebenserfahrung wieder hinausführt. In der Tat führt jener Weg gewissermaßen nur vor die Philosophie, nicht bis zu ihr hin. Die Philosophie selbst ist nur durch eine Umwendung jenes Weges zu erreichen; aber nicht durch eine einfache Umwendung, so daß das Erkennen dadurch lediglich auf andere Gegenstände gerichtet würde; sondern, radikaler, durch eine eigentliche Umwandlung.] (Heidegger 1995, 10)

In this lecture, Heidegger illustrates this "inversion" of life with the example of the life experience of the original Christians. If we put "inversion" in the context of this book, then this passage is actually saying that the only way to get to the ontology is to start from the "mode of practice" rather than the "mode of production". However, Heidegger specifically points out here that this is not an inversion to other objects, which is what the word "inversion" implies: although the "mode of practice" is different from the "mode of production", but the two are not diametrically opposed; rather, one is located at the back of the other. Therefore, the shift from the "mode of production" to the "mode of practice" requires us to flip it, not to abandon it completely. In terms of the concrete content of life, authenticity does not imply a superior, more essential life, but simply a regrasping of the inauthentic everyday life, a reintegration of the life dissipated in the surrounding world into one's self-world, which is already a philosophical gesture. Thus, to grasp oneself anew with a holistic vision is the inversion of life to itself, and thus to enter into philosophy.

According to this line of thought, the "mode of practice" does not replace the "mode of production", but rather it is the realization and rescue of the latter. Heidegger's way of opposing the theoretical is not to deny it, but to find a more complete and original foundation for it. Thus, the "mode of practice" is on a different level from the "mode of production", and the discovery of the pre-theoretical "mode of practice" means that we can fully engage in "theory" or "production" in a "practical" way. Further, such a "practice" is ultimately a "game" that does not distinguish between process and purpose,

between world and self, between every-dayness and authenticity: "Game is also there, actually there, where no being-for-itself of subjectivity limits the thematic horizon and where there are no subjects who behave gamely. [Spiel ist auch dort, ja eigentlich dort, wo kein Fürsichsein der Subjektivität den thematischen Horizont begrenzt und wo es keine Subjekte gibt, die sich spielend verhalten.]" (Gadamer 1999, 108)

It must be acknowledged that early Heidegger's thought is complex and full of dialogue and collisions between different traditions, the two most influential of which are ancient Greek philosophy and the original Christian philosophical tradition. With the help of Christian sources, which are not covered in this book, we find a continuity between inauthenticity and authenticity, but is this compatible with a reading of the relationship between "mode of production" and "mode of practice"? This is already a grand question, involving the two traditions that Heidegger inherited. At the same time, it is extremely important for understanding modern life: as the book suggests, this age has forgotten the

practice; but it has also forgotten the sanctity. It is an age of production as well as an age of secularity. This early Heideggerian source of thought is rich in interpretative possibilities, each of which is a path, and what is needed here is not only the passage of a particular path, but also a "fusion of horizons" between different interpretative paths.

## Bibliography

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