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Reviews and Annotations
Рецензии и анотации

BOYAN MANCHEV'S MODAL ONTOLOGY OF FREEDOM

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In the eve of 2024, as if to honor the 300th anniversary of Immanuel Kant's birth, one of the leading Bulgarian thinkers, Boyan Manchev, published a big book on the Königsberg philosopher. Its title is *World and Freedom. Transcendental Philosophy and Modal Ontology*. The book is big not only in terms of its volume (more than 700 pages long) but more importantly in its scope and depth, as well as in its innovative interpretation.

Before focusing on the book however, I would stress that *World and Freedom* is part of a large philosophical project developed by Boyan Manchev for nearly thirty years – since his doctoral dissertation from 1997 and *The Unimaginable*, published in 2003.¹ If I had to name this project most succinctly, I would call it the Modal Ontology project. The expression “modal ontology”, borrowed from its fleeting appearance in Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus*, and developed conceptually by Manchev for over twenty years now, can be seen as a point of intersection for the various directions in which his philosophy unfolds.

In a narrower sense, Manchev's modal ontology can be said to be composed of two interrelated conceptual directions. On the one hand, there is the philosophical fantastic, and on the other – the metacritique and the hypercritique. There is a clear transition from metacritique to hypercritique to fantastic insofar as (1) bringing out



unactualized semantic potentialities of philosophical concepts (the task of *metacritique*) leads to (2) the dynamization of concepts to the excessive point of their crisis (this is what the *hypercritique* does), which in turn allows for (3) conceptual reconfiguration (which is the main role of the philosophical *fantastic*). In other words, the philosophical fantastic is the horizon of the hypercritical movement.

World and Freedom should be read in view of this broader conceptual framework of Manchev's impressive philosophical project. This context however is not the only one. The book's return to Kant is a polemical gesture against the spreading rejection of the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that became fashionable with the rise of flat ontology and object-oriented ontology. Against authors such as Graham Harman, Manchev undertakes to show not just why we should not forget Kant, but what is the contemporary stake of Kant's critical philosophy beyond the textbook clichés to which it has been reduced. In this context, no longer national, but global, Manchev's daring gesture has almost no analogues. Catherine Malabou's 2014 book *Before Tomorrow* is here a conceptual ally of *World and Freedom*, the first parts of which were written at the same time or earlier.

The main task of Manchev's book can be seen as *ontologizing Kant*. However, this wording requires stipulations and clarification. First of all, the notion that the three Kantian Critiques, and in particular the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the main subject of the monograph, break with ontology to turn to epistemology is problematic and has been problematized earlier – say by Heidegger and Cashier in the late 1920s. In a sense, a continuation of the same problematization can be found in *World and Freedom*. Manchev argues that the ontological plan is already present in the First Critique, but its potentialities are to be actualized and unfolded to the point of crisis for Kant's project itself, a point of hypercritical excess immanent to his system. However, it is no less important to emphasize that Kant's ontologization goes through a rethinking of ontology and the history of ontology. In the phrase "ontologizing Kant" it should not be taken for granted what "ontology" means. In Manchev's project there is a radical refusal to substantivize existence and to reduce it to what is commonly called "Being". This is also one of the important highlights of the book. The reconstruction of the history of ontology shows the series of different substantializations of existence. In an important move of his interpretation of the First Critique, Manchev demonstrates how Kant himself performs a similar substantialization and thus hides from himself the ontological layer of his own critical project. I will come back to this point. Before that, however, I should point out that the rethinking of ontology in a modal key in *World and Freedom* treads on Kant's modal concepts. In the interpretation proposed in the book, "modalities do not express (simply) the relation to the faculty of cognition, but its very operation" (p. 251). Modality is the place where the effectiveness of knowledge – and thus its ontological plane – is revealed. In this sense, the ontologization of Kant here is at the same time also a "Kantization" of ontology, which in this case would mean

the modalization of ontology, the disclosure of the ontology as a modal ontology. *World and Freedom* is not simply a book about Kant, but through and with Kant, and even against him, or at least against certain tendencies in his thinking. The “ontologization” of Kant and the “Kantization” of ontology meet on the edge of hypercritical modal ontology.

The starting point of modal ontology is the statement that what is, is more than what is.² This seemingly contradictory statement actually points to the transformability of what is, thought immanently. If there is nothing transcendent, if nothing exists outside of beings, then its transformability, that it can change, is the modal point of how existent transcends itself, is in more than itself. This “more” then should not be thought quantitatively, but as a kind of “place” of modalities.

Specifically with regard to Kant, however, Boyan Manchev’s work chooses a very specific focal point, which is what reveals the stakes of talking about the German thinker today, and that is the question of *freedom*. The modal interpretation of the First Critique is based on thinking of freedom as necessity. Such a position is at odds with the dominant direction in which Kant has been read and interpreted. Besides, the unorthodoxy of this situation is obvious: after all, necessity and freedom are usually thought of as opposed. However, for Manchev, freedom in Kant requires such a rethinking of the modal category of necessity, which allows the epistemological and the ontological to be associated. In fact, the very turn to the category of necessity is a strong polemical gesture against a prevailing tendency to emphasize contingency, most obviously associated with Quentin Meillassoux. Boyan Manchev, who in earlier works has already proposed his interpretation of contingency as an activity of potentiality³, does not at all reject the category of contingency, and this makes his interpretation much more complex. How to think necessity that does not abandon the notion of contingency in the way it was developed in philosophy and science in the 1960s and early 1970s? Turning to Kant as turning to the question of necessity – and the necessity of freedom at that – is a real challenge and, I think, one of the most powerful gestures of this book.

I will highlight several moments in the rethinking of necessity and the discussion of the question of freedom that are developed in the monograph.

Boyan Manchev distinguishes two types of necessity. The first necessity is associated with nature, in other words, the natural necessity. This is the necessity of natural laws. Manchev highlights a second necessity, which I would preliminarily call practical necessity. Although it is developed in the Second Critique, the place of this second necessity, as shown by *World and Freedom*, is very clearly outlined already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The two types of necessity are initially discussed through the problem of causality, which in turn also allows for two orders causality reconstructed by Boyan Manchev: *natural causality* and *spontaneous causality*. At first sight, there is no direct connection between the two types of causality. Spontaneous causation seems completely unrelated to natural causation.

If the natural one allows us to derive natural laws based on observations of phenomena, the spontaneous one does not obey nature, it is empirically unconditioned. However, as Kant himself points out, one has no other access to necessity than through natural causality: That is, that it is *via* the first causality that one arrives at the concept of natural necessity. The two kinds of necessity and the way we arrive at them through two kinds of causality remain unconnected in a classical reading of Kant. Boyan Manchev offers a complex interpretation in order to show the connection between the two types of causality and, accordingly, the two types of necessity.

According to Manchev's interpretation, necessity performs a self-reflexive movement, in which natural necessity opens itself up to something that is of a different order. Paradoxically, only in this movement is natural necessity itself constituted as such. This implies a particular, non-classical understanding of nature. Nature opens itself up to something that is not natural causality and so allows its own overcoming. Manchev writes: 'No, there is nothing natural in nature. Nature is a field of necessity, because a necessary cause needs a fact to overcome in order to open up an ontological possibility of freedom.' (p. 209) Necessity is necessary in order for there to be an overcoming, that is, in order that freedom is possible. "The necessity of necessity is the necessity of freedom." (p. 315) This, however, means that necessity splits into two – a natural necessity and the necessity for that necessity which opens the way to freedom. The rupture of the two causalities "is also a rupture of the modal aspects of necessity: necessity as inevitability and necessity as overcoming" (p. 161). Thus, the two causalities and the two necessities turn out to be connected.

The self-reflexivity of necessity, which splits it into inevitability and overcoming, posits the condition (natural necessity) in its very overcoming. It follows that natural necessity, necessity in the classical sense of "impossibility not to", is only "a possible order, while the order of freedom will be necessary" (p.146). Or also: "The world of necessity is contingent; the world of freedom is necessary." (p. 161) Natural necessity, expressed as if by the iron laws of nature, is possible and accidental, things can be otherwise. Which makes freedom necessary – but on a different ontological level; it is not necessary in the same sense, there is a "switch to another order" (p. 362).

In this interpretation spontaneous causality is not conceived of merely as inherent in the consciousness of the human subject, but as related to existence. Existence is self-reflexive, and in its turn to itself it works metacausally, cleaving the necessity of inevitability and overcoming. And this involves a shift to another order, where necessity already means something other than the classical "impossibility not to". What is this other sense of necessity? Boyan Manchev's answer is that it is about the general modal meaning "as a relation to things as they should be" (p. 155). Replacing "necessity" with "should" is not innocent. Such a redefinition of necessity inscribes in it an inclination, a direction. Translating "should" from the deontic

to the ontological realm means that existence itself is directed and inclined. It is a direct modalization of being. However, I would question how well-founded this translation is. In other words, does not redefining necessity in the key of "should" deprive us of a strong notion of necessity? Understood in this sense, will the necessity of freedom not turn out to be precisely unnecessary?

Why is it so difficult to perceive the ontological dimension of freedom in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, so difficult that for centuries almost no one commented on it? *World and Freedom* offers an interesting and complex answer, of which I would like to point out only one aspect here. It has to do with what Kant himself called "subreption". Subreption is defined by Kant as the illegitimate transfer of empirical experience into the transcendental field. Transcendental subreption is "the deceptive presentation of a regulative transcendental principle of reason as constitutive" (p. 326). However, Boyan Manchev discovers a subreption made by Kant himself in the First Critique regarding the third and fourth antinomies, when he replaces existence with essence and hypostasizes an unconditional essence. "To put it bluntly: the unconditionality of freedom, the transcendental idea of which was affirmed by the resolution of the Third Antinomy, here becomes the unconditionality of the necessary essence, in a word, of God." (p. 330) For Manchev, Kant's subreption is no longer transcendental, but meta-transcendental subreption, which produces a regulative idea with constitutive action: "Metatranscendental subreption therefore has the character not simply of replacing a regulative with a constitutive dimension, but more than that, of producing a regulative idea with constitutive action: it is essentially an idea, which reason itself puts at its foundation." (p. 344) Metatranscendental subreption thus reveals one of the dimensions of freedom, which limits itself, giving itself a condition that is no longer in the realm of natural laws, but in the realm of reason. In other words, here ontologically existence makes the transcendental turn towards itself, or more precisely the transcendental in its existence self-reflexively refers to itself in order to lay down its own conditions. If this is so, does not metatranscendental subreption show that the transcendental is constituted as transcendental ontologically? The transcendental is constituted as such by something that is not transcendental. What is it that constitutes the transcendental? It cannot be called simply empirical, because the empirical is in turn constituted by the transcendental. I would call it radically empirical. What Manchev describes here is close to Jacques Derrida's notion of striction, a movement of restriction that conceives the transcendental by placing something non-transcendental in the position of the transcendental of the transcendental, while leaving it excluded from the transcendental it has constituted.⁴ For Manchev, this movement is the movement of existence itself, in which freedom continues to transform its own transcendental conditions. The non-classical conclusion this necessitates is that the dynamics of existence, driven self-reflexively by tendency, inclination or aspiration, give rise to various forms of the transcendental field.

There is more than one transcendental structure, and each time it occurs as a result of the vortex of existence turning back on itself.

World and Freedom is an important work not only in the development of Boyan Manchev's thought, but also for the entire Bulgarian philosophical debate, and beyond it – important for the times in which we live, where the experience of freedom is questioned and seems more and more like an effect of a marketing trick. In this sense, beyond the impressive, innovative, and inspiring reading of Kant that it offers, the book is a promise of a liberating thought experience.

NOTES

1. Боян Манчев, *Наративната система в късните романи на Достоевски*, дисертация, Софийски университет, София, 1998; Боян Манчев, *Невъобразимото. Опити по философия на образа*, София: НБУ, 2003.
2. See Боян Манчев, „Що е онтология“, В: Димитър Вацов, Боян Манчев, *Що е онтология? Насрещни определения*, София: Метеор, 2023, с. 68. For earlier formulations of this claim that there is nothing present beyond what is present except its ability to change, see Боян Манчев, *Тялото-Метаморфоза*, София: Алтера, 2007, с. 223, and Boyan Manchev, *L'Altération du monde*, op. cit., p. 251.
3. See Boyan Manchev, *L'Altération du monde*, op. cit., p.84 – 86.
4. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, Paris: Galilée, 1974, p. 272a.

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