CHANCE

Richard Shiff

A felicitous conjunction of Hegel and Manet in the philosopher Robert Pippin's book *After the Beautiful* has confirmed my belief that chance determines the order in which objects, categories, and constructs receive our critical attention.[1] Nothing necessitates the choice of Manet as primary modernist other than a fait accompli. As Pippin would have it, this is "the usual way." Just as the status of Hegel is our intellectual inheritance, our historical chance and fate, so is the status of Manet on the sensory side. If art, philosophy, culture, and the social order have a history (singular or multiple), we can only hope that things are going somewhere better than here and now. And even if it were a turn for the better, the route from our present unease to our future satisfaction can be neither predicted nor logically reconstituted, yet Pippin refers to "the trajectory of modernist art" as if the course were set. Chance events lead to contradiction if we insist on sorting them out. Luckily (ironically), we have a concept of chance at hand, as well as allied concepts of tragedy and comedy; these rational notions dissuade us from applying reasoned analysis to chance itself. Those who accept chance leave explanation aside and get on with life as best they can.

After the Beautiful is a beautiful—that is, an artfully elaborated—thought experiment, a grand hypothetical. Without fulfilling the aim, Pippin argues for the value of applying Hegelian discourse to the morass of our "conflicting com-

1. Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

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mitments in intellectual, cultural, and political life." He notes that analogous conflict marks the "aesthetic experimentation that seemed to begin with Manet," which critics have labeled "modernist painting." Manet's experiment in painting (and its aftermath in Picasso, Pollock, and others) is Pippin's would-be target of, and partner in, his experiment in critical philosophy. I say that Pippin does not actually do what he proposes because he remains on a theoretical plane, never identifying the particularity or historicity of our conditions of moral conflict or laying claim to a specific definition of "modernism." He is nearly mute on such matters, yet inconsistently so. At the start of his introductory chapter, he states that the characterization or periodization known as "modernist" is "highly contested"; at the end of the same chapter, he refers to "the usual way in which all modernist art is characterized." Which is it? Both statements are passive, leaving the reader in want of sources to check. On the topic of modernism, Pippin implies that a broad consensus as well as its utter lack constitutes our situation—a fine Hegelian contradiction.

According to Pippin, a Hegelian sense of the inherent contradiction in all identities—the tension, say, between the body-self in itself (perceived as sensation, emotion, feeling, *existence*) and the mind-self for itself (perceived as intellection, conceptualization, discourse, *meaning*)—has the potential to ameliorate, or at least alter, the vexed situation of modernism. "What is the meaning of existence?" a modernist asks, with little expectation of a definitive answer. Pippin asserts what few would dispute: whatever else it may be, modernism is a process of change. He prefers to use Hegelian discourse in a process-oriented way, rather than directing it to a "triumphalist" end. Hegelian discourse may not change the world of modernity any more than it terminated conflict in the philosopher's own era, but it will affect the way we negotiate our course *through* modernity, and the resulting habits of thought may well amount to historical change. Our thinking alters our art, if not our existence, just as our art affects our thought. Neither changes chance.

Pippin has selected painting, a concrete rhetoric, as the primary modernist art. For the same role, he could have chosen philosophy, an abstract rhetoric, but he did not. Beyond or beneath the discursive thought associated with it, a painting is a material thing. So when critical thinking uses pictorial art as its medium, it must not only change itself but also affect something physical, or at least change the relation of thought to the physical and sensory. Hence Pippin's attraction to and adaptation of Michael Fried's art history, which has a strong phenomenological basis. Modernism puts the lie to Hegel retrospectively, to the Hegel who believed that the project of sensory, physical art had run its course, having become "a thing of the past." But, again, what is this modernism that we find pictured or exemplified in "modernist painting"? Everyone acts as if everyone knows, though no one is talking, least of all Pippin. (I suspect that he could

venture a definition if he were so inclined.) For his art-historical modernism, Pippin relies on only two figures, Fried and T. J. Clark; their modernism is the painting lineage fathered by Cézanne and grandfathered by Manet. Manet is crucial to both Fried's phenomenology and Clark's social history—two bodies of academic study that Pippin regards as recto and verso of a viable modernist critique. But why does he trouble himself with Cézanne, who is not central to the analysis presented in *After the Beautiful*?

It is Heidegger, whom Pippin introduces primarily as a philosophical foil to Hegel, that motivates Cézanne's inclusion. Although the evidence is sketchy, Heidegger appears to have appreciated Cézanne for his radically earthy art. "Earthy" is my colloquial way of referring to Cézanne's dogged pursuit of the most fundamental sensations. Of course, "earthy" resonates with "Heidegger," and one of Pippin's best insights pertains to Heideggerian elements he perceives in Cézanne: "If there is something to the notion of a struggle, or *Streit*, between earth [existence] and world [meaning] in painting, then in Cézanne's paintings of bathers . . . earth is 'winning.'" There may be more "history" realized here than Pippin would imagine, for the notion that in Cézanne "earth is winning" was the opinion of the painter's most astute observers around 1900. Cézanne's art was earth, matter, sensation, existence. The compelling rhythms of his marks caused commentators to wonder what this turn from refined conceptualization to brutish materiality might signify. Cézanne's turn displaced the theme of beauty by the sensation of beauty—beauty that remains *after* "the beautiful," after the concept of the beautiful ceases to function—and it occurred in the art of a well-educated, affluent, high-bourgeois individual. In short, Cézanne was a Manet who was not acting like one. The material beauty of Cézanne's painting, off the scale of cultural norms, spurred critics to imagine what the moral value to society might be when a practice of painting becomes amoral.

Hegelian philosophy may have once celebrated its own triumph, but Pippin applies it now to a different end. We creatures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have found our triumph in accepting indeterminacy—that is, endless contradiction. So there is nothing perversely anti-Hegelian in extending Hegelian discourse beyond the era during which it should have fulfilled itself and expired. Every generation is triumphalist, even if its triumph consists in concluding that tensions in the human soul never attain resolution: to live is to be unfulfilled and unresolved. We continue living, nevertheless. Similarly, every generation finds some degree of adequacy in its art, and even some beauty; such discoveries are not mistaken, despite a following generation's exposure of inadequacies and failings in the art that it inherits. Each new generation desires a more satisfying form of communicative expression, the "social intelligibility" that Pippin (along with Fried and Clark) discovers in the incompleteness of modernist art. The notion of "social intelligibility" is attractive, yet the circularity of Pippin's intellectual

confection nags at me. Was not modernism—identified with social contradictions and pictorial ironies—a Hegelian construct to begin with? Has not modernist art history been inhaling Hegel all along, even if only second hand?

I stumble backward over what Pippin calls "practical contradictions," or (as I might say) logical tragedies, our indeterminate troubles with our words. Pippin features a certain Hegelian principle, directing it from the logical toward the pragmatic: "All things are in themselves contradictory." As an example, consider that existence is not the meaning of existence. From a pragmatic perspective, there ought to be more to life than mere existence. Putting it as a logical abstraction: though *A* must be the same as *A* (*A* is *A*), *A* cannot be the same as *A* (*A* is not *A*), if only because one *A* is displaced from the other, analogous to the way that meaning is displaced from existence. The more we think, the less we know. Can I imagine my nonexistence? I do not know. Whatever sits on the other side of a sign of equivalence or translation (the word *is*, the symbol =), whatever has been carried across this copulative breach in language, must have become different in either existence or meaning; otherwise, we face the contradiction constituted by a thing existing and the same thing being meaningless (as it were, meaning nothing, that is, not existing). Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus*: "To say of *one* thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all." One *A* is the thing as it is, as we feel it; the other *A* is the same thing in its meaning, as we conceive of it (perhaps nonexisting). With sensory feeling being personal and with conceptual meaning being social, the one cannot be the other. This lack of equivalence is reality—a practical political dilemma as well as a logical contradiction.

Pippin's book leaves me wondering what kind of society I might be living in if I were no longer to find contradiction, negative equivalence, nonexcluded middles, and every variety of change so very familiar, at-home, assuring, comforting. Would I be a nonmodernist living under modernism—a social misfit, a nonentity, a nonexistent? I suppose that, from a Hegelian perspective, contradiction indicates my intellectual freedom, if not some sensory freedom. An ideologically rigid society would tolerate no contradiction. Yet such conclusions come all too easily. I fear that our collective academic enterprise has become stuck in its beloved, but invariant, principle of change. The alternative is not stasis but chance. Academics: loosen up.