

BOOK REVIEW

Bowden, Sean and Mark G.E. Kelly, eds. *Problems in Twentieth Century French Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2020, 211 pages.

Bowden and Kelly, two Australian scholars, have assembled and edited a volume devoted to the examination of the concept of *problem* in twentieth-century French philosophy. The editors present a group of academics who give their views, interpretations, and understanding of a varied assemblage of modern French philosophers' treatment of *problem*.

The objective of this study, as the editors explain, is to explore the various interpretations, meanings, and implications of *problem*, *problematics*, or *problematization* in recent French thinking. Their rationale for this undertaking is that thinking or philosophizing begins with problems or as they express it, "problems are the motor of thought and practice"(p.1). Along the way, the editors wish to dispel the common notion that there are well-defined and unquestionable traditions and habits of thought in twentieth-century France, such as French rationalism (shades of Descartes), philosophies of the concept, and those of experience. Their contention is that the terms "problem" or "problematic" have taken on a "pejorative" implication, far too parochial to satisfy philosophical inquiry (p. 2). Thus they are presenting a wide-ranging sampling of philosophical investigation within the framework of modern French philosophy.

Among the philosophers cited are: Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, Jean Cavallès, and Gabriel Marcel. Those represented hardly constitute an exhaustive group. For instance there is no mention of Roland Barthes and, lamentably, the only Catholic philosopher presented is Marcel. Michel Foucault, the darling of the social sciences, appears in two of the offerings.

The first offering, by Giuseppe Bianco, is entitled "The Misadventures of the 'Problem' in 'Philosophy': from Kant to Deleuze." The author gives an historical framework to the philosophical treatment of *problem*. Going back to the dawn of western philosophy, Bianco begins his article with Herodotus, who employed the Greek term for problem which is "obstacle" (*Εγπρόδιο*). Plato took up the challenge, articulating a bifurcated *question*, one part of which existed in mathematics and the other in dialectics. Aristotle in turn classified *problem* into three categories: ethical, logical, and physical. In the Christian era, St. Augustine framed his approach to *problem* in exegetical terms. His interpretation of scripture rested on acts of conversion which included the abasement of pride or self-humiliation. Later in the Medieval universities the philosophical dimensions of *problem* appeared as the Sacred Inquisition, the Church's religious authority, which divided inquiry into four parts: the *questio*, a discussion of a set of exercises selected from scripture that included the *lectio*, a reading of scripture followed by the *disputatio* or a discussion of the text that concluded with the *predicatio*, the enunciation or resolution of the question. In the seventeenth century, Descartes understood *problem* as a matter of mathematical inquiry and *question* as the foundation of non-mathematical situations. In the eighteenth century, Bianco continues, Christian Wolff conflated the two terms. Bianco's article continues on to cover the philosophical engagement with *problem* from Kant to William James. By the twentieth

century, interest in the notion of *problem* had become a major concern in French philosophy circles.

Having situated the discussion in an historical context which serves as a unifying structure for the book, the other essays pursue various related themes. Craig Lundy's article "Bergson's Method of Problematization and the Pursuit of Mystical Reason," develops the proposition that with Henri Bergson the "fascination with the 'problem' commences" (p. 31). Preoccupation with problematics, Lundy maintains, reached its zenith with the work of Gilles Deleuze, though many of his contemporaries were critical of his work and sought to distance themselves from Bergsonism. But Lundy's essay goes on to point out that try as they might to divorce their thinking from Bergson's positions, other twentieth-century French thinkers were drawn to his "non-positivist conception of problems" (p.31). Lundy cites Élie Durling's work "'A History of Problems': Bergson and the French Epistemological Tradition." Durling points out that Bergson's problem-based method of studying the history of philosophy and the history of science drew other philosophers into his sphere of influence. For his part, Lundy sets out to explain and analyze the 'what is' of Bergson's problematic philosophy. In fact, he makes the observation that "...each of Bergson's major books revolves around or is driven by the effort to articulate a particular problem" (p. 32). It is this investigative spirit of *Creative Evolution* and *The Creative Mind* that sets Bergson apart from earlier systematic philosophers like Kant and Hegel. In lieu of a systematic superstructure, Lundy interprets Bergson's objective as identifying and taking on key problems such as causality, change, and creation. These are problems which the philosopher attacks by way of a combination of methodology and metaphysics. Lundy concludes his remarks with an allusion to Deleuze, "...this metaphysical-method or methodological-metaphysics is in fact responsible for *determining the progress* (author's italics) of Bergson's treatment of problems and problematics" (p. 42).

The problems and problematics of history are not the exclusive preserve of Bergsonian philosophy. In her article "The Errors of History: Knowledge and Epistemology in Bachelard, Canguilhem, and Foucault," Alison Ross explores the historiographical convictions of Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and Michel Foucault. Foucault is the senior member of the trio in this essay as Ross references Bachelard's and Canguilhem's epistemological treatment of the history of science with reference to Foucault's skepticism in regard to knowledge. Bachelard and Canguilhem adhere to the rationalist tradition of epistemological thinking in French philosophy. While they emphasize an approach to history which excludes non-scientific schemas of value, Ross suggests that Foucault was not so sure. She points to Foucault's insistence that "no factor that has a role in the production of a specific scientific concept...should be left out of that history of that science..." (p.142). It is here that his skepticism in regard to an epistemology hedged in by a vigorous rationalism becomes apparent.

Of special interest to students of Catholic and personalist philosophers is Jill Hernandez's offering, "On the Problem and Mystery of Evil: Marcel's Existential Dissolution of an Antimony." Professor Hernandez begins somewhat maladroitly, referring to Gabriel Marcel as an existentialist. Marcel was never quite at ease with such a sobriquet. Nonetheless, she focuses on an intriguing topic in her article: the presence of antimony in Marcel's philosophy. She is quick to assure the reader that she does not mean to infer that Marcel employed antinomies in the same way or for the same reasons as did Immanuel Kant. Rather, she intends to demonstrate that Marcel's antinomy lies in his concept of evil, involving his understanding of the terms "problem" and "mystery." Marcel uses these expressions as modes of exploring the idea of evil. In his philosophical lexicon, evil equates with human suffering. True to her characterization of Marcel

as an existentialist, Hernandez informs the reader that he identifies an *existential* tension between the way persons experience suffering and the way in which they apprehend evil. According to Marcel, evil manifests itself in the personal problem of suffering; while evil as observed around us and in the world at large is understood as belonging to the realm of mystery. The important question for Marcel is how to approach evil the problem as opposed to evil the mystery. Considering evil as “problem” is a matter of the functional and the mechanical, he suggests. Personal suffering is regarded as a problem to be attacked and overcome; a straightforward methodology not unlike clearing a barrier or removing some sort of hindrance. But what to make of evil as mystery, its presence in the world of our experience and its recurrent nature?

Drawing on Marcel’s work in *Man Against Mass Society* and *Being and Having*, Hernandez underlines his differentiation between “primary reflection” and “secondary reflection;” where primary reflection is the realm of the functional approach to the problem of personal suffering and where secondary reflection is the realm of mystery, wherein evil must be approached. Here, according to the author, is the heart of Marcel’s antinomy. While functionality is suitable for dealing with the problem of evil, it is ineffective in coming to grips with the mystery of evil. What Marcel tells us is that in regarding the mystery of evil we must abandon our focus on the “functional” in favor of the “meaningful.” He calls upon us to enter into a contemplative posture in “the mystery approach to evil.” Secondary, not primary, reflection is the proper means to confront the mystery of evil. Only by way of contemplation are we able to understand the nature of the self as well as the nature of our deepest fears (that of death), yearnings, and aspirations.

Hernandez’s point—well taken—is that Marcel saw mystery as impenetrable by quantification. This certainly reflects his distrust of the scientific revolution, positivism and materialism, all themes at the heart of his thinking. In a greater sense, it reveals his convictions as a philosopher in the Catholic tradition. In this vein, Hernandez inserts apposite quotations from *Man Against Mass Society*, “...in no sense can the notion of evil be assimilated to that of a defect of function which could be remedied by suitable methods” and “...if I am entirely sincere, I must recognize that evil is not only *before me* but *within me* (author’s italics); in a sense it is something that rings me round, it lays siege to me”(p. 119). His remarks seem to encapsulate the basic premise of Roman Catholic theology in regard to sin (evil)and human frailty. Marcel defines death as the ultimate evil and love as the ultimate good. Hernandez concludes her article with a response to Marcel’s antinomy. The answer to the problem of evil and the mystery of evil is love.

This collection is in no sense the most sophisticated treatment of the subject, but it is a useful companion piece and reference tool to be used in conjunction with more advanced studies. It is, therefore, a very welcome addition to recent Marcel scholarship. The editors might have provided one or two more representatives of the Catholic Renaissance in French philosophy; perhaps offerings on the work of Jacques Maritain or Maurice Blondel.

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