

## BOOK REVIEW

Alan D. Schrift and Ian Alexander Moore (eds.), *Jean Wahl: Transcendence and the Concrete Selected Writings* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 293pp.

History can be unkind; this is nowhere more true than in the life and career of Jean Wahl. During his life he was esteemed as a major voice in French philosophy. In the world of ideas, such luminaries as Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, and Emmanuel Levinas recognized him as one of France's greatest philosophers. During the course of his career he had been in dialogue with members of the philosophical community who ran the gamut from Jacques Maritain and Gabriel Marcel to Michel Foucault. Today he is all but forgotten as a thinker save for a small circle of *cognoscenti* in France. This is as difficult to understand as it is cruel to his memory. During his lifetime Wahl established himself as a poet, historian of ideas, and a philosopher. Perhaps his most notable contribution was as a French interpreter of contemporary philosophy. In this respect he played a key role in introducing French philosophy to foreign movements such as phenomenology, existentialism, American pragmatism, and British empiricism.

The appearance of Alan Schrift and Ian Alexander's volume serves as a valuable introduction—or perhaps *reintroduction*—of Wahl's work to American readers. Part of the “Perspectives in Continental Philosophy” series (edited by John Caputo), the present publication offers a cross section of Wahl's writings which pertain to his thoughts regarding the tension between the spirit and the concrete.

The volume is presented in eleven chapters, the first being an introduction to the author's work by the editors. Each chapter is a selection from the corpus of Wahl's work. In order to stay true to their stated interest—Wahl's observations pertaining to transcendence and the concrete—the editors have chosen only selections that bear on those topics. The first selection is taken from Wahl's 1929 book *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (The Unhappy Consciousness in Hegel's Philosophy). This is a very intelligent choice in that *Le malheur* constituted a new understanding of Hegel in French philosophical circles. Featured in this section is Wahl's treatment of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* which marked a turning away from the German philosopher's *Science of Logic*, that was eloquently covered by Alexandre Kojève with regard to the segment on “master and slave.”

Wahl approached his topic of inquiry by way of a consideration of Hegel's dialectical method. Bypassing the traditional expression of Hegelian dialectic, thesis–antithesis–synthesis, Wahl interpreted the dialectical method as a function of consciousness producing divisions within itself and then overcoming and healing them. This led him to describe consciousness as duality, continually separating itself from itself only to strive to reunite itself. This duality, he maintained, was Hegel's approach to understanding Christianity. God was made flesh, the flesh was destroyed, and reunited with God. One can readily see how this would be intriguing to Catholic philosophers like Maritain and Marcel.

Apropos Gabriel Marcel, the editors have chosen to include the preface to *Toward the Concrete* which appeared in *Recherches Philosophiques* 1, 1931-32. Here, Wahl presents the reader with three philosophers—heroes of realism in the defense against Hegelian idealism—William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Marcel. He uses these three to demonstrate the

primacy of the concrete—concrete space—over Hegel’s Platonism. These three thinkers, an American, an Englishman, and a Frenchman, Wahl claims, reveal to us “...the inanity of Hegel’s critique, a critique that accentuates the *mine*, the *here*, the *now* all these designative elements; these are elements that thought can get a hold of only by denaturing them. These philosophers claim the rights of the immediate.” Regarding the immediate, Marcel began from a starting point of metaphysical reflection; a refusal to reduce his description of the real to atomic points suspended in space. Wahl goes on to describe Gabriel Marcel as an empiricist, but a very different sort of empiricist. He maintains that Marcel’s empiricism is that which has penetrated and triumphed over Hegelian rationalism. Furthermore, he sees a good deal of the thought of Schelling and perhaps even Fichte in Marcel’s empiricism which ought not to be confused with that of John Stuart Mill or Herbert Spencer which is of a totally different nature.

Realism for Marcel was bound up with duration in a sort of Bergsonian sense. This was also true of Whitehead, but in Marcel’s case duration—the development of the real—took the form of “dramatic scenes” that constitute duration and immersion in the concrete. It was this drama through which Marcel expressed his sense of mysticism. Wahl sees such mysticism or religious experience as a mediator in the struggle between Hegelian dialectic and *the real*.

A later selection in *Jean Wahl* is from his *Études kierkegaardienes* (Kierkegaard Studies). This is a shrewd choice on two levels. In 1930’s France, Kierkegaard was even more obscure than Hegel (indeed Marcel noted that he was unaware of Kierkegaard’s work until later on). Once again it was Jean Wahl who did much to change that. Moreover, he set out to demonstrate that Kierkegaard’s antipathy for Hegel notwithstanding, there were points at which the two thinkers were tangential. Such tangency revolves around Kierkegaard’s description of life as a matter of stages or levels. The first level is the aesthetic, the second, the ethical, and the third, the religious. It is his criticism of the Romantic aesthetic that is reminiscent of Hegel. Kierkegaard’s definition of the ethical stage with its treatment of the internal and external can be understood as analogous to synthesis. His critique of the lower stage of the ethical, according to Wahl, is also derivative of Hegelian thought. One finds analogies between Hegelian and Kierkegaardian philosophy in regard to the religious level of life. With the ascent to a religious experience by repentance that completes and destroys the ethical stage, Wahl sees a similarity to Hegel’s description of the inclusion of both the immediacy of the ethical stage and some enlarged and deepened features of ethical reduplication. It also bears similarity to Hegel’s concept of the mediation of the immediate.

Included in the book by way of appendix is a first-time publication in English translation of a letter by Wahl sent to Martin Heidegger at the end of 1937. The letter was written as a thank-you to Heidegger for his contribution to Wahl’s lecture and debate on “Subjectivity and Transcendence.” The overall tenor of the letter is one of admiration, yet Wahl finds Heidegger’s concept of *being* unsatisfying. He was puzzled by Heidegger’s remarks on death and anxiety within the context of *being* (*Sein*). Stating that he would classify Heidegger as a “philosopher of Existence,” he went on to express uncertainty as to what, exactly, is the German thinker’s interpretation of *being*. Wahl’s difficulty in this respect resided in Heidegger’s treatment of the relationship between *being* and *nothingness*. Is *being* transcendent in relation to *nothingness*? Is *nothingness* immanent in *being* at the same time? Unfortunately, the scope of the book does not extend to Heidegger’s response, if, indeed, there was one.

Heidegger occupied a prominent place in Jean Wahl’s interests. In 1932 he published his article “Heidegger et Kierkegaard: Recherche des éléments originaux de la philosophie de Heidegger” (Heidegger and Kierkegaard: An Investigation into the Original Elements of Heidegger’s Philosophy) in the journal *Rcherches Philosophiques*. This article went a long way in

introducing existentialism to French academic circles as well as giving the work of Kierkegaard added legitimacy.

In this article, Wahl focused on Heidegger's treatment of existential subjectivism and realist objectivism. He described them as "two of the most profound tendencies of contemporary thought...." He used Kierkegaard's objectivism to point up Heidegger's subjectivism. But at the same time the thesis of this article is that Heidegger focused on Kierkegaard's objections to Hegelianism and Cartesianism to develop the Dane's feelings of isolation and his conclusion that solitude is essential for the individual who wishes to come to terms with his own *self*. In this instance, Wahl's reading of Heidegger shows him taking inspiration from Kierkegaard in distrusting and even shunning the amorphous "They" of society at large which, in his view, robs us of our individuality. He goes on to explain that "the domain of the 'They'" dwells in "temporality" as expressed by the science of history (not Hegel's *Geschichte*, but the anecdotal *Historie*) which protects it from that profound sense of care (in German, *sorge*; in French, *souci*) which is the essence of existence for both Heidegger and Kierkegaard. This section as much as any other serves to establish the value of this book not only as an introduction to Wahl's work, but as a document illustrating the key role he played in the transformation of modern French philosophy.

Regrettably, Shrift and Moore did not include any of Wahl's pronouncements on Jean-Paul Sartre. Given Sartre's place in existential thought after World War II, it strikes this reviewer as a major lacuna. It seems that some reference might have been made to his work, *Philosophies of Existence: An Introduction to the Basic Thought of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, and Sartre* (see the English translation by F.M. Lory, first published in 1969 and re-issued by Routledge in 2019).

This is a minor complaint. In total, this volume presents a highly usable introduction to Wahl's philosophical positions, particularly for American readers who may not be acquainted with his work. The volume concludes with a bibliography of Wahl's publications and an index of names.

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