

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen Gaukroger and Knox Pedon, *French Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 132 pp.

This book is another in Oxford University Press's popular *Very Short Introduction* series, which now includes more than 650 volumes. The series promises "a stimulating and accessible way into a new subject." This volume on French philosophy offers brief, helpful summaries of a number of philosophers who wrote, or are writing, in French.

The title of this book does raise a question, however: What is French philosophy?, to which the authors offer a response, especially in the first and last chapters. French philosophy is generally, but not always, written in French. And yet, the authors assert, "... the work of Francophone philosophers ... is nevertheless distinctive, and this distinctiveness is what we have set out to trace" (p.2). That distinctiveness is shaped, according to the authors, by concern for the history of philosophy, in which there is a "perennial conflict between secular and religious tendencies in the tradition" (p.3). It is characterized especially by the public and national importance that is placed on philosophy and the way in which philosophy practically affects the concrete lives of the French.

It is appropriate, given this thesis, that the authors structure this introduction chronologically. It is divided into eight chapters—the first and last an introduction and conclusion, and then according to centuries or decades: 16th and 17th century; 18th century; 19th century; the beginning of the 20th century; the 1960s and 70s; and a chapter on contemporary developments in French philosophy. This approach, while effective in terms of organization, has also the drawback of any historical approach; it is far more difficult to lay out clearly and in more general terms what is historically nearer to us, since time has not yet allowed for the sifting out of what is most important and lasting in the range of ideas that have emerged from (especially recent) French philosophy.

The authors locate the origin of French philosophy in the essays of Montaigne, who, in reflecting on the self, embraces a kind of relativism and concern for how to live, unlike Gassendi, who concentrates on natural philosophy, and advocates atomism. These two figures are forerunners to Descartes, who brings together Montaigne's concern for the self with Gassendi's concern for natural philosophy. His approach leads to the well-known conundrum about how the mind and body interact. Unlike Descartes, Malebranche's occasionalism later suggests that the mind and the body do not causally interact; rather, God causes events in both at the same time. The senses, then, do not lead to knowledge of the world, but are merely convenient notifications of something occurring in the body.

The influence of these thinkers, combined with that of John Locke, lead, in the 17th century, to a less systematic approach to philosophy, but one in which there was agreement among the French that sensation, not reason, is the foundation of knowledge. This chapter is organized by topics: rationalism and empiricism; language and thought; sensation and sensibility; medical philosophy; Voltaire and the challenge of the uniqueness of the West. It brings to the fore the development of materialism out of the emphasis on knowledge from sensation alone, and the notion that science might replace metaphysics. Paired with this latter hope is the position that Christianity is contrary to reason and stands in the way of scientific progress.

The following chapter, “Post-Revolutionary Philosophy: the 19th Century and the Third Republic” follows the development of the dichotomy drawn between reason (and science), and religion, especially in the emphasis on progress, inspired by the advancement of science and by the forward, future-oriented philosophies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The aim of these movements, the authors note, “remains an unfulfilled promise that is still worth pursuing” (p.45). And yet, while French philosophers were emphasizing scientific materialism, a movement of spiritualism began to emerge, culminating especially in the philosophy of Henri Bergson, who rejected the positivist dichotomy between life as a mechanical process, and spirit. Instead, life and spirit are a single process that unfold together in time.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Cartesianism in France came to be identified with empiricism as a result of the influence of Hegel and Heidegger. While Husserl held that attending to phenomena would reveal the essences of things, Sartre maintained that no matter how much one reduces one’s experience, there is always more to reduce, such that we never arrive at essences. Instead, he holds that existence precedes essence, and essence is merely a construction of consciousness. This chapter also includes a discussion of de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty.

Chapter 6 considers the development of structuralism and post-structuralism in the 1960s and 70s. With this chapter, the book becomes less of an introduction for the beginner. For example, the authors use both these terms, and assert a distinction between them, without spelling out what either term means. Added to the difficulty is the need to cite and discuss a panoply of thinkers such that, in a necessarily short summary, it is difficult to pursue a train of thought.

The penultimate chapter considers “French philosophy today” and returns to the question of what makes French philosophy distinct. It is, the authors say an “ambitious self-understanding” of French philosophy as characterized by “speculative daring,” akin to the ancient Greeks (p.99). And yet, the authors acknowledge, contemporary French philosophy is also fragmented. Even those fragments, however, are unified by the “way in which innovation itself seems to be grounded in a historical orientation” (p.99). The authors consider developments from Althusser regarding Marxism; deconstruction, stemming from Derrida; the political philosophy of Marcel Gauchet and Pierre Rosanvallon; and finally, the theological turn in phenomenology, ending with a discussion of Jean Luc Marion and his position that God is without being. The authors report “worries that have attended modern French philosophy for centuries in its apparent inability to have done with a religious heritage” (p.114).

While this *Very Short Introduction* supplies helpful summaries of some French thinkers, the selection of modern and contemporary thinkers as representative of French philosophy suggests a dismissal of the possibility of genuine Christian philosophy. Except for a brief mention of Jacques Maritain in relation to Bergson, there is no mention of the flourishing Thomistic revival that took place among French speakers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Likewise, and perhaps even more surprising, given the author’s thesis about what French philosophy is, there is but a single reference to Gabriel Marcel, and then only to name him as the means through which Derrida encounters Husserl. And yet, Marcel exemplifies the authors’ assertion that French philosophers are historically rooted, boldly speculative, and deeply engaged with concrete life. He also offers a genuinely original contrary view to that of Sartre and other existentialist thinkers.

This omission, coupled with the authors’ account of what makes French philosophy French, raises a question worth pondering: the authors give a list of characteristics that they assert are distinctive of French philosophy, but do not explain *why* philosophy in France developed those characteristics. Could it be that the cause of these characteristics is rooted in a history more distant

than the authors acknowledge? Could it be that these characteristics are the heritage of the Christian meeting of monastic and Scholastic thought, of which medieval Paris was the center?

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