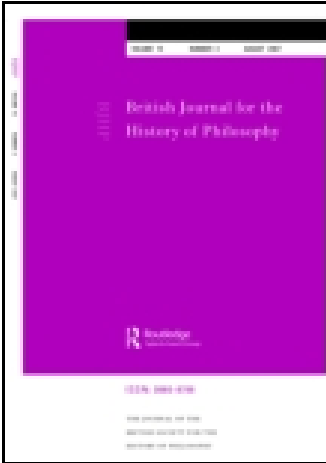


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Time and Philosophy: A History of Continental Thought

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(*Übergangsform*) that stands *between* romantic art and the modern art of *Humanus* (*Aesthetics*, 608). It seems to me, therefore, that, strictly speaking, Rutter's book is more about Hegel's account of the prelude to modern art than about his account of modern art as such. Yet this is not to diminish Rutter's achievement: for he has done more to shed light on Hegel's conception of objective humour than any previous commentator. Furthermore, in the process he has written one of the very best books in any language on Hegel's aesthetics.

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John McCumber: *Time and Philosophy: A History of Continental Thought*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd, 2011, pp. x + 414. £19.99 (pb). ISBN 978-1-844-65276-1.

McCumber's *Time and Philosophy* has three main aims. First, the book aims to provide an introduction to continental philosophy for students approaching it for the first time. McCumber sets about achieving this aim by providing readings of key continental philosophers based around one or two of their most influential texts, together with further reading for each philosopher. Second, McCumber aims to show that continental philosophy involves a unified project. In doing so, he takes an engagement with time to be what distinguishes continental philosophy from what he calls 'traditional' philosophy. Finally, McCumber aims to justify the value of the continental tradition, showing that the focus on time allows it to escape from certain aporias haunting the attempt to relate atemporal categories to a world of becoming. The book is organized around three strands: Germany, 1790–1890, Germany and America, 1900–68, and France, 1945–2004, along with a shorter concluding section dealing with contemporary continental philosophy. Each strand presents the development of continental philosophy as a reaction to a 'traditional' non-continental philosopher: Kant, Husserl, and Sartre. Any attempt to provide an introduction to a tradition as broad as continental philosophy involves trade-offs, but McCumber balances well the demand of breadth of coverage with the demand to show the complexity and sophistication of individual philosophers, and those covered certainly provide a defensible selection of figures.

At the heart of the book is the claim that continental philosophy does form a philosophically unified tradition. This claim is one that, as McCumber recognizes, one might take issue with. As well as readings which reject any unity to the discipline, there are others that assign the unity to sociological grounds, namely the rejection of a group of philosophers by figures in the

early analytic tradition. McCumber's claim is not simply that we can in fact see the continental tradition as unified, but that its unity can be captured in a single theme running through the entire tradition. McCumber states the assumptions that define continental philosophy as follows:

- (a) that everything philosophy can talk about is in time, and (b) that philosophers must be faithful to this at all times. (7)

While the claim that a concern with time is central to the tradition clearly captures one aspect of continental philosophy, the attempt to provide such a simple framework within which to understand continental philosophy leads to a number of problems with the book.

The first difficulty is that the claim that the continental tradition is concerned purely with the question of time somewhat constrains the choice of texts that McCumber considers. In some cases, it appears that texts are excluded because they do not fit neatly into McCumber's narrative. The two moments at which this problem is most pressing, are, I think, the discussions of Hegel and Sartre. Hegel is seen as the originator of the continental tradition as he 'abandoned all appeal to an atemporal order, and opened philosophy up to the past' (8). In order to justify this claim, McCumber focuses on two sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and Hegel's discussions of the place of reason in history. While the *Phenomenology* certainly shows that Hegel believes that reason is present in history, without a discussion of some of Hegel's other texts, McCumber's claim that Hegel rejects all atemporal truths remains unsupported. The *Science of Logic*, for instance, shows the development and determination of the categories of being prior to their expression in time, which only occurs at the conclusion of the work, when reason resolves to externalize itself in nature. Some explanation of how this text, which Hegel himself thought of as the centrepiece of his system, can be reconciled with McCumber's reading is therefore needed, but missing. Hegel, as the first of McCumber's continental philosophers, plays a pivotal role in the elaboration of his narrative, and the lacunae in his reading are therefore especially problematic. In the other direction, Sartre is seen as a 'traditional' philosopher since he privileges consciousness over temporality. McCumber's reading of Sartre's philosophy rests on his 'Existentialism is a Humanism'. The book section he appears in, *France 1945–2004*, does not include within its time span Sartre's major work, *Being and Nothingness*. While McCumber deals with this text peripherally, he fails to take seriously Sartre's claims in that work that temporality is an immediate structure of consciousness. He also portrays Sartre's conception of consciousness' relationship with the world as fundamentally solipsistic, despite *Being and Nothingness*' focus on our relations with others. As such, even on his own terms, the exclusion of Sartre from the continental tradition looks problematic.

Second, the focus on time leads to some strange omissions from the continental tradition. By McCumber's own criteria, a good case could be made for Herder's historicism opening the continental tradition, though given the pedagogical nature of the book, Hegel is pragmatically a reasonable starting point. While Herder is not explicitly excluded, several philosophers are. The claim that Schelling's philosophy is 'an attempt to maintain traditional philosophy' (35), rather than a part of the continental tradition is one that is certainly debatable. Less debatably, it seems clear that both Husserl and Sartre form integral moments of the continental tradition. The fact that both are rather seen as parts of the model of philosophy against which the tradition develops, rather than as a part of the tradition itself, is something of a *reductio ad absurdum* of McCumber's characterization. This result is particularly frustrating in the case of Sartre, given the weakness of the reading offered.

Third, McCumber's claim that continental philosophy is governed by 'all-devouring time', does not make immediately clear what he means by time. At points, McCumber suggests that to be concerned with time is to recognize that there is no atemporal order. Such a conception is clearly too broad, however, as it would allow an empiricist such as Hume to be classified as a continental philosopher. At another point, he claims that time is equated with development, or with history, but these categories are clearly not equivalent to one another. As an example, Hegel shows in the *Philosophy of Nature*, that the diversity of different species can be shown to conform to a system of stages of dialectical development. Nonetheless, he rejects the claim that this development takes place in time, thus rejecting both evolutionary theory, and the equation of development and time. Similarly, in trying to develop an alternative to the kind of anthropocentrism he sees in philosophy, Gilles Deleuze draws what is for him a crucial distinction between becoming and history. While it could be argued that determining exactly what time is was a central strand of the continental tradition, it becomes apparent that McCumber in fact operates with a much more constrained view of time, according to which 'everything is mortal' (58). It is difficult to see how such a view of time, with its implicit links to history and to man, would allow us to include either Bergson or Deleuze, two thinkers not discussed by McCumber, within the continental canon. Similarly, McCumber makes the assumption that to think of time is to think of something free from any invariants whatsoever. The reading of Kant is, for instance, rather unsympathetic to Kant's attempt to take seriously the place of time in philosophy. In fact, as, for instance, Deleuze, has noted, many of the central preoccupations of Kant's philosophy emerge from recognizing the difference in kind between the structure of time and that of logical succession. McCumber's complaint, that certain structures in Kant's account of experience, such as the categories and the faculties are temporally invariant, seems to be one that could equally be made, for instance, of the inescapable character of being towards death for Heidegger, or the structure of

disclosure for de Beauvoir. Time as a general concept appears to be too broad for McCumber's purposes, but history too narrow. Difficulties such as these reinforce the belief that the theme of time alone is too narrow to define the continental tradition, and also gives support to a different theme running through many of the philosophers discussed: anti-essentialism, here specifically relating to the nature of philosophy.

Despite these criticisms of the overarching narrative of *Time and History*, many of the specific analyses that make it up are excellent introductions to the texts in question. The discussion of Kierkegaard, for instance, navigates the complexities of his account of time with clarity, and provides a refreshing alternative to introductions focusing on *Fear and Trembling*. While the contrast with Sartre feels rather forced, the recognition of de Beauvoir's work as a philosopher in her own right, and in particular, the focus on her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, is very worthwhile. The chapter on Heidegger also presents an excellent introduction to his work, and the inclusion of a section on Hannah Arendt serves to give a broader view of continental philosophy than is often encountered in introductory works. It is in the detail that the book is most successful, therefore, and here, while the emphasis on time does not provide a complete characterization of the continental tradition, it does at the least open up a series of informative and lucid connections between and perspectives on some of the most important philosophers in the tradition.

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