

French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century

Gary Gutting

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STEPHEN MICHELMAN

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A sobering thought: 20th-century French philosophy, once--not long ago--the philosophy of the future for literary theory and continental philosophy departments across the country, has become a thing of the past: an historical entity to be studied and interpreted. A redeeming after-thought: 20th-century French philosophy now, with the passage of time, can be more readily and coherently understood than it was a generation ago. Thirty-five years after the student revolts of May, 1968--the historical epicenter of post-structuralism, the last French revolution in thought--the time is ripe to take stock of the past century of French philosophy. To understand the "master-thinkers" as well as their lesser-known professors, to identify unifying movements and themes, to reconstruct internal debates, and to put it all in historical perspective: this is the ambitious aim of Gary Gutting's *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. Minor stylistic and editorial issues aside, the book is an admirable success.

French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century seems to be Cambridge's answer to *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, a small volume published in 1997 by rival Oxford University Press. While the Oxford book (reviewed in this journal, December 1997), by Oxford-trained analytic philosopher Eric Matthews, examines French philosophy largely from the outside--from the perspective of the Anglo-American philosopher peering in and good-heartedly sorting the clear from the muddled--Gutting's new book places the reader both historically and conceptually within the flow of French philosophical life. And while both books are worth owning, Gutting's sympathetic, thorough, well-researched reconstructions of the thought of major French philosophers between 1890 and 1990 are ultimately of greater value for graduate and advanced undergraduate teaching as well as for professional scholarship: they cover many more figures, are more balanced, and they give readers the means (primary source citations, notes to secondary criticism, social and historical context) to form their own judgements. In fact, considering the lack of comprehensive single-volume summaries of 20th-century French thought in English, Gutting's book may become a standard secondary reference in this area. It would be an excellent complement to primary readings in a graduate seminar on recent French thought, or on an individual 20th-century French philosopher.

One of the chief virtues of Gutting's book is its ambition to tell the "relatively self-contained and coherent story" (xi) of French philosophy in this century, not just the parts of the story that American academics have seized upon as distinctive and interesting. Alongside analyses of well-known philosophers like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and

Derrida (a 30-40 page chapter is devoted to each), Gutting provides excellent chronological summaries of early figures like Félix Ravaisson, Jules Lachelier, Léon Brunschvicg, Henri Bergson, and Gaston Bachelard who are infrequently read or discussed in English. Moreover, he shows how the latter prepared the way for the former, and beyond. That is: (1) how the dominant pre-WWII perspectives of French spiritualism (Bergson) and idealism (Brunschvicg) were usurped starting in the 1930s by a generation of “young Turks” (Gabriel Marcel, Jean Wahl, Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty) inspired by German “philosophy of existence” to reject the bourgeois assurances of their professors in favor of a “concrete” approach to human experience; (2) how, starting around 1960, the reigning paradigm of existential phenomenology was in turn called into question by the “structuralist invasion” (here, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Canguilhem, Althusser, Lacan, and Barthes); and finally (3) how the post-structuralist pantheon (here, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Irigaray), from about 1970 to 1990, coöpted the structuralist critique to cast doubt upon the classical ends and means of philosophy itself--attaining objective, foundational truth through rational argument.

The book’s last chapter reserves space for Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, who, though aligned with existential phenomenology, do not fit neatly into this camp due to their religious concerns. And it concisely outlines the programs of recent thinkers, including Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Michelle Le Doeuff, and Jacques Bouveresse, the odd-man-out French analytic philosopher. The last chapter is followed by a compact Conclusion in which Gutting supports his thesis that “twentieth-century French philosophy is best read as a sustained reflection on the problem of individual freedom” (xii) and a brief but useful Appendix summarizing the various levels at which philosophy is learned and taught in French *lycées* and universities.

Professor Gutting is the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (1994) and author of *Michel Foucault's Archeology of Scientific Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) and *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). It thus comes as no surprise that the chapter on Foucault is among the strongest. Especially rewarding here are his hard-nosed reading of *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*) as an early structuralist aberration in Foucault’s career, “oddly marginal to Foucault’s fundamental [ethical] project,” (278) and his critical account of Foucault’s ensuing debate with Sartre, where Gutting sides, correctly I think, with Sartre.

The Sartre chapter (Chapter 5), in turn, may be even better. It is the longest chapter on a single figure (37 pages against 30 for Foucault) and it is among the most engaging, built dramatically around major unresolved tensions in Sartre’s philosophical trajectory: between literature and political commitment, between radical freedom and humanist ethics, and between existentialism and Marxism. The centerpiece of the chapter, Gutting’s careful exegesis of *Being and Nothingness*, deserves recognition as a model of succinct yet probing interpretation.

The remaining chapters devoted to individual thinkers--Bergson, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida--are all quite solid; each stands on its own as a work of accomplished scholarship and can be read apart from the rest of the book.

Taken as a whole, the book’s first four chapters, covering the period between 1890 and 1939, form a coherent, engaging narrative--in part, perhaps, because the figures here

(with the exception of Bergson, seldom discussed in English) are fresher--less freighted with received interpretations--for both author and reader. Concise subsections bring to life the “spiritualistic realism” of Félix Ravaisson, who taught Bergson at the *Ecole normale*, and the “critical idealism” of Léon Brunschvicg, who, as a Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne from 1900 to 1939, influenced Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and many others. Chapter 4, “Between the Wars,” includes a subsection entitled “Toward the Concrete” (102-117) which is as compact yet nuanced a reconstruction of the germination of French existential and phenomenological thought as one will find anywhere. Here, for example, we are reminded of the importance of avant-garde literary journals like *Bifur*, which published the first French translation of Heidegger’s *Was ist Metaphysik?* (in 1931), and of avant-garde writers like Raymond Queneau, whose 1936 novel *Derniers jours*, featured, two years before Sartre’s *La nausée*, a hero who is “overwhelmed in a garden by the nothingness of things” (107).

The author’s Conclusion, subtitled “the philosophy of freedom,” is an attempt to find unity in multiplicity. Here Gutting deftly summarizes the century’s diverse accomplishments around the organizing assumption that French philosophers have been predominantly concerned with issues of individual freedom, and that this concern stems from France’s “distinctive national tradition, spiritualism” (382). While the theory strains at times to explain too much (the French proclivity for literary expression, for example), overall a plausible case is made. And a standard of judgment emerges: Sartre is the central philosopher of the century, Bergson is the key early figure, and “poststructuralism is an interlude rather than a decisive turning point in the history of French philosophy” because it gives lip-service to radical liberation while “contributing little to our understanding of freedom” (389).

A final, critical remark. Each of the book’s twelve chapters is framed by an apposite quotation from Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (formerly *Remembrance of Things Past*). This bold device reminds us of the unique interpenetration of French philosophy and high culture, especially literary culture in the early part of the century, and especially in the case of Proust who, we are told, studied philosophy in the *lycée* with Brunschvicg and was a groomsman at Bergson’s wedding (6).

But it also leaves us wondering how Proust understood the ideas and figures he mentions, whether they play anything more than a superficial role in his novel, and, if not, whether there is another level at which philosophy is engaged by Proust’s work. Since every chapter is introduced by an epigraph from Proust, and since the intimacy between literature and philosophy is a distinctive, perhaps even a defining, trait of 20th-century French philosophy, shouldn’t there be at least a brief discussion of Proust in the text itself (perhaps in the Bergson chapter)? Moreover, the book would benefit from a more detailed, self-standing discussion of the role of literature and the literary avant-garde, and the significance of the literary aspirations of most major French thinkers. While such a discussion would, admittedly, take up valuable space in an already tightly-compacted volume, it would bring an essential, problematic dimension of French philosophy into better focus.

In sum, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* is an impressive reference work that elegantly summarizes individual philosophers while it traces common concerns across

individuals and movements. Maintaining a concise, factual, objective tone and cleaving his analyses to the primary texts, Gary Gutting has produced a comprehensive survey of French philosophy worthy of any graduate classroom or scholar's bookshelf.

*Stephen Michelman, Department of Philosophy, Wofford College, Spartanburg, SC 29303;
michelmansa@wofford.edu*