

Alan Vincelette

Recent Catholic Philosophy: The Twentieth Century.

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This is a companion volume to Vincelette's earlier *Recent Catholic Philosophy: The Nineteenth Century* [Marquette Studies in Philosophy, No. 58, 2009]. As in the earlier study, Vincelette, realizing that his field is vast, has had to make choices about who to include and what to discuss. In this volume, he writes, "I have thus chosen those who I think are the 21 most important and representative of the twentieth-century Catholic philosophers in seven major movements" (7). The movements, and the three representatives of each, are as follows: (ch. 1) Phenomenology (Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Enrique Dussel); (ch. 2) Neo-Thomism (Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II)); (ch. 3) Transcendental Thomism (Pierre Rousselot, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan); (ch. 4) Personalism (Ferdinand Ebner, Emmanuel Mounier, and Maurice-Gustave Nédoncelle); (ch. 5) Existentialism (Louis Laval, Gabriel Marcel, and Xavier Zubiri y Apalátegui); (ch. 6) Analytic Philosophy (Elizabeth Anscombe, Charles Taylor, and Francis Jacques); and (ch. 7) Postmodernism (Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and William Desmond).

The names of some of these figures (Stein, Gilson, Maritain, Pope John Paul, Rahner, Lonergan, Anscombe, and Taylor) will likely be familiar to most readers, even if their writings are not. The names of others (Dussel, Rousselot, Ebner, Zubiri, and perhaps Marion and Desmond), as well as their writings, will likely be foreign territory. The list of figures that Vincelette discusses is heavily weighted in favor of Western European and North American thinkers (as was the list in his earlier volume). Dussel is the only South American; there are no Africans or Asians. Ten of his choices are French; none is American, although some taught for many years at universities in the United States. (Lest I be misunderstood, this is not intended as a criticism, merely an observation, since Vincelette claims that there have been "approximately 3000 Catholic philosophers who have made significant contributions to philosophy in the twentieth century" [7]. But it does raise the question of the criteria for selection, and Vincelette doesn't provide any.) Vincelette also focuses, as before, on the epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion of his figures, not on their political or social thought.

Vincelette's book is not an easy one to evaluate. On the one hand, the discussions, usually ten to twelve pages in length, are all competently written and Vincelette is obviously a knowledgeable student of his subjects, including the ones mentioned above with whom readers may not be familiar. Each discussion (as in the earlier volume) follows a standard format: biographical information, including education and career (positions, honors, etc.), and reference to his subject's major works and summaries of main themes in them. This is a benefit to readers like me who have never read anything by Zubiri, for example. On the other hand, all of the discussions read like entries in an encyclopedia. Aside from occasional amusing tidbits (e.g., that Anscombe was a fierce debater who smoked cigars and liked to blow smoke rings at her opponents as they spoke [184]), they are often bland lists of facts and dates (e.g., 104-5 on Lonergan). In addition, Vincelette peppers his text with copious internal citations (some pages

are half citations) using abbreviations (the book has six single-spaced pages of abbreviations [249–54]), which seriously impedes reading—unless you ignore them, which I found myself doing. More importantly, there is almost no evaluation of the ideas discussed in the text. Vincelette occasionally corrects what he thinks are misinterpretations; for instance, he denies that Anscombe’s famous 1958 essay “Modern Moral Philosophy” abandoned a natural-law approach to ethics (189), and he proposes an alternate reading. But does he agree with Anscombe? Disagree with her? He doesn’t say.

Vincelette similarly describes Gilson’s controversial view that there *is* a genuine “Christian philosophy,” which is not a theology (52–6, 278 n. 21), and, more briefly, the similar views of others (Maritain, at 290–3; John Paul, at 79; Nédoncelle, at 345–6 n. 85; Jacques, at 393–4 n. 129), but has nothing to say about whether he thinks this is a viable position. Does one have to embrace it to be a “Catholic philosopher”, since most of Vincelette’s subjects did not, even if they did not explicitly deny it? This raises again the question of Vincelette’s selection criteria: Who counts as a “Catholic” philosopher? [Do I as a full professor of philosophy at a Jesuit university who attends mass daily but who is quite liberal in his reading of Catholic theological doctrine and social teaching?] And why are some “Catholic” philosophers more important than others? Vincelette chronicles the lives, times, and works of twenty-one authors without himself ever addressing these important questions.

A final reason that it is difficult to evaluate Vincelette’s book has to do with his endnotes. The book consists of 250 pages of text plus 160 pages of endnotes. What to make of this? Is it a valuable addition or just irrelevant erudition? A combination of both, I think. On the one hand, Vincelette is very good at citing works by and about the figures he discusses in the text, in their originals and (where possible) in English translation. As such, the endnotes are often a real treasure trove. If you want to know more about, say, Lonergan, go to 319–24, or to 280–8 for enough on Maritain to satiate even the most omnivorous. The endnotes also often explicate more fully ideas only briefly described in the text, which is usually helpful, although again with the annoying profusion of abbreviations. On the other hand, there are endnotes that seem to me entirely superfluous. For example, Vincelette thinks that there are more than 600 important Catholic political philosophers in the 20th century, many of whom he lists (without discussing any of them) in a four-page endnote (255–9). Another seven-and-a-half-page list (297–304) includes a “sampling” of 1000 influential 20th-century neo-Thomists. What these lists are supposed to contribute to the book is never made clear. In any case, they are not even in alphabetical order.

In sum, this is not an engaging read. But it is useful as an introduction to the ideas of the people that Vincelette discusses, especially the less well-known ones, and for the resources that he provides for further reading.

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