

Gary Gutting

Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960.

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Patrice Maniglier, ed.

Le moment philosophique des années 1960 en France

Avant-propos de Frédéric Worms.

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Gary Gutting's book combines the features of an introduction for advanced students of the subject with a general interpretation of the nature of French philosophy in the 1960s.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the specifics of the French educational system, the *agrégation* (accreditation) system with its focus on the training of elite philosophy high school teachers. The fact that this training took place at a select number of preparatory schools, where the curriculum was geared to prepare the student for the rigorous and comprehensive examinations leading to the accreditation, explains certain peculiar characteristics of contemporary French philosophy. But Gutting does not endorse the views of Pierre Bourdieu and his students regarding the mostly negative influence of this system on the development of French philosophy.

In the following chapters Gutting examines three popular hypotheses about the forces that shaped French philosophy in the 1960s: the influence of Hegel, Heidegger and Nietzsche. Regarding Hegel, Gutting discards the idea that Kojève's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* played a central role in shaping French thought in this period. Instead, he emphasizes the influence of Jean Hyppolite, the translator and commentator of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and a teacher at the École Normale Supérieure and other strategic high learning institutions. Gutting rejects also the notion that French philosophy in the 1960s is only a footnote to Heidegger, and proposes a nuanced account of Nietzsche's influence. These three chapters have an ingenious architecture, identifying in the work of three major thinkers in question—Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida—explicit engagements with the heritage of Hegel (via the work of Hyppolite), Heidegger and Nietzsche. Gutting's treatment is not merely historical: he provides interpretations of the philosophical issues involved and compares their treatment in French and in analytical philosophy, preparing the way for his summations in Chapter 10.

Chapter 6 and 7 deal with the 'ethical turn' in French philosophy, represented by the work of Levinas, by Foucault's last works on the 'care of the self', and by the work of Derrida. Gutting rejects the concept of an 'ethical turn' either in the work of Levinas or in the later work of Derrida and Foucault. In the cases of Levinas and Derrida, their 'ethics' are similar to analytical philosophy's metaethics, i.e., not an imperative to action but 'to

justify my behavior towards others with good reasons' (125). And Foucault's 'care of the self' is closer to a guide to life than to an ethics. The reason for the absence of an ethics in these philosophers seems to be their 'pervasive antihumanism' (147). Readers familiar with the philosophy of Levinas may experience a sense of disbelief reading this section.

Chapter 8 deals with the renewal of a religious interest in French philosophy in the works of Jean Luc Marion and Derrida. Gutting notes the connection between this interest and Husserl's phenomenology (150) and the difficulties he finds in a phenomenological approach to religion. In a central section of this chapter, Gutting shows the similarity and disparity between Derrida's concept of 'différance' and negative theology. He concludes that a believer would be hardly satisfied with such a position, one that remains in the realm of negativity. A believer would probably be more satisfied with Marion's philosophy, which allows for a direct experience of, or non-conceptual knowledge of God, what Marion calls the 'saturated phenomenon' (157). The chapter ends by reconsidering Derrida's position. Derrida asserts a messianic religion, beyond any historical revelation, a position that Gutting associates with the Enlightenment, whereas Marion continues to defend the claims of revealed religion.

Chapter 9 is entitled 'Ontology, Ethics and Incomprehensibility', and is dedicated to the thought of Alain Badiou. Badiou stands out from other representatives of mid-20th century French Philosophy for embracing the grand ontological tradition. Instead of following in the steps of Hegel or Sartre, he 'employs his remarkable intellectual imagination to construct a vision of how things in general are and how they hang together' (164). His is a materialistic, mathematically based philosophy, oriented toward the affirmation of an objective truth and of the central role of the subject. While mentioning some difficulties with his theory, Gutting seems to be generally positive about Badiou's philosophy. He even concludes the chapter with the claim that Badiou is the 'first major French philosopher since Bergson to propose a full-blooded account of the ethical life' (183).

While Gutting's interpretation of individual philosophers stands on its own, this book is certainly conceived as a general interpretation of French philosophy since the 1960s. Several clues have been planted in the preceding chapters, but the interpretation is fully developed in the tenth and final chapter, 'Conclusion: Thinking the Impossible'. Gutting introduces the problem: 'The preceding chapters have shown a distinctive unity in French philosophy since 1960: a fundamental concern with thinking what is conceptually impossible' (184). He acknowledges that philosophy always had to do with what 'at least seemed impossible', that philosophy 'gets going...at the point when thought encounters contradictions'. If this is the case, there is a need for a more precise characterization of the way in which French philosophy in this period attempted to rise to the challenge, one which will explain the differences between French and analytical philosophy. One way of addressing this difference would be to say that analytical philosophy claims that there is nothing that cannot be understood conceptually, whereas the French philosophers in this period seem to be fascinated by what seems to be not conceivable, or at least, not conceivable in any 'standard way'.

Having asserted that the *differentia specifica* is skepticism, Gutting proceeds to classify the 1960s French philosophers in two groups: a group of absolute skeptics (Levinas, Derrida, Marion), and another group of relative skeptics (Foucault, Deleuze, and Badiou). The absolute skeptics reject Hegel's approach of making ineffable truth redundant for philosophy at the expense of making truth dependent on totalization. Therefore they insist on experiences that can never be integrated into a consistent conceptual whole. In this they are totally divorced from analytical philosophers. But relative skeptics are also divided from their analytical colleagues. The analytical philosopher adhere to the standard that, overall, we can rely on 'obvious truths that no one competent to judge sincerely denies'. But French philosophers aim beyond these obvious truths, at the realm of the inconceivable. Gutting examines in some detail the way in which Derrida's 'deconstruction', Marion and Derrida's 'thinking of the impossible' and Deleuze 'repetition' could be seen from an analytical point of view. He notes that Deleuze in particular—but maybe French philosophy of this period in general—cannot be the object of a 'close reading', one in which we can really make sense of each individual sentence. If such a reading is not possible, how should we approach the works of this period? Gutting explains that we can opt for one of two methods. By the first, we immerse ourselves into the text and read it thoroughly, even when we feel unable to understand much of anything. This is a time consuming and dangerous method, which may contaminate our own thought. By the second method we read the works in question looking for intelligible passages, without expecting to understand every one. We aim to construct in a familiar language hypotheses about the work's overall meaning. The end result is a restatement of the text in a familiar language, a restatement we can claim to be a better rendering of what the author had in mind.

It is plain clear that Gutting does not want simply to dismiss French philosophers as obscurantists. He concedes that the subjects they chose to study are complex and challenging. But he is apprehensive of the 'obscurity that arises because authors do not make a sufficient effort to connect their novel concepts to more familiar (even if technical) concepts' that would allow the reader a better assessment of their claims (200). Gutting also observes that the work of major French philosophers is contained not in journal papers and colloquia, but in 'forbidding *magnus opera*' (200), something that does not allow the kind of lively discussion that characterizes the life of academic analytical philosophy. However, he also believes that French philosophy of the 1960s can be an inspiration and important resource for those who think that contemporary analytical philosophy lacks intellectual imagination and is too deferent to 'the banality of obvious truths'.

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Le moment philosophique des années 1960 en France is a collection of twenty-eight essays originally delivered in a series of four conferences organized in 2008 to commemorate and research the philosophical dimension of the May 1968 uprising. As stated in the preface by Frédéric Worms (director of the Centre International d'Etude de la Philosophie Française Contemporaine, one of the main organizers of the conferences),

this book is not only about a ‘moment’, but is supposed to be itself a ‘moment’, or better, ‘a moment’ between ‘two moments’ (1).

This book indeed can be seen either as a unified project, a general (and to some extent, partisan) interpretation of the history of recent French philosophy, or as a collection of essays dealing with the history, issues and figures of French thought in the mid-20th century. From the first point of view, it embodies the institutional point of view of the last representatives of the great tradition of the 1960s, as represented by Alain Badiou and his associates. Badiou was the creator and architect of the International Center for the History of French Philosophy, which is now directed by Worms, and which is at the origin of this work.

The editorial policies underlying this book are reviewed in Patrice Maniglier’s editorial introduction. He begins his essay with the claim that the 1960s was one of the most brilliant episodes in French intellectual history. He then proceeds to enumerate the works that represent the most important achievements of the period: Levi-Strauss’s *Savage Mind*, published in 1962, Althusser’s works, the publication of Lacan’s *Writings* (1966), Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, the early works of Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard, etc. The field so delimited is analyzed using five central hypothesis: i) the 1960s was not an episodic fluke, but something important happened during this period; ii) there is unity beneath the diversity of views developed in that period; iii) such unity is not to be found in a common thesis or positive orientation but in a common interest in the same problems; iv) these problems are not first and foremost philosophical in nature but come from the outside of the philosophical discipline; v) if we can agree with the thinkers in this period that what they were doing was something radical and novel, we do not need to agree with the way in which they themselves understood the nature of their work (7-8). This last statement can be seen as a compromise between the claims to originality of the representatives of the generation of the 1960s and the demands of a new generation of researchers to be allowed to develop their own critical engagement with the heritage of their elders. The path that Maniglier suggests declines negation, blind identification or melancholy. He recommends that we free ourselves from the fascination of ‘unheard of philosophical languages’ (11), because we can no longer try to mimic the way Deleuze or Foucault wrote. Instead we need to translate their idiosyncratic styles to a language which was probably foreign to them, and test their approach to problems they formulated only in an approximate way (12). The 1960s are not to be approached as an object of historical curiosity, but as ‘an inner dimension of our present’ (21).

Maniglier devotes the second part of his introduction to explaining the organization of this work. The book is divided into four main sections: philosophy of science, politics, philosophy, and aesthetics. Each section is composed of a longitudinal survey composed of several papers dealing with the period from an historical point of view, followed by a number of monographic papers dealing with a single thinker. This organization provides a lattice of background/foreground papers, viewed from different perspectives. But the difference between the longitudinal and the monographic is in several of the papers a matter of degrees. This was probably unavoidable, considering that the chapters were originally position papers presented in different settings. It will be

impossible to survey all twenty-eight papers in the context of this review. I chose therefore to concentrate on the fifth part, which deals with philosophy in the technical and institutional sense.

Like the other parts, the ‘philosophical moment’ is divided into a longitudinal section and a monographic one. The first section is composed of 4 papers. The first, by Macherey, compares Deleuze’s interpretation of Spinoza with the monumental study of the *Ethics* by M. Gueroult. Macherey states that the 1960s represents a new beginning for the study of Spinoza’s work in France (294). Through the combined efforts of Gueroult and Deleuze, Spinoza’s philosophy was projected beyond the confines of the narrow academic domain, and became part of the public discussion. And while Deleuze and Gueroult’s interpretation of Spinoza may seem different if not opposed, Macherey believes that it was precisely their differences and even opposition that combined to produce a renaissance of Spinozism (310). Macherey illustrates this convergence with an analysis of a detailed review of Gueroult’s book that Deleuze published in 1969. According to Macherey, the rejection of Descartes is the main point of encounter between Deleuze and Gueroult, and of the influence that these two books had in the reception of Spinoza in the 1960s. Macherey concludes his piece distancing himself from the 60’s anti-Cartesianism and that the relationship between Spinoza and Descartes is more complex than what was assumed to be during the heyday of structuralism (313).

The second paper, by Jean-Michel Salanskis, deals with the relationship between Derrida and analytic philosophy. Salanskis begins with a paradox. From a certain point of view, Derrida’s philosophy looks analogous to analytic philosophy. However, no real conversation with analytic philosophy seems to have taken place. The attempted dialogue in *Limited Inc*, where Derrida engages with the work of Austin and of Searle, remains a monologue. Salanskis proposes in his contribution to reflect on the nature of the absence of dialogue. He identifies the point of conflict between Searle and Derrida in their different understanding of the nature of language, and in order to reach across the divide he proposes a way that, while not effacing the differences, disposes of some of the misunderstandings (321-2). This section is a good example of a recent trend in contemporary French philosophy to embrace and appropriate Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy in a sophisticated way.

The third paper by Jean-Christophe Goddard deals with the nature of thought in the work of Gilles Deleuze. According to Goddard, Deleuze strives to find a middle way between the traditional notion of thought as representation, and the utopia developed by Artaud and Nietzsche of an imageless thought. This tension can, in its turn, be taken as paradigmatic of the intellectual production on this period.

The fourth and last chapter of the longitudinal section by Frédéric Worms focuses on the question of life, and its place in the work of late work of Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida. Worms reminds us of the fact that the three wrote texts dealing with the nature of life shortly before their death. Worms hypothesizes that these texts are important to understand the problematic of their individual work and also the nature of their relationship (350).

The monographic section is composed of three chapters. In the first, Patrice Maniglier discusses Derrida's interpretation of Saussure in the second chapter of *De la grammatologie*. Maniglier claims that this chapter is very important for an understanding of the nature of the 1960s philosophical moment. He confronts Derrida's interpretation of Saussure with the Saussure we know today, after the discovery of several previously unpublished documents. Maniglier also claims that one of the features of the period is the attempt to grasp the philosophical consequences of the introduction of the structuralist methodology in the human sciences, or, as he puts it, to write the book that Saussure did not and could not write (372).

The second chapter deals with Derrida's appropriation of Freud and psychoanalysis, while the third and last one deals with Derrida's 'ethical turn'. In his paper, Peter Dews argues that the period is characterized by a tension between the fascination with explanations of culture and society in terms of rigid, implacable structures, and the drive to subvert and dissolve those same structures. While other thinkers of the period, such as Levi-Strauss and Foucault, never succeeded in resolving this tension in their thought, Derrida was more successful, even at the expense of neutralizing one with the other. Dews suggests that we can gain a better perspective of Derrida's achievement in this sense, and of the difference between his position and Heidegger's philosophy, if we compare his thought with the theses of Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* and related works.

Le moment philosophique des années 1960 en France is not a comprehensive book about the French philosophy of the period. It excludes many philosophers who were active at the time, and who were well respected members of the brotherhood, such as Levinas or Ricoeur. It also excludes thinkers who were leftist but rejected structuralism, or the more literary oriented members of the structuralist movement. Probably no book could give a full account of the richness and diversity of the philosophical explorations undertaken during this epoch. And, for those less interested in an overall characterization of the period and more focused on some of its individual thinkers, this book offers a rich variety of approaches to the work of Althusser, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Levi-Strauss and Lyotard.

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