

Raymond Geuss. *Changing the Subject: Philosophy from Socrates to Adorno*. Harvard University Press 2017. 368 pp. \$29.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674545724).

When Gerry Cohen reflected on how he acquired his enviable skill-set as a philosopher, he concluded that ‘nobody ever told me how to do it.’ He also thought that it may be ‘impossible to *explain* to anybody how philosophy is to be done.’ In light of these and other reflections, he concluded that ‘[t]he only way to teach people how to do [philosophy] is by letting them watch, and listen, and imitate’ (G.A. Cohen, *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 2011, 225). We might see introductory texts on philosophy as giving their readers opportunities to listen, if not to watch and imitate. In *Changing the Subject: Philosophy from Socrates to Adorno*, Raymond Geuss plainly has aspirations of this sort. For he seeks to convey to his readers an understanding of the circumstances in which ‘[p]hilosophy takes place’ (5).

Philosophers have approached this tricky task in a variety of ways. José Ortega y Gasset sought to do it by focusing on what he took to be philosophy’s essence. This is, on his account, a ‘surging impulse toward clarification’ that he traces back to ancient Greece and identifies as the enduring achievement of a group of philosophers he calls ‘magistrate[s] of thought’ (*The Origin of Philosophy*, University of Illinois Press, 2000 [1967], 24 and 109). More recently, Luc Ferry has unfolded a compendious history of philosophical ideas. This history has to do with three things. They are ‘theory’ (‘an attempt to gain a sense of the world in which we live’), ‘ethics’ (how should we conduct ourselves?), and ‘salvation or wisdom’ (e.g., ‘liv[ing] wisely, contentedly and as freely as possible’) (*A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, Harper Perennial, 2003, 14–15). Ortega’s approach is too narrow. ‘[C]larification’ does not convey a sense of the wide range of ways in which ‘the movement of thought’ (to take a phrase from the Canadian jurisprude Ernest Weinrib) manifests itself in philosophical contexts (E. Weinrib, *Corrective Justice*, Oxford University Press, 2012, 13). While engaging, Ferry’s exposition encompasses so many shifts in thought that it threatens to overwhelm readers who are new to philosophy. Geuss’s approach to his subject is more promising than those adopted by Ortega and Ferry. He seeks to illustrate (by reference to a limited number of examples) how philosophers move on from earlier contributions to their discipline by changing the subject in ways that establish a new ‘framework’ of thought (5). Geuss is thus able to focus his readers’ attention on circumstances in which philosophy takes place. However, there are reasons for thinking that much of the philosophy he examines has to do with a subject that we can encompass in a single broad question (that invites a wide range of responses). This is the question of how to conceptualize a mode of existence in fruitful ways.

Geuss finds in the cleric and sometime professor of rhetoric, Augustine, a clear example of a philosopher who succeeded in changing the subject. Augustine was a proponent of classical natural law. He thus followed Plato on the point that law stands in a necessary relationship with morality. Moreover, he (again like Plato) argued that morality’s foundations lie in a metaphysical realm that is accessible to humankind only imperfectly. However, while Augustine echoed Plato on these points, he carried philosophy in a new direction to which Geuss devotes close attention. He notes that ‘actual historical events’ do not play a role in Plato’s argument, in the *Republic*, for an ideal model of human association (98). By contrast, he finds in Augustine a philosopher who presents an account of ‘the *constitutive* role of history in human life’ (102, emphasis added). On Geuss’s analysis, this account helps people to grasp that ‘[r]eal change is possible’ (114). For he impresses on them that the contexts they inhabit are the upshot of events that tell a story of human agency (‘the particular actions of particular people’) (106). What Geuss has to say on Augustine is quite correct. However,

he could have pressed his analysis further by setting Augustine's philosophical contribution in the context of his bitter dispute with the Celtic monk, Pelagius. Pelagius found in human agency a means to the end of social progress. Augustine considered Pelagian thought to be impious. This was because it assumed that humankind, rather than the grace of God, could bring about benign change in the world (D. MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, Penguin Books, 2010, 306-308). This response merits attention since it demonstrates the way in which those who change the philosophical subject may do so in ways that undercut assumptions that occupy a settled place in their own mental landscape.

Just as Geuss dwells on philosophers who change the subject when they respond to their predecessors, he also examines the way in which some of them depart from their own earlier statements of position. He notes that to change the subject in this way is to challenge the assumption that philosophers 'take relatively firm, considered, and unchanging positions on things' (252). Moreover, he demonstrates that a philosopher may go about his or her business in this way – only to resile from an emphatic statement of position. Geuss illustrates this point by reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein made a famous (and 'purportedly apodictic') statement of position on language in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (256). Geuss summarizes this position in the declaration that 'the essential nature of language is to be a picture or model of the world' (255). He adds that Wittgenstein drew from this understanding of language the conclusion that 'anything that can be said at all, can be said clearly' (256). However, in his later work, Wittgenstein abandoned this position and argued that we find in language 'the unbounded multiplicity' of ways in which to say things that defy articulation in clear terms (256).

Wittgenstein and Augustine each lend support to Geuss's claim that philosophy happens when those who engage in it change the subject. However, Martin Heidegger provides an entry-point into a concern common to a number of the philosophers who feature in Geuss's book. Heidegger's philosophy addresses a question that he considers to be 'primordial' (or 'honest, authentic, ... and salutary') (228). This is 'the question of Being' (or existence) – which philosophers have struggled to bring into focus, much less answer (227). Geuss (like Heidegger) adopts an illuminating approach to it (that involves what we might call a strategy of indirection). Rather than plunging into a conceptual analysis on the model of analytic philosophy ('What are the features of "Being"?''), he focuses his readers' attention on the contexts in which this question arises. He notes that, on Heidegger's account, people give an at least tacit answer to the question of Being through their 'mode of living' (232). He adds that Heidegger identifies people as situated beings. For their efforts to understand themselves and their circumstances proceed by reference to context-specific criteria. While this is the case, few people (according to Heidegger) seek to make an explicit response to the question of Being. Rather, they prefer to 'hide this concern from themselves' (227). Nonetheless, Heidegger sought to illuminate a pathway to understanding on the question of Being. To this end, he presented an account of an interpretive process to which he applied the label 'the hermeneutic circle' (235). This process embraces efforts to bring into focus and explain the inescapably interdependent and 'dynamic' relationship between a mode of existence and the context-specific conceptualizations that throw light on it (236). Heidegger also argued that, by moving between a mode of existence and the conceptualizations that relate to it, people can grasp the possibilities for action that inhere in particular contexts.

Heidegger stakes out a position on the hermeneutic circle that has ready applicability to the contributions of many of the philosophers who feature in Geuss's exposition. This point applies to Michel de Montaigne. Geuss notes that, on Montaigne's account, we find ourselves in 'a confused mass of chaotic events that only sporadically and accidentally exhibits any kind of order' (119).

However, Montaigne argues that we can bring some measure of order into our lives by attending to those around us. Geuss expands on this point by probing a term into which Montaigne compresses a great deal of significance. The term is '*s'entendre*' (133). It is an exhortation to people to pay attention to others so as to understand them. But *s'entendre* goes further than this. For it has to do with a mode of cooperation in which people find in those around them a 'mirror' that makes it possible for them to acquire self-understanding (134). Moreover, co-operative interaction on the model Montaigne describes yields a body of context-specific 'rules of thumb' (or guides to action) that make it possible for groups to establish and maintain an ordered social environment. This is a point on which Geuss presses hard and in illuminating ways. On his account, the guides to action that Montaigne describes enable people to make judgments that will be intelligible to the group of which they are a part (e.g., between the 'incommensurable aspects of a situation') (135). In this account of *s'entendre*, it becomes clear that Montaigne saw conceptualization as a process that does not stray far from the group-based mode of existence of which it is a part.

When Geuss fastens his attention on Friedrich Nietzsche, he presents us with a thinker whose arguments tend in a very different direction from those on offer in Montaigne. This is because the mode of existence that bulks large in Nietzsche's mind unfolds not at the level of the group but, rather, at that of the individual. Nietzsche also dwells on two ways in which to conceptualize existence at this level – one rooted in (but chary of) the common life of a co-operative group, the other in the individual him- or herself. Geuss brings this distinction into focus when he notes that, on Nietzsche's analysis, social systems hold appeal for weak people. This is because they find in them readily available reasons for action that invest their lives with significance and relieve them of the burden of self-definition or 'construction' (191). Geuss also notes that Nietzsche contrasts weakness on this model with the strength exhibited by those who (in their efforts to conceptualize their mode of existence) seek to engage in a process of self-definition. Alongside these points, Geuss sets another strand of argument from Nietzsche that places a question mark over the possibility of self-definition. According to Nietzsche, the self is not a 'psychic unity' but, rather, 'a mass of constantly shifting' and 'partially ordered' impulses (192). This is an analysis that reduces the concept of 'the self' to a placeholder for an unending stream of contingency located at the level of the individual life. These points make it possible to draw a sharp contrast between Nietzsche and Montaigne. While Montaigne's account of the interplay between mode of existence and conceptualization presents us with the life in common we call community, Nietzsche opens up the less cheering possibility of self-alienation. For it seems hard to see how we can find the stuff of an enduring identity in the ever-altering mode of individual existence he describes.

When Geuss turns to Hegel, he finds a philosopher who (like Montaigne) sees value in the common life of a community while (like Nietzsche) attaching importance to the individual. However, the community that Hegel describes is, on initial inspection, a less appealing place than the one Montaigne encourages us to contemplate. For Hegel dwells on actually-existing communities in which 'contingencies,' 'irrelevancies,' and 'archaic forms of reasoning' tell a story of partiality and self-seeking (165). While this is the case, he finds in the contexts he describes support for the conclusion that the conflicts that unfold within and between communities yield results that advance the cause of human freedom. Hegel thus teases out of history a doctrine of 'dialectical ascent' that leads (ultimately) to an end-state that secures the goods that make it possible for all people to live freely (159). Thus, we might see him as staking out a morally appealing position that sits between Montaigne (who urges responsiveness to actually-existing community) and Nietzsche (who identifies it as a standing threat to the individual). However, Geuss uses the philosophy of Theodor Adorno

(a prominent member of the Frankfurt School) to raise doubts about the ideal end-state Hegel contemplates. Adorno argues that Hegel fails to bring mode of existence and conceptualization into a harmonious relationship that serves the end of freedom. Geuss captures the gist of this critique when he observes that, where Hegel looks forward to ‘totality,’ Adorno anticipates “‘false’ totality” (282). What Adorno means by ‘false totality’ is that, even when we have fashioned an ideal end-state of the sort Hegel contemplates, we remain creatures who have an unappeasable subjective element. Consequently, we seem fated to grow frustrated with constraints on our ability to live according to own lights (even in circumstances where we have the opportunity to play our part in a just totality).

The emphasis Geuss (following Heidegger) places on efforts to throw light on the relationship between mode of existence and conceptualization carries his exposition in the direction of political philosophy. More particularly, it lends it an anthropological appearance. For it concerns the way in which people relate to others – either as members of groups (Montaigne and Hegel) or as individuals who find in group-life a threat to their efforts at self-definition (Nietzsche). These points afford a basis to point up an affinity between Geuss and another philosopher who features in his book, Thomas Hobbes. Geuss takes from Hobbes the lesson that, ‘if I want to understand the human world, it is good to start by picking out groups held together by shared, collective forms of submission’ (143). The value of attending to such groups is (on a Hobbesian view) that they throw light on the human capacity to respond constructively to a mode of existence in which there is no law. Hobbes argued that, in the absence of law, people’s aggressive propensities would make them a potentially lethal threat to one another. Moreover, he found in law the only basis on which to counter this threat. Geuss notes that, when Hobbes made this contribution to political philosophy, he was ‘clear’ that it presupposes ‘a kind of philosophical anthropology’ (143). ‘Philosophical anthropology’ is an apt term of art for Geuss to introduce into his exposition. For it goes a long way towards capturing a set of concerns that occupy a prominent place in his book (and that find expression in the respective philosophical contributions of, *inter alios*, Heidegger, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Hegel).

On the analysis offered in this review, Geuss does rather more than he intends to do in *Changing the Subject*. He certainly provides support for the claim that philosophers change the subject (e.g., Augustine’s account of history and Wittgenstein’s abandonment of the project that found expression in the *Tractatus*). But to this we must add the fact that he provides support for the conclusion that a number of the philosophers who feature in his book address the same broad question (how to conceptualize a mode of existence?). On this topic, what Geuss has to say is a significant spur to reflection (and seems likely to engage those who are new to philosophy). The verb ‘engage’ merits examination in light of the comments from Cohen with which we began. Cohen was unable to throw much light on the way in which philosophy engages those who seek to become its practitioners. It may be that a text such as Geuss’s leaves (to use a term from Henry Isaacs) a ‘scratch’ on a reader’s mind. By a ‘scratch’ Isaacs meant a goad to reflection (see C. Hitchens, *Hitch-22: A Memoir*, London: Atlantic, 2011, 60). Such a goad takes the form of a thought we return to, repeatedly, in an effort to draw out its significance.

When Geuss sets before us a group of thinkers who circle (in their various ways) around the question of how to conceptualize a mode of existence, he gives us a vivid example of such a reflective process. The fact that this group of thinkers each address this issue prompts the conclusion that Geuss is too sweeping when he identifies philosophy as having to do with changing the subject. Some philosophers clearly do work along the lines he describes (as Augustine and Wittgenstein illustrate). But matters are different when we turn to, *inter alios*, Montaigne, Nietzsche, Hegel, Heidegger, and Hobbes. We can characterize each of them as a philosopher of human existence (or, to use Heidegger’s term, *Dasein* (being-there)). For they each dwell on ways in which people seek to make

sense of and respond to their circumstances. Here we find the centre of gravity in Geuss's exposition. It stands at some distance from his central thematic claim (philosophers change the subject). While this is the case, the philosophers who change the subject in the way he describes do so in ways that have relevance to the effort to make sense of our circumstances. Augustine's understanding of history opens up the possibility of bringing about practically significant change along the timeline on which life unfolds. Wittgenstein (in his earlier and later incarnations) spurs reflection on language as an artefact with practical significance. Moreover, Geuss might have used Augustine to illustrate the way in which a philosopher who changes the subject can undercut assumptions that shape his or her practical world. As we noted earlier, Augustine does this by working up an account of history that tells a story of human agency that is at odds with his understanding of divine grace. These are points that lend support to the conclusion that Geuss's philosophical concerns have a decidedly anthropological orientation. He could have made this clearer to his readers by offering a more complete account of his thematic concerns. While this is the case, anyone who reads *Changing the Subject* closely will benefit from the experience. This is because Geuss alerts us to two of the places where philosophy takes place (successful efforts to change the subject and fruitful reflection on modes of existence). Moreover, he does so in terms that leave a large anthropological scratch on the mind.

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