

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Truth and Method*, second, revised edition, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1989), pp.xxxviii + 594. Reviewed by Ted Vaggalis, University of Kansas.

*Truth and Method* by H.-G. Gadamer is one of the great works in contemporary continental philosophy. However its importance has only recently begun to be widely appreciated by the American philosophical community. Its slow reception has been due primarily to its initial English translation, which was so poorly done that it contributed to frequent misunderstandings of Gadamer's work. This second edition, edited and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, is a welcome event that finally provides an accurate access to H.-G. Gadamer's magnum opus. Not only has the translation been cleaned up and made coherent, footnotes have been updated and new ones added that refer the reader to recent books and articles, by the author and others, that bear on the issues at hand. Gadamer himself has gone over the translation and added points of clarification as well. (xviii) Also, Weinsheimer and Marshall have written a brief preface that explains many of the key German words and concepts crucial for understanding Gadamer's analyses. (xi—xix) On the whole, this is a more critical translation that enables one to see how well Gadamer's account of philosophical hermeneutics has held up over the years since its publication in 1960.

The new edition of *Truth and Method* is an excellent opportunity for recalling the book's overall argument. Perhaps the best place to start is with the correction of a common misunderstanding of Gadamer's project. Some have taken him to be denying that the methods of the natural sciences are an appropriate avenue to truth. They see Gadamer arguing for a new philosophical method based on the peculiar subject-matter of the human sciences. (xxvii—xxvix) While Gadamer does argue against the universal claims of scientific method, he has made it quite clear that he is not interested in setting out a rival conception of method. (xxviii) Instead Gadamer is concerned with clarifying the conditions in which understanding occurs. These conditions are such that they exceed the narrow constraints set by scientific method. (xxi) Accordingly the book is concerned with an analysis of how truth is communicated in the experiences of art and the study of history. Here we are confronted with the inadequacy of science to provide us with any understanding of the meaning of these experiences. Hence Gadamer does not contest the validity of scientific method within its own domain. It is only when it exceeds its limits and claims an authority over that which it cannot understand that Gadamer is critical of the methods of the natural sciences.

The following investigations start with the resistance in modern science itself to the universal claim of scientific method. They are concerned to seek the experience of truth that transcends the domain of scientific method wherever that experience is to be found, and to inquire into its legitimacy. Hence the human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science: with the experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science. (xxii)

Gadamer begins with a consideration of how truth is experienced through the work of art. Art represents an important place in Gadamer's work. It allows one to see clearly the role that philosophical hermeneutics plays in all understanding. Traditionally art was not considered to have any significance in terms of truth. Modernity has viewed the history of art, from the time of Plato down to the present, as primarily an emotive experience that was outside the domain of truth. This view reached its zenith in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In Kant art undergoes a subjectivization that denies it the capacity to generate meaning and transmit knowledge.

In his critique of aesthetic judgment what Kant sought to and did legitimate was the subjective universality of aesthetic taste in which there is no longer any knowledge of the object, and in the area of the "fine arts" the superiority of genius to any aesthetics based on rules.... The radical subjectivization involved in Kant's new way of grounding aesthetics was truly epoch-making. In discrediting any kind of theoretical knowledge except that of natural science, it compelled the human sciences to rely on the methodology of the natural sciences in conceptualizing themselves. But it made this reliance easier by offering the "artistic element," "feeling," and "empathy" as subsidiary elements. (41)

The final phase of Kant's critical project, then, was to legitimate aesthetic judgments and judgments of taste. In order to do so, he had to solve a perplexing feature of those judgments. They have the curious feature of being both subjective in origin and universal in scope. It is here that Kant aligns himself with the dominant philosophical view of art that holds that the work of art does not have any truth value. The result is to produce an alienated conception of art: the "museum" conception that requires one to abstract the work of art from its original world and see it

merely as an object that produces reflective pleasure for a spectator. (xxx—xxxi) What Gadamer finds problematic here is Kant's dependence on the methodological presuppositions of the natural sciences. This requires the separation of the spectator from the work of art that is referred to as "aesthetic differentiation." Thus the spectator and the work must be abstracted from all their contingent features in order to arrive at the intended reflective pleasure.

However such a conception of art is simply inadequate. An ancient image of the gods that was displayed in a temple was not intended to produce pleasure in a spectator. Even though it stands in a museum, torn from its original setting, the world in which it was formed still is a part of it and our understanding of it. (xxxi) Thus a hermeneutic understanding is based on an "aesthetic non-differentiation" where the spectator integrates the work of art into the totality of her self-understanding. (xxx) This process of integration is accomplished when the spectator engages in the play that constitutes the understanding of a work of art. Play is not the subjective attitude of a player (or spectator), but it is the event that draws the spectator into the movement of understanding the work of art, engulfing both as participants and transforming them into a meaningful, structural whole. (117) Thus to truly experience the work of art one must put aside the presuppositions required by a view like Kant's.

We started by saying that the true being of the spectator, who belongs to the play of art, cannot be adequately understood in terms of subjectivity, as a way that aesthetic consciousness conducts itself. But this does not mean that the nature of the spectator cannot be described in terms of being present at something, in the way we pointed out. Considered as a subjective accomplishment, being present has the character of being outside oneself.... In fact being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else. This kind of being present is a self-forgetfulness, and to be a spectator consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching. (125—6)

The result of this transformation into structure is that the work of art acquires a contemporaneity that enables its meaning to transcend the horizon of its original setting while maintaining its truth. (121) Truth in the work of art is that content which is able to find presentation down through time, this is the work's continuity. (121) It is this continuity that opens the work of art up to the spectator, regardless of temporal setting, and allows the truth of the work to address her.

The point of Gadamer's analysis of the experience of art is to enable him to critique the concern with method that has plagued the human

sciences since their inception and formation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Now this concern with method had taken two forms in Europe. The first is the attempt to base the human sciences on the logic of the natural sciences, which had its origins in works like Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and Mill's *System of Logic*. (3—4) The second is the romantic tradition that had its roots in Herder, Rousseau and Kant. Here one finds the rejection of the natural sciences as the basis of the human sciences, in favor of a more historical way of viewing the human condition. However Gadamer argues that underlying both conceptions of the human sciences is the Cartesian subjectivism of modern thought that gave rise to an alienated form of historical consciousness. (271) The irony is that romanticism found itself dependent on the presuppositions of a scientific method that it rejected in regard to the human sciences. (6—8)

The goal of such leading figures as Schleiermacher, Ranke and Dilthey was to provide the human sciences with a method that would make them as reliable as the natural sciences. The problem was in accounting for the peculiar subject matter of the human sciences. The concern of these disciplines was not to be predictive like the natural sciences. Rather their aim was to explain the uniqueness of the event or text in question. The human sciences took as their guide Kant's claims about aesthetic judgments and his requirement that the spectator free herself from all subjective influences, which gave an aesthetic dimension to the methods of the human sciences.

However, in spite of this rejection of Enlightenment valuations, the romantic conception of the human sciences found itself unable to resist the methodological prejudices underlying the model of the natural sciences due to its Kantian orientation. According to Gadamer, the result was that the Romanticist movement of nineteenth-century Germany turned into a reverse Enlightenment that viewed history in terms of a fall from a golden age, like that of Greek culture in the time of Plato and Aristotle. (273—274) It reveals that the scientific inquiry characteristic of the Enlightenment and the rejection of that form of inquiry characteristic of the romantic movement in Germany are really grounded in the same presuppositions, the Cartesian demand that the investigator free herself from all subjective prejudices. These two accounts of method just go about this so-called liberation in different ways. Thus the Cartesian notion of subjectivity and the demand that the investigator free herself from all prejudice functions as a hidden methodological prejudice that distorts the experience of history. The result is that this form of historical consciousness is alienated from its subject matter in much the same way as the aesthetic consciousness of Kant.

Thus the criteria of the modern Enlightenment still determine the self-understanding of historicism. They do not do so directly, but through a curious refraction caused

by romanticism. This can be seen with particular clarity in the fundamental schema of the philosophy of history that romanticism shares with the Enlightenment and that precisely through the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment became an unshakable premise : the schema of the conquest of mythos by logos. What gives this schema its validity is the presupposition of the progressive retreat of magic in the world. It is supposed to represent progress in the history of the mind, and precisely because romanticism disparages this development, it takes over the schema itself as a self-evident truth. It shares the presupposition of the Enlightenment and only reverses its values, seeking to establish the validity of what is old simply on the fact that it is old.... (273)

In order to liberate the tradition of the human sciences from the misunderstanding caused by this Cartesian prejudice, Gadamer focuses on a distinction between two types of experience, that of the notion of *Erlebnis* and that of the notion of *Erfahrung*. ( See pp. 60—70; 164—169; 346—379) *Erlebnis* connotes the singular and unrepeatable aspects of one's experience. It was this notion that guided the researches of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Their emphasis was on capturing the uniqueness of a person's psychic structure which gave meaning to that person's life as a whole. This requires the investigator to free herself from any and all traditional presuppositions in order to accurately reconstruct the original setting of the object under study. The problem was that *Erlebnis*, as a subjectivist conception of understanding, led its proponents into all of the epistemological difficulties attached to this notion. The methodological demand that the investigator free herself from all prejudice covers over the historicizing effect that the past has on the investigator. The investigator must dismiss those very preconceptions given by tradition that has enabled the event to endure through time and made it meaningful. Thus the object of historical investigation is supposedly brought to light in terms of a reconstruction of its original setting in order to produce its original meaning. But in doing this one is mistaking one's reconstruction for the original. (167) The result is the same as the museum mentality found in the Kantian notion of "aesthetic differentiation." The investigator has delivered only a dead meaning which may arouse our curiosity, but it can have no enduring significance for us in the present. (167) Gadamer refers us to Hegel's characterization of the effects of this conception of the human sciences.

He [Hegel] exhibits a clear grasp of the futility of restoration when he writes as follows of the decline of

the classical world and its "religion of art": the works of the Muses "are now what they are for us— beautiful fruits torn from the tree. A friendly fate presents them to us as a girl might offer those fruits. We have not the real life of their being— the tree that bore them, the earth and elements, the climate that constituted their substance, the seasonal changes that governed their growth. Nor does fate give us, with those works of art their world, the spring and summer of the moral life in which they bloomed and ripened but only the veiled memory of this reality." And he calls the relationship of posterity to those works of art that have been handed down an "external activity" that "wipes spots of rain or dust from this fruit and instead of the internal elements of the surrounding, productive, and lifegiving reality of the moral world, it substitutes the elaborate structure of the dead elements of its external existence, of language, of its historical features and so forth. And this not in order to live within that reality but merely to represent it within oneself." (167)

Gadamer argues that the only sure path open to the human sciences is the conception of experience offered by Hegel. This is found in the notion of *Erfahrung*. Like the earlier analysis of the experience of art, experience must be construed in terms of integration. But it can be carried out only if the investigator is caught up in the play through which one comes to know the past. The primary task of the human sciences is to carry out a thoughtful mediation of the past with contemporary life. (168) This task is not to be conducted in terms of the self-forgetfulness characteristic of methodological consciousness in which the investigator suppresses her own presuppositions in order to purely experience the past. Instead it represents the continuing significance of the past for present-day life. This is what Hegel characterized as a thinking relation to the past. (167) It is also consistent with what we found to be the case in regard to the truth of art. However if we are to follow Hegel in our characterization of the human sciences does this not lead us to his philosophy of absolute spirit? (341) To do so would be to undermine all that Gadamer had argued for in regard to the finitude of our experience which prevents any totalization of the meaning of history and art.

Gadamer claims that to accept Hegel's conception of experience does not commit one to an absolute philosophy of spirit (*Geist*). *Erfahrung* is not to be understood in its traditional sense where it is related to a scientific knowing which seeks for a completion of knowledge. Rather Gadamer takes us in the direction of a conception of experience that is constantly exposing one to the limits of what can be known. It is the experience of one's

finitude. (356—357) The totality of meaning that constitutes the past at any given time is always going on beyond us and confronts us with the constant task of deepening our understanding of the relation between past and present. For this reason there can be no attempt at a totalization of knowledge. Nor is it possible to make a closure of history. The hermeneutical human sciences seek to understand in the manner of integrating (or fusing) the horizons of past and present in such a way that the meaning of the events depicted, or the text being examined, may be preserved and delivered over for future understanding.

It is at this point that we can see most clearly how dependent Gadamer is on Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein*. Heidegger's analysis revealed the underlying presuppositions of Greek substance ontology that led to the dominance of scientific method and the conception of absolute knowledge in Hegel. (270) In addition, Heidegger's work showed that the historical knowledge of the human sciences could not be harmonized with a methodological consciousness that ignored these presuppositions. (271) It is the dependence of the human sciences on the investigator's awareness of her 'fore-conceptions' that gives the human sciences their true focus. In bringing the prejudices of the investigator back into play, the circular structure of all understanding is brought clearly into view.

The circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a "methodological" circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding. (293)

Gadamer's appropriation of Heidegger's work brings to light the true task of the human sciences. They are no longer concerned with securing the individuality and psychical life of an author against the prejudices of tradition. But the focus is squarely on the truth of what is said in a text, or depicted in an event, and how its transmission through time has effected our understanding of ourselves and the past. (297) Time has generally been regarded as the force that has brought about an alienation between past and present which has stood in the way of understanding. In Gadamer's work, temporality is now the element in which understanding is achieved.

It constitutes a play of past and present in which the truth of the event or text being investigated is allowed to distinguish itself from mere prejudice. "Time is no longer a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted." (297)

The role of tradition and prejudice in *Truth and Method* is one of the most controversial claims in the book. Critics, like Habermas, question whether the hermeneutic dimensions of understanding provide a sufficient basis for critically assessing the claims of tradition. The problem is that a hermeneutical conception of the human sciences not only fuses past and present, but seems to confuse them; and it does so in a fairly conservative and unreflective manner. Philosophical hermeneutics appears to lack any critical or transcendent feature that can tell us what is wrong with tradition.

But such a view misses the significance of Gadamer's hermeneutical stance. Its task is not to simply reappropriate the past, but to continually call into question the reliability of both its own presuppositions and that of the texts or events under scrutiny. The play of understanding that involves both text and investigator constitutes a logical structure where prejudices are put at risk; as both text and fore-conception, past and present are measured against one another through the activity of questioning. (299) To take up the position of a transcendent or objectivist form of critique is to somehow safeguard certain values in an attempt at planning or managing discourse. But these values must be subjected to a historical questioning in which they prove their continuing validity. Hermeneutics is always on guard against the dangers of a scientific reason which attempts to administer a set of universal values which would then arbitrarily close off the play of understanding.

Does not the universality of understanding involve a one-sidedness in its contents, since it lacks a critical principle in relation to tradition and, as it were, espouses a universal optimism? However much it is the nature of tradition to exist only through being appropriated, it still is part of the nature of man to be able to break with tradition, to criticize and dissolve it, and is not what takes place in remaking the real into an instrument of human purpose something far more basic in our relationship to being?... Understanding certainly does not mean merely appropriating customary opinions or acknowledging what tradition has sanctified.... It seems to me, however, that the one-sidedness of hermeneutic universalism has the truth of a corrective. It enlightens the modern viewpoint based on making, producing, and



constructing concerning the necessary conditions to which that viewpoint is subject. (xxxvii—xxxviii)

The activity of questioning, fundamental to hermeneutics, shows that in all understanding some notion of application is being made. Traditional hermeneutics viewed its task only in terms of explicating texts. But Gadamer shows that all understanding is also an application and not merely an interpretation. Hermeneutic understanding is a matter of determining the efficacy of the text such that its binding character is made manifest through the work of an investigator. Therefore in addition to interpretation, the investigator must apply what is said to her own situation in order to attain that vision that truly discloses the full range of meanings of a text.

Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. The concept of "horizon" suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion....We have already pointed out that a truly historical consciousness always sees its own present in such a way that it sees itself, as well as the historically other, within the right relationships. (305)

The concept of experience as an integration of past and present, along with the dimension of application, brings us to a consideration of Gadamer's conception of language. This constitutes the final section of the book. Gadamer claims that language cannot be reduced to features like lexicons and grammars. (463) It is not a tool that one can use in order to discover or construct meaning, or give one the results one wants. Instead language has the structure of dialogue which binds its participants to one another. Here we see that genuine understanding is not a technique that enables one to control and manipulate the course of conversation. Rather dialogue is an event that places one's views at risk. It remains outside the control of either party involved, requiring them to trust in the justice of what is said. (383) Thus language is a play that draws the participants into it in order to turn their exchange of views into a meaningful whole. (457) In the process of exposing our views to the risk of this play we come

up against the limits that reveal our finitude. We are able to see that language both determines and is determined by us.

...it must be emphasized that language has its true being only in dialogue, in *coming to an understanding*. This is not to be understood as if that were the purpose of language. Coming to an understanding is not a mere action, a purposeful activity, a setting up of signs through which I transmit my will to others. Coming to an understanding as such, rather, does not need any tools, in the proper sense of the word.... But human language must be thought of as a special and unique life process since, in linguistic communication, "world" is disclosed. Reaching an understanding in language places a subject matter before those communicating like a disputed object set between them. Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another. All kinds of human community are kinds of linguistic community: even more, they form language. For language is by nature the language of conversation; it fully realizes itself only in the process of coming to an understanding. That is why it is not a mere means in that process. (446)

Language then is the clearing through which the world is disclosed. From the standpoint of philosophical hermeneutics the world is not just a collection of objects to be described. It is a world in which one is involved and toward which one bears a specific orientation. (443) It is the place where one dwells. It is through an understanding of this orientation that one is able to determine the factualness of objects in the world. The play of language is not only a description of these objects. But it provides an account of the involvements and relations we bear to these things that allows the genuine *facts of the matter* to emerge. (443) From this perspective one can see that the scope of the methods of the natural sciences in capturing the essence of truth is too limited. Their objectivity does not exhaust the notion of factuality, especially as it is found in the experiences of art and the human sciences. (453) The significance of the world is not exhausted in enumerating what is present-at-hand, nor in determining that which can be measured or calculated. Instead our notion of what is significant needs to be enlarged to include the work achieved in the human sciences so that the totality of the world can find expression. (456)

Here we uncover the speculative dimension that language has in its articulation of the world. In language one possesses the power "to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said" and to insure its

understanding. (469) It is this capacity to bring out the infinity of meaning in the finite word that is the ultimate accomplishment of philosophical hermeneutics. But this can only come about when we allow ourselves to be addressed by tradition. Through our mediation with the past we find a transformation occurring which not only reveals our prejudices, but allows the subject matter to work itself out. (463—464) Through an exchange in which interpretations are asserted and rejected we are able to uncover the nature of the subject matter. (465) Thus as one statement balances another the result is that the word which we interpretively select to express meaning is able to do so in the sense that an infinity of meaning is captured in a finite word. (465) The notion that language is play then captures the essence of truth for Gadamer. Play takes seriously what is being asserted. As one plays with the expressive power of language one comes to realize the truth of a subject matter in this play which expresses an infinity of meaning in the finite word. (490) To say that one has understood is to realize that one has been drawn into the play of meaning. Truth is not the limited experience of a spectator who maintains a distance from the object under investigation in order to factually assess it. Rather truth occurs only when one has surrendered oneself to this play which uncovers an infinity of meanings and the web of relations that bind one to an object. (126)

Gadamer's conception of truth and language was determined by his reading of the Platonic dialogues. (464) Socrates is successful because the young men who follow him do not hold themselves back like Thrasymachus. They eagerly engage themselves in the hunt for an answer to the questions posed by Socrates. In this way whatever is under discussion is able to achieve its full presence, however remote its origin or unclear its resolution may be. (127) Language as play, then, links that which is not concurrent with that which is present in such a way that the former can be experienced and taken seriously as a matter to be comprehended by someone who is present. (128) The truth of things is not to be found in the flattened projections that appear in scientific discourse. Truth emerges in a play that makes what is in dispute alive and vibrant for the participants.

This characterization of truth as the result of the play of language is bound to be unsatisfactory to those in the analytic tradition. For them, Gadamer's work will appear to be just more of the continental obscurantistic philosophy that has marked this tradition throughout the twentieth century. Admittedly there is some justice in this charge. The discussion of truth that emerges here is very different from the one that is found in philosophy of science. It seems so vague and indefinite that it easily finds itself faced with charges of relativism. However Gadamer regards this vagueness as the strength of his work in *Truth and Method*. Clearly a hermeneutical approach is not license to read a text or event in the way that one wants. Gadamer is emphatic that a text has a definite meaning. It is just that the play of this meaning is an infinite one that is constantly exposed to new horizons of meaning through language and time. This

infinity of meaning is best expressed through a philosophical hermeneutics that constantly exposes the productive possibilities of the presuppositions that an investigator brings to the event of understanding.

This brings us to a consideration of how well Gadamer's account of philosophical hermeneutics has held up over the years since its publication in 1960. I think that upon reflection one will see that the account he has given us has held up well. It was written at a time when logical positivism was the dominant school in American philosophical circles. Soon after Gadamer's work appeared, Kuhn and Feyerabend published their accounts critical of the positivist conception of scientific method. *Truth and Method* has been equally influential in debates about the logical status of historical explanations and the social sciences. Since this time hermeneutics has played a central role in these debates on method. In both the natural and social sciences the crucial issue is the concern that the methodological demands of scientific explanation are too narrow to account for the way in which understanding occurs in these domains. Social scientists in particular have found an ally in Gadamer's work. There is no question that Gadamer's work has become even more timely in recent years. Of course hermeneutics has had its most lasting impact in the fields of aesthetic theory and literary criticism. But the most promising area for applying philosophical hermeneutics is in that of ethics and political philosophy. Recent works like Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* have raised anew the possibility of a return to an Aristotelian conception of ethics, an issue that Gadamer addressed at the beginning of his career and which continues to hold an important place in his work.

*Truth and Method* is one of those rare works which becomes more relevant as the years pass. One can find in it an inexhaustible store of knowledge. In these days when historical knowledge is viewed as an obstacle to progress, Gadamer's book is an important reminder of the dangers that confront the human condition when it has not adequately reflected on the meaning of its past. I hope that readers of this review will take the time to read Gadamer's *Truth and Method* for they will never be the same after this experience.

*Sartre's Political Theory*, by William L. McBride. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Reviewed by Julie C. Pedersen, Loyola University of Chicago.

To those familiar with Sartre's philosophical and literary works, the title of William L. McBride's new book, *Sartre's Political Theory*, may evoke a cautious if not justified skepticism. While Sartre's work surely addresses itself to questions of political significance, the notion of Sartre as a "political theorist" is somewhat paradoxical: is not Sartre the

philosopher whose radical idea of individual freedom helped fuel an existentialism which rejected theism and humanism in favor of a normative yet pernicious anarchism? While the question of Sartre's commitment to this idea of freedom continues to divide scholars, one doubts whether any tenable political theory can support the notion of individual freedom for which Sartre is so celebrated.

It is with full knowledge of the task before him that McBride endeavors to "reconstruct some of the main moments in the evolution of Sartre's political theory" (p. 85). The term "political theory" is of course a label, but it is not the pedantic concern to fit Sartre into a category that drives McBride's thesis. On the contrary, this book explores the full range of Sartre's thoughts on society, history and politics--thoughts scattered across dozens of works, innumerable pages and nearly half a century--and attempts to show how that thought emerges out of and remains forever faithful to the twin ideals of socialism (understood in a highly specified sense) and freedom.

McBride begins his task with a "situational biography" of Sartre's early life and young manhood. We learn, among other things, of the solitude of Sartre's childhood and of the alienation and violence that circumscribed his adolescent years away from Paris. Although the inclusion of so much biographical information may lead certain readers to reductionist conclusions, McBride overtly rejects such conclusions seeking instead to illuminate the force of circumstances without giving to those circumstances the power of any determinism.

What emerges from this biographical sketch is a portrait of an individual whose early experiences can be characterized by a lack of varied or significant social relations and of a philosopher entrenched in a political slumber out of which not even the spectacle of the Liberation of Paris would fully wake him. The extent of this political slumber is nowhere more apparent than in the stark contrast between the sociopolitical events which shaped the daily life of a continent ravaged by war, and the abstract, pedagogical, apolitical "monument of rationality" to which Sartre gave the title *Being and Nothingness*.

Written during our century's darkest hours, *Being and Nothingness* reflects astonishingly little of the monstrous political climate of the world in which its author lived. With brief exceptions--most notably Sartre's famous promise of an ethics in its closing passages--this metaphysical tour de force remains, as McBride acknowledges, far removed from "anything recognizably political" (p. 36). But if *Being and Nothingness* was written in a sociopolitical vacuum, the same cannot be said of the publications that emerged from Sartre's post-war pen.

In the middle chapters of his book, McBride takes the reader on a guided tour of these publications. Along the way, we encounter both the well-known works (*Anti-Semite and Jew*, or the essays "Materialism and Revolution" and "What is Literature"), as well as the more obscure pieces,

(the introduction Sartre wrote to the preface of Louis Dalmas's *Le Communisme yougoslave*, his work *L'Affaire Henri Martin*, and the series of articles grouped under the heading *The Communists and Peace*). Particular attention is also given to the *Cahiers pour une morale*, a work which Sartre regarded as problematic and unsatisfactory, but one which contains, according to McBride, Sartre's attempt at making good on his promise to deliver an ethics.

Not surprisingly, this journey through Sartre's political awakening leads directly, if not a little too patiently, to a consideration of the two volumes of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and of its introductory essay "Search for a Method". If the writings of the post-war years contain glimmers of an emerging, albeit inchoate political theory, it is in the *Critique*, particularly in subsection A of Book 2 that we find "the heart of Sartre's political theory" (p. 141).

Both its official title, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, as well as its subtitle, "Theory of Practical Ensembles" bear witness to the sociopolitical nature of this work (a sharp contrast indeed to the virtually exclusive treatment of individual consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*!). The former is no accidental pun on Kant's work, but rather a description of Sartre's deeply-rooted belief that nature, society and history are best understood dialectically. Indeed, we are urged to view the *Critique* as a quest to make history intelligible, and to appreciate the fact that Sartre, unlike Kant, Hegel, or even Marx, favors intelligibility over guidance and prediction. But it is the concern with "practical ensembles"—that is to say, with the emergence, formation and function of groups—which dominates the *Critique*; and it is the attempt, within its pages, to work out all the notorious difficulties between the individual and society that makes this work stand out among Sartre's other works, and that qualifies him, in the end, as a political theorist.

What is the nature of the political theory which unfolds in light of the dialectics of existence? It is a theory which sees the human origin of all values and which therefore rejects a teleological view of history. It is a theory which remains committed to the notion of freedom as the supreme value of conscious Being, only now freedom is situated in the context of the lives of individuals who coexist in an increasingly global village. Indeed, the freedom of the *pour-soi* becomes now the freedom of group praxis, as individuals are united in their common struggle to eliminate scarcity.

It is in the processes which circumscribe the formation of what Sartre calls "the fused group" that we best understand the other ideal upon which Sartre's thought rests and ultimately the relation between both freedom and socialism. It is in fact Sartre's growing understanding of the importance of one's place in sociopolitical history that ultimately guides his new conception of situated freedom. The lofty freedom of *Being and Nothingness* remains, in a sense, in the background; but before it can be realized a more basic freedom must first be won. It is the fight to secure

this freedom—played out on an infinite variety of battlefields ranging from real wars to tennis courts and boxing rings—that underlies all human action and that gives rise, slowly and dialectically, to the formation of groups.

It is in the inherent power of the bonds that tie the group together, if only momentarily, that Sartre sees the sole promise for social change. But again, in contrast to his predecessors, Sartre's "vision" of the future is not fixed or determinate, except insofar as his conception of socialism entails "the suppression of exploitation and oppression" (p. 163). It is not therefore the quest to establish the ideal human community which defines Sartre's socialism, for it rejects the establishment of any new world order. If there is a call to action, it is an action which would lead to the elimination of societal structures and hierarchies.

It is thus between these two pillars of Sartre's thought—socialism and freedom—that McBride constructs a political theory out of Sartre's many words. By the time he completes his journey through Sartre's thought—a journey which succeeds at establishing Sartre's direct, if not ironic relevance, to the sociopolitical events of our own decade, the reader acquires a new and broader, and ultimately more sympathetic knowledge of Sartre. Particular questions, such as Sartre's complicated relationship with Marxism over the years, are seen in light of Sartre's struggle toward mature political thought. Concepts such as "class struggle," "rights," "the state," "sovereignty," "institutions," to mention only a few, are imbued with a Sartrean meaning all their own.

If naming Sartre's thought as "political theory" strikes some as too wide, it will no doubt strike others as too narrow. McBride's book is no mere compilation of Sartre's responses, over the years, to political events and ideologies both past and present (although this information is surely there for the interested reader). It is rather a philosophical offering, the resulting gift of which is a new, broader and ultimately more sympathetic image of Sartre, and of the philosopher embedded in the world. Perhaps in the end, one cannot avoid the question of whether McBride has made a political theory where before there was none. In the final analysis, the answer to this question will depend largely on the philosophical temperament of the reader and upon their ability to conceive and attach a new meaning to old words.

*Mind in Action: Essays in the Philosophy of Mind*, by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988. 378 pp. Reviewed by Andrew Pessin, Columbia University.

In *Mind in Action* Amelie Rorty has assembled a variety of loosely related essays written by her over a period of fifteen years. These essays cover a wide range of subjects—personal identity, emotions, allegedly

irrational attitudes such as akrasia and self-deception, virtues, practical reasoning, etc.—and within most of these subjects she reviews, develops, and/or criticizes a wide range of views. The book's opening essay attempts, approximately, to provide some sort of framework for all this diversity; a daunting task, at which I'm not sure it succeeds. There's a lot here: of *that*, at least, I'm sure.

Rorty begins with the question, "Is the philosophy of mind a subject?" What she means is that the issues encompassed are so varied, with so many threads leading back to so many different historical contexts, that it's quite hard to bring it all together. A brief historical review and her main themes are well established, viz. the diversity, and the context-dependency, of all positions. "The range of various 'mental' activities," she writes, "...must each find a place within some explanatory theory. But nothing ... requires that they all find their explanations in the same place" (p. 5).

The essays in the first main division (of four) in the book, "Persons and Personae," focus largely on the nature of persons and personal identity. Her overall claim seems to be that there are many such conceptions, with each one sensitive to some particular social or political or just plain philosophical context. Augustine's religious concerns, e.g., flavored his conception of persons as simple unified agents despite their conflicting faculties; political concerns dominated the conceptions of persons of writers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau; and today's biomedical advances and concerns, I should add, certainly have ramifications for contemporary conceptions. But it's not just that there's diversity, etc.; the deeper point seems to be that sometimes or maybe often the conflicts between conceptions may be unresolvable. (More on this in a bit.)

The essays in the second and third divisions, "Psychological Activities" and "The Wayward Mind," are the most interesting. Those in the second division seek to undermine the traditional distinctions among psychological faculties, presenting various psychological phenomena (love, jealousy, fear of death, self-knowledge) not as occurrent states with propositional contents but as processes or activities which are cognitive, motivational, and affective, as well as socially influenced. The essays in the third division focus on various "anomalous" psychological activities, including self-deception, akrasia, the irrational conservation of the emotions, and agent regret—anomalous because of problems they cause for notions of rational agency. Rorty's main idea seems to be that once you relinquish traditional faculty distinctions and take her more "contextualized" approach, their mysteriousness disappears.

Here's her own brief summary of this approach. It treats the various traditional cognitive and psychological attitudes as:

- 1) Cross-classified with, rather than contrasted to, physical processes; 2) a) Heterogeneous classes with



disjunctive criteria for membership, b) Activities rather than states, c) Complex activities composed of distinctive subprocesses; 3) Actively interdependent and mutually constituting; 4) Partly indeterminate, open to further determination; 5) Organized in habitual or characteristic patterns; 6) Socially structured; 7) Multilayered and multifunctional. (p. 8)

For details, and for her application of this approach to the anomalous activities above, I refer you to the text.

The fourth, shortest division, "Community as the Context of Character," includes essays with a variety of tasks. The first analyzes the theory of action she finds implicit in recent moral theory. The last explores the idea that the range of a person's power is largely controlled by controlling her imagination, specifically her conception of what is possible. The two in between tackle the general problem of assuring the proper exercise of the various dispositions constituting the virtues, and, after criticizing the "master regulatory virtue" solution to this problem—in which, in order to resolve possible conflicts, one virtue is chosen to reign supreme—propose, ultimately, that the appropriate configuration of a person's virtues is determined by social and political institutions and interactions.

Now here's a general criticism: Rorty's approach strikes me as often rather conciliatory. She tends to find some truth in most positions, even those most at odds. Examples abound: p. 43, synthesizing opposed conceptions of persons; p. 54, juggling contrasting criteria for identity; p. 311, balancing competing criteria for balancing opposed virtues. Now she may not be wrong to be conciliatory; perhaps there is some truth in most positions. But it's a criticism because it doesn't make for very exciting reading when almost everyone turns out to be at least a little right.

It's worth noting, too, that Rorty's inclined towards a rather continental style. She observes, more than argues; she's prone to join metaphysical concerns with political; she leans towards the literary. Indeed, there's a near total absence in this book of perhaps the two most widely discussed topics in analytical philosophy of mind of the past two decades or so, viz. the problems of content and qualia. It's insightful to realize just how much issues of mind are entwined with those of ethics and politics, but this book is a lot more about the latter than the former. As such its title is a bit misleading. That's not exactly a tragedy, but be warned. Philosophers' dollars want selective spending.

Some good points of the book include its insightfulness, numerous interesting and provocative observations (especially about, e.g., various emotions like love and jealousy), and its literary flair (e.g., she crafts interesting brief anecdotes in a number of essays to serve as analytical

fodder). At its best moments in those middle two divisions it even recalls Proust.

But there are some lesser moments as well. Insightfulness is sometimes tempered by conciliatoriness. Observations can degenerate into unsatisfying pseudoempirical generalizations ("Even veterans of moral wars rarely set themselves the farsighted statesmanly task of assuring the peaceful conditions that would make their particular virtues obsolete" (p. 301). And its literariness can cloy. For example she sometimes provides brief epigraphs that border on the silly ("Ethics without psychology is science fiction; morality without politics is a bicycle without wheels" (p. 15).

And some minor irritations: no index or cumulative bibliography. That makes a collection of fairly disjointed essays, like this one, especially difficult to work with.

So, overall, a long and difficult book, sometimes rather dense, sometimes annoying—but also sometimes entertaining and insightful. As long as you know what you're getting into, I'd say, on the whole, it's worth looking into.<sup>1</sup>

*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, by Tsenay Serequeberhan. New York: Paragon House, 1991. 250pp. \$13.95 (Paper). Reviewed by Clarence Sholé Johnson, Spelman College.

If one is in search of a book that brings together the various kinds of issues that inform questions about the existence and nature of African philosophy, then this book is certainly it. There are eleven thought-provoking, insightful, polemical and well-written essays in the book, each attempting to answer the question "What is African philosophy?" And the polemic in the essays is decisive evidence that Africans are not (and should not be expected to be) a monolithic group.

Roughly, there are three competing responses to the question. First, is the view of the ethnophilosophers, according to which African philosophy is a documentation of the ideas implicit in the folklores, tales, myths and religious beliefs of various African ethnic groups such as the Bantus or the Yorubas. Second, is the position called philosophic sagacity which suggests that African philosophy is a critique of traditional African beliefs undertaken by individual African sages (or wise men) within the tradition. And third, we have the views of the professional (i.e. Western trained) African philosophers. This group, being mainly college and university teachers, views African philosophy as the engagement by Africans in the analysis of the kind of issues addressed in the curricula of

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Kelly Rogers for helpful comments.

institutions of higher learning, especially in the West; moreover, these African philosophers should utilize their analytical skills in the investigation of African belief systems. In what follows I will discuss a few representative samples of these positions.

In his paper "Is there an African Philosophy?" (ch. 1), Innocent Onyewuenyi, taking his point of departure from the ubiquitous *Bantu Philosophy* of Placide Temples, defends the view that African philosophy is a documentation of the beliefs held by Africans. He argues that Africans have a concept of ontology encapsulated in the idea that there are different forces, the greatest of which is God; that there is an African ethics; and that there is an African epistemology according to which "Knowledge or wisdom for the African consists in how deeply he understands the nature of forces and their interaction" (pp. 40-41).

Onyewuenyi's position is a reaction to the once (and perhaps still) generally held view in the West, most blatantly expressed by such philosophers as Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel etc., that Africans, and in general all non-Europeans, are inherently devoid of the capacity to reason, a capacity that is manifested in the employment of argumentation and dialectic especially on speculative matters. In his introductory remarks, Serequeberhan outlines this view as follows:

Hume and Kant held the view that Africans, in virtue of their blackness, are precluded from the realm of reason and civilization. As Hume puts it, "I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilized complexion than white." Kant, in agreement with Hume, asserts that "[so] fundamental is the difference between the two races of men, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color." Making a subtle observation on the intellectual capacities of a black person, Kant astutely remarks that "this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid" (pp. 5-6).

From this kind of view, it is obvious that Africans are deemed to be inherently incapable of undertaking philosophic inquiry, indeed of having a philosophy at all. And it is to views of this kind and their implications for the question about the existence of philosophy in traditional Africa that Onyewuenyi is responding in his paper. One limitation on Onyewuenyi's position, however, is that it glorifies the traditional elders as the bastion of insight, wisdom and knowledge, and blames the turbulent socio-political realities of present-day Africa singularly on the colonialists. He charges that the colonial administrators "regarded the

educated as the wise people, and consequently and arbitrarily appointed them as legislators and leaders in the community, contrary to African political philosophy, which took the eldest of the community, to be, by divine law, the repository of wisdom and the link between God, the ancestors, and the living" (p. 42). But Onyewuenyi fails to note that traditional African society as embodied in the elders shows an antipathy toward criticism and is repressive. This repressiveness partly explains the ease with which the colonial administration was able to create dissention. One needs only to read passages from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to see this. Okonkwo's only son readily joined the missionaries because he could no longer endure the pain of repression. But it does not follow from an admission of the society's repressiveness that criticism does not at all take place. (Consider Obierika's questioning the beliefs of his Ibo society, beliefs the subscription to which brings nothing but calamity to the group. This is a silent criticism of traditional Ibo life.) In his endeavour to present the case for the existence of a traditional African philosophy in the sense denied by the West, Onyewuenyi fails to bring up the real issue that would have constituted an appropriate refutation of the view that African traditional society is pre-rational, pre-critical, and therefore pre-philosophical.

To show that, however scantily, traditional African society does engage in philosophic activity is the object of Henry Oruka's paper, "Sagacity in Africa" (ch. 2). To begin, Oruka distinguishes between culture philosophy and philosophic sagacity. Culture philosophy consists of the beliefs that are communally owned and shared, beliefs that are uncritically accepted and subscribed to by everyone in the community. The custodians of these beliefs are the elders (sages) in the society. According to Oruka, these elders are therefore sagacious in respect of the society's beliefs and customs. But, Oruka argues, their sagacity is cultural and not philosophic. It is cultural only in the sense that the elders are the repositories of knowledge about the society's customs.

What then is philosophic sagacity? Oruka takes philosophic sagacity to be a critique of culture philosophy, a critique by an individual sage within the society of the society's customs and beliefs. This individual may or may not be recognized as a sage, but he does examine the customs and beliefs of the society. As Oruka puts it, philosophic sagacity is "a product and a reflective reevaluation of the culture philosophy." It involves a "critical assessment" of a culture and its underlying beliefs" using "the power of reason rather than the celebrated beliefs of communal consensus and explanation" (p. 52, emphasis in text).

Note that the motivation for philosophic sagacity is similar to that of ethnophilosophy of the kind advocated by Onyewuenyi, viz., to disprove the claims of Western scholars that Africans are devoid of the power of reason to think coherently, logically and speculatively. Of importance, however, is the parallel that Oruka draws between the origination of

Greek philosophy and that of philosophic sagacity. In Western philosophy, Thales is celebrated as the first philosopher because of his repudiation and substitution of the mythopoeic systems of ancient Greece with rational inquiry. Oruka, by describing philosophic sagacity as a critical rebellion against culture philosophy, is canvassing the idea that African philosophical systems have a similar origin with Western, and generally all, philosophical systems, namely a critique of antecedent or contemporary systems of thought.

It would be off the mark to counter Oruka's position by asking him to identify or produce an African counterpart to, say, Thales or Socrates. The reason is that philosophy in traditional Africa is not practiced as a systematic and organized activity as in the West. But, again, it does not follow from this that philosophic activity does not take place. The objection will therefore be missing Oruka's point. Indeed, the approach of some contemporary professional African philosophers in seeking out and conducting interviews with individual sages is precisely aimed at documenting the existence of philosophers in traditional Africa although there are no philosophic schools as in the West.

Contra Oruka, however, both Peter O. Bodunrin ("The Question of African Philosophy"), with whom Oruka takes issue, and Kwasi Wiredu ("On Defining African Philosophy"), question the existence of a philosophical enterprise in traditional Africa. Bodunrin, for example, contends that traditional African pithy sayings, folklore and myths, though rational, are anything but philosophic. The ideas embedded in these sayings etc. are group-owned; they are not presented and defended with arguments but instead are uncritically accepted by everyone in the community. Furthermore, Bodunrin charges that philosophic sagacity cannot be sustained because traditional African society is non-literate while philosophical activity requires literacy (p. 82). Consequently, he thinks that the object of contemporary African philosophy (and the role of the professional African philosopher) is to take a critical look at the concepts, beliefs and cultural systems of the society in a bid to seek out that which will reveal Africans as members of the world rather than as peculiar beings with peculiar ways as per the representations of ethnophilosophers. However, inasmuch as one applauds Bodunrin's argument for the universality and univocality of philosophical enterprise, his claim that literacy is a pre-requisite for philosophical activity is certainly false and is therefore justifiably rejected by Oruka (pp. 58-59) and also by Lansana Keita in "Contemporary African Philosophy: The Search for a Method" (ch. 7). Recall my observation about Obierika's silent criticism of Ibo beliefs. Obierika is an illiterate old man.

But a paradoxical even if scathing indictment of ethnophilosophy from the standpoint of the professional African philosopher is Paulin J. Hountondji's "African Philosophy: Myth and Reality" (ch. 6). In a tone reminiscent of Quine's invective against the two dogmas of empiricism in

the article by that title, Hountondji charges that ethnophilosophy is a fraudulent discipline that simply masquerades as a science. And to justify its existence as a science, ethnophilosophy posits "the myth of primitive unanimity" (p. 117) that Africans en masse subscribe to a collective system of beliefs and as such are monolithic in thinking. This myth is reflected in a host of works by the likes of Europeans such as Temples, Marcel Griaule, Dominique Zahan, Louis-Vincent Thomas, and their uncritical African cohorts such as Leopold Sedar Senghor of the Senegal, Alexis Kagame of Rwanda, and William Abraham of Ghana, to name just a few.

Hountondji stops short of describing both the rationale for ethnophilosophy and Western reaction to it as racist. But he need not engage in any name-calling to convey this thought. Quoting approvingly the pejorative remarks of Henry Oruka in which the latter denigrates ethnophilosophy, Hountondji calls attention to the condescension and patronizing attitude that informs studies and issues pertaining to Africa. I cannot help reproducing the entire passage.

What may be a superstition is paraded as 'African religion', and the white world is expected to endorse that it is indeed a religion but an African religion. What in all cases is a mythology is paraded as 'African philosophy', and again the white culture is expected to endorse that it is indeed a philosophy but an African philosophy. What is in all cases a dictatorship is paraded as 'African democracy', and the white culture is again expected to endorse that it is so. And what is clearly a de-development or pseudo-development is described as 'development', and again the white world is expected to endorse that it is development —but of course 'African development.' (p. 116).

This passage aptly summarizes the reason professional African philosophers, and indeed philosophers of African descent, are justifiably hostile to ethnophilosophy.

After such firebrand remarks of Hountondji, one naturally expects him to reject as absolutely preposterous the concept of an African philosophy, especially from the ethnophilosophic standpoint. But such expectation is severely thwarted by Hountondji's baffling re-definition of African philosophy as a critique of African beliefs and non-African (or Western) philosophy undertaken by Africans alone. In this regard, as he says, "A work like *Bantu Philosophy* does not belong to African philosophy, since its author [the Belgian, Placide Temples] is not African; but Kagame's work is an integral part of African philosophical literature" (p. 121). Hountondji fails to see the logical incoherence of his position when he expands the concept of African philosophy to include "all research into

Western philosophy carried out by Africans" (p. 122) while maintaining that works of non-African ethnophilosophers do not belong to the African philosophical corpus. Strangely enough, Hountondji claims that his position is not contradictory! But certainly the reader will think otherwise.

Regrettably, I cannot comment on the remaining fine pieces in this volume. However, two that surely deserve brief mention are Kwasi Wiredu's already-noted "On Defining African Philosophy" and Lansana Keita's "Contemporary African Philosophy: The Search For A Method." A member of the professional philosophic school, Wiredu suggests that the definition of African philosophy must be answered with a programme—although it is not quite clear to me, at least, what programme he is really recommending. Nevertheless, the insights in his discussion are worth noting. And, finally, Lansana Keita reviews the other positions already discussed and attempts to counter the idea that literacy is a recent phenomenon in Africa by tracing the foundation of African philosophy to "the *literate* ideas of Egyptian thought and Medieval Africa" (p. 143, emphasis added). It is an open question, though, whether or not Keita's account of the history of literacy in Africa will sit well with many African scholars. Keita then suggests that philosophical activity in contemporary Africa must have a pragmatic goal, that of providing a theoretical analysis of the problems and issues that affect Africa in the hope of offering practical solutions to those problems.

From the discussion I have provided thus far, it should be clear that the issues examined are far from resolved. The plethora of positions on the subject of African philosophy brings to mind the diversity of positions that were adopted in early critiques of African literature. One consequence of the discussion in the book is that it will undoubtedly force philosophers at large, Western and non-Western, to re-examine the concept of philosophy itself. Going beyond philosophy, however, the discussion will certainly interest those engaged in Black Studies, for it examines the philosophical underpinnings of the issues raised in Black Studies. To that end I should call attention to a short but impressive bibliography which the book provides.