
Review

Changing the subject: Philosophy from Socrates to Adorno

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Harvard University Press, Cambridge,
MA, 2017, 368pp., ISBN 9780674545724

Contemporary Political Theory (2019) **18**, S267–S269. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-018-0241-4>; published online 20 August 2018

Ranging from his path breaking *The Idea of A Critical Theory* (1981), to his recent run of essay collections – particular favourites of mine would include *Outside Ethics* (2005) and *Politics and the Imagination* (2010) – to his short but very powerful reframing of realism from the left in *Philosophy and Real Politics* (2008), Raymond Geuss has been a distinct, indeed one might say unique, voice in contemporary philosophy for over 30 years. His reach is dazzling, taking in European and analytic philosophy, the history of philosophy, aesthetics and political theory. In this most recent book, the range and the depth of his reading and thinking are fully on display; the text, however, is so clear and limpid that any sufficiently interested reader can follow it, even when the arguments are complex (as, of course, they sometimes are).

The book has twelve chapters, each focused on a single author, and, for the most part, a single text, bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion. The authors covered are, in turn, Socrates, Plato, Lucretius, Augustine, Montaigne, Hobbes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Lukács, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Adorno. The collection addresses those philosophers who have, Geuss suggests, ‘changed the subject’; that is to say, as he puts it in the preface, all of his subjects have attempted ‘to construct something that is the opposite of common sense ... one is in some sense changing the subject. That is what – or at any rate that is one thing that – philosophy has been’ (p. xiii).

In the space allocated to me in this review, I could not possibly do justice to the nuance and subtlety that Geuss displays in all of the chapters; instead, I will focus on three themes that seem to me to be especially interesting for reasons I will get to (though everyone who reads the book will have their own favourites).

I will start where Geuss himself starts: his introduction. He begins with a meditation on what philosophy is, told through a wonderful retelling of Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, where, famously, a knight, returning from the Crusades, waits for death from plague. When the Angel of Death arrives, the knight’s gambit is to



challenge him to a game of chess in order to stave off the inevitable. His second strategy is to try to checkmate Death, but this fails. When Death looks to checkmate him, his next ploy is to ‘accidentally’ allow his robes to sweep the pieces from the board. But since he has confessed to a priest (actually Death in disguise) that this is his strategy, it is of no use because Death replaces the pieces on the board as they were and proceeds to win the game and claim the knight. Geuss suggests that the key to philosophy, as an activity, is not the first or second moves, i.e. choosing to play a game, or playing ‘by the rules’, but the third, changing the game (by knocking over the pieces). As he puts it ‘the most characteristic feature of philosophy is its connection with a moment when the gears shift, the code breaks down and changes or is changed, the definition of the situation is thrown into question, and we need to reflect on the wider context within which a course of action ... has been proceeding, when expectations change and terms need to be redefined.’ (p. 5).

The question is whether this *is* what is most characteristic about philosophy. That it is *a* characteristic of philosophy is not in doubt (at least not by me), but that it is the essence of philosophy – that seems to me to be open to some question. One might see philosophy simply as questioning our presuppositions or as a conversation – à la Oakeshott and/or Rorty (a colleague of Geuss’s at Princeton for some years and on whose work he wrote an excellent essay). In which case it would not have something that is ‘most characteristic’ about it. His seems – to me at least – to be a stipulative definition.

A second theme that surfaces in many of the chapters is the differing styles of philosophy – and in particular two different ones. In perhaps the most original chapter in the collection, the chapter on Montaigne, Geuss wittily points out that lots of philosophers have been (as he puts it) ‘terrible busybodies, never happier than when sticking their noses into other people’s business, reproving them, putting them to rights, correcting them, giving them unsolicited advice’ (p. 115). Even Socrates, as he points out, while obviously amusing and ironic – to use the terms Gregory Vlastos (1991) used, ironist *and* moral philosopher – had ‘more than an occasional whiff of the (highly sophisticated) intellectual bully about him’ (p. 115). If someone shouts ‘Smite the Ababelites’, one can always say, as Geuss says, ‘no, I don’t feel like smiting any Ababelites today’ (p. 115). But ‘this form of resistance won’t work when one is confronted with a seemingly polite, even self-deprecating, request for enlightenment: “Euthyphro, you’re a priest and a great expert in matters of religion; tell me what piety is, won’t you? I’ve never understood that. I need your help”. Socrates found an absolutely ingenious way to make even asking a simple question an impertinent intervention in others’ lives, thus potentially destabilizing and disorientating them completely’ (p. 116).

Geuss’s point is that Montaigne is almost completely free, as he puts it, of ‘these pathologies. One cannot imagine him wagging his finger, asking an impertinent or embarrassing question, thumping a bible or butting in where he is not wanted’ (p.



117). I agree with this completely, but am tempted ask, as a result, why ‘changing the subject’ is such an important point for Geuss. If the most characteristic aspect of philosophy is that it ‘changes the subject’, Montaigne cannot surely be a philosopher, as there is no subject to change. As Geuss himself quotes, ‘Others form men; I tell of him’ (p. 117). So what subject was there to change?

The final point I want to make relates to Geuss’s overall conclusion to the book. Were I allowed to title this review, I think I might have called it *Funeral Games* – in homage to Mary Renault’s wonderful novel (1981) – since, in his conclusion, Geuss seems to be reading the funeral rites for formal academic philosophy (indeed perhaps for philosophy *tout court*). As he says, ‘The schools of philosophers in Ancient Athens were not closed until the sixth century, although nothing we would recognize as original thought had taken place in them for several centuries ... this is the current state of philosophy in the universities ... philosophy may connect in various ways with deep seated human needs, but it is a highly peculiar social and cultural configuration which requires a highly specific set of conditions to flourish. These conditions, whatever they are, do not seem to have existed during the past 40 years’ (p. 301). Yet he also wants to say that ‘For people in the historical situation we find ourselves these works (i.e. the twelve authors and books he has highlighted) do reward study’ (p. 302).

It may be that there is no direct contradiction here, in that philosophy, as he says, is one particular thing and not all things. And as he also points out, ‘France produced no philosophers of note to speak of in the nineteenth century, but is none the worse for that: it had Flaubert, Mallarmé, Cézanne, Berlioz, Rimbaud and dozens of other remarkable scientists, artists and scholars’ (p. 301). This is possibly a trifle unfair to France – I would call Constant and Tocqueville philosophers, at least of a kind. But I also think he is being more than a trifle unfair to himself. While there are thinkers – let us not use the ‘p-word’ – as insightful, witty and as delightful as Geuss, it certainly cannot be said that original thought is dead, whatever one wants to call it.

References

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