

BOOK NOTICES

Debaise, Didier. 2017. *Speculative Empiricism: Revisiting Whitehead*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 200p.

“After several decades of cloudy postmodernist weather, the spirit of mathematics, natural science and radical Enlightenment predominates once more”. With this sentence, Graham Harman tries to articulate in his series editor’s preface why Alfred North Whitehead’s work is sparking interest among continental philosophers beyond the circle of dedicated process theologians who have carefully preserved and promoted his legacy. Initially deemed too “different” from traditional continental philosophers and equally distrusted by mainstream analytical philosophers for his pronounced speculative tendencies, the British mathematician-philosopher was put into the spotlight by a book of Brussels university professor Didier Debaise, a disciple of Isabelle Stengers, one of Whitehead’s longstanding key-promoters on the European continent, who graced Debaise’s work with a preface. The book, written in French but newly translated in English, zooms in on the widely accepted speculative dimension of Whitehead’s work. In the first part, the method and function of speculative philosophy are demonstrated, while in the second part, the process of individuation is highlighted ; in the third part, its experience as relation among ‘societies’ – a term given central importance by Debaise, almost at par with ‘actual entity’ – is meant to clarify why Whitehead’s philosophy is about more than just actual entities, and how his creative presentation is likely to prevent his philosophy from ‘abandonment’ or from being tagged ‘degenerating’. Limitations imposed by deficient intuition and – especially – language may make it difficult to account for all experiences though a metaphysical system of ideas. Yet, philosophical theories – whether old or new – cannot be simply ‘refuted’ through argumentation, Whitehead believes, in spite of his so-called ‘rationalism’ – which, as is argued, rather stands for ‘descriptive generalization’, the nucleus of speculative philosophy in a Whiteheadian sense. The title given to the conclusion reveals, perhaps more than any other part of the book, what concept is deemed central to the philosophical approach of Whitehead: “What is speculative realism?” A reader in search of new approaches to metaphysics may easily end being surprised by this not-so-new, but ever creative-looking work of Whitehead, of the self-evidence it manages to produce as recommended by the philosopher himself, and of the attempt of reputed scholars to give him the prominent place in Western philosophy which he deserves!

Warnke, Georgia (Ed.). 2017. *Inheriting Gadamer: New directions in philosophical hermeneutics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 248p.

Hans-Georg Gadamer is said to have rejected any association between ‘tradition’

and ‘inertia’; he rather suggested that all forms of ‘affirmation, embracement or cultivation’ of tradition include “rethinking and re-evaluation”. With this idea from Gadamer, the editor makes her point for the concept of the current book, which, as the title suggests, seeks to combine in eleven essays the old (‘inheritance’) and the new (‘new directions’), while reaching out to other disciplines than only ‘philosophy’ in the narrow sense. What is inherited is – for instance – Gadamer’s masterpiece *Truth and Method* from 1960; the work proposed *Verstehen* (‘understanding’) as ultimate criterion for establishing truth in the social sciences, without the need of empirical ‘testing’ as was the norm in the natural sciences that were rather after ‘explaining’; Gadamer rejected criticism through his idea of contextualized ‘prejudices’ or ‘pre-understanding’ of facts, based on the ‘after-history’ of the collective and consensual understanding by previous generations. Another criticism addressed to *Truth and Method* referred to its perceived ‘anti-intentionalism’, allegedly denying any direct link between the meaning of a text and the (exclusive) intention of the author (as far as this is traceable through our ‘understanding’ of the text). This position of Gadamer tends to link him to Jacques Derrida, who held that texts have no stable meaning, and that Gadamer did not even go far enough in emphasizing this. Jürgen Habermas was asking whether Gadamer’s ‘prejudice’ also includes distorted forms of collective understanding (including sexism, racism...), and whether the interpreter shouldn’t be like a psychoanalyst, considering external behavior as ‘symptomatic’ of interior trauma. Gadamer replied that the interpreter should always be critical of his pre-understanding, but that he can impossibly go and stand outside the tradition from which he is a part in the same way as a psychoanalytic therapist. Gadamer still underscored that the reader of a text expects to learn something from the chosen author; so, if necessary, the reader may be prepared to modify and correct his own presupposition. This may be particularly the case in situations of cross-cultural understanding of texts, as one of the first essays illustrates; a conscious and open ethnocentrism can, in a hermeneutical context, revise its position. In another essay, the link between hermeneutics and anarchy is being probed, the latter consisting in the absence of a unique and universal rule. The anarchic character of hermeneutics wasn’t highlighted by politically conservative Gadamer himself, but is found in hermeneutic activities of Luther, Freud, Kuhn and Vattimo, who has lifted ‘interpretation’ beyond Gadamer’s ‘dialogue’. The next part focuses on ‘openness’ to the claims of others, which shouldn’t be taken for granted, and on the importance of style and literary form of a work for its impact on people’s dispositions. But, perhaps, it’s not Gadamer but Gandhi who may be a true model for ‘openness’, through his values of nonviolent political action and nonviolence and emotions like self-suffering and humility? Or we should not only use verbal but also body-language for this purpose? At any rate, the integration of scientific knowledge about the world in our pre-understanding of that same world, the importance of doctors’ and caregivers’ listening to patients and trying to understand them, and of the tricky or manipulative opportunities offered by bio-enhancement technologies are closing the wide range of topics. This book will, therefore, not only appeal to a philosopher’s public, but it will equally capture the mind of anyone interested in contemporary common knowledge and its development.

Watkin, Christopher. 2017. *French Philosophy Today: new figures of the Human in Badiou, Meillassoux, Malabou, Serres, and Latour*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 272p.

As a part of the continental European current in philosophy, the French have always been given some special attention due to the ground-breaking or ‘avant-garde’ value of a lot of French philosophical production since Descartes. The second part of the twentieth century, for instance, saw France soon becoming the cradle of existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, and recently also other trends. A particular feature of this French philosophy is the shift from a triumphant humanism, understood as a direct effect of the ‘death of God, to its eclipse, its opposite. Philosophers after Sartre felt forced to react against his one-sided optimism, by highlighting how the end of God inevitably also leads to the ‘end of Man’, confining the subject within the particular, and barring the road to universal meaning. Remarkably, the most recent developments in French philosophy reveal simultaneous initiatives to ‘rework’ the figure of the human. This trend moves away from particularism, shunning both the ‘old’ humanism’ and its ‘anti-humanist’ counterpart. This trend is what the book of Watkin aims to ‘make visible’, to ‘critique’, and of which it tries to highlight the dangers and possibilities. This ambition is pursued through a comparative approach of five more or less contemporary authors (born between 1930 and 1967) whose approaches may, nevertheless, diverge significantly from one another. However, the author has chosen to present the five different approaches not only in separate chapters, but also to let them interact and be confronted to one another throughout the book in a creative attempt to assess the uniqueness of each, the common feature being that each re-engages positively with the human, even as no specific term matches their complex nature and scope, whether ‘posthumanism’, ‘transhumanism’, ‘new materialism’, ‘new reality’ etc. The partial rejection of the ‘linguistic philosophical’ approach of – for instance – Derrida seems a common feature among the new presentations, but for the rest, terms need to be customized according to the philosopher, such as ‘formalized inhumanism’ (A. Badiou), ‘anti-correlationism’ (Q. Meillassoux), ‘destructive plasticity’ and ‘epigenesis of the real’ (C. Malabou), ‘universal humanism’ (M. Serres) – which situates human language capacity in the narrative of the universe’s ‘Great story’ -, and ‘multi-modal approach’ (B. Latour), the latter veering away from any attempted identification of a ‘host capacity’ (like Badiou’s ‘affirmative thought’) or ‘host substance’ (like Malabou’s brain synapses). Being more affiliated with Natural Science, and particularly neuroscience, than with language, the renewed connection of French philosophy with the Subject should not only interest philosophy scholars, but academics and lay people alike from a wide range of interests.

Woodward, Ashley. 2016. *Lyotard and the Inhuman Condition: Reflections on Nihilism, Information, and Art*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. X+212p.

With the publication of his latest title on Lyotard, Professor Ashley Woodward (University of Dundee) has tried to include the French philosopher’s later works in a

comprehensive synthesis that is supposed to reflect both the overall meaning of his work and the perceived evolution he has undergone. Woodward calls Lyotard a man of ‘wide-ranging’ and ‘highly original’ contributions to contemporary thought, who – in part due to his work entitled *La condition postmoderne* – has been associated with ‘postmodernism’ until today. Woodward doesn’t question the foundation of this, but believes, nevertheless that a simplistic reading of Lyotard may overlook other aspects in his work, that are less typically ‘postmodern’. In an attempt to find another term, he rather goes for ‘inhuman’ – also as a result of one of Lyotard’s titles – or ‘posthuman’. The rationale underlying this choice lies in the perceived breakdown of what used to be the human subject with ‘reason’ and ‘autonomy’ as essential characteristics. The subtitle lifts a tip of the veil that covers the scope of the book: in his later works, the French philosopher has shifted his attention to new technologies and their impact on day-to-day life and the meaning associated with it. Technology has created something of a materialistic monism, a complex relational network between human, animal and machine, doing largely away with classical human prerogatives. The time of the great ‘metanarratives’ has passed, and with them the meaning they were conveying; only the great ‘post-metanarrative’ of the ‘postmodern fable’ – actually not a ‘metanarrative’ at all – seems to remain. This postmodern fable, featuring the solar eclipse expected some 5 billion years from now, triggers a ‘coping’ reaction or ‘development’ in the form of scientific rationality or performativity, that borrows its tenacity from its association with capitalism, tends to have a ‘de-humanizing’ effect as it also alters our perception of matter, space and time. Therefore, a collection of seven essays, some of which have been published elsewhere in previous years, plus an introduction and a conclusion, are meant to guide the reader as a ‘different’ Lyotard is being presented. The author is doing so from a ‘nihilistic’ point of view, showing Lyotard as a critical interrogator of information theory. The latter chapters are directing the attention away from nihilism and mass media to art, which is also affected by new technologies, as they appear to disable Kant’s definition of the aesthetic experience as a precognitive reaction on a sensation; modern technology appears to introduce a conceptual mediation, that problematizes the experience of the beautiful – not of the sublime, however. One important signal given by the book is that – unlike, for instance, Nietzsche and Heidegger – Lyotard never gives in to feelings of nostalgia, rejection and negativity, but tries to find a way out from the abyss of inhumanity without trying to deny its presence. It appears that the wish of the author – to shed a new light on Lyotard, reveal a hitherto unknown ‘image’ of him – may be realized and that scholarship of Lyotard may further discover the richness of this author and of the philosophical school he represents.

Wilfried Vanhoutte