Laval théologique et philosophique

CONCHE, Marcel, *Temps et destin*

Graeme Hunter

Volume 49, Number 1, février 1993

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400748ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/400748ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)
1703-8804 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Hunter, G. (1993). Review of [CONCHE, Marcel, *Temps et destin*]. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, *49*(1), 164–166. https://doi.org/10.7202/400748ar

contemporain. Les questions philosophiques doivent être posées dans ce contexte, et si l'article de M. Gillet est excellent, on pourrait souhaiter que le rapport entre le langage et l'intentionnalité y soit traité plus à fond. Il semble que l'A. ait tout à fait raison d'affirmer au sujet de la communication: «For this to happen, the thinkers involved must have co-referential access to the items about which those judgments are being made and thus the objects of intentional activity, are not just a matter of individual experience but also appear in the thoughts of others. This creates a sense of objectivity in which I adapt my judgments to something which is mutually accessible to me and you and shape my judgments in terms of shared rules for description and categorisation» (p. 91), mais comment peut-on concilier cette approche de l'intentionnalité et de l'objectivité avec la conception du langage qui se limite à la caractérisation de son aspect social. Et encore, si j'ai un accès intentionnel direct aux objets, comme tout autre, et qu'il s'agit là de la condition de possibilité de la communication linguistique, comment peut-on soutenir en même temps, avec Wittgenstein, que «la pensée est essentiellement l'activité d'opérer avec des signes»? La pensée n'est-elle pas intentionnelle? Il nous semble que dans la perspective philosophique qu'adopte M. Gillet, ces questions méritent d'être posées.

Les trois articles suivants concernent respectivement la *Métaphore cerveau*, où D. Lambert, B. Feltz et G. Thill tente de montrer que le cerveau comme objet d'étude est un objet métaphorique et que la reconnaissance de ce fait ouvre un espace pour la liberté; *L'analyse de la cognition par la psychologie cognitive* de R. Kolinsky et J. Morais qui défendent l'irréductibilité d'un niveau psychologique d'explication des activités mentales; et finalement *Carnap, Fodor et le cognitivisme logique* de B. De Gelder qui reproche à Fodor, à tort ou à raison, d'avoir suivi Carnap en faisant une distinction inacceptable entre observation et théorie.

La communication de P. Engel, *Psychologie populaire et explications cognitives*, concerne une question fondamentale et largement débattue relativement aux types d'explication valide des phénomènes cognitifs. Essentiellement, l'A. discute de l'opposition entre Fodor, plus sympathique aux types d'explication inspirés par la psychologie populaire, et Paul et Patricia Churchland qui rejettent ce type d'explication parce que, selon eux, l'esprit n'opère pas à partir de représentations symboliques. Engel soutiendra que la position de Dennett permet de résoudre cette fausse opposition.

Le dernier article, *Et si demain le cerveau...?* de I. Stengers, propose une critique de l'approche neurobiologique de l'esprit. Le point fort de cet article est de relancer le débat sur l'essence de la science. Qu'est-ce que la science? Voilà bien une question philosophique qui précède tout questionnement d'ordre scientifique. La communication de Stengers suggère encore que la voie critique de la compréhension du rapport des neurosciences à la philosophie dépend de la détermination des questions qui valent comme questions philosophiques. Quelles sont les vraies questions qui nous permettent de comprendre l'esprit?

François MOTTARD
Université Laval

Marcel CONCHE, **Temps et destin**. Coll. Perspectives critiques. Paris, PUF, 1992, 213 pages.

A book that is timely, deep, erudite and elegant should be spared the common indignity of a single, hurriedly remaindered edition. The Presses Universitaires de France therefore perform an important service in bringing out a second edition of Marcel Conche's *Temps et destin*.

Here, buttressed and illuminated by decades of careful reading and critical reflection, is a sustained argument for a re-awakened sense of time as *moira*, an allotment, a lot, a portion, a fate. Professor Conche's masterful epitomes of the doctrines of time and fate of Heraclitus, Aristotle, the Stoics, Descartes, Kant and Bergson are a practical lesson in how to write the history of philosophy. Incisive, elegant, thorough, unpretentious.

The essence of the argument is this: With the waning of Christianity in the West comes the opportunity, even the urgency, of re-assessing the nature of time. Historical time, with its familiar landmarks of wars, dynasties and human achievements, by which we measure our lives, is, of course, fully contained in a more comprehensive biological time, of which our history is only a variant and a part. The latter in turn is situated in a still greater geological time. The end of this regress is the fundamental, the absolute time, the time of all times. That is what the author means by the time of fate (94). Its only metaphysically recognizable characteristics are *ekstasis* (separation of intants) and succession. The idea of other times nested within it leaves an opening both for fate and for freedom. Things historically deter-

mined — take, for example, the inexorable proliferation of human rights legislation in recent years — are clearly not determined biologically. Similarly, a biologically regulated process, like embryonic development, is undirected from the point of view of geological time. Applying this reasoning then to absolute time, which alone is, for Conche, the time of fate, our historical lives may paradoxically be said to unfold in absolute freedom. Here Conche is critical of the Stoics, who, he thinks, adopted without sufficient reflection, an oriental fatalism quite out of keeping with Greek Thought at its best. The weakness of Stoic thinking is shown in their view that the future is absolutely and necessarily pre-determined in every detail. It thus becomes indistinguishable from the past, which leads in turn to the Stoic doctrine of eternal recurrence, the circularity of time (59f).

Absolute time, paradoxically, and contrary to the Stoics, is, Conche holds, the foundation of our freedom. Yet it is also the basis of our fate. For by it we are essentially finite creatures, to whom only a portion is measured, before whom, therefore, death always looms as an inevitable end. Our *portion* is finally to be understood as that term was formerly meant, namely, as synonymous with our fate. We are free beings within the allotment that falls between our birth and our death.

Our birth is our *nature*, etymologically speaking. And our nature is our fate. "The place, the era, the date, ... my health, my aptitudes, my ethnicity, my nationality, my family circumstances are all determined in part or in whole at my birth" (81). At the far end, my impending death, whose time and place is not, according to Conche, worked out in advance, nevertheless shapes the life I live. I may either retreat into unauthentic denials of its reality or I must try to face my end with courage, and to look upon my life as a work (oeuvre), for which I assume responsibility (144, 150).

It is not absolute time as such, but rather the finitude of our portion of it, which forces upon us the work of our lives, at the same time making that work of no account. So is conferred upon human lives a dimension of tragedy. Animals, living within time, are of course as impermanent as ourselves, but not fully mortal, and hence not tragic, since death can take away no more than their immediate present, which is likewise snatched from them by every passing instant. Conche would agree with Auden:

Not one of them was capable of lying
There was not one that knew that is was dying
Or could have, with a rhythm or a rhyme,
Assumed responsibility for time.

True and tragic mortality is expressed not in animal, but in human lives, which hoard their past and gather their future in a bulging present. So burdened, they stagger a little down the way until death unloads them. The strong are those who affirm their responsibility for life, even in the face of death's certain, but inscrutable advance (157). The strong confer upon their lives a tragic dignity.

And yet for all its manifold excellences which can only be gestured at in this review, Conche's thought depends on a premise too slight to bear the substantial weight of his intelligence and learning. Repeatedly (16, 49, 85) the reader is assured that the purpose of the book is not, in the first instance, to arrive at the truth of things, but rather in a manner which the reviewer would describe as 'transcendental', to develop the thinking implicit in the 'entente de l'époque'. The labour-saving advantages of such an approach are, of course, self-evident. It frees the author from the burden of stating in advance what this 'entente' amounts to, which would tax even his analytic and descriptive powers. But it also spares him the task of a critique of his own time, that deepest and most needed of philosophical efforts, by which alone the tyranny of fashion can be transcended.

Such advantages are however purchased dearly. Can a critique of one's own day be fully separated from a critique of oneself, to the extent that one is a child of it? Parts of Conche's account of fate seem recognizably drawn from the preoccupations of our time — the talk of nature, ethnicity, authenticity. But some of it seems anti-consensus, for example, his mainly negative account of the body (112f). Are we to be lulled — was the author himself, perhaps lulled? — into accepting Conche's idiosyncratic thoughts as the inevitable deliverances of our age? And what respect do we owe even to these, except as they hold for all ages?

A narrower logical difficulty with Conche's position can provide the foundation for these large philosophical questions. *Temps et destin* is implicitly historicist. It is said to derive, not from the author's absolute quest for understanding, but rather from his attempt to articulate the "reply of our times which it is incumbent upon us to hear" (85). And yet the hard-won concept of history itself, here so evidently in play, is merely part of the collective *oeuvre* of mankind (129), which therefore is likewise allotted only a portion of time, and cannot serve as the vantage point from which absolute time may objectively be

observed. At the foundation of this study, and present like a shadow throughout it, is the Platonic-Christian view of time as an image of eternity, and of ourselves as redeemed from time, and able in part to comprehend it, through being in the image of God.

The author repeatedly dismisses our Christian past, though never without reverence and sometimes with noticeable nostalgia. Had he chosen instead to wrestle with than angel he might have arrived at a defeat more impressive than his present victory. Notwithstanding that, however, the reader of this history and exposition of fatalism will be not merely enlightened, but challenged.

Graeme HUNTER
University of Ottawa

Gerald J. GALGAN, **God and Subjectivity**. New York, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1990, 296 pages.

In this monograph Galgan attempts to recast the history of the idea of being, beginning with Aristotle's conception of substance as the object of "first philosophy", through Anselm's notion of God as the metaphysical link between Aristotle and Descartes, to Feuerbach's inversion of this tendency. Galgan has undertaken an ambitious task. In fact, I must admit that Galgan, employing the combined resources of the historian's philatelic care for details and the metaphysician's predilection for propositional precision, has convinced me of his superb mastery of his subject-matter. Galgan's study, written with concision and clarity, and argued compellingly, recounts the transformation of being as substance to being as subject. "More specifically, as a report on the history of the concept of being, *God and Subjectivity* is a reflection on what mediates between the ancient founding and modern refounding of first philosophy. In essence it is about St. Anselm as a metaphysician — his meditation on and dialogue in first philosophy" (xii).

In founding first philosophy, Aristotle understood being to mean not an hypostatization, but rather as an occurrence which inheres in particular and individual things as a principle for their determination. Being, in other words, is the nature of things. In contradistinction to Parmenides, for whom being and thinking were convertible, Aristotle, in Galgan's view, maintains that substance or being, although disclosed in human thought, "exists independently of man's faculty of thinking or even his desire to thing" (xii). This disparity between the existence of the "this" and the cognizing agent posed no problem for first philosophy since "the other", or object of cognition, was simply given, there for apprehension or observation. The situation would change with Descartes.

Accordingly, with the Cartesian refounding of first philosophy, the human subject understands itself not as a given of nature, i.e., determined by it, but rather as a possibility that can master or lord it over nature. "The actualization and positivity of what is by nature are superimposed by the negativity and potentiality of what is human and particular. The modern refounding places man *between* God and nothingness" (xiii). Galgan intimates that being must now be construed in terms of the finite subject as a *self* with infinite aspirations. Here again, a disparity is discernible. This time, instead of establishing a distance between being and the noetic agent, Descartes focuses on his conviction that the *ego* implied in the dictum *Cogito ergo sum* is not, essentially, a being of nature itself. Because the subject is understood as being substantially apart, ontologically removed, from nature, Cartesian thought suggests that, or allows for, the subject to impose itself on nature in whatever manner it pleases. The result is usually the human domination of nature.

Situated between Aristotle and Descartes is Anselm. "The midpoint in this history of the concept of being — equidistant, so to speak, from the ancient founding and the modern refounding of first philosophy — is the presentation of being *qua* being as the actuality of a creative substance which transcends form as such — a supreme, supranatural, particular 'something' or 'aliquid'" (xiii).

At this junction Anselm distinguishes himself from Aristotle's immanentism, i.e., the insertion of deity into the world as its first substance. In so doing, Anselm posits a God that is so extreme, so utterly different from the natural order that such a supra-substantial existent is held to be the means by which all beings exist. The radical difference between creator and creature which Anselm establishes, whereby the former is postulated as a "essence which exists in a certain unique manner of its own" (47), removes him from Aristotle's tightly-knit metaphysics and draws his somehow closer to Descartes's apparently open system.

This God, construed as spirit, shares the thoughtsfulness or thought-imbued, noetic dynamics of the Aristotelian deity. It is, in brief, a supreme agent that is "eternally mindful of itself" (36). This means that Anselm's God regards itself eternally, and