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Review of “Columbia Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophies”

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Book Review

Columbia Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophies, Constantin V. Boundas (ed.). New York: Columbia University Press. Cloth, xii + 740 pages, 2007. ISBN: 978-0-231-14202-1. \$77.50.

Like a friendly encyclopaedia, this *Columbia Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophies* offers countless chapters on basic topics in philosophy, logics, and related theories. Unlike an encyclopaedia, chapters are not numbered and are not presented in alphabetical order, rather through a free progression of selected themes set into three main sections: 1) Twentieth-Century analytical philosophy, 2) Twentieth-Century continental philosophy, 3) non-western philosophies in the Twentieth-Century. A final chronology lists the titles of dozens of essential publications, from 1900 to 1999 (pp. 713-727). Forty-four scholars and philosophers have contributed to the forty-five chapters written (or reformatted) for this project. Another version of this same anthology was published earlier by the Edinburgh University Press, with the same cover image but at a much different price (under the title *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophies*, 2007).

One of the conducting ideas in this reader is to present a set of the same philosophical themes appearing here into two main sections, according to two distinct traditions: following the Anglo-Saxon authors and then as seen by European philosophers. Among the common topics discussed twice in the two parts of the book by different authors are: metaphysics, philosophy of science, political philosophy, ethics, religion, aesthetics. All these themes get two distinct chapters from different perspectives (the Anglo-Saxon and Continental approaches). Elsewhere, a few single essays are dedicated to a specific author, but rather on recent trends (like "The Hegelian Legacy", "Marxism"), with the exception of the two separate chapters on Kant and Deleuze. Most chapters concentrate on one single idea and its progression throughout the 20th century, for example: "Naturalism", "Pragmatism", "Metaphysics", "Epistemology", in the first section, but also "Phenomenology", "Hermeneutics", "Existentialism", "Psychoanalysis" and many more in the middle part. The last section about the non-western philosophical traditions is relatively shorter but accurate, centred on four regions: India, China, Japan, and Africa. In his general introduction, Constantin Boundas indicates that he wanted to "create a frame for the polyvocality of the philosophical claims advanced during the Twentieth-Century" (p. x). Most chapters were unpublished, except the two reworked articles by Tyler Burge (on the philosophy of language and philosophy of the mind) (see the notes pp. 204 and 227).

In each chapter the author(s) comment on the contribution of a few philosophers, or focus on some selected books related to a given concept that were published during the last century. However, definitions of concepts are not abundant anywhere here; therefore, this Companion would rather fit to advanced graduate students and is not appropriate for college level. The topics chosen by Constantin

Boundas are wide in scope and are not all focused exclusively on philosophy, for example in Douglas Kellner's excellent chapter on the "Frankfurt School and Philosophy". In this extensive account and revisiting of some basic ideas, Kellner explains the birth (in 1923) and evolution of critical theory from Horkheimer, Adorno to Marcuse and Habermas (p. 446). Obviously, Kellner is gifted with a rare sense of up-to-the-point formulas and accurate mappings, for example when he argues that "Horkheimer criticizes metaphysical materialism for attempting to capture the totality of being in a universal philosophical system, making thereby evident his hostility to metaphysical systems" (p. 447). Elsewhere, Kellner writes in the same vein about how German philosopher Max Horkheimer conceived and distinguished the idealist views vs. the materialist theories: "Horkheimer claims that idealist views generally aim at justification, and are advanced by ruling class ideologies for the sake of affirmation of dominant class interests; materialist theories, on the other hand, aim at explanation based on material conditions, classes, and specific historical situations" (p. 447).

Like Douglas Kellner's aforementioned piece, some of the chapters in the second half of the *Companion* are a pleasure to read, possibly because their authors are simultaneously experienced philosophers and skilled communicators. Among this selected group of distinguished scholars who contributed some of the finest passages of this *Companion*, I would include Charles Scott, who wrote a wonderful, reflexive reflection on postmodernism, owing much to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault (p. 504). In a welcome text on a quite difficult topic, Scott simply argues that "Postmodern thought often retrieves what is obscured in Western thought — differences from the dominant ideas and meanings for example — differences that Western thought perpetuates almost silently, always marginally" (p. 514). As opposed to the chapters on, say, positivism, naturalism, logic, and mathematics which are often very difficult to follow and less pedagogical, it seems like Charles Scott has found the right terms and appropriate formulas in order to explain efficiently the concept of postmodernism with clear words, giving the reader the best introduction to the postmodern thought available nowadays. Incidentally, another discussion related to postmodernism occurs in the chapter on political philosophy (p. 573).

Whenever the passages are good, the strength of Boundas's *Companion* lies in its capacity to provide a reflexive look on last century's philosophy (and philosophers), for example whenever he himself comments on the disappearance of the former "grand narratives" or, as he writes (in French), "*grands récits*", which founded our discipline (and other domains, I would add) as a sort of monolithic canon (p. 15). Nowadays, there seem to be no living "guru" anymore in philosophy (but maybe we do not see them yet as gurus). Right from the start (there are no chapters numbers as such), Boundas wrote a very useful, pedagogical piece titled "How to Recognize Analytic Philosophy", based on eleven criteria such as "the Kantian heritage", questioning and doubting (p. 30). This is the kind of tool which undergraduates always look for. I also appreciated Boundas's references to the many academic journals in philosophy, with funny echoes about some of the recurrent themes during the year 1999: "vagueness, counterfactuals, self-deception, logical constants", etc. (p. 23).

In the final pages, the reader will find in the last section on "non-western philosophies" four core chapters on India, China, Japan, and Africa, which are all fundamental. In each case, we find a lively discussion about the main themes, influent authors, and how some Western philosophers would have influenced each region. For example, Roger Ames presents some of the philosophers known as "the new Confucians" but he also discusses how some contemporary Chinese philosophers have read and integrated Marxism, following the works of Mao Zedong (p. 60). If Marx was rejected in many western universities, China adopted him during the middle of 20th century given its Communist turn and

revolution. Finally, in a very strong coda that should not be overlooked, Bruce Janz's essay on African philosophy concentrates on some basic questions like "Where is Africa?" (p. 691) and "How can and does Africa relate to the West, to other philosophical, cultural, scientific and religious traditions, to colonizing countries, to its Diaspora?" (p. 696). Then, when referring to anthropological methodology and more broadly to religious studies (even though he does not mention namely these fields), Janz explains that "witchcraft continues to hold significance for many within African culture, and therefore becomes an interesting object of philosophical inquiry" (p. 699).

When I finally got this hardcover book in my hands, my first impression was somewhat mixed when I realized there was no mention of "ideologies" in the list of chapters and the word only appeared once in the final index (p. 729). However, my critical eye got smoother (if I may say so) from the opening pages (p. 15), when I saw that there were a few discussions related to ideologies, firstly in the general introduction (see the passages about the "Grand Narrative", (p. 15) and then in the middle of the book in the sections on Marxism and on the "Frankfurt School" (pp. 429 and 446). I believe philosophers should consider the studying of ideologies as an essential dimension in their discipline, as social scientists have always done. Oddly, the first occurrence of the concept in this book was related to a reflection stating that some philosophers (after Louis Althusser) considered "the notion of ideology useless" (!) (p. 15). However, other rewarding remarks related to ideologies appear here and there in some of the following chapters (pp. 34, 216, 618, 619, 693).

Some demonstrations are sometimes questionable, for instance in Leonard Lawlor's "Essay on the Overcoming of Metaphysics", in which the author freely draws from Michel Foucault's book *The Order of Things* (1966). Here, Lawlor's argument is founded on Foucault's formula, "*un écart infime, mais invincible*", which Lawlor wrongly translates into "a minuscule, but invisible hiatus" (p. 522). Well, one should note that in French, the word "invincible" is the same as in English (in the sense of "unconquerable"), and it does not mean "invisible" (i.e.: which can not be seen). A similar confusion reappears in the following pages (p. 526). As a consequence, Lawlor's demonstration becomes more fragile, if not misleading. Perhaps one should check whether the mistake was made by the original English translator of Foucault's book *The Order of Things*, which I doubt.

My main quibble about this *Companion* would be the absence of an essential French philosopher of the Twentieth-Century philosophy, Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962). In France (but as well in Italy, Portugal, and even Japan), Bachelard is seen as an fundamental author in epistemology; oddly, he is mentioned only three times here (but also in the chronology, pp. 718-721). Same remark goes for the Swiss theoretician Jean Piaget (1896-1980), who wrote essential pages on epistemology and logics. Another French philosopher like Edgar Morin, who wrote extensively on complexity, is totally absent from this book, despite the fact that it is dedicated partly to non-Anglophone, European philosophy. While it is important to cover "other" philosophies in such a book, one should not limit the selection to the only those authors which were translated in English (like the very "popular" Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, who are about everywhere in this book); otherwise, the potential reader might lose some essential although overlooked thinkers, emerging ideas and unnoticed trends in our field. There should be no fashion movement at any moment in our discipline. Of course, the editor is fully aware of the possible limits of this *Companion* (as for about any anthology of texts in any field) and he humbly acknowledges in his "General Introduction" the potential lacunas that might exist (p. xi). This is probably why there are countless readers available on bookstores which are neither alike nor repetitive.

Despite my numerous remarks and critiques, I nonetheless feel that this *Columbia Companion to*

Twentieth-Century Philosophies remains an impressive — although uneven — collection of essays and would benefit not only to graduate students in philosophy, but also for any academic in fields like history of ideas, sociology of knowledge, ethics, social epistemology and Cultural Studies. Even experienced philosophers might learn from it.

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