

# Current Tendencies in French and German Thought

By Chong-Min Hong

ANYONE WHO ATTEMPTS TO WRITE A BIOGRAPHY OF A philosopher is faced with a fundamental methodological question. What is the proper relationship between the work of a philosopher and the events in his or her life? The literary definition of biography — a chronicle of a life — does not seem to be appropriate when dealing with human beings whose primary significance is in the realm of ideas and concepts, and not in the events of their personal lives. Ideas cannot simply be reduced or explained away by a reference to a historical sequence of events; they possess, as Plato argued over two thousand years ago, an existence of their own, apart from the thinkers who have conceived of them.

Yet no one can deny the importance, for example, of the influence exerted on Hegel's thought by his Lutheran background and his initiation into the university culture of his native Germany. Similar remarks could be made about Nietzsche, Kant, Schopenhauer, Rousseau, and Kierkegaard. Their ideas are at once universal and specific. On the one hand, Nietzsche has nothing to do with Germany. On the other hand, the two are, in a profound sense, inseparable.

For a biographer, balancing the contingencies of a philosopher's life with the supposedly universal nature of his or her ideas requires more than the combined skills of a historian and a philosopher. For the fundamental relationship between a thinker and his or her ideas is a reflexive one, in which the events of life influence the development of ideas; and these ideas in turn influence the course of life. There exists an eternal tension between the two which often remains unresolved.

The publication of Rüdiger Safranski's biography of Martin Heidegger is a notable event for at least two reasons. First of all, it marks the first significant reevaluation of Heidegger's work and life by a German author since the publication of

## BOOKS REVIEWED

*Ein Meister aus Deutschland: Heidegger und seine Zeit.* [A Master from Germany: Heidegger and his Time.] By Rüdiger Safranski. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag. 544 pages.

*Michel Foucault et ses Contemporains.* [Michel Foucault and his Contemporaries.] By Didier Eribon. Paris: Fayard. 366 pages.

*Raisons Pratiques.* [Practical Reasons.] By Pierre Bourdieu. Paris: Editions du Seuil. 254 pages.

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Victor Farias' controversial *Heidegger et le National-socialisme*. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, *Ein Meister aus Deutschland* is a monumental philosophical biography. The wordplay of the subtitle, which echoes the title of Heidegger's 1927 masterpiece *Sein und Zeit* [*Being and Time*], indicates the work's concern for both the ideas and the life of Heidegger. The result is a treatise which will serve as a work of reference for years to come.

Safranski traces the evolution of Heidegger's thought from his childhood in Konstanz and his early grooming for a career in theology all the way to his death in 1976 and the posthumous publication of his infamous *Der Spiegel* interview in Germany. Along the way, Safranski explores Heidegger's early investigations in Husserlian phenomenology, his friendship with Karl Jaspers, his call to Marburg University, the publication of *Sein und Zeit*.

The work also chronicles Heidegger's deeper and deeper involvement with the German National Socialist party in the 1930s. But although a significant portion of this book is devoted to the Nazi involvement, it is not the focal point of this book. Rather, Safranski seeks to show that Heidegger's life, like his philosophy, is fraught with contradictions and remains powerfully disturbing, leaving more questions unanswered than answered. As he writes near the end of his book, in characteristically elegant prose (something often missing in Heidegger's own writings):

Arthur Schopenhauer hatte gegen Ende seines Lebens einmal gesagt, "die Menschheit hat einiges von mir gelernt, was sie nie vergessen wird." Von Heidegger ist ein solcher Ausspruch nicht überliefert. Er hat keine konstruktive Philosophie im Sinne eines Weltbildes oder einer Morallehre geschaffen. Es gibt keine *Resultate* des Heideggerischen Denkens, wie es *Resultate* der Philosophie eines Leibniz, Kant oder Schopenhauer gibt. Heideggers Leidenschaft war das Fragen, nicht das Antworten.

[Toward the end of his life, Arthur Schopenhauer once said, "humanity has learned something from me that it will not soon forget." But such a statement is not appropriate to Heidegger. He did not produce a constructive philosophy, in the sense of a world-picture or a moral theory. There are no *results* of Heidegger's thought, as there are *results* of the philosophies of Leibniz, Kant, or Schopenhauer. Heidegger's glory was in questioning, not answering.]

In philosophy, understanding the question is often more important than understanding any answers. And no book is better than Safranski's to be recommended for understanding the significance of the questions posed by Heidegger and the relationship of these questions to his own complicated life.

**N**O BIOGRAPHY ON THE SCALE OF SAFRANSKI'S WORK ON Heidegger has yet been written for the French philosopher Michel Foucault. This situation owes to Foucault's tragic, early death from AIDS in 1984, which left his provocative research program unfin-

ished. At the time of his death, many of Foucault's later thoughts were in a stage of incubation, and while Heidegger, in his old age, had the opportunity to personally supervise his *Collected Works*, Foucault did not even have the chance to offer a final synthesis of his investigations into the history of sexuality.

If anyone does attempt to write the definitive philosophical biography of Michel Foucault, it will be written with constant reference to Didier Eribon's *Michel Foucault et ses Contemporains*. Eribon's book can be best read as a rejoinder to his earlier book on Foucault, which still remains the standard biography of the controversial French philosopher.

In both of these works, Eribon displays the fruits of his remarkable access into often parasitic and nepotistic world of French intellectocracy. He penetrates elite academic institutions like the Collège de France, the Academie Française, and the Ecole Normale Supérieure — as well as elite periodicals such as *Libération* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Furthermore, Eribon's access to the personal archives of contemporaries like Georges Dumézil, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacqueline Verdeaux, and Paul Veyne has opened up a wealth of new information. Anglo-American readers will be especially startled by Eribon's chapter on Foucault's relationship with German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

The book is roughly divided into two parts: "Foucault aujourd'hui" [Foucault today] and "Foucault de son vivant" [Foucault in his lifetime]. In contrast to the objective tone of Eribon's earlier work, this book seems to be written almost out of anger. Its polemical and often passionate tone may strike readers, especially French ones, as strange at first. But it must be understood that *Michel Foucault et ses Contemporains* is a book which is essentially waiting to be translated. It is *not* intended primarily for French audiences (most of whom are entirely unfamiliar with names such as Camille Paglia or James Miller, and with the postmodern wars that are taking place in the American intellectual scene), but rather for general readers in the United States, Latin America, and Asia.

Eribon is a great admirer of Foucault's work. Thus some of his treatment of philosophical criticism of Foucault (especially his dismissal of the powerful critiques of Luc Ferry and Alain Renault) may seem cursory and unjustified. It is true that in the U.S., Foucault has been most strongly taken up by what is vaguely called the intellectual Left. Yet if one considers the Foucauldian opus itself, there is no reason why this must necessarily be the case. Habermas correctly saw in the work of Foucault a strand that he found to be disturbingly neoconservative, for many of Foucault's points have two edges; and in the messy realm of real politics, acts of liberation and oppression can often both be justified by the same arguments. A treatment of this crucial issue is the one thing lacking in Eribon's otherwise fine treatise.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HOUGH MUCH OF THE CURRENT PHILOSOPHICAL WORK being published in France seems to be far removed from the problems which occupy Anglo-American philosophers, the latest work of philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is a striking exception. *Raisons Pratiques* is a collection of lectures and conferences given at various locations: Princeton, the University of Tokyo, Berlin, and Amsterdam. Two

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famous lectures, given at the Collège de France, which make up the core of the work. Hence, *Raisons Pratiques* is not a single book, but more like a *Festschrift*, with corresponding strengths and weaknesses. Though all of the essays and lectures are individually interesting and thought-provoking, the book seems at first to lack an essential unity.

Yet this is not the case. For the goal of all of the essays is to explore and eventually lay the foundations for a true sociological science. When seen in this light, the remarkable variety and fruitfulness of Bourdieu's constantly evolving intellectual project becomes clear. Some of his most interesting essays investigate what it means for an act to be disinterested, and whether such an act is possible, connecting investigations in motivation theory with psychology and philosophy. Bourdieu also presents significant research into cross-cultural contexts, which ties the methodological basis of his anthropological program with the validity of a sociological theory.

The unity of the various essays in this book consists in the recognition of the fact that the foundations of sociology are to be found in the foundations of related disciplines, and that the human sciences share the same foundational problems. Illuminating a problem in one discipline illuminates problems in many others as well. ◻

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#### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The publication of Eribon's book coincides with the welcome release of the massive four-volume *Dits et Ecrits [Statements and Writings]* of Foucault by Editions Gallimard, which collects almost all of Foucault's unpublished essays, speeches, interviews, and conference colloquia.