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BOOK REVIEW

Peter Sloterdijk, *Philosophical Temperaments: From Plato to Foucault*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), ISBN: 978-0231153737

Peter Sloterdijk's *Philosophical Temperaments* accomplishes a surprising amount for such a small book. However, despite originating as a series of prefaces to 19 canonical philosophers, it should certainly not be confused with an introduction to philosophy. The essays themselves are quite short, usually around five pages, and demonstrate Derrida's dictum that all prefaces, insofar as they are written after the text they introduce, are actually postfaces.¹ To varying extents, Sloterdijk writes under the assumption that the reader is already familiar with a minimal outline of each author's work but, for the most part, does not demand a deep understanding. For example, in order to understand most of the argument of the essay on Schopenhauer, it suffices to know that he was a pessimist who entertained an intellectual conversation with Buddhism. Other essays may be less accessible. However, doing away with the standard introductory details on the philosophers gives Sloterdijk the space to explore unexpected dimensions of their work. Plato is juxtaposed to shamanism, interpreting the intellectual access to the Forms as a rationalization of spiritual practices. The essay on Marx largely bypasses the philosopher himself in order to discuss the priority of interpretation. The choice of approach to each philosopher is itself as interesting an intellectual exercise as the content of the essays themselves.

For readers with the patience to weather the book's rapid transitions and presumed knowledge, *Philosophical Temperaments* offers much as its own independent work of philosophy, and is recognizably a part of Sloterdijk's broader projects. A helpful, albeit brief summary in Creston Davis' salutary foreword helps to prepare the reader for the numerous references to Sloterdijk's past works, but making the book fully accessible may require further readings or familiarity with Sloterdijk's corpus. For example, Fichte turns out to be arguing that "you must change your life," (46)² while Kant must be arguing for an understanding of the human being as self-domesticating.³ Besides such direct references, the themes of cynical reason and sphereology

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 7.

² Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

³ Peter Sloterdijk, "Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the Letter on Humanism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 12–28.

run throughout the text. In an essay echoing the “prologue” to *Globes: Macrosphereology*⁴, Sloterdijk’s Plato inaugurates philosophy as a form of education that welcomes the learner into a broader, richer cosmos organized around the center of “the True-Good-Beautiful” (9). Leibniz’s connections to the monarchist court evoke the image of a “Faustian science” (38) drawn directly from the *Critique of Cynical Reason*.⁵

Read as a straightforward contribution to Sloterdijk’s work, *Philosophical Temperaments* offers a form of guide to post-metaphysical thinking. From this perspective, the book contains two parts. From the essays on Plato to Hegel, Sloterdijk charts the rise and culmination of the grand metaphysical systems. Meaning, value, and understanding arouse out of a proper interpretation of the subject’s place in a broader cosmic sphere. The essay on Schelling, which traces the transformation of his early work as an Idealist deducing principles of nature to his later work on “the finiteness and historicity of reason” (62) as an allegory of the “price of maturity” (63), serves as a bridge to the second part of the argument. From the essay on Schopenhauer to the final essay on Foucault, Sloterdijk offers a collection of possibilities for thinking in a world devoid of a central, spherical intellectual form.

The final essay dedicated to Foucault serves as a conclusion to the argument. Summarized as a practitioner of “Event philosophy” (99) who discarded the centrality of fixed notions of subjectivity, theology, and cosmology in order to leave himself open “to the dizziness of the dissolution of boundaries and to the acuity of analysis” (97), Sloterdijk is able to cast Foucault as the culmination of the destruction of metaphysics. It is not a coincidence that Sloterdijk makes a thinly veiled third-person reference to himself in the essay. Who else does he have in mind when he compares Foucault to “the neokynical⁶ aesthetic of the everyday” (96)? Sloterdijk’s Foucault is the paradigmatic post-metaphysical philosopher, one for whom thought takes place beyond the comforting confines of artificial “womb[s] for the grown-up unborns who sought to escape the coldness of the modern outside world” (92). This theme of the importance of philosophy for (or as) a way of life, an intellectual shelter from the caprices of an irrational cosmos, remains a constant throughout Sloterdijk’s work, and this essay can be read as a summary of that trajectory. However, readers of Foucault may be somewhat surprised to see him enlisted in support of such a holistic project. While Sloterdijk pines for a return of a philosophy fit to serve such a grand, guiding role,⁷ Foucault maintained an enduring interest in cultivating a “limit-attitude” committed to de-

⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Macrosphéologie Sphères II*, trans. Olivier Mannoni (Paris: Fayard/Pluriel, 2010), 11-38.

⁵ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred, *Theory and History of Literature* 40 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 175.

⁶ “Kynical” is Sloterdijk’s term for the continuation of classical philosophical Cynicism, exemplified by Diogenes, in contrast to the more colloquial meaning of the term “cynical”.

⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 3-14.

termining and experimenting with the boundaries of forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and power.⁸

Conversely, Foucault, along with the other character sketches, provides Sloterdijk less with substantive arguments than with a cast of temperaments. From Hegel's optimism in the consummation of the world in *Spirit* to Augustine's relative misanthropy and disappointment about humanity's divine fall, the essays present a series of affective responses to metaphysical and post-metaphysical philosophy. At times, this facet of the text can come across as bizarrely vapid. For example, "Hegel's typical times are therefore fall and evening; his preferred figure of thought is the deduction; his innermost color is gray, so closely associated with the night" (52-3). Just as this book is not genuinely an introduction to philosophy, it is also not a work of biography, although its argument that philosophy and biography intermingle and evoke each other places it somewhere between the two genres.

This approach leads to the most exciting aspect of *Philosophical Temperaments*, namely its speculative task of reading dead philosophers *as if* they were contemporaries. What would it mean to be strategically anachronistic and read the history of philosophy as an antidote to the challenges of today? Even readers unconvinced by Sloterdijk's judgement of contemporary problems may find something valuable in his method. By historicizing the philosophers in question, he investigates the differences that they introduced relative to their intellectual, political, or historical context. In writing about Descartes, Sloterdijk challenges the reader to imagine "the epoch when what posterity liked to call the project of modernity was hardly more than a lively exchange of letters between a few dozen correspondents." Can we read Descartes as if he was (still) a "New Philosopher" (27)? There is evidently something nostalgic about this approach, but not naively so. When Sloterdijk writes of Nietzsche, "He turned old texts into new tunes, and wrote new texts for old tunes" (81), one can easily interpret this line as a summary of the book as a whole. The new tunes may be recognizably Sloterdijk's melody, but therein lies the strength of this book as an excellent entry point into Sloterdijk's enormous body of work by way of an innovative retelling of philosophy's history.

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⁸ Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, trans. Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 124–26.