Philosophy in Review

Rodolphe Gasché, "Locating Europe: A Figure, a Concept, an Idea?"

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Rodolphe Gasché. *Locating Europe: A Figure, a Concept, an Idea?* Indiana University Press 2021. 256 pp. $80.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780253054838); $30.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780253054852).

More than simply a successor volume to his *Europe, or the Infinite Task* (Stanford University Press 2009), Gasché's new volume constitutes an attempt to present different aspects of the question as to whether Europe amounts to a figure, concept, or idea (with the latter determination holding particular fascination for him [xiv]). For Gasché, all three cognitive possibilities differ insofar as a figure would bestow a shape and look to Europe, thus making of it an imaginal construction, while a concept would refer to a closed and completed essence of Europe. Finally, an idea of Europe would include in its determination a *telos* to be accomplished—in this case an 'infinite task.' Gasché's book of essays is structured around one of the figures that it uses to construe Europe—the archipelago, 'as a figure of plurality defined by its relationality ... thus respecting the singularity of the various entries on Europe rather than unifying them into one idea' (xi).

The essays that comprise the book amount to so many phenomenological sightings of the question of Europe: Figure, Concept, or Idea? What Gasché's project does not involve is a simple geographic, demographic or geopolitical consideration of the continent. At a time when such issues are hotly debated on both the Left and the Right, Gasché seeks rather to recover a philosophical consideration of Europe: 'It is the name for a cluster of interrelated, at times aporetic, exigencies or injunctions such as the following: rationality, self-accounting, self-criticism, responsibility toward the other, freedom, equality (including for the different sexes), justice, human rights, democracy, and the list goes on' (ix). Additionally, 'the name *Europe* also stands for a distinct mode of thinking, namely philosophical thinking' (ix). At stake for Gasché is therefore a paradox: that which is most proper to Europe is its tradition of philosophical thinking which prioritizes self-criticism and openness to the other. This, it might be said, is what Gasché most values in the name 'Europe.'

Chapters One through Three consider the figural status of Europe—as archipelago, horizon, and light. Fascinating for Gasché, in Cacciari's conception of Europe as archipelago, is the figure's 'nam[ing] a conception of togetherness whose origin, descent, and belonging can no longer be attributed to it' (10). Older than 'even the first words of European destiny' (5), the figure of the archipelago becomes occluded by later 'figures and concepts' of Europe (5). This is because '[t]he separation and parting from all terrestrial rootedness—from one's home and *ethos* ... is the basic and unifying trait upon which the archipelago is founded' (7). At the origin of Europe lies a figure that breaks up identity and continuity: 'the departure of each member from itself toward the others is the common ground, the idea that unites them' (8). This shows Gasché that, at the inception of thinking about Europe, there is always already a tendency towards the idea of Europe as infinite task. Next, Gasché takes on Nancy's claim that Europe is no longer a horizonal space. This matters because the conception of horizon has played a distinct phenomenological role in determining the environing world: 'Understood from the Greek verb *horizein* (to divide, to separate from, or, as with a border, to mark out by boundaries, to delimit, to determine, to define), the universal—or Europe, for that matter—is a horizon, and more precisely, the horizon of the world' (19). Europe's universalizing philosophical tendency marks the horizon of the social, political, and even personal world. Nancy's claim is, therefore, radical insofar as it seeks to construe Europe as a-horizontal. However, Gasché wonders, would such a construal even be thinkable? It would certainly amount to 'the destruction of human space' (21). Being no longer structured by the figure of a horizon of universality, Nancy's conception would amount to a finite world of Europe which 'is no longer a human world: not

inhuman, though, but a-human' (27). Gone would be the ideology of individualism and personhood characteristic of modern conceptions of humanity. Finally, Gasché turns to Jan Patocka's construal of Europe as light. Gasché wonders whether, if the limits of light are brought to light *in* light—i.e., if Europe undergoes a self-exposure to its own limits—such light can still be considered a given: 'To inquire into the boundaries of light, where light comes to an end, is to seek out the limits from which it can shine forth, from which light thus becomes visible as an infinite task' (47). Gasché understands this to be an incitement to 'work in light of light,' to undertake the 'infinite responsibility of making light shine forth from those limits' (47). Only in so doing will Europe be able to fulfill its task of letting the other show itself.

Chapters Four through Six explore Europe as a concept. For Hans-Georg Gadamer, as for the others in these chapters, the property of Europe's being open to the other is of signal importance. Gadamer's construal of this property is far more limited than Gasché would like. For Gadamer, 'the other is inseparable from me. To speak of the other as other is to acknowledge an irreducible relation to the other ... he is experienced and conceptualized by me in relation to myself while, at the same time, I see him as determining me as an identity distinct from his own' (53). Gasché wonders whether a notion of otherness that is [just] the otherness of ourselves is at all capable of diagnosing the current problems of Europe and the world (62). Otherness, for Gasché, needs to be thought in a more radical manner. This raises the question as to whether 'Europe, as the form of a concept, [is] not also the promise of another form of togetherness—a togetherness in which diversity is no longer simply diversity with the One' (63). Next, Gasché considers Karl Jaspers' usage of the concept of Axial Age civilization as a way to construe Europe. Noting again 'what is specific to the West is that its identity is constituted under the sign of the other' (83). The 'other' referred to here is doubtless the Axial Age civilization which both gives to Europe its impetus (in the form of Athens and Jerusalem) as well as overflows its boundaries (in the form of Indian and Chinese spirituality). To the extent that Europe becomes interested in seeking out its origins once more, it maintains and affirms its openness to the other. Finally, Gasché surveys Karl Löwith's insight that Greece, and therefore Europe, distinguishes itself from other cultures in that 'in receiving and transforming what they encountered from the Orient, they demonstrated the ability of "free emergence from out of oneself, and the consequent power of appropriation which proceeds from a free attitude toward oneself and the world"' (102). If Europe has a deep knowledge of itself, this is only because of its deep ability to understand appropriately what is not its own. Europe's openness to the other grounds its self-understanding.

It is, finally, Jacques Derrida who 'completes' Gasché's narrative, and therefore, the four essays dealing with his thought form a kind of unit. Derrida radicalizes the injunction of openness to the other to include not only that which is other to Europe, but also that which is other within Europe, and that which is the other of the concept and the horizon of Europe (117). For Derrida, Europe currently is the 'experience ... of this necessity that all identity and all universality claims require nonexclusion and an opening to the other, the non-Western, but also too what is still strictly speaking to come, hence not calculable, hence other than the opposition between Western and non-Western' (130). This is an idea of sorts, but one that transgresses the Kantian conception of idea, insofar as it does not belong to an infinite trajectory that can only be approximated: 'Europe is an "idea" that requires execution here and now, without delay, in the entirety of the injunctions in question at every single moment' (148). This 'idea beyond the idea' (220) must 'be met in full at any moment' (220). The infinity of its task in no way allows us to avoid this injunction.

Gasché's volume is a deft and penetrating exploration of what philosophical Europe could, and perhaps must, look like today. I wonder whether this exploration would include not simply openness to what is other to Europe, or what is other within Europe, but also what is other to the idea of

Europe. This would mean (in good Hegelian fashion) re-engaging with earlier discursive shapes of Europe—geography, demography, geopolitics—that seem to be forgotten in this work. Doing so would not be easy, but I think, it would press forward with the Derridean radicalization of Europe's ownmost tendency as wonderfully elucidated by Gasché.

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