

University of Virginia, traces anti-American thought from those 18th-century philosophers, including the Count de Buffon and Cornelius de Pauw, to the 19th-century French racialist Arthur de Gobineau, the German intellectual Oswald Spengler, and, finally, the post-modern theorists Martin Heidegger, Alexander Kojève, and Jean Baudrillard.

These America haters, Ceaser argues, rely on nonpolitical theories of causation, often fatalistic and biological (though not always racialist) ones, leaving little room for the machinery of democracy. By contrast, traditional political science—exemplified for the author by *The Federalist* and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*—eschews determinism and stresses moral and ethical choices based on the empirical study of politics. The author leaves no doubt where his sympathies lie: "It is time to take [America] back from the literary critics, philosophers, and self-styled postmodern thinkers who have

made the very name 'America' a symbol for that which is grotesque, obscene, monstrous, stultifying, stunted, leveling, deadening, deracinating, deforming, rootless, uncultured, and—always in quotation marks—'free.'"

Gracefully written and provocative as it is, Ceaser's volume falls short of reclaiming America from its critics. The author dismisses critiques of the nation as self-evidently preposterous, undeserving of serious analysis. Instead of refuting anti-American ideas, he disparages their intellectual parentage and moves on. Ceaser also ignores the critical thought of writers such as Richard Weaver and Albert Jay Nock, who do not fit easily into his thesis. Still, it is difficult to dispute his contention that the United States is better served by thinkers who aim to understand its political machinery than by those who deride the nation as a vast, homogenizing Disneyland.

—Solomon L. Wisenberg

## Religion & Philosophy

### CONFESSIONS OF A PHILOSOPHER:

#### *A Journey through Western Philosophy.*

By Bryan Magee. Random House.  
496 pp. \$25.95

"Life . . . hurled fundamental problems of philosophy in my face," the author declares, somewhat melodramatically, in this appealing intellectual autobiography. A former philosophy professor who calls himself "a commentator rather than a player," Magee wants to persuade the educated lay public that philosophical problems deserve our contemplation and that the writings of philosophers, even the "heavy going" ones, merit our attention. This is not Magee's first attempt to stimulate interest in philosophy; he also created two widely admired programs for the British Broadcasting Corporation, *Men of Ideas* and *The Great Philosophers*.

What most interests Magee is the nature of nonscientific knowledge, especially knowledge derived from art. What, he asks, do we learn from art, given that "the creation of, and response to, authen-

tic art are not activities of the conceptualizing intellect?" Drawing on Schopenhauer, Magee argues that art is a kind of "direct experience"—an experience that cannot be put into words—that brings meaning to our lives. Blending the sensibility of the aficionado with that of the philosopher, Magee deems music the most meaningful of the arts: it creates "an alternative world, and one that reveals to us the profoundest metaphysical truths that human beings are capable of articulating or apprehending, though of course we are not capable of apprehending them conceptually."

Magee's ideas about "direct experience" are not completely clear. What is a metaphysical truth that cannot be apprehended conceptually? Moreover, the book's autobiographical elements can be distracting—or, occasionally, banal, as when Magee dwells on the "existential challenge" of his midlife crisis. But at its best, *Confessions of a Philosopher* is a compelling guide to some perennial problems of philosophy.

—Stephen Miller