

Ayer: *con ou non?*

Ben Rogers, *A.J. Ayer: A Life*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1999. xii + 402 pp., £20.00 hb., 0 7011 6316 X.

At a New York party in 1987, A.J. Ayer, then in his late seventies, walked into a bedroom where Mike Tyson was forcing himself on a young woman. In reply to Ayer's warning that he should desist, Tyson replied: 'Do you know who the fuck I am? I'm the heavyweight champion of the world.' Ayer's response was priceless: 'And I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic. We are both pre-eminent men in our field; I suggest that we talk about this like rational men.' The two men talked, while Tyson's captive – Naomi Campbell – made her escape.

The tale is emblematic of many of the themes of Rogers's biography. To begin with, there is Ayer's presence at a celebrity gathering. Perhaps de Beauvoir and Sartre, or Foucault, had they still been around, might have been invited as well, but it is hard to think of anyone else from the ranks of former Wykeham professors or international emeriti who could rival Ayer's glamorous socializing, or for that matter his (not unprincipled) hedonism. More notably, the episode exemplifies Ayer's courage; his egotism and guileless confidence in the currency of a proudly held title; and – as often, against the odds – his Enlightenment confidence in the power, in life as in philosophy, of rationality. I don't suppose Tyson would have known what hit him.

Ayer is widely regarded as a guilty party in the analytic movement's much-bemoaned remodelling of the discipline in English-speaking universities – a process in which great questions about the meaning and purpose of existence were abandoned in favour of specialized, professional, second-order inquiry. Ayer gave a memorable summing up, to Isaiah Berlin, of his attitude to the relationship between philosophy and life: 'There is philosophy, which is about conceptual analysis – about the meaning of what we say – and there is all of *this* ... all of life.' Taken together with his enduring commitment to the fact/value distinction, this attitude, and its considerable influence, earned Ayer the enmity of a diverse collection of interests and groups, including the philosophical establishment

of 1930s' Oxford, the Churches of England and Rome, the post-Bloomsbury culturati and its descendants, and, from the late 1960s onward, the British intellectual Left (a number of whose members have since, of course, moved to his right). Ayer's intention, according to Rogers, was not just to 'separate philosophy from life but to liberate life from philosophy', by undermining the pretensions of philosophers and philosophy to a special authority about the fundamental nature of the universe, life and morality. As Ayer saw it, that supposed authority had typically been used to foster oppressive and imprisoning superstitions about eternal rewards and punishments, as well as anti-experimental, and therefore anti-scientific, limiting metaphysical systems. Freed from their effects, people, in both life and science, would, Ayer thought, be less prejudiced, more experimental and open to other points of view, as well as to what life has to offer. In many ways – whatever else might be said about Ayer's influence and that of the analytic movement – he was right.

Nevertheless, if Rogers is correct, Ayer's aim was not to separate philosophy from life, but to challenge philosophical pretensions to authority about life: a challenge based on a definitely philosophical attitude towards life. Certainly in Ayer's case the claimed division between philosophy and life was far from straightforward. In the first place, his many political campaigns and his wartime service manifested his utilitarian hedonism and opposition to harmful prejudice. According to Rogers, moreover, Ayer was well aware that for the many who lacked the opportunity, his humanist conviction that people should make the most of the one life they have would be ashes in the mouth. Humanism, he argued, carried an obligation to do something about that.

Rogers also suggests some interesting, if not entirely convincing, links between Ayer's philosophical commitments and his various personal idiosyncrasies. Ayer's anti-essentialist belief in the bundle theory of personal identity, for example, may have stemmed from his lack of interest in individual psychology

(whether his own or anyone else's) and what, for most of his life, struck many of his acquaintances as a lack of emotional depth. Likewise, his belief that philosophical problems are primarily linguistic in character could have owed something to the fact that Ayer always thought in words (asked what he saw when he thought of Paris: 'A sign saying "Paris"') and regarded thinking in images as primitive.

Ayer's conception of philosophy did not lead him, as it did other analytic philosophers, to eschew political philosophy, or to confine himself simply to working out the consequences of his personal political commitments. Rogers notes that, in contrast to Marcuse's claim that empiricism operates with an image of humans as passive receivers of experience, Ayer's liberalism went with an attraction to political theorists – notably Marx, Proudhon and Sorel (who he admiringly referred to as 'a moment of glory, a spanner in the works') – who stressed the working and active nature of humanity.

Moreover, notwithstanding his dismissal of Heidegger and Derrida as charlatans, Ayer displayed much greater willingness and seriousness in engaging with non-analytic philosophers than most of his contemporaries. Rogers lists six articles on existentialism published in the ten years after the Second World War, including a long and detailed critique of *Being and Nothingness*. At the time, existentialism was very popular among non-philosophers, and despite its congenially anti-authoritarian doctrine that the meaning of life is something the individual must create for herself, Ayer's main interest was in undermining whatever unwarranted authority that popularity carried with it. He regarded Sartre's analysis of *mauvaise foi* as 'often very penetrating', while repudiating his 'startling indifference to logic'. While he agreed with Camus that life was ultimately meaningless, in the sense that it has no transcendent purpose beyond what we give to it, Ayer argued that Camus's inference from this that life is absurd, as well as his ethic of heroic defiance, was based on the mistaken assumption that the absence of transcendent purpose was some kind of catastrophe, rather than, as Ayer thought, a logical necessity. Incidentally, it is Sartre who, in ruling out a public meeting with Ayer ('Ayer est un con'), is revealed, by contrast, as unwilling to engage.

Ayer's considerable published output is given a serious and sympathetic evaluation by Rogers. What emerges from this, in addition to a diverse range of interests, is a relentless and hard-headed quest, through the gradual elimination of error, for a Popperian kind of truth, in which former commitments were succes-

sively abandoned or revised, including, by the time of *Central Questions of Philosophy* (1973), a concession that some metaphysical doctrines may be illuminating (if wrong) and a rejection of the phenomenism of *Language, Truth and Logic* in favour of, in his own words, 'a sophisticated form of realism'. In addition to the appraisal of Ayer's publications, Rogers also draws on reviews, letters and interviews with philosophical contemporaries and former students to provide some account of his standing as a philosopher. As a teacher, by all accounts, Ayer was devoted, generous and inspiring; genuinely welcoming disagreement, as many philosophers say they do but don't. As a philosopher Ayer considered himself 'much better than Austin, although not quite as good as Quine'. (Michael Lockwood, to whom the remark was made, commented that 'Most people think like this ... but few will admit to it. It was the guileless nature of his vanity that made it more charming than objectionable.')

Ayer's importance for twentieth-century philosophy is certainly harder to pin down than that of Austin or Quine. It is clouded by his public status. He will be chiefly remembered as the author of *Language, Truth and Logic* and for a position – a philosophical doctrine – whose brief moment came and then passed (which is not to say that it came to nothing). But Ayer was not, as many have remarked, the originator of any major tenet of logical positivism. He was, instead, both for English-speaking philosophy and the wider public, its popularizer. And yet the idea of a popularizer is that of a simplifier, which Ayer, at the cost of his ambitions to follow the popularity of Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* and *The History of Western Philosophy*, most certainly was not.

The logical positivists were not as one on all matters of philosophical importance, and *Language, Truth and Logic*, with its emotivist theory of moral statements and phenomenism, was, in that respect at least, typical. Nor did he ignore or minimize the philosophical problems associated with logical positivism; principally the difficulties in providing a plausible and coherent account of the verificationist theory of meaning. Ayer typically took objections to his position seriously enough to set them out carefully, to concede qualifications where he thought they were called for, and even to admit to having no suitable response to offer. It established him as a stylish (although, as befits a logical positivist, the style was always free of unnecessary ornament) and eloquent advocate, paradoxically, of a movement that valued clinical symbolism over natural language. As such, he delivered a certain kind of clarity for logical positivism, which, in view of the

importance it placed on clarity, positions him as one of its foremost representatives. Ayer's was not the canonical clarity of quantifiers, operators and so on, but if the point of verificationism was to set a standard for meaning in what can be understood, he did more than anyone else to make it understood.

Despite the publication of some his best work during the period, postwar analytic philosophy was a considerable disappointment to Ayer. The ordinary-language philosophy of Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin and, later, the essentialism of Kripke and Putnam abandoned, from his perspective, the philosophical progress achieved by Hume and, in the twentieth century, by Moore, Russell, the *Tractatus* and the Vienna Circle. His own association with those figures must have sharpened his sense of disillusionment (without diminishing his confidence in the achievement and enduring progressive promise of Enlightenment

reason), but more so, perhaps, his treatment as an unfashionable stalking-horse, as the author of *Language, Truth and Logic*. For all his pride in it, it is a book whose principal defect he described to Brian Magee as being that 'nearly all of it was false'. It is worth remembering, nevertheless, that it was one of the highest selling and most influential philosophy books in the postwar period. It still sells two thousand copies a year in Britain.

'There is philosophy ... and there is all of *this*': all of *this*, in Rogers's telling, reveals a man who lived up to his humanist credo. He was heard at least once to observe that he had made something of a mess of his personal life: a judgement with which many who knew him would have agreed. For all that, Ayer crammed a vast amount into life, was much loved and made a difference, mostly for the better. We could do with more Wykeham professors like that.

Kevin Magill

Ethics for porcupines

Daryl Koehn, *Rethinking Feminist Ethics: Care, Trust and Empathy*, Routledge, London, 1998. viii + 215 pp. £45.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 415 18032 5 hb., 0 415 18033 3 pb.

Janna Thompson, *Discourse and Knowledge: Defence of a Collectivist Ethics*, Routledge, London, 1998. v + 155 pp., £40.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 0 415 18543 2 hb., 0 415 18544 0 pb.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud recalls an image from Schopenhauer. Human beings, from a social point of view, are like freezing porcupines: they roll together for warmth, but find close contact painful, so roll apart again; but the cold eventually forces them back together; and so on indefinitely until an optimum distance is arrived at. Perhaps there is an analogous process to be observed in ethical theory as we feel, alternately, the claims of individual autonomy and of collective authority. If so, then Janna Thompson's book represents the 'freezing' phase of the oscillation – the reaction against what she sees as an excessive individualism in moral epistemology; while Daryl Koehn's represents the prickly phase in which the epistemic capacities of the subject are reasserted. Koehn, however, is the more overtly feminist of the two in her terms of reference, and she is also the one who makes an explicit appeal to the value of 'care' – though she argues that the proper object of care for moral beings as such is not particular persons, but the *logos*, or co-operative effort to avoid wrongdoing through thoughtful dialogue.

Koehn's book is predominantly critical, with the 'care, trust and empathy' of the subtitle each corresponding to a position in recent feminist ethics; her main interlocutors are Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Annette Baier, Trudy Govier and Diana Meyers. The shortcomings she finds in these writers provide the subject matter of her first three chapters, while the fourth, which unexpectedly turns out to centre on Plato's *Crito*, develops a dialogical account of moral reasoning designed to correct the irrationalist tendency of the positions criticized. (One may feel that Koehn should have thought twice before converting 'female ethicist' – a phrase in use throughout the book – into a philosophical term of art, inapplicable to 'women who adopt a more traditional approach to ethics'; her evident awareness of the facticity and political contestability of such labels makes this choice of usage a strange and slightly vexing one.)

Koehn is to be applauded for giving voice to the disquiet many women must have felt over the 'discovery' by academic philosophy of *de facto* feminine habits of moral thinking – habits deriving

from a domestic rather than from a public (juridical) context. She finds the resulting body of theory worryingly slow to challenge the expectations that arise in relationships of intimacy and dependency, or to provide safeguards against the kind of injustice (to ourselves or to third parties) which we risk condoning through emotional partiality towards our intimates. Against the view that the self is generated by, or even 'is', the social relations in which it is implicated, she argues that 'not all distance from others is bad', that the demand to 'apprentice' ourselves empathetically to others is not always appropriate, and that 'people can be overly responsive to one another'. What degree of distance, or of responsiveness, may be right in particular cases is a matter to be decided by rational discursive means, seeking at every stage the consent of one's interlocutor to the direction of movement of the *logos*, and (most strikingly) providing a 'right of exit' from the discussion – in the manner of *Crito* 51d – if a *bona fide* (non-cynical) interlocutor neither succeeds in convincing the opposition, nor comes round to the opposing view. (The right of exit is pictured by Koehn not as merely notional, but as a serious political desideratum, to be constructed by means of international extradition treaties, arrangements for the transfer of pension funds, and so forth. As a contribution to the theory of criminal justice and/or international relations, this struck me as the weakest passage in a generally sane and realistic text. If we think that '[a] person's history in a particular context [may be] partially responsible for the person performing [a] condemned deed', so that 'this same person may cease to be a threat if treated differently by another community', why not start by getting our own house clean – for instance, by ceasing to tolerate gross social inequality?)

Janna Thompson's discussion takes place, in the main, at a more abstract level and contains less in the way of textually detailed debate with other writers. (The most significant individual presence in her bibliography, which is much shorter than Koehn's, is that of Habermas.) Her doctrine of 'ethical collectivism' – and this is very much a book with a positive theory to promote – is based, first, on the thought that each of the multiple viewpoints from which individual moral thinking proceeds is partial and limited, so that a policy of relying on our own judgement cannot but lead to some degree of error; and, second, on a commitment to press forward nonetheless to views about disputed moral questions (specifically, questions about the 'right' as distinct from the 'good') which are not just the best that can be arrived at for purposes of

political compromise, but actually *correct* as answers to those questions.

We might wonder what would be wrong with acquiescing in merely political solutions to what are undoubtedly, from one point of view, problems of social coexistence. For example, it is unclear why supporters of the pro-choice position on abortion should care particularly about eradicating the views of their opponents, provided that abortion remained legal and that the existence of such views posed no practical threat to its legality. According to received liberal wisdom, one of the positive achievements of modernity is precisely to have devised political systems which diminish the importance of substantive moral agreement as a condition for the survival of communities, and while there is room for ambivalence about this achievement, Thompson could be accused of failing to appreciate it. I would not deny that 'the authority of ethical judgements and our ability to think of them as knowledge require ethical agents to strive for a rational consensus', but I am underwhelmed by the observation that 'behind every moral agreement lurks potential for dissonance, awaiting its opportunity to emerge', and unsure why this should be thought to threaten the rationality or objectivity of ethics. One might ask: What did you expect? And, in fact, isn't there something to be said for a culture within which people have the necessary composure to maintain uneasy truces and silences? To treat this as a concession to ethical scepticism is to write off something of value in the liberal tradition.

The core of Thompson's theory lies in the distinction she draws between a 'critical' and a 'constructive' stage of ethical argument. The critical stage takes us as far as we can go in moral enquiry on the basis of 'monological' methods, meaning those that can be employed by individual thinkers pictured as operating autonomously. Such methods, however, are not guaranteed to eliminate disagreement, and for this reason we must proceed to a constructive stage, in which positions that have emerged from critical discourse with a claim to be regarded as 'cogent' (a term to which I return below) feed into a process directed towards 'dialogic equilibrium' (the echo of Rawls is deliberate). This equilibrium is reached when all parties can agree in regarding a certain 'proposal' (a candidate for the status of best or most plausible judgement on the relevant question) as indeed the winning candidate for that status – an agreement that will reflect the ability of the proposal to accommodate better than any available alternative the various concerns embodied in the assembled 'cogent' positions. 'Since participants know

that these views are partial', explains Thompson, 'they have no reason to suppose that the right conclusion is identical with any one of them. So they will attempt to reach agreement by making proposals which take into account ... aspects of each of the positions represented in discourse. These proposals can be thought of as hypotheses for explaining the [doxastic] data', the hypothesis which provides the best explanation being the rightful winner.

Since participants in constructive ethical discourse are supposed to give equal weight to all positions certified as 'cogent' at the prior, critical stage, it is a matter of some moment how that title is to be earned. Thompson tells us that in order to admit a view as cogent, participants in discourse 'have to be able to judge that the reasons given for the view are good reasons – that they adequately support the view – and that objections and criticisms can plausibly be answered by those who hold it', a requirement which Thompson thinks we often judge to be satisfied even when we disagree with the view at issue. However, this usage of 'good reasons', 'adequately support', 'plausibly answered', and the like is open to question: does our understanding of these terms license the idea that we *can*, logically, regard a view that we hold to be false as being supported by genuinely *adequate* or *good* reasons, or as capable of producing (more than superficially) *plausible* answers to objections? (Compare the question whether it is logically possible to regard the criteria for the truth of a proposition as being – really, genuinely – satisfied, while continuing to entertain the thought that the proposition might be false.) Since I am inclined to answer this in the negative, I remain unconvinced by Thompson's proposed method of generating an array of views to which equal epistemic weight must be accorded at the subsequent, 'constructive', stage.

Thompson's political motivation can hardly fail to win respect. In contrast to the 'monological' tradition, she promotes from empirical to *a priori* status the proposition that freedom and equality, underwritten by suitable social institutions, are necessary to successful moral enquiry (since 'an ethical collectivist *must* value social conditions which enable others to contribute to discourse'). But progressive thinkers too will find grounds for anxiety in this book. Abandoning 'monology' means assenting to the thesis of individual fallibility, not just as a reminder of the continual need to expose one's beliefs to criticism (a role in which any rational person will make room for it), but as a principle requiring that one allow those beliefs to be cognitively diluted by engagement with others which

one persists – in an individual capacity – in thinking false. I find it anything but obvious that the cause of moral and political reason *per se*, as opposed to the (however desirable) short-term elimination of conflict, will be advanced by doing this. I therefore suspect that Thompson's position calls for an excessive degree of epistemic sociability, and find myself drawn to Daryl Koehn's implicitly dissenting claim that individuals 'should not have to endorse another's view if that view seems mistaken'. Or, in Kant's version, 'The motto of enlightenment is ... *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding!'

Both books are clearly written and presented. Thompson's is a sophisticated work of philosophy and a model of orderly, professional exposition, but Koehn is the more readable and, arguably, the more rewarding.

Sabina Lovibond

The personal is political

Warren Breckman, *Marx, The Young Hegelians and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999. xii + 335 pp., £35.00 hb., 0 521 62440 1.

The Hegel revival in the Anglophone philosophical world has produced over the past thirty years many monuments of critical insight and scholarship. That they represent advances in our understanding of their subject is not to be doubted. Yet there has been a price to pay in terms of certain constitutional weaknesses of the movement. They stem in large part from its revivalist character, its sense of itself as pressing its claims on an indifferent or hostile world. This has created a pressure to accommodate Hegel to the ways of that world, to make him palatable to its ruling intellectual powers. Thus, the dominance of analytical habits of thought has encouraged a systematic downplaying of his metaphysical ambitions so as to represent him as essentially an epistemologist. In practice the only feasible way to do this is to assimilate him as closely as possible to Kant as a fellow explorer of the transcendental conditions of knowledge. The tendency is illustrated by the influential work of Robert Pippin and, in more extreme form, of Klaus Hartmann, a German scholar under the influence of Anglo-American philosophy.

A succession of works has, moreover, sought to suggest or imply that Hegel would himself have been quite at home in the contemporary United States, for all his apparent aversion to republicanism, liberalism and democracy, and the continuing existence of mass poverty, the problem which, according to Hegel, especially ‘agitates and torments’ modern societies. Hegel’s recent American admirers do not seem in the least agitated and tormented by it. Thus, for Michael Hardimon, the modern social world constitutes a satisfactory home for human beings provided only that the ‘philosophically reflective’ bourgeoisie is reconciled to it, while the presence of poverty has simply to be accepted, admittedly as a ‘moment of melancholy’. That representative, *bien pensant* members of the liberal academy are less troubled by large-scale suffering, injustice and alienation than Hegel was should indeed induce melancholy reflections on the moral and intellectual darkness of our time. To avoid embroiling Hegel in the darkness it is natural to turn for help from the philosophical commentators to the intellectual historians. They may surely be expected to show what may reasonably or intelligibly be attributed to him in the light of his intellectual formation, cultural context, the assumptions and expectations of contemporaries and their reception of his work. To that undertaking Warren Breckman’s book makes a striking and original contribution.

The book begins, it must be admitted, somewhat ominously, with the apparent intention of treating its concerns in the context of ‘the current debate about civil society’ initiated by the dissidents of Communist Eastern Europe. This invites us, Breckman declares,

to ‘revisit and rethink’ the original debate on the subject that developed under the impact of Hegel’s thought. Such an approach seems in general to be at odds with the historical scruples he displays elsewhere: the resolve not to impose current preoccupations on the past. This is illustrated by, for instance, the polite distancing of his view of Hegel from that of Pippin. Moreover, the approach being canvassed seems inept on more specific grounds. For Hegel, civil society is essentially the capitalist market economy together with the institutions needed to mitigate its ferocity. This conception must sit awkwardly, and idly, with any supposed revolution *of* civil society under Communism.

In fact any misgivings the reader of Breckman’s opening pages may be forming turn out to be groundless. The standpoint of the present programmatically announced there turns out to have no effective role in the subsequent discussion. It is true that the current debate about civil society reappears in the last few paragraphs of the book and, indeed, the Vaclav Havel of 1988 is invoked on the need to struggle ‘against the momentum of impersonal power’. This invocation may shed some oblique light on Havel’s evident resolve to use power himself, once he had laid hands on it, in as wilfully personal a way as he could manage. It sheds none at all on what Breckman had immediately before referred to as ‘the Young Hegelians’ emancipatory struggle against the sovereign discourse of personal authority’. Nor is his claim that the two topics are linked ‘ironically’ at all persuasive. Here, as elsewhere in his book, the ironic serves its familiar function of inviting the reader to stay cool over a hiatus in the argument while shuffling off responsibility for repairing it.

However, it is not merely Breckman’s introductory and con-cluding remarks that serve the substance of his work badly. This is true in general of, so to speak, the way its substance is packaged.

Most obviously, the book’s title is comprehensively misleading. Marx does not deserve his prominence there, for he looms no larger in the text, and is strategically less important to the developments it traces, than Feuerbach,



or even Arnold Ruge. Neither is the work a study of the Young Hegelians as such, since it is highly selective in its choice of subjects. The most prominent thinkers who receive no sustained attention in it are Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner. It cannot even be placed safely in the genre of 'the Young Hegelians and Karl Marx'. The Young Hegelians who do figure are not primarily treated in relation to Marx but in relation rather to the controlling themes of the argument, themes to which the treatment of Marx is itself strictly bound. Finally, the book's central concerns cannot reasonably be said to fall within the scope of the, admittedly elastic, term 'social theory', radical or otherwise. Yet, while the title seems a concoction of the publisher's marketing department, the subtitle 'Dethroning the Self' is an accurate pointer to what is really at stake.

The book is chiefly preoccupied with early-nineteenth-century conceptions of the self as they manifest themselves in philosophical theology on the one hand and political theory on the other. The links between these two realms of thought and discourse are characterized by Breckman in terms of 'homologies', 'analogies' and 'structural parallels'. This may seem unsatisfactorily vague to some readers, who may wish to have the nature of the links specified more precisely. That would be hard to do, however, in view of the complexity and slipperiness of the relationships involved, as Breckman conceives them, and forcing the issue might well lead to distortion. In any case, it seems entirely proper for him to claim that he is aiming to disclose 'not firm causal relations but rather meaningful relations within a constellation of themes'. The simplest case is the homology of the traditional Christian conception of a personal, transcendent God and the advocacy of personal monarchical sovereignty in Restoration political theory. God is both the 'exemplar' of the personal monarch and the source of the authority of all earthly instances. These sovereign persons, taken together, serve as the guarantors of personal property and of the established order in general. On the other side of the theological-political divide there is the looser, but still intelligible, connection between the impersonal, immanent deity of pantheism and progressive political theory, with socialism at its outer limit. Breckman studies this connection in detail in the work of such thinkers as Heinrich Heine, Moses Hess and August Cieszkowski. He traces also the process, culminating in Marx and Engels, through which the radical critique of personalism was secular-

ized, shifting its main target from personal monarchy to the egoistic individual proprietor of civil society.

These questions are dealt with by Breckman with a consistent sharpness, subtlety and force. His demonstration of the overwhelmingly theological content of the various debates is itself a feat of historical imagination, given that we are all now inheritors of their final secularization. Moreover, his attempt to shift backwards in time the moment at which they took on a political dimension is persuasive and enlightening, breaking as it does with the conventional picture of an apolitical 1830s and a highly politicized 1840s. The point is made with particular clarity in the important case of Feuerbach. There are many lesser benefits to be gained from Breckman's discussion. It sheds light, for instance, on an issue which has puzzled many readers of Marx's *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*. This is the extent of his interest in what may well seem a minor matter, Hegel's attachment to constitutional monarchy. Marx's interest in it takes on a fresh significance and validity against the background of Breckman's account of the personalist controversy.

What is perhaps most impressive is Breckman's relaxed, indeed magisterial, way with the evidence, derived in large part, no doubt, from his confidence in the soundness of his overall picture. Thus, he is quite willing to acknowledge the need for qualifications and exceptions in large points of detail – for instance, with regard to the conjunction of devotion to a personal God and to liberal politics in such varied figures as Jacobi, Novalis, Weisse and Immanuel Hermann Fichte. There is perhaps one area in which Breckman may be suspected of forcing the pace a little: that is, in the claims he makes for the influence of Saint-Simonianism in Germany. In the cases of Feuerbach and Ruge in particular, he seems to go somewhat beyond what the evidence strictly warrants. Even here, however, he may at least be said to be bending the stick in the direction it now needs to go, against the prevailing current. Moreover, his general emphasis on the intimate links between French and German intellectual life in the period in question is both convincing and salutary. His book is fully worthy to be set alongside John Toews's *Hegelianism* as a study of the immediate reception of Hegel's thought. We are fortunate to have two such recent works in English on a portion of intellectual history rich in reverberations that have continued to sound loudly right down to the present.

Joseph McCarney

Hobson's choice

Marion Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998. xv + 288 pp., £14.99 pb., 0 415 13786 1.

Some critics set great store by what's new. They initiate debates, open fields, break fresh ground. The question of contemporaneity where 'deconstruction' is concerned is complicated by the fact that although it's a coinage, it's one that bears the stamp of older currencies, including that of Heidegger's *Destruktion*. For all the accusations of faddishness and fashionability that attach themselves to Jacques Derrida, he has always insisted upon his place within a long tradition, underlining the classical nature of his work rather than its cutting edge. Of course, to write in the margins of philosophy, as Derrida claims to do, is not to write against it. Derrida has gone so far as to say that, as with philosophy, so with science: he has the greatest respect for its fundamental premisses and modes of inquiry. This traditional side to Derrida is seldom emphasized by friends or foes alike. Both are happy to see Derrida as an iconoclast. His 'radicalism', whether commended or condemned, is readily acknowledged by all. Less remarked upon is the extent to which he is a reactive, perhaps even a reactionary, thinker, in the sense of being responsive rather than innovative.

While claiming to be writing from within the philosophical canon, Derrida also insists that he is essentially a respondent and a correspondent, one who answers calls for contributions to conferences and collections. This occasional aspect to Derrida's work seems at odds with the popular perception of the deconstructive project as patterned and programmatic. Moreover, it sits rather awkwardly alongside Derrida's ongoing critique of those he terms 'professor-journalists'. The picture of Derrida as a commissioned critic, someone who writes to order, and whose interventions into philosophical and literary debate arise directly from solicitations, does however chime with his reputation as a philosopher of the everyday; an intellectual of the present moment who has something to say on every subject; a 'commentator', if not a 'professor-journalist'.

These two Derridas – the man with shoes of wind who flies round the world intervening by invitation only, and the philosopher firmly grounded in the great tradition, albeit treading or trespassing on its borders and verges – are sometimes hard to reconcile. Because both literary and philosophical critics of Derrida have tended to be selective about his work, there remains

a suggestion of fragmentation. One could see in this a positive sign. After all, deconstruction depends precisely upon fragments. Derrida, though, has arguably suffered more than any other thinker from the splitting and parcelling out of his writings. Caught between a rock and a hard place, he has engaged in a struggle for acceptance and recognition across a number of fields. The interdisciplinary nature of his writings and reputation has led to a separation of the strictly philosophical from the more general cultural and political material. The major writings have been divided broadly into 'dry' and 'wet' work. *Of Grammatology* would be an example of the former, *Glas* of the latter.

The problem with this kind of division is that Derrida's intellectual project is not being considered as a whole. In France, Derrida is arguably regarded first and foremost as a philosopher. In an Anglo-American context he is transformed into a 'Jacques of all trades'. The systematic quality of Derrida's work has been recognized by Rodolphe Gasché, but Gasché's defence of Derrida is geared towards trying to win him back for the philosophers, and he deliberately underplays the wet, wild and witty side. More recently, in *Acts of Literature*, Derek Attridge set out to reclaim Derrida for literary studies.

Derrida's best critics have long been his translators – Alan Bass, Peggy Kamuf, Gayatri Spivak. But something has been lost in the translation, not least of all because the task of the translator is to convince the reader that a reasonably accurate translation is actually possible. The truth lies somewhere in between those critics who maintain that Derrida's chief interests lie in philosophy and those who insist that his real concern is with fiction. Behind this fragmentary figure who flits between philosophy and fiction is a French Derrida. What has been lacking is the combination of an understanding of Derrida's debt to French language and literature with an equally intense appreciation of his familiarity with Anglophone traditions. Marion Hobson's painstaking examination of the interconnections across Derrida's corpus thus marks a crucial moment in critical accounts of deconstruction. This book displays the same clarity and compression as Hobson's work on Rousseau. It is argued throughout with an impressive mix of flexibility and rigour. Hobson knows both the French contexts and currents

that Derrida is plugged into, and the larger European and global networks that he traverses. *Opening Lines* is on one level an exercise in reconciliation and reconstruction, bringing together a range of writings by Derrida and making a case for their connectedness. Hobson demonstrates that Derrida's work consists of 'reworkings of conceptions of subjectivity, meaning and identity'.

Ironically, Hobson's reminder of Derrida's investment in French comes along at precisely the moment at which Derrida's relationship with the French language has itself become an object of his concern. Born and raised in Algeria, he sees himself as an outsider with regard to metropolitan French culture. In *Mono-lingualism of the Other*, he has gone to great pains to mark out his distance from domestic French, his disenfranchisement, positioning himself as an Other even in his mother tongue. He styles himself 'the exemplary Franco-Maghrebian', haunted by 'nostalgeria'.

Hobson is admirably alert to Derrida's idiomatic French, and to the overall consistency as well as the characteristic idiosyncrasies of his arguments. This is not a book for the beginner, but it is a formidable and challenging study, which will help change the way in which Derrida and deconstruction are received. Hobson begins by pointing to the ways in which Derrida has been read out of context. There is some irony in a French philosopher becoming a central and con-troversial figure in English Studies. Hobson takes her cue from Richard Rorty, who famously argued in an essay published over twenty years ago that the key to understanding Derrida was the conception of philosophy as 'a kind of writing'. As Hobson puts it, 'language is freighted in ways we cannot oversee and control'. In Derrida's case this is further complicated by the fact that he is writing in a language foreign to the discipline in which he has been most readily received. To reinforce her point, Hobson cites Derrida throughout in both English translation and French original. A crucial component of Hobson's argument is that Derrida's writing is not easily reduced to neat summaries, to kernels or nutshells. It obstinately resists this sort of appropriation or familiarization exactly because it 'is designed at some points to allow for what is new, or difficult, to emerge'.

There is no doubt that Hobson is more concerned with accountability than accessibility. (Her chapter headings are far from reader-friendly: 'Strange attractors: singularities', 'Negatives and steps: "pas sans pas"'. Derrida's titles are by contrast direct and lucid, even when they are punning and provocative.) Her

aim is to clarify rather than simplify. If this makes her treatment of Derrida's arguments at times a little arid, this is a small price to pay for such sterling scholarship. *Opening Lines* is the first truly comprehensive study of Derrida's work. The old literary and philosophical split is elaborately deconstructed to reveal a network of underground tunnels connecting a very varied body of work to different traditions. Hobson combines close readings of individual texts – concentrating on particular passages, and sometimes specific phrases – with an enviable understanding of larger cultural and historical formations. It is precisely with the relationship between microscopic fragments of text and the mapping of a macropolitical sphere that Derrida is concerned.

Derrida's most recent work points to ethics as a sustaining concern. Hobson's closing quotation, typically convoluted, comes from Wittgenstein citing Kierkegaard while speaking of Heidegger: 'Man has the impulse to run up against the limits of language.... This running-up-against Kierkegaard also recognized and even designated it in a quite similar way (as running-up against Paradox). This running up against the limits of language is *Ethics*.' If ethics is about limit or test cases, and is thus necessarily taxing and troubling, then Hobson's is a profoundly ethical book.

Willy Maley

Revolutionary Lacanianism

Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Verso, London and New York, 1999. vi + 409 pp., £20.00 hb., 1 85984 894 X.

The latest and largest instalment in Žižek's already expansive oeuvre presents itself as little less than a politico-philosophical manifesto for the reformulation of the left intelligentsia. In a manner oscillating between revolutionary zeal and wry self-parody *The Ticklish Subject* opens with a sort of intellectual call to arms: 'A spectre is haunting Western academia, the spectre of the Cartesian subject.' Žižek goes on to list his thesis and his project: (1) Cartesian subjectivity continues to be acknowledged by all academic powers as a powerful and still active intellectual tradition; (2) it is high time that the partisans of Cartesian subjectivity should, in the face of the whole world, publish

their views, their aims, their tendencies, and meet this nursery tale of the Spectre of Cartesian subjectivity with the philosophical manifesto of Cartesian subjectivity itself.

Zižek does not hereby proclaim an orthodox Cartesianism, but rather the elaboration of the obscene truth that sustains the idea of a self-transparent cogito but is overlooked in the critique of Cartesian subjectivity. This is an oversight that Zižek claims occurs



throughout the dominant debates of Western academia, between Habermasians and deconstructionists, cognitive scientists and Heideggerians, feminists and New Age obscurantists. For Zižek, the philosophical manifesto of Cartesian subjectivity is provided by the Lacanian reading of German idealism and Marxism that he has developed over the last ten years. *The Ticklish Subject* provides perhaps the most ambitious application of this position to date, not least because of the hyperbolic political claim made for this project: namely, that in unearthing the common presupposition of Western academia we are enabled to address the ‘burning question of how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multi-culturalism.’

Zižek performs his multilateral assault on Western academia through a serial criticism of three authors whom he takes to have provided exemplary critiques of Cartesian subjectivity: Heidegger, Badiou and Butler. Each analysis is coupled with an accompanying elaboration of the principle underlying its critique:

subjectivity in German idealism, political subjectivization in post-Althusserian political philosophy, and the Oedipus complex as the psychoanalytic account of the emergence of the subject. Despite the scale and multiplicity of the material covered, the argumentative strategy of the book is relatively clear and, correlative to its three main parts, can be summarized as follows:

1. Contra Heidegger’s displacement of the problem of subjectivity into the history of Being, it seeks to recover the notion of an irreducibly negative, obscene (i.e. con-cealed) or excessive dimension to subjectivity as the fundamental lesson of German idealism.

2. Contra Badiou’s constitution of subjectivity through the positive affirmation of a truth-event, it draws an analogy between German idealism’s logic of subjectivity and the experience of political order, such that however unsurpassable a political order may appear prior to the event of its transformation, this apparent unsurpassability is nonetheless sustained by a

necessarily concealed condition of possibility which threatens to explode it.

3. Contra Butler’s pluralization of subject formation, it emphasizes how capitalism remains a fundamental condition of subjection, which despite being obscured by this pluralization continues to underlie it.

Thus, through the novel optic of a Lacanian reconstruction of German idealism, Zižek pursues a surprisingly classical Marxian project: a radicalization of politics through the politicization of an apparently apolitical economic base. Indeed, the leitmotiv of *The Ticklish Subject* appears to be the translation of the Lacanian ‘Real’ as capitalism. The promise of this translation is that it will provide a psychoanalytically infused articulation of the subjective experience of capitalist societies. This is clearly the matrix that Zižek obsessively illustrates elsewhere. However, the status and structure of this matrix is rendered deeply problematic by Zižek’s apparent endeavour to generalize Lacanian psychoanalysis into a form of speculative philosophy, while eliding the question of how psychoanalysis can convincingly overcome the specificity of

its original interpretative situation. Hence, for the most part, the infusion of a Lacanian critique of subjectivity into a Marxian critique of political economy remains forced and one-sided. As a result, in so far as Žižek figures the emancipatory project of a re-politicization of the economy as the realization of demands for subjective multiplicity, the precise character of this project remains obscure.

Ironically, this elision of the specificity of psychoanalysis results from the inversion of Žižek's debt to Althusser. Althusser's construction of a theory of ideology through recourse to Lacan, with Hegel as its principal philosophical target, is transformed into Žižek's Lacanian *redemption* of Hegel, once Althusser's commitment to the structuring condition of scientificity is dissolved. This enables the dissolution of Althusser's neo-Kantian organization of the field of knowledge around the specific objects of the various sciences. However, Žižek does not perform a direct critique of neo-Kantianism, in the manner of Lukács's Hegelianism, for example. Rather, he effaces the specificity of Lacanian psychoanalysis by generalizing it through the model of Hegel's speculative philosophy. Thus, Žižek tends to fulfil the Althusserian fantasy of a Hegelian 'expressive totality', in which the particular phenomena of contemporary society become immediately expressive of the 'subject' of capital.

This reduction is exacerbated by Žižek's form of exposition, which, despite his Hegelianism, remains illustrative rather than dialectical. Žižek's extraordinarily fluent application of Lacan to contemporary culture does not of itself establish its truth, in so far as it is facilitated by the independence of theory from its material. It is noteworthy in this respect that Žižek's interpretation of cultural phenomena is largely indifferent to their form. The consideration of form is for Žižek almost entirely a question of the (psychoanalytic) interpretation of the explicit narrative of those phenomena. The consideration of the form of, for instance, cinema, as a specific organization or mediation of social experience, as distinct from opera or sport (a consideration which radically affects its meaning independently of any psychoanalytic interpretation of its explicit narrative), appears to be beyond Žižek's concept of interpretation. To help overcome this limitation we can still usefully consult the cultural criticism developed by the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

Stewart Martin

Refresher

Anne Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999. 159 pp., £45.00 hb., £13.99 pb., 0 7456 2108 2 hb., 0 7456 2109 0 pb.

Political theorists are well used to the notion of essentially contested concepts. The ideas central to their discipline have not only been honed by analytical labour; they have emerged through an ongoing process of political struggle. Debate over the significance of terms tends therefore to incite ideological differences which are intrinsic to concepts like freedom, equality or justice. There is a further process at work here, too, inasmuch as concepts move in and out of fashion according to wider political interests. Freedom offers a good illustration. Attempts at definition threw up a fertile dichotomy between negative and positive liberty which thereafter enframed debates while also splitting the term along politicized lines: liberalism versus its critics. Yet freedom does not figure much in more recent analyses, having been replaced by political theorists' interest in justice, democracy and rights.

The concept of equality seems to have suffered a similar, even a more pronounced, fate. Because of its entanglement with the idea of justice it has been especially vulnerable to occlusion under the weight of Rawlsian or Habermasian fascination with formal procedures of justice. At the same time, equality became a politically difficult word during the 1980s, abandoned by just those exponents of radicalism who were previously its natural allies. For the Left it acquired an aura of anachronism unless diluted into a tepid equality of opportunity; among feminists it has been widely derided as insufficiently sensitive to difference.

It is in this context that Anne Phillips has written *Which Equalities Matter?*, a book that self-consciously aims to put the concept of equality back on the agenda and one that explicitly situates itself within the politics of Blairite Britain. It is a fairly short book, written with the sort of clarity and commitment that is a trademark of Phillips's work. If it does not exactly say much that is new, it does say a good deal that has become unfamiliar. In this sense its very appearance is important; it offers an incisive account of the various meanings, weaknesses and debates that have surrounded equality, thus providing a framework for the term's rehabilitation.

In fact, equality is not a new concern for Phillips. More than a decade ago she published *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class*, in which she considered feminist claims to sexual equality and

focused on the problematic way gender and class are imbricated. Since then her ideas have been through the crucible of debates about a far more extensive litany of differences. The influence of some of the more modest postmodernists is apparent here, but consistent throughout Phillips's work is her strong commitment to egalitarianism. In this latest volume she comes full circle, insisting and lamenting that it is the *economic* equality associated with class that has fallen out of recent discussions about difference.

Inevitably it is the polemics surrounding equality-versus-diversity that feature most prominently in the analysis. But Phillips is inclined to transpose the debate into one concerning the relation between economics and politics, stating that it is their separation which lies at the heart of her book. Despite applauding the revived interest in politics that is apparent in the 1990s – where democratization provokes questions about equal citizenship which involve rethinking representation as well as the role of respect and recognition in multicultural societies – she worries that this emphasis on political equality has eclipsed earlier anxieties about economic inequality. In particular, and as Phillips insists time and again, economic inequalities subvert not only our substantive ability to participate equally as citizens but also any genuine respect for those whose difference involves significant material inequality. It is in their lack of attention to the structural arrangements which reproduce an unequal distribution of life-chances, income and wealth that Phillips finds deliberative democracy and a politics of recognition, as well as more classically liberal arguments, inadequate.

One of the best things about *Which Equalities Matter?* is the way Phillips combines analytical meticulousness with political conviction. She takes us through the major conceptual analyses of equality (although there is little discussion of Marxism), showing why many of the senses in which it is politically appealing are actually quite confused. It is apparent here how the fastidiousness of Anglophone political theory has a rather paralysing political effect, which it shares with some deconstructive approaches. Terms with a strong ideological resonance begin to look too dangerous to handle without scare quotes and certainly too problematic to stake one's political ambitions on. But this is balanced in the text by Phillips's unequivocal commitments, which she states with a refreshing lack of ambiguity.

Some of her theoretical convictions will send post-structuralist alarm bells ringing, as when Phillips states boldly that it 'is that assertion about a funda-

mental human equality (in the capacity for reason, or perhaps just capacity for suffering) that underpins my use of the term'. But many will surely sympathize with the uncompromising political conclusions she draws. Phillips's positions are always sensible and pragmatic. She accepts the inevitability of capitalism and merely advocates policies such as affirmative action that will have some effect on outcomes. She recognizes broad structural dimensions of inequality, such as the power of private corporations, but leaves them aside in favour of more operational concerns such as reducing income differentials and reforming the division of labour. Even so, readers for whom economic equality *has* remained high on their political agenda might wonder whether a more rigorous sociological exploration might not reveal structural limitations to even Phillips's more modest demands for material equality. If the book has a weakness, it lies in its failure to match its analytical rigour with any account of the sociology of contemporary Britain. What is missing is any attention to actual material disparities and their trajectory; their distribution across gender and racial or ethnic lines; the identity of those who are socially excluded and who constitute the underclass, and so on. Perhaps, in fairness to Phillips, her book has done enough simply by putting economic equality back at the heart of political theory. It deserves to be widely read and discussed. But if a new and vital conceptualization of inequality is to emerge, it surely must arise out of an informed consideration of the sociology of late modern societies and not merely from the logic of conceptual analysis.

Diana Coole

Tommy and Jim

John Corvino, ed., *Same Sex: Debating the Ethics, Science, and Culture of Homosexuality*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD and Oxford, 1999. xxvii + 394 pp., £20.95 hb., £13.95 pb., 0 8476 8482 2 hb., 0 8476 8483 0 pb.

The project of *Same Sex* is declared in the subtitle: *Debating the Ethics, Science, and Culture of Homosexuality*. John Corvino places his authors with careful thought, so that they answer each other, sometimes explicitly. It seems that this has been found useful, because *Same Sex* started life as a hardback in 1997, and now comes with approving comments from reviewers on its papered back.

Corvino's goal is to render discussion 'more rational, more civil, and more productive', and most of these essays are indeed quietly purposeful. What doesn't get addressed is the agenda. If the idea is to balance the debate, where does the centre lie and what are the extremes? From this point of view, *Same Sex* is distinctly depressing. Let me show why.

In the opening chapter Corvino argues that his friends Tommy and Jim, who have been together for fourteen years and have 'lovingly restored' their Victorian house, may properly have sexual relations. In the next two chapters David Bradshaw and John Finnis hold that homosexuality is bad in principle, because it 'fails to respect the given form of the human body as male or female' and treats 'sexual organs as mere instruments of pleasure'. Then Andrew Koppelman replies that gay couples are as legitimate as 'sterile heterosexual relations'. No one argues on behalf of lesbian and gay sex outside stable partnerships.

This pattern continues. The Ramsey Colloquium (Jewish and Christian biblical scholars) declares that gays 'embrace the false and dangerous claims of the sexual revolution'. Thomas Williams denies that they must do so. No one suggests that a sexual revolu-

tion, supposing we have had one, or were to have one, might be a good thing. One scholar claims to show that St Paul regarded homosexual relations as ethically neutral; another that they are condemned consistently throughout the Bible. No one says the Bible is irrelevant.

It is debated whether a refusal to acknowledge that there are gays in the military exhibits either prejudice or a reasonable concern for good discipline. There is no analysis of the masculinist ethos that is assumed to be necessary if you are going to get people to kill each other. The pros and cons of marriage are fairly put, but the book doesn't entertain the more risky prospect of lesbian and gay parenting.

My point is not that Corvino has treacherously compiled a homophobic collection of essays. Probably he has done his best to set up the issues so that instructors in philosophy classes will feel able to take them forward with their students. What is depressing is that these seem to be the terms on which that is possible, at least in the USA.

Let's hope Tommy and Jim aren't waiting on the outcome.

Alan Sinfield

Historical humanism

Sean Sayers, *Marxism and Human Nature*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998. 203 pp., £45.00 hb., 0 415 19147 5.

This book falls into two parts: one deals with the world of work, especially in the writings of André Gorz, the other concentrates on Marxism's attitude towards morality, particularly the ideas of Norman Geras. Only the introductory first and the last chapters ('Marxism and Human Nature' – Sayers's most recent contribution to his ongoing debate with Geras) are new. Not surprisingly, Sayers's views with respect to some issues appear to have evolved in the fifteen-year period which has elapsed since the publication of the earliest paper in 1984.

One of the central themes of the book is Sayers's attempt to present an alternative to two allegedly erroneous doctrines which, in his opinion, have dominated recent discussion of Marxism's attitude towards human nature and/or ethical values. The first of these is the 'essentialist' humanism of the Enlightenment. This affirms that there is such a thing as human nature; is completely ahistorical; adopts an absolutist or objectivist approach to ethics; and postulates the existence of a universally valid, transhistorical ethical yardstick which might be used to critically

evaluate existing society in the manner of traditional natural law theory. Sayers associates such a humanist interpretation of Marxism with the work of Norman Geras. The second doctrine, which Sayers refers to as 'conventionalism', denies altogether the existence of human nature and is committed to the principles of both social constructionism and ethical relativism. Sayers associates this second doctrine not only with postmodernism but also with a particular interpretation of Marxism which he himself rejects. In Sayers's view, each of these opposed doctrines is one-sided. The approach adopted by Marxism is, he insists, neither completely universalist nor exclusively relativist but, rather, historicist. As such, it represents a form of 'historical humanism'.

This Marxist historicist approach recognizes the existence of that which is universal, so far as both human nature and ethical values are concerned, but nevertheless insists that this universal is always historically mediated. For example, man is a productive being who possesses a natural need to work. However, as in the case of all natural needs, the specific form

which this need to work takes in contemporary society 'is a product of the historically developed conditions of modern industry'. In the final analysis, then, human nature (and its needs), together with any natural ethical values associated with it, remain historically constituted. Hence, *pace* Norman Geras, they are unable to provide a transhistorical or transcendent standard for the critical evaluation of existing society.

This is not to say, however, that there are no reasons for objecting to capitalist society on moral grounds. Sayers maintains that Marx's historicism *can* provide us with a standard of moral evaluation but that, at its decisive point, this is necessarily a historical standard. It is a standard which is not transcendent, as Geras suggests, but immanent within the historical process itself. According to Sayers, given its recognition of the historical mediation of all universal values, it is only possible for Marxism to avoid the political quiescence associated with ethical relativism by committing itself to the idea of moral progress. The ethical values of a later and higher stage of historical development are superior to those of an earlier and lower stage and might therefore, in certain circumstances, be used to critically evaluate society at that earlier stage. Sayers insists, however, that this form of historicism is not one which is teleological in the manner Hegel understands this term. There is no end to moral progress.

Considered simply as an account of Marxism's attitude towards human nature and morality there is a lot to be said for this thesis. However, he has a tendency to employ the terms *historical* and *historicist* interchangeably, thereby giving the impression that he himself subscribes to the conventionalist or *historicalist* reading of Marx which he later rejects. For example, he maintains that his own approach involves 'seeing human nature in a *purely* historical fashion' and that human nature is 'social and historical *through and through*' (my emphasis). In connection with the need to work he claims that this is not 'an inherent and universal feature of human nature'. For although it is 'a real and fundamental need in present society', this 'has not always been so'. This statement seems to imply that the need to work is something which is *exclusively* historical and conventional and in no sense natural or universal. Consequently, it appears to contradict the central thesis of the book as a whole. This is historicalism rather than historicism properly so called.

Sayers rightly associates Marxist historicism with a rejection of that type of essentialism which is usually associated with the humanism of the Enlightenment. However, he occasionally gives the impression that he

thinks that this is the only form of essentialism. Hence at times he appears to be suggesting that Marxism rejects essentialism *per se*. But this is inconsistent with his acknowledgement that there are certain universal characteristics and needs which are possessed by all human beings. For this acknowledgement logically entails that there is a human 'essence' after all. In short, Sayers's implicit claim that Marxism rejects essentialism outright is historicalist rather than historicist and appears to contradict his assertion that Marxism is a form of historical *humanism*.

So far as morality is concerned, Sayers maintains that the essential insight of Marxism is that morality, also, is 'a social and historical phenomenon'. Marxism sees different moralities as 'the products of different social and historical circumstances and tries to understand them in these terms'. Hence it 'cannot and does not appeal to universal moral principles or values'. However, here Sayers once again appears to overstate his case. For these statements seem to imply that, in his view, Marxism denies altogether that there is any natural or universal component to morality, and affirms that moral values and principles are exclusively social or historical in character. But this would be to present a purely conventionalist account of Marxism's approach to morality. This is inconsistent with the central claim of the book as a whole and something which Sayers himself explicitly rejects later on. Once again this is historicalism and not historicism properly so called.

Tony Burns

Really, really want

Kevin Magill, *Freedom and Experience: Self-Determination without Illusions*, Macmillan and St Martin's Press, London and New York, 1997. x + 207 pp., £40.00 hb., 0 333 63453 5.

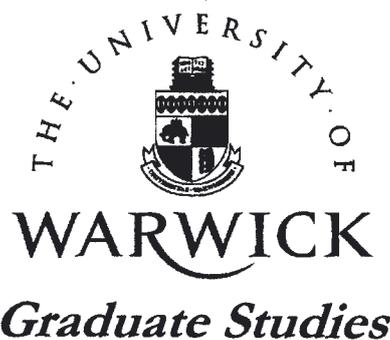
The debate on free will, agency and moral responsibility still rages in analytical philosophy. Compatibilists (like A.J. Ayer and D.C. Dennett) champion the view that determinism – the doctrine that at any instant there is exactly one physically possible future – is compatible with free choice, free action, and moral responsibility. In contrast, libertarian incompatibilists (like P. Van Inwagen and R. Kane), deny that these freedoms and moral responsibility are compatible with the truth of determinism, and insist that, if we are unable to choose or do otherwise, consistent with the past and the natural laws remaining as they were prior to choice

or action, then we are not relevantly free – our beliefs about free will, agency and moral responsibility are partly or wholly illusory. According to some recent accounts (e.g. of Honderich and Double), the debate is inconclusive and so the problems of free will are irresolvable.

Magill's book belongs to the compatibilist tradition and tries to dispel the apparent irreconcilability by addressing and explaining away or deflating the intuitions and experiences which make the libertarian picture of the incompatibilist tradition attractive or even inescapable. He admits that compatibilists have not done enough to justify our 'phenomenology of freedom' – our undeniable experiences and unreflective attitudes and feelings about free will, agency and moral responsibility which in general favour incompatibilism. Magill admirably rectifies this deficiency of existing compatibilism by making these *experiences* and *attitudes* metaphysically innocuous and offering an account of how we can have non-illusory freedom worth wanting. Our practice of holding people morally responsible for their actions, for example, fundamentally depends upon 'moral reactive attitudes and feelings', but these attitudes themselves do not need a further general theoretical justification in terms of metaphysical presuppositions about 'origination', 'agent-causation' or 'ultimacy' which are incompatible with determinism. Our capacity for self-determination does not rest upon a metaphysically robust notion of alternative possibilities in acting and choosing invoked by incompatibilist libertarians. Instead, a person's non-illusory self-determination and freedom consists in their 'hierarchical' and 'evaluative' identification with what they really want and their doing what they really want *because* it is what he really wants. Whether Magill's strategy works depends upon his own compatibilist presuppositions and the detail of his arguments, which cannot be discussed here. On the whole, I think he does a fine job to capture incompatibilist intuitions and to meet libertarian worries to a considerable extent.

Magill's book is not introductory. It is packed with illuminating, interesting and often original elaborations of central themes in the contemporary discussion on free will, agency and moral responsibility. It offers a subtle defence of compatibilism to which incompatibilists should respond. Anyone concerned with the analytical debate on human freedom should engage with it.

Stefaan E. Cuypers



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