

# Universalism's struggle

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000. xxi + 312 pp., £20.00 hb., 0 521 66086 6.

In her latest book Martha C. Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, takes up the moral challenges of enriching public policies and political activism for the benefit of non-privileged women in poorer countries. She does so not only as a professional academic but also as an 'international feminist' whose duty, as she sees it, lies in counteracting the inhuman aspects of globalization through the advocacy of universal norms of human dignity and quality of life. Her method is to formulate categories of human capabilities that can indicate and compare the extent of wellbeing and agency of woman across nations. She sees this task primarily as a 'freestanding' moral project which is not dependent on teleology. From her perspective, it is necessary for international feminists to use the universal language of justice and rights even at the risk of being accused of Westernizing and colonizing. From her book, it seems that by 'international feminist' she means Western feminist.

This is an important and original book as, by stressing the 'bread and butter' issues, it provides a counterpoint to the prevailing dominance of cultural theories and textual analysis in feminist discourses in rich countries. Nussbaum urges academe to take up the problems of poor working women, rather than those of middle-class women, as the central point of their studies.

The text focuses on normative political philosophy. Nussbaum does not feel the need to draw upon sustained historical research or empirical enquiry. 'Feminists who disparage abstraction', she insists, 'are very unwise to do so', as philosophical theorizing can have practical political values. In order to redress the prevalent moral and analytical lacuna in international feminism in this regard, she takes up the challenge of formulating concepts that focus on the urgent needs and interests of women in the developing countries. She is aware of being an outsider, but with her commitment to human empathy and universal values she feels confident that she will not be accused of paternalism.

Nussbaum's is a moral project, couched in ethical arguments that stipulate and champion a list of 'capabilities'. These are the capabilities which allow women, the traditionally disadvantaged group in all societies, to fulfil their potential as true 'human beings'. Her vision and mission are essentially conditioned by Marx's precept that a true human being is a dignified human agent who shapes her or his own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others, rather than in the manner of a 'flock' or 'herd' animal, being passively shaped or pushed around. Marx followed the Aristotelian heritage of stressing the importance of material needs; he was also deeply influenced by the Kantian notion of the inviolability and dignity of human beings. Nussbaum's list of capabilities is thus inspired by both Marx and Kant and encompasses capacities that give women and men access to basic necessities such as food, security, protection against sexual abuse and violence, as well as opportunities and choice in the realm of the senses and of imagination such as love, sexual satisfaction, concern for animals and fellow humans. Her list of capabilities includes freedom to engage in various forms of social interaction with freedom of political speech and assembly. She gives equal weight to all the capabilities in the list as universal categories.

The guiding principle in Nussbaum's world-in-abstraction is not only the Marxian materialist philosophy but also the Marxian idealism that views each person as an end in themselves. Nussbaum champions this principle in the cause of gender justice, as women, so often, in all societies serve merely as a means to other people's welfare and wellbeing. The principle, as Nussbaum sees it, could be made operational by articulating and translating it into the principle of each person's capability. This articulation places emphasis on the agency of and choice by women in transforming their society. By stressing the rule of opportunities as distinct from that of realized wellbeing, Nussbaum distances herself from the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen, her long-time col-

laborator, who pioneered the capability approach for cross-national comparison. While Sen emphasizes the realized potentials of human lives, such as literacy and life expectancy, Nussbaum stresses the role of realizability that allows women and men to choose their priorities and mould their destiny. John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* lies at the core of her analytical paradigm, yet she departs from Rawls (as well as from Gary Becker) in holding that the principles of public justice should apply directly to the internal life of families. In Nussbaum's paradigm, the family is the major site of contestation of power and bargaining; women need public justice in order to ensure that they are treated as ends and not simply as means even within a family.

In Nussbaum's 'overarching analytical model' there is no room for patriarchal cultural relativism nor for the adaptive preferences of women who uphold family welfare before their individual well-being, particularly in poorer countries. The desire for food, mobility, security and the use of reason, Nussbaum argues, are universals, which culture can blunt but not altogether remove. There is a space for the 'deformation of these desires', especially in societies where women are conditioned to make sacrifices for others. This is why, as Nussbaum claims, international/Western feminists should not feel shy of prescribing those categories of capabilities, formulated in the spirit of Aristotelian universalism.

Nussbaum's text is contentious and provocative. In these turbulent times, when the politics of difference colours the post-colonial discourse on North–South relationships, it takes courage to make a case for universal values that claim to cut across the boundaries of class, caste, religion and nation; values that are justified by the authorial gravitas of philosophers influenced by Western epistemology. Her courage is particularly striking as she explores the social situation of women in India, which has been the hotbed of debate on the relevance of Enlightenment philosophy for non-European countries. In the last decade Indian elites, along with diasporic Indian intellectuals, have been vociferous in challenging Western claims of unravelling the complexities of colonized societies. Post-colonial historiography and cultural theories – dominated by Indians at home and abroad – highlight the limitations of Western grand canons in comprehending the power of metamaterial dimensions – religions, beliefs, mythical and episodic histories – in shaping the political and cultural processes of this formally democratic and secular country. India's increased links to global modernity did not obliterate

her quest for cultural identity. If anything, it is modernity itself that brought the question of traditional culture to the fore in radical philosophies of the Left as well as of the Right.

Nussbaum's advocacy and defence of Aristotelian universalism, devoid of historical contextuality and empirical findings, will, I believe, be rather ineffective in the face of rising cultural nationalism. In India the questioning of universal values emanates from the progressive movements of women and men in their attempts to formulate strategies of resistance to Western hegemony; it is also endorsed by the Hindu fundamentalist parties, with passionate support from their women's wings. Histories, traditions and symbols get invented in order to assert *Hindutva* (Hindu consciousness) in public policies. Any attempt to address and improve the condition of women must take note of the complex turns that women's own sensibilities can take in these contexts. A political philosophy of universalism that does not take into account this anxiety on the ground will have little chance in enriching either women's movements or public policies.

Nussbaum's book is laudable as a moral project. However, her appeal to global feminism may not have the desired effect, as her philosophical position does not engage adequately with post-colonial anxieties. The post-colonial search for cultural identity has created deep uncertainties even in the West, particularly among radical intellectuals who, in principle, would like to establish or retain solidarity with the progressive movements in the poorer countries. A questioning of logocentric values and the assertion of cultural pluralities in ex-colonies has at times encouraged them to espouse moral relativism to the extent of condoning female circumcision or the practice of sati (widow immolation) in order to be free of any paternalistic, colonial guilt.

At this time, international feminism has lost its momentum as women's efforts to reform or transform societies elsewhere have become a mere 'spectacle', whose observation itself becomes circumspect as it is acknowledged to be biased by the observers' subjectivity. Since it has been felt that there was no objective truth, justifications for lending solidarity to dispossessed women in poorer countries too lost their ground. Nussbaum's philosophical project is a riposte to what she views as the political and moral vacuousness of the global feminist movement of the 1990s. Her call to reorient international solidarity among women, on philosophical grounds, however, is likely to remain unheeded unless her project gives due



importance to the profound questioning of dominant Western epistemology by feminists in both rich and poor countries.

Nussbaum's vision of global feminism needs also to recognize the emerging realms of contestation and negotiation in North–South relationships. Her philosophical construct takes into account the unequal relationship of power between women and men but does not refer to the disparity in bargaining power between the rich and the poor nations. This is reflected in the working of the WTO, the IMF or the World Bank, institutions that dominate the trajectory of globalization and the international economy. In the background of such an unequal global power relationship, a woman's identity as a woman in the developing world may take a secondary place to her identity as a citizen of a less powerful nation.

Nussbaum's philosophical construct is contingent upon an assumed commonality of interests and aspirations in all societies, particularly with respect to their material wellbeing. This assumption is not supported by empirical evidence anywhere, and definitely not in India, a kaleidoscopically fragmented society in terms of caste, class, religion and region. In the face of rising Hindu fundamentalism, I know of many

Muslim women in Mumbai willing to trade off their choice and opportunity to have sexual satisfaction, or marry for love, for the protection of their families by their own community. They will do so, if necessary, by accepting the norms of their community even when these are not 'women-friendly'. Women in India as elsewhere have multiple identities. Women become conscious of their social and public role as women only when women's movements mobilize them in order to transcend gender-related obstacles. These movements are, by definition, contextually specific and historically defined. The erudite, yet consciously ahistorical, non-empirical philosophical text of Nussbaum leaves readers uncertain about both the feasibility and the desirability of the capability list. She conspicuously leaves out the resonance of symbols, representations, fantasies and myths – the stuff culture is made of and which conditions our consciousness, identity and politics. I fear it may be methodologically problematic and strategically unproductive to underplay their significance merely as a reflection of the false consciousness of Indian women or the moral defeatism of Western/international feminists.

Coming from the poorer part of the world and from a discipline that is anchored in empiricism, I cannot but be aware that we do not live in one well-defined universe and that norms of morality and capability get formulated in diverse universes by the dominant interest groups or groups that represent the numerical majority. Standards get set in all societies by what the powerful section feels to be the universal norms of behaviour and morality. It could be the Taliban in Afghanistan or the free men in Aristotle's Greece. The moral project, thus, as I see it, should not be simply to advocate universal values but to explore ways of empowering minority groups struggling to survive under the dominance of their country's 'universal' values. The transformation of a society depends crucially on finding ways of bringing disadvantaged groups, women or men into the political process which defines and implements laws and constitutions of nations. While sharing Nussbaum's faith in democracy, I would nonetheless urge some caution in placing almost sole emphasis on constitutional reforms or public policies; social and political consensus without constant vigilance can lead to the tyranny of the powerful or the majority.

**Swasti Mitter**

# Faster, faster

Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000. 216 pp., £45.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 0 415 23705 X hb., 0 415 23706 8.

Tony Smith, *Technology and Capital in the Age of Lean Production*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 2000. 224 pp., £11.95 pb., 0 791 44600 X.

We live in a speeded-up world. This is the theme connecting these two accounts of the latest stage of capitalist development. But they have very different approaches. Tony Smith is an orthodox Marxist concerned both to explore what is new about capitalism today and to refute its bourgeois legitimization. Teresa Brennan situates her critique of capitalism in the context of psychic and natural foundations, revising Marx's value theory in the process.

Smith provides a thoroughly researched, beautifully clear, exposition of claim and counter-claim with respect to the 'new economy' which has come out of the crisis of the 'Fordist' model of mass production. He calls it 'lean production' and defines it as

a system of production and distribution involving work teams, the elimination of non-'value-adding' positions in production (quality control, cleaning, middle management), the use of just-in-time deliveries from suppliers and to distributors, mass customization (that is, relatively short product runs aimed at narrowly defined market segments), and the cooperation of different enterprises within networks.

Defenders of this new economic paradigm in the scholarly and business press often concede that the 'old' capitalism was far from ideal, but assert that 'lean production' is immune to Marxian criticism. They claim it harmonizes capital and labour, institutes consumer sovereignty, and embodies trust and cooperation in networks of firms. Smith shows that 'lean production' does not, and cannot, avoid subjecting the workers to the 'old' problems: 'structural coercion, exploitation, and real subsumption'.

With respect to this last he contests the well-known identification of real subsumption with 'deskilling', and after a survey of the empirical evidence concludes that 'the deskilling thesis has not been definitively falsified ... but neither has it been conclusively established.' A brilliant dissection of the much touted 'consumer sovereignty' establishes that there is 'real subsumption' of consumption too. As for the claim that the 'new economy' supersedes antagonism between capitals, Smith argues that the big firm at the 'core' controls 'ring' form, leading to superexploitation of workers there. At the end, Smith dissents from the expectation

of a new global boom consequent on the spread of lean production, and he poses an alternative to both the Soviet model of 'socialism' and this new capitalist paradigm.

Perhaps the single most important dimension of lean production is that of time compression. As Smith puts it:

The 'new economy' involves a significant compression of the time spent in product design, a reduction in the time of deliveries of inputs from subcontractors, a speed-up of production, a faster delivery of finished commodities to distributors and final consumers, and so on. Everything else being equal, a faster turnover time allows more capital to be accumulated over time.

This exhausting pace of capital accumulation is one feature of Brennan's *Exhausting Modernity*, the other being the exhausting of human and natural resources. The economic argument of her book is the same as that in her earlier work, *History after Lacan*; it is bracketed by sections on the psyche and the polity. The writing is suggestive rather than argumentative, challenging rather than convincing. I would have liked the economic part to be presented in its own terms rather than encumbered with psychoanalysis and philosophy; but Brennan explicitly repudiates such a reading.

Briefly, Brennan constructs a 'foundational fantasy' articulated around a desire for instant gratification which is materially enacted in the social order and is amplified in the macrocosmic world of commodities. The subject-object nexus is also central: with the notable exception of Spinoza, Western philosophy has failed to comprehend the energetic interchanges in and between the social and natural worlds; it has taken the subject to be self-contained. Starting from such considerations Brennan claims to give a more penetrating critique of capitalism than Marx, because he was still too 'subject centred'. This flaw in his theory 'prevented him from perceiving that nature as well as labour is a source of value'. On her view *all* the natural forces in play, not just labour, make their contribution to 'value'.

Brennan understands Marx's value theory to be based on the idea that 'the materialization of living

labour is inseparably tied to the transformation of the product'. She provides several telling passages in which Marx treats Nature, by contrast, as a dead object. What she does not recognize is that these passages are about the production of use value. It does not occur to her that any failing in Marx's analysis in this respect does not necessarily subvert his theory of value, which is a theory of the *social form* of the economy. Brennan notices that in *Capital's* first chapter Marx makes the point about use value that 'labour is its father and the earth its mother', and she asks rhetorically if there is anything that really distinguishes Father Labour from Mother Earth is such a manner that justifies taking labour to be the sole source of surplus value? She then says that the only real argument Marx gives for distinguishing labour and Nature concerns the *will*. She cites the well-known passage contrasting the architect and the bee. She rightly trumps this with the observation that 'capital will downgrade if not virtually eliminate opportunities for the worker to use the will that is meant to distinguish him or her from "Nature"'. In sum, she situates Marx's alleged failings in the context of the subject-object syndrome which wrongly splits away non-human living forces and natural energies.

Is this criticism valid? Not in my view. Curiously enough Brennan has hit on the right answer when she notices that the distinction between Father Labour and Mother Earth is that the former is a subject, however repressed, endowed with will, however subordinated. A clue to its relevance is seen in Marx's *Grundrisse*:

'The presupposition of the master-servant relation is the appropriation of an alien *will*. Whatever has no will, e.g. the animal, may well provide a service, but does not thereby make its owner into a *master*.... The master-servant relation ... is reproduced - in mediated form to be sure - in capital.' What this shows is that Marx's value theory is not rooted in an ahistorical theory of factors of use-value production as such, but in the peculiar *social relations* in play therein. The relevance of the worker's will for capital is that it is uniquely recalcitrant to being exploited in a way Nature is not. Value is a sign that capital has successfully *reified* labour *as if* it belonged to the object world. But it does not. In brief, it is not labour's relation to production in general that founds the labour theory of value but its specific role in capitalist commodity production as capital's interlocutor. It is not labour's *energy* but labour's *subjectivity* that is relevant to the social relations of production expressed in value and surplus value.

What, then, of Brennan's own value theory? It is a theory of energetic interactions:

Like labour-power, natural sources and forces are commodities capable of releasing and adding energy. Like labour-power, they have a certain time of natural reproduction, which means that, potentially, the value they add in production can be greater than their reproduction time.

This explains capitalist exploitation of nature because capital cares nothing for the reproduction time but prices things on the basis of their 'speed of acqui-



sition'. The time of reproduction enters into the equation in the short and medium term only where it constrains the speed of acquisition. But in the long run, what Brennan calls 'real value' kicks in as resources become exhausted. Brennan takes the phenomenal speed-up in the circulation of capital alluded to earlier as exacerbating this more fundamental contradiction. In effect, however, this 'real' value should be called 'unreal' value, for it does not enter into the explanation of the contemporary dynamic of capitalism. Brennan's value theory is really normative, not a definition of the value operative *in* capitalism but one it *ignores*. Brennan's insights are better situated in the contradiction between value and use value. Notoriously, capital treats the collateral damage to use value as an 'externality' because its 'real cost' is not counted in its circuit. Brennan makes a telling point when she says that 'production under capitalism is consumption, not production; it gobbles that which is already there, gives nothing back but waste.'

**Christopher J. Arthur**

## Defensive functioning

Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000. xvi + 344 pp., £50.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 7456 1657 7 hb., 0 7456 2392 1 pb.

'Internet banks "in denial" on hacking thefts', a *Guardian* headline announced the day I began this review. It would be hard to deny that denial is ubiquitous these days, but few have tried to survey the topic as comprehensively as Cohen does here. Why, he wants to know, is it quite so easy for most of us to avoid seeing what we don't want to see; recalling what we don't want to know? Given the current obsession with issues of memory, we might expect to find this question asked everywhere. But it is only the blindness of *others* we tend to notice; the desperation and neediness of those around us surface, if at all, as irritating harassment – the annoying behaviour of an undeserving army of beggars, bogus refugees and 'squeegee-merchants'. Knowledge of our 'inner' lives is proclaimed a virtue and necessity; while understanding the collective fate of others remains a less valued, dispensable distraction.

Some scholars of memory, including Andreas Huyssen and Eva Hoffman, have noticed the irony that the more we try to remember the past, to memorial-

ize it, or to shore up all our knowledge in computer banks, the more we seem in danger of distorting or forgetting it. Such trepidations generate a host of questions, querying the accuracy of biographical narratives or casting suspicion over the rise of ceremonies recalling the atrocities of history – paradigmatic in Holocaust remembrance. Rituals of remembrance designed to prevent the repetition of past horrors are usually officially sanctioned only when the distance from immediate responsibility for the acts recalled renders them safe from direct demands for intervention, restitution or retribution. So while memory work is evident everywhere, denial emerges as its ubiquitous shadow. But is there anything useful to say of concepts like denial, which swirl around gathering tenuous meanings from diverse scientific, clinical and populist domains?

There are one or two things even psychologists know about human experience. These include the unreliability and imperfections of memory. But psychologists have tended to circumvent their knowledge of the unpredictabilities of human behaviour with their enthusiasm for mechanistic metaphors for cognitive functioning. These range from filing cabinets to the diverse prototypes of computer programming. Cognitive psychology's models of false inference (rejection or distortion of contradictory information, faulty risk assessment and the like) aim to provide the scientific rigour also sought in psychiatric diagnosis. The latest American clinical diagnostic index (DSM) provides seven levels on its 'Defensive Functioning Scale' for measuring the degrees of maladjustment attending cognitive distortions.

Such scales and models attempting to tie down meaning to measurements lack the complicated ambiguity of descriptions of fallibility pictured in psychoanalytic accounts of 'repression', 'disavowal', 'dissociation' and other defence mechanisms. Psychoanalysts attribute the self-serving misconstruals and evasions of much of our daily experience to the expeditious dance of the ego striving to forestall the recurrence of miseries past. These survive as buried sediments of the frustrations and distress that inevitably accompany our earliest desires for sensual pleasure and the undivided attention of the m/other who supplied it. Psychoanalytic accounts thus present a muddled picture, where a person both knows and does not know something at the same time: 'the blindness of the seeing eye' is a phrase regularly – though, Cohen suggests, perhaps inaccurately – attributed to Freud. Neither mainstream psychological, psychiatric nor psychoanalytic theories of human behaviour encompass the degree of freedom

which existentialists, like Sartre, see as the defining feature of human existence. Here, the burdens of responsibility give rise to the 'bad faith' we resort to in rationalizing our behaviour, when we avoid noticing what we just might more courageously have chosen to see and respond to differently, to remember differently.

All these perspectives, and more, are painstakingly catalogued by Cohen. Like Sisyphus, however, his labours might seem in some ways to be of little avail. The more he uncovers the better he sees that the essence of self-deception remains elusive. This is not just because in ascribing denial – whether to perpetrators, bystanders or victims of harm – we rely upon slippery, highly contextualized practices that vary according to time, place and the specific identities and belongings of speaker and audience. Put more directly, it is simply that 'the ability to deny is an amazingly human phenomenon, largely unexplained and often inexplicable, a product of the sheer complexity of our emotional, linguistic, moral and intellectual lives.' This is why commemorations of atrocities and stories of personal abuse have ushered in the memory wars.

As Cohen notes, in our blossoming cultures of self-help, blame and personal growth, 'denial' is thought of as an individual affair, a curable defect behind the maladjustments or 'addictions' that produce our everyday miseries. But for those who speak another idiom, of *shared* injustice, suffering and misfortune, some form of denial can be seen to be the norm. Indeed, those who do not routinely refuse to heed a great deal of the suffering of others, near and far, more often than not become objects of ridicule themselves: shunned as the whistleblowers, head-bangers or traitors whom ordinary folk try to avoid; or worse, face clinical depression or psychosis. Depressives believe that other people have a poor opinion of them; healthier folk do not. But it is, psychologists have found, depressives who have the more accurate perception. By the end of his book, Cohen is clear that the interesting question is not how to explain people's failure to recognize the distress of others, but rather what makes some people acknowledge and work to prevent it.

This minority does not share some exceptional altruism, he suggests, judging from the stories of those who have rescued others, even at serious risk to themselves. But they do have a strong sense of being attached to a common humanity, beyond family, place or community belongings. The difficulty for those, like Cohen, who cannot ignore the suffering on what was his doorstep (the torture of Palestinians in Jerusalem)

is that it is far from clear what creates such 'instinctive extensivity'. And so he leaves us, knowing 'every personal life, and every society' is built on denial, but that some resist it. Cohen can but urge us to acknowledge that reality, and ponder how to increase the numbers of resisters, that minority who could not live in the vicinity of the smoke coming from a Nazi death camp, without quite 'knowing' its purpose.

But if he has few answers, he discerns the complexity of the questions that need asking. Some of these address the idiocies of much memory work today, like that of the four hundred Californian Christians embarking on their millennial Reconciliation Walk to apologize to the descendents of those butchered in the Crusades almost a thousand years earlier. 'Instead of being solemnly greeted and *thanked* by religious and political leaders', Cohen comments, 'they should have been treated with total derision'.

Lynne Segal

## Post-occidental ethics

Couze Venn, *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks CA and New Delhi, 2000. 264 pp., £60.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 0 7619 5411 2 hb., 0 7619 5412 0 pb.

Published through the Theory, Culture and Society Centre at Nottingham Trent University, where Couze Venn is Reader in Cultural Studies, *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity* is aimed primarily at an audience in departments of sociology and cultural studies. Opening it to discover that Venn explicitly situates his work in relation to the twinned concepts of postmodernity and postcoloniality, one would not be unjustified in fearing the worst, given the questionable uses to which such terms have often been put within these disciplines over the last couple of decades. But such preliminary fears are, at least partially, unwarranted in relation to this ambitiously wide-ranging and philosophically astute book.

Venn's central concern is to delineate what he calls the 'unique conjuncture characterized by the co-emergence of "rational" capitalism, European colonialism and modernity', where 'the specificity of each must be understood in terms of the relation of co-articulation between them'. 'Occidentalism', as it is defined in the opening pages, refers to 'the conceptual and historical

space in which a particular narrative of the subject and a particular narrative of history have been constituted' through this 'co-articulation'. Drawing heavily on the work of Homi Bhabha and on Todorov's extraordinary 1982 book *The Conquest of America*, Venn convincingly restates, with admirable passion, the argument that while the relation between modernity and capitalism has long been an object of study and debate, there has been a persistent and fatal 'neglect' or 'forgetting' of his third term – colonialism – in the most influential accounts of modernity's origins and development, from Adorno to Habermas to Foucault and Lyotard.

Venn's reading of these accounts also makes it clear that 'modernity' is to be understood most consistently in *Occidentalism* in terms of that conception of the philosophical discourse of modernity for which, as he sums it up in the final chapter, 'modernity is the period in which a particular – logocentric, Eurocentric, phallogocentric, rationalist – form of subjectivity has been instituted as normative'. Venn's genealogy of this 'normative' form of subjectivity situates the colonial construction of the other as a crucial, inaugurating moment with regard to the hegemonic projects of the 'modern period' and Enlightenment ideas of autonomous reason. It is on this basis that he seeks to intervene in the debate surrounding what he terms the resulting 'problem of the "post"' which has opened up in relation to the concepts of both modernity and colonialism in our time: the 'problem' 'of "who comes after the subject" and after modernity' and, thus, of 'the transformations that would provide the conditions of possibility for a post-occidental way of being'. Citing the later Lyotard, Venn suggests that the 'post' be conceived not as the indicator of 'a new age' or 'really existing' new social or cultural space, but rather as the index of a historical possibility of a 'rewriting of a number of features claimed as its own by modernity' which 'has been at work, for a long time already, inside modernity itself'.

Now, it remains a moot point whether 'postmodern' is the best name to give to this 'rewriting', or whether it is not in fact rather more confusing than helpful. This is particularly debatable with regard to Venn's tight conjoining – as 'a thread for binding the destiny' of one to other – of the 'posts' contemporaneously attached to the colonial and the modern. The benefits of such a 'binding' for an articulation of the former are questionable; not least because (despite their incontrovertible historical connection) it is far from clear that 'colonialism' and 'modernity' are actually the same *kind* of concept. Leaving this aside, it is at any rate increasingly evident as the book progresses

that Venn's attempt to think 'the conditions of possibility for a post-occidental way of being' is actually very 'modern' indeed. In fact, far from endorsing a generalized 'incredulity toward metanarratives', Venn has set his sights on constructing a new one out of a 'rewriting' of one of the most exemplary of 'modern' conceptualizations of historical time: the narrative of humanity's 'becoming-mature' that can be found in Kant's essay on Enlightenment.

Venn's proposition is, essentially, to rewrite Kant's 'project' as the (presumably interminable) 'becoming of being as ethical being' – as opposed to the teleological and univocal narrative of a universal history of 'becoming-rational' – where the 'ethical' is understood to indicate a responsibility for and recognition of the other, countering both the violence of much of the 'practical' history of Enlightenment (and colonial) modernity and the forms of subjectivity from which such violence has supposedly derived. This notion is pursued in the concluding chapter of *Occidentalism* through an attempt 'to concretize the other-worldly basis of ethics in Levinas not only by reference to embodiment – the face, sight – but also in terms of the inter-human thickness of sociality, and in terms of historicity'. Particularly crucial, for Venn, is the possibility of reworking Levinas' 'time of the other' as a more historically concrete recognition that 'every form of exploitation and oppression', as manifested in the social and cultural forms of colonialism, capitalism or patriarchy, 'ultimately reduces to the appropriation or the theft of someone else's time, and/or the community's time'. Against this Venn envisages a projected 'non-egological form of subjectivity' tied to the narrative of 'becoming-ethical' of humanity, which he defined as 'a developmental process suggesting apprenticeship'. If this developmental process connects such a project to the core emancipatory promise and temporality of Enlightenment modernity itself – which then also functions as 'a crucial stage in this apprenticeship' – it draws as well, Venn argues, upon a more fundamental 'promise arising from the recognition of injustice and the commonality of suffering' – a recognition which is 'inseparable from the recognition that we exist as beings in time, conscious of temporality and of the inevitability of finitude'.

This desire to reconfigure Levinas's conception of the time of the other in more properly social and historical (rather than religious) terms is not unique to Venn: it seems to promise a way of recasting the relation of same to other which would provide a basis for countering the violence of the colonial relation and its 'theft' of the time of the other. Nonetheless,

it brings with it certain problems which are not fully resolved here. Given the issues at the heart of Venn's project, one might well have hoped, in particular, for a more detailed exploration of how the relation between the ethical and the political is to be understood, especially as this is such a notoriously tricky issue with regard to Levinas's own work. Howard Caygill's claims, in a recent issue of this journal (*RP* 104), for a more complex reading of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas's thought notwithstanding, it remains, for me, uncertain that Levinas's privileging of ethics as 'first philosophy' can provide the underpinning for a 'politics of difference' as readily as is often implied.

Venn focuses on the relation between 'historicality' and the 'time of the other', implicitly arguing against Levinas' own tendency to reduce 'history' to the homogenized time of 'historicism'. Yet what is one to make of his concluding assertion that 'we' have come to a 'fateful crossroad' where 'we can choose to continue down the path of a careless postmodernity towards a catastrophic and inhuman destiny, or we can decide to bring about a post-occidental, post-colonial, transmodern future which modernity itself had glimpsed'? Even without pausing to marvel at the dizzying play of 'posts' in this statement, one must, I think, at the very least wonder how 'choice' and 'decision' – or indeed the status of this (historical) 'we' – are to be conceived. Posing such questions requires a more nuanced analysis than Venn provides, of the relation between the possibility of 'becoming-ethical' and the domain of the political, and the questions of agency and historical consciousness it involves. Moreover, in his attempt to concretize the ethical relation, Venn repeats a common sleight of hand in readings of Levinas (encouraged to a certain extent, one would have to say, by the texts themselves): a move from the *ethical*, as the 'metaphysical' name given to the primacy and ineliminability of a responsiveness to the other, to the suggestion of an actual *ethics*, which would, in a more determinate manner, underwrite that historical 'apprenticeship' of 'becoming' Venn desires and which would function socially as 'a regulative Idea (and ideal) directing judgement in local situations'. Venn's description of such an ethics as 'negative', 'non-normative' and 'non-prescriptive' does not confront the problem of the how the transition is to be made in the absence of Levinas's appeal to theology.

In many respects – for these reasons and others – Venn's book is a frustrating one. At times, it takes the form of an overly compressed syncretic combination of contemporary theoretical positions, without unravelling the complex tensions between them. (How,

for example, is the Kantian concept of a 'regulative Idea', upon which Venn's notion of 'apprenticeship' relies, to be squared with the 'eschatological' conception of historical time in Levinas or with, say, Derrida's notion of the *à venir* which Venn elsewhere invokes?) Nonetheless, in producing some fascinating critical sparks in pursuit of its ambitious project, it undoubtedly makes an intriguing contribution to its field.

David Cunningham

## Eisenman's banana

Andrew Benjamin, *Architectural Philosophy*, Athlone, London, 1999. 216 pp., £47.50 hb., £16.99 pb., 0 485 00415 1 hb., 0 485 00605 7 pb.

Architecture and philosophy have been entangled from their beginnings. In the main the relationship has been established through analogies. As architects, we are gently flattered by Aristotle's figure of the *architekton*, the methodical organizer of the city and, by implication, of ideas, a figure who exemplifies the intersection of theory and practice. We also find succour in Descartes' analogy of the architect as rational agent of renewal. And when the going gets really tough, we dig out Wittgenstein's observation, made after designing a house for his sister, that architecture is more difficult than philosophy – conveniently overlooking the knowing self-deprecation in Wittgenstein's sentiment. In the end, however, a relationship based solely on analogy is unsatisfying, unconsummated. A more insistent relationship between the two spheres has been developed on the basis of their shared use of language. But, as Andrew Benjamin notes at the beginning of his new book *Architectural Philosophy*, plotting the relationship through language is 'too easy'. Instead he aims to address the particularity of the architectural and to do this through a philosophical thinking.

Benjamin introduces the particularity very bluntly. It is that 'architecture is inevitably articulated with function or with programmatic concerns'. It is hard to argue with this, though whether, as Benjamin will continue to imply, this is the principal defining feature of architecture is much less clear. Having introduced the primacy of function, Benjamin's project is to disrupt the modernist dogma of a homological relationship between function and form. This is not such a difficult target to dismiss and Benjamin does it with some grace and ease, introducing time into the equation. The temporal, he argues, is already built



into architecture but is often ignored or suppressed. A consideration of time introduces the uncertainty of the yet-to-be, an unmasterable and open spacing that challenges the stability and authority of determinist form-making. Time thus brings with it alterity, which Benjamin describes as ‘the possibility of otherness within function’. Alterity here always exists in tension with the repetition of function which, he argues, architecture inevitably enacts. In recognizing this tension between alterity and repetition, architecture can avoid the traps of prescriptive form-making whilst releasing the potentials of the incomplete, of the yet-to-be. Here the argument is developed through productive readings of Bataille and Leibniz: the former through the concept of *l’informe*, the latter through a reading of the monad as a plural present – at the intersection of a static present there to be perceived, and a futural potential which demands interpretation in terms of becoming. Benjamin argues that it is through these terms that architecture can and should be thought. It is here that the book is most convincing, as a lateral thinking of architecture which disrupts any assumptions of the architectonic as a static, determined, object. Benjamin suggests what architecture may be, a philosophy of potential, in which the distance of thinking productively and critically (but not instrumentally) prepares for the more immediate engagement with architectural production.

Much less successful are Benjamin’s attempts at interpretation of architecture as project. In his readings of two American architects, Peter Eisenman and Reiser/Umehoto, he tries overly hard to relate their work to the strands of thought that run through the book. The strain tells, and cracks open up; he finds what in many cases is simply not there in the work. It is symptomatic that his writing in these sections becomes even more convoluted than elsewhere, as if by rubbing on presumed philosophical complexity, the architectural work will be imparted with intellectual depth. But strip away these wordy excesses and what is left underneath in the architecture is not so complicated. At heart Eisenman and Reiser/Umehoto are fascinated by the generation of form and new ways in which this may be approached. In order to resist the charge that this is mere formalism, the architects overlay an intellectual justification, with Eisenman in particular having played the philosophical field brilliantly and opportunistically over the past thirty years. Benjamin is more convinced, or possibly seduced, by these architectural gyrations than am I; in their heady mix of pioneering shapes and topical thinking, he slips into making almost causal connections between form and content, conflating formalist philosophy with a philosophy of ideas, and potentially implying the corrupting equation that avant-garde form denotes avant-garde thought. But he is in good company in

this seduction by form. Derrida has also slipped on Eisenman's banana skin. In a remarkable display of mutual flattery Derrida once assumed the role of architect and Eisenman of writer, resulting in a project for a garden at la Villette, Paris. The project succumbs to an obviousness and lack of enquiry totally at odds with the radicalizing nature of Derrida's written work. Thought turned to stone.

Benjamin has not, yet, turned his hand to design, but he has become the intellectual muse to a certain group of architects, his philosophical presence providing gravitas to their formal flights. The trouble is that this book, or more precisely this collection of essays written over eight years, does not fully supply the necessary weight (a position further undermined by the countless typos, which are indicative of the speed of the production of the book). The hope in such collections is that cross-readings occur, ideas accumulate and interpretations gather strength – the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts. The dangers are those of repetition, inconsistency and lack of sustained argument. This collection reveals both sides of the coin. I suspect that Benjamin works best as an essayist, drawing fresh speculations from partial philosophical readings. The book has the pattern of each essay ending with one or two paragraphs of teasing provocations which genuinely challenge one into new ways of architectural thinking. The down side is that these are left hanging in the air, the argument never fully developed.

Take Benjamin's themes of function and alterity. In a book founded on the notion of function as representative of the particularity of architecture, it is strange that the term is left almost unexplained and thus remains undeveloped from a monolithic modernist interpretation. There is also a problem with the lack of specificity in the term 'alterity'. In most other fields, the generalized nature of terms concerning the other has been challenged and overturned, but here the book upholds the virtues of 'alterity' as itself enough – as if the very term brings with it a radicalizing impulse of criticality and disruption. Somewhere the idea of politics is attached and suddenly the term 'alterity' becomes a convenient catch-all for a 'reworked politics of architecture'. But in its very lack of specificity, alterity can be appropriated in countless different ways, some less politically motivated or radical than Benjamin might suggest. This can be seen in a recent project by Eisenman which conjoins formal excess

with the sustenance of capitalist excess. Most of the architects associated with Benjamin's position eschew an explicit social or political intent, haunted perhaps by the ghosts of the failures of modernism. However, architecture is inextricably implicated in the political and social world and so this eschewal is really just a deferral of the inevitable. It is therefore necessary to confront any such deferral head-on, to act with intent, so that the alterity that Benjamin rightly proposes can begin to take on a political specificity.

This is not a call for a return to the modernist project of social salvation through form, but it is an acknowledgement of the plural conditions that architecture must address. Benjamin is absolutely aware of the problem. He notes that alterity should be seen in terms of spacing and distancing, and that these terms demand judgement. He tells us what judgement is not – it is not for him an ethical matter (why not?) – but he is in the end overly cautious as to what may inform judgement. This aporia may be because Benjamin's take on architecture is so partial. He rather grandly announces that there has been a shift in architectural theory from a concern with meaning to a concern with form. This may be true if you hang out with a certain group of New York and London polemicists, but there are plenty of other discourses going on which transcend the limitations of formal production and which address other particularities of architecture, most notably its occupation and spatial production (in the Lefebvrian sense).

Interestingly, Benjamin unwittingly suggests his own limitations and points to a way out of them. At the end of an essay on Descartes, for me the best in the book, Benjamin notes how Descartes suppresses the body, the domestic and the everyday but cannot eliminate their threat. He concludes that, 'Once it could be allowed that the body and domestic fell within the domain of radical change ... what would have to emerge is radical change as a consequence of their inclusion. Were this to be a possibility then architecture becomes a central concern.' The opening of this line of enquiry may in the end have been a more productive field than Benjamin's fixation on formal production, because it is exactly in the admission of the body, the domestic and the everyday as thematics of change that architecture can gain its full resistive potential.

**Jeremy Till**

# The post-bohemian condition

Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2000. 275 pp., £19.95 hb., 1 86064 567 4.

Elizabeth Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture: Cities, Culture*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi, 2001. 167 pp., £15.99 pb., 0 7619 6975 6.

The central problem that Elizabeth Wilson confronts in these two books can be understood as primarily aesthetic. To make such a claim means steering aesthetics away from a narrow concentration on 'works' to the most social of issues: the question of how to live in the modern world. This is a resolutely social aesthetics concerned with the experience of modern life and with the inventive and imaginative practices that generate new forms of living. This is aesthetics shackled to life, to its poetics and its *poesis*. In this way 'style' becomes the register for a profound engagement with the modern world, even if that engagement is continually being recast and packaged as 'lifestyle'.

Over the last couple of decades and using a number of different genres (historical survey, crime novel, critical essay, and journalistic *feuilleton*) Wilson has mapped a cultural cosmology imbued with the operations of style. A fascination with fashion and cafés, with sexuality and the politics of everyday life, combine to form constellations that orbit around concerns with the lives of women and the possibilities and problems of urban living. While fashion is not the only indicator of style, it provides a good index to a problem continually confronted in Wilson's work: if clothes can register something more than a coded message, if they can 'talk', for instance, of embodied hopes for a more satisfying life, then they also signal the possibility that these desires might simply get reduced to nothing more than a system of signs to be bought and sold. Such a fate, however, is not limited to the world of fashion and can be understood more ubiquitously as connected to life practices in general. While this might sound like the condition of postmodernity, Wilson seems to suggest it can also, and more concretely, be thought as the post-bohemian condition.

In *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts*, Wilson looks at aesthetic avant-gardism from the perspective of those who chose to live it. Although her thematic account of Bohemia includes people dedicated to painting and writing, it also focuses on those, whose devotion to life meant that there was little room for leaving material marks. To account for bohemians whose *métier* was talk, sex and parties, for instance, requires an expanded archive that includes hearsay

and anecdote alongside the more 'proper' materials of historiography. By expanding Bohemia's archive Wilson can include those who didn't write or paint their way into history, resuscitating lives that have often either been marginalized in accounts of famous bohemian artists or, more often, simply ignored. Here 'muses', lovers, dancers and café owners, who in actuality had such a vital social role in the everyday life of bohemia, share centre stage with a canon of bohemian artists.

If bohemian politics generally echo the anarchist demand to 'live life as an experiment for the future', then the style of bohemian life should provide material evidence of the revolutions in everyday life that were being both imagined and lived. It is here, of course, that judgements about bohemian politics can be located, and it seems easy enough retrospectively to puncture bohemian dreams of sexual liberation (for instance) by scrutinizing male Bohemia's treatment of women. Wilson's account is neither celebratory nor retrospectively critical; rather, she is interested in the productive conflicts and confusions that bohemian life evidences. So, for example, while white bohemians have often celebrated black culture in a way that can't be reduced to liberal tolerance, the language such celebration is coded in often articulates a paternalistic primitivism that isn't a world away from more explicit racist discourse. At the same time what this meant in everyday actuality was that, for people of colour, Bohemia often provided a relatively safe space within a larger, much more hostile, culture. Bohemia could be a place where white and black bohemians could congregate in a sort of mutual conviviality that wasn't available in the wider culture. Another crucial aspect of the bohemian celebration of cultural otherness was that it could become a vehicle for a more general cultural recoding that provided space for gay and lesbian sexualities to become part of the landscape of the (bohemian) everyday.

For Wilson, we dismiss Bohemia at our peril partly because a bohemian lineage can be traced in cultural formations that many of us hold dear: second-wave feminism, for instance, and academic projects like cultural studies (though the recent 'policy' drive within

cultural studies comes from a slightly different heritage). But Bohemia asks its most pressing questions in its death throes. It seems that Bohemia was dying at the same moment that its cultural project was being incorporated into modern consumer culture. On the one hand, this marks the very real gains that have been made in some areas of social liberation (sexual liberalism, most obviously); at the same time, it evidences a more pervasive colonialism of everyday life by the commodity. If Bohemia has been packaged as 'lifestyle' (the 'Boho' look, and so on), then what alternative is there to the 'poverty of everyday life' in its neo-liberal consumerist guise? In a more bohemian vernacular – how can you demand that everyday life should become a work of art within a culture that attempts to sell the most mundane of commodities (mass-produced bathroom fittings and such like) as if they were 'works of art'?

In a couple of places in *The Contradictions of Culture* ('Living Dolls' and 'The Unbearable Lightness of Diana') Wilson writes of an unnameable dread or anxiety that might be read from certain street performances and from the mourning (relayed through the circuits of mass mediation) that accompanied Diana's death. What links *The Contradictions of Culture* and *Bohemians* is the intuition that the 'end of Bohemia' and the melancholic outpouring over Diana's death can both be seen as morbid symptoms of a cultural malaise that remains both nameless and profound. If we were to give this malaise a title we might think of it as the feeling of an end to history (*posthistoire*) brought about by the success of what in the 1960s Lefebvre designated as the 'bureaucratic society of controlled consumption'. This might mean that the term 'the postmodern' exists not as a diagnosis, but as another symptom for which it provides a vague and unsatisfying label. Although the endless, brutal and mundane triumph of capitalism produces many social and cultural effects, for Wilson it is the way it registers at the level of the cultural imaginary that is of particular interest.

Many of the essays in *The Contradictions of Culture* take stock of recent debates about cultural and political issues. What emerges time and again are critical dead ends and cultural confusion. Wilson's cultural reconnaissance uncovers a culture where 'traditional' forms of socialism and feminism no longer provide the imaginative resources for directing social change. In such a culture the only revolutions that can be envisaged are the ones supplied by the market. Yet what is also clear is that the desire for something else has not been extinguished, even if its articulation might be seen as blocked. In many ways the social

landscape that allowed for the expressive desires of bohemianism, feminism and socialism has not fundamentally altered. In the essay 'Dogs in Space', for instance, class and gender conflicts are made vividly present through an autobiographical account of dog ownership. But if the social landscape continues to evidence age-old structural inequalities, it could be said that these inequalities rarely find convincing and intelligible expression in the general culture. Wilson seems to suggest that the task for contemporary leftist cultural criticism is not simply to rejuvenate cultural forms that might be well past their sell-by date (so to speak), but to transform (and style) such cultural forms so that they can register persistent, yet protean, dreams for social change.

Wilson's social aesthetics is dedicated to understanding the experiences of a modern post-revolutionary culture from the point of view of someone who refuses to relinquish revolutionary desire. Such an aesthetics not only requires the subtle diagnoses of 'style' in all of its many forms; it also demands that the study and writing of culture generate new forms capable of recovering moments of cultural and social dissonance. In this way, Wilson's writing evidences a resilient optimism. If Gramsci suggested a 'pessimism of the intellect' and an 'optimism of the will', Wilson shows us that writing need not only be an intellectual pursuit. A wily and passionate intelligence is at work here.

**Ben Highmore**

## Today and tomorrow

Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, Philosophy Now series, Acumen, Chesham, 2000. vi + 250 pp., £40.00 hb., £15.00 pb., 1 902683 06 4 hb., 1 902683 07 2 pb.

The Philosophy Now series promises to combine rigorous analysis with authoritative expositions. Ruth Abbey's book lives up to this demand by being a clear, reliable and up-to-date introduction to Charles Taylor's philosophy. Although it is an introductory book, the footnotes and references ought to please those who want to study the original texts more closely. Abbey's book is structured thematically: morality, selfhood, politics and epistemology get fifty pages each. The focus is on the internal coherence of Taylor's work, not its critique of or defence against other positions. The chapters are self-contained, but together they give a good overall picture of Taylor's position. The concluding chapter is a highly interesting preview of Taylor's unpublished work-in-progress on secularity, which according to Abbey is comparable in magnitude to *Sources of the Self*.

Some interpreters have taken Taylor for a full-fledged historicist, while others have stressed the role of human constants and transcendental arguments in his work. Against these, Abbey sees Taylor as a proponent of a two-dimensional analysis of selfhood: both ontological and historical features are central. Within the horizon of modernity, the contents of self-interpretations include such historically evolved ideals as autonomy, inwardness, authenticity, affirmation of ordinary life, benevolence and avoidance of suffering. The ontological dimension concerns humans as purposive, embodied agents. In any historical situation, humans as linguistic beings are self-interpreting animals and strong evaluators, and their identities are dialogically constituted. However, Abbey notes that this ontological dimension of Taylor's account is not too clear and specific when it comes to bioethical borderline cases.

Abbey approaches Taylor's moral theory from the viewpoint of human constants: as strong evaluators, humans inescapably have implicit or explicit moral frameworks, which contain a plurality of goods. There has been some debate whether Taylor's notion of strong evaluator applies to unreflective people as well. Abbey's analysis of strong evaluations is in this respect very clear and well argued: strong evaluations are qualitative distinctions of worth, which may but need not be reflective and which may but need not govern such everyday choices as a choice between diets. Further, the adjective 'strong' refers to the qualitative worth of evaluations, not their force or motivational power. Thus everyone, even unreflective people, have strong evaluations.

In contrast, Abbey suggests that only some moral frameworks include what Taylor calls 'hypergoods'. These are 'supreme among strongly valued goods' which 'become hegemonic in one's life'. Abbey's example is someone protesting against logging in a redwood forest because of a dedication to environmental values. The protester does not deny other goods like education, world peace, individual liberty and socioeconomic justice, but these are not hegemonic in her life, and so forest preservation is her hypergood. Because all of us do not structure our lives around ethical goals, Abbey concludes that some of us do not have hypergoods at all. Against this, as Abbey points out, most interpreters have taken Taylor's claim to be that hypergoods are a universal feature of moral life. For every moral agent, some good is the most strongly valued one. Taylor sees a very close connection between 'most strongly valued goods' and 'hegemonic goals in one's identity'. A follower of

Rorty might think that education, world peace, individual liberty and socioeconomic justice are the most important goods, and yet the hegemonic goal in one's identity might be to sustain ironical distance towards these goods one nevertheless lives by. In this case it would be hard to say whether the notion 'hypergood' would refer to what is ethically most valued or what is most central to one's identity. Abbey's suggestion seems to be that while such a person would have strong evaluations, he would have no hypergoods.

Abbey locates Taylor's moral realism between what she calls strong and weak realism. Weak realism claims that people merely *experience* moral values as real and independent but this experience is an error: in fact values are only subjective projections onto a neutral world. Strong realism holds that values are objective and real whether or not humans experience them in that way. In contrast, Taylor thinks we ought to accept the theory, which makes the best sense of what people in fact experience: moral realism.

Abbey calls Taylor's moral realism 'falsifiable realism'. This is an unfortunate label, because it fails to distinguish between Taylor's realism in natural sciences and in morality. Taylor would not deny that natural scientific theories are also falsifiable. Yet Taylor thinks that morality and natural sciences are, as Abbey points out, diametrically opposed to each other in almost every other respect. Morality can be grasped only from the engaged perspective of moral agents, whereas in the modern natural sciences a disengaged perspective is adopted. Moral values, like secondary properties, are relational, unlike the independent objects of natural sciences. Further, language has a constitutive role in shaping or manifesting the moral dimension. Thus Taylor's moral realism is *phenomenological, falsifiable, relational and manifestationist*, while his realism in natural sciences is *non-phenomenological, non-relational and non-manifestationist*, but nevertheless *falsifiable*.

Having read the book, it remained unclear to me what Abbey and Taylor think of the relation between a 'moral' and a 'historical' source. Taylor calls a moral source something that both constitutes the goodness of ordinary values and motivates us to act morally. He names three possible modern moral sources: human capacities, nature and God. According to Taylor's theory (although not according to his own hunches) it seems to be theoretically possible that the value of autonomy has historically Christian roots, but at the same time the genuine moral source of autonomy is the human capacity to moral self-determination. This would mean that connecting a moral ideal to its moral

source would be different from connecting the same ideal to its historical sources. If I have it right, in Abbey's analysis Taylor's goal is to recover theism as a moral source by stressing the fact that Christianity has been a historical source for many ideals.

The chapter on politics deals with Taylor's position on the liberal–communitarian debate. Taylor's suggestion that advocacy issues and ontological issues ought not to be assimilated has led some people to interpret him as a communitarian on the ontological level and a liberal of some kind on the advocacy level. Abbey accepts this when it comes to ontology, but thinks this is too simple on the advocacy level. Taylor is rather a pluralist who affirms both communitarian and liberal goals, and rejects both unitary communitarianism and unitary liberalism. In addition, Taylor criticizes some liberal goals like neutrality or negative freedom. Abbey's interpretation is sound in general, but the highlight of this chapter is the way Abbey shows that in *Politics of Recognition*, 'Taylor is also continuing his dialogue with [Isaiah] Berlin, despite the fact that his name appears nowhere in the article'. It is illuminating to see Taylor's essay as replying to his former teacher's views on recognition.

The chapter on knowledge contains a seemingly disparate variety of issues, from the distinctions between human and natural sciences to the scientific revolution and theories of language. What holds these together is Taylor's thesis of the priority of the engaged, embodied perspective. The disengaged perspective aiming at objective knowledge purged from subjective coloration has proved successful in modern natural sciences, but nevertheless remains a local achievement. The disengaged perspective should not be ontologized by taking it to be a general structure of human mind, nor should it be smuggled into human sciences. According to Taylor, such ontologizations and smugglings, and the ethical ideals that support them, have a tremendous hold in modern culture. Taylor's struggle against naturalistic reductions is also a major theme in his theories of selfhood, morality and politics. Self-interpretations, strong evaluations, communitarian ties between people, shared goods or reality of values might seem quite trivial things were there not such an influential world-view questioning whether there is room for these in the best ontology.

**Arto Laitinen**

## The shoe on the other foot

Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001. 179 pp., £35.00 hb., 0 521 79176 6.

The main aim of *Being and Time*, at least those sections of it that Heidegger completed, was to analyse the structure of human existence in terms of truth, without making any separate reference to beauty or goodness or anything else. This ambition might seem tediously traditional, indeed Platonistic, if it were not that Heidegger also insisted that truth is not at all what we ordinarily take it to be. Truth, he argued, is not a distant stately monolith towards which humanity slowly plods, but an encompassing swarm of all-too-human events, an unpredictable multitude of historical happenings in which specific aspects of the world momentarily reveal themselves to us and then sink back into obscurity.

When the torso of *Being and Time* was published in 1927, it was soon noticed that Heidegger's idea of truth-as-happening could be taken as signalling a campaign to move philosophical thinking out of the orbit of the sciences, especially 'modern science', and into that of the arts, especially 'modern art'. So it is rather remarkable that Heidegger did not plan to discuss art anywhere in *Being and Time*. He touched briefly on attitudes to historic monuments, but he never thought of mentioning works of art as such – neither in the two Divisions that he published, nor in the remaining four that were envisaged but never written.

However, he turned to the topic quite decisively a few years later, in a set of three lectures on 'The Origin of the Work of Art' delivered to art students in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1936. Using an astonishing combination of gushing lyricism and hard-edged abstraction, Heidegger sought to trounce 'aestheticism' in all its forms. Genuine art, he argued, was essentially concerned with the origin of truth, and it had nothing to do with private passions, refined sensibilities, or delightful beauties. Works of art were important because it was through their workings that truth originally happened, and in them that individuals and peoples acceded to their moments of truth.

'The Origin' is probably the most popular of Heidegger's essays, but on occasion – especially when Heidegger gets carried away in describing a pair of shoes painted by Van Gogh or the Temple of Neptune at Paestum – it can seem oddly vulgar, even kitsch. As

Derrida has written in a brilliantly funny ‘polylogue’ on shoes and art (‘Restitutions’, in *The Truth in Painting*), it is all too easy to collapse in laughter at Heidegger’s discussion of Van Gogh. It is as though we were a crowd of cultural tourists who have travelled all the way to a tiny village in Southern Germany to look at a world-famous painting which happens to be housed there. We get out of the coach and find a craggy old peasant who hobbles off to fetch the key and then unlocks the door and



lets us all in. But instead of letting us gaze at the picture, he gives us a self-centered and sentimental lecture in his quaint Swabian accent, and ‘from time to time he gestures towards the fields outside the window and somehow nobody notices that he is not talking about painting any longer’. There may be more to ‘The Origin’, Derrida suggests, than meets the philosophical tourist’s eye.

But as Julian Young reminds us in his clear and informative new book, ‘The Origin’, with all its paradoxes and surprises, was only the first of Heidegger’s many attempts to get to grips with the meaning of works of art. Soon afterwards, the poetry of Hölderlin began to exert its fascination over him, and if Young is right then the philosopher allowed himself to be slowly ‘educated’ by the poet. Hölderlin taught him to appreciate the place of post-classical movements (especially Christianity) in the Western tradition and forced him to attend to the differences between poetry and prose – a matter which was notoriously fudged in ‘The Origin’. After the Nazi period was over, Heidegger was even able to embrace what Young calls the ‘modern paradigm’ of art, opening himself both to Eastern culture (especially Japanese painting and Noh theatre) and to European modernism – the poetry of Rilke and Celan, the music of Stravinsky, the buildings of Le Corbusier, and above all the paintings of Van Gogh, Cézanne and Klee.

Young’s account of the range and intensity of Heidegger’s involvements with contemporary art in the last thirty years of his life will come as a surprise to the buzzy cosmopolitans who still enjoy patronizing him as a backward-looking Black Forest peasant. But perhaps Young overstates the implications of his findings for our understanding of Heidegger’s philo-

sophical development. His argument is based on the idea that the Heidegger of ‘The Origin’, though he never mentioned ethics and morality, believed that works of art must be fundamentally ‘ethical’, and indeed that they ought to offer us ‘a moral identity’. Young also holds that Heidegger was at that time in thrall to a ‘Greek paradigm’ which was ‘not only arbitrary but oppressive’. Hölderlin would eventually convert him to the ‘modern paradigm’ and rescue him from his ‘Graecocentrism’ but for the time being he was committed to ‘a stance of complete alienation from the art of his own times’.

This is a surprising judgement on an essay whose most famous passage is a paean to Van Gogh. And whilst ‘The Origin’ also contains a mesmerizing meditation on a Greek temple, Heidegger was not trying to invoke any kind of mediumistic spiritual contact with a world we have lost: ‘if we visit the temple at Paestum’, he says, we will find ‘that the world of the work that stands there has perished’. We cannot experience its world, in other words, except by ‘repeating’ it in terms of our own. Like any other work of art, it cannot do its work – as Heidegger points out in a powerful section which Young overlooks – without the participation of communities of interpreters (or ‘preservers’) who are capable of making something of it for themselves. In this context the very distinction between ancient and modern art becomes mercifully irrelevant: the temple may be thousands of years old, but if it can still do something for us then its work is just as ‘modern’ as if the pillars were still glistening with fresh paint. Young is surely right to commend Heidegger’s ever-deepening engagements with twentieth-century art, but he need not have diminished his earlier work in order to do so.

**Jonathan Rée**