

Review of Edelman (ed), *Sense and Reality – Essays out of Swansea*, Ontos Verlag, 2009. Hardback 235pp. ISBN:13: 978-3-86838-041-5

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For those who have been fortunate enough to have inspirational teachers or colleagues, there will always be the pressing question of how one is to pay homage to their influence. This collection of critical and exegetical essays on the work of the so-called 'Swansea Wittgensteinians' was born of this feeling, and throughout the work the profound indebtedness and sympathy of the essayists to their subjects is clear. This fact constitutes both the great strength of the collection, and its slight weakness. While it provides a fascinating insight into the often difficult and unfairly maligned thoughts of an influential and under-appreciated group of philosophers, there slight doubts remain about the audience for whom this book is intended.

The book is divided into nine chapters, eight of which deal with a different philosopher associated with the Swansea philosophy department during its remarkable period of flourishing that lasted from the 1950s until the 1990s. The ninth essay, by Mario von der Ruhr, is an historical overview of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Rush Rhees and their influence in Swansea. The eight essays deal in turn with: Rush Rhees, Peter Winch, R.F. Holland, J.R. Jones, Howard Mounce, D.Z. Phillips, Ilham Dilman and R.W. Beardsmore.

It is fitting that the opening two essays deal with the work of Rush Rhees and Peter Winch, the most influential and arguably most interesting of the group. Both David Cockburn's piece (on Rhees) and Lars Hertzberg's (on Winch) are admirable pieces of exegesis and explication. Hertzberg's essay, entitled 'Peter Winch: Philosophy as the Art of Disagreement' tries to find common themes amongst Winch's extensive corpus. His illuminating discussion connects themes from the early *On The Idea of a Social Science* to his essays on morality, for example the influential pieces 'Moral Integrity' and 'Particularity and Morals'. One lesson that Hertzberg draws is that the differences between individuals who respond differently in moral contexts (for example, between the Samaritan who stops to help the injured man and the Levite who passes on) could or should be characterised as differences in 'moral outlook'. Rather, the divergence between the two men is one of a divergence of understanding despite having a shared language: "What distinguishes the Samaritan from the others cannot be captured in anything he might have said *about* the situation; rather, he sees something different *in* it." (40) This conclusion looks forward to similar things said by John Edelman in his paper on D.Z. Phillips.

Cockburn extracts themes from the posthumous collection of Rhees' notes entitled *The Reality of Discourse*, which is a fascinating piece of scholarship on the nature of language, as well as a trenchant critique of elements of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and has so far received little critical attention. (A notable exception being ch1 of Stephen Mulhall's *The Conversation of Humanity*.) Cockburn stresses that, for Rhees, what makes language distinctive is that in it there is the possibility of growth in understanding. Language must be variously distinguished from 'a game', 'an organisation where each member plays its role' and a 'wallpaper pattern'. Cockburn builds on these contrasts and comparisons to bring out what

is distinctive in Rhees' conception of language, though inevitably much exegetical work remains to be done.

One feels when it comes to Rhees' work, that comparison and engagement with mainstream accounts of language use would be helpful. There is general awareness, but not much understanding of Rhees' work. For example, Jerry Fodor says in his new book *LOT 2*: "It was once widely believed that there simply *ain't* be a language of thought because it's true a priori that languages must be vehicles of communication. Thus Rush Rhees concludes his early paper 'Can there be a private language?' (1963) with the resounding observation that 'language is something that is spoken', by which I take him to mean that language is *essentially* something that is spoken. That is, I think, an extremely interesting claim, but Rhees offers no argument that it is true." (*LOT 2*, p.21) One suspects an answer is contained in Rhees' focus on "the importance for *saying* something of a particular conversational context" (17), but that calls out for elaboration.

From another direction, an explication of Rhees' views would profit from closer comparison both to Wittgenstein's own views, and also to other views inspired by Wittgenstein. One striking example is the following, intriguing claim: "the forms of scepticism that have had a central place in philosophy – scepticism about the external world or about the past, for example – are best viewed as forms of, or, perhaps, displacements of, a scepticism about the reality of discourse." (15) It would be interesting to know, for example, whether this claim differs from Stanley Cavell's diagnosis of scepticism as an expression of, or displacement for, dissatisfaction with the limits of knowledge. (See, for example *The Claim of Reason*, *passim*.) For Cavell, scepticism stems from a tendency to refuse to ascribe to another an independent reality, because of an intimation of the cost of acknowledging such independence. Is this ascription a part of, or a precondition for, a commitment to the reality of discourse, or are the two readings of scepticism independent?

Rhees' work is a major theme of John Edelman's piece on D.Z. Phillips. Edelman discusses the question of how far Phillips moved, before his death, away from his picture of philosophy as being a purely contemplative discipline, one that stands apart from advocacy of any particular religious viewpoint. One problem with the notion of philosophy as disinterested in this fashion is that – supposing this kind of 'neutral' perspective is even possible – it leaves it unclear what relation the practice of philosophy could then have on the actual life that one leads. According to Edelman, Phillips' lingering uncertainty over this question stemmed from his mistaken account of the differences between individuals and their religious perspectives as between 'world-views' or 'perspectives'. Marshalling the difficult and at times baffling work of Rhees ("to say that discourse is possible is to say that understanding is possible, and to say that understanding is possible is to say that 'living has sense'" (144)), Edelman argues that philosophy need not be purely contemplative, and engagement between individuals is possible, because in discourse two individuals can grow in their understandings of what life is, or what it means. What each individual brings to a situation is nothing so general as a world-view or way of life: "the very conception of any way of life is an abstraction derived from the lives people actually live. But as an abstraction it must leave behind the particularity of meaning and so the particularity of understanding that make the lives of those individuals the lives that they are." (149)

Another common theme of the papers is the relationship between thought and reality, and the diagnosis of misleading philosophical pictures of the nature of the relation and how we are to account for it. The recurrence of this question and its transformation in the writings of the various different thinkers discussed here provides a fascinating insight into how the issues of traditional metaphysics have been taken up by Wittgensteinians. Of those surveyed, Mounce's work remains closest to the orthodoxy in terms of debates over the mind's relation to reality. By contrast to Winch, who attacks the mythologisation of a relation between "language and reality" (40), and Rhees, for whom questions of the correspondence of language to reality become questions of the possibility of understanding, Mounce found in Wittgenstein both early and late a commitment to "transcendent realism"; in other words, to the doctrine that "our linguistic practices are extensions and developments of our instinctual relations to independent reality which cannot therefore be put into question." (110) As Michael Weston's fine summary puts it, Mounce concluded on the basis of his substantial metaphysics, that "one can only (really) value unconditionally the unconditioned". (121)

Heidi Northwood, in her interesting paper on absolute ethics and Greek tragedy, offers a reading of Sophocles' *Ajax* in which the eponymous hero represents a noble commitment to absolute value which is in marked contrast to Odysseus' morality of "compassion and compromise" (54). This contrast, in service of explication of Holland's remarks on the possibility of an absolute limit to the will imposed by recognition of the Good, is important, but her reading occasionally strains plausibility. It is not immediately plausible that Odysseus should be seen as self-interested when he argues for Ajax's burial on the grounds that in so doing "he too might escape the justice of the inflexible ancient ideals." (56) Correspondingly, when Ajax feels pity for his wife and child "because he will be leaving them a widow and orphan surrounded by enemies. He pities them because of his love for them; he does not want to see them suffer", it is a leap to claim, as Northwood does, that "there is nothing self-interested in this." (59) One could equally well see matters as the other way round: Odysseus is acting selflessly because he is foregoing his right as victor to punish the deceased, a right he repudiates because he realises that he shares with his enemies the same mortality and vulnerability to misfortune. Ajax is acting selfishly by refusing to contemplate living with his dishonour even for the sake of his wife and child; his commitment to his self-image is more important for him than the fate of his family. This is the reading of Ajax's behaviour suggested by Euripides, which Bernard Williams discusses in *Shame and Necessity*, p.73. That suggests that the question of what behaviour counts as selfish when faced with a choice between commitment to an absolute value and compromising on that value is not to be settled as easily as Northwood supposes. Nevertheless, her discussion is instructive in showing how a commitment to absolute value need not involve appeal to anything transcendent or unconditioned. This can therefore be read as a challenge to Mounce's account of the metaphysical preconditions of unconditional value.

Chryssi Sidiropoulou's paper on Ilham Dilman paints a picture of an extraordinarily broad thinker, whose work spanned the various disciplines of metaphysics, philosophy of language, ethics and philosophical psychology. Dilman's insistent emphasis was always "on the required human context where our concepts, language, questions and answers are embedded" (180). That could be taken as a tagline for the general approach of the philosophers portrayed herein.

Occasionally, one wonders about the philosophical merit of the exegesis. In Gealy's well researched and thorough essay on J.R. Jones, for example, we are told that "he travelled far on this road [from empiricism to the "new Wittgensteinianism"], but... he never reached the point where it could be said of him that he actually pushed the frontier further on. Indeed, it can hardly be said that he himself reached that frontier." With the greatest of respect for Jones's abilities as a teacher – and in this culture of research fetishism that is nothing to be belittled – one might wonder what interest there is for a modern reader in an account of one man's transition from empiricism, itself hardly a popular view these days, (nearly) to the imposingly-titled 'Wittgensteinianism', of whose merits one might reasonably remain unpersuaded. It is at such points that the work is most fruitfully read as an interesting contribution to the intellectual history, of Swansea in particular, and thus to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in general.

The philosophers honoured in the book, as well as being united by an appreciation for the writings of Wittgenstein, share anti-theoretical and anti-reductive tendencies. The essays here all stress that philosophers should rid themselves of their aspirations to give theoretical accounts of human phenomena, contenting themselves instead with a multitude of fine grained distinctions and characterisations of phenomena drawn in such a way that they do not occasion the bafflements that engender the beginnings of philosophy. Mostly this is done with skill and sensitivity. Occasionally, however, claims are made under the guise of common sense or in explication of a concept's 'grammar' which may cause bristling. (For example, Gealy's claim that "it is intelligible to say something like 'I do not know if I have toothache'... because I am unaware of... whether I am using the right concept in this context. The pain might not be a toothache but a pain caused by, say, an abscess or a gumboil."(90))

It is ironic that a book of essays in honour of a group of iconoclastic philosophers whose intellectual forebear was the great philosophical iconoclast should be so gentle, almost reverential in its tone. The contributors make little effort either to challenge those thinkers with whom they are dealing, or else to bring their reflections to bear on modern work in philosophy. In response, it may be claimed that this is not the place for such things. But one is then left to wonder what place this book occupies in the intellectual landscape, and to whom it will therefore appeal. It is this reviewer's opinion that the work as a whole stands as homily to the legacy of Swansea, and will be most relevant for those unfamiliar with and interested in the distinctive philosophical approach embodied there. For those already intimately familiar with the work of the philosophers discussed, the essays herein will be useful summaries, but could not (and were not intended to) replace close reading of the works discussed. But it remains a welcome addition to the literature. If the book serves as a prompt and introduction for a new generation of philosophers to read and engage with the thinkers characterised therein, then it will have done philosophy a great service.