

becomes more to "express himself" than to comprehend the natural order of things. The modern artist is more concerned with things strictly human than with the relationship of man to the Divine.

In political terms, of course, the results have been catastrophic. Paradoxically, Christianity deplores the miserable wickedness and worthlessness of man left on his own, and yet glories in the value of man as a creature of God. Modern secular trends have reverse tendencies: they tend

to glorify man as the noblest of beings, yet, not seeing him as ennobled by any divine element, have seen fit to debase him through the use of slave labor camps, psychiatric institutions, goon squads, and the like. The decline of Christian consciousness is at the root of the modern glorification of the self, and, while this lesson may seem to be trite, it is one that we in the West have not learned very well so far, and may be doomed to learn much better in the future.

Ethics Without Principles?

Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, by Bernard Williams, *Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985. ix + 230 pp. \$17.50.*

ONE OF THE CHIEF tasks of philosophy, as understood by Socrates, is to tell us how we should live and why we should live that way. Should we grant philosophy this high prerogative Socrates claimed for it, and should we still expect so much from it, now that it has become an academic discipline so far removed by its analytic abstractness from the concrete practices of our living? These questions preoccupy Professor Bernard Williams throughout his latest book, and his answers to them will not be encouraging to those who still think philosophy can deliver on its Socratic promises.

Philosophy, as Williams defines and practices it himself, is an "abstract, rationally reflective" discipline that specializes in critical analysis. The limpid, painstakingly deliberate style of his book will be familiar to any reader who has been exposed to analytic philosophical writing — but it is, surprisingly, the ghost of Nietzsche that haunts these pages,

though he is hardly mentioned in them. The rigorously analytic manner of Williams's thought belies its Nietzschean argument that reason cannot provide us a rational justification for our ethical convictions. It cannot trace those convictions back to any absolute principle; nor can it provide us a new, rationally justified set of beliefs derived from such a principle, in spite of the ongoing effort of Kantians and utilitarians to perform just this feat. First principles are out of its reach. For philosophy is just as hemmed in as we are by our historical condition. Try as it might, it cannot lift us above that condition to some absolute standpoint from which we might grasp, in all its transparency, an ultimate justification for our particular actions. It cannot give us a vision of how we ought to live.

What task remains for ethical philosophy once one has reached that conclusion? Only the task that Williams undertakes in this book: an elegant, skeptical dissection of philosophy's limits and rational pretensions. But the most unexpected surprise of the book is not its skepticism toward philosophy but its insistence that the ethical dimension of our lives will be richer when we wean ourselves from the vain hopes it has made us cherish. Williams thinks we will do more justice to,

and better understand, the complexities and subtleties of our decisions when we stop trying to find a philosophical theory to simplify and justify them.

Williams's key criticism of the whole enterprise of ethical philosophy has to do with the way it transposes ethical questions into theoretical issues. Such questions always arise in the context of practical deliberations, and it is the job of practical reason to resolve them. An employer does not allow racist considerations to influence his hiring decisions because he fails to appreciate the logic of an ethical theory purporting to demonstrate why racism is wrong. His failure lies in his practical reasoning, in his looking at what is irrelevant and overlooking what is relevant to his decision. Theorizing, even if it is theorizing about ethical questions, does not make one virtuous. This may sound like a platitude if one only considers virtues like temperance or kindness. It is less obvious but, Williams thinks, just as surely true, that ethical theorizing does not make one more prudent in one's everyday practical deliberations. The deliberative process that goes on in actual decision-making has little if anything in common with the kind of reasoning practiced by ethical theory when it tries to track our convictions back to some ultimate principle. Practical deliberation keeps us pinned down to the concrete circumstances, the particular historical, cultural situation in which we live. That is precisely its virtue and the best guarantee we can ever have for choosing well. In a very profound sense, ethical theorizing gets us off the track of our lives in their particularity by trying to get us to an absolute viewpoint. For the closer it brings us to such a viewpoint, the further it removes us from the actual, cultural milieu of our decision-making. Practical deliberation reminds us, as nothing else can, that we cannot get out of being who we are.

If we are fearful that unmasking the pretensions of ethical philosophy must lead to nihilism, it is, according to Williams, only because we have failed to

appreciate how such convictions and the virtues that enable us to practice them arise from the concrete, social context of our lives. In the ethical sphere it is *who* we are that matters, not our capacity for theorizing our way back to absolute principles. In this book, largely devoted as it is to skeptical criticisms of efforts to reach such principles, little is said about the virtues that mold character except that they are the key to being ethical. They create dispositions of desire and belief that help one to live well. They are nurtured by and responsive to the actual practices of a culture and so make those who have them active participants in the ethical life of their society. This pivotal role played by the virtues might lead one to hope that reflection on them might yet yield the kind of philosophical foundation for the ethical life that Williams thinks is not attainable by trying to find an absolute principle from which to derive one's beliefs.

Since it is who we are that matters, one might try to develop a portrait of the kind of person we should strive to become if we intend to live well. This is the kind of ethical philosophizing that Aristotle attempted, and, because it focuses on people and their virtues, not on the attempt to justify beliefs theoretically, Williams is sympathetic to it. But even here he does not expect philosophy to be able to deliver what it has traditionally promised. A philosophical theory of the virtues is probably unattainable because virtues that made men virtuous once do not make men virtuous always. History counts; it reaches all the way down to who we are and who we ought to be. In Williams's judgment, a fixed concept of human nature is no longer tenable, and so we cannot say once and for all who we ought to be if we are to be fully human. We can emulate Aristotle's style of ethical inquiry, with its emphasis on character study and its fidelity to the exigencies of social life, but the hope of using it as a method for reaching an absolute viewpoint is probably a vain one. We could become absolute only by ceasing to be ourselves.

That does not mean we have no ethical

knowledge. It means that the ethical knowledge we have is inextricable from the localized historical standpoint we occupy when engaged in practical deliberations. Nor are such deliberations beyond criticism. We are only mistaken in thinking such criticism must come from a theoretical standpoint lying outside the practical milieu. Ethical self-criticism is always a necessity if a certain way of life, and the virtues that make it possible, are not to degenerate into thoughtless routine. But what keeps our practical judgments free of the bias of traditionalism is not the saving grace of philosophical theorizing but a more judicious practical fidelity to the ethical exigencies of the concrete circumstances in which we are situated. It is, in fact, Williams thinks, precisely because we have tried to make theory do this job that our capacity for real ethical deliberation and criticism has been impoverished.

I have not tried in this review of Williams's book to do justice to the subtlety and intricacy of its arguments or to outline his treatment of its many topics. I have tried, instead, to present what seems to me to be its most important and provocative claims. It remains for me to say that I do not think they are correct, as I understand them. It is very puzzling to me that in a book that takes such pains to determine the role of philosophical thinking in ethical life the word "wisdom" hardly merits a mention. The wise man, as Socrates portrayed him, was no mere theoretician; he was certainly not an academic in the modern sense of that term. But he did possess, in Socrates' view, a certain understanding of first principles that ought to guide human conduct. Socrates did not think one could be fully informed in one's practical deliberations unless one was guided by such principles. And he did not think one could reach an understanding of them without engaging in philosophical reflection. But then for Socrates the practice of philosophy involved much more than abstract reasoning. He compared it to the practice of dying. He would not have expected it to lead

to wisdom, once it ceased to be understood as a profound process of personal transformation.

If philosophy does not now deliver on the promises Socrates made in her name, perhaps it is because we no longer have much sense of what it would mean to practice philosophy in his way. The idea of wisdom is hardly discussed today. It certainly does not function as an ideal in the modern practice of philosophy. In his elegant elegy for ethical theory, Williams fails to consider what theory might yet become if we were to reintegrate it with the cultivation of that most Socratic virtue.

— Reviewed by Jerome A. Miller

The Hour of Reckoning

The Tares and the Good Grain: or The Kingdom of Man at the Hour of Reckoning, by Tage Lindbom, *Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1983. xviii + 143 pp. \$11.95 (paper).* (Originally published in Swedish under the title *Agnarna och Vetet*, translated into French with an introduction by Roger Du Pasquier under the title *L'Iraie et le bon grain, ou le royaume de l'homme à l'heure des echeances*, and translated into English by Alvin Moore, Jr.)

A COMMON SAYING among educated Swedes is, "In Sweden, Christianity arrived late and left early." For them this epigram summarizes the rather complex relationship between the religious belief and the political behavior of a nation and a people who, more than any other at the midpoint of the twentieth century, seemed to have discovered the "middle way" to building