Booknotes

Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, (Free Press, New York, 2011) is a philosophy book which has attracted a good deal of attention in the USA, beyond the confines of academic philosophy, and deservedly so. For here are two philosophers using their philosophic knowledge and ability to say things of philosophical importance to the general public, and in doing so drawing on great works of literature. If we judge that the result does not live up to the promise, we should not be taken to imply that the effort was not worth making.

To say that *All Things Shining* is a shallow book might not seem a criticism to its authors, for they quote approvingly Nietzsche's admonition that, like the Greeks, we should stop courageously at the surface of life, to be superficial, 'out of profundity'. They also tell us that in our lives we should cherish the moods of the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, and all these ordinary aspects of living, as opposed to striving, fruitlessly, as they see it, to uncover some single deep or transcendent meaning in existence. There could indeed be a good shallowness here, a Dantean sense, perhaps, that all these *brevi contingenze* are not too small for the divine love to have created and cherished, but this is not the way of Dreyfus and Kelly; nor does their shallowness rest on a Nietzschean contemplation of the abyss, for they see the ancient Greeks as *happy* polytheists, as if *The Iliad* were bathed in an Arnoldian sweetness and light; nor do they ever really appreciate Nietzsche's own sense that the death of God is, at some level, collectively, if not individually, a catastrophe. To adopt a Jamesian manner of speaking, for all the book's *prima facie* virtue, in the end *All Things Shining* is not just shallow, it is *shallowly* shallow.

The argument of the book can be stated fairly simply. In the twenty-first century, the source of value and meaning has come to be seen as the human will. (The large numbers of people even in middle-class America for whom this is not true are predictably, in a work of this sort, somewhat overlooked.) However, Dreyfus and Kelly are keen to suggest that will is not enough. That way – post Enlightenment the way for most of those likely to be reading *All Things Shining* – lies boredom and worse, as they illustrate by focusing on the suicide of the novelist David Foster Wallace. But things

doi:10.1017/S0031819111000179
© The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2011

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were different in the polytheistic world described by Homer, in which men (and women) experienced gods as creators of moods and values to which we humans resonated. The Greeks were open to the world in a way we are not, swept up by their gods into shared moods, erotic, war-like, convivial and so on. The gods were the attuning ones, and men responded to them accordingly.

While Dreyfus and Kelly are blissfully insouciant as to the actual existence of these gods ('one does not have to believe that the Greek gods actually exist in order to gain something deep and important from Homer's sense of the sacred'), it is very important that there are or were a lot of them; hence polytheism. In the Dreyfus–Kelly story Aeschylus and Christian writers subsequent to him moved towards monotheism, which does have the merit of suggesting values outside of us. But monotheism is unsustainable both philosophically (as it turned out), and psychologically, in implying that there was a single value or source of value, which wiped out both individuality and the richness and variety of meaning and indeed of life. Monotheism was further tainted by its association with Platonism, which, apart from anything else was in tension with any sense of Incarnation and, crucially, led to the disparagement of appearance and of this world which so angered Nietzsche. At this stage of the argument, surprising as it might seem, Moby Dick swims into view. For after pretty cursory accounts of Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Dante and Luther, and a suggestion that Descartes and Kant ushered in a subjectivism which had not previously existed, but which threw us back, tragically, on our own autonomy, the faceless, formless, fearsome presence of Melville's great white whale is presented as the best image we have of the monotheos we can never know or reach. So all we appear to be left with is ourselves, and the Sartrean hell of the responsibility for our existence being placed squarely upon our own shoulders. This ultimately unavailing and boredom inducing attitude is reinforced by the promise of technology in which the world appears to be placed entirely at our disposal, manipulable and subservient to our desires.

Dreyfus and Kelly try valiantly to persuade us that we need to focus on sources of value outside of ourselves and our desires. They open their book with an account of a man who responded heroically and urgently to the demands of the moment (which were not his demands) when he threw himself under a train on the New York subway track to save a fellow passenger (though as the book goes on, we rather lose track of what might have been involved here). Then there is the anti-technological focus of attention involved in craft-work, where one is guided by the nature of the material and of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

long-honed skills, rather than moulding things to our own fantasies and conceptions. There is also what they call the whooshing feeling one gets when swept away by collective emotion at a sporting and other occasions, as they earlier saw the Homeric gods doing to those who came within their ambit. And, connected to this latter, there is Roger Federer, whose athletic grace and beauty they see as embodying a metaphysical mystery and magic, a this-worldly kind of sacred. Those who thought the Fed was a tennis player, a brilliant one, the very best even (until Nadal beats him yet again, maybe), but a tennis player nonetheless, might be reminded at this point of another, slightly more volatile, tennis player: 'YOU CANNOT BE SERIOUS'.

But Dreyfus and Kelly are not as sage as John McEnroe. Despite their worries that the whooshing of crowds, whipped up by benign enough charismatic figures, such as Muhammad Ali and Martin Luther King, could occasionally be just a tiny bit fascistic, their conclusion is that 'we can become receptive to a modern pantheon of gods – to the ways in which (the baseball player) Gehrig and Federer shine, the ways in which Marilyn Monroe or Albert Einstein changed how we see the world in which we live'; and, remembering some of the sacred moments from earlier times, we can also respond to the (unfortunately unspecified) 'manifold senses of the sacred that still linger unappreciated at the margins of our disenchanted world'. If we are able to do these things, or, perhaps become more receptive to what they can do to us, then, in the book's closing words, 'this contemporary Polytheistic world will be a wonderful shining world of sacred things'.

One could quarrel with the detail of the interpretations in the discussions of the western classics, for example that Homer is 'dangerously' noncommittal when Hector's body is dragged round the walls of Troy. Noncommittal he may be, but that is because he shows the horror of war and what it does to men (and women) in unsparing pitilessness, and does so, in an amazingly even-handed way. Does *The Iliad* really give us a picture of the Greeks as *happy* polytheists, or is it providing foundations of Aeschylean tragedy (as Aeschylus himself said), and even in some ways anticipating elements of Christianity, as Simone Weil thought? Then again, there is indeed a tension, as Dreyfus and Kelly say, between Platonism and Incarnational Christianity, but why can the transition to Christianity, as memorably described by Augustine in *The Confessions*, not be seen as an intellectual and moral advance? And following on from that, is the human face in Dante's beatific vision *merely* that God's radiance is 'painted' with man's image, or is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Dante suggesting something profound here about the nature of the Deity?

These are all important questions, and, to be fair, they are raised by the discussions of Dreyfus and Kelly, though their touch is far too light to provide the materials for thinking about them. But this is all rather beside the point in the context of the book as a whole. It fails completely to clarify what might be meant by modern Polytheism, even to the extent that one hardly knows whether what they call the sacred refers to any sacred being or beings existing outside our subjective experience. And, almost as bad, the examples of modern gods or shining things tend to be so bathetic as to defy serious comment. (If Federer and Marilyn Monroe are our shining ones, why not Sir Elton John, Wayne Rooney and the winners of the X-factor?) One could imagine the book as emerging from late night undergraduate meanderings, but in a culture with real intellectual standards, it would not be taken more seriously than that. That the book seems already to be making its mark on popular consciousness is a sign of a contemporary thirst for some meaning beyond Enlightenment autonomy and the prevailing scientific naturalism – as Dreyfus and Kelly correctly infer – but it is equally a sign of the lack of the resource to slake that thirst.

The cast of mind *All Things Shining* finds wanting is well exemplified in Allen E. Buchanan's *Beyond Humanity: The Ethics of Biomedical Enhancement* (Oxford University Press, 2011). It is no doubt significant that this book appears in the Uehiro Series in Practical Ethics, whose aim is stated to be the bringing of the 'best scholarship in analytical philosophy' to bear on 'the most significant problems of our time', and to do so in a way which will be accessible to the general public. Those *au courant* with these things will hardly be surprised that a book with this provenance makes short work of the objections of the likes of Michael Sandel, Leon Kass, Jürgen Habermas (and, needless to say, of The (US) President's Council on Bioethics) to human 'enhancement'. It is somewhat difficult to know what to make of the arguments for and against in this area, for a lot of them seem to consist in making predictions about the likely social, physical and psychological effects of genetic manipulation of human beings in various fields. (That genetic manipulation of our psychology is envisaged is clear, even a quite a deep level; the reduction of negative psychological dispositions due to our evolutionary past is certainly an aspect of the altering of human nature which Buchanan is happy to contemplate.) Those against such tinkering tend to emphasise the likely bad outcomes, which those in favour minimise; the antis, so to speak, also tend towards slippery slope

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

arguments, while those in favour stress continuities between what might become possible and what we already do, and, at the same time, playing down any reliance on the part of the antis to what the would be enhancers see as biological essentialism (disposed of, according to Buchanan, by Darwin).

So long as a debate is framed in largely consequentialist terms, when as in this case, we have little idea of the actual consequences, it is bound to have an air of inconclusiveness. As would be expected, in a book like Buchanan's appeals to principle, to absolute boundaries and to what he refers to as the status quo are given pretty short shrift. The thought expressed, however tenatatively, by Dreyfus and Kelly that seeing human desire as the main source of value is likely to be disastrous (particularly in an area such as human 'enhancement') would not so much fall on deaf ears here, as be all but unintelligible. A symptom of this attitude comes out when Buchanan discusses the conservative argument against what he calls 'radical improvement' on the grounds of our cognitive and affective limitations. He says that if our limitations are as debilitating as the conservative thinks, then the correct (conservative) response should be to alleviate those limitations by 'enhancement' as quickly as we can. The Fall, even if taken as no more than a metaphor for our condition, would be a suitable subject for reflection at this point, if *per impossibile* any conception of original sin became admissible in Uehiro discussions.

However, the effects of the Fall aside, Buchanan does see one problem with the movement towards human 'enhancement'. It is that 'enhancements' might be unequally distributed, leading to even greater and more self-reproducing divisions between the economic haves and the have-nots than is currently the case. It would indeed be awful for all sorts of reasons if the wealthy were not just more wealthy than the rest, but that they formed a genetically enhanced caste or sub-species, increasingly isolated from and superior to the unenhanced.

Buchanan's response, on which he clearly prides himself ('unique in the literature on enhancement') is for a Global Institute for Justice in Innovation, which will in effect force innovators in the field of human 'enhancement' to distribute their innovations at a discount all over the world. Buchanan talks at this point of a system of 'compulsory licensing' of these innovations in countries which could not otherwise afford them, but it is hard to see how the mere licensing of a product will ensure its equal distribution, unless there were also powers to ensure its manufacture and distribution as well. Once the Global Institute were set up, extension of its powers in this respect would undoubtedly follow, as night follows day. So

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human 'enhancement' has as its price a global authority to regulate and distribute the thing. It is hard not to see this as other than a significant step in the direction of world government, and also as leading pretty inevitably to that authority more or less imposing its 'enhancements' on whole populations, whether individuals wanted them or not (because those who refused them would lose out in any competitive field, and in the medium to long term might well be denied health care and other benefits as the price for having refused to be 'enhanced'). One has to wonder if the remedy is not as objectionable as the problem. *Beyond Humanity* may fulfil the Uehiro series' remit of 'creating knowledge' to 'make people's lives better', but only if it is seen as a dystopian warning.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press