Booknotes

Michael Moran taught philosophy for many years at the University of Sussex. While there he co-founded the first course in a British University on the History of Ideas, in which due prominence was given to non-English speaking authors. Shortly before his death in 2016 he gathered together a large number of his papers, which were published in 2018 by Fastprint Publishing of Peterborough, which is not one of the better known of academic imprints. There is indeed an element of extra-academic outspokenness, not to say a suggestion of samizdat, in the 750 pages of Moran's *Metaphysical Imagination and Other Essays on Philosophy and the Modern European Mind*.

In his book Moran discusses a very wide range of authors, including Hegel, Nietzsche, Bentham, Coleridge, Mill, Croce, Russell, Cassirer, Ortega y Gasset, Freud, Jung, Sartre, Heidegger, Charles Taylor, Isaiah Berlin, Collingwood, Rorty and many others. What he has to say is never less than interesting, and is at times unexpected. But more unexpected, and more unusual in 2018, is Moran's strong espousal throughout the book of what he calls ordinary language philosophy, culminating in a strong defence of this approach in his last two chapters.

Moran is accordingly strongly committed to clarity of expression and to the avoidance of oracularity and airy pontification. He quotes approvingly Mill's claim that Hegel 'depraves' one's intellect. But it goes further than simply an antipathy to bad style. Moran also shares Roger Scruton's antipathy to the anti-bourgeois posturing of the Parisian *soixante-huitards* (see Scruton's 'Confessions of a Sceptical Francophile', in this journal, vol 87, 2012, 477-495). Like Scruton Moran deplores the subversive intellectual climate which, in the wake of the earlier surrealism of Breton and Bunuel and the destructive existentialism of Sartre and de Beauvoir, the 1968 *evenements* spawned, and which continue to dominate in many areas of academic enquiry, and not just in France. (pp 39-40) Even more outrageously, according to current cultural orthodoxy, he records that his adolescent devotion as a 'working class kid' to Chopin, Schumann, Liszt (yes, even Liszt!) and Rachmaninov inoculated him to pop music and 'youth' culture to such an extent that he found the Beatles, when they appeared, 'quite ridiculous, both in appearance and in virtue of the noises they made.' (p 688)

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Moran's ordinary languageism extends not just to a rejection of the views and style of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and the like. It would condemn any attempt on the part of philosophers to breach the (or a) fact-value distinction and to enunciate value judgements, particularly in matters of morality and politics. He is particularly offended by what might now be called 'virtue signalling' on the part of philosophers, but what he rather charmingly calls the 'good boy/girl syndrome': one is nowadays 'required to display at least noticeably popularist (if not quite always left-wing), caring, optimistic sentiments. Having the right emotional credentials is considered to be not just a human, but a *philosophical* merit.' (p 685) Commenting on the increasingly prevalent trend of philosophers to pronounce on politics and the like, and actually to start their investigations from a declared or implicit political or moral position, he goes on to say that 'speaking for myself, I'm bound to say that, especially in the field of politics' not every contemporary philosopher 'is likely to have anything particularly illuminating to say to me. In any case, the main point is that what they say in this vein shouldn't be thought of as *philosophy*.' (p 703) Many a contemporary philosopher will no doubt disagree, even if they fail to interest the likes of Moran, but what might produce a more general nod of approval is Moran's tart comment about much current academic 'scholarship', in this case about Heidegger, but clearly extendable far more broadly, where the writer uses an obscure text simply to preach: 'Since it's anybody's guess what Heidegger sometimes meant, reading one's own concerns into such passages becomes a convenient way of airing those concerns in a seemingly scholarly context.' (p 732)

Mill is an author of whom Moran approves, but whose true meaning he thinks is misunderstood. *On Liberty* is not attuned to the world in which we now live. Liberty is misinterpreted as permissiveness: 'I sometimes try to imagine how Mill and his wife Harriet would react to one night of to-day's television' (p 17), among many other examples of contemporary decadence, which tact forbids listing here. Certain groups, Moran opines, are currently subject to far less restraint than is actually good for them, or for the rest of us. So it is not as if Moran isn't himself prone to the occasional value judgement. He also has apposite things to say about university bureaucrats asking about the impact a course on the British Empiricists or on Post-Kantian Idealism might have on the future career of the undergraduates taking it, and about the lifeless character of most of what goes for academic writing. He does offer some defence of his explicit condemnation of claims to philosophical expertise in evaluating in politics and the like, on the grounds that

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there are no value facts: values are made by us, collectively. (pp 255-6) But surely, even if it were the case that values are humanly constructed, evaluation of the constructions, far from being precluded is actually demanded, and what should such evaluation be called, except philosophical?

Moran quotes a beautiful passage from the end of Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*, in which Pater argues against philosophical *systems*, against what he calls the 'facile orthodoxies' of Hegel and Comte against the 'sharp and eager' observation of the human spirit: 'The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of experience, in consideration of… some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves,… has no real claim on us'. And Moran also refers to a similar statement from Merleau-Ponty, about the fundamental strangeness and unpredictability of human history and experience, a sense which philosophical generalization and abstraction is liable to gloss over. (Moran, pp 93-5) If it is the systematizing and generalising of much contemporary philosophy that Moran is really objecting to, rather than to the philosophical examination of values, he would be on stronger ground, especially from an ordinary language point of view – dedicated as ordinary language philosophy is to the motley of experience and value. He would also have something in common with John Kekes and his latest book *Hard Questions: Facing the Problems of Life* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

In a way some of the spirit of Kekes' thesis is well captured, though in somewhat less temperate terms, by Conrad in 1920 in the 'Author's Note' to *Under Western Eyes*: 'The ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and in fact basing itself on complete moral anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolution encompassing destruction by the first means to hand, in the strange conviction that a fundamental change of hearts must follow the downfall of any given human institutions. These people are unable to see that all they effect is a change of names.' Like Conrad, Kekes is unable to foresee any fundamental change of the human heart – a strange conviction indeed; and like Conrad he is profoundly aware of the depradations wrought by the human heart over the centuries, and to this day. Kekes deftly shows that many of the most influential philosophers, both past and present, are in the grip of the illusion that human beings are basically disposed towards the good, and that evil, where it occurs, as it almost universally does, is due to bad institutions and arrangements. Those subject to this belief include Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Mill and Rawls, along with 'most of our contemporary moral, personal, political,

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religious and other evaluations'. (p 144) We might recall here de Maistre's comment on Rousseau: saying that men are born naturally good is like saying that sheep are born carnivorous, but everywhere eat grass. As Kekes demonstrates, something similar could be said of Plato, Kant, Mill, Rawls and the rest.

According to Kekes, the illusion about an ineradicable human propensity to evil means that those in thrall to it are unable to confront what we are, or indeed evil itself, when confronted with it. We could add that it also makes them all too likely to favour utopian political schemes and destructive ideologies in the way Conrad suggests, invariably with disastrous results. Of course Kekes sees that we have benign tendencies too, but celebrating this side of our nature should not lead us to deny the other.

In discussing evil – one of the hard questions of the book's title – Kekes recounts the story of Anna, a Holocaust survivor who manages in later life to dwell on her tragedy and violation as little as possible, in contrast to a Priest, who helps her after her ordeal, but whose faith is severely shaken by what happened to Anna. Anna's eventual response is what might be regarded in William James's terms as 'healthy-minded' – certainly it shows a remarkable degree of fortitude – while the Priest's is tragic. But what neither of them do is what Kekes and Bernard Williams say that most modern moral philosophy does, which is to make evil disappear in the light of some overweening theory of 'autonomy, equality, happiness, justice, liberty, rights, virtue, and so on… they take no notice of evil (as) an obstacle to even the most carefully constructed theory. They ignore the concrete experience of evil to which Anna and the Priest were compelled to respond'. (pp 138-9) Ignoring evil is not just to evince a blindness to what is before us, always; it also leads to the formulation of theories and policies which are bound to fail, and fail disastrously, because they fail to recognize human imperfectibility.

Evil is a particularly dramatic example of Kekes's hard questions. Others include the demands (or not) of some absolute value, the obligation (or not) to conform and to serve one's country, the demands of justice, human and cosmic, the extent to which we should forgive, the desirability of shame, the aim of being true to oneself in all circumstances, the question as to whether good intentions are always justificatory, and whether moral values always over-ride other considerations. Each of these questions is considered through stories, actual or fictional, of people who took different positions on the dilemmas they faced, for example, Antigone and Creon in the case of justice, Melville's Captain Vere and Albert Speer in the case of forgiveness,

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an NKVD officer in the Gulag and an apparently well-meaning SS officer in the case of intentions, a kamikaze pilot and a draft dodger in the case of serving one's country, and the younger Cato and Montaigne in the case of the demands of morality. In each question Kekes endeavours to show how one or more of his exemples typically over-emphasises one aspect of the question at the expense of other considerations, thus over-simplifying a complex dilemma often with disastrous results, humanly speaking.

At the risk of over-simplifying a complex and subtle discussion ourselves, it might be said that the most illustrative of Kekes's contrasts is that between Cato and Montaigne. Cato was morally speaking wholly admirable, at least in a Stoic manner. But humanly speaking he was cold and inflexible beyond measure, and his over-weening rectitude also had worse consequences politically and in other ways than if he had, like Montaigne, been prepared to show common-sense, flexibility and humanity. Cato was the absolutist, the theorist, who is so set on one line of approach (what he saw as the moral approach) that he overlooks other equally relevant and important values, factors and considerations.

Kekes believes that there are certain minimum human standards which should always be aimed at, the systematic violation of which can never be seen as anything but bad. However, all reasonable views about the human good will go far beyond these minimum requirements. About these conceptions of the good there can and will be disagreements, and reasonable disagreements. Further most if not all human situations are complex, with different factors in play all the time. So there will always tend to be conflicts about how things should be evaluated, with reasons on both sides. Further there is no single good which will always outweigh every other consideration. That there is such a good is the belief of the ideologue, who will always want to force his or her vision on everyone else. And there will be some occasions where things are so difficult and conflicted that even one or other of the minimum requirements of the human good may be overrriden.

Kekes's philosophical heroes are Montaigne, Hume, and, in his experiments in living mood if not in his over-optimism about our nature, Mill; in more recent times, Kekes favours Berlin, Bernard Williams and Oakeshott. But he finds a tendency to abstraction from the complexity of the concrete and an unacceptable desire to erect one value or set of values over all others in many, if not most, philosophers past and present. He is not, however, an irrationalist or an advocate of subjectivism. We can and should subject our evaluations, context-dependent and particular as they are, to critical

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examination. So we are not stuck with the values we our society inherit, but we must recognise that any evaluations, including our own well considered ones, might be mistaken. 'When it comes to hard questions, all answers, reasons, and evaluations are defeasible. That is why we should see our condition as an adventure in personal self-enactment'. (p 299) *Hard Questions* is a literate and compelling example of the sort of adventure Kekes is recommending philosophers and the rest of us to undertake.

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