Booknotes, April 2009

Of noted twentieth century philosophers, few can have suffered as full an eclipse as Ernst Cassirer, a rout, indeed, according to Edward Skidelsky whose *Ernst Cassirer, The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2008) looks at first as if it might be an attempt to rehabilitate Cassirer. Indeed it is not hard to see why people might want to rehabilitate this last of the great neo-Kantians, regarded in his own day as the equal of Carnap and Heidegger, and a salutary counter-balance to each. Against the monism and scientism of the logical positivists, Cassirer defended eloquently the validity of a multiplicity of symbolic forms; and against what many saw as the nihilism of Heidegger and his associates, philosophical and political, Cassirer incarnated an urbane liberalism, seen quite correctly by Skidelsky as Goethean in its range, in its inclusiveness and in its anti-absolutism about any single approach to reality.

In an effort to elucidate Cassirer's reciprocal relativisations of the various different cultural forms, Skidelsky quotes Goethe: 'However fully developed our nomenclature is, we must remember that it is only a nomenclature; that a word is merely a sign of syllables attached to a certain phenomenon. Thus it can never express Nature completely and ought to be regarded as mere equipment for our comfort.' This does indeed sound like Cassirer, and it sounds like a relativised Kantianism too, in its implication that we spend our lives in the symbolic forms we create and their languages. Through their distance from instinct and desire, the forms afford us a certain intellectual and moral freedom. These forms include language, the sciences, history, the arts and religion – which, from Cassirer's perspective will raise an unresolved question as to the meaning of transcendence in religious practice. Is it a quasi-transcendence still rooted in human activity, or does it actually take us beyond the human and so beyond our symbolic forms?

For all the similarities between Cassirer and Goethe, it is worth underlining that Goethe was no Kantian, at least not in his deepest instincts. He had too strong a sense of the Earth Spirit breaking in on us, of our being struck dumb and blind by the divine, of the torch of life which burns and consumes us – and from which we have to turn; but in whose rainbow coloured reflection we live, or ought to live. See, for example, Faust's great hymn to life and the

doi:10.1017/S0031819109000321
©2009 The Royal Institute of Philosophy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819109000321 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sun at the start of *Faust, Part Two*: 'Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben' ('our life's a spectrum-sheen of borrowed glory', in David Luke's translation).

In less poetic terms Skidelsky sees Cassirer caught in a Kantian trap. If the symbolic forms are created by us, and if our lives are lived within these forms, how can we ever really know reality? Against an obfuscating Kantian activism, Heidegger poses a passivity, in which the world into which we are thrown discloses itself to us in our experience of it, in our desire, our instinct and of course, for Heidegger particularly, in our awareness of death. For Heidegger, the task of philosophy is not to console us with culture, with science, with progress; it is to awaken us to our own finitude, and to what in this experience is revealed to us of Being. Skidelsky's view is that politics and liberalism aside, Heidegger has a profounder grasp of our predicament than Cassirer, and that even Cassirer's liberalism fails to give adequate weight to the power-relations on which politics is built, particularly a politics which admits nothing beyond human decisions. 'We pay tribute to Cassirer, but Heidegger remains the secret master of our thoughts'. One question raised by Skidelsky's interesting book is whether it is tribute enough to encourage any sort of Cassiran revival.

The Heideggerian predicament raises its head again in a thoroughly unexpected location. James Flynn's *Where Have All the Liberals Gone? Race, Class and Ideals in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) is a deeply felt and strongly argued attempt to do two things: to provide a balanced survey of the race and IQ debate, and at the same time to revive liberalism without metaphysics. As Flynn is both a major contributor to the discussion of race and IQ (and discoverer of the 'Flynn effect', which shows how IQs of different ethnic groups have a tendency to improve over time) and also a student of Leo Strauss, what he says would undoubtedly be worth listening to, even without his robust and engaging approach.

Flynn's views on race are beyond our scope to assess. Much of what he has to say involves a fascinating analysis as to why there is such a high proportion of single mothers among American blacks – a major factor in black underachievement, it seems. Flynn does, though, want the race/IQ issue discussed and brought into the open. He thinks that the consequences of making it taboo are disastrous, for all the usual reasons connected to the restriction of free enquiry. Further, while he believes that environment plays a larger role than genes in explaining the historic black-white IQ gap, the Flynn effect notwithstanding, 'anyone who tells you that they are certain is, in my opinion, either ignorant or unwilling to squarely

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819109000321 Published online by Cambridge University Press

face the evidence'. And face it he certainly does, evincing in the process more respect for his opponents, such as Charles Murray, than for the right-thinking censors of academic discourse. In the end, though, were American society better, would any of it matter? 'If America afforded access to a good life to all of its citizens, blacks would have about as much interest in why there are fewer black than Irish doctors as Irish have about why there are fewer Irish than Chinese accountants.'

There will doubtless be disagreements between Flynn and his opponents on how to make America better, specifically over affirmative action and welfare. But just as Flynn pays tribute to his opponents, his opponents will find it hard not to pay tribute to his honesty, which brings us to Leo Strauss. For Flynn puzzles over the philosophical standing of his 'humane-egalitarian ideals', and about the threat that cultural relativism poses to any moral or political position that goes beyond mere pragmatism. In his view the only serious attempt to 'save' America from cultural relativism has come from the followers of Leo Strauss in general and Allan Bloom in particular. Allan Bloom, by the way, a propos of the era Skidelsky describes, wrote, more nuancedly than Skidelsky, of 'that ambiguous Weimar atmosphere in which liberals looked like simpletons and anything was possible for people who sang of the joy of the knife in cabarets'; but then we tend to see the Brecht/Weill/Lotte Lenya ambience through the sepia smoke and murk of old films, overlooking what made it possible, and the nihilistic philosophies, including Heidegger's, which it co-existed with.

But Flynn rejects the Straussian return to the great books and the wisdom of the ancients as a way out. In the detail and cut and thrust of actual human life and politics, Plato's metaphysics is too distant and flawed and Aristotle's metaphors of health are too elusive to help. The Nietzschean threat remains real, and difficult to head off directly, though Nietzsche's own solution via a new élite is fraught with difficulty, as Flynn shows. Openness will remain the best hope for the discovery and emergence of the sort of genius we – and Nietzsche – want.

We should, Flynn says, abandon the quest for ethical objectivity, instead articulating and logically probing the ideals to which we commit ourselves. As Flynn's own ideals focus on treating all of humanity as being worthy of moral concern, his ideals will not, he thinks, be subject to the logical and empirical difficulties of opponents like Nietzsche and racists. Some may wonder whether this sort of somewhat familiar move will be enough to defeat relativism – though, as Flynn points out, it is actually the sort of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819109000321 Published online by Cambridge University Press

manoeuvre Socrates makes against Thrasymachus in Book One of *The Republic*. And being a Straussian of sorts, Flynn believes that there is actually no Good of the sort Plato invokes to keep society together, nothing actually above the Divided Line. Echt-Straussians and possibly Plato himself know this, but think it bad to tell it as it is, because lower or weaker people (such as Glaucon and Adeimantus) need an illusory assurance of ethical objectivity. But Flynn is (on his own admission) a traitor. Un-Straussian here, he is prepared to spill the beans, and hope for the best by using his admission of ethical scepticism as a springboard for the kind of arguing which will promote people's acceptance of his humane egalitarianism.

Flynn remains Straussian enough to say that nonetheless we should all read Plato and Aristotle and also Aquinas. At the very least, in these great pre-moderns, we will discover great delight, as, to a lesser but not insignificant degree, will be found in reading Flynn himself – even or even especially by those who disagree with him.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819109000321 Published online by Cambridge University Press