Booknotes

There is no respite in the production of philosophical door-stoppers. Despite our animadversions in April 1995, at times it seems that 14, Gordon Square is submerged beneath an avalanche of Companions, Readers, Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, Guides, and now a new series: *The Big Questions*. All worthy stuff, but rarely original or idiosyncratic or even interesting, geared as so much of it is to the textbook market.

If for no reason other than brevity of life, patience and attention, we should welcome two series of short books. First, there is the Phoenix series of very short books on The Great Philosophers, edited by Frederic Raphael and Ray Monk. Perhaps these are too short, a mere 50 or 60 small pages to each of the thinkers covered. They are not exactly encyclopedia entries. There is no attempt to summarize the whole work or achievement of the philosopher in question. One aspect only is focused on. The hope is that the reader will then have a solid platform for further investigation, a reasonable assumption with contributors such as Peter Hacker on Wittgenstein, Michael Ayers on Locke, John Cottingham on Descartes and Ray Monk himself on Russell.

Secondly, there are Duckworth's *Intelligent Person's Guides*. The guides mark a change in Duckworth's style, at least as far as philosophy is concerned, being both short and stylish. Idiosyncrasies thankfully remain. The list includes *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Guilt* by Paul Oppenheimer and *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Post-War Britain* by Alan Sked, the founder of the UK Independence, Party (both well worth reading).

Of direct philosophical interest are Roger Scruton's guides to Philosophy and to Modern Culture and Mary Warnock's guide to Ethics. Scruton's guide to Philosophy is an attempt to rescue philosophy from the tedium of philosophy masquerading as 'theory' or scientific report. Moreover, 'if this book has a message, it is that scientific truth has human illusion as its regular by-product, and that philosophy is our surest weapon in the attempt to rescue truth from this predicament'.

Would that this were more so than it is. But, as Scruton observes in his chapter on God, it is the ability to see the world in personal terms which overcomes human estrangement. Science blocks this ability by reinterpreting everything in its terms, as part of the natural world, subject to causal law and scientific explanation. The question we are left with is whether, without recourse to theology, we can maintain enough of the sense of the sacred to see either the world in personal terms, or ourselves in fully ethical terms.

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That this is hard is a message, possibly unintended, of Baroness Warnock's guide to Ethics. Level-headed, well written and often wise, this book exposes all too clearly our contemporary dilemmas on such matters as euthanasia, abortion, embryo research, and genetic engineering. Warnock takes what many people would regard as sensible views on all these matters. For example, she mentions *en passant* that as a headmistress she had 'more than once encouraged a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl to have an abortion, as quickly as possible, and come back to get on with her A-levels'. Nevertheless, her book, even before it was published, aroused a storm of protest from politicians and sections of the press, perhaps precisely because of its level-headedness. Her critics doubtless found her grasp of the sacredness of human life insecure, as indeed it is; on her account the value of human life is not intrinsic to it, but depends on the quality of each particular life.

If Warnock aroused controversy, so did Scruton in his guide to *Modern Culture*. On one point, Warnock and Scruton do agree. Both disapprove of Foucault and Derrida and of their influence, particularly on the young. But Scruton's despair at modernity, or postmodernity, or whatever it is, is far deeper than that. He has nothing positive to say about popular culture or about the cultural establishment (though plenty of interesting things to say about both). Our malaise derives from our loss of that religious sense, which would allow us to endow our lives (and culture) with a meaning, a value, and a sacredness. Scientism has deprived us of it. Not even good sense of the Warnockian variety can help us now. However, all is not necessarily lost: 'prayer and penitence have been interrupted, but not forgotten. To those who wish for it, the ethical life may still be retrieved'.

At this point *Modern Culture* links with *Philosophy*. Whatever one thinks of his conclusions, Scruton has the breadth of mind to see these links and the grounding in both philosophy and culture to explore them fruitfully.

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