

of the natural law is as difficult as he supposes, is there not something after all to be said for authority in morals? Nor need this be given a specifically religious foundation by appealing to a belief in divine guidance for Bible or Church. Two purely secular considerations can be offered. First, some respect for the past guards us against following too closely the fashions of the age (and the moral fashions of our own

age are as much culturally conditioned as those of any other). Secondly, it can be argued that moral perceptivity is a function of quality of life. If that is so, it cannot be wrong to give at least as much weight to the insights of those of conspicuous sanctity as to our own reflections.

But it is a book that deserves to be widely read and reflected upon.

DAVID BROWN

**THE IDEA OF A CRITICAL THEORY. Habermas and the Frankfurt School**  
by Raymond Geuss. Cambridge University Press, 1981. £10.00 and £3.75.

In the preface to Raymond Geuss' book, the editors of the Modern European Philosophy series published by CUP state that: 'The purpose of this series is to help make contemporary European philosophy intelligible to a wider audience in the English-speaking world, and to suggest its interest and importance in particular to those trained in analytical philosophy'. The work of the Frankfurt School authors in general, and that of Jürgen Habermas in particular, is notoriously difficult to come to terms with even if one has enjoyed the benefits of a 'continental' philosophical education. A clear exposition of the objectives and methods of 'critical theory' for those English-speaking students lacking such a background is thus to be welcomed.

Geuss defines critical theory as 'a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation'. By critical theory, then Geuss has in mind the work of Freud and of those philosophers who have drawn inspiration from Marx's theory of society. Critical theorists have always claimed that the truth of their analysis of society would be demonstrated by the enlightening and emancipatory consequences of acceptance of their analysis. Geuss is concerned to examine the claims of critical theory to the status of 'knowledge' (*Wissenschaft*) against the background of claims by both proponents and opponents of critical theory that the 'knowledge' offered by critical theory is not strictly comparable with scientific knowledge as understood by empiricists and positivists.

The methods of critical analysis are clearly demonstrated by psychoanalysis.

Only if a patient accepts the truth of the analyst's diagnosis of his condition will he be able to free himself from deep-seated neuroses. The acceptance of the truth of the analysis is thus a precondition of the cure; whilst the cure, in turn, verifies the truth of the analysis. This form of verification is implied by the description of critical theory as a 'reflective' theory.

Whilst it is thus fairly easy to verify or falsify (on its own terms, at any rate) psychoanalysis – either patients get better or they don't – the problems surrounding the notion of a critical theory of society are clearly much greater. The central tenet of a critical theory of society is that human beings fail to perceive true interests as a consequence of the hegemony of an ideology which misinforms them as to the true nature of society. They thus fail to recognise that they are being exploited, and are unable to embark on the kind of political action which would create the kind of society in which they could realise their true interests and lead the good life. Geuss recognises that central to this kind of argument is the idea that we can sensibly speak of the real or true interests as opposed to merely the desires of human beings; and concludes that when we speak of the 'interests' of human beings, what we are in fact doing is attempting to describe the way in which individual human desires could be rationally integrated into a coherent 'good life'.

Geuss then moves on to examine the work of Jürgen Habermas in an attempt to discover whether the notion of a critical theory of society is a valid one. Habermas sees the conditions for the acceptance by

human beings of critical theory – i.e. the acceptance by human beings of the dissolution of repressive ideology – as being grounded in the human use of language. The use of language, Habermas argues, presupposes at the least the possibility of an ‘ideal speech situation’ – a situation in which human beings would, free from any form of coercion, be able to debate the nature of the good life. For Habermas, a theory or argument is ‘cognitively acceptable’ – i.e. true – if it would enjoy the universal assent of all human beings in an ideal speech situation. Geuss concludes that the much-discussed distinction between scientific theories (verified, according to positivists, by their observational content) and critical theory (verified both empirically and reflectively, according to Habermas) is really one of degree only: if ‘knowledge’ is whatever gives human beings ‘successful orientation in action’, a critical theory of society would qualify as a form of knowledge. The attempt to elaborate a critical theory which will free human beings from harmful delusions about the true nature of society is a philosophically valid project.

Throughout, Geuss is concerned not so much with the substantive knowledge which might be yielded by critical theory as with whether the notion of a critical theory is intellectually valid. All this is well and good, but the reader is left at the end of the book with the feeling that Geuss might have attempted a brief discussion of whether the project of critical theory – the communication of knowledge conducive to human emancipation, in an ideal speech situation – is a practical one. Critical theory could be *elaborated*, according to Geuss. But could it be effectively *com-*

*municated*? This seems to me to be a problem which Geuss fails to tackle. If the truth of critical theory is at least in part to be determined by the acknowledgement by those to whom it is addressed that it has indeed promoted enlightenment and emancipation in their own lives, then it surely becomes necessary to establish not only whether such acknowledgement is theoretically possible (it is) but also whether it is likely to occur. This is where Habermas goes wrong. Habermas’ proposed method of dissolving repressive ideologies – the creation of a debate free from coercion, in which human beings will be able to debate the nature of the good life – seems doomed to failure, since repressive ideologies exist precisely to prevent the kind of free debate about ends which Habermas sees as the precondition of their dissolution. This is not to say that the creation of such a free debate is impossible; merely to observe that, on present form, it seems unlikely that Habermas’ ‘ideal speech situation’ will ever prevail outside of V arrondissement cafes.

As I say, the reader is left with the feeling that Geuss might have pressed his discussion of critical theory a little further. But this is not to detract from his very substantial achievement in setting out clearly the nature of the debate surrounding the whole project of critical theory. Geuss’ book is now the best starting-point for English-speaking students who wish to understand the debate concerning the claims of critical theory to the status of knowledge.

STEPHEN SALTER

**THE ETHOS OF THE BIBLE** by Birger Gerhardsson. *DLT*. 1982.  
pp viii + 152 £5.95.

‘Ethos’ here means ‘the kind of people we ought to be and the way we ought to behave . . . attitudes and behaviour which conform to norms’ (p 1), and ‘the Bible’ means the Christian (Protestant) Bible, in which the New Testament is so central that the Old Testament can be reduced to a brief section on ‘attitudes towards his-

tory and politics’ and a chapter on ‘the ethos of the Jewish theocracy’. The author regrets that in the space available justice could not be done to the Old Testament material but reflects that ‘the young church regarded its teaching as the adequate exposition in the age of fulfilment, of what is written in “the law and