

LIVING PHILOSOPHY: AN INTRODUCTION TO MORAL THOUGHT by R. Billington. *R.K.P.*, London & New York. 1988.

This book is intended for those who have no former background in philosophy, for sixth formers, first year students of philosophy and others. Seeking to avoid technical jargon in order to make his thoughts more accessible, Billington tries also to relate issues of moral philosophy to every day life. Questioning the possibility and even the desirability of writing a neutral analysis, his own commitments are bound to surface. There is no doubt that a lucid, non-technical work introducing moral philosophy, anchored in 'real life', is potentially of great service.

Billington divides the book into three sections. The first deals with the general theory of ethics (including themes like facts and values, and knowing right from wrong). The second examines certain approaches to ethical theory (Kantian, Utilitarian; Existentialist; Religious). The third tackles some particular issues (maturity; free will; politics; education). Case studies are provided at the end of each chapter to stimulate discussion.

It has to be said that the book does not live up to expectations. Maybe as a consequence of eschewing the more rigorous academic approach, the argument seems radically to lack cohesion; a sense of drifting from one topic to the next prevails. Although some case studies relate to the preceding material (eg. 13 & 17), this is not always so. In the text itself it is not clear that the author always knows where he is going. More attention to outlining the internal structures of the three main sections, with accompanying justifications for the material he chose to include or omit, would have been helpful to his readers.

It is regrettable that the book is not well written, even from the standpoint of basic English. Expressions like 'a snarl word' (p. 248) do not aid clear thought. The use of parentheses throughout the book is also a cause for worry: thus, 'a fatal (as far as clarity is concerned) flaw' (p. 243), 'such grim (as matters are) decisions' (p. 114), 'hearing or reading the word "concept" should, as I have already warned several times, so I really mean it, ring a bell' (p. 212). These do not bring philosophy to life; they obscure it.

As to content, Billington's purpose is to avoid too many technical terms. The imprecise manner in which he employs those he does use must make us grateful that the damage to the incipient moral reasoning of his intended readers is thereby limited. In contradistinction to medical ethics, he says medical morals would be a matter of the morals of a doctor (p. 17); he does not specify whether he means *qua* doctor, *qua* husband, *qua* ... He speaks of Hobbes as inducing from himself to the rest of mankind, when he should have said 'extrapolating' (p. 235). He claims that his own theological background gives him a 'right' to speak on theological matters, when he means to say that such experience provides him with a particular type of authority in those matters (p. 241). With regard to efficiency being a criterion in the appointment of teachers, he misleads by using words which carry a meaning beyond what he may properly claim. To assert that 'universal agreement' would be a prerequisite for efficiency to become the 'sole' criterion here (p. 48) is a gross misrepresentation of the issue. To portray opponents of abortion as 'absolutists' who have 'unilaterally decided' that the foetus 'is a person' and their opponents as people who

consider the foetus as 'no more a person than a tadpole' (p. 4) positively precludes serious discussion of the problem. Philosophy should teach its novices to challenge such facile presentations, to insist upon some definition of 'person', to ask both sides to expose their presuppositions so that terminological and conceptual clarification may facilitate further dialogue on the problem.

It is not merely terminological inexactitude that creates the very confusion of thought this sort of book ought to be concerned to dispel. In the second section Billington seems to be inconsistent. Thus, Kant is said not to have had any problems over reconciling conflicting duties (p. 107), and yet he apparently had precisely this problem over promises it might not be possible to keep (p. 111). On the one hand Kant's philosophy is criticised as entailing obedience to external authority (p. 108); on the other Kant is said to have rejected external authority (p. 110), without reference to the former statement. Having decried 'concepts' (p. 212), Billington cheerfully stresses the importance of the concept of causality (p. 221). More useful to his novice philosophers would have been to have indicated that differing views as to what freedom entails do not mean that there is no concept of freedom, but mean that there is a need to specify clearly the particular sense in which a concept which is not univocal is being used. The same lack of precision in his thought leads him to treat teleology as necessarily consequentialist.

Billington's rejection of his previous religious commitment as an ordained minister creates a particular problem for his readers, who, as novices, may be too easily misled into thinking he is being objective. The truth is that he lacks even the minimum objectivity necessary for a work of this nature to be at all credible. 'How can anyone rationally speak of moral progress under the influence of belief in God?' (p. 75). Western theism, he says, takes no account of the logical problem of an omnipotent God co-existing with human suffering. Christian morality is simply presumed to be necessarily voluntaristic. The command of love, being found in other faiths and societies, is said not to be specifically Christian; that specificity does not necessarily entail exclusivity does not seem to have occurred to him (pp. 68–78). Either Billington is unaware of the attempts to respond to these questions by the use of analogy and by the development of theodicy (in which case he should inform himself before making sweeping condemnations) or he is aware of them and is unpersuaded by them (in which case he should have given his readers cogent arguments for the conclusions he asserts and he should at least have recognised that an attempt had been made to confront the issues).

By contrast Billington seems to be amazingly indulgent towards Eastern religions. His sympathies for these and also for existentialism go beyond revealing his personal commitments; they cloud his thinking. Indeed, what emerges throughout the book is a relativism that leads his readers nowhere. There is a suspicion that he is playing to a gallery of young students with their prejudices. Instead of facilitating a critical assessment of them, the text of the book frequently nurtures them.

It would be hard to commend this book to the people for whom it is written, except perhaps as a compendium of what ought to be avoided by anyone seeking a living philosophy and a worthwhile introduction to moral thought.

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