

Ilham Dilman, *Existentialist Critiques of Cartesianism*, London: Macmillan, 1993, xv + 179 pp. £35.

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Like so much twentieth-century philosophy, this book casts Descartes as the arch-villain. In virtue of his mind-body dualism, Professor Dilman opens by declaring, Descartes is 'separated from his body, from this world, and from other thinking beings, that is human beings who live in it' (2). Whereas the truth, as per the Wittgensteinian gospel, is that 'the world in which we interact with other human beings, belongs to the language and culture in which we are rooted . . . One cannot hold this world in suspension or separate oneself from it, even in thought' (7). It is not just that Cartesian ontology and epistemology are all at sea; Dilman complains that the misconceptions spill over into our understanding of the nature of our emotional lives. Descartes regarded emotions as descriptions of an 'inner object' or 'state of consciousness', whereas in reality they are affective modes which 'reflect the significance we find in things'; shame, for instance, is 'being or becoming aware of one's situation as humiliating' (29).

The ritual denunciations of Descartes, are based, unfortunately, on only the scantest attention to what Descartes actually said. For although Descartes of course made the famous 'real distinction' between mind and body, he also insisted that many of our distinctively human characteristics (most notably those very affective modes Dilman is so concerned about) are *not* ascribable to an incorporeal self, but are irreducible properties of embodied beings of flesh and blood. Dilman, in short, has been content with the standard caricature based on (parts of) the *Meditations*. Had he looked further, for example in the *Passions of the Soul*, he would have found definitions of shame (see article 205) and all the other emotions which take fully into account their significance for the desires and aspirations of those who have them. An incidental point worth making here, since it is related to this cavalier attitude to sources, is that the only bibliographical reference to Descartes in the book is to 'Descartes (1927)' – an obscure volume of 'Selections'. This sort of slap-happy approach to the canonical giants is a peculiar disease of philosophers; could one imagine a critical study by a professor in an

English Literature department identifying key sources by reference to a volume of 'Shakespeare (1927) *Selections*'?

These gripes out of the way, it is time to say that, despite the inauspicious beginning, Dilman soon gets into his stride. What matters for the aims of the book is not so much the Cartesian straw man as the contribution of the existentialists to our understanding of the human predicament. The main focus is on Sartre, beginning with his account of the emotions, which Dilman expounds thus: 'our emotions . . . are an expression of the humanity of each individual in the life in which he finds himself – a life from which the world in which we live is inseparable. It is to situations which belong to this world that our emotions are directed and their significance enters our individual lives and assumes a reality there for us through our emotions.' (42). It is hard, perhaps, to see how anyone could possibly disagree with this; but despite the bland appearance, there is something illuminating which Dilman manages to bring out: the sense in which those aspects of things to which we respond emotionally are both real and, at the same time, the product of our personal reactions. The reality lies in the fact that something is named in a public language, and that there is therefore something that is meant, which has objective significance, and whose truth or falsity depends in part on the stance of the agent, on the way he 'goes on' (48). There follow some interesting reflections on the famous Kierkegaardian thesis that 'truth is subjectivity'. As unpacked by Dilman this does *not* mean that truth in the realm of morality and the emotions is just what I say it is; all assertions are in principle evaluable in terms of public criteria. But, for all that, the personal dimension is still crucial: unless I make the truth mine, unless I possess it so that it enters into my being, touching the way I live, then it has no reality for me (50–1).

Though drawing heavily on Sartre, Dilman offers a challenging critique of his account of the self in relation to others. The pervasive aura of pessimism in Sartre's writings arises from the way in which he sees other people as 'objectifying' me, as reducing my sense of self and autonomy to one of 'shame' – the sense that I have 'fallen into the world, in the midst of things, and need the mediation of the other in order to be what I am'. The famous Sartrean image of this 'fall into objectivity' is the moment when, as I peer through a keyhole gloating over an intimate scene within, I turn to find myself observed by a stranger in the corridor. But Dilman offers a far more

positive vision of the challenge posed by the presence of the other. So far from objectifying me, the responses of other human beings 'draw me out of any inauthentic or defensive postures I may have adopted'. They give me the opportunity to 'open up', and thereby ultimately to grow up and find myself (110).

The strongly psychoanalytic overtones here are no accident. Following up his previous illuminating works on Freud, Dilman aims to 'untell' the Sartrean story of shame, alienation and bad faith, revealing instead how the psychoanalytic process can give the subject a 'second chance' to re-experience and re-interpret the damaging patterns of emotion he may have faced in childhood. In one sense this preserves something of Sartre's stress on our responsibility for who we are – the way in which through our actions we enter into our own moral and emotional development. But Dilman (rightly, in my view) sees the Sartrean model as giving undue primacy to what one might call the moment of raw existential decision; Sartre's stress on choice overemphasises the role of reason and the intellect in determining who we are and what we can become (158–9). Only if we are prepared to give up some of the defences of reason is the way open for true growth and self-knowledge.

A crucial, perhaps *the* crucial, test case for any account of self-development which aims to have a remotely happy ending is the arena of human sexuality. Both in Sartre and (in a different way) in Proust, there is, as Dilman shows, a tragic aspect to sexual desire: for Proust, the unattainable ideal of unqualified maternal devotion sours all subsequent relationships by finding them wanting; for Sartre, the demands of the carnal inevitably generate tensions between the need to appropriate and the desire to remain autonomous; and at a deeper level, the nature of the other remains alien, since all of us are condemned to what Dilman aptly labels 'existential solipsism'. To oppose this gloomy picture, Dilman gives us the propitious vision of Gabriel Marcel: in philosophy we start not from 'I am', but from 'we are' – a shared human life. And this shared life is the key to realizing my true individuality: 'the tie which binds me to others gives me myself' (122). This opens the way to what Simone Weil calls the 'miracle of friendship, by which a person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being who is necessary to him as food' (126). The conclusion is a noble one, but one is left wondering whether Dilman has not

achieved it at the cost of a partial *ignoratio elenchi*. The job was to defend the possibility of autonomy and freedom within human sexuality; but in the focus on Weilian 'togetherness', we seem to have a defence of something much more anodyne – mutually respectful affection. What gives the game away are telltale phrases like 'at a certain distance' and 'without coming any nearer' – phrases which harshly fail to ring true when applied to erotic passion. The English word 'love' is vague enough to cover a multitude of emotions, but in Greek terms Dilman's argument seems to have jumped from *eros* to *philia*. Yet the gulf that separates the two is shown by the fact that the former is grist for the tragedian's mill from Euripides to Shakespeare and beyond, while the latter is a subject for calm Aristotelian debate within a treatise on virtue. *Eros*, as the Greeks knew when they deified it, always retains something of the alien and the terrible. It is what J. B. Leishman called the 'vehemence and intransigence' of erotic passion, or what emerges in Jacques Lacan's reading of Freud as the aspect of the *unheimlich*, that seems to preclude an accommodation between the existential agonies revealed by Proust and Sartre, and the distanced yet harmonious 'communion' envisaged by Weil and Marcel.

Dilman moves on, in his concluding chapter, to acknowledge that there are conflicts in the human predicament which cannot straightforwardly be resolved, but which have to be 'worked through', until, eventually, there is an easing of the 'affective cramp' which generated the conflict in the first place: 'A man may, since early childhood, like to have his cake and eat it. To live with that he may develop an elaborate character structure in which he satisfies himself symbolically that he both eats his cake and has it: an illusion or "phantasy" he enacts throughout his life. It is possible for such a person to be weaned from wanting to keep his cake: he can learn to share it, even to give it away, without feeling diminished. Or he can come to find a different way of obtaining nourishment' (167). There are, I believe, some extremely important insights here. But a worry remains about which values for 'cake' will yield acceptable results. If the cake stands for erotic passion, it is perhaps true (as the Stoics argued) that we can learn to give it up, or find 'other nourishment'; what is less clear is that we can do so without losing touch with one of the most powerful sources of what makes us human. At stake here, of course, is the age old debate about the place of the passions in the good life; and although it is greatly to be welcomed

that philosophers (Dilman in the vanguard) are at last beginning to take account of the psychoanalytic contributions to that debate, it is not yet clear how far those contributions do, or could, dissolve away what is tragic in the human condition. At the very least, as Dilman observes in his conclusion, the vulnerability which is an inescapable feature of human life will always leave us open to what Freud called 'ordinary' or 'real' (as opposed to neurotic) unhappiness. But those 'ordinary' unhappinesses are, in the end, transparent to rational description and assessment, so that the relevant events are ones which, however painfully, we can in principle come to terms with. If Sartre and the tragedians are (in their different ways) right, there is much about human passion that is inherently immune to any such accommodation, since the very nature of the feelings involved strikes at the roots of our autonomy and sense of self.

Overall, Ilham Dilman has given us a humane and open-minded book, written with engaging simplicity of style, and pervaded by a richly nuanced and deeply reflective optimism about the human condition and the possibilities for achieving authenticity in our emotional lives. Whether the reader will find that optimism persuasive is perhaps a matter for individual response; indeed it is one of the implications of Dilman's methodology that philosophizing (at any rate in the moral arena) cannot be a matter of passively inspecting the results of an intellectual argument. To do philosophy that way would be to fall into the trivialities of Nietzsche's 'objective man', who with his 'mirroring and eternally self-polishing soul, no longer knows how to affirm or deny' (53). The reality is that when it comes to trying to understand ourselves and our relations with others, a true grasp of the significance of what is going on can be achieved only from within the personal dimension. Dilman's study throws a great deal of light on the nature of that dimension, and on why, if we wish to understand what lies at the core of our humanity, we cannot ultimately avoid it.

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