

Reviews

RUSH RHEES ON RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY edited by D.Z. Phillips assisted by Mario von der Ruhr, *Cambridge University Press*, 1997, pp. xxii + 389, £35.50.

WITTGENSTEIN AND THE POSSIBILITY OF DISCOURSE by Rush Rhees, edited by D.Z. Phillips, *Cambridge University Press*, 1998, pp. xii + 303, £35.50.

Rush Rhees (1905-1989) was one of the most remarkable philosophers of his generation. Born in New York, educated at Choate and Rochester University, of which his father, an eminent New Testament scholar, was President, Rhees was expelled in his second year for persistently arguing with one of the philosophy lecturers. 'From a Puritan I have revolted into an atheist', he was quoted as saying at the time. He arrived in Edinburgh in 1924 with an introduction to Norman Kemp Smith (1872-1958), who taught at Princeton for thirteen years before returning to Scotland, author of scholarly commentaries on Descartes, Hume and Kant, with a take on Hume (since 'The naturalism of Hume', a two-part study in *Mind*, (1905) which invites comparisons with the later Wittgenstein's social conception of mind and is, in any case, much more interesting and plausible than the still dominant view of Hume's philosophy as radical scepticism. In a letter to his close friend Baron Friedrich von Hügel, Kemp Smith referred to his new student — 'He is quite a picture, like the young Shelley, & rather lives up to it — tho' quite a nice & simple youth — wearing his shirt collar loose & open at the neck', etc. The main influence on Rhees in the Edinburgh years was, however, John Anderson (1893-1962), a Glasgow-trained philosopher, who migrated to Australia in 1927, and had more influence than anyone else on the development of a whole generation of Australian philosophers (J.L. Mackie, J.A. Passmore, D.M. Armstrong to name only three). Rhees retained all his life something of Anderson's leftwing social philosophy.

Graduating in 1928, Rhees taught at Manchester (the only assistant to the professor); went to Austria in 1932 to study the work of Franz Brentano (1838-1917), a former Catholic priest, whose work influenced Freud, Meinong, Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, among others, as well as G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, though Rhees' interest centred only on his theory of relations. Meanwhile he started doctoral research at Cambridge, supervised by G.E. Moore, soon began to frequent Ludwig Wittgenstein's classes, and abandoned the doctorate. The editor suggests that the paper 'On Continuity: Wittgenstein's Ideas, 1938', first published in 1970, contains 'some of the fruits of his reflections'; but since the Ph.D. was formally abandoned in 1936, and the discussions with Wittgenstein took place in August 1938, it seems more likely that the paper marks an entirely new departure from whatever he was struggling to say in the abortive doctorate. (Rhees would not be the only philosopher whose way of doing philosophy was completely

overturned by contact with Wittgenstein: John Wisdom is an obvious case.) In 1940, when he was working as a welder, Rhees was appointed to a temporary lectureship at Swansea to fill in for lecturers on war service. In 1944-45 he failed to obtain posts for which he applied in Oxford and Dundee, despite references from Moore and Wittgenstein — but then his application ended as follows: 'I have published nothing, and I have not written anything that might be published. It is not likely that I ever shall. I have had opportunity enough'. Even then, when a record of inspiring teaching counted much more than frequent publication in the right journals, such modesty was not likely to gain employment in a philosophy department.

A permanent post was created for Rhees in Swansea, however, and he taught there until he retired in 1966. With his continuing friendship with Wittgenstein (whom he saw frequently until his death in 1951), and colleagues like J.R. Jones, R.F. Holland, and Peter Winch, not to mention their students, Rhees was the progenitor of the 'Swansea Wittgensteinians'. As one of the literary executors, he devoted himself to the difficult task of editing Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*. His own essay collections, *Without Answers* (1969) and *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (1970), demonstrate his originality as well as his fidelity to a Wittgensteinian way of doing philosophy. Shortly before his death he was told of *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars*, the volume in his honour edited by D.Z. Phillips and Peter Winch (1989), gathering essays by Cora Diamond, Norman Malcolm, R.F. Holland, H.O. Mounce, David Cockburn, Lars Hertzberg, Ilham Dilman, Raimond Gaita, and Paul Holmer, as well as by the two editors themselves. While the work of these distinguished philosophers is very varied, no one could fail to see a certain 'family resemblance', in the sense that, however diversely, they exemplify a tradition, springing from Wittgenstein, but decisively influenced by Rush Rhees. It is a minority tradition, different from, not to say opposed to, the style of philosophical practice, and even of interpreting Wittgenstein, dominant in English-speaking universities at the present time.

Though he claimed to have 'nothing' for posthumous publication, Rhees left sixteen thousand pages of manuscript, covering the whole gamut of philosophical topics. After what must have been extremely demanding editorial work, the two volumes under review have been carved out of this mass of material: the first representing Rhees' reflections on religion, the second his reflections, somewhat *contra* Wittgenstein, on the unity of language.

Rush Rhees on religion and philosophy reprints three of the papers in *Without Answers* as well as the lengthy paper 'Wittgenstein on Language and Ritual' (from the G.H. von Wright *Festschrift*, 1976), on Wittgenstein's reflections on Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Otherwise the contents are entirely new.

In most of the papers Rhees repeatedly says that he is out of his depth, failing to understand this or that, and so on. When a philosopher says that he finds something unintelligible, he usually means, dismissively, that there is something wrong with it; Rhees, on the other hand, assumes that he is being stupid or even not up to understanding the issue. For example, and in this following Wittgenstein, he dislikes St

Paul's doctrine of predestination but assumes that he is just not on the appropriate level to appreciate it (pp. 238-248). That is to say, the *spirit* in which Rhees practises philosophy is very unusual in a climate where philosophers are mostly out to trounce adversaries and exhibit mastery of the issue. He has Wittgenstein's belief that 'you cannot do philosophy without being hurt' (p. 250), again not a general assumption in the academy.

Rhees relates predestination to divine judgement, another difficult idea to discuss; but here he invites us to 'listen to Mozart's *Requiem*; or perhaps almost any setting of the Requiem Mass, for the idea of Judgement is all through it' (p. 245).

One of the surprises in this volume is Rhees' interest in Catholicism. When he writes of 'the Church', as he quite often does, he seems always to mean the Roman Catholic Church. Though not a member of any church (p. 315, cf. p. 372), he writes (in 1964) about 'coming home from mass' (p. 381), an expression that a regular Mass-goer would use. Admittedly this comes in notes sent to a devout Catholic friend, Barbara O'Neill; but he also laments the post-Vatican II reform of the liturgy: 'When it was announced that one of the Sunday masses in the local church would be in Latin, I went to that one, because I had missed the Latin mass — the mass in 'the vernacular' never was just the same' (p. 315), a passage that suggests fairly sustained Mass-going over a period. Allowing that he speaks 'only from prejudice', he inveighs as strongly against ecumenism as the most reactionary Catholic (p. 372). For example: 'I cannot find anything in any form of Protestant Christianity to compare with what there is and has been in the Catholic Church' (p. 373). Again, perhaps hinting at some personal crisis: 'At one period in my life the Church gave me a help which I do not think I could have found anywhere else or in any other way' (p. 382).

One objection familiar in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is to the idea of natural theology, at least if it is thought of as the *foundation* of the rest of religion (cf. p. 35). Throughout the book, Rhees argues with Brentano's evidently rationalistic neo-scholastic apologetics, often accepting that important issues are raised but steadfastly opposing what he takes to be Brentano's view that religious beliefs are *probable* (p. 58), that religious belief is 'an attempt to answer certain questions which could have arisen independently of religion altogether' (p. 121), objecting to his attempt to say what one's relation to God is in non-religious terms (p. 64), etc. Kierkegaard and Simone Weil are cited far more than any other modern thinker, not always with approval, especially in her case. Thomas Aquinas is cited two or three times, but only in connection with the 'proofs'. Rhees wishes that Wittgenstein had written more about St John of the Cross (p. 244). He thinks that Pascal's idea of what God would say to a troubled heart — 'you would not be looking for me, unless you had already found me. So, do not worry' — is 'wonderful', and yet only 'superficial' compared with St Paul (Romans 11): 'He hath mercy on whom he will; and whom he will, he hardeneth' etc. (pp. 243-44). Quite often, when Rhees speaks once again of his ignorance and lack of understanding, one wishes that he had known more of the classics of pre-Reformation theology and spirituality, and even of the best examples of

neo-Thomism. He mentions Teilhard de Chardin, in connection with Peter Medawar's famous debunking; but what if Rhees had read something by Henri de Lubac or Hans Urs von Balthasar? What would he have made of Pieper or Garrigou-Lagrange? Much of what he says is quite close to the kind of thing that de Lubac says, in *The Discovery of God*, the revised version of the much-discussed book that appeared in 1945 (recently published in unabridged translation, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1997).

If he often seems a solitary figure, exploring familiar paths as if for the first time, there is no doubt of Rhees' serious concern with central issues in the philosophy of religion. Precisely because of the tentative, questioning, self-critical approach — 'without answers' — he is able to lead the reader into reconsidering the deep issues that are often too smartly settled in such philosophy of religion as there is in the current academic environment. The distinctiveness of his approach cannot be illustrated without lengthy quotation. Occasionally he comes out with a brief summary of a long discussion: 'You cannot understand the reality of God, unless you understand the worship of God' (p. 55) — which does *not* mean that belief in the existence of God derives from regular church-going. The chapters entitled 'Gratitude and ingratitude for existence', 'Living with oneself', and 'Christianity and growth of understanding', might be good places to enter Rhees' conception of philosophical reflection on religious matters. But there are many provocative and sometimes moving discussions — to pick only one: 'The way in which Christians speak of love seems to me one of their most perplexing and (for me) one of the most discouraging sides of their teaching' (p. 379). What Christians seem strangely blind to, Rhees thinks, is the fact that it is 'with love that the most terrible misunderstandings begin — the misunderstandings which are the stuff of tragedy'.

Four years after Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* appeared in 1953, Rush Rhees started writing the many pages of critical response which yield *Wittgenstein and the possibility of discourse*. The editor suggests that it may well be the 'cumulative result' of many discussions with Wittgenstein during his frequent visits to Swansea. In a sense, these notes on Wittgenstein's later view of language, which conclude in 1960, must constitute the background and preparation for one of Rhees' most celebrated papers, 'Wittgenstein's Builders', published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1959-60, and reprinted in *Discussions of Wittgenstein*.

Language, the early Wittgenstein held, is the totality of propositions (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.001). When he was drawn back into resuming philosophical work he first played with the picture of language as a kind of calculus but very soon, probably as a result of his years of teaching in village schools in the Austrian mountains, he began to think of language as a kind of game, or complex of games, far more than the sum total of propositional statements. It might be said, even, that he overthrew the conception of language as propositions that had dominated philosophy for centuries simply by attending to how children learn to speak. Children learn their native language, he reminds us, for example, by playing games such as ring-a-ring-a-roses (*Investigations* §7). A great deal else has to be in place, that is to say, before we have the skills

involved in making propositional statements.

Before bringing on the children and their games, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a language entirely composed of commands in which the individual words name objects (§2): someone is erecting a house with a variety of building blocks, and his assistant has to pass them to him as he shouts out what he wants: 'Block!', 'Pillar!', 'Slab!', etc. Here, instead of reminding us of how children learn language, Wittgenstein concocts a little thought-experiment: doesn't the thought of a language consisting entirely of nouns and imperatives only point up very strikingly how much else language actually involves? The story includes a practical situation (building), co-operation between two creatures (the builders), a vocabulary (block, pillar, etc.), and a use of the vocabulary (calling for the objects and bringing them). It is an example, as Baker and Hacker point out in their commentary (volume 1, page 66), that antedates the children's game-playing in the development of Wittgenstein's conception of language.

Perhaps it is not such a good example. Rhees, it might be thought, makes heavy weather of it. 'It disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application', Wittgenstein says (§5) — the fog created round the way that language works by a certain general notion of the meaning of a word, i.e. the notion that the meaning of a word is the object for which the word stands. The builders have words that stand for objects; but do they not seem robot-like, merely signalling and reacting? When Wittgenstein goes on (in §6) to ask us to imagine the builders' language as 'the whole language of a tribe' — 'The children are brought up to perform *these* actions, to use *these* words as they do so, and to react in *this* way to the words of others' — he surely hints at a great contrast between these children and the children whom he immediately introduces as playing round games, etc. The point perhaps must be that a great deal of spontaneous, 'natural' and instinctive high-spirited behaviour would have to be suppressed to get people to behave as the builders do (a point Stanley Cavell has made). Considering their very basic, stripped-down use of language highlights for us, by contrast, just how different language as conversation actually is, compared with any supposed attempt to define its essence.

Rhees, anyway, contrasts the builders with the case of training a dog to go to its basket when you call 'Basket!'. The worker who reacts to the order 'Slab!', unlike the dog, *understands* what the other builder *means*. He is not just reacting automatically to a certain audible stimulus. They would not be *building*, Rhees argues, as the story assumes, unless they knew what they were doing. That is to say, when one calls for a slab and the other hands it to him, one is actually *telling* the other something, and the other shows that he understands. However rudimentarily, they are together in the space of *discourse*. But if that is the case, Rhees thinks, they are able to say things to one another apart from their co-operation on the building site. Neither is giving or carrying out orders as you might do with your dog. The second builder does not simply learn to do what he is told; he learns to *understand* what he is told, and that, in turn, means that he might tell someone else the same thing (cf. p. 133). What the fiction of the builders shows, then, is that there is a difference

between learning to hand over bricks at someone's command and learning what *makes sense* (p. 184) — and that is what makes language.

While Rhees sees that the analogy of language as a collection of language-games with a family resemblance to one another is intended to break the hold of the picture of language as having the unity of a calculus-like totality of propositions, he worries that it goes to the other extreme. The very idea of a game suggests a completeness which does not do justice to the open-endedness of language (e.g. p. 254). The kind of unity suggested by the family resemblances analogy does not tell us how language 'hangs together' (p. 142). Plato had more idea of this than Wittgenstein, Rhees contends. It is a misconception if Plato regards all speech as dialogue; but, so Rhees maintains, language as 'conversation' is radically *dialogical*. 'Not all speech is conversation', as he remarked in 'Wittgenstein's Builders', 'but I do not think there would be speech or language without it'. In finding the unity of language in *conversation*, Rhees is certainly emphasizing something in a way that Wittgenstein never did — though whether it might not be found, near enough, in Wittgenstein's writings, is another matter. There can, anyway, be no doubt that this book casts a great deal of light, not just on the philosophy of Wittgenstein and of Rhees, but on the most ancient philosophical question of all — the relation of language to reality, of word and world, of *logos* and being: on what it means to *say* something. It is to be hoped that the third volume that is announced (p. 3), provisionally entitled *There Like Our Life: Discussions of 'On Certainty' and Related Issues* will soon appear. While nothing that Rush Rhees writes would ever pass the referees of submissions to such journals as *Mind*, these books will bear re-reading for many years to come and bear witness to the depth and seriousness of his philosophical reflections.

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Short Notices

THE SIZE OF CHESTERTON'S CATHOLICISM by David W. Fagerberg, *University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame and London, 1998, Pp. 224, \$25.00 cloth, \$18.00 pb.*

G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), received into the Catholic Church in 1922, showed how much at home as a Catholic he was in *Orthodoxy*, among his most enduring books, published in 1908. As Ignatius Press, San Francisco, project 35 volumes of collected writings, Professor Fagerberg offers by far the best theologically informed introduction, quoting liberally and highlighting the central themes: wonder and asceticism (chapter 2); the value of ordinary life (ch.3); paganism as *praeparatio evangelica* (ch.4); the indispensability of ritual (ch. 5); the complexity of doctrine (ch. 6); authority in the Church (ch. 7); and liberal Protestantism (ch. 8). 'Ritual is really much older than thought; it is much simpler and much wilder than thought': such remarks, from 'Christmas and the Aesthetes', reprinted in *Heretics* (1905), are even more provocative and divisive in the philosophy of religion today than they were then. Highly recommended.