

## BOOK REVIEW

### **ALL THINGS SHINING: READING THE WESTERN CLASSICS TO FIND MEANING IN A SECULAR AGE** (Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly)

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The landscape of professional philosophy in the English speaking world has been dominated by a tradition, derived from both Cartesian rationalism and the British empiricists, which conceptualizes the relationship between human beings and the world as being mediated by a veil of mental and/or verbal representation. Rather than acting within the world, this tradition sees human beings as reflecting upon mental images derived from the world and acting on the basis of these conscious or non-conscious reflections. Less represented in Philosophy departments outside of Europe has been an alternate tradition, represented by continental philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, which has adopted a position more influenced by Aristotle, one which places less emphasis on representation of the world than on the actions of beings that are deeply integrated into the world. For decades the dominant analytic philosophers and the less common proponents of continental philosophy have engaged in little constructive dialogue.

In recent years, however, certain tendencies within the analytic tradition, stemming perhaps from commitments to Aristotelian naturalism, but also responsive to developments in such fields as neuropsychol-

ogy, have perhaps begun to develop a common ground where fruitful dialogue with members of the continental tradition may be becoming more possible. This is found, for example, in the growing support for theories of embodied cognition which have emphasized a view of human beings as that of physical bodies that are integrally situated within essentially interacting with the world. Others have suggested an intermediary non-conceptual sphere of mental life that stands between mere reflex reaction and full-scale conceptual mental content. The philosopher Andy Clark has even questioned whether there is a strict division between our minds and the tools we use to understand and negotiate the world: there is for him no principle difference between the human visual system and the, for example, telescopes that extend the capacities of that visual system or the human memory systems and the notebooks or computers that we use to expand our ability to remember. These philosophers do not deny that mental representations play an important aspect in our mental lives - if there were no mental representations how, for example, could we think about the future or non-actualized possibilities? — but they do tend to emphasize that such representations are grounded in a less intellectual

and more body-oriented relationship to the world.

Herbert Dreyfus was one of the most prominent predecessors of this trend. Since the late 1960s he has written about continental philosophy, most particularly the work of Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, restating their sometimes quite obscure manner of presentation to a language that is more accessible to those trained in the analytic tradition. Reflecting perhaps Heidegger's critique of technology as a manifestation of the Cartesian split between the subject and the world, but also reflecting his mastery of the relevant scientific fields. Anticipating later theories about embodied cognition Dreyfus did not deny the notion that non-human machines could think, but held that truly thinking machines would have to be robots who actively interact with the surrounding world, would have to be characterized by what Heidegger called being-in-the-world, a phrase that provided Dreyfus with the title for a classic study of Heideggerian philosophy.

Heidegger conceived of his philosophical position as manifesting a deep critique of the nature of modern society, not merely a study in academic philosophy and in *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, a Harvard philosopher who had been Dreyfus' student, extends Dreyfus' line of thought to a similar consideration of the spiritual problems of the modern world and how they might be remediated. Although Heidegger is only mentioned twice in the main text of the book it is very clear that his deep influence on it, and on the thought of the authors, can be felt throughout it. As with

Dreyfus' earlier work, there is a substantial shift away from Heidegger's style in this work. Rather than adopting Heidegger's rather prophetic stance and ponderous vocabulary, the authors adopt an informal tone of discussion that suggests a conversation between intelligent persons rather than the pronouncements of exalted wise men. This makes the book accessible not only to analytic philosophers unsympathetic to the rhetoric of Heidegger but also to the wider audience of non-philosophers for whom the book seems to be primarily intended.

This matter-of-fact approach must not, however, be taken to suggest that the scope of the book's concerns is at all unambitious. The authors in fact advocate nothing less than a return to a relationship of a sort that the authors suggest was characteristic of Ancient Greek polytheism. Moreover though their method includes a good number of examples taken from everyday life, its core is to be found in a wide-ranging survey of classic literary and philosophical works whose authors include Homer, Aeschylus, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Descartes, Shakespeare, Kant, Melville, and the contemporary American novelist David Foster Wallace. For all of its rather conversational tone, this is a book of considerable ambition.

In essence, the book is a critique of the modern emphasis on personal autonomy, a basic value of modern Western culture that is attributed to the separation of the self from the world that particularly followed from the Cartesian notion of mental life as mediated inner representations of the world rather than a more embodied view of mentality. This autonomy, according to the authors, inevitably leads to nihilism because it provides

each individual with an indeterminate number of choices about what to want and how to live but provides no basis for preferring one chosen way over another. Much of the book consists in the analysis of the way this movement towards nihilism is represented in a series of literary classics that are assumed to provide strong expressions of the values of the cultures of the time.

To some extent this assumption of literary expressiveness of cultural value systems is well-taken: certainly Dante's expression of the belief world of his time resonates more with late medieval culture than it would with the Enlightenment culture of the eighteenth century. Dreyfus and Kelly plausibly reject the idea, still quite current in the dominant tendency of analytic philosophy, that the self can be reduced to a bundle of propositional attitudes, of beliefs and desires, for one that holds the propensities to think and act in certain ways are as deeply, and integrally, assimilated into the self as is a primary language. This, however, begs the question of whether a detailed connection can be made between a work of the highest culture, with a core of ideas derived from the study of the philosophy of Aquinas, and the deep cultural of the ordinary people of the era, many of whom may have been illiterate. Cultures just may not be as unitary as the authors' method suggests they are. The authors suggest the people of the Middle Ages were determined to experience themselves as given a place on earth by God, but if this is the case how can one explain the popular revolts that occurred in that era. Can we really conclude on the basis of a book read only by a small number of members of an intellectual elite that prior to Descartes human beings had little sense of an interior self?

In other words, the author's assumption that literary and philosophical classics provide a truly accurate representation of the culture from which they emerged is at least questionable.

Yet despite the questionable nature of their method of presenting their critique of modern culture their book remains a penetrating addition to a longstanding critique of Western notions of individualism and autonomy that has precedents not only in the work of Heidegger but also in such contemporary communitarian thinkers and proponents of virtue theory as Alisdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. In these emerging traditions of thought human beings are not primarily conceptualized as autonomous individuals, but rather as integrally acculturated into a context which provides them with values, goals, and narratives which ground their relation to themselves, to others, and to the world. In the thought of these philosophers standards of behavior are not reducible to rules, as in Kant's ethics, or methods of evaluation, as in utilitarianism, but to deep character traits that, like Aristotelian virtues, have as their underlying basis processes of both habituation of action. One of Dreyfus and Kelly's main examples in the book is a man who risked his life to save someone who had fallen onto a New York City subway track: the authors note that, like the heroes portrayed in the Greek epics of Homer, he acted not out of reflection but merely in response to a perceived situation. A virtuous person, for Aristotle, is one who acts appropriately not because he engages in rule-based calculations but rather one who confidently responds out of a highly honed and deeply embedded "gut instinct", to use the phrase that the contemporary

American thinker Jesse Prinz uses to characterize the physically-based responsiveness of emotions. Without such a deeply based responsiveness human beings are faced with a wide range of choices but a nihilistic sense of “a lack of any genuine motivation to choose one over the others”. (Dreyfus & Kelly, chapter 1) Only with a sense of where one really is, a notion derived from Heidegger’s being-in-the-world but illustrated by the basketball player (and United States Senator and Presidential candidate) Bill Bradley’s description of his global awareness of what is going on around him on the playing court. Persons such as the heroic subway rescuer or the skilled athlete act, according to the authors, not out of an autonomous consciously controlled rational self but as if something else, conceptualized by the Greeks as the gods, were acting through them. They write that

To say that all men need the gods . . . is to say, in part at least, that we are the kinds of beings who are at their best when we find ourselves acting in ways that we cannot – and ought not – entirely take credit for. (Dreyfus and Kelly)

The appropriate stance towards life, then, is not autonomous pride but rather a gratitude, a notion connected with the important Heideggerian notion of thankfulness, towards what we have been given to perceive about what is important in the world and, through that perception, to do.

Much of *All Things Shining* consists of an attempt to trace through literary examples the fall from this enchanted world to the modern desacralized world of autonomy,

free choice, and, the authors suggest, alienation. Although one may question this literary method, in itself seemingly influenced by Heidegger’s suggestion that serious literature and art provides a special source of insight into the world and our relation to it, there is much in this central section of the book that is worth pondering. Particularly interesting, for example, is Dreyfus and Kelly’s suggestion that the rise of monotheism played a role in disenchanting the world by imposing a unity on it, distracting us from the varied and unintegrated modes of attunement to the world represented by Greek polytheism. Also critical is his tracing the notion of autonomy from the notion of the interiority of the self allegedly introduced by St. Augustine, to the attempt at epistemological self-sufficiency in Descartes, to the ideal of the universalist moral autonomy found in Kant’s contention that human beings are ethical self-legislators who share a common morality on the basis of their shared rational nature. Particularly fascinating, even if perhaps somewhat questionable, is the central literary chapter of *All Things Shining* that concerns Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, a novel that the authors see as epitomizing the modern Western tradition’s desperate nihilism, its inability to fulfill those within it with an adequately meaningful life.

The purpose of *All Things Shining*, however, is not merely to diagnose the inadequacies of the modern situation but to look for ways that can point us beyond that alienation. In the final chapter of the book he finds one glimmer of that in the modern obsession with sports, a place where it may be possible to “find sacred community most easily” (Dreyfus and Kelly, chapter 7). It is,

however, not only through such community with fellow fans in which sports are important but also in their celebration of the embodied self and its relation to the surrounding environment:

... great athletes seem to catalyze our awareness of how glorious it is to touch and perceive, move through space, interact with matter. (Dreyfus and Kelly, chapter 7)

It is a virtue of the work of Dreyfus and Kelly that they should find in a realm that we ordinarily feel to be mere diversion a not only a remnant of a sacralized world but also a link to emerging intellectual trends like that of embodied cognition. Such advances, it seems to be suggested, are not merely aspects of scientific and intellectual history but harbingers of a new cultural way of living within the world, one that can help recover ways of being that the authors find to be characteristic of the ancient Greeks. As noted above, one might certainly question the linkage between scientific and philosophical research and the way lives are actually lived, particularly in a culture in which people seem to be moving towards the disembodied technological modes of interacting with the world, but the intellectual audacity, albeit one expressed in such a matter-of-fact style, of the authors' suggestions are certainly worth considering.

There is, however, also an acknowledged danger in this approach. A longstanding problem with the communitarian and virtue traditions is their inability to distinguish what may be valuable in the ideals of certain traditions and ideals

of human perfection and what we confidently feel are reprehensible. A speech by Hitler and Martin Luther King's "I Got a Dream" speech of 1963 both served to establish, through rhetorical devices, a sense of community of shared values, and a sense of what virtuous human beings should be, among those who experienced them. Yet, as Plato would have noted, this rhetorical power, this sense of being carried forward by a force that is deeper than oneself, is highly dangerous and can be an instrument of tyranny. The persuasive rhetoric of the tyrant cannot be distinguished merely on the basis of rhetorical force from the claims of the crusader from justice. Only by rationally, and consciously, evaluating the content of the speeches can we distinguish between the two speeches. Gut instincts may be necessary for survival but they also can often lead us astray when not carefully considered by the autonomous rational mind emphasized by the post-Enlightenment tradition. A major problem for views that have criticized such rational autonomy has been to nonetheless find a way of making critically important ethical distinctions. This is a particularly critical issue for thought based on the Heideggarian tradition given Heidegger's own association with the German Nazi regime.

Dreyfus and Kelly's attempt to avoid the dangers associated with loss autonomy involves the consideration of what he calls a meta-poiesis, a higher order skill that allows one to determine when it is appropriate to give in to gut-instincts and when it is appropriate to resist the tendency to do so. In Aristotle's virtue theory this determination of appropriateness, which he called the doctrine of the mean, came only when one



moved beyond the deeply embedded habits of the self and engaged in rational consideration of the rational basis for those habits. This, it might be argued, is one basis for the Enlightenment's suggestion that the autonomous rational being should detach himself from his gut-instincts and, even at the cost of alienation from the deeper sources of the self, objectively evaluate one's commitments. Dreyfus and Kelly, on the other hand, while not entirely banishing rational reflection, place it within a context of a development of a mode of seeing that will allow us to determine what is worth caring about, what is shining, and what should be rejected.

The nature of this perception and how it can be connected to the neuropsychological mechanisms that embody cognition in the modern scientific views that have influenced the authors are critical problems for the views proposed in *All Things Shining*. For all of the analogies that the authors find with the Greek gods, these mechanisms are not manifestations of the sacred but rather of Darwinian processes of natural selection. As such they are amoral and there is no compelling reason to assume that they provide us with an ability to distinguish between what is worthwhile and what is reprehensible; they can be engaged by the rhetoric of a tyrant as well as by the rhetoric of a saint. Our gut instincts can at times lead us to heroism, but, as history, modern and ancient, demonstrates they also can lead us to the most despicable acts imaginable. There is, that is, no reason to think that we have an innate ability to make the distinctions between what is worthy of our care and what is not. As Plato noted about the amoral, if not often immoral, Greek gods themselves

one needs to place the literary stories that provide them with their power under rational philosophical scrutiny if we are to use them to make judgments about their appropriate place in our life. A major problem with the views proposed by Dreyfus and Kelly is that such scrutiny, once applied, may lead to precisely the autonomous rational judgment that the authors see as a source of the alienation of modern man.

This book, then, extends a long tradition, beginning perhaps with works like Burke's reflections on the French revolution and extending to modern communitarian thought, that suggests that Enlightenment values leave human being alienated and unable to lead meaningful lives. It is certainly a worthy addition to this important trend of thought even if it does not provide an adequate solution to its central problems.

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