



perhaps because it is insufficient, at least as a commentary on the possibilities, and not only limits, of critique. While not inconsistent with the rendering of critique in the book, it reveals a certain conscious narrowing of the role of critique, insofar as it focuses on the capacity of the critic to effect an ‘escape’ from an inherited problematic. That critique today will not show us the way forward does not mean, of course, that it doesn’t express and effect crucial political work. The stakes of critique remain significant: the critic may be unable (or inappropriate) to lead the way to a new imaginary, but may be able to reveal conceptual closures, ghosts, erasures and violences, and so loosen their hold and open possibilities for other articulations, practices, legitimations and responses. This, of course, is work to which Bartelson’s book contributes. However, it would be well complemented by a reading of the critical practices it discusses that historicized them in the broader practices of politics in their days. While the conclusion about the limits of critique might not differ from Bartelson’s, such an approach would enable a consideration of a politics of critique as necessarily engaged by, but not confined to, the concept of the state, and thus perhaps a richer understanding of critique, and indeed of politics.

Although its conclusion will discourage those who turn to political theory to predict or create the future, Bartelson’s book offers much to other political theorists: it poses an important challenge to those for whom the politics of critique are expressed otherwise than in a desire to create the future, and it provides invaluable resources to those who seek to affect critical work today without reproducing the inherited closures and dead ends embedded in the critique of the state.

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Scanlon and Contractualism

Matt Matravers (ed.)

Frank Cass Publishers, London & Portland, Oregon, 2003, viii + 138pp.

ISBN: 0 7146 8456 2.

Contemporary Political Theory (2005) 4, 209–211. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300175

As Matt Matravers avers in his helpful introduction, ‘[t]he publication of Scanlon’s *What We Owe to Each Other* in 1998 was a philosophical event.’ (p. 1). Such an ambitious and accomplished work should leave a considerable mark on the landscape of moral and political philosophy and is richly deserving of the diligent, close reading and critical engagement brought to it in



this collection of papers, all of which move beyond exegesis to pursue key topics in the light of Scanlon's contribution to them.

Sarah Marshall's paper is the most exegetical, and brings out nicely many key features of Scanlon's views on reasons. Shedding light on Scanlon's notions of irrationality and objectivity, Marshall draws out the motivation for his change from a desire-based, Humean account of reasons, to the more Kantian view that reasons are basic and motivational of themselves. Her criticisms of Scanlon's arguments are somewhat incomplete (as her conclusion tacitly acknowledges), but they are thought-provoking and carefully constructed.

Susan Mendus's paper focuses on the conflict between personal values, in particular friendship, and the more impartial concern for what we owe to each other merely as fellow moral agents. She explains how Scanlon's view that the value of friendship is underwritten by impartial respect for persons effectively denies that there is any real conflict between personal and impartial values, and it is this that Mendus finds unsatisfactory. Her arguments to this effect are slight, and depend heavily on our sharing her dissatisfaction; however, her own positive account of friendship, which also draws on Korsgaard, is compelling and ably supported with an example from Ibsen. Significantly, we need to know, even if there is no deep conflict, when our duties to people as such override our particular concerns for our friends; this is something that Scanlon's comments do not settle, but which Mendus's work illuminates.

Brad Hooker's paper goes to the heart of the contractualist view, examining closely the so-called contractualist formula, which claims that wrong acts are those that would be disallowed by any principle that cannot be reasonably rejected from the standpoint of one affected by it (Scanlon, 1998, p. 153). Hooker's discussion is structured around the 'spare wheel' objection that holds that the contractualist formula can only give an answer as to what is wrong by tacitly assuming it at an earlier stage. Unfortunately, Hooker's version of this argument claims that the formula fails as a test for wrongness, yet it is not intended to serve as one. Scanlon is aiming to explain wrongness, and to structure our appeal to reasons in a way that enables us to consider their relevance to questions of wrongness. To this extent Hooker's argument misses its mark, but it does tap into a genuine puzzle: if the reasons considered in assessing rejectability enable us to make this judgement, what can it add to say that (for example) not only is it mean and hurtful, but moreover an act is wrong *because it is rejectable*? Despite some failings, then, Hooker's paper is intelligently suggestive and has many incidental insights. His concluding discussion of aggregation will be of interest to many as it ably brings out some common dissatisfactions with Scanlon's treatment of this issue.

Matravers's paper on responsibility provides an excellent summary of Scanlon's distinction between attributive responsibility (who can be praised or



blamed for an action) and substantive responsibility (who should 'pick up the costs or benefits that result' (p. 81)). Against a background of a common liberal reticence to commit on metaphysics, Matravers asks whether Scanlon's view is as free of metaphysics as he claims; in particular he assesses Scanlon's claim that the two kinds of responsibility are compatible with the Causal Thesis that all of our actions are caused in line with familiar causal laws (Scanlon, 1998, p. 250). Matravers's claim is that Scanlon's position is incomplete and that his account of substantive responsibility needs to be filled out before its compatibility can be determined, and so before its ability to meet the theoretical needs of these liberals can be assessed. His discussion is brief but persuasive.

Michael Pratt's paper on promising is an excellent exploration of the chief rival accounts of when and why we should keep our promises. He provides an effective critique of Scanlon's view that we should keep our promises because of the expectations we have raised in the promisee: he argues that this view is circular since the expectations are only raised because the promise obliges us to do what we have promised. Pratt then draws on Scanlon to develop a new position that avoids this charge. Not only does Pratt provide an excellent critique of Scanlon, he also makes a fruitful original contribution to the debate on promising.

The closing paper by Jonathan Wolff is something of an oddity in this collection, in that it has remarkably little to say directly about Scanlon. Instead it is an exploration of how virtue theory could be shaped and supported by contractualist reasoning. This suggestion will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Kant's emphasis on the virtues, but it is nicely, if schematically, presented here. In motivating his suggestion, Wolff also offers a very clear summary of some popular criticisms of virtue ethics.

The papers in this collection are variously stimulating and rewarding although, in general, they are provocative rather than conclusive. The papers by Marshall, Mendus and Pratt are especially worthy of attention.

References

Scanlon, T.M. (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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The Sceptical Idealist: Michael Oakeshott as a Critic of the Enlightenment

Roy Tseng

Imprint Academic, Thorverton, 2003, vii + 302pp.

ISBN: 0 907845 22 3.

**In Defence of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott**

Efraim Podoksik

*Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2003, vii + 260pp.**ISBN: 0 907845 665.***Oakeshott on History**

Luke O'Sullivan

*Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2003, xii + 296pp.**ISBN: 0 907845 290.**Contemporary Political Theory* (2005) **4**, 211–217. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300179

If there is a theme common to all the books on Michael Oakeshott's thought recently published by Imprint Academic, it consists in the attempt to overcome a certain polarization in Oakeshott scholarship. Either Oakeshott was studied so as to work out what his 'political philosophy means for political life as we know it' (Franco, 1990, p. 236) or read 'as a theorist of knowledge, not a moralist (much less an ideologue), and as a philosopher of human experience generally, not only of politics' (Nardin, 2001, p. 230). Roy Tseng and Efraim Podoksik address this polarization directly. However, the exact character of the difficulty involved in bringing Oakeshott's philosophy and politics together becomes clearer in what seems to be an indirect engagement with it; that is, in Luke O'Sullivan's enquiry into Oakeshott's philosophy of history. The question arising out of reading the three books together is whether 'human conduct' is an abstract world of experience, defined as 'practice' in Oakeshott's earlier work, or is it rather 'a much more messy affair in which we come and go somewhat inconsequentially between a variety of the universes of discourse' (Oakeshott, 1999, pp. 25–26, n. 8)?

For Tseng, Oakeshott's thought is a tireless investigation of the conditions of the conditionality of human experience and thus an ongoing philosophical attempt at overcoming abstraction. At the same time, although contextualized mainly by reference to Hegel's absolutism and Bradley's scepticism, Oakeshott's philosophy differs from both in its acceptance of the fragmentation of experience into a number of modes, such as science, history or practice, specific to the condition of modernity. Accordingly, it is an engagement with the crisis of modernity and three specific responses to it: positivism, pragmatism and historicism, all of which are attempting, each after its own fashion, to impose a single idiom of enquiry onto the whole of experience (p. 72).

The main target is the Enlightenment project, with its foundationalism in philosophy, formalism in ethics and naturalism in historiography. Oakeshott is