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NOTE

Lear, Jonathan, *Wisdom Won from Illness: Essays in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 328, US\$39.95 (hardback).

- 5 From a certain perspective, Jonathan Lear will appear to have remarkably wide-ranging interests. He is, for starters, both a philosopher and a practicing psychoanalyst. *Wisdom Won from Illness* collects some of Lear's essays on diverse topics: Plato and Aristotle, psychoanalysis, cultural devastation, the concept of irony—as well as essays tackling the literary interpretation of Shakespeare, J.M. Coetzee, and Marilynne Robinson. For
- 10 this he might look like the proverbial fox, were it not for one remarkably consistent line of inquiry that drives his work, somewhat in the manner of the hedgehog: what is it to be fully awake in ethical life, alive to the fact of human finitude. His concerns are resolutely *practical*: the interesting question, for Lear, is never a theoretical question about (say) the parts of the mind or soul and the principles of their relation, or (say)
- 15 how to describe what it is to go on in a particular way of life. The interesting questions have to do with self-understanding of a sort that is *efficacious*: one understands what it is to be human as one frees oneself from imprisoning modes of thought and thinks creatively about how to go on from here.

- This unifying theme runs through these essays partly via Lear's appeal to the contemporary Kantian idea that we constitute ourselves as agents through practical
- 20 thought. But something remained unsettled, for me, in Lear's use of this idea. He says that 'Psychoanalysis is inherently committed to the recognition and acceptance of the reality of other subjects—and this is an inescapably ethical commitment' [156]. Indeed, it may even be *the* ethical commitment: what matters most, if we are going to be fully
- 25 awake to the problem of being human. Yet it remains an open question whether the contemporary Kantian theme of self-constitution can adequately accommodate the ethical significance of concrete others—so I found myself wishing that Lear would either leave Kant out of it, or else face up to the difficult philosophical and interpretive questions that arise with this appeal.

- 30 Throughout, Lear suggests that genuinely practical reflection typically requires some kind of friction against default patterns of thought. He seems to me to find such friction, as a philosopher, in literature. While all of the essays here are philosophically rich, some mostly clarify and develop ideas from Lear's earlier books; the essays on Coetzee and Robinson display a particular alertness to other ways of thinking.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2017.1365090>

