

Alexander Nehamas, *The art of living: Socratic reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Sather Classical Lectures volume 61) University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998. pp. xi + 283. ISBN 0-520-21173-1

John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: reason and the passions in Greek, Cartesian and psychoanalytic ethics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998. pp. xiii + 230. ISBN 0-521-47310-1 hardback; 0-521-47890-1 paperback.

Jonathan Lear, *Open minded: working out the logic of the soul*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1998. ISBN 0-674-45533-9

The history of Philosophy is spangled with occasional figures who are so fascinating and so irritating that the subject can never let them go: Socrates, Descartes, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, Foucault to name but a few. The continuous love-hate relationship that philosophers feel or have felt for these figures is something that perhaps we ought to be able to explain. Indeed, could it not be that what makes us so annoyed or so fascinated is our inability to put our finger on precisely what it is that attracts or repels us about the character in question? Neither Descartes, nor Wittgenstein nor Freud figures in Alexander Nehamas' choice of Socratic disciples—his later chapters select Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault for attention—whereas Plato, Aristotle and Freud gain more attention in the explorations of John Cottingham, and Wittgenstein as well as Freud figure prominently in the book by Jonathan Lear: Cottingham and Lear share neither the Socratic focus of Nehamas nor his desire to unpack what accounts for our fascination; but there remains a certain coherence to this otherwise unrelated set of books all of which happened to be published in 1998. All three are turning over again for us the pages of perennially irresistible thinkers whose ideas never cease to hold us transfixed; all three are inviting us to notice that the material that we thought we knew has got more to do with what Nehamas calls 'the art of living' than we might have realised; and all three are making space for attitudes, responses and areas of self-understanding that are, by traditional classifications, irrational and hence sometimes inadequately acknowledged by philosophy as we usually understand it. And, of course, all three are juxtaposing thinkers from the ancient world with major figures from recent and early modern times.

Most successful and enjoyable by some way is Nehamas' *The art of living*. Delivered originally as the Sather Classical lectures at Berkeley in 1992-3, his chapters address Socrates as their overtly classical subject matter, and explore a question about what is meant by 'irony' which looks initially as if it might belong to conventional literary studies. But really their message is neither historical nor literary in any conventionally recognisable sense, since they aim to make the Socrates of Plato's dialogues more mysterious, not less, and they attempt to demonstrate, both in their own practice and in the investigation of other practices inspired by that mysterious Socrates, the art of care of the self that is inspired by the mysterious Socratic model, thus conceived. This is not a merely historical investigation. It is a book that tries to make life and philosophy look quite different.

Socrates here is a literary character; he is the character that we find in Plato's dialogues, and the irony is therefore a creation by Plato. "The philosophers of the art of living keep returning to Plato's Socratic works because they contain both the most coherent and the least explicable model of a philosophical life that we possess. Like a blank sheet, Socrates invites us to write; like a vast stillness he provokes us into shouting. But he remains untouched ..." (9). Plato's Socrates never explains how he became what he is, nor does he offer us the reasons why his way is the right way to live. Does he even know that it is right? We cannot tell, and he is not there to ask. Thus the Socrates of the early dialogues is characterised by irony. As Nehamas deftly shows, this irony does not equate to deception, nor to saying the opposite of what you mean, nor to intending the hearer to understand some other meaning than is apparent on the surface. Irony, rather, equates to that fascinating characteristic of leaving the hearer believing that there must be more behind what has been said, but frustrated by the fact that it is not quite apparent what more (or different) is intended. Irony thus understood is what makes the dialogues so rich in the way that they demand a response from the reader, because what we read on the surface invariably leaves us feeling that more has been left unsaid than has been said, and that we deceive ourselves if we think we know it all. Nehamas uses a lengthy discussion of Thomas Mann's character Hans Castor in *The Magic Mountain* to illustrate this invitation to self-deception on the part of a reader who comes to feel he is superior to the benighted characters in the dialogue, only to realise that his self-satisfaction is of just the same kind. Although the illustration is somewhat laboured, the point is very fruitful in drawing attention to Plato's artistry in creating the irony in the relationship between the reader of his dialogues and the dialogue's main character. Plato succeeds in making us think that we have discovered the historical Socrates, because the Socrates that he portrays does not reveal what he believes, yet the question that he puts to us, the question of how we ought to live, appears to have an answer which the character Socrates knows, but neither Plato nor the reader can

find out. Socrates just leaves us to try to unmask ourselves and discover whether we are victims of self-deception. It is a demanding task. Ultimately, so it emerges in Part Two ('Voices') of Nehamas' study, everyone who has taken Socrates as model has had to struggle with the fact that his pattern is a pattern for being oneself, not for being an imitation of anyone else. Their lives, then, though modelled on Socrates' own need to be reflections of Socrates without producing a life that is actually anything like his. The silent irony of Plato's Socrates explains not only the recognisably Socratic reflections of Montaigne and Foucault, but equally the fascination that drove Nietzsche to a bitter hostility towards Socrates, and an attempt to be different that turns out, ironically, to be itself a reflection of the Socratic model.

In chapter five Nehamas explores the way in which Nietzsche blamed Socrates for the dogmatism which he associated with the philosophical tradition of demanding a reason for everything; he saw Socrates as responsible for instituting the prevailing culture of rationality that was Nietzsche's *bête noir*. However, on Nehamas' own analysis we discover that, since Socrates actually could not provide the answers to the question why, though he always asked the question, he was not so clearly in the opposing camp to Nietzsche. In having no reasoned answer of his own, Socrates was himself living just such a life of authentic instinctive action as Nietzsche proposed, the very life that Nietzsche accused him of rejecting. "Socrates constituted an immense problem for him. Nietzsche took his project to be to attack traditional, dogmatic philosophy and to make a conscious effort to fashion himself as an inimitable individual. But he could never be sure that his own project was not also the project of the character who animated the tradition against which he defined himself" (p.155).

Nehamas' elegant presentation of Socrates and three of his interpreters leaves us with a sense that what is most important about Socrates is that very demand that one be oneself, so that however much you find out about what Socrates stood for, it will never give you a secure model to follow unthinkingly, since to follow Socrates is to be only yourself and nobody else. Nothing in Socrates' own life will tell you in what way you should develop yours.

While it is Plato's early works that provide Nehamas with this Socrates, characterised by an ironic silence that refuses to justify or explain, we might wonder whether Nehamas is too ready to deny that this genuinely ironic Socratic figure appears at all in Plato's Middle Period works. It is true that the Middle Period Socrates now suggests various ways to provide rational support for the commitments that had been implicitly endorsed by the earlier Socrates, yet surely the irony of Plato the author is never lost, even in those works. While his Socrates tries out argument after argument upon his listeners within the dialogue, Plato never comments. Does Socrates mislead his interlocutors? Is he always searching for someone with the wit to challenge his claims? Is he still hiding his real reasons, or lack of them, behind a purported expectation of a final justification, an expectation that he believes could never be satisfied in reality? Despite what Nehamas says, Plato's silent irony in the Middle Dialogues seems to me as powerful as it is in the early ones. Historically, the failure to read it that way must surely be a failure on the part of readers who sought a comfortingly dogmatic Socrates, not a failure on the part of Plato to maintain the ironic blank-look.

John Cottingham's *Philosophy and the Good Life* has a very different feel to it. Part of his project is to remind us that philosophy was not always, as it normally is now, an academic discipline devoid of any ambitions to sort out the world's problems outside the lecture room or the hardback monograph. Rather, until recently, it conceived of itself as seeking the answer to how one ought to live, and as offering that answer for the benefit of a wider public. Cottingham employs an avowedly broad-brush sketch of major contributors to philosophy from Plato onwards, and gives refreshing attention to the under-recognised ethical side of Descartes' project, stressing the fact that Descartes saw philosophy as an organic and unified system, so that the new physics, to which he devoted so much energy and attention, would provide a wholly different underpinning for what would be a correspondingly new ethics. The naive but all too prevalent assumption that Descartes conceived of human beings dualistically, as mind and matter, is neatly taken to pieces as Cottingham shows (with reference to the *Principles of Philosophy* and some of the letters) that Descartes is committed to a kind of tripartite—an odd word, but I suppose we need it here—anthropology, in which sensory experience forms a distinct mode of awareness not included in the thinking of the intellectual soul, a mode of awareness that derives from the union of soul and body and is not attributable to either soul or body by itself.

Besides demonstrating this truth, that philosophy was, in the ancient world and beyond, concerned with how a man should live—a truth which is unlikely to seem new or surprising to scholars of ancient philosophy but is surely salutary for the standard classroom treatment of the early modern period—Cottingham's other task is to explain why contemporary philosophy has retreated to academic debate and no longer has a message for the world at large. Cottingham diagnoses a certain loss of confidence in the power of 'ratiocentric' philosophical systems to cope with understanding the human

predicament. That is to say, acknowledging the place of the unconscious in the human psyche leaves philosophers less certain that the secret of fulfilment and well-being lies in the answers derived from reason alone. Cottingham suggests that nowadays we need to take seriously the contribution of psychoanalytic theory, which should radically change our conception of the task that an ethical theory has to fulfil. The relationship between reason and the passions can no longer be conceived in quite the same terms as it was traditionally, he urges. Yet, as he rightly observes, it will still be philosophy's task to work out what the right answer is; and Cottingham's own task is to clarify the new perception that philosophical ethics must adopt if it is to return to its project of finding out, on behalf of us all, how best to live.

Since Cottingham acknowledges that his broad-brush treatment will sometimes irritate specialists, it would be inappropriate to embark on the kind of nit-picking criticisms that are so easy to make in response to attempts to schematise the whole history of philosophy in this way. However even at the broader scale I think that there are problems with Cottingham's characterisation of the tradition of ancient ethical thought, which he finds defective in its treatment of the relation between reason and the passions:

But the solutions offered by both these earlier systems [sc. Greek and early modern ethics] were defective in important respects, and it will be argued that the defects only begin to be remedied with the development of the concept of the unconscious. (p.6)

Granted, the prime example of ratiocentric ethics, as Cottingham needs it for this argument to work, is the Stoic one, which does indeed allow the passions very little space, and excludes them altogether from the practically unattainable but ideal life of the perfect sage. But Cottingham's picture of Plato and Aristotle, who emerge as proto-Stoics in this respect, seems rather quaint and dated to me, and just a bit out of touch with recent work in ancient philosophy. Only by focusing on certain atypical portions of Plato's work could one ever venture to suggest that Plato was either unaware of, or unsympathetic to, the claims of the non-rational motivations, or indeed insensitive to the vital contribution of the passion inherent in reason's own desires, as it figures in the pursuit of the truly philosophical life. Socrates himself, as Plato portrays him in the *Symposium* for instance, provides at once both a model of perfect self-control and an exemplar of a life open to the most powerful erotic drives. This and other crucial material in the Platonic corpus is quite absent from Cottingham's discussion. Instead, by privileging a certain rationalistic reading of the *Protagoras* and *Republic*, by treating the Guardian element within the *Republic's* psyche as representative of Plato's picture of the whole human person (when in fact it represents one third of Plato's new-look anthropology, with its strikingly complex and diverse personality), and by reading the *Phaedo* through Cartesian spectacles, Cottingham gives us a quite distorted account of what Platonism is, one that was not particularly prominent before the twentieth century, as far as I can see.

Despite acknowledging that there is indeed a way of reading the *Republic* that is more benign, Cottingham asserts, with no further argument, "But it is the first, narrowly intellectualist, picture, that of 'rational exclusivism', that seems closest to Plato's heart," (p.37). I cannot see why anyone who read Plato's dialogues as a whole, rather than picking out isolated proofs and arguments from within them, would be remotely inclined to agree.

In a similar vein, Cottingham tries to show that Aristotle, rather despite himself, was drawn to the same 'Platonic' confidence in the power of reason to dominate and control. 'Despite himself' because, of course, no one can deny that virtue ethics, with their emphasis on ethical habituation and their relatively positive recognition of finely tuned emotions in the well-rounded citizen, have won Aristotle a place among the good guys in the eyes of many recent thinkers. Cottingham is not ignorant of that picture of Aristotle —indeed he swallows its somewhat crude contrast between Aristotelian ethics and their supposedly Platonic antithesis, as that contrast is often drawn by enthusiasts for the neo-Aristotelian ethical project—but he does try, nonetheless, to fit Aristotle into his great schema, whereby the whole of Greek Ethics from Plato to Stoicism is (unconsciously?) tempted by a neat but unrealistic ratiocentric model, a model that idealises the life of pure reason. Tongue in cheek, I wonder whether we are supposed to diagnose in the Greek philosophers some kind of endless obsession with Plato, the father figure of rationality, a fantasy which we shall learn to diagnose in ourselves, and thence escape, once we realise that something called 'the unconscious' exists and that it accounts for our obsession with this picture.

There is something curiously self-refuting about the apology for psychoanalysis made by Cottingham in chapter four of his book. "Coming to terms with the non-rational parts of ourselves," Cottingham says, "is not to be confused with a bland acceptance of irrational drives and impulses"

(144).¹ Rather we are to go further, by taking on board the suggestion that the human psyche also manifests unconscious irrational impulses of which the agent is unaware, stemming from causes which are essentially not open to reason's scrutiny, let alone its control. This claim is fundamental to the psychoanalytic approach, and in some degree alien to earlier traditions (regardless of the extent to which they welcomed or rejected the ordinary sort of explicit feelings and emotions as allies or opponents in their pursuit of the good life). But what is it that persuades us to posit such unacknowledged impulses that resist rational scrutiny? The 'we' that becomes convinced that there are such things is the 'we' of rational explanation, and it is in an attempt to explain, rationally, behaviour that resists rational explanation, that we appeal to some unconscious motives. Cottingham resorts to telling the stories of hypothetical individuals undergoing analysis, in his attempt to defend the explanatory value of theories that allow room for the unconscious. But eventually there comes a point when he has to ask us, the reader, like the patient on the couch, to accept the explanation on the grounds that it all makes sense:

Seen in the context of the deep and unrealized needs of his childhood, the 'infatuated' decision to pursue his flighty and superficial mistress now emerges as all of a piece with the complex structure of his early life. (159)

'Emerges as all of a piece' seems to be another way of saying that it all now seems intelligible to him; but is it not the case that, to get this result, the analyst simply plays upon a ratiocentric urge on the part of the patient, an urge to explain, justify or make rational sense of all his apparently irrational behaviour? Thus, by pursuing an explanation, to the point where his still so very "Platonic" and tyrannical reason is satisfied that it now sees how it all 'fits together' and makes sense, the analyst succeeds in persuading the patient that he has discovered a truth about himself. He jumps to the conclusion that the purported explanation is true, because he now sees it as rationally intelligible: it fits into an apparently explanatory structure, a structure set up for the purpose by psychoanalytic theory, whereby patterns of events and purported connections that would not formerly have seemed rational can appear, after all, to be explanatory and acceptable to reason. Thus, so far from allowing us to acknowledge and accept an irrational and inexplicable side to our nature, the theory actually provides a rationalising structure within which the patient and analyst alike can draw the inference that nothing is after all so irrational or inexplicable, and we no longer need to see ourselves as acting on bizarrely inexplicable or unpredictable impulses. The unconscious becomes tamed and reasonable as it is slotted into structures that seem to have a predictable pattern, predictable so that it smacks of explanation. But of course it is an ineradicable urge to rationalise and explain that impels the patient to fall for what are, by any other criteria, dangerously ill-supported inferences. The attraction of psychoanalysis demonstrates, in the end, nothing so much as the powerful dominance of ratiocentric impulses in the human psyche.

I think that this line of thought should make us think twice about whether Cottingham is right to conclude that the project facing philosophical ethics has much changed in the light of psychoanalysis. It seems clear that psychoanalysis itself perceives the pathological condition of a person who is in the grip of irrational fears, obsessions or disturbed behaviour patterns as one that requires therapy. The diagnosis that identifies the source of the disturbance, perhaps in some traumatic event or abuse in the person's past, does not provide us with a reason to endorse, welcome or embrace the obsessive behaviour, nor would we alter our conception of the choiceworthy life for human beings. Rather, we find that the condition in which subconscious fears or desires have got out of proportion renders life intolerable. It is an attempt to remedy the condition—to lay to rest the disturbance that had led to psychic disorder—that motivates the therapy. Thus we are not invited to suppose that our well-being depends upon having such disordered or irrational obsessions, or that we should redefine the successful human life as one in which reason relaxes its control over our voluntary behaviour. At most we are invited to see that the remedy for situations of severe mental disorder may involve redirecting certain deeply embedded motivations whose explanation or cause is not transparent to the conscious mind. This is a minor adjustment, if an adjustment at all, to Plato's observation in the *Republic* that there is more than one part to the psyche, and that the non-rational kinds of motivation can be either educated or corrupted by many childhood influences, including stories, art, drama, music and the presence of appropriate role models.

Jonathan Lear's *Open Minded* is a collection of essays, many of them with an explicitly apologetic agenda on behalf of Freud's psychoanalytic theories. The first essay, for instance, entitled 'On Killing Freud (Again)' was originally written as a response to the decision by the Library of Congress to

¹ One might be forgiven for thinking that it was the latter that had been the focus of attention in the rather problematic readings of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the early moderns that I have just been discussing from the first three chapters.

postpone an exhibition on Sigmund Freud in 1995. This was seen as symptomatic of a culture of Freud-bashing, and Lear attempts a rebuttal of certain well-known criticisms of the Freudian enterprise. He includes, for example, a brief response (p.25) to Popper's objection that the claims of psychoanalysis are in principle unfalsifiable so that we should rightly classify it as a pseudo-science. Popper's challenge seems to me to be much more powerful and interesting than Lear allows, and his facile claim that, on the same basis, nothing could falsify history or economics or our ordinary psychological interpretation of persons rather misses the point and avoids a good opportunity to explore the degree to which psychoanalysis relies on underdetermining the features required in the explanans, or appeals in its causal explanations to experiences that are so vaguely specified and so universally distributed as to make any purported correlations meaningless.

Lear's pro-Freudian obsession in *Open Minded* slightly mars what is otherwise a collection full of admirable insights into the work of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In contrast to Cottingham's rather derogatory classification of the ancients as benighted ratiocentrists, Lear finds, in their attention to the erotic and the tragic, and in the complex psychology of Plato's *Republic*, not merely subtle anticipations of ideas of current interest, but frequently insights that can move us towards a better understanding than Freud himself could have offered.

Six out of the twelve essays give more than passing attention to ancient matters, but of these the three that have most to say to ancient scholars have already appeared in contexts familiar within the discipline (two in *Phronesis* and one in *Aristotle and Moral Realism* ed. Robert Heinaman). Chapter 3, which has not appeared before, offers a perceptive reading of *Oedipus Tyrannus* (starting, wisely, with a total rejection of Freud's famous mis-reading of Oedipus) in which he focuses on the obsessive 'knowingness' that Oedipus displays which prevents him from stopping to find out what he does not know, and leads to his tragic uncovering of what he needed to know all too late. Lear moves to a diagnosis of the same sort of knowingness in modern society, because whereas Sophocles' audience could learn their lesson and retreat to a recognition of fate and the gods, we find ourselves left with no alternative source of truth than that of our own making. "We seem thus to be trapped in the Oedipal position of 'knowingness' with no place to go" (p.53).

Chapter four explores Socrates' and Plato's credentials as "ancestors" of psychoanalysis, Socrates because he invented a cathartic method of cross-examination to try to expose the deepest beliefs of his interlocutor and thereby heal their superficial errors, Plato because he invented the idea of a multi-faceted psyche containing conflicts within itself. Lear then proceeds to link some of Plato's work with an anticipation of the notion of transference, but there is little detailed work on the ancient material as such. More fruitful for specialists in ancient philosophy is the chapter on Plato's *Symposium*, not previously published, which devotes considerable attention to the episode with Alcibiades, and also again returns to the issue of how far Socrates can be viewed as a proto-psychoanalyst.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 are the ones that may be familiar to readers from previous publications. 'Testing the Limits: the Place of Tragedy in Aristotle's Ethics' starts with some sound reflections on the place of political debate in the Aristotelian polis, as the context in which political animals can become most fully themselves, and then proceeds to reflect on the Platonic objections to Tragedy and Aristotle's alternative account of tragedy (with a brief glance at Freud between the two). The emphasis is on the way in which Aristotle makes tragedy 'safe for human consumption' by focusing on pity as a way of drawing limits round the human; this Lear finds less satisfactory than Plato's acknowledgement of the darker side of human desires, and the consequent limits to human rationality and autonomy.

Chapter nine ('Catharsis') is a further exploration of Aristotle's discussion of Tragedy. Lear challenges past work on the precise significance that Aristotle intended in using the word 'catharsis' for the effect of tragedy on the audience, arguing that the various attempts to interpret it as a purgation, purification or education of the emotions are all misguided. Instead Lear concludes that the process cannot be any kind of corrective for a pathological condition, but must in fact be a method of awakening in us emotions in response to situations of tragic proportions, emotions that we thereby learn to release in a 'safe environment' within the theatre.

Chapter 10 is Lear's familiar 1992 article 'Inside and outside the *Republic*' which includes a response to Bernard Williams' classic objections to the city-state analogy (*Exegesis and Argument* ed. Lee, Mourelatos, Rorty, 1973). Lear responds by appealing to the notion of internalisation of a psychological structure from a cultural environment, which makes the image of isomorphism between city-soul and citizen-soul far from unintelligible. The essay concludes with some attention, once again, to Plato's views on poetry. I thought that this essay stood up well to re-reading seven years on.

As will be apparent from my remarks above, many of the essays in this book are heavily engaged with the psychoanalytic project, which will doubtless draw a variety of reactions from readers. Lear's enthusiasm for the theoretical commitments of Freud's own psychoanalytic methodology goes well beyond the minimal demand that one allow theoretical space for the possibility of motives not directly

open to rational scrutiny, a demand that I imagine most would now be willing to meet. Sadly (for this is a book full of nuggets of gold) more than once I found myself mentally placing the essay I was reading on a notional reading list for undergraduates, only to remove it again as I read on and the insights it offered were undercut by uncritical application to Freudian ends, so that I came away feeling that the essay provided the very model of how an undergraduate should not be taught to proceed. It is understandable that one might react to ill-informed and blinkered Freud-bashing with the same kind of zeal as that with which religious believers might react against ill-informed and blinkered persecution, but it seems that many of the insights that Lear offers can be appreciated without the Freudian setting, and that they would have a wider audience and make a richer contribution if, instead of subserving a defence of Freud, they were presented in the service of a better understanding of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Wittgenstein or Kant.

There is a sense in which Lear provides an answer to Cottingham, in his richer understanding of why both Plato and Aristotle were interested in the effect of Tragedy on audiences in the Athenian *Polis* or in the ideal republic. Plato's negative attitude towards the arts, as it appears in the *Republic*, seems to be a recognition of a threat that is real. It rightly observes that art can be a powerful influence in human life, though Socrates' imagined response in the *Republic* seems to be unduly pessimistic for real life; indeed we should surely want to give greater prominence to Plato's openness in the *Phaedrus* to a rather different image of the connection between madness and creativity. By contrast with both Cottingham and Lear, Nehamas' exploration of the image of Socrates in Plato's dialogues presents a more optimistic sense that a genuinely successful human life, integrating and nurturing both the rational and the erotic aspects of the psyche, is not only possible but incumbent upon us. In Plato's irrepressible portrait of Socrates such a life involves a passionate commitment to reason, so that the unexamined life cannot be deemed acceptable and one cannot rest from enquiry into reasons; yet at the same time it also demands an intense, personal commitment to following deeply-held intuitions, despite the fact that they have so far resisted intellectual scrutiny and may well do so for ever. This strangely contradictory model is the one that can seem both irritating and yet compelling; it also seems to hold out a better vision for the authentic human achievement, manifest in a life that does not lack enthusiasm. The Socratic life turns out to be one in which the unconscious desires are beautifully awakened by what is genuinely rationally attractive, so that the whole psyche is pulling together towards a single goal. This model does not deny the ratiocentric urge to explain and give reasons; nor does it deny that our motives may be deeper and less open to scrutiny than we would have liked to believe, when we started out in the self-deceptive confidence that Socrates initially instils into his unsuspecting interlocutor; nor does it seek to suppress or censor the inspiration that derives from an appreciation of the beautiful and the good. That is why, after reading and reflecting on all three of these books, it was the blankly ironic face of Socrates, as it emerged in Nehamas' book, that seemed to come nearest to revealing the philosopher's answer (or is it a question?) to how we ought to live.