

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 16 | Issue 2

Article 16

4-1-1999

Phillips, ed., RUSH RHEES: ON RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Gordon Graham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Graham, Gordon (1999) "Phillips, ed., RUSH RHEES: ON RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol16/iss2/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

not to be abolished but controlled so that we have “(relatively) stable linguistic conventions, (approximate) fulfillment of a variety of relevant historical conditions, and close (enough) correspondence between what the authors intended to say and what they actually said” (p. 145).

The final three chapters might be thought of as applications. Chapter 8 argues that in the light of postmodern philosophy of science, religious experience can have evidential value for theological claims. Chapter 9 argues that the social sciences have value presuppositions, that they require ethics as a higher science to adjudicate those issues, and that ethics in turn requires theology as a higher science to adjudicate its disputes. The final chapter is devoted to an analysis of supervenience and the non-reducibility of ethics to biology.

Drawing creatively on a wide variety of literatures, Murphy offers many challenging claims deserving careful examination and wide discussion. But the reader should not look for help in grasping the relation between Anglo-American and French postmodernism. Here Murphy’s massive erudition fails her. Too dependent on secondary sources, she too readily passes on such popular but insupportable claims as that deconstruction refutes itself (p. 60), denies reference (p. 136, 140-41), and argues for a “total indeterminacy” of meaning (p. 141). The latter would be the case, of course, if the only alternative to total determinacy were total indeterminacy, but that is just the kind of modernist thinking Murphy herself repudiates in favor of meaning that is “(relatively) stable”. So on her own account it simply doesn’t follow from French arguments against total determinacy that the authors espouse total indeterminacy.

A more helpful treatment would have asked: why is Anglo-American postmodernism so preoccupied with the question of justification and its criteria while French postmodernism is not? No one, I think, can challenge that fact. But how to explain it? Perhaps the solution is to be found in that heritage of modernity that is most important to each side to preserve in some postmodern form. Modern philosophy was about justification in large measure because it was about critique. Anglo-American postmodernity asks the question: how is justification possible after foundationalism? French postmodernism asks the question: how is critique possible after foundationalism?

Critique and justification were essentially inseparable in modernity. Perhaps they should be for postmodernity as well. Perhaps we should not think with Murphy of Anglo-American postmodernity as a safer alternative to the French versions but, to use one of her own phrases, seek “an integrating model” (p. 81) in which the two are, well, integrated.

Rush Rhees: On Religion and Philosophy, edited by **D.Z. Phillips**. Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xxii and 389. Cloth \$69.95

GORDON GRAHAM, University of Aberdeen

Rush Rhees is best known not because of his philosophical writings, but because of his philosophical connexions. A student and friend of Wittgenstein (later one of his literary executors), he became the teacher

and colleague of a subsequent generation of Wittgensteinians—Peter Winch, R. F. Holland and D. Z. Phillips notably. He published very little, and virtually none on his own initiative. He left, however, voluminous writings, and this book is an edited version of some of them.

There can be no doubt that it represents a prodigious work of editorship including, I imagine, a lot of deciphering as well as sorting, collecting and arranging. For this Phillips certainly deserves credit. But does he also deserve thanks? This depends on whether the outcome is regarded of special interest and enduring value. Interestingly, Rhees himself, it seems, thought not. Phillips records in the Introduction that when pressed about publishing some of his writings, Rhees said he had “nothing, absolutely nothing”. In view of this remark Phillips understandably expresses his considerable surprise that this “nothing” should turn out to be 16,000 pages of script. But presumably Rhees knew full well the number of pages and meant, rather, “nothing of consequence.” And it is by this standard, his standard, that what is published here should be judged.

Philosophical consequence must be assessed in a context. I may have written much and yet have nothing new to say if someone has said it before me, or others have pursued the matter further. In the case of Rhees, I am inclined to think, both of these conditions were satisfied. He was a convert to Wittgenstein’s way of doing philosophy, and a very good exponent of it. He was also, obviously, an inspiring teacher, partly because of the sheer painstaking integrity of his intellect, and its transparency. But so inspiring was he, he transmitted, without residue it could be argued, the heart and spirit of Wittgenstein, with the result that those very able people who were inspired by it worked up the Wittgensteinian philosophical method and style to maximum effect. One outcome of this, however, is that between the originating genius of the master and the explorations of the subsequent generation, there is little room left for Rhees’s own writings to occupy.

Anyone reading these papers who also knows the context cannot but be struck by the regular recurrence of all the familiar moves and phrases. “‘God exists’ is not a statement of fact. You might say that it is not in the indicative mood. It is a confession—or expression of faith. . . . If you ask, ‘Well, when we are talking about God, does our language not refer to anything?’, then I should want to begin . . . by emphasizing something of the special grammar of this language” (p.49). “Some of your trouble comes from thinking of Christianity and of belief in God as a kind of *theory*” (p.127). “Can’t philosophy *decide* whether there is a God or not? If it were like that, the question would not have the importance it has”(p.153). “. . . you ought to have referred *much* more to examples. This is the principal shortcoming all through your essay . . . although thinking of good examples is not easy” (p. 301). For Rhees there are few errors or problems, but rather ‘confusions’ and ‘puzzles’.

We have heard all this before, many times, not least from Phillips. So striking is the similarity of language, that in reading the pages presented here, the thought ‘so that’s where it came from’ is impossible to resist. Nor, I suppose, would Phillips, who himself has done much to make these thoughts and moves a familiar voice in philosophy of religion,

want us to think otherwise. But the question naturally arises: is there any special point in hearing it again?

It is striking that much of what is published here is taken from extended letters and exchanges, and a great deal appears in the form of notes, incomplete sentences and non-continuous prose. This is to be expected if Rhees's writings are thought of as primarily comments, musings, queries and reflections. And so they ought. Close to his death Rhees remarked, apparently, "Discussion is my only medicine. When that is finished, so am I" (p.xx). Now it seems to me that discussion and conversation play a vital part in philosophy. To say this, however, is to observe that philosophy is an activity, one involving the engagement of living minds and the pursuit of personal, shared, understanding. It is not only this, of course. Part of the point, and often the outcome, of such discussion and conversation is the formulation of a point of view into a more finished form which admits of publication and is thereby laid down for future generations. But not all writings, even highly considered ones, should be thought of in this way. Some, many perhaps, are part of the preparatory conversation, and take their point, and life one might say, precisely from this context. To put them in print is to freeze a living thing, to attribute to them a nature that they do not have and cannot bear. On reading this volume, it is hard to resist the thought that this is precisely what has happened here.

It is highly understandable that those who learnt so much from Rhees should want others to learn from him also. Now that he is dead, and has left so many pages behind, it is tempting to suppose that there is to be found preserved in them the thoughts, insights and stimulus that students and other admirers found in his conversation. This, no doubt, is why Peter Winch, before he died, concurred (in the publishers blurb) with Phillips's view that the material in this volume stands "clearly head and shoulders above anything being written in contemporary philosophy of religion". But there is a mistake here, and not one of estimation. Conversation is essentially an exchange. What we cannot do with this book is ask it questions, and yet this is what every page invites: How do you mean? Tell me that again? But surely. . . ? Precisely this is impossible, however, because what is presented to us is not the living voice, but the fixed and final page.

Usually great philosophers are contributors both to the contemporary conversation which constitutes the activity of philosophizing in their own day and to the repository of texts which constitutes its enduring residue for future generations. Sometimes, however, despite having taken little part in the conversation, they leave us with writings of great interest and importance. Most ordinary philosophers, by contrast, simply contribute to the conversation. More rarely the contribution of great philosophers, or at least specially talented ones, is simply being a voice in the conversation. This, I am disposed to think, is the case with Rush Rhees. And in case this remark is thought of as a slighting judgement, I should add that it is true of Socrates also. Plato, however, wrote *for* Socrates. Phillips is not here writing for Rush Rhees. He is giving us conversations. These cannot but be distorted, and perhaps devalued, by

publication. As Rush Rhees himself believed, I think. That Rhees was a very considerable philosopher who had an important and continuing influence on the subject need not be in doubt. What is in doubt is whether that influence can be captured, or served, by publishing his literary remains.