

fully-formed human is so mysterious to us that we naturally stumble and are often uncertain how to react to it. Much of the time we rightly treat it with a strong, general, undifferentiated respect. But sometimes there are emergencies – genuine clashes of interest where its claims do really have to be weighed against those of the people surrounding it. This is a real choice of evils, requiring decisions that must try to do justice to all parties. I have seen no arguments in this book to persuade me that such questions can always be given the same simple answer. But I do have a clearer idea of the background that has led people to want one.

MARY MIDGLEY

PHILOSOPHY AND ITS PUBLIC ROLE edited by William Aiken and John Haldane, *St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2004, Pp.viii+272, £14.95, pbk.{PRIVATE}

This is a collection of papers by former Fellows of the St. Andrews Centre for Ethics, Philosophy and Public Affairs. Several of the authors are American and it is therefore appropriate that the opening piece, by Haldane, considers the transference of philosophical leadership in the English-speaking world from Britain to the United States. While in many areas of philosophy that has brought huge rewards, it may explain some of the unease I feel with the essays in the present volume. Many seem to work within the parameters of the discourse of “public reason” in the American “constitutional” context: at its lowest the “democratic” process of sitting down and working out socially convenient arrangements to solve immediate problems with agreed disagreement on fundamentals – if not in many quarters an assumption that moral foundationalism is impossible or unnecessary.

The tone of much of the discussion is summed up by John Arthur as follows (p. 44): “Public reason’s most fundamental commitment – at least Rawls’s social contract variant – is to identify institutions and laws that can win the approval of all citizens, viewed as free and independent equals.” In this and similar formulations of contemporary needs, we find that the active role of the state (or of the government or the *polis* more widely understood) has more or less disappeared; it has been replaced (at least in social policy) by the notion of the provision of a “level playing-field” for warring, and often well – if covertly – financed interest-groups. Which in some cases, as in that of abortion, amounts to promoting a compromise between good and evil policies – though happily Rawls’s goal of the approval of all the citizens can never be reached.

This book admittedly is about applied philosophy, and it is revealing that its general spirit is post-Kantian, the debate being determined by the deliverances of practical reasoning, without metaphysics. That means that from the Catholic point of view the results can only be provisional, even though some of the detailed analysis is useful and sophisticated. Thus one of the essays concerns the possible special responsibility of intellectuals to contribute to public debate. Intellectuals can be sophists and publicists as well as philosophers; indeed if reasoning is solely instrumental, as many hold, they cannot be anything else.

As is appropriate, the remaining topics in the present volume are wide-ranging: they include the individual and society, post-mortem reproduction, the nature and desirability of equality, human rights (the revealing current phrase for natural rights), punishment (capital and other), globalization and the perils of the internet, faith schools and military tribunals. Underlying and unresolved questions include: the benefits and limits of tolerance; the nature and limits of human rationality, a topic on which an untoward degree of optimism is generally shown; a possible non-conventional basis for rights claims.

The attentive reader of the present volume can learn how to sharpen his arguments about the contemporary problems debated – especially where the wisdom of

Aristotle is invoked in a more contemporary context – but this reader at least suffered from a feeling well described by Alasdair MacIntyre: that in the absence from the “analytic” global village of seriously defensible foundations for moral and political decision-making, we are living in a world of unending and inconclusive debate. In this book, as in much current writing on applied philosophy, we enter the Academy of the Chattering Classes. Many of the essays here presented may have produced good discussion when they were delivered, but in view of the ever-growing number of intellectuals who find their way to getting their thoughts published, we need to ask whether talk should not far more frequently be left as just that, without damage to sustainable forests.

JOHN RIST