

**THE THREAD OF LIFE** by Richard Wollheim (Cambridge: CUP, 1985). Pp xv + 288. Price £20.

When, nearly 40 years ago, I was working on my first review one senior colleague advised me that my prime duty was to say, both about the author's project and about what had been done to fulfil that project, sufficient to enable readers to decide for themselves whether they either wanted or needed to pursue some closer acquaintance with the book. My advisor's intention must have been to discourage me from following his own wrong example, since he was at that time regularly exploiting other people's new publications as the occasional pegs on which to hang his own always lively and worthwhile weekly contributions. But that advice was no less excellent for being yet one more case of 'Do what I say, not what I do'.

It can, however, be followed in the present case only in so far as a demonstration of my own inability to provide any intelligible account of Professor Wollheim's project will persuade some that this is indeed just the book for them, and others that it is not.

Both characteristically and significantly Chapter 1, 'Living', opens with three sentences quoted from Kierkegaard's *Journal*. Then, after musing a little on this text, Wollheim announces his central theme: 'the issue of what it is to lead the life of a person' (p. 2). The dust jacket too informs us: that 'His central thesis is a mind dynamically conceived'; and that 'he proposes that we should take as fundamental the process of *living as a person*'.

Notice that this putative 'central thesis' is a topic and not, what in better days theses were all expected to be, a contention. And what are the possible alternatives which, by taking 'as fundamental the process of *living as a person*', Wollheim has it in mind to exclude? We are no doubt all born as (perhaps only potential) persons, and we will all surely die as persons; or perhaps as already, in effect, ex-persons. Now in the interim, what else is open to us but to live? And, being persons, what else could we live as but persons? Since such profound questions seem never to have occurred to Wollheim, we should not be surprised to find no answers to them in *The Thread of Life*.

What we do have is a long-sustained, enigmatic, allusive and elusive, causerie. Nowhere are we presented with any straightforward and businesslike statement of some problem; followed by an equally straightforward and businesslike examination of that problem; and concluding with the author's findings. In a namedropping Preface Wollheim remarks: that his book 'does not plot its course by reference to the work of other philosophers'; and that he is in this following the example of 'a philosopher to whom, on almost every other point of method or doctrine, I have found myself opposed: Gilbert Ryle' (p. xiv).

Whereas, however, it was reasonable enough, when *The Concept of Mind* had named almost no other writers, for Ryle to boast there was from cover to cover not a single footnote, it is, surely, slovenly for Wollheim, who devotes much of his space to discussing psychoanalysis, to provide very few quotations and absolutely no notes. It is not without reason that Wollheim expresses gratitude to egghead cafés in San Francisco, Berkeley, London, and New York: 'For nomadic writers such places are the equivalent of the great libraries that scholars tell me about' (p. xv).

To the present reviewer of a book as demanding as it is unrewarding the most remarkable thing must be the bizarre prefatory assertion: The philosopher of tradition to whom my intellectual debt is deepest is David Hume: I hope that this is obvious' (p. xiv). We might expect to see this falsehood followed by an equally incongruous tribute to 'the implacable Professor' J.L. Austin, aptly citing Austin's own contemptuous dismissal of *les ivresses des grandes profondeurs*.

ANTONY FLEW