

## THE PROBLEM OF METAPHYSICS, by D. M. MacKinnon. Cambridge Press. £2-95.

The hundred and seventy terse and lucid pages to which Professor MacKinnon has fined down his Gifford Lectures must surely prove a far more enduring and rewarding contribution to this illustrious series than the author himself would easily credit. Compared with the often prolix and discursive arguments of many of his predecessors, his sober and circumspect apologia for the possibility of metaphysics takes compelling hold of the reader and makes him reconsider how he looks at things. As a deployment of powers of speculative metaphysics that are not wholly unlike the finest in a great tradition, these lectures bear out what they propose.

Plato, Aristotle and Kant are chiefly the thinkers with whom, and over against whom, Professor MacKinnon develops his line of argument. There can, of course, be no future for metaphysics unless the Kantian strictures upon it are either respected or circumvented. But for all Kant's insistence on the role of the subject, it is not difficult to see that he holds to the position that 'in coming to know we do not construct a world of our own fashioning, but compel that which is given to us to yield its secrets in ways admitting of our assimilation'. This is not so different, after all, from Aristotle's approach to 'that which is given to us' in terms of 'forms of being' which are 'polarised upon substance'. Substances are what our discourse is finally always about. That which is substantial is that which is fundamental in referential discourse. In the opening chapter, then, Kant and Aristotle can be brought together as descriptive metaphysicians who seek to disclose the structure of what it is that the assertions we make are finally always about—that which is traditionally spoken of in the category of substance.

In the second chapter, with the help of Plato, we are brought to realise how a certain 'thrusting against the limits of language' takes us beyond the confines of ordinary referential discourse. The question arises which will dominate the rest of the book: what claims, if any, can be made for the truth or falsity of such extraordinary forays beyond the ordinarily referential. The result cannot be taken seriously if it is only our own creation and projection; it must somehow be a discovery of what is the case. This leads naturally to a chapter on the notion of fact—a notion much debated in English philosophy since Moore and Russell—and Professor MacKinnon argues that, while our notion of fact must certainly be much more liberal than that permitted by

radical empiricists, we cannot intelligibly dispense with concern for the factuality of things about which we wish to make metaphysical assertions. The cavalier attitude towards the factual which is displayed by some of the theological *avant-garde* reveals how deeply, if unwittingly, they are possessed by the temper of idealism—even if they may regard themselves as positivists and even as materialists!

After a brief chapter on the climate of positivism from which we are emerging ('we', there, being philosophers in the British universities), Professor MacKinnon turns, in a chapter which proves to be the watershed of the book, to the problem of ethics and metaphysics in Kant. As everybody knows, Kant makes metaphysics impossible and then encourages it to flourish in the form of ethics. He leaves us with the problem of something that eludes the powers of factual discourse to represent but which presses upon us with such directness and immediacy that we cannot doubt its reality. While claiming ultimacy for our freedom to originate our own lives as moral beings, Kant finds no satisfactory way of representing it. But how are we to talk sense about what we cannot properly represent? If there is something of whose reality we cannot doubt but to which we are powerless to refer in the ordinary language of descriptive representation, how are we to proceed? How are we to allude referentially enough to what must by definition elude representation if we are to avoid the charge of subjective invention? 'So we find ourselves trying to do the impossible, to find the means of saying the unsayable'.

In the rest of the book Professor MacKinnon explores one by one six different fields of discourse about that which is metaphysical and transcendent, each of which can fulfil the condition of being in some measure referential. He begins by devoting two chapters to the notion of parable. It is of the nature of the parabolic to intimate ways in which things in fact are. In this sense parables can be true or false, and they can enlarge our stock of knowledge about what is the case. But after a lengthy and very illuminating study of parabolic discourse, Professor MacKinnon concludes that the crucial question remains whether, by means of parable, myth, etc., we are enabled to talk sense about what transcends ordinary discourse. He then turns back to Plato and Aristotle and interprets their metaphysical endeavours as the isolating of a sort of discourse that transcends

all others in that it is woven into the texture of every other sort of utterance. This is clearly a very promising way of approaching the doctrine of categories but we are left at that—'we have to ask ourselves whether the matter may not admit of other styles of treatment'. And if it is plainly to these other styles of treatment that Professor MacKinnon is himself more attracted, perhaps he has offered a clue there which others might profitably follow up. The failure of speculative nerve in latter-day Scholasticism surely need not taboo for ever all further attempts by students of Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas to practise metaphysics as a way of disclosing the references to the transcendental order woven into the fabric of our everyday commerce, through knowing and choosing, with what is. But we shall do well to heed Professor MacKinnon's warning that the metaphysician can be every bit as narrow in his conception of experience as any positivist. Bentham and Plato come close to one another only in their dismissal of poetry: 'the Platonist and the positivist agree in dodging the disciplines of close attention to the concrete and familiar and the enlarged awareness of realities, and indeed of the way in which they reveal themselves to us, that may be born of such piecemeal concentration'. This admonition is issued in the course of a chapter in which Cézanne's attitude to his work is discussed. As one meditates on the self-understanding of such an artist one begins to realise something of the complex ramifications of the notion of transcendence. This is where the metaphysician must go to school to others—and here Professor MacKinnon gracefully acknowledges how much he owes to his wife in matters of poetry and art.

Following upon these explorations of parable, classical ontology and the experience of the artist, there is a chapter on the notion of miracle. The instructive ambivalence in the presentation of the miraculous, i.e. the transcendent, in the Christian tradition, emerges in an exemplary study of the irony in the story in the Fourth Gospel of the raising of Lazarus. The one who is presented by the narrator as able to raise a dead man to life is immediately treated in the sequel as himself subject to mortality. A tale that demonstrates the omnipotence of the divine man is interwoven with a report of a meeting of the Sanhedrin that takes for granted his vulnerability. The miraculous sovereignty of Jesus over death did not exempt him from the power of a familiar sort of web of plotting and machination. By juxtaposing the story of the raising of Lazarus with the report of the

decision to put Jesus to death, the narrator qualifies the miracle with a certain irony, which jolts the reader into realising the paradoxical nature of the Christian transcendent.

This leads to what is perhaps the most original work in the book—an exploration of tragedy as a discourse into which reference to transcendence insinuates itself. Professor MacKinnon seeks to break with monism—'that sort of synthesis which seeks to obliterate by the vision of an all-embracing order the sharper discontinuity of human existence'—in order to open the way towards representing the relations of the familiar to the transcendent in a discourse that does justice precisely to the *discontinuity*. He suggests that a refusal of monism need not commit us to radical irrationality and atheism but may on the contrary bring us to understand tragedy as 'a form of representation that . . . enables us to project as does no available alternative our ultimate questioning'. The problem is 'to recapture the tragic element in the Christian vision'. The way in which things are is disclosed to us most tellingly in the discourse of tragedy.

And finally, in the sixth and last of these explorations, we are brought back, by a study of Arthur Koestler's testimony to his liberation from Stalinism, to the fact of the intervention of the ethical in human life as the presence of an absolute. There is a kind of intrusion upon us that makes it clear that it is not up to us to choose our stance towards reality. 'We are concerned with what is not a matter of our choice but what is thrust upon us'. And if this seems a thoroughly Kantian point at which to come to rest it should also be clear that the preceding chapters have gone much further than Kant ever did to situate the discourse of ethics over against several other fields of discourse in which 'a pattern thrust upon human notice' is apparently disclosed. But in fact the conclusion to the book—a sort of coda—is more Aristotelian than Kantian because Professor MacKinnon quotes at some length from a remarkable long poem by Hugh MacDiarmid, 'On a Raised Beach' (a poem first published in 1934 and written, entirely in English, in the Shetland Isles), which registers and celebrates the sheer factuality of the rock-strewn landscape, and enables the poet and, after him, the philosopher, to be 'delivered from a self-regarding anthropocentrism': 'The world is not of our making; its fundamental orders do not express the haphazard play of our imaginings. Rather, that order is something in whose forms we may be confident in as much as without them there would be no

objectivity; and one of these forms is the principle of substance'. The poet's meditation on the making of stones—on 'lithogenesis'—leads back to Aristotle's doctrine of substance—but also to Aristotle's doctrine of God: 'Aristotle's first mover, whose activity is defined as *noesis noeseos*, is too lightly dismissed by Christian theists as too coldly indifferent an ultimate to be bearable; this because to recall Aristotle's theology in the light of this poem is to be reminded that at least it honestly faced the question of what ultimately is, without prejudging the answer, that it must be an ultimate concerned with the human scene'.

There will be no future for metaphysics unless the ontology of the theist can face the facts about the nature of what is with as much fidelity as the ontology of the atheist. Professor MacKinnon's final shaft is to wish that he had the gift of pastiche to be able to write as Lenin might have done about a great deal of modern theology. No one would call Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* philosophy, he tells us; 'yet it is the sort of work that the philosopher who is concerned with the problem of metaphysics would do well to remember'.

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**BANDA**, Philip Short, London and Boston. *Routledge & Kegan Paul*, 1974. pp. 316 + Bibliography 4 + Notes 27 + Index 8. Price £3.50.

Since this is the first full-length biography of Dr Hastings Banda, Life-President of Malawi, Philip Short's main concern is clearly not so much to gather comment on this extraordinary man as to document in detail the facts of his life and confirm them with as much evidence as possible. Such an approach is necessary, given the tendency of successful political leaders to obscure, reinterpret or even rewrite history, particularly their own. Certain facts invite suppression. We learn, for example, that when Banda moved from his medical practice in London to Ghana in 1953 it was primarily to escape the publicity from divorce proceedings in which he had been named as co-respondent, and when Short adds that 'Mrs French joined him (Banda, in Ghana), and there they lived together as man and wife' (p. 79) he is careful to quote as his sources 'Chiume, Matinga and unattributable interviews'. The frequency with which the rubric 'unattributable interviews' occurs is itself a heavy hint that Malawi is not yet ready for an objective description of its leaders. There is entertaining anecdote: Banda is renowned for his fastidiousness, and in England 'When he (Banda) took meals in a restaurant, he carried with him a small hand-towel which he used in preference to that provided in the washroom' (p. 37).

However, the aim of recounting anecdote and detail of Banda's private life is not to mock him or accuse him of hypocrisy but rather to establish the complex nature of his personality, 'his facility for maintaining un-integrated an array of conflicting ideas' (p. 316). This is vital, because while such inconsistency is absent at the moments of Banda's greatest triumphs, the secession of Malawi from the Federation and the attainment of full independence from Britain, it characterises his

important pronouncements about policy towards white-ruled southern Africa. Short argues convincingly in his conclusion that Banda's promotion of contact between black and white and the fear which Banda believed to be basic to apartheid stand logically in contradiction to each other. (Incidentally, one could go on from there and ask how such illogicality compares with that of current British policy in southern Africa, where firms like Lonrho are encouraged to exploit the economies and yet where the Government disclaims all political responsibility, and further whether it surpasses the illogicality of the O.A.U. which fulminates against apartheid while failing to condemn genocide within its own member states.)

Radical changes have taken place in nearly all African countries in the decade or so since independence. The European parliamentary system of government and opposition has yielded to the supremacy of the executive and a single state party; the European legal system with its emphasis on the protection of the innocent has been replaced by less cumbersome judicial procedures—and some procedures that are not even judicial but merely military; and, most important, the leader soars above those comrades who fought with him for independence. Banda is Kamuzu, Messiah, hence the knock-about description of Malawi as a 'one-man Banda'. An appealing characteristic of Banda is the candour with which he justifies such changes. First, the irrelevance of democracy in Africa today:

'The people in Britain today take everything for granted—trade unionism, free assembly, and freedom of the press—but I can quote instances after instances to prove that it was