

COMMUNITY AND IDEOLOGY. An Essay in Applied Social Philosophy, by Raymond Plant. *Routledge and Kegan Paul*, London, 1974. £2.80.

AGENCY AND URGENCY. The Origin of Moral Obligation, by Thomas E. Wren. *Precedent Publishing, Inc.*, New York, 1974. \$7.50.

The first of these books is brief and unassuming-looking, but full of insights and useful information. Also it faces squarely what seems to me about the most urgent and frequently evaded of basic social and political problems. The notion of 'community', it is pointed out, is a bit like that of 'democracy'; people are generally in favour of community, but admit that what it consists in is very obscure (pp. 12-13). It is often maintained that while members of communities treat one another as whole persons, members of mass societies regard one another simply as means to ends (p. 18). One hears of 'the loss of the total person in the anonymity of urban life' (p. 30), and community work, in accordance with much of the great tradition of sociology, is conceived as an attempt to counteract this.

Against the ideal of community, on the other hand, it has been pointed out that loss of it is 'a necessary condition of the emancipation of the self-conscious, self-directing individual' (p. 31). Hence the hostility to it evinced by such writers as Hobbes and Bentham, and in our own time by Dahrendorf, who stresses the illiberal and reactionary implications of the hankering for community. This is evidently a matter which deserves some thought, since most community workers would envisage their work as radical in intention and effect. The crucial question thus seems to be whether one can achieve a clear and distinct idea of 'community' as what politics and social work should be aiming at, while taking into account the criticisms which have been levelled at it (p. 34).

The author remarks that philosophy and social work have rather lost touch with one another in the last half century. I hope that this fine book will help to bring the estranged parties together again. After all, philosophical questions arise 'naturally when community workers reflect on the question of the justification of their own activity' (p. 6).

The title of the second of these two books, redolent as it is of Pseud's Corner, is far the worst thing about it. Its author admits to combining an analytical with a phenomenological

approach to the philosophy of action; an excellent thing, in my view, and a necessary condition for making a really useful contribution to the subject at this stage of its development.

The notion of human action, it is argued, is primitive and irreducible; it cannot be reduced to a relationship between externally observed events, or understood properly from the point of view of a mere spectator. Our experience of agency is basic even to our knowledge of the external world, which is pretty well that-which-there-is-for-us-to-act-upon. Since there are other agents, whose ends are liable to coincide or conflict with my own, there arise the problems of morality. Given that not all rules are right, and that one cannot go on *ad infinitum* justifying rules by appeal to other rules, there is needed some basic principle or set of principles of moral justification. Many such principles have of course been put forward by philosophers; the one proposed by this author, which derives from his basic conception of agency and from consideration of the problems of co-operation between agents, is: 'Act in the way that maintains and promotes the most effective harmony among agents' (p. 116).

Each agent is normally a member of many overlapping communities of harmonious agency; what is to be done when these are in conflict? The author seizes the bull by the horns, and declares roundly that we can have incompatible duties which do not tend to cancel one another out. This need not, according to him, paralyse one's moral agency, but may actually constrain one to greater moral achievement; though it could also, as he rather reluctantly concedes, conduce to a more virulent strain of immorality (p. 122). (If I'm wrong, whatever I do in my situation, then to hell with it all! I might as well enjoy myself without all these tiresome scruples.)

The book in general is to be commended as stimulating and thought-provoking, and as free from the triviality and practical irrelevance of so much moral philosophy.

HUGO MEYNELL