

## REVIEWS

Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns. Rethinking Modernity*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 236 p.

This book of professor Rosen is a collection of essays, some new and some reprinted, which, according to the author, are offered as a contribution to the unending task of restoring the seriousness and difficulty to the obligation of being a resident of modernity - as prolegomena to modernity. This becomes clearer by the author's thoughts that "We have all become hermeneuts and deconstructors simultaneously, that is to say, interpreters of a text that dissolves before our very gaze. In the contemporary idiom, reading has been transformed into writing. The rejection of domination is accordingly also the exercise of the ultimate domination or rewriting of history, an activity hitherto reserved for tyrants. [...] What I wish to defend is the thesis that it is difficult to be a modern. I would therefore reject the facile assertion, popular in some quarters, of a quarrel between antiquity and modernity as an opposition between austere nobility on the one hand and sophistry on the other." (viii).<sup>1</sup>

With a linguistic adeptness and a language which sometimes takes poetic flights and sometimes startles the reader by its rhetorical use, Rosen exercises a polemic against popular words of our time, as post-modernism, ("Postmodernism is the Enlightenment gone mad. [...] My point is rather that this extreme rhetoric does an injustice to the paradigm of enlightenment." (20)), while simultaneously he does not hesitate to criticize great philosophers of the past. A lot of insight can be sensed through the pages of this book and it can serve as a source of inspiration over a wide range of subjects.

In his first chapter, "A Modest Proposal to Rethink Enlightenment", Rosen lays down the premises of his subject and indicates his own aim and proposal. Some citations will help the reader to understand the spirit and the *problematique* of the book: "That it [the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns] could not have occurred in antiquity in the same terms is a historical contingency which takes nothing away from the capacity of modern thinkers to see themselves in the mirror of the past. If the doctrine of historical relativism were true, there would be no such quarrel because the mirror would be opaque." (2)

"I want now to argue on behalf of modified or moderate enlightenment. Underlying this argument is the presupposition that the differences

between the ancients and the moderns are contingent, or that there are ancients and moderns in both epochs. [...] The extreme form of my thesis is that the evidence for modernity may be derived from antiquity." (3)

Rosen exposes two main forms of attack on Enlightenment, which converge to the following fundamental political thesis: "The public expression of reason leads inevitably to the domination of reason by the imagination, which is in turn subservient to passion, and in the extreme instance of passion, to the will to power." (5). "In sum: enlightenment is held to be impossible because, if it is pursued, reason will either destroy itself or succumb to passion." (7). After having exposed an indeed frightening imaginary application of the classical paradigm of virtue, he concludes that: "The relation between theory and practice, precisely on the classical or ancient view, is such that we cannot apply the classical doctrine of virtue as a standard for improving modern moral and political life except by transforming that life beyond recognition, and indeed, in the extreme case by destroying it. If this is right, then there is something immoderate about classical moderation." (11), and suggests that "If radical conservatism leads to tyranny and radical enlightenment to nihilism, then perhaps it is radicalism that should be avoided." (12).

Rosen himself is a proponent of modernity, but this does not prevent him from searching for the link between antiquity and modernity: "Revolutions may advance in stages. Thus the inner logic of philosophy may provide a continuity between antiquity and modernity that presents itself as historical opposition." (14). He believes, in connection to this, that "The greater nobility of modernity is not the consequence of modern arguments, but rather of the genuine philosophical nobility of the ancients, as manifested in the revolution instigated by Socrates. [...] If deductive arguments are themselves noble and base, then there is no noncircular way in which to demonstrate by such arguments the rational superiority of one paradigm of nobility to another. [...] In the nature of things, we must employ rhetorical as well as logical arguments; it even seems to follow that rhetoric is more fundamental than, although it certainly cannot dispense with, logic." (19).

His own paradigm consists of the following elements: "It is always better to know than not to know, in spite of the fact that knowledge may be put to evil use. The early moderns were entirely correct: Knowledge is power. [...] For this premise to make sense, we have to include moral and aesthetic sensibility to our definition of knowledge. [...] we need to

learn from the ancients not prudence or the superiority of temperance to courage, but the intimate connection between reason and the good. [...] The paradigm of enlightenment that I am defending is rooted in the present, not in the past or in the future. It is a paradigm that enjoins us to face the present courageously and that makes possible facing the present courageously because it does not define courage as a resolution toward the future or as resignation toward the past. [...] we must acknowledge the wisdom of the past [...] as we cannot take the present seriously without accepting the inevitability of the future. But if nobility is not present to mankind in its contemporary circumstances, it will not some day be vouchsafed to us as a gift of Being. ... [it] is more sensible and more prudent than the ancient paradigm as it is given political expression, and also than the extreme or immodest version of the Enlightenment understood as the bad infinite. [...] infinite progress means the valuelessness of each moment of progress [...] it is noble to strive for the increase of human power, not in the vain desire to become gods but in the reasonable desire not to be slaves." (21).

In the next chapter, "A Central Ambiguity in Descartes"<sup>2</sup>, Rosen deals with Cartesian dualism as a "secularized version of the Judeo-Christian teaching of the separateness of body and soul" (23), which "radically altered the classical conceptions of *theoria* and *physis*" (22). He concludes that neither Materialism nor Idealism can escape the problem of dualism. But also "existentialists and phenomenologists repeat the error of Idealists and Materialists [...] namely the error of assuming that the defect in dualism lies in unnecessary complexity. Philosophers of these schools all seem to have surrendered to the powerful human desire for unity, a desire that leads, if unchecked [...] to monism. But monism is merely a cryptic, and ambiguous, form of dualism" (35). He suggests that dualism must be replaced by trinitarianism, if it is to be replaced at all, including a third principle of *factic harmony* (rather than unity).

In "Anti-Platonism. A Case Study", Rosen goes on to examine the case of Anti-Platonism, and especially the question "Was Kant an Anti-Platonist?" (38). He argues that "what are popularly known as Platonism and Anti-Platonism may be found in both Plato and Kant. The technical differences between the two thinkers arise from different attempts to solve the same problem. But there is no solution to this problem, because each formulation of the solution is necessarily a restatement of the problem. Language is a human production, and in that sense an original; as a

statement of the structure of eternity, however, it is also an image. This holds true of formal or artificial as well as of natural languages" (64). In this way Rosen also explains why contemporary philosophers of science believe both that scientific theories are not direct representations of physical reality, and that science is knowledge of physical reality.

In "Freedom and Spontaneity in Fichte"<sup>3</sup>, Rosen is occupied mainly with the problem of freedom, and its conception in classical and modern thought. He deals with Fichte because "Fichte will be for us the paradigm of a theory, the failure of which licenses the abandonment of theory or rational justification of the primacy of freedom" (67), and concludes that "Freedom and self-consciousness unite in spontaneity.", "Fichte's doctrine of intellectual intuition is the ostensible explanation of how we grasp pure activity [...] there is no first principle of the deduction of the structure of activity" (82). And in a quasi-belligerent, quasi-didactic manner, he ends up by noticing that "surely there is an important lesson here for those who talk endlessly of liberating human thought from the reifying limitations of Platonism." (82).

Next, in "Sophrosyne and Selbstbewusstsein"<sup>4</sup>, the author is occupied with establishing the connection between Hegel and the Greeks, with respect to the general problem of subjectivity, and in particular, of self-consciousness. He searches for evidence in the ancient texts, especially in the Platonic, and gives some special weight to the Platonic doctrine of Eros as it relates to the connection between the ancient *sophrosyne* and Hegel's *Selbstbewusstsein*. He is led to the result that "The problem faced by the Socratics is how to preserve the stability of these forms [of things, that the mind sees or imitates] from the erotic motions of the soul. Their solution, developed more fully by Aristotle but already evident in Plato, is to conceive of noetic vision as a limit case of psychic motion, in which self-consciousness disappears in favour of the forms of knowledge. [...] Subjectivity is excluded from noetic activity by the very satisfaction of the erotic appetite for knowledge. One therefore finds in Greek thought the source of the Fichtean interpretation of reflective understanding, as well as the elements which, if properly developed, lead to the overcoming of Fichte by Hegel." (105-106).

In the chapter "Theory and Practice in Hegel: Union or Disunion?"<sup>5</sup>, Rosen raises the question "whether Hegel succeeds in establishing the union of theory and practice that is an essential ingredient in his system." (107), and goes on to substantiate his point with passages from the *En-*

*cyclopedia*, which refer to Hegel's opinions about the connection between thinking and freedom, to logic, philosophy of Spirit, etc. He charges Hegel with structural incoherence, and is not satisfied with possible defenses. In resuming his arguments, he comes to the question: "What is freedom? Is it thinking, or thinking united with doing? I have suggested that if freedom is *Sittlichkeit*, then the Absolute must be beyond freedom. But if freedom is thinking, then there is no union between theory and practice. It is by no means obvious that man can be free under any circumstances or in accordance with any philosophical explanation. I think, however, that if freedom is to have any meaning at all, there can be no union of physics and politics, to use somewhat old-fashioned terms. Man is free, if at all, only in the interstices of the split within nature between the cosmos and the state." (117).

In "Logic and Dialectic", Rosen defends the thesis that there is an intimate relation between logic and dialectic, in the sense that they are joined together in the texture of everyday modes of reasoning. However, dialectic is the broader of these two functions of thought; there can be no *logical justification of logic*. His main question is therefore "how to certify the rational, as opposed to the merely rhetorical, nature of the dialectical defense of logic." (118). The author goes on to quote from Tarski, as well as from Ian Hacking, and draws the important inferences that "intuitions cannot be simply replaced by theories, because the function of theories is to explain, and so to be measured by, intuitions. On the other hand, intuitions cannot be precisely captured in theories. It is almost immediately evident that the relation between intuition and logic is *dialectical*." (119) and also that "any natural language is by nature dialectical rather than logical. Justifications for the semantics of classical or deviant logics are not arbitrary with respect to common usage [...] I am not denying that any sentence uttered in natural language can be analyzed in accord with the laws of classical logic. I am asserting that the decision to engage in this analysis must itself be justified by higher laws, and these laws are dialectical." (121). And he concludes that "the intention of dialectic is to provide a rational basis for logic, one that it cannot furnish for itself. In other words, logic is powerless against rhetoric; and the distinction between logic and rhetoric leaves the way open for a doctrine of rationality with respect to rhetoric. Dialectic is such a doctrine." (125).

Rosen then shifts his interest first towards logical consequence, the

*follows from*, where he believes that “The quarrel between Platonism and nominalism is not about the sense of logical consequence but about the nature (or lack of nature) of *what* follows from *what*. We may be able to avoid a good bit of ontological controversy by shifting our focus from the question of logical forms to the question of logical consequence. Perhaps we shall be able to settle the question of *what* once we have answered the question of *follows from*.” (132), and then towards *contradiction* arising from intuitions, where he also discusses Lakatos, agreeing with him that “there is no way to repair the contradictory consequences of some intuitions, in a rigorous or formalizable manner, by having recourse to other intuitions. The correct inference to draw from this is to give up the attempt to formalize natural language.” (142). He also criticizes the Popperians for retaining an essentially traditional, mathematical conception of rationality and for not distinguishing clearly between logic and rhetoric. He believes that justification of science is neither formalist nor conjectural; it is *dialectical*. “One function of dialectic is to produce conjectures, but it does not do so in the dark, nor as a mindless reflex to historical fashion.” (144).

However interesting this is, together with his following distinction between *formal* and *existential contradictions*, they do not, of course, assimilate to a full-blown theory of dialectic, as the counterpart to a theory of formal logic, the reason being that “no such theory is possible, because dialectic is the explication of natural language, which is not formalizable.” (158). I should note though, that in my opinion Rosen has rather disregarded “deviant” logics, even for the purpose of clarifying his rather vague concept of *existential contradiction*, partly due to his intention: just to try to distinguish between dialectic and logic, having “no wish to reduce logic to dialectic any more than [he] would wish to reduce dialectic to logic.” (159).

In “The Limits of Analysis. Linguistic Purification and the Nihil Absolutum”<sup>6</sup>, Rosen turns to one of the most characteristic features of twentieth-century philosophy, as he characterizes it, the attempt to remove traditional metaphysical problems by a purification of the language in which they are expressed. He associates this effort with Descartes, and even with Plato, and points out that “one way of understanding the difference between ancients and the moderns is to note the modern conviction that we know what we make” (160). He goes on to examine the connection of logical analysis to Being, and especially the status of the

logical function *not*, and mentions in this respect, as well as with respect to analytical reasoning, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Hegel and Wittgenstein. His intention, as revealed in the closing paragraph, was not "to hypostatize Being and nothing but rather in defense of the thesis that, whereas Hegel is correct to say that everything is a mixture of Being and nothing, he is wrong to assert that there is a complete conceptual explanation of this mixture. I myself am a partisan of the thesis that we understand Being and nothing but we cannot explain them in a rigorous, consistent, noncircular manner" (174).

As it is obvious by the title of the next chapter, "Rorty and Systematic Philosophy", the author seeks the connection between systematic philosophy, a *systema* being literally a "standing together", and Rorty's account, where "things stand together depending on how we (that is to say, influential intellectuals) talk about them." (175). Rosen finds that "Richard Rorty situates himself in the Wittgensteinian version of the attempt to philosophize without foundations. If we trace this attempt back to its source, I suggest that we will find it in the misunderstanding of the nature, as well as the failure, of Hegel." (187). Grasping the chance to make a comment on Hegel again, Rosen argues that Hegel's system has no foundation: "if Hegel attempted to build a philosophical system on the external foundation of the Absolute, he failed absolutely", the net result being that either philosophy must proceed without foundations, or that philosophy without foundations is not philosophy at all, it is to be abandoned. "It is Rorty's merit that he understands this and does not attempt to conceal it from himself [...] What Rorty does not understand, and what may not be intelligible, is that if philosophy is to be preserved, it must return to Hegel in this minimal but indispensable sense: it must come to terms with the *nihil absolutum*" (188).

In the last two chapters, "Nietzsche's Revolution"<sup>7</sup> and "Poetic Reason in Nietzsche. Die Dichtende Vernunft", Rosen deals with Nietzsche's political position and his influence upon modern thought and critique towards the Enlightenment. At first the author deals with the authoritative influence that Nietzsche's rhetorical power had upon so many different political movements of our era. He suggests that we can make sense of Nietzsche "not as an ontologist or unconscious Platonist, and not as a reactionary spokesman for the high culture of archaic Greece or Italian Renaissance, but as a product of the very Enlightenment he purports (for the most part) to castigate. Nietzsche is a late disciple of

Descartes, Newton and Voltaire. He illustrates very well the inconsistency of the characteristic elements of the Enlightenment; namely, the transformation of nature from friend to enemy, the virtual identification of reason and mathematics, and the degradation of God from agent of personal salvation to clockmaker" (208). In the next chapter Rosen's main interest is Nietzsche's "reversed Platonism" and he attempts to show that "Nietzsche's reversal of Platonism is a circle, and in that sense a labyrinth, which can be called the eternal return of the same if and only if the same is understood as chaos. [...] We may benefit from Nietzsche's purity or nobility only by asking ourselves how it is possible for bad consequences to follow from good intentions" (233-234).

In general, this is an interesting though controversial book; I find however that its scope and wide range of subjects works sometimes negatively upon the special weight that some of Rosen's insightful moments obtain. Needless to say, they can always serve as sources of inspiration.

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## NOTES

1. Numbers in parentheses indicate pages in the book. Latin numerals correspond to pages in the Preface.
2. This essay first appeared in *Cartesian Essays: A Collection of Critical Studies*, ed. Bernd Magnus and James B. Wilbur, 1969 by Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, Netherlands.
3. This essay first appeared, in somewhat different form, in the *Philosophical Forum*, Volume XIX, Numbers 2-3, 1988.
4. This essay first appeared in the *Review of Metaphysics*, 1973.
5. This essay appeared in *Hegel's Social and Political Thought*, ed. D. P. Verene, 1980 Humanities Press International, Inc., Atlantic Highlands, N.J., and Harvester Press, Ltd.
6. This essay first appeared in *Etudes Phenomenologiques*, (Belgium), no.7, 1988.
7. This essay appeared in the November 1987 issue of *The World and I*, a publication of *The Washington Times Corporation*.