

Moral Questions, by Rush Rhees, edited by D.Z. Phillips (MacMillan, 1999)
Reviewed by Richard Joyce in *Philosophical Books* 41 (2000)
[penultimate draft]

When Rush Rhees died in 1989 his papers were purchased by the Department of Philosophy at the University College of Swansea. Since then, D.Z. Phillips has been piecing together and editing volumes of Rhees's work, of which *Moral Questions* is the fourth. This volume consists of twenty-six pieces—written between the late 1940s and the mid 1970s—derived from notes, letters, diaries, and a couple of previously published articles, all of which are grouped loosely into six sections: Philosophical Ethics, The Personal in Ethics, Issues of Life and Death, Sexuality and Ethics, People and Animals, and Ethics and Human Lives.

The result is something of a 'scrapbook' of philosophical thoughts, but, given the circumstances of compilation, one could hardly have expected anything else. The pieces differ dramatically in subject matter, rigour, and length; some are sustained arguments of over twenty pages, others are brief philosophical curios of a few hundred words. No overall case is explicitly developed, nor clear position advanced, in the course of the book. Rather, what unites the pieces—apart from the fact that they all, more or less, deal with issues of moral value—is the approach that Rhees brings to his questions.

Whatever his subject matter, Rhees is focused on the question of what it is to sensibly *say something* regarding it. In the early essays (the more 'meta-ethical' ones, though I suspect Rhees may have rejected that label) the theme is whether we can sensibly say, of another person, that her judgment that she morally ought to act in a certain way is mistaken. Rhees thinks not, developing a useful analogy with the question of whether we could sensibly say that her judgment that she *wants* something is mistaken. To make a moral judgment it is not like judging whether an empirical fact obtains—it is something more profoundly personal than that. "[W]hen all the relevant considerations have been placed before me, then (in an especially important way) it is only I that can finally decide what to do ... [A]nother person in similar circumstances — as similar as you may imagine them — might, for the same reasons as I have considered — have taken a different course ... [Y]ou cannot argue that one of us must have been right and the other wrong" (p. 89). The worry is, of course, that in rejecting moral realism in this manner, Rhees wanders into the arms of "de gustibus non disputandum est". He is cognizant of the threat of relativism, and mitigates it by claiming that internal criticism is possible in a way in which it is not for genuine matters of taste: coming to see that a moral judgment I made in the past was hopelessly flawed is not like coming to prefer chocolate ice cream over vanilla when previously I preferred vanilla. But Rhees insists that from this it does not follow that *another* individual could make that moral criticism for me. Presumably, when I judge that my past self was morally mistaken, the reasons that underlie that criticism are 'embedded' in my life in a way that those very reasons, if presented by somebody else, would not be. Rhees's discussion brings us to this very interesting point, but does not, to my mind, succeed in explicating what this 'embeddedness' consists in.

The later topics—those that might be of more interest to students of ‘applied ethics’—are too varied all to be mentioned here. Perhaps the oddest example is a series of extracts from Rhees’s diaries concerning the death of his dog in 1974. This private thanatopsis continues for years, and strikes the reader initially as morbidly obsessive (Phillips says that he included it only after “much deliberation” (p. xxviii)), yet it becomes clear that although Rhees is personally focused on his dog, the end of his own life is hanging in the air: “I know that I am not going to grow more intelligent or more methodical; that in this sense I am not going to grow any better ... Two years ago he was still here” (p. 226). However, what is of philosophical interest is Rhees’s fixation on a cluster of thoughts (or feelings) that one has towards any deceased loved one: the desire to “remain true to him”, “to stay with him”, to speak of him as “gone”. Rhees is rightly perplexed by these ways of talking, and wonders to what degree they are intended literally. If they are figurative, what literal thoughts are they substituting for? It is touching, and not without irony, that although the crisis prompted by this death apparently paralyzed Rhees’s capacity for work, his manner of dealing with it was to engage in philosophical investigation into the language of grief and guilt.

The two preceding discussions—one meta-ethical, one on the death of a dog—may be seen as defining a continuum ranging from the highly theoretical to the personal and particular. The rest of the book lies between these poles, covering topics such as euthanasia, suicide, the relation of virtue to knowledge, sincerity, and self-deception. Though rich and subtle, *Moral Questions* is, in the end, a somewhat unsatisfying book. Because much of it consists of Rhees’s notes, there is a sense of his asking (himself) a lot of interesting questions, rolling the issues around, but rarely bringing things to a clear conclusion. I found myself yearning for the clarity and structure that might be imposed with a few more sentences along the lines of ‘What I will argue in this essay is the following...’ It is regrettable that some of these notes were not brought to a more refined completion by Rhees himself; however, one does suspect that the ‘failure’ to state crisp conclusions is characteristic of his philosophical approach: even the pieces previously published (one in the *Philosophical Review* from 1965) are distinguished more by the generating of suggestive and subtle questions than they are by satisfying answers. There is much that is stimulating in this book, but it is doubtful that it will have much of an impact on contemporary moral debate.