

MORAL FREEDOM

by Jeffrey Olen

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988, xi + 151pp.

A book worth reading, even if one ultimately rejects its conclusions. Olen sets out to reconcile three seemingly inconsistent "truisms": (1) that moral rules are society's rules; (2) that morality is a matter of individual choice; and (3) that some things are wrong no matter what any society or individual has to say about them. The book's purpose is to find adequate interpretations of these points, on the assumption that all three must be preserved.

As the title of the book suggests, the author's primary concern is with the second point. He clearly wants to preserve a strong version of it, and some readers will conclude that he does so only by greatly diluting the other two "truisms". Olen, however, maintains in the end that he has preserved all three points in their strongest forms (p. 131).

Olen distinguishes between two moral points of view: the impersonal, which is concerned with moral rules; and the personal, which is concerned with one's personal projects, commitments, and conception of the good life (see p. 24 for some illuminating remarks). The second "truism" does not rule out the first and third because the latter are specifically concerned with the impersonal point of view - they are truisms about moral rules. The third point is not at odds with the first owing to a distinction between "valid" and "invalid" moral rules (see chapter 4, especially pp. 75 and 77). Although moral rules are society's rules, not every moral rule is *valid* - that's the sense in which (3) is true.

The main threat to point (2), Olen believes, comes from those who think the impersonal point of view somehow overrides the personal one - that moral rules (rules "intended to define and regulate practices for the common good, independent of any individual's personal projects" [p. 24]) somehow take precedence over personal

BOOK REVIEWS

commitments. In chapter 2 (especially pp. 24-33) he argues that the impersonal perspective does not *morally* override the personal; in chapter 3 he argues that it does not *rationally* override it. The end result is a view of morality which gives enormous weight to the personal standpoint. It is no coincidence that this sounds very Nietzschean and hence anti-Kantian. The author indicates at the outset that he has been significantly influenced by Nietzsche, and that his main foils are neo-Kantians.

For further details I refer the reader to the book itself. I suggest reading the first four pages of the concluding chapter before getting too deep into the book; otherwise it might be difficult to piece together Olen's position. This is the result of a unique style which sometimes makes his reasoning hard to follow. As Olen says in the preface, some of the book (virtually all of it in my opinion) has a "let's-try-this-no-that-doesn't-work-let's-try-that flavor." He also says he likes "books that record the author's explorations instead of merely reporting on their results" (p. xi). We might expect an author intent on recording his explorations to skimp slightly when it comes to furnishing arguments. Olen does this at times. For example, although Kurt Baier is the main foil of chapter 3, nothing said there comes anywhere close to refuting, or even seriously threatening, Baier's position. The arguments are simply too sketchy.

The book is not suitable for undergraduates, partly because of its style, but mainly because it assumes considerable familiarity with contemporary ethical theory. But I recommend it to anyone beyond the undergraduate level. The author is highly informed and thoughtful, and says many things that are valuable even if one finds his ultimate project either uninteresting or unsuccessful. On the way to his main conclusions, Olen discusses a variety of philosophical issues (e.g., the "internalism/externalism" controversy) and many important moral philosophers, including Harman, MacIntyre, Nagel, Rawls, and Williams. All of these discussions are original, and illuminating even when brief.

JOHN TILLEY

INDIANA UNIVERSITY - INDIANAPOLIS
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA 46202
USA