

*Nihilism Inc.: Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability* by Arran Gare. Sydney: Eco-Logical Press, 1996. Pp.x + 438; index. A\$39.95 (paperback). ISBN 1 876236 00 0

This work started life as two volumes, *Nihilism Incorporated* and *Beyond European Civilisation*, both published in 1994 and now combined as one revised volume, not yet officially priced in UK currency at the time of review. Readers familiar with Gare's last book, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, will be familiar with the breadth of the writer's concerns and his efforts to combine depth of analysis with accessibility; here he explicitly identifies the gaps between academic disciplines, and between academia and the general public, as being one of the problems to be addressed, maintaining that the book is partly 'meant as an attempt to undermine institutionalised audience differentiation' (p.x). For this reviewer, Gare succeeds in this department, managing as skillfully as before to combine breadth and depth with readability. However, despite clear commonality of many themes, the differences between this book and its immediate predecessor are notable.

*Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* was something of a flawed gem, in which much careful analysis and exposition was desperately spoiled by a careless final chapter. Here the picture is painted on a still broader canvas and with greater evenness of quality. In 17 chapters, Gare moves from an examination of our current ecological predicament, categorised as a consequence of the nihilism engendered by internalising the metaphysics of mechanistic materialism, then through a sweeping analysis of the history of the European culture which spawned and exported it, and on to developing his alternative vision. This latter involves replacing mechanistic materialism with an adaptation of process philosophy which, by incorporating the evaluative realm, looks to reintegrate meaning into the flux of life and transform the relationship between the humanities and natural sciences, whilst being intimately culturally linked to a reformulated Marxism and a benign and economically protectionist form of nationalism.

In relating these components, Gare attempts 'to show that there is something fundamentally wrong with our culture' (p.33) in the way we conceive and deal with problems, and bases his analysis on the assumption that 'cultures are dominated by particular conceptions of the nature of being' (p.72). Tracing the prevalence of being over becoming in Western thought from its Platonic origins, he argues that this ultimately 'led to a more and more pervasive individualism which eventually led to an almost complete dissolution of the holistic terrestrial community' and 'a domineering orientation towards both people and nature' (p.89) which was both legitimated and exacerbated by capitalism and Newtonian mechanistic thought. Marxism is then invoked as 'the main tradition of radical opposition to the dominant culture within European civilisation' (p.189), a radicalism that Gare then seeks to assimilate in process terms rather than interpreting in the usual mechanistic fashion. He concludes with a sketch of a just and sustainable future civilisation as part of a new grand narrative to motivate political action and radical resistance to the contemporary world order.

Yet these are only the bare bones of a book of immense scholarship, whose breadth is in excess of even the most ambitious of explanatory schemes to emerge from environmental philosophy in the past. Multiple disciplinary boundaries are crossed – cultural history, anthropology, psychology, politics, economics, sociology, biology, physics – in a *tour de force* of erudition; to give some idea of the range encompassed, Gare does not merely gesture towards a new integration of humanities and the

Copy made on behalf  
of Swinburne Library  
Date Copied: 6/2/98  
Date of Acquisition: 27/1/98

sciences, but goes so far as to produce non-reductionist reformulations of genetic and evolutionary theory in process terms. The suggested new metaphysics is even given a head start by Gare's joining the quest for the the holy grail of modern physics, attempting to show that 'if relativity theory, quantum theory and thermodynamics are interpreted through process philosophy, there is hope that they can be conceptually reconciled' (p.325).

This is an extremely significant work and, resentment from jealous guardians of academic boundaries apart, should interest all those working on environmental issues with a philosophical or historical bent. I applaud warmly. A superb achievement, and highly recommended.

PIERS H.G. STEPHENS  
*University of Manchester*

*Animal Rights: The Changing Debate* edited by Robert Garner. London: Macmillan, 1996. Pp.xv + 218; index. £40 (hardback); £12.99 paperback). ISBN 0 333 61582 4 and 67484 7

This is a valuable, informative and welcome book. It is an interesting mixture of the philosophical, the practical, the historical, the scientific and the political. Following an airing for Singer's arguments for animal liberation the papers by Benton and Francione address issues central to the idea of animal rights. Broadly, these are (a) whether and in what way the concept makes philosophical sense; (b) whether it makes practical and political sense to ascribe rights as opposed to relying on the broader conception of animal welfare.

Benton's paper (which I found to be one of the most interesting in the collection) discusses various conceptions of animal rights and locates the discussion within the context of discussions concerning human rights. Following an examination of (and rejection of) the utilitarian case for animal welfare, he argues that animals can be the bearer of passive, but not active rights. He then proceeds sceptically by questioning the value of the attribution of rights in a modern capitalist society. Roughly the argument is that rights are necessary because society ill treats people and animals; rights are granted in recognition of this; but the granting of rights to the vulnerable is not matched by a proper provision of the wherewithal for their full potential to be realised. Hence he argues that while rights might be necessary, they should not be regarded as a solution independent of fundamental social, economic and moral change. This chapter is recommended reading for anyone looking for a clear account of the philosophical issues lying behind the ascription of rights to animals combined with an acute political sensibility.

Gary Francione argues that a commitment to animal welfare is not enough as, in the ensuing calculus of benefits and harms, priority will always be granted in the end to human well-being and animal suffering will therefore receive no guaranteed or absolute consideration. He thus defends the concept of animal rights, while attempting to answer critics who accuse it of being an unrealistic response to the practical problem of animal welfare. He insists that it is necessary to embrace animal rights, but that it is at the same time possible to adopt an incrementalist approach to their implementation.

The above chapters comprise part one of the book; in parts two and three the angle of view shifts towards the practical, the empirical and the political. The authors address, for example, the scope and limits of animal welfare within the UK legal