teorema
Vol. XXXV/2, 2016, pp. 107-123
ISSN: 0210-1602
[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2016) 35:2; pp. 107-123]

Thoughts on Reading Kitcher's *Deaths in Venice*

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For a book that totals 246 pages – some fifty of which are composed of genuinely interesting footnotes – Philip Kitcher's *Deaths in Venice* is so rich and densely packed that it resonates with Venice itself. The book is centered upon a close reading of Mann's novella that engages both other secondary sources and biographical material. Such readings can easily become pedantic, in the attempt to be responsible to earlier scholarship, or reductionist, in the attempt to express the deep similarities between Mann's own life and that of Gustav von Aschenbach. Kitcher avoids both dangers. In addition, he offers serious analyses of Benjamin Britten's opera *Death in Venice,* Mahler's development, and delightful excurses on Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Joyce, without ever losing sight of his central focus. His book is also a meditation on the relationship between literature and philosophy, and perhaps most importantly, a meditation on the meaning of life. (In this it shares much with Stanley Cavell's great essays on Shakespeare, which are simultaneously deep readings of *King Lear* and *Othello* and philosophical explorations of what it means to know another human being.) I shall focus on the last two aspects of *Deaths in Venice.*

In the midst of this thematic wealth, *Deaths in Venice* maintains a central thesis, namely, that the borders between philosophy and literature are highly permeable. (13)[1] It's a thesis that has been anathema to philosophers, and not only since the 20th century. To be sure, things got worse when philosophers as different as Bertrand Russell and Martin Heidegger read their own obsessions with knowledge back into the history of philosophy, skewing our narrative of philosophical change towards matters of truth, knowledge and certainty in ways that would make the gulf between philosophy and literature seem even more vast and less bridgeable.[2] But as Kitcher well knows, the opposition between philosophy and the arts goes all the way back to Plato, who so feared the seduc-

tive possibilities they represented that he would have banned not only most forms of music but the greatest passages of Homer from his ideal republic.

Plato's opposition between the stern and steely voice of reason and the sweetly tempting tones of literature can seem ironic in view of the fact that he was one of the few really good writers in the history of philosophy. His myths and metaphors are always more memorable than his arguments: few professional philosophers can reproduce the argument from the divided line without going back to the text, while almost any reader will remember the metaphor of cave and shadow, the speech of Alcibiades, the challenge of the Noble Lie. Even more importantly, Plato's account of the trial and death of Socrates singlehandedly created a heroic narrative of philosophy itself, the brave unflinching devotion to questioning received wisdom, come what may. With the exception of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, philosophy from Socrates to Nietzsche hasn't offered much in the way of heroic gestures, not to mention heroic deeds, yet Plato's stirring story has moved generations of philosophers and their students to believe they were engaged in an enterprise worthy of epic. Questions of how to live may be raised in philosophy; they become alive, and urgent, in literature – as Plato's narrative of the trial and death of Socrates itself shows.

If the borders between the two are porous, what common task do they share? I believe that both, at their best, increase our sense of possibility. This is something that philosophy conceived as argument from premises cannot be expected to do, for the premises themselves are given, hence unable to call the most crucial assumptions into question. On that model, the philosophizing subject passes through a series of cognitive states that stand in appropriate logical relations to each other, and can be stated in declarative sentences (14). Kitcher's characteristic generosity is evident in his description of the tradition he calls into question, though a hint of irony shines through: anyone who believes that this is the only legitimate way in which philosophical changes of mind take place knows next to nothing about human psychology – a subject that, like literature, has been entwined with philosophy since the beginnings of both. What Kitcher describes as the "popular model of philosophy" is most popular among a particular class of analytic philosophers who have dominated Anglo-American philosophy for more than one lifetime, but are hardly the only people who think about philosophical questions. And the view that reason, and reasoned prose, must be sober and dull if it is to avoid seduction, was not only undermined in practice by Plato, but (in

theory, and even occasionally in practice) by Kant, the first significant philosopher in history who warned against using mathematics as a model for philosophical reasoning. Kant's first *Critique* distinguishes between the real use of reason and the more straightforward and uninteresting logical and empirical uses of it. The interesting and problematic form of reason is sometimes called real, and sometimes called regulative, but its purpose is to provide ideals – most significantly, ideals of freedom and justice – that inspire and guide us. Nothing could be less dull, or even sober.[3]

Thus Kitcher's insistence that there is another mode of philosophical reflection than what he calls the traditional one, closer to literature and more inclined to show than to say things, may be more traditional than he suggests. In other words, Kitcher's description of philosophical thinking is arguably more faithful to tradition than the descriptions of those who have dominated professional philosophy this past half-century and more. As he writes in one passage, "Instead of a rigorously connected sequence of clear and precise declarative sentences, we are offered a rich delineation of possibilities – accompanied by a tacit injunction: Consider this" (23) Elsewhere he eschews description in favor of the question "…whether there might be a philosophical task – arguably a highly important task – of reflectively criticizing the concepts and idioms we have inherited". (16) In fact, I believe that most of the great achievements of modern philosophy should be seen as just such an enterprise.[4] Yes, the mighty Transcendental Deduction – a paradigm of philosophy as argument – proves we could not have coherent experience without a set of concepts we bring to bear on it. But one can also, and more trenchantly, see Kant's epistemology as a reflection on the fact that traditional metaphysics presumes a form of experience that could only be available to God. Kant's critique of Hume proceeds less by marshaling a set of arguments than by showing that the Scottish atheist's skepticism depends on assumptions about knowledge that could only be valid for a divine mind. As Kant writes,

> If by the complaints – *that we have no insight whatsoever into the inner nature of things* – it be meant that we cannot conceive by pure understanding what the things which appear to us may be in themselves, they are entirely illegitimate and unreasonable. For what is demanded is that we should be able to know things, and therefore intuit them, without senses, and therefore that we should have a faculty of knowledge altogether different from the human, and this not only in degree but as regards intuition in kind – in other words, that we should not be human but beings of whom we are

> unable to say whether they are even possible, much less how they are constituted. (A277/B333)

The achievement of Kant's metaphysics thus lies in having shown us something very deep about being human – our dissatisfaction with our own humanity, our temptation to imitate God - a depth that gets lost by those who focus on the thorny arguments rather than the forest they inhabit. Similarly, Marx's greatest achievements lie less in the details of *Capital* or the *Grundrisse* than in simply asking how the concept of property we inherited, hence presuppose, could actually arise. And in calling our attention to the genealogy of morality, Nietzsche opened our eyes to connections between value and power (or powerlessness) with which we still wrestle today. These are all forms of what Kitcher calls reflectively criticizing the concepts we inherited. As Wittgenstein felicitously put it, good philosophy illuminates the things that escape notice because they are always before our eyes.

Literature functions differently. To be sure, Wittgenstein's description works for literature too. Anyone who has marveled at the way Eliot can show how the pressure of an arm reveals the end of illusions about a marriage, or the way Tolstoy's description of how a peasant child watching the resting Kutuzov reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian campaign, has marveled at literature's power to open our eyes to those aspects of the ordinary we overlook just because they *are* ordinary. Literature's way of showing possibility, and enjoining us to "Consider this!" has similarities with Kitcher's description of philosophy, but it is hard to point to the inherited concept that is questioned in *War and Peace, Middlemarch* or *Death in Venice* as we can point to those exposed by Kant, Marx and Nietzsche. Those and other novels can lead us to examine many things about our lives, but it's hard to condense them into one concept or question, unless the question is as large as: *How to live?*

For Kitcher, this is the fundamental question of *Death in Venice,* Mahler's works, and Joyce's novels. (His suggestion that the latter consider the question from the standpoint of precocious youth in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* ordinary middle age in *Ulysses,* and the end of life in *Finnegan's Wake* is particularly illuminating.) Kitcher calls it the oldest and deepest question of philosophy; I suspect it may be the guiding and deepest question of any body of serious literature. In any case, Kitcher is surely right to see literature as necessary for engaging with it, for

> …to understand how to live, one must become vividly aware of what it would be like to live in various ways; one must enter into the substance of a potential life and reflectively evaluate its successes and failures (19).

Unless one is a monotheist, *how to live?* is not the sort of question that admits of anything but an exceedingly complex answer.

I will come back to monotheism shortly. But before we examine answers, it's important to see that *how to live?* is not quite question enough. For one thing, it doesn't distinguish the philosopher from the moralist, or the author of self-help books. For the ancients as well as for Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, the "how" embraces the sort of practical questions you might find in any good book of popular psychology: how much regard to give to wealth or fame, for example, or private life and community; how to find and keep love or happiness. (This isn't to suggest that self-help books should be dismissed; some of them provide a measure of practical wisdom often missing in philosophy.) One clear difference between them is that the business of producing self-help books thrives by providing answers, where philosophy and literature deepen the questions, often to the point where any answer seems hopeless, because far too simple. The philosopher's question may be practical, but it's not instrumental. Self-help books assume an end that is already given - health, wealth, fulfilling romantic relations – and offer suggestions about the means to attain it. So, for that matter, do moralists, for they assume that acting morally is the highest good of all, though the means may be as different as measuring general utility or following the categorical imperative. Philosophy, and literature, raise questions about the end itself.

But why do we bother to ask? Is it simply that we happen to speculate about whether spending most of our lives playing Sudoku is as valuable as spending most of our lives teaching philosophy? This is the sort of question a good self-help book might resolve. But philosophy, wrote Schopenhauer perceptively, like the overture to *Don Giovanni,* begins with a minor chord:

> The more specific character of the astonishment that urges us to philosophize obviously springs from the sight of evil and wickedness in the world. If our life were without end and free from pain, it would possibly not occur to anyone to ask why the world exists [Schopenhauer (1977), Vol. II p. 222].

It is telling that Schopenhauer finds this obvious, but there it is again, the significance of something that has escaped notice because it's always before us. If life were entirely as it should be, it's hard to see how it could occur to ask any question at all. We might engage in some forms of science out of sheer curiosity, though Kant's account of the Unconditioned suggests that even this might be impossible.[5] We might even ask *how to live?* in a way that a self-help book might answer. (More vegetables? Mindfulness training?) But it's difficult to imagine that we'd ever be lead to ask about the meaning of life if our lives were not so hard that it often leaves the point of them in doubt. Schopenhauer's argument that this is the worst of all possible worlds – for existence is so precarious that any number of things could render it entirely impossible – is only partly ironic. "Consequently, the world is as bad as it can possibly be, if it is to exist at all. QED" [Schopenhauer (1977), Volume 2, p. 584].

Schopenhauer's question – if life were without end and free of pain, would anyone ask about the meaning of it? – is actually two. Pain will shoot through the lives of even the luckiest of us. The developmental psychologist Erik Erikson argued that the experience of teething is the "earliest catastrophe in the individual's relation to himself and the world" and "probably the ontogenetic contribution to the biblical saga of paradise" [Erikson (1950) p. 79]. For the same mouth that was the infant's primary source of pleasure is now its primary source of pain; even worse, the pain can only be alleviated by biting, an act which, by leading the mother to withdraw her breast, only makes matters worse. The gap between *is* and *ought* is thus revealed at five or six months of age; not only is there incomprehensible pain in our lives, but that pain reveals a world that does not work as it should. Erikson concludes that the experience shatters a basic trust in the world that we never entirely regain:

> Even under the most favorable circumstances, this stage leaves a residue of a primary sense of evil and doom and a universal nostalgia for a lost paradise" [ibid, p. 80].

The pain that we suffer while teething is significant because it is usually the first, and it strikes us when we are most helpless, clueless, and vulnerable. It will seem trivial next to those experiences of oppression, abandonment or torture that lead to full-fledged despair. Jean Amery's description of his loss of trust in the world with the Gestapo's first blow, and his analysis of the despair that accompanied the two years he spent as a prisoner at Auschwitz, is chilling and unanswerable.[6] It is all the

more astonishing that Amery wrote that *nothing* he experienced at Auschwitz was as appalling as the normal human process of aging and death.[7] For the later Amery it is not painful or early death, but *any death at all,* that is an affront to reason itself. We are thrown into a world with capacities and relations that seem meant to be developed, projects that seem meant to be completed, only to learn that the stuff that occupies our lives is perversely, literally fatally flawed, for our tasks can never be completed or fulfilled. Moreover, they will usually be cut off without warning. The modern injunction to autonomous thinking and acting is cruelly self-defeating, for if death can end that thinking and acting at any time, what is our autonomy worth?

This means that even if our lives were (*pace* Erikson) without pain but nevertheless finite, the rift between *is* and *ought* would still run through them. One might suppose that some people – perhaps those healthy, unreflective blond and blue-eyed ones whom Kitcher discusses in relation to *Tonio Kröger* – whose experience was apparently without pain could lead lives so happy that the question of their meaning never arose. Our pleasure at the sight and smell of a garden isn't clouded, after all, by the fact that we know its blooms will fade and wither. The difference is that the flowers that delight us today will be replaced next spring by others, in a way that human beings cannot be. Even the most unremarkable of us will have, at the least, a mother for whom our demise would be tragic.

It is possible to argue that knowledge of our own mortality is crucial to feeling most intensely alive; those who have come close to death sometimes do. I am not sure that many of us can truly imagine our own death, much less accept it. But even if we can reconcile ourselves to our own mortality as a condition of truly living, who can face the death of a loved one without thinking, at least once: *that* should not have happened? Thus even the most fortunate of us will know, with time, the ache of loss of someone who is irreplaceable. We may distract and console ourselves by finding other teachers, new friends; but none of this makes up for the fact that this particular person, with this particular history of relations to me, is gone forever.

If the experience of death – if only through foreknowledge – intrudes into even the happiest of lives, those lives are shadowed by the problem of evil: the gap between *is* and *ought,* the fact that the world is not as it should be. Schopenhauer and Amery make this explicit, though the problem, as I'll show in a moment, is implicit in Kant. The question, therefore, is not *how to live?* but *how to live in the face of death?* or even *how to*

live in view of the fact that the world we are given is structured in stark opposition to reason? This is why Aschenbach's death – neither particularly early nor concluding a life that was particularly painful - looms so large: "We are easily persuaded into concluding that this death, so intricately presented to us, must negate what went before" (60).

As Kitcher points out, the *how to live?* question disappeared from philosophy "…for the obvious reason that it seemed to have received a definite answer" (17). It is worth pausing to consider just why Christianity's answer was so powerful. Both Judaism and Islam offer answers to *how to live?* Unlike Christianity, they each provide a set of rules concerning nearly every aspect of private and public life. Encompassing intricate matters of diet, sexuality and clothing, some of them read like maxims that could be found in a self-help book, were it not that the rules are meant to bring those who follow them closer to God. (Without an account of an afterlife, of course, Judaism's understanding of closeness to God is sufficiently abstract to be called distant.) The story of the Fall makes sense of the senseless by offering an explanation, if not a solution, of the problem of evil: everything *was* as it should be until we went wrong, bringing toil, pain and death into the world. The problems with that story have generated enough works to fill libraries many times over, but those who raise objections too often miss a crucial structural point. True, it seems harsh that a taste of the wrong kind of fruit should be sufficiently sinful to merit a death sentence for all of Adam and Eve's descendants, just as it seems implausible that a Creator who was able to design a perfect world couldn't design a being less susceptible to temptation. But however problematic these and other features of the story may be, it has resonated through three religions because its very simplicity meets deep needs for understanding. Why is life not as it should be? Long ago, it was. The garden of Eden *was* the best of all possible worlds; God saw what He created and called it good. It is we who stumbled and fell, turning a word without suffering into a world in which the most basic human activities – eating our bread, bearing our children – are marked by pain, and bound to end without sense or redemption. This explanation of why, as Freud put it, "life is too hard for us", is psychologically satisfying: many studies show that survivors of great trauma prefer explanations that connect their suffering to their own (alleged) guilt to having no explanation at all.

The story of the Fall thus gives suffering an explanation, which is part of what the sufferer seeks, but only Christianity gives it a meaning. It does this by mirroring the structure of our own despair into the design of the world itself. What innocence could be greater than that of Jesus,

what suffering could be greater than that on the cross? The promise of redemption, in which happiness is finally and eternally balanced with virtue through a judgment that sends the righteous to heaven and the wicked to hell, treats death as a problem which anyone can overcome by following a set of rules,[8] but it isn't as deep an answer to the problem of evil as the Christian move to reflect the problem into the universe itself. This is what happens when it forms the heart of the Passion. (The mystery of the Trinity perfectly reflects, among other things, psychological ambivalence, allowing us a double identification: we feel with the man who cries that the father has forsaken him, while knowing that the pain of contemplating one's own child's torture would be even worse.) Christianity thus offers brilliant answers to several questions at once. *How to live in the face of death and suffering?* By recognizing, first, that they are so deep a part of the world as to make our own death and suffering seem pale; and by imitating Jesus who will, if you do so, solve the problem of death. The great socialist activist and songwriter Joe Hill's dismissal of the Christian solution as "pie in the sky when you die" is too simple; Nietzsche was right to find it riveting, even as he spent much of his life working on a way to reject it.

No wonder the question *how to live?* disappeared from philosophy. For those who could make the leap of faith to Christianity, the question had been answered. And once Christianity had been attacked on so many fronts that its answer could no longer be taken for granted, it's no wonder that the question returned with a vengeance. As Kitcher notes, for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, "the problem of achieving a genuinely worthwhile life is far deeper than the ancients or their modern followers realize". (18) Nietzsche often suggests that the Greeks *had* no problem of evil; their answer to the question of how life is justified was to have their very gods live it. What more affirmation could life receive than having the immortals constantly jumping into every aspect of it? But Nietzsche's praise of what he views as the Greek affirmation of life relies too heavily on its contrast to the Christian abnegation of it. He seems to ignore the ways in which mortal Greeks worried about death, hence the meaning of life, as well. Having an afterlife didn't help, as Achilles' speech in Hades – the first poetry Plato would ban from his republic – clearly shows. Nietzsche's praise of tragedy sometimes seems to forget that it's *tragic;* we ache for Antigone and Priam and all the others. Their attempts to resolve competing ethical obligations always end badly, their references to fate always read like a way of throwing up hands. Explaining suffering by saying you sacrificed to Athena but forgot Poseidon, or vice versa, is as

little an explanation as an appeal to dormative virtue. Small wonder we remember the Greeks' appeal to what they called the wisdom of Silenus: the best thing would be to never have been born, the second best, to die soon. *Pace* Nietzsche, neither sense of the question *how to live in the face of death and suffering* is really answered by the Greeks – nor, I suspect, by other polytheistic cultures. The question echoes right through them.

Still the question may be harder for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche because having had an answer and losing it will make the problem feel worse. The death of God is surely no less painful than the death of anyone else onto whom we've projected our love. The positivists were wrong to think the question could disappear, but without monotheism there is no possible answer to it. Christian monotheism, in particular, had a way of formulating both question and answer, but the answer involved placing the meaning of life in something that lay outside it. Once that no longer seems tenable, it no longer makes sense to speak of an answer to the question: *what makes life meaningful?* Some ways of life cohere more, radiate more; but only literature can show that. When philosophy tries to say it, it speaks in platitudes.

But was it for Schopenhauer and late 19th century Germans that the Christian solution imploded and the problem of meaning became pressing? (35) Kitcher is certainly right to see this as the point when the problem was made explicit, but I believe it became urgent more than a century earlier. Not simply *how to live?* but *how to live with the split between* is *and* ought? is the central question of modern philosophy, once Christianity's answer could no longer be part of philosophy but at most a matter of faith. This is why the Enlightenment focused on the problem of evil as no century before or since has done.[9] Kant did make room for some kinds of faith, but he explicitly denied that they included faith in theodicy, even a theodicy of the sort that urges us to accept the incomprehensibility of God's ways.[10] For Kant, the split between *is* and *ought* is the "metaphysical wound in the heart of the universe", as Nietzsche exquisitely put it. Neither faith nor knowledge can ever heal it, and maturity – philosophical and otherwise – depends on recognizing and learning to live with that. I think this includes, but goes further than, what Kitcher calls acceptance of incompleteness (176ff). In this sense Moses Mendelssohn was right to call Kant all-destroying. A very abstract and distant God may be preserved by Kant's rational faith.[11] But the structure that gave life meaning through the certainty that *is* and *ought* will be reconciled beyond the grave was conclusively shattered by the Critical Philosophy.[12]

If my reflections have merit, they show that Kitcher's concept of philosophizing is not only more traditional in form than he may realize; it is also more traditional in content. The problem of the meaning of life did not disappear between the ancient philosophers and Schopenhauer. If it is evident throughout the Enlightenment, it lies at the heart of modern philosophy. Kitcher's work is less a matter of calling our attention to important but marginalized philosophical questions and ways of approaching them than of bringing philosophy back home: to the space it inhabited before it lost its way.

> Human finitude undercuts the worth of what we are and do: our strivings are endless, our accomplishments ephemeral, our lives incomplete. We should either recognize the futility of our actions (abnegating the will) or find some way to transcend the run of common humanity (185-186).

Kitcher's statement of the problem is precise, as is his awareness that whatever answers may emerge will be so complex, nuanced and detailed that without the arts (preferably all of them, in the sort of synthetic complex he prefers, and provides in *Deaths in Venice*) we will remain in the dark. But he is sufficiently bold, ambitious and disciplined to want to do more than identify the problem, as well as the only sensible path to confronting it; he wants that confrontation to produce answers.

The answers are easier to gather, if not quite to state, in the case of those great artists to whom most of *Deaths in Venice* are devoted. However much Mann/Aschenbach or Mahler may have been tormented by the problem of the meaningfulness of their lives, their ability to delight and inspire souls like Kitcher's settles the question. *Mutatis mutandis,* of course, for Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and many others. It isn't quite a paradox: by describing their own tormented struggles for meaning they make our struggles less so. These are fairly easy, albeit crucially important, cases of Kitcher's view of what makes lives valuable: having "the right sort of impact on others" which he understands

> …in terms of positive effects on those others having the opportunities to find their own projects, to shape their own lives in ways that connect them to yet further people (and the equally indefinite 'enough' is to be pondered later)" (188).

Yet Kitcher wants to address the hard cases too: the value of the lives of the rest of us, whose "constructive effects on the lives of others"

will be modest. Most of us will not leave behind the sort of monumental art or enlightenment that is the subject of much of his book, but rather the smell of pipesmoke left in a cottage that *Doktor Faustus'* Leverkuhn archly calls immortality. As seriously as Kitcher takes Nietzsche's concerns, he is far too democratic to rest with the latter's elitism. The contrast between the torn and haunted lives of the great artists who pose questions of meaning, and the lives of the "lightly living", is one of *Deaths in Venice*'s most important concerns. Even if the latter never ask whether their lives have meaning, Kitcher wants an account that takes those lives as seriously as any others.[13]

Kitcher seems to accept Mann's (and Nietzsche's?) disjunction between those tormented souls who, in giving form to their fear that their lives may be without meaning, create a great deal of meaning for the rest of us; and those who live and die carelessly but happily (generally procreating in between to assure at least a straightforward material connection between themselves and a future). I suspect the disjunction may be a projection by those of us whose lives are more *intellectually* tormented. Tolstoy assumed that there are happy families, but Thoreau's suggestion that most people lead lives of quiet desperation seems more accurate. Or as *Candide*'s wise old woman tells Cunegonde as they travel to the New World:

> Have some fun, get each passenger to tell you his story; and if there's not a single one who has not often cursed his life, who has not often said to himself that he was the unhappiest of men, you can throw me into the sea headfirst [Voltaire (2009), p. 41]

Being able (or even interested) to articulate the problem of evil is not a requirement for experiencing it. If death and finitude overshadow the existence of all of us, any answer to the question *how to live?* ought somehow to connect us all – as Christianity did in earlier times.

Nietzsche would have been troubled by the Christian resonance of Kitcher's answer; placing the value of one's life in one's constructive effects on the lives of others would have seemed to him not only slavish, but trying to find value in life by appealing to something outside of it. I'm not bothered by the fact that Kitcher's answer could easily have been given by Pope Francis; it could also have come from any great socialist. But I am troubled, a little, by the Nietzschean objection that the value of one's life should not be sought in anything outside of it; and I have long been troubled by what I'd like to call, for the moment, the problem of

vitality. Kitcher approaches it in discussing Mann's encounters with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche:

> …caused 'less by the teaching of morality and wisdom, which is the intellectual flower of their vitality, than by the vitality itself, the essential and personal substance – so by its passion more than its wisdom' (24).

I'm unwilling to accept Mann's opposition between passion and wisdom. But it is perfectly clear that some people seem more alive than others, even if we are unable to state how, much less why – whether or not they seem happier. Nor need we experience them directly in order to experience this. You can see it immediately in a portrait of Diderot, or a photograph of the faces of Einstein or Picasso, but it need not be confined to those great artists or thinkers who leave something behind for the rest of us. Attempts to describe it straightforwardly inevitably wind up sounding like Nietzsche, at best, or Ayn Rand, at worst; only literature is capable of doing it justice. (Think of the contrast between Hamlet and Laertes.) I suspect that Kitcher's beloved Leopold Bloom was one of these vital ones; what else would draw Stephen Daedelus to him? It's Bloom's exuberant experience of an ordinary day in Dublin, reflected in Joyce's wild and glorious language, not that day by itself, which makes his ordinary experience so meaningful.

The reader who has followed thus far will forgive me, I hope for quoting an earlier attempt of my own to express this phenomenon in prose:

> Earlier times may not have understood it any better than we do, but they weren't as embarassed to name it: the life force or spark thought close to divine. It is not. Instead it's something that makes those who have it fully human, and those who don't look like sleepwalkers. Those who have it can turn the meeting of an ageing couple into a dramatic triumph, find meaning and beauty in scrap iron or tomatoes; they can make prose lyric, and poetry transcend. It isn't enough to make someone heroic, but without it any hero will be forgotten. Rousseau called it force of soul; Arendt called it love of the world. It's the foundation of eros; you may call it charisma. Is it a gift of the gods, or something that has to be earned? Watching such people you will sense that it's both: given like perfect pitch, or grace, that no one can deserve or strive for, and captured like the greatest of prizes it is. Having it makes people think more, see more, feel more. More intensely, more keenly, more loudly if you like; but not more in the way of the gods. On the contrary, next to heroes like Odysseus and Pe-

> nelope the gods seem oddly flat. They are bigger, of course, and they live forever, but their presence seems diminished. Even their love-making is dimmer and trite. Circe's bed is flawless, and Calypso's island is spellbinding, but their lust for the hero is just that. Both pale before the description of the joys of the marriage bed, where the lovers cannot sleep for reveling in each other's words and arms [Neiman (2009), pp. 316-7].

But if this quality looks (and feels) like something granted by grace, it's hard to see it as something one can achieve by trying. And if that's the case, how can we view vitality as the most vital thing of all without retreating into the worst kinds of elitism? There's an answer to that question: consider babies. Nearly every baby approaches nearly every bit of her world with the intense vivacity that the most talented turn into art, some day. It's a new world, after all, to be explored with the bold high spirits that leave Columbus in the shade. Earlier ages might have called the baby's awe and wonder religious. I believe it's the reason they exert such fascination on adults (at least those who are not responsible for them 24 hours a day); evolutionary psychology no doubt has an instrumental explanation of babies' ability to grip our gaze. Something in the way our world is structured destroys the ability to experience life itself that children express in their first two years.

Could the value of life simply be living this vividly? When we aspire to it, we struggle to view life as a gift –despite our knowledge of its deep, even structural flaws. Living life in recognition that it is a gift after all is a form of gratitude for the fact that it's been bestowed upon us. Something like this is suggested in the stanza of Bob Dylan's "It's Alright, Ma" which John Rawls once cited to me as his favorite:

> He not busy being born
> Is busy dying

The more we can do this, the more meaning we will win; all the more if our lives contribute to uncovering and opposing those forces that deaden the light in children's eyes.

Philip Kitcher is a very rare philosopher. Having established impeccable credentials in those areas considered central to contemporary analytic philosophy, he not only went to work on an unusually broad range of questions considered (falsely, as I've argued) peripheral to it; he used that work to question the assumptions of analytic philosophy itself. In a very fine essay for *Metaphilosophy,* he describes the current state of phi-

losophy with an exquisite metaphor: its practitioners behave like musicians who no longer bother to play music, but content themselves with showing off their virtuosity to other cognoscendi [Kitcher (2011)]. Among its other achievements, *Deaths in Venice* shows that philosophy, in the right hands, still has music to play.

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NOTES

[1] I use numerals in parentheses to refer to the page numbers in *Deaths in Venice* [Kitcher (2013)].

[2] Heidegger, of course, thought the history of philosophy's focus on knowledge ruined many things, most prominently our relation to Being, but he never bothered to question whether the focus on epistemology might be an inaccurate narrative of the history of philosophy. Bertrand Russell baldly states that Leibniz, the only historical philosopher he bothered to read as a mature thinker, was mendacious in writing the *Theodicy*.

[3] For a particularly inspiring passage in which Kant's actual reasoning was equal to his ideal descriptions of it, try the passage that begins „Two things fill the mind with awe and wonder the more often and the more steadily we reflect upon them, the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.“ For that matter, the very first sentence of the first *Critique* – "Human reason has this peculiar fate…" is magnificently stirring, though this is clearer in the Kemp Smith translation than in the more recent Guyer-Wood version.

[4] I restrict my claim to modern philosophy because it is my area of greatest expertise, but as the above remarks about Plato suggest, I think the claim can be extended.

[5] See my *Why Grow Up?,* [Neiman (2014] chapter 4, for more on this score.

[6] Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* [Levi (1989)] which begins with an open letter to Amery, was an attempt to answer it; some have argued that Levi's suicide reflected, among other things, the awareness that his answer was hollow. One can argue that Amery's own writings on the Enlightenment compose an answer to *At the Mind's Limits* [Améry (1998)]*;* but his own suicide suggests that he did not find his own answer to *how to live?* finally compelling.

[7] See Améry, *On Ageing: Revolt and Resignation.*

[8] Of course Calvinism's doctrine of predestination complicates that picture, but then Calvinism portrays a world much more troubling than anything de Sade was able to devise.

[9] All the questions were raised in Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary,* published in 1698 and known as the Arsenal of the Enlightenment; Leibniz's *Theodicy* was an attempt to answer them. The 1755 Lisbon earthquake, however, was a pan-European event that gave the questions an explosive sort of urgency. See Neiman (2015).

[10] See his "On the Impossibility of Every Future Attempt at Theodicy". Even the title is striking as the only time Kant insists on ruling out every attempt to show something in the future.

[11] Though Kant wouldn't have acknowledged it, the fact that the God left by his rational faith is far closer to the modern Jewish than the Christian paradigm may explain the passion of Jewish neo-Kantians like Cohen, Cassirer and Arendt for his work.

[12] It's a measure of how thoroughly Kant succeeded in shattering that 20th century philosophy no longer took this effort seriously. Between Kant and Darwin, Providence came to appear a straw man. Nietzsche was the only post-Kantian philosopher to appreciate the significance of what was lost. - The centrality of the destruction of theodicy for Kant's work is complicated by the fact that the early Kant compared Rousseau to Newton because Rousseau had „answered the objections of King Alfonso and the Manicheans" and proved that whatever is, is right. Kant's enthusiasm for Rousseau never wavered; he wrote that he found the beauty of Rousseau's prose so overwhelming that he had to read it several times over before he calmed down sufficiently to reflect on its implications. Still Kant came to see that even Rousseau's solution to the problem of evil could only be partial – at the very, very best.

[13] See Amery (1978) for a comparable ambition.

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RESUMEN
El libro *Deaths in Venice* de Philip Kitcher no es sólo una muy sutil lectura de la obra de Mann y una meditación sobre las relaciones entre filosofía y literatura, sino también una discusión sobre el propio significado de la vida. Esta cuestión, argumento, se entiende mejor si la ponemos en la siguiente forma: ¿cómo vivir en un mundo que tan a menudo, quizás estructuralmente, se opone a la razón? Discuto algunas razones por las que esta pregunta, más comúnmente de lo que piensa en la filosofía moderna, es tan urgente a la vista de las respuestas que, desde muy al principio, le ha dado la cristiandad, antes de sugerir modos de pensar sobre la manera de vivir, o sobre los niños, que podrían proporcionar una respuesta más satisfactoria que la que probablemente obtendríamos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *significado de la vida, literatura y filosofía, el problema del mal.*

ABSTRACT
Kitcher's *Deaths in Venice* is not only a very fine reading of Mann's work and a meditation on the relations between philosophy and literature but a discussion of the meaning of life itself. That question, I argue, is best understood as the question: how to live in a world that is so often, perhaps structurally, opposed to reason? I discuss some reasons why that question, more common than thought in modern philosophy, is so urgent in face of answers earlier provided by Christianity, before suggesting ways of thinking about living, and children, that might provide as much of an answer as we're likely to get.

KEYWORDS: *Meaning of Life, Literature and Philosophy, Problem of Evil.*