

Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly

All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning In a Secular Age.

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The flyleaf describes this as a book about the ‘choices’ we find ourselves forced to make in our lives and the various, often confusing, theological guides our culture has offered to make those choices ‘appropriate’. The book asks: ‘If our culture no longer takes for granted a belief in God, can we nevertheless get in touch with the Homeric moods of wonder and gratitude, and be guided by the meanings they reveal?’ Can we still achieve a ‘harmonious attunement with the world’ that is as ‘culturally satisfying’ (21) as the one the ‘shining gods of ancient Greece’ once offered? According to Dreyfus and Kelly, the answer is, yes, we can.

The book has caught popular attention, climbing well up the New York Times list. This may be because it echoes a strand of Nietzsche’s defense of the poets against Plato’s charge that the moral authority they accorded Homer’s gods was dangerously misleading. But Dreyfus and Kelly’s proposal to return to moral reliance on the poets’ gods is more than a matter of philosophical debate. They present it attractively as a therapy for the ‘sadness’ of our contemporary Western culture and age (ix & *passim*). They see suffering and sadness as being best resolved by the kind of stability, certainty and confidence that the best athletes display as they respond to situations outside themselves.

The first two chapters use case studies to frame the sadness they are concerned with against its cultural history in the West. Chapter 1, ‘Our Contemporary Nihilism’, cites two contemporary heroes whose behavior we recognize and admire, but which we find exceptional. The play of a basketball star like Bill Bradley, for instance, or Roger Federer, seems to be literally inspired by forces outside themselves. Similarly, risking one’s life to save a stranger who has fallen in the path of a train is not something we expect to see every day. Such an act seems to contradict normal private self-interest. It, too, seems to arise outside of the hero, who reacts without hesitation to the situation, the need of another. Dreyfus & Kelly note that, ordinarily, we see ourselves as unlike such heroes. We see ourselves as immobilized by indecision when faced by such physical or moral challenges.

In Chapter 2, Dreyfus & Kelly suggest that this chronic indecisiveness and hesitation reflects our culture’s ‘nihilism’, which they describe as the view that, in the end, ‘[w]e seem to have no ground for choosing one course of action over another’ (15). There really seems to be ‘no reason to prefer any answer to any other’ (21). In sharing this nihilistic attitude, they argue, we resemble the figures of two other case studies. Authors David Foster Wallace and Elizabeth Gilbert seem to represent our own

experiences as they suffer deep anxiety over their lives and personal and professional choices.

Yet, despite this allegedly endemic nihilism, we nonetheless do acknowledge unhesitating acts of courage and unbelievable virtuosity. So what actually does ground our choices? Is it possible to challenge the grip of this widely held nihilism?

Dreyfus and Kelly set out to find a ‘middle way’ between Wallace’s self-absorbed sadness & Gilbert’s resort to a faith-based ‘passivity’. That ‘middle way’ involves cultivating our awareness of ‘shining things’ that we encounter ‘whooshing up’ in social and cultural experience, while maintaining a capacity to discern between the tyrannical rhetoric of a Hitler and the prophetic insight of a Martin Luther King or the human dignity and grace of a Lou Gehrig, or of a Helen of Troy.

Chapter 3 develops their campaign against sadness and passivity. They point out that nihilism has not always dominated Western culture. They find in Homer ‘an artist sensitive to positive phenomena of existence that we have long since lost the ability to see.’ They present the ‘polytheistic Homeric Greeks’ as ‘open to the world in a way that we, who are skilled at introspection and who think of moods as private experiences, can barely comprehend... For Homer, moods are important because they illuminate a shared situation: they manifest what matters most in the moment and in doing so draw people to perform heroic and passionate deeds’ (60). They see ‘at the center of Homer’s world... the sense that what matters is already given to us, and that the best life is the one that manages to get in sync with it...’ Drawing on what they interpret as a prophetic line from *Moby Dick*, the authors suggest that ‘[t]o lure back these Homeric gods’ is a ‘saving possibility after the death of God: it would allow us to survive the breakdown of monotheism while resisting the descent into a nihilistic existence’ (61).

The next three chapters explore details of their intriguing theological account of ‘gods’ as publicly shared ‘moods’. (There is, in fact, some historical justification to this characterization of the Greek gods as moods. Down to about the 8th Century BCE, the Greeks did not use the word ‘*theos*’ as a noun so much as a kind of adverb signaling wonder or astonishment—something like what Dreyfus and Kelly talk about as ‘whooshing up’). Chapter 4 traces what the authors see as a constricting ‘monotheistic’ mood dominating Western culture from Aeschylus to Augustine. Chapter 5 focuses on the period from Dante to Kant, during which, on their account, the individual as autonomous replaces the former socially engaged community members who were sensitive to ‘catching’ and sharing moods that change agents like Christ, or Descartes, might initiate.

It is, by now, clear—Chapter 6 confirms it—that Dreyfus and Kelly draw their vocabulary from phenomenology, and their philosophically poetic style and method from Martin Heidegger. In reading these chapters one is aware of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* playing loudly in the background. The book’s rather strained theological vocabulary also echoes Heidegger’s famous comment (1966 *Der Spiegel* interview), ‘Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten’ (‘Only a God can save us’). Heidegger’s poetic phenomenological

preoccupations so drown out other voices, including other phenomenological ones—voices the authors really should have acknowledged to strengthen their analysis. William James' 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* still has important, empirically grounded things to say on the dynamics of sadness and anxiety, especially about the question of happiness as the chief human concern, and how it affects those happy, confident people whom he calls 'once-born' and the others whom he names the 'twice-born'. Hans Jonas, himself a student of Heidegger's and an acknowledged expert on gnostic religion and its pervasive cultural effects, also has challenging, timely, biologically informed views on anxiety and fear and their roles in moral judgment and global survival (cf. *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God & the Beginnings of Christianity*, Beacon Press 1958; *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Harper & Row 1966; *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. Hans Jonas and David Herr, University of Chicago Press 1984).

Chapter 7, the conclusion, is disappointing. The authors' preoccupation with sporting images is a distraction that limits the credibility of their argument. But their argument *is* an important one. It needs to be explored, not only because Heidegger dominated so much literary and philosophic conversation throughout the 20th century, but also because a serious debate needs to be renewed about how cultures communicate and/or change their values, and about how individuals, autonomous or otherwise, actually manage to learn—as distinct from just proposing effective knowledge claims.

That said, *All Things Shining* is an engaging and challenging book. It will be a truly useful book if it prompts some vigorous debate. It should do so. But Plato's warning against poets who grant their gods too much moral authority remains valid, in my view, especially when the poets are co-opted by theologically challenged philosophers, or treated as the exclusive source of evidence on moral issues. James and Jonas both demonstrate that many other voices need to be sought out, and heard.

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