BARRETT'S <u>THE</u> <u>ILLUSION</u> <u>OF</u> <u>TECHNIQUE</u>

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William Barrett: <u>The</u> <u>Illusion</u> <u>of</u> <u>Technique</u>. Pp. xx +
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     Solzhenitsyn, Skinner and freedom of the will:
these are the people and the problem with which William
Barrett begins and ends <u>The</u> <u>Illusion</u> <u>of</u> <u>Technique</u>. It
might seem that Solzhenitsyn and Skinner are a rather
odd pair upon whom to base a discussion of the problem
of freedom of the will. For Barrett, however, there are
no two better contemporaries around whom to develop his
primary thesis that freedom can and in fact must be made
real in a society of extreme technology. While Skinner
is a writer in the relatively free United States, he
nonetheless expounds the virtues of total social control
and conditioning; whereas Solzhenitsyn, a writer from
the totalitarian Soviet Union, argues for the absolute
spiritual freedom of human beings. "Clearly," notes
Barrett, "we live in a strange time." Now it might seem
that an equivocation has taken place on the word
"freedom," for clearly Skinner speaks of a political
freedom while Solzhenitsyn has in mind philosophical
freedom. But this is just the point that Barrett wishes
to make, namely that the two types of freedom must
finally collapse into one notion. Our views of political
freedom, he claims, directly influence our views of
philosophical freedom and vice versa. It is with that
belief that Barrett proceeds to investigate the nature
of technique and the importance of human freedom for our
contemporary world. The great danger in our century,
according to Barrett, is that whereas "[f]ormerly deter-
minists argued for a metaphysical reality that remained
invisible behind the scenes; in our century they have
not only brought it onto the scene, but also made it
dominate the action, as they seek to shape society by
its light."

     While this book has faults, which I discuss below,
it still is to be applauded for one key aspect. It,
like Carl Sagan's <u>The</u> <u>Dragons</u> <u>of</u> <u>Eden</u>, attempts to re-
turn our thoughts concerning the nature of science and
intellectual endeavors away from the technological side,
which has predominated our thought for the last fifty
years, and place it more in accord with theology and

the search for final ends, which has been emphasized
historically. Like Sagan, Barrett sees much of the
contemporary view of science as overemphasizing tech-
nology and often directly identifying science with
technology, in so doing forgetting the important role
that the search for final rather than immediate ends
plays in the advancement of science and intellectual
thought in general.

Barrett's approach to the problem of technology
and freedom is first to investigate what he takes to be
the ideal par excellence of technique in this century,
namely symbolic logic, and to show the limitations and
failure of that ideal. He accomplishes this by con-
trasting the ideal language approach exemplified in
Russell's and Whitehead's Principia Mathematica and
Wittgenstein's Tractatus with the latter Wittgenstein
and his attempt to open up the restrictions that have
traditionally been placed on the nature and role of
language. From there Barrett moves to Heidegger and his
improvement on the later Wittgenstein; an improvement,
he claims, in the sense that language only confronts us
within "Being" and thus "Being" is more fundamental and
important for intellectual investigation than language.
However, as Heidegger stresses, "Being" just is and
nothing more can be expected of it. Thus while it may
encompass all, it is only understood or exemplified
through action. This latter exphasis leads Barrett to
the pragmatism of William James where he concludes that
the problem of freedom is one which ultimately is dia-
lectically inconclusive and that--because determinism
lacks a rigorous logical demonstration and proves to be
non-falsifiable--humans have the right to believe that
they are free. To paraphrase James "my first act of
freedom is to believe in freedom."

The problems with Barrett's book are numerous.
His extreme dislike for Russell and Sartre make his com-
ments on these two philosophers often useless. For
instance, on Russell's continual shifting of positions
on the nature of the external world, Barrett holds "Here
philosophy has become a playful exercise. This is the
higher frivolousness carried out with aristocratic
panache. Lord Russell indeed!" Of Sartre on freedom
he days, "I cannot read Sartre on freedom without
sensing the ghost of Buridan's donkey hovering in the
wings." But then again similar comments made of others
are not only amusing but somehow enlightening. When
discussing Skinner's ardent campagning for his ideal
community, Barrett remarks, "One feels that Professor
Skinner might have made a great career for himself in
advertising or public relations."

Other problems are more disturbing. His strange branding of the later Wittgenstein as a behaviorist stands in direct contrast to his wish to show how the latter tries to release us from a narrow picture of how words and world relate, to say nothing of Wittgenstein's own proclamations. "'Are you not really a behaviourist in disguise? Aren't you at bottom really saying that everything except human behaviour is a fiction?'--If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a grammatical fiction." Even stranger is his treatment of Heidegger's Naziism. After having criticized Descartes and Husserl for ignoring the concrete aspects of existence he claims we can "look past such accidents of personality and history" as Heidegger's adhesion to Naziism. But then only four pages later he attempts to explain these "accidents of personality and history" by Heidegger's love for his homeland and the "strong appeal to regional feelings" made by the nationalist party. Such explanations merely leave one wondering why he bothers to mention the relationship at all.

Another minor problem I see with the book is Barrett's inability to put into words a desire he expresses implicitly throughout the book. That desire is the wish to find some common aspect in contemporary intellectual fields that will explain their natures and tie them more closely together. Numerous references to this can be found. "We live in our own atonal world." On "science-technology": "what is the force of the hyphen here? Is it only an accidental coupling, or does it signify some more essential bond between the two terms it unites?" "The belief in the decisive role of technique has not vanished; it has passed from the philosophers into the culture at large." What is it that underlies the contemporary movements in the arts and sciences and culture at large? Is it a belief in the value of technique or is it such that certain areas of study, such as quantum mechanics, positivism, and atonal music have different conceptions of rationality than many of their counterparts? Barrett provides little help here.

The major problem with this book, however, is Barrett's misunderstanding of the linguistic turn as initiated by Wittgenstein. This is exemplified in his claim that language is only to be found within "Being" and "that language itself is not understandable apart from Being." Language is seen by Barrett as a communicative set of conventions that are adopted to help us understand nature. "[W]e might, for example, decide to change our mathematical conventions and drop the notion of irrational numbers altogether. After all, they have been a troublesome part of mathematics, and no alto-

gether satisfactory theory of them has yet been worked
out. But the diameter of the square would still be there
to be measured. And it is this need to deal with nature
that ultimately takes the measure of our various con-
ventions--mathematical and others." What is missed here
is Wittgenstein's later conception of language. Barrett
presupposes the very model of language that Wittgenstein
argued was too narrow. Language, for the later Wittgen-
stein, was not to be conceived as something which is
subsquently added to pre-existing objects. It is not
as though language and the world were independent enti-
ties, but that we come to the world through language
itself. We are to unite linguistic signs, objects and
human activities into one notion and treat them as de-
pendent rather than independent entities.

Simply to look upon Wittgenstein as introducing in
the "linquistic turn" as another choice of how one might
choose to proceed intellectually, is as superficial as
simply saying that Kant introduces a "Copernican turn."
For it is not that Kant simply moves from an emphasis
on "being" to an emphasis on consciousness--as if we had
an option--but that what is involved for Kant is a whole
new philosophical orientation. That is, he stressed a
radically different notion of objectivity than that which
had preceded him. Similarly Wittgenstein exemplifies,
indeed, a linguistic turn. But it is much more than
simply beginning with language rather than being or
consciousness. It is not as if we have a choice. We
begin where we are and where we find ourselves, and
that for Wittgenstein is in the milieu of the "forms of
life," modes of activity which involve intentional
actions, in accord with rules or norms, directed to
purposeful ends. These activities are divisible into
language-games which are, for Wittgenstein, the most
general way to characterize the relationship of word
and world. Language-games are to be thought of as
fluid, dynamic and evolutionary, where the constitutive
rules of a particular activity are the key to interpre-
tation, meaning and objectivity. That is, in order to
engage in any rational activity, the constitutive rules
of the language-game are importantly involved. It is
this radical shift in viewing the relationship of words
and world that Barrett misses in the later Wittgenstein.

Thus very much like his previous book Irrational
Man, Barrett's The Illusion of Technique is most en-
lightening when he puts forward his own views and much
less so when he is interpreting the positions of others.
Fortunately much of his new book consists of the former
and is therefore well worth the difficulties encountered
with the latter.