

A Critique of Pure Reason

Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary,
by Robert Nisbet, *Cambridge, Mass.:*
Harvard University Press, 1982. 318 pp.
\$17.50.

"ABSTRACT LIBERTY," wrote Edmund Burke, "like other mere abstractions, is not to be found." As with most of what Burke has to say, the charm of his observation comes from being direct and sensible, so much so that it is quite easy to overlook the most uncommon wisdom behind it. Intellectuals have always tended to confuse obscurity for imagination and observation with being literal, and our age is no exception. Thus, Burke's inherent sensibility ensures that, while his work may be respected, it will never animate the way other thinkers do: not for a moment could one imagine violent revolutions led by guerrillas quoting Burke, Tocqueville, or even Solzhenitsyn. If there is any characteristic that unites these men, it is an Aristotelean respect for experience, an abhorrence of the theoretically perfect, a distrust of radical solutions that would yield mankind a new enlightened age. Quite simply, they were too conscious of the Fall.

Professor Robert Nisbet's latest book, *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary*, is a distinctly American work which exhibits the same careful suspicion of the abstract his philosophical forebears felt in their souls. The subtitle comes from Voltaire's famous dictionary of almost two centuries ago, but that is really as far as the similarity extends—the title and the opening inscription are much more instructive, both coming from Burke. Far from dismissing simple prejudices for their often silly and baseless conclusions, Burke saw that great practical value could be derived from them. Consequently, he urged intellectuals not to explode such prejudices (a relatively easy task), but to "discover the latent wisdom which prevails in the world," thus restoring reason to its proper role as a means rather than as an end (a more difficult task).

Nisbet treats some seventy subjects in his book, all arranged in alphabetical order and covering everything from abortion, envy, and genius to psychohistory, psychobabble, and victimology. If there is any one sentiment that predominates throughout, it is a profound grief over the dissolution of traditional communities, a dissolution he says was effected by the ever-encroaching authority of the centralized State. Critics have variously written about Nisbet's "love for the past" or his "nostalgia for bygone days," but such assessments hardly scratch the surface. There are no sweet dreams of blissful nineteenth-century hamlets or moving passages on the yeoman farmer, but, true to his conservative nature, Nisbet is not ashamed to believe that there was some good there that has been lost, and is impatient with those willing to chuck it all for anything so irresponsible as the Marxist promises of Never-Never Land.

Community is not so much a "thing" that is outside of its members as it is a living, breathing organism, with its own peculiarities and ways of doing things. It is no more possible to cut off a community from its habits, mores, and rituals than it is to cut off a man's leg and expect him to walk well. In their eternal quest for homogeneity, social revolutionaries, whatever their brand of idealism, are forever missing this point entirely, bent as they are on eliminating the past in one clean sweep, believing habits, traditions, and manners easily expendable. Given the unprecedented horrors centralized authority has produced in this century—Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, Mao's China, and a host of other mini-Gulags—it seems that Nisbet has the weight of the evidence on his side. The stifling narrowness of the local curate or town council, so accurately portrayed by countless American novelists, pales in significance when placed against this century's totalitarian quest for uniformity, if only because the former's power was limited to his immediate domain and people could always leave.

Although it has been common enough for conservatives to bemoan the passing of

our traditional communities, it is most uncommon for such laments to be accompanied by a vigorous defense of the market economy. Even those who favor capitalism tend to apologize for its undermining of the time-honored bonds of society; Marx, it may be recalled, gave considerable emphasis to the "revolutionary role" of the merchant bourgeoisie in overthrowing feudalism, a point supply-siders eagerly take up. Nisbet will have none of this, and those searching his work for *mea culpas* about capitalism's effect on the community will be most disappointed. He cites, for example, Japan, where the social order "has suffered little during the past century in which capitalism has burgeoned and prospered."

This sort of defense of the market is all the more striking as it comes from a social philosopher and not a Chicago-style economist. Like Burke and the Founding Fathers, Nisbet has his eye focused on the commonwealth and the laws, customs, and beliefs that keep it together. His prescriptions, then, as befits a social philosopher, tend to the practical and not the moral, even where moral issues are raised. In days past, he writes, such moral dilemmas were solved, or at least decided, by those directly concerned: clan, church, and town. These local authorities have, however, in accordance with Tocqueville's predictions, been usurped by centralization. "The problem with democracies," says Nisbet, "is that while the appeal of community has risen steadily during this century, the ordinary means of gratifying the need for community have been weakened, largely by the invasion of political power."

In sharp contrast to his loyal defense of the free market is Nisbet's bitter antagonism toward Western individualism, which he sees at the root of the West's problems. Comte, Durkheim, and even de Gaulle are all summoned up as testimony for the prosecution. This misguided idea is traced back to the hated French Revolution, which set out deliberately and systematically to abolish all traces of the *ancien regime*—the guilds, monasteries, communes, universities, provinces, the

patriarchal family, and, most of all, the Church. But in the course of their prosecution they did not succeed so much in abolishing these establishments as they did in pulling the rug out from under French society, transforming its citizenry not into liberated individuals but rather into "a rabble of disconnected atoms"—the perfect breeding grounds for the Leviathan. It was thus that Burke correctly predicted the rise of Napoleon; as Nisbet makes clear in his essay on tyranny, the greatest foundation of any democracy is not its constitution but a stable social order.

The blind spot in the French Revolution, and indeed in much of the libertarian thinking on freedom, was to forget the communal aspects of freedom—partially a result of abstracting human beings into "political man," "economic man," or "social man," all the while forgetting that the reality upon which these abstractions are based is a united and indivisible whole. Nisbet draws a crucial distinction between liberty and individualism, promoting the former as a harbinger of political, economic, and cultural progress and denouncing the latter as a prelude to totalitarianism. In effect, the distinction he makes is between liberty and license: "Political collectivism could scarcely exist," he states, "were it not for the erosion of the social authorities and the consequent release of masses of individuals."

Nisbet's abiding trust in the efficacy (not objective veracity) of the community's moral solutions leads him to posit a strong pro-abortion stance at the same time that he chastises the United States Supreme Court for the 1972 *Roe v. Wade* decision that swept away the abortion statutes of forty-six states, a decision he finds as repugnant as *Dred Scott*. Reviewers on the Left and Right have devoted considerable ink to this particular essay, not only because it is the first and one of the longest essays in the book, but also because it is so different from the other chapters—this to the delight of the Left and the discomfiture of the Right. In this essay Nisbet derides the anti-abortionists as political totalitar-

ians, calling them a greater threat to American society than the assorted lesbians, homosexuals, and women's libbers aligned on the other side.

This strikes me as a classic case of the philosopher chasing his own tail, asserting what he ought to prove logically and substituting a higher decibel level for substance. Given his traditional bent, one would have thought that even if he entertained doubts about proscribing abortion, the way the battle lines have in fact been drawn gives some indication—unless it is a total coincidence—of what is at stake. As James T. Burtchaell noted in what may be the most scholarly examination of the issue,¹ those opposing abortion today are the same people who have withstood past progressive onslaughts against the family. Instead of bitterly insisting that there is no necessary link between gay rights, women's lib, and even socialism (those with doubts should read Ms. Gloria Steinem on the issue), it would be more profitable to inquire why things have turned out this way as opposed to insisting that ideally it is not a necessary link.

From Nisbet's own starting point, it must be said, he cannot be faulted for his conclusions, but he should be reprimanded for the undignified and unwarranted crankiness that leads him to some silly *ad hominem*s here. Anti-abortionists are said to have started calling the fetus a human life because they are opposed to abortion. *He* does not believe this sticky proposition about the fetus and thus abortion does not perturb him; by no stretch of the imagination can this questionable order be imposed on the anti-abortionist side. It is the anti-abortionists who insist—who have always insisted—that abortion is wrong because the fetus is a human being. It is they who have science and medicine (I shall leave out morals) on their side and who ground their arguments on simple reality. By contrast, it is the pro-abortionist side, including Nisbet, who are guilty of obfuscating the issue with a Jerry Brown-like flair for terms such as "termination of pregnancy," "product of conception," "trimester," and so on. Nisbet's reasoning and

curious use of Pauline Christianity make the scholastics with their angels on pinheads appear downright earthy.

Individual essays aside, if there is any flaw in the book as a whole, it is a certain petulance that seeps through at various junctures, of which the abortion essay is the most overt. Nisbet generalizes a great deal, especially about things that annoy him, and it often leaves the impression that he wrote as his bones were creaking. Yet in fairness it must be added that it is a relatively minor flaw, one of style and not substance, and that even here he does rise above mere pettiness to illustrate what can best be called a noble pagan character. This he accomplishes by refusing to name names when denouncing this or that cad for some boorish action, be it social, political, or intellectual. Granted, most readers will immediately recognize the majority of louts in question, and, given human nature, many will probably spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out the unknowns; still, by not naming them, Nisbet forces the reader into an objective consideration of the moral.

If there is any figure who comes to mind while reading *Prejudices*, it is not Burke, Tocqueville, or even Voltaire, but a worthy man who is not even mentioned—Marcus Aurelius, the world's only real philosopher-king. The incarnation of those Roman ideals Nisbet admires so much, Aurelius was that all too-rare combination: an intellectual who proved a capable sovereign. The wars, plagues, and famines that besieged the empire during his reign made him aware that the *Pax Romana* had peaked, and in his *Meditations* he thus directs his thoughts inward, like a true stoic. Yet despite a difference of focus, there is this in Aurelius that is in Nisbet: an acute knowledge of our human condition, which in both cases placed an unrelieved burden on the authors. To a nonbeliever, or one with a wholly rational belief, there is no consolation with knowledge. Philosophy may tell us that we are miserable, and even why we are miserable; that is its unfortunate limit.

Prejudices is neither a totally consistent

nor a comprehensive work. Themes and anecdotes are repeated throughout, a characteristic that rather prevents its being read like any other book. But this is apparently in accordance with Nisbet's wishes: inasmuch as it was written to please the author, so it should be read for the sheer pleasure of a learned man's illuminating company. *Prejudices* was designed for those who like to skim, to jump from one subject to whatever else catches their fancy, where they may be annoyed or amused, but always edified. It is the rare book these days that can make such a claim.

Reviewed by WILLIAM MCGURN

'Rachel Weeping (New York, 1982).

Troubles and Opportunities in Academe

The University and the Public Interest,
by A. Bartlett Giamatti, *New York:*
Atheneum, 1981. xii + 184 pp. \$12.95.

A. BARTLETT GIAMATTI became president of Yale University in 1977, a time when institutions of higher education were in deep troubles that promised to become even more oppressive in the decade to come. In addition to problems imposed by inflation, colleges and universities feel a special impact of demographic patterns and cultural changes that affect student generations. With falling enrollments, faculties become over-tenured, blocking the recruitment and retention of young teachers. A disastrous job market for Ph.D.'s is driving many of the most talented and promising graduate students out of the academic profession. College students reflect declining

standards of their earlier education in the essential disciplines of language and mathematics, and the traditional liberal studies suffer most from the growing trend towards practical and "vocational" studies.

These troubling matters, along with an affirmation of positive university values, are discussed by President Giamatti in this collection of thirteen separate essays, mostly addresses given on Yale University occasions. The preface admits that the book presents "no new legislative proposals, no policy initiatives," but suggests that a unity may be found in a "set of private convictions" about the role of education in promoting the public good.

In spite of some limitations imposed by official occasions and the disclaimer of the preface, the reader will discern some policy implications in these well-informed and frequently pungent observations on academic affairs. Although the author frankly describes difficulties and dangers, he warns against the seductions of an "apocalyptic style," which may offer "fatigue masquerading as philosophy" to young people in these years approaching the end of a millennium as well as a century.

Two early essays reflect views of the professor of Renaissance literature who was to become university president. "Sentimentality," written in 1975, observes that students entering college at that time were victims of the anti-structures of the "sentimental 1960's." Of all the institutions attacked, "the one that suffered most was the institution of language itself." Rebellion against the discipline of language can be illustrated by an inflammatory speech of Abbie Hoffman at a Yale campus gathering, but it is more alarming that a high official of the National Council of Teachers of English could deride the notion of teaching "basic skills," and in effect would "rather have students avoid meaning and grope for feeling." As a result of such doctrines "millions of school children . . . have been lied to." This sentimentality, "this deep distrust of the restrictions of language . . . is at the heart of why young people today cannot write."