

REVIEW

James Miller, *Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-374-15085-3

I have struggled to find a way to review James Miller's *Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche*, and because of that struggle and the personal reasons associated with it, this will not be a typical academic review.

There is no doubt that *Examined Lives* is an engaging and concisely written biographical account of famous philosophers, whose biographies are in turn well-known by those with a classical education. The academic merit of the work is manifest from the opening pages. James Miller says his motivation for this biographical collection is that philosophy has become "a purely technical discipline, revolving around specialised issues in semantics and logic." (6) There is, according to James Miller, "a principled disregard" (7) for the personal and the lived lives of philosophers and "It is generally assumed that 'philosophy' refers to the 'study of the most general and abstract features of the world and the categories with which we think: mind, matter, reasons, proof, truth etc.," to quote the definition offered by the outstanding recent *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*." (6)

James Miller emphasizes the personal element and takes a position on one side of what has become a methodological schism in the humanities. That divide is found along the subjective/objective fault line between the engaged specific intellectual—to use the Foucauldian term—who finds a way to understanding through subjectively situating themselves in relationship with the lives of others, and those who feign disinterest and objectivism and who believe they can *a priori* stand outside of power-relations, counting the numbers, analyzing the social texts and pointing to the disembodied facts without becoming morally obligated to the lives of people as they are lived.

I have argued—in other places—that philosophy approached with a principled disregard, speaks to the intellectual hubris of people who try to put themselves above the normal affairs (power-relations) of the great mass of ordinary people who are living extraordinary lives in their own ways. So, I was sympathetic to James Miller's project from the start. Being immersed as I am in my discipline of applied and practical ethics as it is lead by Peter Singer, the author of *Animal Liberation*, I thought that philosophy had, for the most part, moved away from a principled disregard of the personal. Perhaps, however, I am not as in touch with the state of the academy as I thought. For cloistered as I am from what people in my situation call 'the real world' and focused on my intellectual pursuits, which are always grounded in consideration of the kind of person that I have been, who I am now, and who I would like to be-

come, then perhaps I have missed the desiccated definition of philosophy from the recent *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. At first I thought the competing perspectives of an engaged specific intellectual and a disinterested objective intellectual would play an important part, but having highlighted the competing intellectual perspectives and his bias, James Miller takes a side and immerses the reader in the lives so the personal details thereof do the work they are intended.

Having experienced a poor outcome from my formal education, at 23 years of age I picked up Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* in search of answers for why I had driven my life to a crisis point. Reading James Miller's *Examined Lives* has reminded me of why I undertook a study of philosophy, what I found in Bertrand Russell's *History*, and why I have achieved, against the odds in this day and age, a classical liberal arts education. It was to arrive at an understanding of Self through the lives of others.

The wider project of James Miller's book is to bring back into the view of a contemporary philosophical education, the rich tradition among the classical philosophers. This is what he calls the "primary point"; an exploration of "the kind of person, the sort of self that one could elaborate as a result of taking the quest for wisdom seriously." (7) James Miller makes the point for the importance of a life lived and an understanding of the philosophical canon, which can inform "a choice of life" rather than the forming of "existential opinion." (7) James Miller presents the lives so very well and so concisely that any attempt by me to further summarize his work would do him and this excellent book a great disservice.

Examined Lives is aimed at animating the personal power of philosophy. So, rather than review the book, I believe it will be far more insightful to talk about its impact on me, as it struck an ontological sore spot. I started to read *Examined Lives* just when I was faced with a very important choice in my life: should I resist the wishes of my University, who held my academic future in its hands, or should I acquiesce and have an assured future. In other words, would I choose virtue or pragmatism? Would I follow the example of Socrates' virtuous life, or Plato's pragmatic life? James Miller's treatment of the first two philosophers brought the ontological, moral and philosophical issues into stark personal focus and hence the relevance of the lives depicted was very well illustrated for me. Even though I know the biographies well, having them presented and reading about them at that very moment in my life, helped me greatly.

So, how did the choice between virtue and pragmatism and my academic future come about? Working in the modality of a Foucauldian genealogical analysis, my PhD research uncovered a hitherto unidentified pervasive praxis of punishment by private agents of punishment who commit the most extreme acts of torture and murder in Australia. In my thesis, I detail the emergence of a sense of Self and Other through a sovereign, and then a disciplinary power to punish. I argue that a carceral understanding of Self is maintained by the norms of and resistance to, disciplinary power as it is described in *Discipline and Punish*. I trace a normative discourse surrounding punishment, which shapes the emergence of this carceral understanding of a good Self which is oppositional to a bad Other who is categorised as being like an 'animal.' I find that the animal analogy of Otherness is a hyper-subjective ready-reckoner that is widely used to conclude that a bad offending Other is so unlike the normative 'us' of a good Self, that it is morally permissible for that bad Other to be a victim of violence

and slaughtered like a nonhuman animal. I detail how the discursive acts of victims of crime advocacy of the law-and-order lobby, Government and law enforcement all contribute to a necropolitical discourse, which is manifested as a popular public hate-speech. This discourse is then used by delinquents to ethically support the torture and murder of certain vulnerable Others who are their victims. I find that the law-abiding Self as well as the delinquent Self join together in the hate-speech and the torturous and murderous violence so as to assert their hyper-subjective sovereign-like sense of Self, and to advance their political and personal agendas.

In one case study I drew on the hate-speech of a leader of a law-and-order and victim's lobby and then made a moral judgment against his unethical conduct. That I would make a moral judgment against a public figure was seen as highly controversial. I proved the case for the necropolitical discourse to such an extent that the University was concerned that if my research were to become public it would pose a risk to my physical safety. I should also say that I did not employ a lot of subtlety in reporting the findings of my research. I did not feign disinterest and objectivism; I did not claim to be standing outside of the power-relations I was exposing. I took a moral stand as an engaged specific intellectual who is situated within the field. Michel Foucault said that the genealogical method "demands relentless erudition... from a vast accumulation of source material" to demonstrate the depth of the impact of the power-relations, which are being examined. That is just what I did as I hammered home dozens and dozens of examples of the necropolitical discourse of the law-and-order lobby, Government, law enforcement and the accompanying violence and public disorder by delinquents. Added to the controversy of these findings is the fact that I am a long-term, high-profile prisoner in Australia.

I had passed the examination processes. However, because of the controversial nature of my findings and the moral judgments against public figures; because I had proved a case for an immoral necropolitical discourse; because I did not feign a disinterested objectivism; because there was considered to be a risk to my personal safety if my findings became known; and because of my status as a high profile prisoner, the University said that before it would award the degree it would need to consider if public access to my research should be restricted.

So, how would I respond to the University wanting to suppress the findings of my research by not making the thesis, or even the award of my degree, public? The lives in James Miller's work illustrated my very practical dilemma. I could take the virtuous personal and political position of Socrates if I was to oppose the suppression of my research, but we know what happened to him; or I could try to negotiate a compromise, but I could well end up like Plato after his failed pandering to the political power of tyrants and his final retreat from Syracuse with his tail between his legs. Perhaps I could look to the personal and political pragmatism of Aristotle if I acquiesced to the suppression of my research. Aristotle's is a safe path, but his life is seen as one characterized by logic and not the virtue of Socrates. Why not say: *to hell with it all*, and take the hypocritical personal and political position of Seneca and just get what I can for myself under the circumstances, but Seneca did not do so well in the end either. Most of my friends and colleagues were advising that I should *just get the bit of paper* and not fight with the University before the award.

Since my first reading of Bertrand Russell's idiosyncratic *History of Western Philosophy* to my readings of James Miller's *Examined Lives*, Socrates has been 'the' philosopher for me. So with the University yet to formalize my award, I opposed what I called their suppression of my research and I made an uncompromising argument for my academic freedom and for courage and action in the face of the dominant necropolitical discourse. I argued that my thesis should be made public by the University on its library website, like all other PhD theses. I pointed out that the risk was mine to take and that I had made nothing but fair comments about matters which were all on the public record. I waited, but heard nothing until the University awarded my PhD and then a month later I was told that my research would not be publicly available for a period of five years, at which time its status would be reviewed. I was advised my award would be publically announced in the normal way.

The point of this personal aside has been to demonstrate that philosophy and learning has an active role in the lives we live and it is not just the study of the most general and abstract features of the world, or of mind, matter, reason, and proof. James Miller's *Examined Lives* provides that which is fundamental to our understanding of ourselves and our present, the example of the lives of others from which we can learn. *Examined Lives* came to me at just the right time and the examples illustrated by the lives helped me find my way and make a moral choice about how I should behave; there can be no greater recommendation for any book.

Postscript: After submitting this review, the prison has acted to suppress my PhD research as they will not allow me to send it to a publisher. Despite all the factual information being drawn from the official public record and from published reports in the news media, my narrative and moral judgment against the necropolitical discourse, is thought by the prison to be so controversial that it would cause a threat to the security and good order of the prison and the safety of prisoners, including myself, if it were to become widely known. The University was concerned about a violent reaction from the public, political branches of government, law enforcement and community leaders so they suppressed my research; the prison is also concerned about a violent reaction from prisoners, which is given as another reason for suppressing my research. These circumstances say to me that everyone is heavily invested in the necropolitical discourse that there are certain bad Others who should be tortured and murdered so as to shore-up a sense of their good Self. Such is the nature of this ontological investment that it is thought by the prison that my analysis exposing the naked immoral and logical inconsistency of the investment in annihilating the Other would cause acts of violence. The situation I found myself in with the University was essentially a moral choice, but the prison has, in my view, quite explicitly threatened my safety in the context of a violent environment where people are murdered—perhaps I need to reexamine Plato's pragmatism in pandering to tyrants after all, perhaps.

Craig W.J. Minogue
La Trobe University and somewhere in the carceral archipelago
Australia
craig2016@bigpond.com