

# Editorial: Persuasion

In the London *Spectator* for September 30th 1995 there appeared a review under the title of 'The return of the Anti-Christ'. It turned out to be about Bernard Williams' recent collection of essays *Making sense of Humanity*. In the review Professor Williams is regarded as more disruptive than 'safely mad figures' like Nietzsche on the grounds that this new Antichrist is one who 'can defeat the analytical moral philosophers at their own game' while forcefully exposing 'the errors and illusions on which morality rests'.

Philosophers, like other academics, have been known to complain about lack of media coverage. But is this the sort of coverage they want? And, more to the point, is it fair?

That it may be is suggested by Williams' own words, on the nature of morality and practical deliberation more generally. By contrast to an ethical Platonism, his picture is of 'a world in which everything is, if you like, persuasion, and the aim is to encourage some forms of it rather than others'. What the resulting abandonment of ethical theory leaves us with is the 'practical and ethical task' of deciding, in ethical and other questions 'who can speak, how and when'.

Some will doubtless like this more than others. There will be those who will wonder, as *The Spectator's* reviewer did, whether Williams' reduction of the ethical to the persuasive provides sufficient grounding for a tolerant society allowing any suitably polite contributor to be heard rather than shouted down by someone more powerful or more persuasive.

But, as Williams says, it is a platitude that we need more than philosophy to think seriously about a decent life in the modern world. It may also be that morality does not depend on anything a philosopher might recognize as an ethical theory. Elsewhere in the same issue of *The Spectator* we learn about Georges Casalis, the Calvinist pastor who provoked something like repentance in Albert Speer. What Pastor Casalis taught Speer and his fellow prisoners in Spandau was that 'the power of morality is greater than the morality of power.'