

well as social solidarity. The plays of William Shakespeare offer an early example of the theatre playing this kind of role. Towards the end of the modern period (and the end of the second part of this book) the plays of Bertolt Brecht represent a critical response to this modern ethical framework, and one which ushers in a phase of ethical thought and performance for which I am using the term 'Postmodern' as the title of the third and final part of the book.

In Part Three, I consider the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), which arose in response to what Levinas (and others) viewed as the disastrous consequences of certain aspects of modern rationality. In this view the genocide committed by the Nazis in the 1940s represented the logical extension of a kind of rationality that had turned both irrational and unethical. Levinasian ethics seeks to replace an ethics based on the freedom of the individual (modern) or the realisation of individual potential (ancient) with an ethics oriented entirely towards the other. Performance conceived in relation to Levinas' post-modern ethics encourages the spectator to stop seeing the performance as an exploration of his or her own subjectivity and, instead, to take it as an opportunity to experience an encounter with someone else. Performance, in this view, invites the spectator to assume ethical responsibility for the fragile life of the other. Here I consider work by the performance group Goat Island and the artist Walid Raad, as well as some recent critical writing about performance.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, thought about the relationship between theatre and ethics has

produced some valuable critical work, upon which I draw in the final part. In such work theatre and performance is valued for, among other things, its own ethical stance and the ethical responses it elicits from spectators. As I suggest in the conclusion to this book, this state of affairs runs the risk of creating a theatrical culture in which performances are valued only for what they might offer in terms of ethics. I therefore end the book with a suggestion that there might also be ethical value in theatre and performance that turns its face away from ethics altogether. But before doing away with ethics, let us find out what it is.

What is ethics?

The word 'ethics' derives from the Greek *ethos* ('character'). We might therefore think of ethics as the study of character. It is not about studying character in a psychological sense, however, as we might when studying a role in a play or a patient in the therapist's room. Ethics as the study of character is not much interested in psychology: it cares little what anyone might feel about his mother, what traumatic events in the past might have shaped someone's behaviour in the present, or what cures might make someone's painful emotional life more bearable. Ethics is interested in character in the sense that it is used when we speak of 'character witnesses'. A character witness is called upon when someone is accused of a crime and wants the court to take into consideration, as evidence in the case, how she normally behaves. The idea is that a character witness will present such a glowing portrait of virtuous and unselfish behaviour

that the judge or jury will be convinced that she simply could not have committed the hideous crime of which she has been accused: 'She just doesn't do that sort of thing.' To have committed the crime would have been to 'act out of character'. So, in a certain sense, ethics is about who you really are, deep down. Are you good or bad? Greedy or altruistic? Heroic or cowardly? Psychology might be interested in working out what made you that way. Ethics is not. Ethics is about the kind of person you are.

It is also, of course, about the things that you do. As Beatrice-Joanna in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's play *The Changeling* (Phoenix Theatre, London, 1622) finds out to her horror once she has commissioned the murder of her husband, she becomes 'the deed's creature' (3.4.137). She may not previously have thought herself the kind of woman who would organise a murder. But the moment she commits such an act, that act becomes part of what makes her who she is. She is created by her own actions: 'the deed's creature'. Part of Neoptolemus' confusion, when he asks himself, 'How shall I act?', arises because he has just done something – lied to Philoctetes – which he had previously thought to be the sort of thing he just did not do. His sense of who he is has been undermined. He is not quite the man he thought he was. We might think of ethics, then, as the thought and practice of acting in keeping with who we think we are. Ethics is about acting in character. There are things we do and things we don't do, and if we wish to think of ourselves in positive terms, from an ethical point of view, the things we do are good, and the

things we don't do are not. Ethics is about being good and staying good by acting well.

This sounds quite straightforward on the face of it, but you will already have noticed that there is a problem. How do we know what is good? This question introduces another way of thinking about what ethics might be. We might think of ethics as that branch of human thought concerned with finding out what is good and what is not. We might further imagine that it is the branch of thought that investigates how it might be possible even to know the difference between what is good and what is not. So it is not simply a matter of defining good and evil, of drawing up a set of rules by which to live. It involves working out on what basis, if any, we can make such judgements. On what do we found our conceptions of right and wrong? As I have already suggested, briefly, above, there are certain historical situations in which this kind of question tends to arise more urgently than at other times. Where there is an extremely powerful social consensus around a particular set of rules – as where everyone adheres to the same religion and where that religion, as many do, has definitive texts which prescribe how people should behave – ethics has little work to do. We know what is right and wrong because we have read or heard the sacred texts. It is where this level of unanimity does not exist that the task of ethics becomes demanding.

It is just such a space of ethical uncertainty into which Sophocles inserts Neoptolemus. Ought he simply to do as he is told – obey his elders and respect what appears to be the will of the Gods – or should he strike out on his own and

act in accordance with some other set of principles, and if so, which? And where would they come from? Can he just make them up himself? It is in the situation of doubt, in the moment of choice, when you ask yourself, 'How shall I act?', that you are opening up the space of ethics. In posing the question 'How shall I act?' you are also, implicitly, posing a far wider question: 'How can I establish a basis on which to act?' Or, to frame it less personally, 'Can we create a system according to which we will all know how to act?' With that question comes a host of others, such as 'Can we create a system that everyone will agree with?', 'Can we create a system which is entirely rational?', 'How do we balance the claims of individual freedom with those of collective justice?'

Before long these questions, which start out as questions about yourself and an isolated situation in which you don't know what to do, start to become philosophical, and even political. Questions of ethics are involved in how we organise the ways in which we live with one another. Our behaviour never takes place in a vacuum, and our actions always have consequences for people other than ourselves. One of the constant tasks of ethical thought is to assist us in making social and political arrangements that minimise the negative consequences of one individual's actions for the rest of society and also, perhaps, maximise their positive impacts. As we shall see towards the end of this book, much contemporary ethical thought is specifically directed to such questions, including not only our direct, interpersonal relationships with others but the framework within which we conduct

relationships with 'others' as such. We began with ethics as the study of character – a definition that might suggest that ethics is all about yourself – but we have ended this brief attempt at a definition with the thought that ethics might in fact be all about everyone but yourself.

Why theatre?

The prime theatrical example I have called on so far – of Neoptolemus' moment of ethical confusion in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* – suggests at least one reason for thinking about theatre and ethics together. Theatre dramatises ethical situations. Furthermore, it does so in specific historical situations. By this I mean the historical situations from which the theatre in question itself emerges. We can reasonably assume that the kind of ethical problems confronting a character in a play, for example, are the sort of things that count as ethical problems in the society in which the play itself was produced. Presumably the dilemmas faced by men involved in war would have been considered significant by Sophocles and his audience in Athens, a state which engaged in successive wars with Persia and Sparta during Sophocles' lifetime, wars in which Sophocles himself participated alongside the fellow citizens who made up the Athenian theatre audience. This indicates a second important factor in how we think theatre and ethics together. Generally speaking, theatre is a social art form. It tends to represent people in social relationships with one another, rather than in isolation. Although it might be possible to imagine a play in which there is no social interaction at all, yet in which an ethical

problem is somehow aired, this is not the usual pattern. This means that, in the theatre, ethical problems tend to get presented as social problems, a fact which gives their treatment additional historical specificity. Although, from the great distance of nearly two and a half millennia, the issues confronting Neoptolemus in Sophocles' play can be made to appear somewhat abstract (the account offered above is necessarily schematic), they are unlikely to have been experienced in that way by the audience to whom the play was initially presented. They are far more likely to have been understood in relation to the fabric of the life which the audience and the playwright shared. Similarly, to take a playwright often thought of as a latter-day Sophocles, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Det Kongelige Theater, Copenhagen, 1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (Residenz Theater, Munich, 1891) present not abstract reflections on marriage, childbirth and the life of women but concrete embodiments of a crisis intrinsic to the society about which the plays were written, and in which they were received.

It may be objected that none of this is specific to the theatrical presentation of ethical problems. The same might be said of novels, for example, or of films, both of which present characters in concrete social situations and play out ethical questions through the representation of social action or behaviour. However, theatre makes ethics a social affair in at least one way which is not really available to the novelist or the filmmaker: the dramatisation and social situating of an ethical problem takes place in the presence of the spectator. I wrote this book because I think there is something

particular about theatrical spectatorship that offers ways of thinking about ethics – and, specifically, thinking socially and politically about ethics – that no other cultural practice seems to offer. Theatre inserts its ethical questions into the lives of its spectators in a situation in which those spectators are unusually conscious of their own status as spectators, and thus as people who may exercise ethical judgement. It also takes place in the presence of spectators who are aware of their status as spectators who are engaged in reciprocal spectatorship. We watch ourselves watching people engaging with an ethical problem while knowing that we are being watched in our watching (by other spectators and also by those we watch). Because so much ethics is concerned with questions such as the relationship between how people seem and how they are, this situation of mutual spectatorship raises the ethical stakes in theatre in a way that is not quite possible anywhere else. This situation is further complicated by the fact that we tend to know, in the theatre, when people are pretending and when they are not. That is to say, the theatre is a place where we know that there is a difference between how people seem and how they are, but it is also a place where we pretend not to know this difference. It is therefore, perhaps supremely, a place of ethical confusion or cross-purposes. Indeed, if ethics has anything to do with truth – and it is hard to imagine an ethics that has not – then the theatre might be a very strange place to come looking for it. It is, after all, the home of pretending. All the same, people do come to the theatre looking for truth. Perhaps it is the uncertainty about truth and untruth, which

is foregrounded in the experience of theatre, that makes it an appealing place to come in search of ethical questions.

The idea that the theatre might be a strange or even inappropriate place to come looking for truth needs to be addressed a little more fully. Here might be the place, then, to consider briefly the idea that the theatre itself should be avoided by anyone interested in his or her own ethical well-being. This is the famous idea that there is something wrong with the theatre, and that the wrong in question is a question of ethics.

What is 'wrong' with theatre?

This famous idea is generally understood to have its most significant point of origin in the work of the Athenian philosopher Plato. Across a range of philosophical works, all written in the form of dialogues, but most famously in *The Republic* (c.360 BCE), Plato investigates the nature and consequences of artistic production. He does so within the wider framework of a systematic enquiry into ethics. His most anguished and extensive reflections concern poetry, and, most particularly, those forms of poetry which may be read aloud or performed. It is clear that the practice of reading epic or non-dramatic poetry, such as the works of Homer, formed an important part of public and private life in Plato's Athens. However, it is theatre, and most particularly the tragic theatre of Plato's time, that becomes, in *The Republic*, the art to which his thoughts turn time and again. This has the effect of making theatre itself the paradigm for art in general and the location for the development of

important elements in Plato's ethical thought. The ultimate test for theatre is to what extent it can make a positive contribution to the development of the human individual towards self-fulfilment or self-realisation. For Plato, the highest aim of a human being should be to achieve the life of the philosopher, engaged in the pursuit and contemplation of truth. Encouraging this aim is the basis of his ethics. If theatre can support such an aim, then it has a place in the imaginary ideal world of *The Republic*. But if it cannot make such a contribution, it has no place there.

For Plato, the highest achievement of the human is reason. Imagination, in contrast, is entangled with emotions. The task of reason is to keep emotion in check, so as to maintain the coherence and stability of the individual human being. If theatre overwhelms its spectators with their own emotions and encourages them to imagine that human identity might be unstable or changeable, then theatre will have to be resisted. This tension between reason and emotion, or between rational thought and the imagination, has recurred in ethical thought, about theatre and about life in general, from Plato's day to our own.

The dialogue form in which Plato writes (with his lead character, Socrates, in constant conversation with other characters who seek his wisdom) already points to a spirit of contradiction in those works where both dramatic representation and poetry are subjected to systematic critique. As many critics have noted, Plato's attack on poetry and on tragic theatre in particular is launched from within poetry itself. His rationalism is presented by way of a work of the