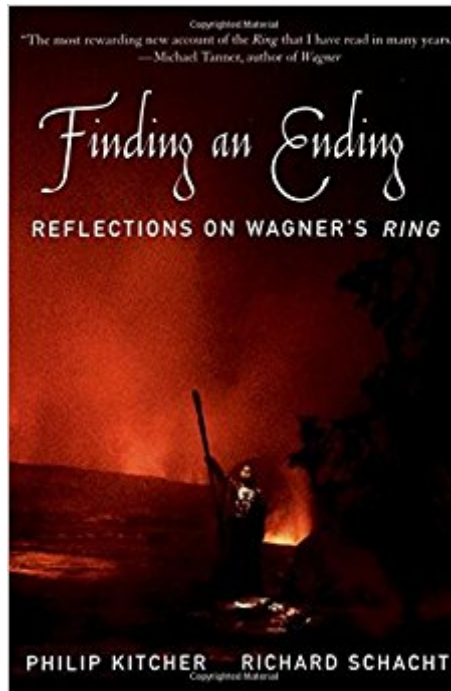




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Finding An Ending: Reflections On Wagner's Ring



Synopsis

Few musical works loom as large in Western culture as Richard Wagner's four-part Ring of the Nibelung. In *Finding an Ending*, two eminent philosophers, Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht, offer an illuminating look at this greatest of Wagner's achievements, focusing on its far-reaching and subtle exploration of problems of meanings and endings in this life and world. Kitcher and Schacht plunge the reader into the heart of Wagner's Ring, drawing out the philosophical and human significance of the text and the music. They show how different forms of love, freedom, heroism, authority, and judgment are explored and tested as it unfolds. As they journey across its sweeping musical-dramatic landscape, Kitcher and Schacht lead us to the central concern of the Ring--the problem of endowing life with genuine significance that can be enhanced rather than negated by its ending, if the right sort of ending can be found. The drama originates in Wotan's quest for a transformation of the primordial state of things into a world in which life can be lived more meaningfully. The authors trace the evolution of Wotan's efforts, the intricate problems he confronts, and his failures and defeats. But while the problem Wotan poses for himself proves to be insoluble as he conceives of it, they suggest that his very efforts and failures set the stage for the transformation of his problem, and for the only sort of resolution of it that may be humanly possible--to which it is not Siegfried but rather Brinnhilde who shows the way. The Ring's ending, with its passing of the gods above and destruction of the world below, might seem to be devastating; but Kitcher and Schacht see a kind of meaning in and through the ending revealed to us that is profoundly affirmative, and that has perhaps never been so powerfully and so beautifully expressed.

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"Determined like no other composer to 'fathom the depths of philosophy,' Wagner wrote operas exploring the elemental passions and conflicts of the human condition. Kitcher and Schacht, distinguished philosophers in their own right, present a profound analysis of the guiding ideas of the Ring which enables us to grasp as never before the power of Wagner's most ambitious work."--Charles E. Larmore, University of Chicago Law School"Each chapter contains thought-provoking discussions that will intellectually engage readers, even those who are unmoved, or perhaps repelled, by Wagner's music and ideas."--Library Journal"A strikingly successful reading of Wagner's music drama as a philosophical meditation on the meaning of human existence and freedom."--Paul Boghossian, New York University"An analytic gem...[Kitcher and Schacht's] definitions and explanations [are] crystal clear.... This book will surely satisfy Wagner aficionados as much as it will make those who are new to the Ring feel welcome."--Nicholas Vazsonyi, Wagner Notes

Philip Kitcher is John Dewey Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University. He is the author of seven previous books, is a past president of the American Philosophical Association (Pacific Division), and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He currently holds the Romanell Professorship in Philosophy, awarded annually by Phi Beta Kappa. Richard Schacht is Professor of Philosophy and Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His previous books include *Hegel and After*, *Nietzsche, The Future of Alienation*, and *Making Sense of Nietzsche*.

excellent

As a retired philosopher of religion, I find this book appealing--especially its emphasis on the glorious, soaring, wordless theme with which the Ring ends; and also its finding parallels in the Judgment theme in Mozart's Don Giovanni and in Shakespeare's Cordelia in King Lear. Following Nietzsche, however, the authors reject Wagner's last opera, Parsifal, and apparently all religion--Christian, Buddhist, etc. Strange that philosophers that can grasp the meaning in a mytho-poetic work like the Ring reduce religious tradition to simple, literalist fundamentalism!The

Ring, according to the authors, was written under the influence of Feuerbach's secular humanist optimism, complicated by Wagner's own experience of the failure of worldly political utopianism. The ending symbolizes the "death of God," not merely the death of the Idols, as theologians would have it. The atheist pessimism of Schopenhauer came to seem more realistic to Wagner (with his last opera *Parsifal*??), but not before he finished the Ring with a ringing affirmation of life and love. In trying to articulate how it is that, in spite of defeat and death, "not everything has been lost," they come surprisingly close, but are finally blocked by the ghost of logical positivism. In Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the authors see Nietzsche's *Übermensch*; a figure literally beyond good and evil, and not subject to any truth or negative judgment beyond the conflicting prejudices of finite creatures. In the judgment of the authors, the Commendatore, and the transcendent Judgment he symbolizes, is laughable. So also with positive judgment; the final theme of the Ring cannot be "redeemed by Love," but merely "triumph and vindication of Brunnhilde." (In whose eyes? If all judgment and truth are relative? If all who judge are temporary, finite, fallible creatures? If there is no Ideal Observer?)

Written by 2 distinguished philosophers who are also amateur musicians, this book is a very interesting exploration of Wagner's great Ring cycle. Kitcher and Schacht argue that the Ring is an extended exploration of the existensial dilemma of establishing meaning in life. The analysis is based on a close examination of the libretto, Wagner's stage directions, the music itself, and what we know of Wagner's intentions and thought during the prolonged gestation of the Ring cycle. This is a particularly sympathetic analysis of Wotan, whom Kitcher and Schacht present as struggling to establish a meaningful, better, and lawful world. The alternatives to Wotan's efforts are the beautiful but heedless natural world of the Rhinemaidens and the corruption and brutality of characters like Alberich and Hunding. Wotan's efforts, however, are ultimately self-defeating, something that Wotan himself appreciates as a tragic destiny. Wotan's greatest successor is his daughter Brunnhilde, the Valkyrie become human whose ability to combine what Kitcher and Schacht describe as empathic love with eros constitutes a redemptive alternative to Wotan's struggle to establish rational, lawful order. But Brunnhilde also fails and the plot of the Ring seems to point to unavoidable failure to wrest meaningfulness from the universe. Wagner's incredibly powerful music, however, indicates that it is Brunnhilde's efforts to establish meaningfulness that vindicates human existence. This is a very ambitious undertaking and my brief description doesn't do justice to the careful development of the authors' analysis. I certainly found it convincing. If anything, Kitcher and Schacht may not go far enough. Their analysis emphasizes human construction of meaning. Wagner certainly thought of himself as a "maker" (*kunstler*) with a very expansive and typically Romantic view of the

constructive power of art. The authors establish the Ring as a sophisticated and powerful allegory-analysis of the effort to establish meaning in life but this can also be seen as an allegory of Wagner's craft.

the writing style is atrocious. plodding, confused sentences. the introduction took me three tries to get through. the first chapter on feuerbach and schopenhauer is a mess. the sentences are muddled, convoluted garbage. these philosophers (along with nietzsche) are tough enough to grasp when the explanation is lucid.i was hoping for points of view with which to examine subtleties and/or subplots within the ring. what i got was an unreadable drek.

The writing style in this book is both painfully obtuse and condescending. It reads as though the writers were trying to find a complicated way to write something that is simple while dispensing erudition ex cathedra along the way. A quarter of a century ago one of the authors tried to attack sociobiology, which is the study of the genetic basis of social behavior, and which has the support of evolutionary theory. Both the attempt on the creative work of Wagner and the creative work of E. O. Wilson were unsuccessful. As a scientist who spends most of his time discovering and very little time criticizing as I do in this review, I think it pretentious for others to make a living writing what amounts to those little comments you see scribbled on bathroom walls. It was once said that we don't erect statues to critics. I think that is a good way to sign off on my own very few moments of critical comments about the prolix pronunciations of those who do not discover, but who take potshots at those who create.

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