

BOOK REVIEW

Santiago Sia. *Society in its Challenges: Philosophical Considerations of Living in Society*

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This volume brings together Filipino-born and Irish-based scholar Santiago Sia's writings over a number of years on the nature of the human person, ethics and culture to produce a book-length study of the general topic of ethical living in society. The result is a stimulating set of reflections on a vital topic for our times, since contemporary society in many parts of the world is often thought to be facing something of a crisis of ethical values, not only in the area of individual behavior and personal morality, but also with regard to modern living more broadly, such as in business, politics, and law. Sia brings his considerable philosophical ability and wisdom over a lifetime of studying these matters, in the company of several major philosophers, to offer us a penetrating set of insights on various dimensions of the ethical problems we face today. His work in this volume is inspired and informed by the thought of process philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, as well as traditional thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Confucius and Mencius, along with other inspirational figures from whom we have much to learn, such as Martin Buber. In this way, the book is a treasure trove of ancient and modern wisdom, as well as a measured, but insightful set of reflections on the crisis of ethics in contemporary society that has contributed so much to the disturbing levels of cynicism, desperation, dysfunction, economic hardship and alienation among the general public.

The book is divided into two sections. In the first, Professor Sia addresses the more theoretical questions of the discussion, including the foundational question of the nature of the human person. In the opening essay, Sia explains the role and importance of philosophical thinking for addressing problems in modern society that, to its detriment (as Sia notes), is moving away from the kind of thinking cultivated in the study of the liberal arts, towards the increasing dominance of the utilitarian mind-set (especially in the business sense of the financial bottom line), a mind-set that now includes the false ideology that there are technical, scientific solutions to all human problems. Sia argues that central to the discussion about the nature, direction, and ethical goals of society is a prior philosophical question concerning the nature of the human person. He rightfully points out that only when we answer that question can we address many of the nuts and bolts questions with regard to how society and culture can contribute to human fulfillment. This discussion reveals that there is always a view of the self-operating behind any ethical or political prescriptions, as Sia illustrates in Chapter 2, but this view of the self must be made obvious, explained and defended rather than simply assumed and imposed on society by fiat.

There is always a conception of the self operating in the background that gives rise

to some of the issues involving public and private interests in society, and one of the most difficult political problems—at least in the context of a democratic society—is whether (and why) citizens should live according to someone else's conception of the self. More specifically, perhaps, the question can be put this way: which (and whose) conception of the self should regulate public morality? This is a question that requires a debate about the true conception of the self. Sia does not point out that this debate presents contemporary democratic societies with a serious problem which they will have to face eventually: how to resolve debates about ethics, politics and culture if there are different and indeed competing views of the self in the same society. But his concern here is more with establishing that there is always a conception of the self behind public ethical pronouncements.

After offering a critical reflection (inspired by the work of Hartshorne) on the dualistic way of thinking in modern society which often leads to division (physical/mental, individual/society, church/state, along with racial and gender divisions, which also often pit us against each other), Sia turns in Chapter 4, in an essay entitled “Relationships and Communal Living: A View on Types of Relationships”, to the work of Martin Buber to offer a fascinating account of human relationships. Buber’s account of the nature of the human person, though not unique to him, is given an interesting formulation in his most famous work *I and Thou* (1923). Whereas traditional philosophers like Aristotle and Aquinas held that the human self is by nature a social being, Buber proposed that it is in fact in our relationships with others that the individual self emerges and becomes real. The traditional view is that a human being only finds fulfillment in some kind of community, because this is part of human nature; Buber takes this view a step further to suggest that it is only by means of human relationships, which he characterizes as “I-Thou” relationships, that a true individual self comes to exist. Before that, the self is incomplete. This again is a claim about the nature of human beings, and a fascinating one, since it is often believed that an individual self would have to exist first before it could enter into relationship. But Buber’s point is that the self prior to relationship is not really individual since an individual needs relationship with other human beings to become not only fulfilled, but also individual. This is an empirical claim about the self, one that Buber and other thinkers who hold the same view, such as Gabriel Marcel, believe must be confirmed by a person in their own individual experiences with other people.

This understanding of the self, as Sia notes, would have far-reaching implications for individual morality and for society as a whole. If this view is correct, it would mean that the modern and contemporary view of the self, which comes from the tradition of thinkers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill, is largely incorrect and misguided. This influential (indeed, for the twentieth century, *defining* view of the person) is founded upon the notion of individual autonomy, with a strong emphasis on the exercise of one’s freedom (over and against the influence of others, whose concern must be regarded in the first instance as “interference”). It involves pursuing one’s own path in life (as Mill put it) from a range of choices, with little restraint from morality or tradition, and while often being encouraged, especially in modern interpretations and applications of Mill’s thought, to regard other people as an impediment rather than as necessary to the task of developing a complete self and achieving human fulfillment. Mill’s view is often regarded as selfish because it puts so much emphasis on the individual, what the individual wants from the point of view of self-interest, on how the individual *chooses* to relate to others (if at all). The choices of the

individual are always primary and the role of others (even family members) are, to a large degree, secondary on this understanding.

Buber's account, Sia argues, suggests a different approach—one driven by an empirical analysis of human nature—and illustrates that the Millian approach leads to a lack of fulfillment in our day-to-day lives. Indeed, the increasing dominance of the Millian approach would explain the sense of alienation, loss of meaning and crisis of confidence in the use of reason to make functional choices that many experience in contemporary society, despite appearing to be doing very well on the surface in terms of human well-being. It is not so much perhaps that Mill's understanding of the self should be abandoned but that a serious tempering of it is necessary, along with a recognition that our nature requires us to put the other person before ourselves in many of our choices—that this approach is a better path to human fulfillment. We see the same idea in thinkers such as Levinas and Marcel; it is also the dominant view of the person in the Christian tradition. Sia follows up this discussion (again drawing on the work of Hartshorne) with an attempt to explain and to reconcile both the individual and social aspects of being human.

In the last essay of the first part, "Ethical Thinking and Formation: A Challenge for Living in Society," Sia turns to the work of Mencius to further elucidate the deeper aspects of ethical thinking. Mencius emphasized the fact that human beings have a moral nature, and that we must make an effort to cultivate it; this involves the use of both reason and emotion, and focuses on key aspects of that nature such as our essential goodness; in addition, Mencius held that we need to make an effort to put aside our selfish interests. One problem is that we too easily allow ourselves to be led astray by our appetites, and then engage in a process of rationalization to explain why we failed to exercise self-control. Society and cultural trends also make the process of rationalization (which is a form of self-deception) easier, one of the insights of Aristotle and the Greeks—that a corrupt society is very likely to have a corrupting influence on all but the most strong-willed who live in it. These points have application in the areas of education and business, for instance. Many schools profess to be educating the whole person, but are under pressure to conform to a business model, which places the emphasis in the curriculum on teaching skills that will lead to good jobs and higher salaries, whereas the ideal curriculum should focus not only on skills but on good training in the liberal arts. Similarly in business, a simple business transaction must be conducted with honesty rather than with deception or fraud—for example, when selling a product (a topic Professor Sia has discussed with the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, who held a series of meetings with educators, experts and community leaders in the wake of the banking crisis in Ireland). Sia notes that a cultivated moral center is required to make good ethical decisions—in business or medicine for example—and argues persuasively that our educational systems today have a misguided tendency to neglect moral education for other things that are deemed more economically or politically expedient.

In Part II, Professor Sia turns to more practical issues. Chapter 7 provides a fascinating overview of and reflection upon the dominance of the *image* in modern culture. This issue of our times raises all sorts of important philosophical questions concerning the difference between the image and reality, the dominance of the image over reality, the question of who has control over the images, the attempt to shape culture by means of images, the desire of people to confirm to the images being presented to them, the role of the image in

the way media reports news, and so forth. Sia proposes some criteria for deciding where to draw the line on the creation of images and free speech, but the criteria are abstract and would benefit from illustration with concrete examples. The problem we face today is that there is a strong tendency towards subjectivity and relativism on these kinds of questions, as Sia notes. He tries to walk a middle line between freedom of speech and the need to insure a reasonable and responsible approach to public culture, but it is hard to know how to defend it.

Several of the essays in the second part of the book deal with issues of public affairs, business and education. Sia argues that because human beings are primarily moral beings (indeed some philosophers argue that this is what sets us apart from other species, rather than reason or higher consciousness), we must have an ethical approach to life in public affairs, and that public officials have an obligation to promote an ethical climate in society. It is tragic that many officials today would deny this common sense observation and claim that their public work has little to do with ethics, or would simply, as an exercise in public relations, pay lip-service to the need for decisions to be guided by ethical standards. Appealing again to the work of an ancient Chinese thinker, this time Confucius, Sia argues (in an essay titled, “Social Roles, Public Office and Moral Society: Lessons from the Past for the Present?”) that human beings require contentment and satisfaction, but as Confucius argues, this comes from the fulfillment of our moral nature primarily and not from material needs (though these should not be neglected and indeed are necessary, but are not an end in themselves). But we must concentrate on the higher things that are part of the essence of being human. So we judge a society by whether it leads to the fulfillment of the moral nature of human beings, and this means “creating a moral atmosphere for only in such a society will the people truly prosper” (p.186). This means that those in public office should try to act in a moral way in the carrying out of their duties. It does not necessarily require forcing a particular worldview on society, and perhaps it is best understood in terms of the application of the virtues, rather than as calling for the moral transformation of society (though Sia does not spell out how it would work, nor what challenges it would face in a pluralist culture). However, he is right to stress that it is not adequate for politicians or public figures to claim that they are not public role models, for they influence people in virtue of their position and actions whether they wish to or not.

Sia notes that the banking and economic crisis and collapse of 2008, particularly in the Irish context, but also more globally, was caused by simple human failings in morality, and less so by any conscious efforts to introduce a new moral philosophy! One of these failings was simple human greed. Sia provides an analysis of the issue of accountability in ethics, and proposes several guidelines in this regard, including the need for financial institutions to have public oversight (a point that recent scandals in Ireland involving various charities underscores once again).

There is a fascinating essay on the “Bologna Process” (a project of the European Union, drafted initially in 1999) which was an attempt to bring about a certain amount of standardization among universities in Europe. Sia discusses the issue with his usual common sense, recognizing that colleges of higher education should take account of the requirements of the labor market in their area of society, and the skills that people require, but that the best educational systems must also educate what the Jesuits call “the whole person”—intellectual, morally and spiritually—as well as in techniques and skill sets. As Sia

notes, the key aim of education is the development of the human person. And the question is: if a person studies only chemistry, or accountancy, or physical therapy, how much do they develop as a person? They also need to study philosophy, theology, literature, psychology and other liberal arts subjects, which give them exposure to the key thinkers and ideas in intellectual history, and which include as an important part of the process the cultivation of critical thinking skills, leading to the formation of informed citizens for the modern world. Sia's view is that the ultimate aim of education should be the pursuit of wisdom, "which is ultimately rooted in our nature as human beings and the various dimensions of our humanity: intellectual, emotional, ethical, spiritual, aesthetic, social, creative, and others" (p.216). Unfortunately, this view of education is under attack for various reasons, to the detriment of society. As an example, many scientists today who pop up on popular TV programs or in documentaries on science TV channels obviously came through an educational system where they studied mostly science, and show little appreciation for critical analysis and discussion of deeper human questions, and so their work comes across as uniformed and superficial. Some betray their lack of a well-rounded education even further by arguing that we should not waste time on a liberal arts education! In a final essay, Sia turns to the much vexed question of faith-based education and schools. He notes the problems of this issue in a pluralist context, but warns against the acceptance of a secularist alternative worldview masquerading as a neutral view.

These are the themes of this excellent collection of essays from a very wise philosopher. Sia writes with probing curiosity, measured restraint, and a great deal of common sense. He is a careful thinker, influenced by a wide range of figures from classical and contemporary philosophy, and he brings wisdom and clarity to a set of vitally important topics for our times.

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