

## BOOK NOTICES

Summit, Jennifer & Blakey Vermeule. 2018. *Action versus contemplation: Why an ancient debate still matters*. Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 978-0-226-03223-8, 256p.

The book of Summit and Vermeule is about ants and grasshoppers. No, it doesn't offer an alternative natural history, but a confrontation between two paradigms of attitudes, expectations and patterns of interest in life, of which those insects are the respective symbols. The ant is the ever-busy creature that puts output and performance above any such thing like meditation or quiet reflection. These qualities are embodied by the grasshopper instead, who tends to live life as it comes, without much planning, preparation or anticipated self-defense. The common opinion is that the two paradigms, known as action and contemplation, are opposed to one another and that personalities fit in either one or the other. Likewise, it is believed that often heard problems with stress, overwork and depression have their roots in a lack of balance between the two forces in one's life. All of these common beliefs, the authors intend to challenge, as they previously did while teaching a course on that topic at Stanford University. Delving into history of literature and philosophy since the Ancient Times, they show how the meaning of terms has changed since the arrival of modernity, and how this has also had its repercussions for the actual university curriculum debate around the balanced relation between specialist courses and the humanities. The latter, even if often accused of being 'useless' or producing 'worthless degrees,' could play a crucial role in the definition of a 'philosophy of life,' that focuses on the restoration of inner unity and meaning. Not only the university, but also the corporate world offers a background for the debate between action and contemplation. This may take the form of a conflict between institutional productivity and institutional reflection, but definitely has a lot to do with 'action bias,' or the obsession with efficiency and control, which is as much an illusion as it is a profound psychic reality, as the authors are stating, looking for support in Hannah Arendt's critique of contemporary culture. Office workers may be over-frustrated with the giant production of papers and reports, but shifting to manual work or to adventurous leisure tours doesn't offer a remedy for the *homo faber* paradigm and for the distorted urge to have 'impact' on people. The same action bias may be underlying a change in meaning or connotation in the Latin 'couple' *otium* and *negotium*, with the former initially focusing on the positive side of 'freedom of obligation,' later turning more into 'laziness, unproductiveness.' Even the most determined actions often fail their purpose, it is observed. In a non-ending dialogue with literary and visual arts, the authors keep offering new perspectives on the same core of their message, that a

harmonious relation between action and contemplation, without mostly unfounded commonplaces, is the key to comprehensive well-being. At the end, the book returns its focus on the university, and its role in building up the social and political tissue. Dualism between the elite of university graduates and the rest of society should be rethought according to the authors; echoing P. Drucker, they point at the information-driven post-industrial society which will no longer distinguish between 'management' and 'work', therefore also nullifying the need to distinguish between 'research universities' and 'comprehensive' institutions. In view of achieving inclusive excellence, today's universities are called to inventively build bridges between the active and the contemplative way of life, even as the authors admit most of that work still has to start. This book will surely appeal to so many categories of intellectuals, from the humanities as well as the sciences, university faculty as well as administrators, and even ordinary people who are in search of overcoming the uneasy features of a one-sided life.

Kanaris, Jim. (Ed.). 2018. *Reconfigurations of philosophy of religion: A possible future*. Albany: State University of New York Press. ISBN 9781438469089. 295+xxip.

The book edited by Jim Kanaris consists of twelve essays. All of these are trying to embody philosophy of religion in their own way. Indeed, it is impossible to talk about a single discipline called 'philosophy of religion'; rather one should imagine a range of disciplines that meet each other in various, particular ways, leaving the discipline with a highly pluralistic identity, which is rather the object of debate than of consensus. Therefore, no reader should expect to find a uniform approach to philosophy of religion in this volume, the contributions to it being called 'eclectic' by the editor. This diverse and multi-color approach has an enticing effect, since it signals the intention to break beyond traditional boundaries, shunning any 'déjà vu'.

The reason for the 'tentative' or shaky identity given to philosophy of religion is partially the result of the dissatisfaction with the current state and practice of the discipline, and of the plan come up with conjectural models of how it will (likely) develop and how it will look tomorrow. With the help of inspiring authors from early and more recent modern times, attempts are undertaken to put up bridges between philosophy and religious studies or theology, or to come up with a typical 'post'-comment, like 'poststructuralist', 'post-phenomenological', 'post-postmodern', etc.

The over-all purpose is to connect with the past, but mainly to deconstruct its dividing practices, and to affirm the vitality of the future, looking at new developments – whether analytic or continental, whether Western or Asian, or as one of the latest developments, such as ideology critique or eco-feminism. The so-called 'death' of 'philosophy of religion' mainly refers to the traditional analytic style of philosophical practice, focusing on outdated questions, including that about God's existence, his goodness in the presence of evil, and life after death. Oriental input may consist in the questioning of the distinction between philosophy and religion, which, in Japanese, occurred only in the 19th century.

Ricoeur provides inspiration in relation to the issue of human finitude and limitation,

and how a more positive anthropology can be achieved through human transcendence. The concept of ‘life’ in global philosophy is another possible catalyzer of renewal, while the influence of geo-philosophical language connected to post-colonial theory (Deleuze) and globalization is equally underscored. New philosophical or theological terms and trends, including enecstasis, critical reverence, and radical theology, may trigger a curious response in the reader. ‘Radical’ theology (Caputo) offers an incommensurable alternative, rooted in Kierkegaardian ‘hidden inwardness’, for mainstream ‘confessional’ theology, while science and philosophy are somehow brought together under a new and unifying denominator, sounding as ‘non-philosophy’ (Laruelle), the subject of which is a kind of generic human being, even as it is called ‘Christ’. This Human-as-Human would no longer be connected to religion, nor to philosophy, but to a new, ‘generic and universal science of humanity’ (p.248). The strict distinction between philosophy and theology cannot be maintained according to some, so that – rather than to critically think about religion - philosophy should learn how to think with religion. At any rate, the place of philosophy of religion in an academic institution, whether State-run or private, whether with a secular or a religious mission – can still be justified, according to Wildman, in spite of some (ideological) tensions. But he wisely goes on observing: “As is so often the case in life, economic considerations trump ideological consistency” (p. 263). After all these considerations, the main objective and recommendation for philosophy of religion remains to shake off its bias (in favor of a Western-style religion and conceptual apparatus), to become multi-disciplinary, transcending borders put up in between artificially maintained divisions in human scientific or hermeneutic practice. Herewith, the contributors are offering a challenging picture of the ailing philosophical discipline, even as her search for a new and clear identity may still linger for the foreseeable future!

Goodhart, Michael. 2018. *Injustice: Political theory for the real world*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780190692438. XI+281p.

The book by Michael Goodhart turned out to be something different from what the author first had conceived: instead of a reflection on the role of democracy in global economic justice, it turned out to be a confrontation with Ideal Moral Theory (IMT), generally considered as the dominant theoretical trend that deals with global justice. An expert in human rights and globalization, with background in both the academe and activism, Goodhart calls himself ‘frustrated’ with the way of working of the Anglo-American IMT. The global financial crisis of more than a decade ago and an exposure to the reality of injustice in Brazil, China and India were among the main triggers of his search for alternatives, as mainstream theories of justice obviously did not work in the real world, the importance of which is also reflected in the book’s title. The author situates his own work in the wider context of global normative theory since the 1970’s, dominated by the consequentialist approach by Peter Singer and – especially – the constructivist approach of John Rawls, from whose thoughts IMT has risen. What the author primarily reproaches to Rawls and his followers is their abstract theoretical style.

Idealization of justice opens the way to ideological abuse, according to the author. Therefore, he recommends considering the issue as political rather than philosophical. Only in this way can the democratic deficit of IMT be corrected. Rather than to waste time in looking for the definition of perfect justice, and associated moral justifications, the author prefers to study cases of concrete injustice, which are often the result of domination, oppression, exploitation and other distortions in power relations. The recommended approach is called ‘bi-focal’: it combines analysis and prescription, realistic and normative analysis within a single framework. This approach is considered to offer the highest chances of leading to successful social transformation.

Goodhart’s book comprises three parts, the first aiming at a ‘de-familiarization’ with the prevailing constructivist IMT; the second part tries to come up with a reconceptualization of justice and injustice on the basis of a real world exposure; the third part elaborates some consequences of adopting the new paradigm; paramount in this context is that any attempt to address political injustice shall be counter-hegemonic, this means that it should be going against established beliefs, interpretations, practices, structures. This isn’t supposed to be a short, transitional event; the author mentions ‘discursive political engagement’ that has as goal “to establish a reflexive, open-ended, and continual process of repair, renewal, and (re)generation – to establish the conditions for the realization of many diverse utopias” (p.12.). This brings Goodhart to confirm that his book is ‘meant to be provocative’, which - he hopes - will ‘contribute to emancipatory social transformation’. This implies a confrontation with the hegemony of neoliberalism, both as an economic and a political doctrine, advocating not only free markets, but also minimizing government interference in economic matters through liberty and individualism. This trend, dominating in the West and even in the rest of the world through the intervention of institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, is actually leading to the restoration of class power, as stated by Goodhart. The emphasis on the hegemony of neoliberalism in today’s globalized world is primarily the result of the author’s concern with injustices like poverty and inequality; he is aware that he ‘borrows’ ideas from others at times, but doesn’t see a problem in this as he considers his argument as ‘broadly synthetic’ and an example of what he calls a ‘collaborative political theory’ that is ‘essential for challenging injustice’(p.18). Hence, the book wants to be somehow a ‘good example’ of what it recommends. Goodhart’s work belongs to the more passionate type of scholarly works, and illustrates how projects engaging social and political issues are hard to keep purely theoretical. Any reflection about practice calls for its translation in another practice, not rarely challenging the practice reflected upon. This book will, therefore, appeal to more than just global normative theorists, but inspire all those who have a dynamic interest in the ethos of today’s world.

**Wilfried Vanhoutte**