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Book Review

Moral Disquiet and Human Life. by Monique Canto-Sperber. Trans. Silvia Pavel. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-691-12736-1. 232 pp., with index. \$39.50

It has been a while since I have read a philosophical monograph that has so provoked, enticed, bored, and encouraged me often within the compass of a few pages, and then done the same all over again.

The title of Monique Canto-Sperber's short book is somewhat misleading – it is comprised of two compilations of essays, “Moral Disquiet” and “Human Life.” Their relation seems fortuitous, not intentional; the book as a whole is episodic, partial, ranging from the thoughtful and provocative to the soporific (especially Chapter 3, “French Moral Philosophy and its Past Misfortunes,” an historical apologetic of the lapse of moral philosophy in France over the last century).

The temptation is to wish Canto-Sperber had found a good editor, but given she is director of l'École normale supérieure in Paris and herself editor of *Le Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophie morale*, an editor with the ability and fortitude to hold her to some more consistent standard would be a rare bird.

The irony is that her two essays, and the smaller essays of which they are comprised, fall into the category of what, in their first appearance in the writing of Michel de Montaigne, “l'essai” actually meant. Canto-Sperber's essays are trials, attempts, explorations, evidence of a mind thinking, wrestling with concepts and ideas, not the well-groomed aftermath of such efforts. Where I was provoked, she challenged some of the sacred cows of my own thinking; where enticed or encouraged, she echoed my own criticisms or offered insights that I want to explore; where bored, it was when she moved away from engagement with the reader into an apologetic for her pointed criticisms in the first pages of the book of the state of French moral philosophy.

On the whole, it is a book well-worth the reading, where there are nuggets that will appear on a second or third reading that lay unnoticed the first time through.

“Moral Disquiet” includes three sub-sections, identified as chapters -- Chapter 1 (“Ethics and the Challenge to Moral Philosophy”) and Chapter 2 (“Goals of Ethical Reflection”) – though, again, the chapter designations seem almost arbitrary. While there are threads running through most of the small essays in these first two chapters, Canto-Sperber wrestles with different facets of what she sees to be the larger problem of the nature of ethics, its distinction (if possible) from morality, and how the disappearance of moral philosophy from the intellectual stage renders substantive debate on ethics and morality in the modern age impossible in France (and by extension, elsewhere).

While resisting the impulse here to quote at length from these two chapters, I found them easily the best

parts of the book. That they are followed by the weakest element, the third chapter laying out the various intellectual and personality trends in French philosophy over the past century that tanked moral philosophy, in itself ends the ferment she has created to this point is unfortunate. Had the book continued into the second part, “Human Life,” after Chapter 2, the work as a whole would have been improved – and that non-existent editor should have insisted Chapter 3 be consigned to an appendix, in small print, for those with the intestinal fortitude to digest it.

Given her targets in “Moral Disquiet,” I need to offer as apology and disclaimer that I teach ethics – not even philosophical ethics, but applied ethics. Moral philosophy as a subject is not in my syllabus, and while its elements emerge in lectures and discussions, the focus is on the specific application of personal and social values to ethical decision-making, especially in terms of the practice of science, technology and medicine. At a stroke, this seems to make me one of “them,” the purveyors of puerility, who have little recognition of what is at stake in moral philosophy and less ability to recognize the world-as-it-is than someone who is delusional.

To be fair, Canto-Sperber doesn’t quite paint with such harsh colours, but her dismantling and critique of books by those in the current “schools” of ethical thinking in France is no less devastating for the absence of more pungent adjectives about their work. That it comes from the head of ENS (Ulm) seems like throwing down a gauntlet inviting intellectual mortal combat, or at least continuing into print a debate that would have been a spectator sport at an academic conference.

Yet it was this first section of the book, especially the first two chapters, that I found the most compelling. In the first chapter, (“Ethics and the Challenge to Moral Philosophy”), she observes that “French moral philosophy is not blooming”; despite the current emphasis on ethics, it is “as ignored today as it was a generation ago” (3). Whatever the current vogue of ethical reasoning, moral philosophy is rarely taught in high schools or universities, nor – as a discipline – is moral philosophy to be found in today’s French universities: “The contrast with ethics could not be greater; in France, the teaching of moral philosophy has no recognized place whatsoever” (4).

While much of this chapter goes on to explain how ethics without moral philosophy is little more than philosophical caricature, what caught my attention was the applicability of everything she says to the comparative state of ethics and moral philosophy in its North American context. The emphasis on ethics as *de rigueur* in all fields, regardless of content; the focus on application of axioms that remain not only uncontested but often unidentified; the migration of the term into popular conversation and the easy acquiescence of philosophers and other academics alike to the kind of sloppy thinking Canto-Sperber identifies in French philosophy, strike unnervingly close to home.

She yearns for a proper debate on the subject, not just of the nature of the moral commitments embodied in ethical decision-making, but of the rational construction of how we, as humans, view the nature of moral questions themselves. The shrill voices that dismiss the value or validity of religious commitments in favour of some new transcendental, secular humanism (yes, these are the kinds of oxymorons yoked in the writing she critiques!) are as unhelpful as the equally shrill voices of those who dismiss the spiritual sterility of secular modernity in favour of some rosier (and non-existent) theological golden age: “Moral philosophy is not politics, a religion, or a general philosophy about human beings; rather, it is a mainly intellectual, rational field of research....The value of moral thought is gauged first by its reasons, not by the grandiloquence or emotional appeal of its premise” (7). Not to pull any punches about what is going on at the moment, she writes: “The propensity for veneration that begets dogmatism and stifles open and

lively debate goes in hand with an excess of criticism and denunciation that has a sterilizing rather than an enriching effect on intellectual debates. It is precisely this mixture of blind veneration and stubborn misconception that makes me doubt the existence of conditions conducive to open and lively debate in France” (7).

As to what is blindly venerated and stubbornly misconceived, Canto-Sperber sets out a series of axioms underlying contemporary ethical discourse: “the certitude that moralizing intentions or power struggles are always the hidden motivating factors of moral thought; the doctrinaire assertion that moral thought and ethics are opposites...; the stubborn belief that, modern ethics being rational and autonomous, it has left behind religion...; the mistaken belief that only atheists can legitimately engage in moral thinking; the unrealistic conviction that modern man is the product of a necessary and univocal process of emancipation; the illusion that modernity is a singularity and, as such, is homogeneous and could not have evolved differently from what it is today; the deluded notion that Kantian philosophy has generated a new kind of reason, Kantian formalism and universalism define by themselves the relevance criterion for modern moral philosophy as a whole, and that everything preceding the Kantian approach, particularly the thought of the Ancients, is therefore out-of-date” (9-10). In identifying these mistaken axioms, Canto-Sperber has likely put herself in opposition to most of those of her colleagues, and then issues the challenge, saying that without constant evaluation and critique, these propositions “become ossified dogma when taken as indisputable and unconditional truths”:

“As articles of faith, though, they are at best unwarranted and at worst misguided approximations of ethical thinking. They encourage philosophers and their readers to accept passively comforting illusions and to misunderstand completely the complex intellectual tasks that our world faces today” (10).

Stepping back from the thrown gauntlet, she explains to the crowd: “If my analysis appears to be critical, it is so because it inevitably reflects at least part of what is presently being said, written, or thought in France. When criticism is used fairly, without libel or abuse, it can become an intellectual duty –all the more so when bias and dogmas threaten to stifle dynamic thought” (10).

In the course of the first two chapters, Canto-Sperber singles out the books of three individuals who exemplify different facets of the problems that result from these axioms and the substituting of ethical pronouncement for moral philosophy. Alain Badiou (*Ethics*, 1993) “describes ethics ...as a stabilizing influence on the discussion of political, social or scientific events....In his view, ethics is an outline of opinion guided by the motto “You should only like what you have always strongly believed.” Focusing on the dark side of life, Badiou believes “the current obsession with evil and fondness for victims provides ethics with a unique program: the defense of human rights,” and explains “the infatuation for bioethics and the obsession with euthanasia,” making “the inordinate predilection for ethics exhibited by our contemporaries...a manifestation of nihilism” (11). Calling Badiou’s book a “sound-and-light display,” its surface merit as a critique of contemporary ethical thought in fact underneath “displays the same self-righteousness as its target” (12). After further discussion, she says, he “attempts to lock us in a false confrontation between an ethics of conservatism, resignation, and a death wish and this ethics of truth and superhumanity. His conception of ethics, which invokes immortality, calling, and creative events, is closer to incantation than philosophy” (16) and is, in the end, “but a fruitless undertaking” (17).

Moving to the distinctions attempted between morality and ethics in the modern context, Canto-Sperber rejects them as assertions that, like a battle plan, do not survive contact with the reality of their

expression in the world today. The two other authors whose work she then proceeds to dismantle in the rest of Chapter 1 are Luc Ferry (*Man Made God: The Meaning of Life*, 1996) and Gilles Lipovetsky (*Le Crépuscule du devoir/The Twilight of Duty*, 1992), as she explores (and explodes) the notion that atheism is a precondition for moral thought today, and that secularism can in some fashion be given a transcendental character or some aura of rational sacrality in the modern age. The titles of the smaller essays reflect how the work of these authors is dispatched – Lipovetsky primarily in “Myths of our Time: Moral Grandstanding and Ethical Self-Indulgence,” and Ferry in “Morals and Religion: The Misconception that Atheism is a Prerequisite for Moral Deliberation.” Having devastated these opponents, Canto-Sperber moves, in Chapter 2, to an exploration of moral responsibility and how it might better be enacted in the ethical choices with which current social and environmental dilemmas confront our society.

When I moved into the third chapter, what I was expecting (and hoping to find) was the culmination of the trajectory, laying out the propositions Canto-Sperber wanted to debate, the terms of the dynamic discussion for which she was calling in moral philosophy. Expecting the climax of the trilogy, I was instead presented with what sci-fi authors awkwardly call a “prequel,” explaining what came before the initial book, which at best, and in comparison to the other chapters, is lengthy, pedantic and unnecessary.

With some relief, I was able to turn to the second part of the book, “Human Life,” in which Canto-Sperber presents thoughtful, and even amusing, commentaries on a miscellany of topics.

This part exemplifies the kind of reflection on existential questions, on the nature of human life and how to consider what it means, that Canto-Sperber wishes were taking place in the French academy today. The reflections are again loosely grouped into chapters: Chapter 4 (“the Absurd and the Meaning of Life”); Chapter 5 (“The Invariants of Human Life”); and Chapter 6 (“The Good in Human Life”), the titles of which identify a thread running through shorter pieces with varied and intriguing captions like “The Meaning of Life in a Naturalistic World” and “The Boredom of Living Forever.”

As I read through these reflections, the image came to mind of a puppy for the first time let loose in a field criss-crossed by the scent trails of rabbits and other animals. The hither and yon roaming of Canto-Sperber’s intellect, considering, chasing, musing, pausing briefly before heading off in another direction, is delightful, challenging, refreshing – and (unfortunately) too uncommon in more sedate, careful and methodical philosophical publications. The absence of any capstone reflection or summary statement unfortunately weakens the overall effect of these nuggets – again, such a conclusion would have been something on which a good editor would have insisted – but she is to be applauded for taking the risks to do some of what she says needs to be done.

Given that the book was first published in 2001 (as *L’inquietude morale et la vie humaine*), and the translation is from the second edition of 2002, the time-lag to this translation begs the question as to what has happened since in France, whether there has been the kind of debate Canto-Sperber intended to provoke. (This is one instance where the role of translator should have been expanded, as a preface situating the book or the author in current French philosophy should have been included.) An essay on how this book has been formational in some of her later work in liberalism would also have been useful for a North American audience not as familiar as perhaps it should be with recent trends in French thought.

Overall, this *mélange* is well worth the price, and the criticisms, cautions and exhortations of Monique

Canto-Sperber about ethical thinking and moral philosophy should be heeded today in other philosophical academies outside of France.

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