

Richard White. *Spiritual Philosophers: From Schopenhauer to Irigaray.* Bloomsbury 2020. 232 pp. \$115.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350129115).

Richard White clearly and quickly reveals his goal for the book, ‘to look more closely at spirituality and spiritual experience ... quite apart from all the explanations, religious or otherwise, and not to reject spiritual conclusions that derive from a different set of beliefs than our own’ (1). To do this White examines the ‘spiritual’ works of nine thinkers, several of which may be a surprise to find in such a volume. The chapters are arranged according to three spiritual concerns: spiritual virtues, spiritual practices, and spiritual points of focus (182). But what does White mean by ‘spiritual’?

It is difficult to get a clear picture of just what White means by ‘spiritual’ but that may be part of his intent. He says that spirituality ‘involves a sense of being connected to a great power or meaning’ (7). In chapter 7 White offers his three aspects of a spiritual life: 1) moving away from ordinary goals like wealth, power, status; 2) a journey toward ultimate means, and; 3) a wholeness of life—the spiritual cannot be a mere interest or hobby (141). It is throughout these chapters that White seeks to show how these various thinkers each speak on such spiritual aspects of life.

The first two philosophers White mines for spiritual insights are Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, two early postmodern thinkers. Counterintuitive figures for a volume such as this, but this is not to suggest White’s treatment is wholly strained for he is not shy to point out inconsistencies in the philosophers’ thoughts. Beginning with Schopenhauer, White demonstrates that he was one of the first Westerners who ‘celebrated the Vedanta philosophy of India and Buddhism wisdom traditions,’ and saw them as equal, if not superior, to Christianity and Judaism (17).

Compassion, White argues, is a ‘spiritual impulse that speaks to our connection to a higher or greater reality that transcends our own selfish lives’ (18) and this is where Schopenhauer steps in. Because we are all a part of the great-undivided will, the thing-in-itself, and our individual existence is insignificant, we are all one and another’s distress is basically my distress. Thus, the basis for the ethical life is compassion (28), but as White notes, compassion for Schopenhauer is not psychological but metaphysical (29). This connects Schopenhauer to Buddhism in several ways for each held compassion to be primary but also pervasive, extending to all life, not merely the human. While differences remain between these Eastern wisdom traditions and Schopenhauer, White concludes there are spiritual questions provoked by this spiritual philosopher (35).

The theme of spiritual virtues continues with Nietzsche’s ‘gift-giving virtue.’ White justifies his inclusion of Nietzsche saying, ‘Nietzsche is spiritual but not religious’ unlike many modern atheists who are neither, implying Nietzsche is a spiritual philosopher because he recognizes ‘the need for meaning and a sense of belonging that characterizes spiritual life’ (38). There is much discussion regarding what constitutes a gift-giving virtue, but White seems to land on it being a ‘spirit that fosters another person and inspires her to “become what she is”’ (46). The focus of this chapter is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and while an interesting treatment, it takes work to make sense of Nietzsche’s gift-giving virtue being spiritual because it ‘reflects the generosity of life itself’ (53).

The next four chapters query the views of Wassily Kandinsky, Walter Benjamin, Carl Jung, and James Hillman. While not typically considered philosophers, each offers philosophical insights on spirituality from their respective disciplines. Kandinsky was an artist and author who, in his 1912 book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (Dover Publications), argued that ‘true art inevitably acts on the soul’ and that only art can ultimately save us from the soullessness of materialism (56). White explores three themes from the book: spiritual evolution, the correlation of form and color in art with spiritual reality, and the artist as spiritual leader. Key to each seems to be ‘spiritual vibration’ which

moves the artist to create, communicate truths to the viewer (and listener), and summon the ‘competent artist’ to ‘send light into the darkness of men’s hearts’ (64). Perhaps key to Kandinsky’s writings is that he sought to awaken one’s capacity ‘for infinite experiences of the spiritual in material and abstract things’ (69).

The author asserts Walter Benjamin as ‘one of the most original thinkers of the twentieth century’ (73). This chapter taps into Benjamin’s ideas concerning the wisdom found in the telling of stories. Wisdom, White explains, is the ‘true depth of understanding’ (74) which must be contrasted to simply amassing and knowing information, which is the folly of modernity. Storytelling connects us to the other, facilitates communication of experience and wisdom, the sorts of things lost in the mere accumulation of information. White explains that Benjamin is a spiritual philosopher because he ‘dwells on the impoverishment of modern life’ (89) and furthermore, that wisdom is a spiritual theme that connects us to the world, others, and ourselves.

White discusses two Jungian thinkers, James Hillman and, conveniently enough, Carl Jung. Jung’s discussion of God in *Answer to Job* (Ark 1984) is provocative suggesting that while Job grows and becomes a much better person God, throughout the biblical tale, is ‘petulant and spiteful’ (96). God eventually grasps that God ‘was wrong to punish Job for no good reason, and the incarnation is God’s atonement for his own crimes against humanity’ (97). God’s incarnation allows humans to discover God within themselves. Individuation, according to Jung, is the process of self-understanding and wholeness—self-realization. Individuation is a kind of freedom of consciousness that brings the ‘individual into absolute, binding, and indisputable communication with the world at large’ (105). The author ends this chapter with high praise for Jung proclaiming him to be ‘one of the most important spiritual philosophers of the modern age’ and that his work will ‘continue to inspire us at the deepest spiritual level’ (108).

The discussion of Hillman primarily concerns how the ‘soul’ has been neglected and debased for ‘spirit,’ and how the two are not interchangeable. Spirit (*pneuma*) is otherworldly, ‘high,’ focused on the self while soul (*psyche*) is concerned with the world, ‘deep,’ communal. The soul is what will save us from the mundane of modernity and scientism. Like other thinkers discussed, Hillman lauds the mythic, creative, and artistic. There is a ‘wonder about the world’ and Hillman’s ‘archetypal psychology’ attempts ‘to re-animate things by recovering a sense of enchantment’ (123). The point is not to rise above the world to gaze at the One, but to see that everything in the world, including diversity and conflict, is ‘miraculous and marvelous’ (125).

The next spiritual philosophers are titans of the postmodern—Foucault and Derrida. White discusses Foucault’s care for the self as a spiritual goal against the backdrop of care for the self-being, a modern ideal. One would not immediately think of Foucault as a ‘spiritual philosopher,’ but this seems to be the intent of the book. ‘Foucault’s account of the care of the self,’ according to White, ‘illuminates the authentic possibility of self-determination as a spiritual goal that we can aspire to’ (144). Derrida’s thoughts on mourning as a ‘spiritual relationship’ are discussed as a way to honor the dead but like Foucault, also as care for the self. Derrida’s thoughts are presented as a mean between Freud’s assertion that mourning must quickly be resolved and Barthes’ that life can never really go on without the loved one. For Derrida the ‘impossibility of mourning,’ as he calls it, means that we must find a way to continue with the departed (153). White offers ‘a *spiritual* perspective’ because it ‘pays attention to the relationship between the self and the other, the living and the dead’ (161).

The final discussion is of Luce Irigaray’s thoughts on love against the backdrop of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. For Irigaray love is a dialectic between ‘two lovers, the human and the divine, the physical and the spiritual, the male and the female’ (170) all for the ‘spiritual flourishing

of each partner' (164). Irigaray approaches philosophy as the 'wisdom of love' and how breathing, listening, thinking, and teaching are each spiritual practices. White closes the chapter, bringing the discussion full circle highlighting how Irigaray's and Schopenhauer's approaches differ but also how each, through the recovery of Asian wisdom, call us to 'reaffirm *all* the spiritual possibilities of the world that we belong to' (180).

The book concludes with a discussion of the difference between religion and spirituality. But he also offers a defense of spirituality from the attacks of *scientism* which reduces not only life to the biological but thinking itself to a 'preordained method that constrain all our thinking in advance' (186).

White's book is provocative inviting the reader to reassess what is spiritual and who is a 'spiritual philosopher.' The author implies each of these philosophers are spiritual, though hardly unified in their spiritual philosophy, because each offers insight concerning a 'sense of being oriented toward a higher or greater reality such as nature, life, truth or the divine' (183).

Wm. Curtis Holtzen, Hope International University