John Cottingham. *The Humane Perspective: Philosophical Reflections on Human Nature, the Search for Meaning, and the Role of Religion*. Oxford University Press 2024. 256 pp. $90.00 USD (Hardcover 9780198918912); $89.99 USD (eBook 9780198918936).

For the past several decades, John Cottingham has drawn attention to key ways in which anglophone philosophy has struggled to be suitably *humane*. He has also sketched at great and varied length what he takes to be paths to remediation on this front. This volume comprises thirteen previously published essays, with a vision-casting introductory chapter, which jointly constitute a kind of expansive compass to a more humane vision of the philosophical enterprise.

Cottingham takes stylistic and methodological concerns as an initial point of entry to humane philosophy. The first substantive essay in this collection, "What is Humane Philosophy and Why Is It at Risk?," begins with a quizzical consideration of the author-date method of citation, so common in academic journal publishing and predicated on the predominant style in the sciences. Cottingham does not seek to admonish it wholesale but wonders whether it is injurious to a domain like philosophy, which is fundamentally, for him and Bernard Williams alike, "part of a wider humanistic enterprise of making sense of ourselves and our activities" (37). Cottingham agrees with Charles Taylor that philosophy has *especially* helped us to see ourselves as existing within a space of questions about our life and its meaning as a whole (38). He worries, though, that our broadly contemporary approach to writing philosophy tends too often to treat these foundational questions—which have striking, lively, and robust *histories* to them—carelessly, in a manner that seems historically neutered. To engage these questions *humanely*, Cottingham insists, should involve approaching them in a way that is carefully respectful of their particular stories.

Cottingham's concern on this front is not, of course, principally stylistic. He reminds us, as countless others have, that philosophical inquiry—like so much in the contemporary academy—has become too narrowly analytical and fragmented. Such an orientation runs contrary to a more synthetic, holistic, or *integral* philosophical outlook. In pursuit of such a reintegrated philosophical perspective, Cottingham variously commends that we attempt to reclaim something like the ancient conception of philosophy as a *modus vivendi*—as Pierre Hadot has proposed. Among the virtues of such an approach is a sensitivity to the *layeredness* or polyvalence of various aspects of human life, meaning, and experience, which run the risk—on a less humane or more scientistic approach to the discipline—of being eschewed as unsystematic, unhelpfully ambiguous, or theoretically idiosyncratic (cf. 41–2).

Cottingham contends that a humane philosophical perspective critically involves, *inter alia*, a sort of fundamental caution toward construing philosophy as a *second-order* discipline—i.e., one which situates itself *over and above* the practices or forms of life with which it is concerned, such that it can uniquely offer conceptual clarification, moral assessment, or other types of meta-analysis of them, from the perspective of disengaged reason. While not disavowing this conception of philosophy altogether, Cottingham expresses a broad guardedness toward it and the way in which it poises the philosopher to be critically "aloof from the living currents of human thought and action that animate the area of life [they] are supposed to be studying" (3). In contrast, Cottingham

broadly commends an "involved and engaged stance" with respect to issues of philosophical concern—one that is finely attuned to the ways in which they "actually operate in the lives of the human beings involved" (4). Such attentiveness to embodied human practices and "forms of life" helps to humbly ground our philosophical reflection and prevent it from becoming like hyper-abstracted Rortyan cultural oversight (cf. 28).

Cottingham devotes chapters four through six—and, indeed, much of the rest of the volume—to a deft reconsideration of some of the most foundational topics in the (Western) philosophical tradition, including happiness, narrativity in life, conversion, and spiritual practice. His core concerns resound throughout these discussions, as he stresses the way in which these central human dynamics and concerns unfold (at least paradigmatically) *in the space of* human lives. The foil in such discussions, and especially in the third part of the book, is a kind of denuded take—which he sees as endemic in contemporary philosophy—on human moral development and religiosity. On the latter front, such a misapprehension tends to cast religiosity as being chiefly about *argumentation* ordered toward arriving at *explanatory hypotheses* (and theories). While admiring the technical work of Swinburne and others who have deployed theism as an explanatory apparatus, Cottingham bemoans, in a Wittgensteinian mood, the way in which this philosophical shift has prompted many to fundamentally misconstrue human religiosity and spiritual practice. Cottingham sees a renewed humane methodology as pivotal to rectifying this misconstrual. This involves for him, among other things, a broad consideration of rituals, texts, authors, and other source material that might typically not seem so germane to philosophical argumentation. These range from the Psalms and various liturgical prayers to the private revelations of Mother Julian of Norwich; from Shakespearean drama to the poetry of Blake and Eliot. Such literary and poetic forays make this work eminently readable, fascinating, and pleasing.

Admittedly, though, one can at times feel a sense of fatigue with Cottingham's style and methodology. His conceptual and linguistic commentary is rich and subtle, and notably more substantial than what often passes for satisfactory. It can sometimes feel heavy-handed, however, as though the reader is being treated to a kind of methodological showcase. One wonders, for example, whether three adjacent footnotes call for a juxtaposition of Aristotelian Greek, Stoic Latin, and Cartesian Latin, along with approximations of the years of composition of Aristotle's *De partibus animalium* or Cicero's *De finibus* (158). To be sure: these would be appropriate in a journal of classical or ancient philosophical studies, but their full-throated inclusion in a more standard work of English-language philosophy can seem disproportionate. Relying excessively on translations is no doubt a present-day academic vice, but Cottingham's writing could at times be aided by a simpler deference to them.

A deeper concern arguably surfaces regarding the overall aspirations of his humane *oeuvre*. While its broad trajectory is uniquely enriching and philosophically corrective, it can at times seem exceedingly wistful, in a way that can obscure the practical realities surrounding the matters of human life and concern that he seeks to elucidate. To see this more clearly, consider the third part of the text, "Science and Its Limits," in which Cottingham at length develops the aforementioned concerns about what he takes to be commonplace philosophical misappropriations of the religious.

Following Herbert McCabe, Cottingham stresses that "To be religious … is in a certain way to embrace … mystery, with hope and perhaps with joy" (135). Similarly, he notes, "[a] religious outlook is not founded on a search for rational explanations, but is concerned to deepen our sense of the wonder and mystery of existence, and … to make us ever more responsive to the 'unseen depth of goodness, significance and love' that lies behind the mystery" (153). Laying emphasis on this utterly central dimension of much human religiosity seems both just and salutary relative to typical philosophical treatments of the topic. Given his concern, however, to be practically grounded—specifically in the more ordinary lives and practices of religious adherents—this sort of take on the religious can seem dangerously idealistic. That is, it might well be the case that religiosity is *supposed to be* like this, but it might in fact be decidedly less sublime or romantic for many ordinary practitioners. For them, it might be a singular source of hope and joy amidst the suffering of life, but it might also simply be what they were taught or told to believe and practice at a young age. Cottingham would do well at times to emphasize this less romantic underbelly of the domains of human life that he seeks to understand humanely. (As another example, he notes how cosmically transformative liturgical praxis can be, but he might also highlight how, for many, it can seem taxing, insignificant to life's concerns, and rote. [163–4]). A similar concern could apply to the discussions of narrativity and happiness that factor importantly in part two, "Morality and Meaning." In this section, Cottingham offers a noble defense, in conjunction with MacIntyre and Taylor, of the aptness of narrativity when thinking about the trajectory of human lives, and the way in which suffering can be redeemed within their course. He could profit, however, by considering a pessimistic alternative to such a perspective—like Galen Strawson's, on which narrativity seems forcefully superadded to lives that just plainly are what they are in its absence.

At any rate, such concerns are relatively minor and fundamentally points of emphasis that could clarify and strengthen Cottingham's project. These essays, along with his broader work on humane philosophy, are a singular service to contemporary anglophone philosophy and its future. Especially in a day when the value of the academic philosophical enterprise is under greater scrutiny, Cottingham masterfully reassures his readers of the perennial worth of the most foundational philosophical questions and their vital role in our task of understanding the world, ourselves, and the most significant facets of our lives.

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