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Book Review

Bentz, Valerie Malhotra and Vincenzo M. B. Giorgino, (eds.). 2016. *Contemplative Social Research. Caring for Self, Being, and Lifeworld*. Santa Barbara: Fielding University Press

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In the preface to the reviewed volume, Sander Tideman expressively outlines: “The field of *contemplative science* offers fresh perspectives on our subjective experience of life, our ‘inner reality’ or the first-person perspective, which complements our understanding of ‘outer’ phenomena—that is, the second- or third-person perspectives” (p. 10). The word “fresh” can be regarded as essential, as for decades the world of science has appeared to be completely “deaf” to the evidences coming from first-person experience. It has been based on the belief that such experience has no connections with objective methods. Furthermore, such experiences should be limited to human/social branches, as well as to art or religion. However, as it has been shown in many academic works (e.g., Wallace 2007), first-person testimonies could have been considered at least as an addition to the “objective” measures. For instance, the scanning of human body, brain with the state-of-art technology can be supported by verbal/written experiences of a “scanned” person. Especially when it comes to people with a high level of skills in meditation practice. It therefore appears

that science does not have to lose its epistemological abilities due to using the first-person experiences, but it could benefit from it. If science is thought to be the device for exploring nature, it cannot ignore the human experience—the latter belongs to reality in the same way as sub-atomic sphere, genes, or instincts. Undoubtedly, it is the time to equip scientific laboratories with the laboratories of “mind.”

The first-person experiences can be immensely enriching as a tool of understanding human emotions and inner landscapes. Meditation and similar techniques serve for that. As studying of, for example, Buddhist philosophy convinces, the training of mind leads not only to individual development (aspiration for spiritual enlightenment), but also contributes to cultural and moral values (Loy 2015). The meditation practice is correlated with the attitude of compassion and work for others. It is an important topic for evaluation. Contemplative science means not only observation of human brain and estimation of how far we can train its flexibility (see: Begley 2007), but, most of all, complex, multi-

faceted inquiries of *conditio humana*, emotions, and social values.

The importance of contemplative studies is testified by, among others, the activities of Mind & Life Institute (see: mindandlife.org for details), organizing seminars, workshops (involving the 14th Dalai Lama, who supports the organization), but also an increasing number of academic publications. One of them is the book *Contemplative Social Research: Caring for Self, Being, and Lifeworld*. It contains 11 chapters and is divided in two parts.

The first part, entitled “Contemplative Knowing and Being,” is opened by the chapter of Zack Walsh on the political and social significance of contemplation. He underlines that “it is evident that the modern reduction of contemplation to an individual’s isolated experience is a historically and socially constructed phenomenon” (p. 28). Today, this process is reduced to using contemplation only as a tool for individual serenity. It sometimes seems to be one of the “products” available for modern consumer in high-developed capitalist countries. In a sense, it is related to the separation of the sphere of religion and public life and the phenomenon called the “invisible religion” (Luckman 1967). Walsh considers contemplation (referring to Christian, as well as Buddhist tradition) as shaped by social context which provides an opportunity for, for example, the incorporation of perspective of women into contemplative studies. It seems that contemplative studies could deal with the statement that “everything is political.” The author recommends some kind of “ecology of knowledge in the context of contemplative studies” (p. 43), based on, among

others, showing how these studies can be related to physical, social, political, or economical aspects of life. This proposition could be regarded as a kind of methodological advice.

In her chapter, Valerie Malhotra Bentz is reflecting on the relationship between phenomenology and contemplative practice. She states that phenomenology (one of the most prominent branches of contemporary philosophy) is by nature contemplative as it addresses such issues as consciousness or *epoché*. Especially, the latter might be analyzed in the context of meditation as it recommends taking one’s views and perspective in bracket. Meditation, as well as a phenomenological approach, presents the way of observing what is happening in the structure of being and—as a consequence—knowing (as human experience appears as some “projection” of minds, or, as V. Malhotra Bentz states, “we operate on our own assumptions and preconceptions” [p. 55]). Furthermore, phenomenology elaborates the existence of the “inner spaciousness” (the transcendental consciousness) shared by all beings. This, as Bentz convinces, is connected with some phenomena called “spirit,” “bliss,” or “god” (thus, with the characteristics relating to spiritual traditions). The author tends to reflect on the connection of “Atman” (inner self/soul in Eastern spirituality), “core consciousness,” and “lifeworld” concept from phenomenology.

The next two chapters are dedicated to an interesting discussion on theoretical and methodological convergences. In his chapter, Douglas V. Porpora is trying to present the connections between some branches of philosophy and spirituality. He

considers “critical realism” as more open to the contemplative sphere than, for example, positivism. It is an excellent time to test some theoretical assumptions, also due to questions of relational and the interdependent nature of reality (both in visible and, e.g., sub-atomic sphere). Whereas Xabier Renteria-Uriarte makes a proposal of contemplative science and the contemplative foundation of science (in terms of definitions, branches, and tools), he mentions that we have much to gain from contemplative studies due to their heuristic dimension. This chapter, in turn, gives rise to call for a more structural way of elaborating—there is urgent need to construct some models of contemplative science—with consistent structure, terminology system.

In his chapter, Donald McCown provides example of thinking on mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) not only for individual purposes. He accents some dimensions of MBIs, like relational, being together, or community development. The analysis is based on an empirical study of an eight-week MBI class. As the author states: “In the existential intensity of an MBI class, in which participants directly encounter their own suffering (and the possibility of death) with and through the others’ situations at the limit, strong affective charges arise, and the participants co-create a way of being with such a situation” (p. 122). It makes an understanding of community (or, human, in a broader sense) aspects of contemplation more visible, but we can look through it in a more nuanced way: it is a way of appreciating the different aspects of being contemplative—not only in terms of being focused on “consumer” ego.

The first part of the book is concluded with the chapter by Vincenzo M. B. Giorgino who reconsiders the possible relations between contemplative knowledge and social science. At first, he elaborates that the two domains belong to different realms of knowledge: the first aims to answer the human quest for meaning in life, but the second attempts to interpret social interactions. Giorgino shows, however, that step-by-step, contemplative topics become more visible in academic publications. For example, there are data indicating that there were 674 articles related to mindfulness research published in 2015, in comparison to 12 papers in 2000. He connects it, among others, with a growing meaning of secular contemplative practices, as they have appeared more as daily-basis practices than “magical/spiritual” activities. Research cannot avoid those elements that become part of everyday practices. Most of social research is based on “first-person” testimony—the subjective “state of mind” called “identity,” “personality.” The difference is, as Giorgino states, that social studies use methodology investigating states described after experience. In most cases, it is true, but we should add (especially in the context of qualitative methods of research) that social sciences are able to investigate “living” and “lived” experience during ethnographic field-work, participatory observations. Many topics—like religious communities, subcultures, sport, establish difficult spaces for research based only on “after experience” testimonies. As a consequence of encounter between social and contemplative sciences, one could reconsider the definition of self and agency, and, for example, need for critical analysis of the context in which contemplative practices are embedded.

Probably, the interconnection between social and contemplative science is more visible than one could assume. As Krzysztof Konecki points out, opening the second part of the volume, social scientists could gain a benefit from meditation during their fieldwork. He provides some practical functions of meditation for sociologists, for instance: “meditation could be a very useful tool for developing the researcher’s sensitivity and intuition... Describing our own experience of phenomena or sociological research *per se* we can locate the structures of the sociological mind during the empirical research. We can get to the essence of the experience” (p. 223). Konecki illustrates that, for example, Zen practices could support fieldwork, help to let go of all the impressions that come to the mind. In some sense, the attitude of mindful awareness seems to be crucial in every research practice as we all need to stay focused on people’s words, gestures, as well as moments of silence (which are sometimes more important than any discourse). What remains to be elaborated on in the context of using contemplative techniques during research is, for example, an issue of participation in activities which stand in contradiction with being “mindful.” For example, in research of some subcultures (football fans, rock music fans, and so on), there is a need to engage in practice like drinking alcohol. Interesting is how to connect the contemplative process and experience in such extraordinary cultural activities.

The rest of the chapters in the reviewed volume describe many different dimensions of contemplative science, sharing some spiritual insights with readers and providing some new methodological

agenda for further inquiries. Annabelle Nelson presents some interconnection between imagery and spiritual development. Focusing on image, symbols play an important role in the work on ego, as it allows reducing mental distractions. In some branches of spiritual traditions, for example, Tibetan Buddhism, the focus on saint syllable, mantra, or lama (spiritual teacher; the visualization of this form supports following a spiritual path). Nelson clearly depicts the connection between symbolic dimensions of meditation and brain physiology and psychodynamics of archetypes proposed, for example, by Carl Gustav Jung. The only weak point is that the author tries to adopt too many themes and, as a consequence, readers may feel a little confused. There is a crucial finding, however, that “There is no specific set of archetypes, nor is there a magical list to choose from. Different traditions manifest different archetypes” (p. 255). It is obvious to review many various approaches in a research paper, although in practice, the focus on one method seems to be the key to success.

Luann Drolc Fortune, using the phenomenology background, incorporates the matters of body insights into contemplative studies. She states that “Research tactics that invite the embodied lived experience of research participants, as well as the researcher are better able to convey this aesthetic dimension [connected to deeper personal insights and inspiring sense-making of one’s body—RK] to others” (p. 261). It is a topic strongly connected to both research methodology and therapeutic processes. The author presents how the analysis of somatic spheres (and sensory processes) releases the potential of individual and facilitates a deeper insight

into the self of a researcher, as well as to sensitize to different aspects of reality. This approach is visible, for example, in sport research (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015). On the other hand, how studies by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2009) show, mindfulness can fruitfully influence some somatic aspects of life (focus on different parts of the body for pain relief).

David Casacuberta reflects on the necessity of reformulating digital contents' interface to make them serve human and moral values. He discusses the role of affordances in the sphere of interfaces, programs, and applications. There is an interesting discussion on the concept of "affordance" incorporated by Casacuberta. He shows (compiling thesis from various approaches) that affordances (generally speaking, they mean the possibility of an action) cannot be reduced to both subjective experiences and physical properties of things. The key to understanding the nature of affordances is their relational character, according to, for example, culture and ecological imperatives, affordances can become either meaningful or meaningless. The author considers the meaning of affordances in the domain of interfaces, what is particularly important as most people are functioning more and more in the "ecological" environment of Internet. We can state that affordances attributed to Internet are neither good nor bad by nature. There is advice provided by the author: "digital technologies based on conventional affordances generate plenty of distractions. Be sure that any source of distraction in the interface can be disconnected easily. Provide affordances to help the development of deep work and concentration" (p. 295). It might sound cliché, but one should be aware of how many problems

(especially young) people experience to be "disconnected" and not distracted. Perhaps the future apps and interfaces will be fitted with options: "turn off," "stay focused," "meditation mode"—the enlightened affordances for digital generations.

Christopher Mare, in the last chapter, points out the meaning of spiritual values and contemplative studies for making design decisions. He concludes: "The typical built environment of North America was constructed according to the logic of 'real estate' within the dictations of 'the markets'" (p. 322). The alternative is, for example, the project of Yoga College: "The retrofit conceptual plan emphasizes the flow of *chi* and the containment and storage of that *chi* within the campus...Entrances are reworked to facilitate an inviting openness, while other areas are designed to nurture privacy and contemplation" (p. 321). It is a kind of truism to convict that housing conditions are pivotal for well-being. With no doubt, this issue gains in significance in Polish context in which, definitely, the logic of real estate reigns. As a result, there are many residential buildings designed with no reflection on such issues as community, respect for nature, and so on.

Housing, interfaces, research methodology, psychological well-being, and many more—the reviewed book evaluates many different aspects and dimensions of contemplative studies, spaces for inquiries, and activities. As it seems, the book contributes to a branch of studies which are engaged in both cognitive processes (the study of what nature of reality and mind is) and activities contributing to creating a better world and culture. In that first mean-

ing, contemplative science seems to be an excellent “companion” for other scientific methodologies (from physics to philosophy). On the other hand, it

should be considered as an important political tool, as changing minds and hearts always influences the change of social worlds.

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