

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Antoaneta Nikolova**,

SWU “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad,

member of the scientific jury

regarding the PhD thesis of **Martin Smith**

on "**Certainty in Uncertainty: The Value of Stoic Virtue Ethics**"

for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**"

in the professional field - 2.3 Philosophy

Scientific speciality - History of Philosophy

1. Data about the PhD student

Martin Smith is a Bachelor of Acupuncture and Master of Philosophy, PhD student at SU “St. Kliment Ohridski”. His biography reveals him as an independent innovative person who searches for and follows his own path.

2. Data about dissertation and summary

The dissertation consists of 215 computer pages, the bibliography contains 111 titles. The dissertation is structured in an introduction, three main parts, a conclusion, an appendix, figures and a glossary.

The abstract is 56 pages long and clearly and informatively presents the main logic, thesis and conclusions of the study. The presentation of the discussion points and perspectives for further research is very valuable. The contribution points are well outlined.

3. Evaluation of the scientific results

The dissertation is written in a very dialogical manner. The main aim is clearly stated and the main thesis is convincingly justified, being at the same time “made accessible for consideration by the reader”, the possible objections, shortcomings and challenges in application are clearly acknowledged, since the goal of the dissertation is really ambitious – to “create a new virtue ethics”.

The doctoral student takes as a point of departure for his considerations the premise that philosophy should “be recognised by its intention towards continual improvement” and “can be described as an initiative that follows where the human condition leads”. Based on this understanding, the author proceeds very decisively to the established norms, concepts, categories and interpretations. He managed to take them out of the rigidity of their established

treatment and gives them a new life and meaning. His aim is not to present a precise and self-sufficient historical-philosophical analysis, but to extract from old and new ideas that essence which could be valuable and workable for the present situation, which could help here now the present human being who lives in an uncertain world. Very important in the study is the orientation towards practices and the attempt for a real applicability of the knowledge. This determines the importance of ethical issues as well, since for the author "ethics is that which supports life itself", ethics is aimed at "solving the problems in the world and further improving conditions therein".

Breaking stereotypes is only possible with excellent knowledge of them, which the author has undoubtedly demonstrated. He bases his reflections on a rethinking of the ethical concepts of Aristotle, Machiavelli, as well as of Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, but determinative in terms of purpose, manner of discussion and reasoning are the Stoic principles. To a large extent, the dissertation can be seen as a very contemporary and largely innovative version not only of Stoic ethics, but also of Stoic logic, physics and metaphysics.

The method for structuring the dissertation is clearly outlined. It involves not giving ready-made answers but outlining building blocks that the reader could creatively combine.

The first part of the dissertation is entitled simply "The Problem" and is based on the premise that in order to find a solution, we must first clearly see the problem and its causes. For the author, modernity often offers a substitution in which the problem is presented as the solution. In line with Stoic philosophy, the PhD student points out that "reality provides a more robust grounds for an ethics". For him, evil is not a deficiency of good, but an independent principle of destruction, opposed to the principle of creation, defined as good, and as such is necessary in itself. Therefore, according to the author, the problem is not that evil should be abolished, but that it should be accurately recognised and humanity should be able to determine its attitude towards it.

In this regard, he rethinks Heidegger's concept of *das Man* as "a collective entity, one that avoids confronting its existential fears, specifically its death" and develops an understanding according to which this collective entity "fears reality itself", reality that for the Stoics is actually the most valuable and is the basis of all ethics. In this retreat of *das Man* into "a simplified, emotionalised narrative crafted by the expert technician — offering perceived safety, consensus emotion, group membership in exchange for obedience and belief", the author sees its amoral nature through which evil in the world is facilitated and amplified, and he emphasises that ethics must take this circumstance into account.

The second part of the dissertation proposes approaches towards a solution of the problem. The PhD student justifies his thesis that evil and good should be seen as equally necessary for life and as synonymous for its aspects of creation and destruction. In this way, according to the author, unrealistic aspirations to some absolute ideal can be avoided. This aspirations are untenable since they do not take into account the dualistic nature of reality. For him, ethics must reconcile the two principles that are present in everyone, and "virtue ought not service an abstract ideal, but rather a standard against which life is improved and suffering reduced". In this regard, ethics is bound up with practical wisdom, which privileges the practical over the theoretical and acts not in accordance with what ought to be but with what is.

This adherence to reality, rather than to our view about it, is actually very difficult, and the PhD student not only analyses both approaches, but also proposes concrete steps for adhering to reality, the basis of which are the achievements of Stoic philosophy.

In the third part, called "Discussion", the author discusses approaches to the reality of religion and modern philosophy, compares the conceptions of virtue developed by Aristotle, Machiavelli, and the Stoics, and argues for the suitability of the proposed method of moral realism.

The Conclusion very convincingly summarises the main outcomes, discusses the contributions, points out the limitations of the study and identifies the main points for future research. Particularly promising is the idea to make comparisons with Eastern philosophies, as well as exploring the moral dilemmas connecting with artificial intelligence.

The dissertation ends with several very interesting and innovative sections. The Appendix analyses in more detail the aspects of Aristotle's and Machiavelli's philosophy relevant to the studied issues. The Figures present and explain very clearly the main ideas of the study. The Glossary highlights key concepts and the way they are used throughout the dissertation.

4. Summary remarks

The PhD student presents one very interesting, provocative and original work, constructed in a rather unconventional way. All its parts are subordinated to a strict logic, which is not linear, but holistic. Each part complements and mutually interacts with each other. The dissertation is a truly original philosophical work, which aims are not simply to present a theory, but to make a real contribution to the "the subject's well-being and survival".

5. Evaluation of publications on the thesis and the summary

Martin Smith has three publications related to the dissertation topic that present complementary aspects and emphases, and thus fulfils the necessary requirements.

The abstract is fully consistent with the content of the dissertation. I agree with the principal contributions and think that they are real contributions.

6. Conclusion

Martin Smith's dissertation is an original and innovative study, carried out with erudition and dialogicity. The quest for practical application of the ideas expressed is convincingly presented and justified. The doctoral student shows a marked capacity for scholarly creativity. His work meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. Therefore, I will confidently vote positively for Martin Smith to be awarded the scientific and educational degree of Doctor in the professional field - 2.3 Philosophy, scientific specialty - History of Philosophy..

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23.11.2024

Assoc. Dr. Antoaneta Nikolova