

**Opinion** by Prof. Dr. **Vladimir Gradev**

for the dissertation of **Martin Smith**

*"Certainty in Uncertainty: the Value of Stoic Virtue Ethics"*

for the acquisition of the educational and scholarly degree Doctor (PhD)

The thesis submitted by Martin Smith is written in English and is 215 pages long. The dissertation begins with a very brief Introduction to the problems of the study and consists of 4 parts, the last of which is a conclusion and should not be detached as a separate part. There are appendixes, devoted to Aristotle, Machiavelli and eclectic philosophy, but not to Stoicism. There are also 4 extended figures in which Martin Smith summarizes and visually presents the results of the study. The bibliography contains about 110 titles in English. In his dissertation Smith strives for his own reading of the authors under consideration - above all Aristotle, Seneca, and Machiavelli - and this, of course, is the most valuable aspect of his work. However, a more thorough and critical examination of the secondary literature on Aristotle, Stoicism and Machiavelli, and especially of major developments in contemporary moral philosophy, especially in the area of virtue ethics, would have allowed Martin Smith to defend his theses more confidently, and achieving certainty is the stated aim of his work.

For the sake of the procedure, I will note that Smith has submitted three publications on the topic of the dissertation, which are not yet published, but are forthcoming. The abstract is done as required and accurately reflects the content of the work. Worthy of note and positive evaluation is the fact that Martin Smith presents not only the main contributions, but also the limitations of his research, thus showing self-criticism, a valuable and rare quality. Also briefly outlined are prospects for future research that the work opens up.

I also cannot help but point out that Martin Smith's project is an ambitious one: challenging the traditional approach to virtue ethics and better aligning it

with the actual\*real realities of our times. But why precisely the virtue ethics is the most adequate approach to the problems and challenges of our time? Isn't it not the same claim as the one, exposed by the other two main currents in contemporary moral philosophy, namely consequentialism and deontology, to mention only these two? With the aim of the thesis thus stated, a brief critical examination of the main trends of contemporary moral philosophy and their positions on the issues addressed in the thesis is necessary and would provide a clearer and more secure framework for the study. Smith looks at the ethics of Aristotle through the lens of Thomas Aquinas and interprets it as a theological ethics, which is entirely justified approach. But in such a case shouldn't all virtue ethics be seen as theological ethics?

The title claims that the present study will provide greater "certainty in uncertainty". But what is certainty? Martin Smith does not give a brief historical overview of this basic philosophical concept, does not indicate its main characteristics, and especially does not provide criteria for certainty in the moral judgment.

Evil is undoubtedly a problem *for* and *of* moral philosophy. In philosophy, evil is traditionally seen as natural, metaphysical, and moral. The author, without considering the natural and metaphysical evil, focuses on moral evil, undoubtedly because it is the focus of moral philosophy. In the pursuit of certainty, however, the general ethical issues regarding the natural and metaphysical evil cannot be overlooked, because they are related to the foundations of morality, to the goals of ethics, and to the moral significance of suffering, which is central to a virtue ethics. In order to avoid any moral confusion, which is the stated aim of the work, it must be clearly defined what exactly is moral evil? Moreover, the classical Western moral theory, even if we assume that there is a unified one, does not treat evil simply as deviation or moral ignorance, as the author of the dissertation claims, but sees them only as some of the causes of evil.

From the fact that evil has no ontological weight and substance of its own, for authors like Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, it is not at all following that it is unreal, that it is an illusion, but on the contrary: in this perspective evil is present when there is annihilation, damage, destruction, oppression, suffering, and the very real disappearance of the good, the lowering of being, the demolition of existence. Yes, the great, "substantial" evil is easily discerned, and then the distinction between good and evil seems clear and certain. But the real dangers, the serious temptations and problems in the moral life begin with the small, insignificant, almost imperceptible steps. The most difficult moment to realize is the moment of crossing a line that shouldn't been crossed, of opening a door that should have remained closed. Then the forces of evil invade, obsess, infect, begin to multiply rapidly with cancerous excess. These forces do not exist independently, "in themselves" and "for themselves," and that is why for this tradition evil has no substance or ontological weight of its own. The things on which evil depends are inherently good, because they come from God in the perspective of a theological ethics, a position that Martin Smith, too, says he supports. And evil spreads like mold or rust over the good, or to use, an even more accurate metaphor, like a parasite or tumour that takes up residence in a living being and destroys its shelter from within. This dimension of the "non-substantialist" conception of evil is not taken into account by the author of the dissertation, who, in order to criticize it successfully, firstly should have clarified it thoroughly and precisely.

Martin Smith takes concepts from various authors and uses them for the purpose of his study such as *das Man*, *virtù*, banality of evil. He is, of course, free to do so, but both the author and the reader need to be sure of their usage, which requires careful clarification of the meaning of the terms in the authors from whom he takes them. Thus, for example, *das Man* in *Sein und Zeit* is neither "anonymous multitude", nor a "crowd", as Smith claims, in order to build his own distinctions and constructions upon them. *Das Man* (an impersonal form in

German) is an existential, i.e., a primary element of the positive structure of Dasein and is *Dasein's* abyss in its everyday life.

In the case of *virtù*, Smith has made an effort to clarify the concept in Machiavelli, and this is commendable. But his one-sided view of *The Prince* as a satirical work, based on a narrow reading of Benner's theses, has prevented him from seeing clearly the radical novelty of Machiavelli. In the first place, *The Prince* is a manual of political technique, the prescriptions of which might be applied by any political reader who has mastered them. With *The Prince*, Machiavelli first of all sets politics apart as an autonomous sphere, not launched from any other entity (be it religious, metaphysical, moral), making it clear that religion, morality, and law are heteronomous with respect to it and that it has its own principles and rules. It is problematic, then, to transfer Machiavelli's conceptions of politics directly into the realm of morality, a transfer that makes the work truly satirical and mocking of traditional virtues. What is *virtù* for Machiavelli? Certainly it is not the moral virtue of the noble man, nor that of the devout Christian. What is *virtù*, then? *Virtù* is the political virtue, *par excellence*, i.e., the public ability to act politically, according to the conditions and requirements of the particular political situation. It is no by accident that the paradigms of this new, purely political, *virtù* are the founders of new states.

Finally, I want to ask Martin Smith what is the relation between the moral life and the good life in the virtue ethics, developed by him.

With the present work, Martin Smith has shown that he has the ability to think independently and his thesis largely fulfils the tasks he has set himself and, should I receive a satisfactory response to the issues raised in the opinion, I will vote for the award of the educational and scholarly degree Doctor to Martin Smith.