



PROJECT MUSE®

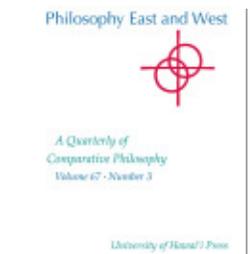
---

*Philosophy East/West: Exploring Intersections between  
Educational and Contemplative Practices* ed. by Oren Ergas  
and Sharon Todd (review)

Patrick Laude

*Philosophy East and West*, Volume 67, Number 3, July 2017, pp. 938-940 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2017.0076>



➔ *For additional information about this article*  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/664508>

the unexplored aspects of policy implementation reveal areas in which further work on this topic is needed.

#### References

- Cafaro, Phil, and Eileen Crist, eds. 2012. *Life on the Brink: Philosophers Confront Population*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- McKibben, Bill. 1998. *Maybe One: A Case for Smaller Families*. New York: Plume.
- Overall, Christine. 2012. *Why Have Children?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rieder, Travis. 2016. *Toward a Small Family Ethic: How Overpopulation and Climate Change Are Affecting the Morality of Procreation*. Dordrecht: Springer.

*Philosophy East/West: Exploring Intersections between Educational and Contemplative Practices*. Edited by Oren Ergas and Sharon Todd. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. Pp. 208. £19.99, ISBN 978-1-119-14733-6.



Reviewed by **Patrick Laude**

School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Georgetown University  
laudep@georgetown.edu

Oren Ergas and Sharon Todd, the editors of *Philosophy East/West: Exploring Intersections between Educational and Contemplative Practices*, articulate the two main concerns of their project in the introduction. The first intent is to embrace a cross-philosophical approach that may integrate a wide spectrum of wisdom traditions the world over in order to maximize fruitful dialogue and cross-fertilization. The second is to take stock of the recent “contemplative turn” in education, as illustrated primarily by the growing contemporary trend to emphasize meditative and mindfulness practices. The main objective of the editors of this thoughtful and creative volume is to reflect upon the ways such a “contemplative turn” can provide, particularly when it is grounded in inter-civilizational awareness and knowledge, a suitable and integral framework for a truly “lived” model of education. Thus, the essays included in this book consider the zones of intersection between comparative philosophy, contemplative practices, and education in a contemporary context.

In her essay “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies in View of the Love of God” Simone Weil defines academic study as an education of the capacity for attention. Weil proposes that “the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies.” This remark could serve, in a way, as a common thread running through the nine essays included in this volume. The authors contend that a creative engagement with contemplative pedagogy and learning is the only way education could be integrally fulfilled, or restored to its

inclusive meaning and function. However, these essays reveal a keen awareness of the contemporary challenges to such an endeavor. Thus, they are particularly intent on debunking frequent reductionisms and recuperations of contemplative practices and mindfulness in the modern world. Among these are the recurrent concern for a validation of meditational practices by modern science and the compartmentalization and instrumentalization of contemplative practices within the logic of “economic imperialism” and its *de facto* secular marginalization and divorce from ethical and ontological concerns. Oren Ergas articulates these concerns very effectively when he asserts that “the discourse of justifications for contemplative practices accentuates this issue (of obsession with assessing performativity) because threading wisdom traditions through the eye of the needle of quantitative science so that they fit the bill of an economic-secular public educational ethos inevitably yields reductionism” (p. 51).

On the side of Western philosophical contributions, the book draws from ancient European wisdom traditions, but also from contemporary figures such as Heidegger, Foucauld, and Levinas. David Lewin sees in Heidegger’s “care for Being,” for instance—a contemplative corrective to the limitations and ambiguities of “the recent interest in mindfulness in education.” He contends that “for Heidegger the current interest in mindfulness would represent a concealment of the essence of attention and precisely the oblivion to being that needs to be overcome” (p. 84). As for Levinas, it is on the basis of his concept of the “traumatism of astonishment” in relation to the Other that Sharon Todd can suggest that his works may help induce a decentering of the self, and therefore foster the inner conditions for a true attention to others. Robert Hattam and Bernadette Baker, on their part, call for an understanding of the “contemplative turn (that) represents a ‘post-secular’ social theory based on robust critique of the secularisation thesis that has been the paradigmatic narrative of mainstream social theory for much of the last century” (p. 11). They, like other contributors to this volume, refer to Foucauld’s distinction between philosophy as determining “the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth” and spirituality as a work of self-modification that is “the price to be paid for access to the truth.”

Although the authors tend to keep their distance from Foucauld’s reductively aesthetic understanding of the latter as an “elaboration of one’s life as a personal work of art,” they see the cultivation of virtues inherent in his interpretation as an integral part of contemplative education. In this connection, one must note the inclusion of significant reflections on the intimate relationship between virtue and knowledge in several of the essays included in this volume, particularly in “Reuniting Virtue and Knowledge” by Tom Culham. This stress on the unity of ethics and knowledge runs parallel to a recognition, on the part of several contributors to this volume, of the contemplative genealogy of philosophy in the West, as testified to by the recurrent references to Pierre Hadot’s restitution of Neo-Platonism.

On the Eastern side, the prime focus lies in Buddhism, and secondarily in Daoism, no doubt because of their non-theistic and methodical outlook, and their greater ability, therefore, to be integrated within secular contexts. However, some authors, like Edward Sarath in his “Improvisation and Meditation in the Academy:

Parallel Ordeals, Insights, and Openings,” contend that one must be mindful of availing oneself of the integrality of the Buddhist tradition by refraining from formatting it to fulfill the demands of a prevalent “materialist scientism.” By and large, the authors demonstrate a keen awareness of the dangers associated with any abstraction of contemplative practices from the ontological *Weltanschauung* from which they flow, and from the ethics of detachment and compassion with which they coalesce.

It must be noted that the three monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are largely, if not totally, absent from consideration. One can presume there is a number of circumstantial and strategic reasons why this is so. These may include the theological exclusivism of major religious trends and the moving away of mainstream theology from contemplative concerns in favor of ideological or humanitarian focus, as well as the cultural tensions inherent in the manifestation of religion in secular, or post-secular, contexts. It may be deemed, however, that the inclusion of the contemplative dimensions of these traditions might facilitate a greater and deeper integration of the contemplative turn in the West. It may do so by serving as a source of renewal of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of religion. One may recall, in this connection, Simone Weil’s reflection, quoted at the beginning of this review, on the education of attention as a propaedeutic to prayer. Weil’s understanding of prayer does not relate to mere devotional petition but to a “waiting for God,” or, to put it in language more akin to the philosophical emphasis of this volume, to the development of an awareness of transcendence. It may be noted that the latter word is somewhat absent from the current volume, no doubt for contextual reasons, although it is undoubtedly the explicit or implicit concern of the authors, as the silent word and “motionless mover” of any contemplatively grounded holistic education.

*The Philosophy of Living.* By François Jullien. Translated by Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson. London and New York: Seagull Books, 2016. Pp. 256. \$27.50, ISBN 978-0-8574-2-216-3.

*This Strange Idea of the Beautiful.* By François Jullien. Translated by Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson. London, New York, and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2016. Pp. 259. \$27.50, ISBN 978-0-8574-2010-7.

Reviewed by **Oliver Leaman**  
University of Kentucky  
oleaman@uky.edu

It is appropriate to deal with *The Philosophy of Living* and *This Strange Idea of the Beautiful* together since they both embody the methodology of François Jullien that is to be found in many of his books. The European Continental tradition in philosophy on a particular topic is outlined and then contrasted unfavorably with Chinese philosophy on the same topic, although it has to be said immediately that by “Chinese philosophy” the author means those parts of it that he selects. Often this approach is perceptive and imaginative, and Jullien always has interesting things to say on what