
REVIEWS

Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*. New York: Free Press, 2011. Pp 254. ISBN 978-1-4165-9615-8, \$26.00 hb. ISBN 978-1-4165-9616-5, \$15.00 pb.

All Things Shining, a philosophical book written for a popular audience, is an ambitious project which diagnoses a core contemporary problem, uncovers its literary pathology, and writes a curative prescription. The problem is nihilism and “the burden of choice.” Its pathology developed from individualistic tendencies in the writings of Aeschylus, Augustine, Luther, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, as well as others. Finally, the prescription is to develop a sense of the sacred in terms of a public mood, especially through the development of skills. Ultimately, whether or not Dreyfus and Kelly’s account is convincing depends upon whether or not the methodology they employ, namely a phenomenological approach to literary analysis, is suited to their goals. Unfortunately, one of the interesting parts of the project, a defense of communitarianism as a counter to liberal individualism, is undermined by their particular use of the phenomenological approach.

The communitarian goal is an implicit one and the evidence for it does not appear until late in the book. In their acknowledgements at the *end* of the narrative, Dreyfus and Kelly point out that the book was the result of encouragement by Sandel and Taylor to address polytheism in a seminar on Taylor’s book, *A Secular Age*. One goal of Taylor’s book is the communitarian hope of bringing a halt to the corrosive effects of liberalism, and Taylor does this by discussing the importance of God in our lives despite Nietzsche’s oft-repeated claim that God is dead. *All Things Shining* has a similar goal but is less enthusiastic about whether monotheistic views can succeed in returning meaning to our lives. This is reflected throughout

Chapter 6 where Dreyfus and Kelly interpret the title character of Melville’s *Moby Dick* as standing in for a monotheism that is empty of meaning. It is also in this chapter that their communitarian solution is suggested in their interpretation of two different scenes in Melville’s novel. In the first, Ishmael, along with others, is working with the spermaceti found in the heads of sperm whales. Their interpretation deserves to be fully quoted:

Ishmael finds himself, along with several other shipmates, assigned to the task of “squeezing these lumps back into fluid.” During this task he sometimes finds himself unwittingly squeezing his co-laborers’ hands. His description of this kind of loving, *communal* experience seems to be the essence of Melville’s understanding of the Christian mood of agape, or Christian love for others (167, emphasis added).

They go on to point out that this secular ritual appropriates the Christian view of the sacred. This scene is then contrasted with that of Pip’s experience of being a castaway. According to Dreyfus and Kelly, once becoming a castaway, “Pip has lost all his connections with other men and the *Pequod*, which is his center. The ship is the stable, human thing that grounds one on the infinite sea. It is the loss of everything connected with this final human thing that Pip finds horrifying” (177). In other words, a complete disconnection from others is the source of a truly horror-filled life. Communitarians such as MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor and Walzer see liberalism and its commitment to atomistic individuals as leading to loss of connections with others and is one of the core communitarian critiques of liberalism. For Dreyfus and Kelly, however, a shared ritual, like that of squeezing spermaceti, can be the foundation that avoids such a life. But, just as this evidence provides the seeds for

a communitarian reading of *All Things Shining*, these seeds are mixed with individualistic weeds built into their phenomenological method. To see this, however, requires that we look at the organization of the book, how they set up the problem of the contemporary age, and their discussion of the term ‘sacred’.

The circuitous structure of *All Things Shining* somewhat obscures any case it attempts to develop. Consider that an explicit claim of the book is that external constraint is an effective bulwark against nihilism created by individualism. The very nature of the book, however, is an example of how external constraints fail to limit interpretation and loss of value. There is an external constraint on how to describe the organization of the book, namely the number of chapters it has. But the structure of the book allows for multiple descriptions, suggesting that the external constraint has limited effectiveness in restraining individual interpretations. First consider a topical arrangement. Chapter 1 and 2 focus on the joint problems of nihilism and the burden of choice that the contemporary West confronts. Chapter 3 describes a polytheistic alternative to the burden of choice and nihilism found in Homer but not in Classical Greece or after. Chapters 4 and 5 trace the “secret history of the West” in terms of growing individualism and an inward-looking self-conception from Aeschylus to Kant. Chapter 6 attempts to show that Herman Melville, in *Moby Dick*, not only understood and agreed with Dreyfus and Kelly about the development of nihilism, but also tried to suggest a community-based solution. Chapter 7 outlines how *poiesis*, or the craftsman’s skill in bringing out the best in an object, can be the foundation for a meaningful way to confront the West’s current situation. Now consider a methodological arrangement. Chapters 1 and 7 are conceptual analyses while chapter 2-6 are literary analyses. Which description of the book’s organization should be favored? The answer will depend on individual interests. Given this, and the fact that there are more than just these two descriptions of the book’s organization, the ability for external constraints to reign in individualism is called into doubt.

As already mentioned, the problem of living without effective external constraints is the topic of the first two chapters of the book. For brevity, only the first chapter will be discussed. This chapter describes the West’s burden of choice as having too many life alternatives set before us, but no motivation, or reason, to choose between them. Choice requires a reason, but merely picking means pursuing an alternative for no reason whatsoever. The burden of choice that the West has created for itself is a world where we can do nothing but pick alternatives. Furthermore, picking only allows for two forms of motivation: becoming self-confident or becoming enslaved. The person who is self-confident is one who “is committed to bringing the world into line with his version of how it should be” (5). The self-confident person sees external reality as perfectly malleable, as providing no constraints on choice. In the end, reality is just an extension of the self. The enslaved, on the other hand, is “the person who makes no choices about how to act because he is enslaved by obsessions, infatuations, or addictions” (6). For this person, there is no self, merely a set of desires that cannot be resisted. For Dreyfus and Kelly, neither alternative is acceptable. One point of the book is to find another way to deal with the burden, one that is not based in liberal individualism which forms the foundation of the self-confident and enslaved options. The solution will be to find an external source that limits the alternatives and provides reasons for choice. That external source is the authority of the sacred.

Unfortunately, *All Things Shining* does not pay sufficient attention to the notion of sacredness. What do Dreyfus and Kelly mean by “sacred”? In the solution chapters of the book (3, 6, and 7), the “sacred” is described as a mood that is publicly shareable; it involves gratitude and is related to human excellence. Beyond this, it is hard to say what the authors mean by “sacred.” Admittedly, given the fact that Dreyfus and Kelly want to support a polytheistic version of the sacred, it would create some tension for them to provide a definition with individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. But this vagueness means that the notion of the sacred cannot perform its key function—it cannot actually provide meaningful

constraints on choice. In fact, it seems as if the meaning of “sacred” is something we merely pick and do not rationally choose.

The closest that Dreyfus and Kelly come to explaining the meaning of “sacred” is in the seventh chapter’s discussion of *poiesis*. This term is related to acts of creation, but not limited to the mere technical act which brings something into existence. Dreyfus and Kelly exploit this notion as related to craft skills which bring out the best in the objects that are at hand. To be a craftsman requires that one see distinctions in the world that those who are not craftsmen cannot see. Thus, a craftsman, as opposed to a mere producer, will recognize that a fact of the matter is out in the world, and will use intelligence and flexibility to bring out that fact in the best way possible. In their example of a craftsman who works with wood, they claim that such a person will recognize qualities in the wood and realize how to create something with the wood that brings out its best qualities. In doing so, the craftsman enters into a relationship with wood that is nurturing and in some sense external to the individual. As they point out, however, this is an essentially phenomenological mode of entering into such relationships. Furthermore, it is one where an *individual* discovers which domains of action—tennis, writing, teaching, woodworking, painting, sculpture, music, etc.—are sacred for him or herself.

Since the meaning of “sacred” is something that is determined by an individual picking amongst possibilities, Dreyfus and Kelly generate an internal tension in *All Things Shining*. The authors try to connect individuals with a community by having moods that are individual in origin become publicly shareable. This, however, gets the explanatory story backwards for a communitarian. A communitarian would begin his or her explanation with the external community as the source of the meaningful and the sacred. But Dreyfus and Kelly begin with individual experiences. Furthermore, there is almost no discussion of the communities in which individuals find themselves. Phenomenology, in the hands of Dreyfus and Kelly, is a method that focuses on individual experiences,

even if the individual experiences occur within a group setting such as a public event. Thus, the sacred and the meaningful that any one person will find will be what emerges from the individual, and not from the community. Such individual-based experiences cannot give rise to the sort of external constraint that Dreyfus and Kelly indicate is needed to avoid the self-confident person’s view that the world is an infinitely malleable entity waiting for a strong will to shape. Despite their efforts, Dreyfus and Kelly have not countered the view that the sacred is something we impose upon our experience.

Despite problems in the argument of *All Things Shining*, there are good things to take away from this book. The desire to provide a foundation, even in outline, for a positive communitarian project is laudable. Individual chapters and their analysis of literature, especially Chapter 6 on Melville, are quite thought-provoking. Finally, the methodological problems in *All Things Shining* do not diminish the potential for the development of the idea that *poiesis* can be a source, once properly understood, of excellence and community, as well as providing a way to avoid nihilism. But this would require beginning with a community of master craftsmen and exploring how that community jointly produces knowledge, understanding, and a sense of the sacred that is transferred to individual apprentices. It does not start with the accidental physical or emotional contact of individuals that can occur when people are spatially and temporally near each other.

James M. Okapal
jokapal@missouriwestern.edu

Robert M. Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 233. ISBN: 978-0-19-539302-6. \$27.95 (hb).

Unbeknownst to most of us, a new utopianism is afoot. This most recent edition of utopian ideology arose from the alluring possibilities of capturing the essence of human intelligence in computational

platforms, a view heralded by proponents of Strong AI. Strong artificial intelligence research is based on the assumption that genuine cognition will turn out to be a species of information processing, making the aim of uploading human minds into the supercomputers of the future a reasonable endeavor. The name Robert Geraci gives to this movement is “Apocalyptic AI” (henceforth AAI) because its rhetoric and many of its fundamental beliefs about the future of humanity are unquestionably similar to what are found in the apocalyptic traditions of Judaism and Christianity. In *Apocalyptic AI*, Geraci states that this strange utopian brew shouldn’t be written off as inconsequential fantasies of a few overwrought enthusiasts of ancient arcania or futurist sci-fi geeks because, as he aptly demonstrates, it has already made inroads into our social imaginaries through online game-worlds like *Second Life* which have the apocalyptic agenda written into them, and most significantly, it is already gaining cultural prestige with substantial governmental funding for its research projects which will enable it increasingly to shape our future.

On Geraci’s reading, AAI is, despite its avowed secularism, really a new religious movement that uses the categories of ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic theologies for scientific and distinctly secular aims, basing its apocalyptic-like promises not in the interventions of supernatural entities but in the progress of science and technology. Robotist Hans Moravec (founder of Carnegie Mellon University’s famous Robotics Institute, and presently Chief Scientist at Seegrid Corporation) is the guru of this movement, while world-renowned inventor/entrepreneur Ray Kurzweil (star of the recent documentary *Transcendent Man*) is its chief evangelist. The avowed aim of AAI enthusiasts is to engineer a form of cyber-immortality through which ultimately we, or our near future relatives, will escape the weaknesses and limitations of our flesh and be transformed into software files existing in cyberspace. These secular prophets predict we will upload our intellects into the massive database of a future supercomputer and continue our lives endlessly in virtual bodies and worlds. There will be, however, a cyborgic transition period along the

way to this post-biological virtually immortal form of existence. Before we take up final residence in the unlimited possibilities of cyberspace, we will need to annex our flesh to robotic computational devices and inject nanobots into our bodies to keep us intact long enough, and to make us intelligent enough, to engineer the intelligent machinery of our ultimate redemption from flesh. In this way, AAI, as it were, reconciles religion and science: science and technology bring about the realization of the valuations and aspirations of religion.

Geraci argues quite convincingly that the hopes and promises of key AAI boosters (Hans Moravec, Ray Kurzweil, Kevin Warwick, Hugo de Garis, Marvin Minsky, et. al.) are “almost identical to those of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions” such that should their promises come to pass, “the world will be, once again, a place of magic” (9). Cyberspace will be our home—the heavenly realm of enchantment where our spiritual yearnings for the transcendent will be finally satisfied and our struggles with flesh ultimately concluded. Geraci makes apparent that both ancient apocalypticism and contemporary AAI presume a fundamental cosmic dualism and human alienation from the present physical world, which is viewed as a place of darkness, pollution, and ignorance. Moreover, they both anticipate a future world of redemption that will be infinitely more meaningful than either the present or past, and they expect to be freed from the bondage of the flesh by being resurrected in new angelic (i.e., virtual) bodies. Whereas ancient followers of Christian apocalypticism were hoping for the *parousia* (return) of Christ, proponents of AAI are waiting for “the Singularity”—a kind of secular “Rapture”—to arrive, the point where technological progress “occurs inconceivably fast, leading to a meaningful future that abolishes cosmic dualism and resolves the experience of alienation” (24).

Despite having its roots in ideas and dreams of ancient essentially gnostic worldviews, Geraci convincingly argues that AAI has nonetheless also become a modern research program with a very effective strategy for garnering research funding

as well as an influential shaper of and advocate for online virtual life. Many of the proponents of AAI are motivated by the quest for funding, prestige, and cultural authority. Owing to the evangelical zeal with which AAI is marketed in the public and governmental sectors, AAI advocates have convinced many American politicians that any decreases of funding to robotics and AI research constitutes a “real threat to our country” and its national security (57), a funding tactic reminiscent of the Cold War arms race. Along with this scare tactic, a good part of the success of AAI in acquiring funds and cultural authority is due, says Geraci, to its calling on “religious categories to heighten the allure of their subject matter” (61). After all, if such R & D “can produce cheap, efficient energy, reduce traffic accidents, eliminate earthly pollution, prevent military deaths, care for the elderly, and produce food at almost no cost, then who would resist the moral value of robotics research and who would begrudge our saviors a few extra dollars?” (69).

Geraci shows that sci-fi writings and movies which effectively transpose religious values and goals into techno-scientific narratives have been immensely influential on the techno-culture of the west (56). One of the most important symbols in science fiction is the intelligent machine, a symbol which Geraci suggests is nothing else than deity in a techno-scientific register as engineered matter with capabilities of evoking fear, fascination, and awe. If this is the case, then it explains Marvin Minsky’s quip that compared to sci-fi authors such as Asimov and Pohl, philosophers are just shallow. Stewart Brand goes so far as to claim “Science fiction *is* the literature at MIT” (52). Geraci reveals how indeed life imitates art in MIT’s robotics and AI community where “researchers try to build the fascinating things described in science fiction” (53). It actually turns out that the idea of mind uploading so central to AAI first showed up in Arthur C. Clarke’s 1953 *The City and the Stars*.

Geraci notes that the programmers and designers of the virtual worlds have written the apocalyptic agenda into fabric of these worlds, and in this way they have normalized the agenda for millions

upon millions of people by virtually relocating the sacred to the digital realm (75-6). AAI devotees of online virtual worlds like *Second Life* view these virtual worlds as theaters that train us for, and as bridges to, the digital paradise just the other side of the Singularity. According to a survey Geraci conducted, nearly 50 percent of the inhabitants of these worlds felt that their virtual friends were as important to them as their offline friends (81), making the prospects of transferring their conscious selves into these virtual worlds alluringly attractive—especially as the online worlds come to contrast more and more invidiously with the offline world.

AAI has made inroads not merely into pop science and culture, but also influences philosophers, lawyers, governments, and theologians in NA and Europe, prompting them to explore larger questions that they would otherwise have likely either ignored completely or excluded from serious consideration. For example, philosophers are now struggling to answer questions about machine consciousness and mind-uploading; serious textbooks on cognitive science for undergrad psychology courses are now dealing with notions that previously were interesting only to sci-fi fans. Questions surrounding the issue of responsibility for intelligent machines’ actions are now discussed by lawyers, decision makers, and political consultants—e.g., is it “the builders, programmers, distributors, users or perhaps even the government agencies that legalized the machines”? (125). “Can intelligent autonomous systems bear Constitutional personhood, legal rights, and responsibilities?” is a question now being probed and debated by legal experts and government agencies largely because AAI zealots like Minsky and Kurzweil have been able to convince such cultural overseers to take the AAI worldview seriously (118). AAI also has sent theologians back to the drawing board to find within their religious hierarchies, doctrines, and practices a place for intelligent machines, machines possessing their own beliefs and desires. Since its beginnings in the 1980s as a largely ignorable counter-cultural movement associated with the Max More’s Extropy Institute, AAI has crept much closer to the 21st century’s cultural center by both garnering for

its agenda massive funding from both private and public research coffers, and by forcing philosophical, legal, and theological discourses to bear the impress of its cultural import. AAI has become tremendously influential today because “it impressively integrates the two most significant areas in modern life: religion and technology” (143) thereby becoming modernity’s only scientifically sanctioned soteriological quest.

This book is a valuable addition to the few books like Noreen Herzfeld’s *In our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (Augsburg, 2000) and Anne Foerst’s *God in the Machine: What Robots Teach us about Humanity and God* (Dutton, 2004) that explore the religious dimensions of a fundamentally computational vision of human destiny that is subtly colonizing the dreams and directions of western civilization’s aspirations. Its weakness is that it doesn’t devote much energy or discussion to the obstacles in the way of this secular religion. For instance, Geraci

barely mentions, let alone explores in depth, the bioconservative resistances and challenges to AAI found in the writings of Francis Fukuyama, Leon Kass, Bill McKibben, and George Gilder, who view AAI, in the words of Fukuyama as “the world’s most dangerous idea”. A more pertinent issue for the readers of this journal would be not merely the ideological road blocks to the movement, but the philosophical and conceptual *aporia* that may cripple its technical progress. I have in mind here the question of feasibility regarding the very foundation of its vision: mind-uploading. If Polanyi is correct that human minds bear an ineliminable and non-reducible tacit dimension, then any attempt to “decode” the brain’s patterns into explicit re-codable data structures may quite literally “change the subject” which would certainly be a conceptual obstruction in its flowchart for the future, if not an existential wrench in its machinery for engineering personal immortality.

Bob Doede
BobD@twu.ca

