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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **Anthropology and Philosophy: Creating a Workspace for Collaboration**

**Review by Christopher Kloth**

*Anthropology & Philosophy: Dialogues on Trust and Hope*

By: Sune Liisberg, Esther Oluffa Pederson, and Anne Line Dalsgard eds.

Berghahn Books, 2015

Anthropology & Philosophy: Dialogues on Trust and Hope, edited by Sune Liisberg, Esther Oluffa Pederson, and Anne Line Dalsgard, is the latest in the Anthropology & series, which seeks to put anthropology in conversation with neighboring disciplines, in order to advance inter-disciplinary work, and increase cross-fertilization, as well as aid in remedying what has sometimes been a troubled relationship with between anthropology and these various other disciplines. This particular volume is a further contribution to the dialogue between anthropology and philosophy, two disciplines that are frequently engaged in an examination of similar issues, though different methods and modes of questioning. The dialogues that combine to make up this volume anchor the overall examination of the disciplinary relationship, on behalf of the editors, through the consideration of trust and hope, each entertained as a critical mode of understanding the social and political world. This book makes an important contribution to both the anthropological and philosophical literature, in addition to the intersection between the two, as it aids in the further development of a fruitful dialogue between the two disciplines. Additionally, it makes more explicit a series of conversations between these disciplines, as well as the broader conversation, that seems to be consistently taking place, though often implicit.

The book is divided into six dialogues, each containing a joint statement, by both an anthropologist and a philosopher, and, in most cases, two articles that have been individually written. In dividing the text this way, the editors aim to create a “workspace” in which anthropology and philosophy can be fruitfully put into direct conversation with one another. By creating this “workspace”

the editors allow for joint work, in which the authors work in a collaborative manner, while still creating scholarship within their respective discipline. Further, such a “workspace” creates an inviting space in which we can see what specifically can be accomplished through direct conversation between these two disciplines, as well as the challenges that such collaboration faces.

The first dialogue, titled “Practical Philosophy and Hope as a Moral Project among African-Americans,” offers a joint statement and a co-authored article titled “What Can We Hope For? An Exploration in Cosmopolitan Philosophical Anthropology,” by Uffe Juul Jensen and Cheryl Mattingly, a philosopher and anthropologist respectively. Their joint statement offers a brief reflection on the relationship between anthropology and philosophy, concluding that a fruitful interaction will take place if they are able to further elaborate on the fieldwork Mattingly has done among African-American families in Los Angeles. While not necessarily subscribing to Kant’s philosophical thought, they use his cosmopolitan philosophy as a starting point for further elaboration of what a cosmopolitan anthropology might look like. This theoretical line of thought is used to further explore and understand hope as it operates in African-American communities in Los Angeles. They understand hope to function as a “what if” (p. 41), an imagine future, and a moral project.

The second dialogue, titled “Existential Anthropology and the Category of the New,” written by Michael D. Jackson and Thomas Schwarz Wentzer is divided into a joint statement, two chapters, written individually, and a joint afterward. The authors together discuss the desire that humans have to improve any given situation and similarly the suffering that is created as a result of an inability to do so. They perceive of this as a gap between “expectation and opportunity” (p. 59), arguing that it exists for a large portion of the world. The authors are especially interested that, despite this, people continue to feel hope, and moreover feel entitled to this hope. More specifically, hope for something “that will support their active participation in life rather than their passive endurance of circumstances into which they find themselves thrown” (ibid.). Considering this problem from different angles, Jackson’s is based on his view that ethnographic research is the best way to gain an understanding of these questions. Wentzer’s, on the other hand, is an historical/existential approach having a direct bearing on Jackson’s ethnographic work, in essence clearing the path for it. Despite these different approaches, they share a view that there is a search for “natural justice” (ibid.) that is felt by human beings. This is a crucial component of what Jackson has called “existential anthropology.” (p. 60) This conception of a philosophical anthropology aims to join “ethnographic and philosophical analysis seeking to understand human existence...[which] might allow one to address the ‘human condition’” (ibid.), while avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism.

Dialogue three, titled “Intentional Trust in Uganda,” by Esther Oluffa Pederson and Lotte Meinert, focuses on the author’s interest in “understanding the attitudes of trust and distrust as [they] are formed in, and of, the social sphere of human life” (p. 10). They develop a more complete picture of trust through two independent lines of research, one being philosophical thought and the other being fieldwork in Uganda. The philosophical insights gained by Pederson are explained through a discussion of Meinert’s fieldwork, together filling in how we might conceptualize the role of trust in social life. They explore the difference between levels of trust and distrust in social life and draw attention to the predominant feelings of distrust in Meinert’s fieldwork.

Dialogue four, titled “Trust, Ambiguity, and Indonesian Modernity,” by Sure Liisberg and Nils Bubandt, is concerned with the relationship between trust and ambiguity, and moreover the challenge that ambiguity poses to trust and trusting behavior. Their respective chapters “address the same overall questions: How is trust possible under certain conditions? What kinds of paradoxes go into trust when trust itself is being eroded by exigencies of existential life-worlds or political power? How, inversely, do existential life-worlds and political power interpellate each other — call each other into existence — through the ambiguities of trust” (p.139)? Beginning their articles in both Indonesian fieldwork and the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre, they center their engagement on inauthenticity. Like the “public climate of ambivalent authenticity” and a perceived inauthentic political system in Indonesia, Sartre’s philosophical work, as discussed by Liisberg, emphasizes the ambiguity that is “implied in our conscious existence” (ibid.). Through both philosophical examination and ethnographic research, the authors demonstrate haunting of trust by inauthenticity, leading to numerous ambiguities in political and social life.

In dialogue five, titled “Gift-Giving and Power between Trust and Hope,” philosopher Sverre Raffnsoe and anthropologist Hirokazu Miyazaki “investigate the relationship between trust and hope through the lens of gift-giving and the social power it entails” (p. 14). The authors make use of Miyazaki’s ethnographic fieldwork in Fiji when discussing Raffnsoe’s aim, which is to develop a new conception of power. This conception of power “enables us to consider trust as something which involves power, and vice versa” (ibid.). This conception of power is used to further explore Miyazaki’s fieldwork, enabling them to better understand the unitizing forces throughout a nation, especially his work on Fiji, during disasters. Together, they are better able to explore and understand the relationship and reciprocal trust that is created through gift-giving, especially between the government and citizens. “Miyazaki’s analysis is concerned with the managerial motives of the ‘kizuna campaign’ and the question of why the campaign failed and instead engendered a sense of distrust in the government”

(p.15).

The final dialogue, titled “With Kierkegaard in Africa,” is written by philosopher Anders Moe Rasmussen and anthropologist Hans Lucht. Both authors take as their starting point Kierkegaard’s philosophy, but differ in both their employment and analysis of his work. As a result, their chapters work alongside each other as different ways of reading, understanding, and applying Kierkegaard, especially to the development of an understanding of hope. Rasmussen is concerned with the discourse of hope as being crucial to our political and social life, especially when understood as being related to faith in the possibility of social change. He develops this view by drawing largely on Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith. Lucht applies Kierkegaard’s thought to his own understanding of hope in relation to a Ghanaian fishing village. “Lucht interprets the struggles of Ghanaian fishermen in accordance with this structure of hoping that the outside world will react responsibly to their sacrifices” (p. 17). What both have in common then is the view that hope can bring about change in social life, and moreover, plays a crucial role in this process.

While each of these overviews of the dialogues is incredibly brief, and certainly leaves out the incredible detail with which they were written, they draw largely on the joint statement provided by the authors. These joint statements offer the most significant discussion of the theoretical overlap between the authors, as well as the kind of project envisioned in embarking on a undertaking such as this. Additionally, the joint statements offer the most obvious point from which we can gain insight into the overall theoretical contribution of the volume as a whole.

While this book is seemingly aimed primarily at an anthropological audience, there exists a clear desire to make a contribution to both disciplines. As a result, this book is incredibly valuable for those interested in producing scholarship in either discipline, in addition to interdisciplinary work. Moreover, the dialogues that make up the majority of the text demonstrate the possibility, as well as the difficulty, of putting two importantly distinct disciplines in conversation with one another. It demonstrates the possibility of making explicit the intellectual companionship between anthropology and philosophy, ensuring that this text is a resource for both disciplines.

As a result, the most obvious strength of a book such as this is that it brings into conversation two disciplines that are frequently complimentary, but as Cheryl Mattingly and Uffe Juul Jensen note in their dialogue, often seem to keep a distance from each other. The approach taken by the editors is both unique and valuable. As one learns in reading this book, much can be accomplished when, in addition to considering other disciplines in their own individual work, authors are able to develop larger projects and conversations while working in their respective disciplines, with an eye towards collaboration.

Interdisciplinary work provides invaluable insights into near every problem, but this volume offers a unique take on the notion of interdisciplinary work: where an individual typically produces interdisciplinary scholarship, this volume takes the pressure off of the individual. It allows, instead, two individuals to produce scholarship in their respective disciplines, with the goal of collaboration in a larger sense, as opposed to the individual scholar alone developing an interdisciplinary project. The notion of a “workspace” allows of this: a joint discussion of what each article and discipline contributes to a broader conversation.

One downside to the dialogue between these two disciplines, though importantly not restricted to just this book, is the range of philosophical material that is often thought to be valuable in making contributions to interdisciplinary work. The breadth of the philosophical literature engaged with is rather small, leaving out the vast range of work that has been written on similar topics, and as such could have been discussed here. While this does not undermine the incredible value of this book, it does leave open a significant space from which this conversation can be expanded in future work and future conversations.

Overall, this book makes an incredibly valuable contribution to a dialogue that is often lacking between anthropology and philosophy. Additionally, it opens multiple avenues from which the conversation can be continued, expanding even beyond just the consideration of trust and hope.

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