



BOOK REVIEW

**David E. Cooper, *Pessimism, Quietism and Nature as Refuge*  
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David E. Cooper's concise, elegant new book defends a pessimistic and misanthropic appraisal of the human condition and recommends to us a style of 'quietism' inflected by a religious sensibility. Readers familiar with his work will find all his characteristic virtues – the deployment of ideas from global philosophical and religious traditions, an economical style of writing leavened with literary and cultural learning, a judicious combination of analytical carefulness and existential reflectiveness, and a sobering perspective on the forms and possibilities of human life. The interest of this book for philosophers of religion should be, first, the centrality of Cooper's theme of the human condition to many religious traditions. In Chapter 1, the Buddha's discourses are used to develop a general account of the human condition – one from which anxiety and self-preoccupation and other kinds of suffering are inseparable. Unlike modern 'bright-siding' accounts of Buddhism, the bleak picture admits of no easy solution. We 'unenlightened worldling' are all 'burning' with craving, aversions, attachment, delusion. For many Christians, too, our condition is dominated by corruption, concupiscence, and sin. Cooper, in a section offering 'a brief history of pessimism', reminds us of a long history of sombre reflection on our moral and spiritual condition. This includes ways of responding to our condition, including temptations to 'denial' or, better, embracing the mood of 'disquiet' arising from sober reflection on human life (8–18).

A second related interest for philosophers of religion concerns the content and tone of Cooper's characterization of the human condition. It is a bad - motivating pessimism and misanthropy in the philosophical senses of those terms: the human condition is a bad one, suffused with many bad features that cannot be corrected or removed, including a dense array of moral vices and failings. Such pessimism is not, argues Cooper, 'confined to a few German thinkers suffering from *Weltschmerz*', since a wider survey reveals pessimism and misanthropy to be 'perennial perspectives on the human condition, manifest in many philosophical and religious traditions' (12). Granted, there are historical and cultural variations in the exact content and implications for the conduct of life of these perspectives. Zhuangzi, Augustine, Calvin, Cioran, Benatar, and others disagree on the details, but agree our condition is enduringly and substantially negative.

A third interest of Cooper's book for philosophers of religion will be the positive recommendation: the cultivation of modes of 'quietism' of a sort informed by Buddhism, Daoism, the Hellenistic, and Christian traditions and various contemporary literary and intellectual figures. In Chapters 2 and 3, Cooper rejects three responses to the dreadfulness

of the human condition. 'Amnesia' and 'nihilism', with their faults, will command few admirers, but more readers will be challenged by the rejection of 'activism', defined as collective efforts to permanently and substantially improve the human condition. True, activist projects can be diverse in methods and aims, but Cooper challenges the 'air of obviousness' of the good of activism (34). Much harm is done by ambitious efforts to improve the world. Social and political activism can provide 'scope and encouragement' for our failings – anger, hubris, self-righteousness, and a lack of realism, for instance (36). As many spiritual traditions urge, our primary concern ought to be 'care of the self' or soul, by aspiring to tranquillity, virtue, and the cultivation of kinds of life that are 'in the truth', as Kierkegaard put it.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to Cooper's positive proposal for a response, at a personal level, to a pessimistic perspective on human life. He labels it 'quietism', a versatile term whose history and meanings are assayed, concisely and clearly, in those chapters. Drawing on many religious and philosophical sources, Cooper endorses a style of moral quietism he ultimately labels 'humane *wu-wei*', terms owing to classical Chinese philosophies. Resisting the accusation of egoism, an attractive quietism is constructed from exemplars including Montaigne, Wittgenstein, the titular French Catholic tradition, and more recent models of quietism, like the 1960s hippie 'drop-outs' and the reclusive sort of misanthropes whom Kant labelled 'Fugitives from Mankind'. As a 'strategy for living', a quietist aspires to tranquillity and equanimity, 'freedom from a wide range of human failings, and true understanding of things look to be the benefits of this strategy for living' (74).

The articulation of quietist forms of moral life will be welcome to those who find their culture fixated on ambitiousness, noisy commitments, contentiousness, restlessness, and obsession with activity, change, and other aspects of what Heidegger called the 'gigantism' of modern life. Quietists pursue gentle pleasures, attainable moral successes, and the humane satisfactions that help them cope with their abiding mood of 'disquiet'. Chapters 6 to 8 complicate this ideal of quietism, connecting it with the need for 'refuge' – a term with resonant religious meanings. A refuge 'affords liberation, however fleeting, from the presence of the suffering, cruelty, pettiness, vanity' and other ills central to dark, pessimistic, and misanthropic visions (82). Refuges offer relief from the disquieting realities of the world, as well as prospects for rejuvenating spiritual and moral practice. In a refuge, 'people experience innocence, order, beauty, freedom, or confidence' (87). Religious communities can be refuges, whether for monastics, or those visiting for a 'retreat'. Natural environments are especially hospitable refuges. In Buddhist traditions, forests and gardens are ideal environments for enjoying the serenity, wholesomeness, and calm impossible among 'uninstructed worldlings' in the 'dust-filled trap' of cities (70).

In these chapters, the disquiet integral to an internalized pessimism is mitigated by commitment to quietist strategies of living that require, some or most of the time, spaces of refuge. Cooper's expertise across ethics, aesthetics, environmental philosophy, phenomenology, and the Western, Indian, and Chinese philosophical traditions is used to render this vision attractive and, at least for this writer, compelling. Criticisms, qualifications, and limitations are noted, too. Except for a few 'virtuosi', quietists cannot, alas, fully realise their aspirations. The disquiet of pessimists 'can never be expelled' (58, 87). For those whose pessimism runs deep, there may be more despairing conclusions, beyond those drawn by Cooper. Our vices and failings flourish as our world becomes more fractious and more cruel; the aspiration to tranquillity is tragically unattainable in a hyper-active world; the despoilation of nature ruins the few natural refuges that remain. For these 'deep pessimists', one fears, amnesia and nihilism become all but irresistible.

The tensions between amnesia, nihilism, activism, and quietism will be interesting for commentators to explore. Certainly, one can find – in online discussion forums and the academy – champions of each. In the final chapter of the book, though, Cooper adds a

final component that ensures a central role for religion within those debates. In Chapter 9, 'Quietism, Truth, and Mystery', the ideal of quietism supplemented by refuge is judged incomplete as it stands. Confidence in a quietist life is, argues Cooper, unstable without 'a sense of consonance' with the way of things (122). In many traditions, exemplars of quietism report a deep trust that their style of life is grounded in, sustained by, or aligned with something that transcends the world as ordinarily experienced – a way, power, energy, spirit, or God, depending on the particularities of those writers one consults. Cooper eschews reductive perennialism, keeping in clear view the differences of religious and metaphysical imagination of the figures and traditions under discussion. In earlier works, Cooper has elaborated a complex doctrine of mystery. The quietism advocated in this book expands and complements this earlier work, especially the venerable south and east Asian precedents, like Buddhism and Daoism. Cooper concludes, in fact, by describing a 'double, circular movement – from the quietist style of life towards a sense of mystery, and from there back to virtues that belong to this style' (133).

*Pessimism, Quietism, and Nature as Refuge* offers us an interesting, complex, provocative, and richly informed characterization of a certain kind of religiously informed moral life. Philosophers of religion will find many rich themes – pessimism and misanthropy; nihilism and disquiet at the human condition; the virtues and aspirations of moral quietism; the diversity of our vices and failings and the complexities of suffering; the subtle links, found in some forms of 'nature mysticism', between aesthetic appreciation, natural environments, and religious sensibility; the many ways recognizably human forms of life can be informed by a doctrine of mystery. Moreover, the book exemplifies, to a remarkable degree, the importance of a historical, humane, 'multicultural' style of philosophizing. Cooper's claims should be taken up and investigated by philosophers, theologians, and religious studies scholars, as well as by historians of pessimism and advocates and critics of misanthropy. It would, for instance, be interesting to study specific kinds of moral and religious quietism, such as the Amish. We should study the varieties of pessimism latent in modern environmental and spiritual cultures. After all, there is more to pessimism than antinatalism and nihilism and we should look for possibilities for pessimist modes of life consistent with kinds of spiritual and moral commitment. Cooper's book, with its wise, learned engagement with philosophers, religious thinkers, poets, novelists, environmentalists, misanthropes, and pessimists, should help that effort. By drawing on thinkers from a range of world traditions, he has offered an excellent defence of something that seems increasingly forgotten in this world – 'the wisdom of the quietist dispensation' (134).