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Giving Life, Giving Death by Lucien Scubla [Book review]

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Scubla, Lucien

Giving life, giving death:

Psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy.

Translated by M.B. DeBevoise.

East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016.

(French original 2014.) xiv + 367 pp.

Scubla's impressive *Giving life, giving death* is a rich, complex piece of scholarship. Its explicit theme is the way in which maternity – women's unique ability to create new life – has been dealt with, or rather, has often been strikingly neglected, in anthropological (and other) theorization: 'Even though everyone knows that women bring children into the world and that men do not, not only the human sciences but modern Western thought as a whole, to which these sciences give expression, are determined to ignore this female prerogative and the original asymmetry of the sexes' (p. x). His detailed analysis of the anthropological, psychoanalytic, and structuralist thought surrounding (and often ignoring) this 'fundamental and primary asymmetry' (p. 110) extends to a more general exploration of the significance of our interpretation of the relationship between nature and culture for our understanding of human lives and their social structures.

The specific topics discussed in this broad and deep study range from family and ritual to violence and death, to classical scholarly concepts such as the Oedipus complex, as well as various related matters that need to be addressed not only by cultural anthropologists, but also by basically everyone within the humanities and social sciences. The works critically examined include modern classics by Freud, Girard, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss, as well as those by theorists who are best known in France, such as Françoise Héritier and Alain Testart. It should be noted that the relatively large number of individual scholars and ideas commented on, often in great detail, leads to some compromises with his discussion's clarity and coherence; the author constantly moves from considering one figure to interpreting another in a way that occasionally blurs the narrative. In brief, the argument's structure

could have been a bit more clearly organised. It would also have been helpful to have had a proper concluding chapter that summarized the central findings.

Readers may agree with Scubla that it is ‘futile to deny the existence of a distinctively human nature and to set the given against the constructed’ (p. 16). It is, precisely, a ‘given’ basic biological fact about our ‘nature’ that women bring children into the world (p. 54) – it is not just a social construct, as Scubla repeatedly reminds us (p. 101). Thus Scubla, when criticizing (with good reason) naïve constructionism, is in the end engaged in something like philosophical anthropology based on his interpretations of anthropology’s empirical data. A key question in this philosophical endeavour is how exactly the relation between nature and culture ought to be conceptualized as a factor shaping human lives. Clearly, culture, whatever it is and means, is a product of human nature – but we should not forget that, conversely, what human nature is and means for us is conditioned by culture. In order to investigate such philosophical issues more deeply, Scubla could have explored in some detail themes now only relatively quickly touched upon, e.g., the distinction between relativism and evolutionism in anthropology or the question of whether culturally universal traits are either nomologically necessary or historically contingent (pp. 98-99).

While the ‘opposition of nature to culture’ may seem to have been ‘naively adopted by professors of philosophy’ and may have become ‘one of the intellectual reflexes of all decent people, or more exactly of all half-educated people’ (p. 157), this is only a partial truth. There have certainly been major figures in twentieth, and twenty-first, -century philosophy who have *not* naively adopted any such dogma. For example, the American pragmatists never endorsed it, but instead developed philosophical anthropologies to overcome it. This philosophical orientation is neglected by Scubla: the non-reductive naturalisms or naturalized culturalisms proposed by philosophers like John Dewey would have added a valuable perspective on the ideas and arguments he explores. Nonetheless, Scubla is certainly right to remind us that the prevalence of the nature–culture dualism has not only

scientific but also political and religious background influences (p. 161) – and that it has contributed to what he takes to be a widespread neglect of the fundamental difference between the sexes (p. 164).

Given how vitally important the conceptualization of the nature–culture relationship is for the understanding of the nature, methodology, and the very aims of all the human sciences -- and more generally any inquiry into human life – it would have been interesting to learn what Scubla might have had to say about those philosophers who have explicitly denied any fundamental dichotomy between nature and culture. At any rate, this book is to be warmly recommended to anyone interested in serious inquiry into the nature of humanity.

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