

Reviews

Zen-Brain Horizons: Toward a Living Zen. By James H. Austin, MD. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014. xxi + 273 pages. US \$27.95.

James H. Austin is an “inquisitive neurologist” (p. 130) and accomplished “skeptical clinician” (p. 11) now in his late eighties (p. 124) who has practiced Zen meditation in the Rinzai tradition (nonverbal) for decades. Having published four books on similar topics before, which he quite frequently references in this “slender volume” (p. xvii; 81) for the sake of brevity and “background information” (p. xv), he now goes about his mission by offering “a warm welcome-hospitality with open arms” so as to leave a legacy (p. 175). He, thus, candidly challenges the scientific research community (see pp. 120, 168, 176f), testifies to his personal “spiritual Path” (p. 5), answers articulated questions, and gives straightforward advice to readers whom he addresses as “you”; all this reflects his still active involvement in conducting retreats and seminars (see, e.g., pp. 100, 194). But the book is more than just that. Since a “neurologist’s job is to stop brain damage” (p. 73), Austin also explores brain functions in their relation to the training of proto-conscious attentional skills to form “loving kindness” (p. 65) and “unbounded kindness” (p. 92) through a “Living Zen practice” (p. 182; see also pp. 83–89). Convinced that such “long-term meditative practice . . . cultivates higher societal values and authentic meanings *beyond* our sense of Self” (p. 171), he invites readers to cultivate “the clarity of mindfulness” (p. 185) by daily meditative exercise, albeit explicitly stating that this “does not necessarily mean Buddhist meditation” (p. 73).

Three short items—a Preface, Acknowledgements, and “By way of a personal introduction” section (pp. xiii–xxi)—precede the five parts of the book followed by brief remarks (“In closing,” pp. 183–185), four appendices (A–D, pp. 186–200), extensive notes (which include bibliographical references; pp. 201–249) and a detailed index (pp. 250–273). The parts, which contain fifteen numbered, clearly structured chapters of varying length, are arranged along a temporal trajectory. Beginning with “Looking far back into the distant past” (I, pp. 3–48), trailed by “Looking back into earlier centuries of the Common Era” (II, pp. 51–70), “Sampling recent reports” (III, pp. 73–96) and “Looking out into the distance above the horizon” (IV, pp. 99–151), the journey terminates at “Peering into the future” (V, pp. 155–182). Besides five anatomical and functional illustrations of the brain supplemented by the same number of color plates one also finds special pages inserted before each section depicting visual representations of a Bodhi tree leaf (p. 1), a swallow (p. 49), the human brain (p. 71), the treble clef (p. 97), and the resolved nine-dot problem (p. 153). Such design of the opening pages, along with the visual allusions in the phrasings of the parts’ headings, indicates that the book is as much about sensual realization by sight and sound of the (natural) world around (see p. 184 and especially Appendix A: “The forest as a sanctuary for re-creation,” pp. 185–189) as it is about providing information and stimulation. The latter is also epitomized with epigrammatic aphorisms of numerous authors

from across times, religions, and disciplines appearing at the beginning of each part and the opening of chapters. While the dust jacket illustration and the writing style show the author as an experienced Zen meditator who occasionally succeeds in avoiding speaking of himself in the first person singular (non-Self), the careful attention Austin pays to explaining concepts and technical terms reveal him as a seasoned teacher who skillfully blends the informative with the narrative.

All this sharing of insights and experiences, of stories and reflections, of knowledge and research pivots around the ultimate goal of Zen meditation, namely to attain *kensho* or *satori*, that is, that brief state of intense awareness during which “all body-mind boundaries of one’s former Self vacate the scene,” where “every primal fear”—including the fear of death (see p. 179)—“drops out” and all “sense of time dissolves into an awesome impression of eternity (*achronia*)” (p. 59; see also p. 190). Such “deep awakening” is “infused by a direct, authoritative impression” that the respective “experiential perceptions *are* Reality,” making consciousness undergo “a shift at its *core*, not at its surface” (p. 93). The content of this ineffable, paradoxical “emptiness-fullness” experience (p. 11), which Zen masters have labeled “thusness” or “suchness” (p. 59), Austin describes with the “ancient Sutra phrase ‘just this’” (p. 21; see also, e.g., pp. 194–195, 11, 62). Austin’s unique contribution, however, consists in claiming that, based on the neuroplasticity of the human brain, “the innate neural expressions of kindness, intuition, compassion, and gratitude can become embodied subconsciously in . . . everyday activities” (p. 185) by long-term meditative practice ultimately leading to “the gradual transformations of character”; that is, a “slow process of subconscious ripening” which meditators “who happen to drop into major awakenings along this Path can accelerate” (p. 92). While the “deep mechanisms” of the Zen-brain’s workings “still seem obscure” they “might,” however, “have some potential to shed light on issues of paramount interest to humanity in general” and bring some healing to “a planet suffering from a litany of Self-inflicted woes” (p. 142).

These daring hypotheses certainly will be contested, because they imply basic categorical assumptions not shared by everyone. One among these is the assumption that *kensho* discloses “Reality” (which Austin pointedly distinguishes from ordinary “realness”; see p. 94). While the subjective intensity and certainty of this experience are not questioned, the revelatory quality of this reality might well be, because what is “real” requires critical—and thus articulated—clarification among all who are part of it. An individual’s experience, even if all-embracing, stays with that person. It does not give a clue what “reality” is to others, especially not to those who cannot afford to join the privileged elitist circles which cultivate focused introspection in secluded settings over the long term.

Another basic issue is the appeal to “Self-lessness.” Austin plays with the ambiguity of the term making it oscillate between its moral (selflessness) and epistemological connotations (see pp. 18, 23, 192–193). In Buddhism the “Self” as awareness of being an individual person is seen as the root cause of all suffering which has to—and can—be overcome by following the “Path,” that is, the teaching of the Buddha. However, negating the self and dissolving the boundaries of a conscious individual goes against fundamental convictions regarding human existence as perceived in Western cultures, convictions that reach at least as far back into the distant past as do the utterances of the Buddha. The well-intended goal of

Living Zen for authenticity and global, unbounded lovingkindness notwithstanding, dissolving personal identity in a systematic way also runs the risk of making people ignore their personal accountability for responsible action in the world.

Finally, the reviewer noted to his surprise that the human brain is described in spatial terms throughout. Reference is made to “upper” and “lower,” to “inner” and “outer,” to “frontal” and “anterior,” to “lateral,” “dorsal,” and “temporal” locations only. What about the evolution of the human brain? An evolutionary perspective would allow to speak of “older” and “newer,” of “basic” and of “evolved” sections and thus to discriminate between distinctively human capacities processed in the cortex and neo-cortex and those more basic ones of the brainstem shared by all mammals and vertebrates. Far from being trivial, this observation goes to the heart of the argument which advocates the reconditioning of brain functions at their core, the limbic system, so that neither emotions (see p. 119) nor words (see, e.g., pp. 75, 86) get in the way of *kensho*. What will be the repercussions for mental and emotional health?

Raising these concerns in no way diminishes the profound contribution James H. Austin makes to the interdisciplinary dialogue of science and religion with this book. These concerns, rather, speak for the soundness of arguments advanced by an author who authenticates his mature views by a lived meditative practice while being fully aware that “meditation is no panacea” (p. 87). This is what makes his cause accessible for meaningful and serious discourse.

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A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion. By Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015. xvii + 246 pages. US \$36.00

The book under review here gives an account of the comparatively recently established (i.e. since the 1980s, p. 180) interdisciplinary “cognitive science of religion (CSR).” The authors define CSR as “the scientific study of religion as a natural evolved product of human thinking” (p. 13) concerned with rational arguments regarding “the existence and attributes of God” (p. 1). Its two authors, a couple teaching in departments of philosophy at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (de Cruz), and Ghent University, Belgium (de Smedt), “examine the implications of CSR for natural theology” (p. 17), an idea promoted by Enlightenment philosophers, which “does not explicitly presuppose the existence of God” but appeals “to observations and intuitions shared by all” (p. 11).

Acknowledgments and an introduction (pp. xi–xvii) precede the nine chapters of the book followed by sparse notes (pp. 201–06), the bibliography (called “References,” pp. 207–39), and a general index (pp. 241–46). Chapters 1–3 clarify some basics of “Natural Theology” (1, pp. 1–17), the “Naturalness

of Religious Beliefs” (2, pp. 19–39), and “Intuitions about God’s Knowledge” (3, pp. 41–60). Chapters 4 – 8 discuss the five most common arguments attempting to vindicate the existence of God, namely “the argument from design” (4, pp. 61–84), “the cosmological argument” (5, pp. 85–108), “the moral argument” (6, pp. 109–30), the “argument from beauty” (7, pp. 131–54), and the “argument from miracles,” notably the resurrection of Jesus [Christ] (8, pp. 155–78). In the final chapter, titled “The Natural History of Religion and the Rationality of Religious Beliefs” (9, pp. 179–200), the authors draw conclusions from their extensive interdisciplinary investigations. They find that “prior assumptions about the existence of God mediate to an important extent the perceived reliability of cognitive faculties that are involved in the formulation of natural theological arguments” (p. 198) and state in closing that “theists and nontheists end up with very different conclusions about what we can gather from evolutionary origins of religious beliefs and . . . about the intuitions that underlie natural theological arguments. Nontheists start from the assumption that the natural world is all there is and attempt to explain religious beliefs by appeal to everyday, natural cognitive processes. . . . By contrast, theists begin with the supposition that God is responsible for the design of reality, including human minds. . . . Taking into account their respective outlooks, it seems that both theists and nontheists reach reasonable conclusions and are justified in holding them” (p. 198–99).

These somewhat trivial findings are the result of wide-ranging experimental and philosophical explorations—most of which are not original, several quite inconclusive and questionable—stitched together in a patchwork fashion to make a case. The argumentation lacks stringency and cohesion, despite the clearly structured chapters that always tell what is coming next and always close with a “Summary,” making one wonder if the authors had unintelligent, inattentive readers in mind or if they had to reassure themselves again and again of the route taken in the bewildering maze of studies from evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, philosophy, theology, sociology, and so on they cite and draw upon, some only poorly understood. Inconsistency is noticeable in their language too, not only in the subtitle of the book which speaks of “The Cognitive Science of Theology” instead of “Religion.” The authors, although concerned about terminological precision when quoting particular studies, do not properly discern and sufficiently differentiate religious phenomena like “God,” “faith,” “truth,” and “resurrection.” “God” is always a masculine-gendered personal entity; “faith” or “belief” (like “belief in God” and “belief in germs,” p. 170) stand for as broad a spectrum of meanings as assumption, guess, trust, confidence, conviction, illusion, meaning; “truth” stands for “consensus,” namely for what is accepted by all and what everyone can agree upon, whereas the “resurrection” (i.e., “the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,” p. 156) “recounts that someone died . . . but became alive again” (p. 163).

Methodologically the authors apply a “moderate naturalism” which they claim to be “neutral with respect to metaphysical assumptions” when investigating “the cognitive processes that underlie religious beliefs” and “the relationship between the psychological origin of a belief and its justification” (p. 5). They do so in a straightforward positivistic manner leading them to pass numerous judgmental

statements regarding “right,” “justified,” or “correct” and “false,” “wrong,” or “incorrect” beliefs (see pp. 27, 28, 37, 49, 52, 57, 100, etc.), oftentimes without any noticeable critical assessment. Holding that “the cognitive science of religion” is a strict scientific pursuit they are blind to historical and theological arguments, which they obviously misperceive as mere guesswork instead of valuing these as representations of accumulated, seasoned, and well-tested insights providing “thick descriptions” (Clifford Geertz) of human experiences complementing or challenging experimental finds.

While the book provides readers with interesting insights into cognition studies of various kinds and related philosophical arguments, it does not cultivate genuine interdisciplinarity. Merely appealing to a broad range of topic-related studies in other fields, each with methodologies and terminologies of their own requiring explanation for nonexperts, and mainly quoting only briefly from secondary sources, however authoritative, does not make a book interdisciplinary; rather, it is the authors’ hermeneutical effort to bridge the “two cultures” (C. P. Snow) that does. Less accumulation of material and more thoroughgoing reflection along systems-theoretical lines would have served ardent students much better than what they have to deal with now.

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