



Review of Graham Parkes, *How To Think About The Climate Crisis. A Philosophical Guide to Saner Ways of Living*, London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. ISBN 978-1-3501-5886-3. 272 p.

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“A man walks into a bar [...and] orders a hamburger”—the new work from Graham Parkes begins with this simple sentence. But what appears to be a kind of irony soon turns out to be the real tragedy of our age: an everyday action that causes global ethical and ecological problems and is by no means banal or should not be so to any degree. Our facticity has ontic-ontological consequences, because our consumption, which is expressed in eating, clothing, travel habit, etc. and is the result of our biographical experience, fragments the future of coming generations and determines in a rather haunting ways how we will live in the years to come, indeed even *who we, as human beings, want to be in the future.*

In order to convey this sense of urgency and offer a solution to our environmental problems, philosopher Graham Parkes has created a work, and one that is not just aimed at experts, “Climate Crisis: A Philosophical Guide to Saner Ways of Living .”

The work starts with the apparently simple introduction mentioned above, which at the same time dares to venture into the heart of the problem (21–40) and immediately names the culprits for our climate miseries, namely “libertarians” (54–68). But despite the apparent simplicity of the narrative, Parkes is a philosopher and, what’s more, also a specialist in East Asian philosophy. This means that both his review of the situation and his proposed solutions (40–53) include Western and Asian perspectives that view the problem from an intercultural perspective. His proposed solution is therefore: Let’s look to the east! In the west, we have, to a certain extent, this far failed. According to Plato, among others, Prometheus is partly to blame for this—he gave us survival, but not political wisdom (45–46).

In order to provide ourselves with a perspective for the future we should thus broaden our horizons, changing our way of seeing and thinking by getting help from Buddhist and Confucian reflections among other sources. We need this help, even if the question is not exactly new. It still is about how we can live in harmony with nature or what makes a good life. Does that sound Platonic? No, or not only, because, as we can glean from Parkes, there are clear guidelines in Buddhist and Confucian reflection as to what constitutes the good life and how it might be lived. The key is this—

the path to the golden mean! Thus, it is not about the often fear-inducing manner of renunciation propagated by young people in the green movement. Instead, it is about a harmonious and balanced life that does not result in asceticism, but rather in well-considered and limited consumption and use of resources (13). And here our weakness, which is to say the weakness of the first world, is revealed: our greed and gigantomania, which stands in the way of a harmonious life (15).

The solution, according to Parkes, lies now in dialogue between the Eastern and Western ways of thinking, between Chinese and Western European ideas. Yes, you read that right: Chinese thinkers, i.e., thinkers of a nation that has been quite actively involved in the destruction of the environment, are supposed to remedy this global problem. But the response as to why this is important and how it should succeed runs throughout the work from Parkes which has been years in the making.

An important point comes with Parkes' warning concerning the manner in which conversation is conducted, because all too often the West or the representatives of Western European countries and the USA try to impose their own frameworks for thinking and discourse on all other parties (123). For example, in the case of China there is general disregard for the long path of political thought behind the Chinese political tradition, which "focuses rather on duties and responsibilities, and correspondences between family and state" (123). And he warns that "[i]t's not that their ideas are incommensurable with ours: [...] but it requires acknowledgment of the difficulties and respect for the philosophy and culture of the other side" (123). In addition, it has been shown that "[l]ecturing from the moral high ground hasn't proved effective" (Ibid.).

This is thus where the key to our self-made misery and failure to solve the environmental problem lies. In order to slow down environmental degradation and get it under control in the long term, we need most of the world's nations *as partners and as allies*. Western countries, however, cannot win these nations over if they do not treat them as equal, respected partners, rather than as marginal figures and *executors of their own initiatives*. Such an approach comes across to partners as "intellectual imperialism and conceptual colonialism" (123–124), and not only in China. Such teachings also awaken memories of colonial rule for delegates in many countries, which triggers strong resistance to such lecturing as a result (123–127). But why do delegates from Western countries act in this way? Are they simply naive or ignorant? Or are there other reasons for such behavior that have not yet been considered?

The cause lies deeper than expected, because "[n]othing could be farther from the individual fantasy than the Confucian notion of the particular person as a node of network of familiar, social, and political *relationships*" (127). But what tells us that? Are we, we Western Europeans and North Americans, just atomists who try to indoctrinate other, socially integrated people with our own idea of a lonely existence? Yes, it appears so, because if we do not listen, also cannot understand, among other things, the alternative Chinese concept of the "family or clan as macrocosm of the structure of the particular person, and a microcosm of the society, or state" (127). It is

about an alternative concept of the subject, i.e., a macrocosm of the extended individual integrated into the microcosm of the respective society (Ibid.). At first glance this appears opposite to everything we know and experience everyday in the West, since we each imagine ourselves as our own macro- and microcosm with ourselves as its core. Because we have long since exchanged God for ourselves as Self, Inc. and therefore feel empowered both to convert all those who think differently and to dominate nature.

But this apparent incompatibility between the interpretation of a social and a singular subject has not always been there. It has only been exacerbated in the last few decades, because, as Parkes reminds us, Plato and Socrates already had ideas like those of ancient Confucians, according to which the psyche is to be understood as the microcosm of the polis (129). Here, however, opinions between the philosophical traditions differ, because libertarians want to be free above all, but, in the words of Nietzsche, “[w]hoever cannot obey himself will be commanded” (129).

So what is to be done? We are offered here a hybrid, European-Chinese or Western-East Asian solution that takes into account the ideas of ancient Confucians and Daoists as well as those of Stoics and Epicureans. This says, for example, that:

1. Political leaders need a practice of cultivation, because only this brings harmony and order within the state and the family in the sense of “All-under-the-Heavens” (137).

2. The Confucian notion of “soft power” should be included because it leads people to do good through attractiveness or persuasion rather than through power or money (136).

3. According to natural philosophers (Daoists, like Laozi and Zhuangzi, but also Stoics and Epicureans) we should regard nature as part of our existence and not as an object that stands opposed to us. This brings about, according to both Stoics and Daoists, a “sympathetic resonance” with nature (145).

4. Limitations of natural resources are to be celebrated and not regretted (151).

5. We should in any case endorse the “golden mean” and should not strive to acquire and own everything, this being, according to Heraclitus, “not better for human beings” (156).

We can achieve all of this and much more if, summing up Parkes, we set out on the way to the good life with “congenial things” and learn, with the help of Zen practice among other approaches, to respect the “soul of the world” (165–186).