

## BOOK REVIEWS

point. Bonotti and Zech identify four such problems: (i) people's status as free and equal beings is undermined by emerging discrimination, violence and hatred that target members of vulnerable groups; (ii) political actors fail to comply with the demands of justificatory civility as they take the opportunity to advance sectarian agendas; (iii) certain social groups whose members may already suffer from various forms of marginalisation and vulnerability (e.g. racial minorities, women, LGBTIQ+ people, older people) may be faced with policies that impose unreasonable 'strains of commitment'; (iv) a limited understanding of the virus within the scientific community, the lack of research on the social and cultural dimensions of Covid-19, and the politicization of science for personal or partisan reasons all pose serious obstacles to justificatory civility.

The strength of the book is undoubtedly the way in which the authors have been able to show that a thorough consideration of the many dimensions of 'civility' can shed light on how to deal with Covid-19. Bonotti and Zech rightfully explain that both governments and citizens play an important role. Although the authors have shown with rigour, nuance and care that without civility a healthy democratic participative society is not possible, what I somewhat missed is a strong reflection on the fact that nowadays (western) societies have become more and more individualized and polarised. Should a book that considers Covid-19 through the lens of 'civility' and that holds that an appeal on civility might be key to contain the pandemic, not first consider the changing tide of a society that is increasingly in the grip of widespread populism, emotional argumentation and ad hominem attacks? Several scholars have written about a decline in civility and a rise in incivility and it seems to me that (western) societies that cherish what Isaiah Berlin calls 'a negative form of liberty' or that suffer from what Michael Sandel defines as a lack of 'focus on the common good' may be faced with extra difficulties in the 'fight' against Covid-19. An appeal to 'civility' (asking people to set aside private interests for the good of the society) may be the right strategy, but this may be even harder to realize than Bonotti and Zech think. It is not that the authors are fully negligent on this. They mention, for example, that "[...] it would be unreasonable to apply the same policies indiscriminately across different cultures, countries, and contexts. Absent this broader understanding, such policies might be both ineffective and inconsistent with the demands of justificatory civility" (156-157). However, it would have added extra colour to their analysis and made their book more complete if they would have first scrutinized the 'civility crisis' and then continued with their highly informative study. Nonetheless, this is a very recommendable book!

François Levrau  
University of Antwerp

Kimberley BROWNLEE. *Being Sure of Each Other. An Essay on Social Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 246 pp.

Kimberley Brownlee is a professor of philosophy at the University of Warwick, well-known for her controversial challenge to the 'conventional' view of the idea of civil disobedience. Brownlee is, namely, the author of *Conscience and Conviction* (Oxford: OUP,

2012) and of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on the topic. Most of her more recent work may be said to focus on ethics and politics of ‘sociability’, within the perspective of applied ethics. Her most important book along these lines, until the publication of the present one, was *Disability and Disadvantage* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), co-edited with Adam Cureton.

Brownlee’s new book addresses the need each of us has of each other, and the harms of deprivation. Her starting point is the idea of “[...] a human right against social deprivation” (vii). She promises to address the question in a later book within a wider framework, but this volume just tries to make the case for a ‘new human right’. The forthcoming ‘companion’ book she is working on will consider “[...] the flourishing end of our sociability” (1), but the current work is more limited in scope and ambition. It aims at presenting the case for a minimum floor of the *needs of sociability*, which should be enshrined in some kind of human rights convention or shape political public practices on human rights grounds. In a nutshell, we have a right to “[...] decent human contact and connection” (1).

From our nature as ‘social beings’, a certain number of claims and rights follow. The idea is not new. The author notes that other contemporary philosophers (not to mention old ones such as Aristotle whose idea of *philia*, the author understands as really meaning ‘sociability’) are working along similar lines, such as Martha Nussbaum, Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit. All have long ago made inroads to show that the capacity to “[...] form and enjoy meaningful interpersonal relationships is a fundamental requirement of basic justice” (1). But Brownlee goes forward from human phenomenology to rights-talk, that is, she resorts to “[...] the politically potent language of human rights” (1).

In the first chapter of her book, Brownlee explores the ‘normative force’ of our core social needs. Our core social needs, she argues, include not only the needs related to our personal relationships, but also relationships towards non-associates. In this first chapter, the author also defends the primacy of social needs in relation to the other needs usually explored in the debates on distributive justice. The second chapter underlines that our social needs, while so important for combating social deprivation, are highly neglected within the framework of human rights. The third chapter claims that we have the right to promote and contribute to the wellbeing of others. From chapters four to six, Brownlee tries to undermine (individualistic) liberalism claims that we have a basic right to choose who we associate with, i.e. with whomever we want. Not only our “[...] core social needs extend beyond the boundaries of our personal associations, to our wider social world” (3), but “[...] our freedom to dissociate [...] is secondary to our positive social claim-rights and must take a back seat when the two conflict” (4), or so the author claims. Chapter seven focus on the moral puzzles from problematic associations (such as parasitic dependencies, among many others ‘messy’ cases). The final chapter deals with the various forms of social segregation that occur with people considered to be threatening who are thus imprisoned or confined.

Kimberley Brownlee’s book is a wonderful example of how to write a philosophical book: the clarity of argument and counterargument goes along with a very readable style that is both provocative and interesting (and often also entertaining). In addition to being

## BOOK REVIEWS

elegantly written and evolving from the most diverse cinematic and literary references, such as A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Robert Altman's movie *Gosford Park*, Wordsworth's poetry, and the children's tales of C. S. Lewis (among many others), this is, above all, a very humane book that cannot fail to seduce the most avid readers of social and political theory, either fellow professional philosophers or inquisitive 'lay people'.

That said, the thesis defended by Brownlee raises a major question: the asymmetrical rights of association and dissociation. To pick one of her own examples, what happens if Winnie the Pooh, instead of accepting Piglet's hand, preferred not to associate with him (nor with anyone else who had the 'right' to contribute to Pooh's wellbeing)? Despite the author's contention that personal isolation is often reasonable, she ends up admitting that sometimes an 'intervention' is necessary in order to prevent the individual decisions of those who prefer isolation, or fasting, from making them victims of the evils of social deprivation, and thus being negatively impacted by voluntary isolation (67).

This implies, therefore, that the author sees any individual isolation, in the long run, as potentially harmful. For a liberal, the question is: who should enforce this new-found human right, and what freedoms are we have left with. Would we be forced to socialize regardless of our character, personal situation, and our own will? At the political level: will all groups and associations be constrained to respect laws that enforce positive social rights over negatives? To what extent will civil, political and economic association rights end up being curbed to grant access to 'socially needy' people? And who will decide who needs to come out of isolation, if those who so live do not want to? Brownlee's recurrent (intellectual) adversary is the (atomistic) liberal, and the liberal arguments are considered and answered (and sometimes answered more than once).

However, the fact that human being's social character is important is obvious even to liberal-individualistic. A society, any society, even the most infuriated liberals acknowledge, requires the maintenance of interactive relationships. So, it often happens in this book that just as Don Quixote sails forth against windmills, Kimberlee Brown, sails forth against 'liberalism' (never described at length). Sheer individualistic 'liberals' seem to the present reviewer to be 'straw man' within the book's argumentation. But at times her work flirts with rather illiberal ideas: she demands not just the social base of self-worth, as say John Rawls upholds, but companionship and love. It is reasonable for us rational beings to care about others of our species. It does not seem so clear, however, how to enter their private interior world to ensure everyone's wellbeing, even against their will. These attempts at enforcing affection and compassion can, at best, promote the discontent of those who choose to isolate themselves even in a group. At worst it may imply coercion and declare those who stubbornly refuse to be labelled as human right's trespassers.

But these critical remarks should not cloud the importance of the book, because the interest, depth and humanity that pervades the book as a whole, make it mandatory reading for those concerned with the problem of social deprivation and vulnerability.

J. A. Colen

Universidade do Minho and University of Navarra

Rúben Batista

Universidade do Minho