

BOOK REVIEW

**SILVIYA SERAFIMOVA'S MONOGRAPH IN SEARCH OF THE
"UNIVERSE'S HELPLESS CAPTIVE"**

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Silviya Serafimova's new book *In search of the "universe's helpless captive": A glimpse to Peter Wessel Zapffe's philosophical heritage* (Sofia: Avangard Prima, 2019, 523 p.) is a tribute to one of the most unique minds in Norwegian philosophy, and an introduction to the genealogy of his incredibly complex taxonomies, seen in their full spectrum. Zapffe has left behind a significant intellectual heritage, broad both in epistemological and a moral-philosophical sense. His deep reflections on moral theory led him to the conclusion that deontological ethics cannot account for the meaning of life that humans attach to their role of moral agents neither on a personal nor on a collective level. Perhaps even more importantly, he came to the conclusion that even the answer to the question "What does it mean to be a human" would vary, depending on whether we are going to turn to *autotelic* or *heterotelic metaphysical morality* (i.e. a type of morality which construes humans as individual moral agents in their strives for finding a meaning of life rather than that *in* life). That is why he dedicates an enormous amount of effort to developing intricate, multi-lateral theories and functional taxonomies, which appear in all of his intellectual endeavours, be they investigations of ethics, aesthetics, theology, or dramaturgy. Serafimova's monograph addresses all of these with remarkable precision and sensitivity to nuance, and illuminates the connections between them. Recurring themes in the book include interest, values, pessimism, catastrophe, the tragic, guilt, heroism, greatness, religion, and cosmogony.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to Zapffe's *biosophy*, which is simultaneously an explanatory method, a type of experiential philosophy, and a theory that clarifies interspecies relationships through the hypothesis about the four *interest fronts* (biological, social, autotelic, metaphysical). Each of us is an *interest-bearer*, i.e. engaged with fulfilling an *interest* (need)

by performing a specific *task* through specific *means*, in specific *external conditions*. There is always an *ending*, and there may always be certain *risks*. All living beings can be over- or under-equipped for the purposes of a given task, but only humans are characterized by the very high ability that Zapffe calls *unfixability*, as well as by the ability to create *fixation* mechanisms (also known as “panic means”, or deliberately introduced limits to the content of consciousness). Another trait that distinguishes humans from animals is our expanded *interest circle*, as it covers more than just our biological needs, plus our awareness of the needs of others. Even among humans as interest-bearers, there is a hierarchical scale, where *great* (tragic) people are placed on the higher end due to having *autotelic* and *metaphysical interests* (e.g. pondering existential dilemmas and meaning), while *primitive people* occupy the lower end. The complex nature of human needs enables us to become bearers of a *multi-frontal* interest. Motivation and its ties to normativity are clearly fascinating to Zapffe, both on a psychological and a philosophical level. For him, the act of assigning value to something (e.g. an objective) unfolds in a very complex and nuanced system of meanings, needs, and anticipations. This system is a system of *biological morality*, which reflects animals’ *situations of choosing* where the morally relevant choice is the biologically optimal one. However, Serafimova argues that Zapffe cannot be considered a Neo-Darwinist, since he does not ground autotelic and metaphysical morality in evolutionary explanations, and he clearly regards the biosophical and the biological methods as “mutually inclusive, but irreducible to each other”. According to her, Zapffe is also far from a nihilist, but rather a *provocative pessimist* in the sense of the term coined by the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright, who used it when describing thinkers engaged in seeking a more profound form of meaning *of life*. Zapffe himself also relies on a curious functional taxonomy of pessimism, the most notable forms of which (*original pessimism* and *unoriginal pessimism*) form a recurring part of almost all other explanatory models discussed in Serafimova’s analysis.

Chapter 2 is where aesthetic values and experiences are introduced. Aesthetic behaviour is understood by Zapffe to be mostly intentional (i.e. a deliberate choice, and therefore of a positive value), and essential both to the justification of unoriginal pessimism and to the experience of the *tragic course*. Serafimova analyzes how the embodiments of the tragic relate to aesthetic values, distinguishing between *culturally relevant catastrophes* in real life (understood as the non-realization or non-fulfillment of achievement interests) and those in the

poetic-tragic discourse. In his work, Zapffe never does provide a formal definition of aesthetic interests, but rather seeks to invalidate moral values on a normative level by overrating aesthetic values at their expense, e.g. through the example of *dramaturgical sympathy* (which he sees as being related to catharsis), where the aesthetic experience draws on the piece's impact on us, despite the impact's clear non-moral origin. While the *necessary tragic* may be an essential feature of the human condition, sympathy can be explained as a "process of identification", triggered by means of the mimetic treatment of a *catastrophic course*. Serafimova's investigations of Zapffe's *theory of mimesis* (which differs in more than just a subtle manner from that of Aristotle) will also assist the reader in obtaining a better grasp of the relationship between all elements of his taxonomy of catastrophe, presented in Chapter 4. Serafimova's main – and much appreciated – contribution in Chapter 2, though, is that she sheds light on the complex functional interactions between dramaturgical sympathy, catharsis, sublimation, and dramaturgical empathy, whilst preserving the original conceptual borders between them.

In Chapter 3 Serafimova examines various aspects of the *theory of heroism*. Starting out from the distinction between *moral genius* and *immoral genius* (a distinction which is made on the basis of motivation), she explains Zapffe's conception about heroes as highly developed interest-bearers of multi-frontal interests and conflicts, who alone can anticipate the so-called *necessary tragic*. The necessary tragic can be encountered in heroic behaviour either as a *heroic catastrophe*, or as an awareness and anticipation thereof (*dolus eventualis*); however, not all tragic subjects are heroic, and neither is every hero a tragic hero. A parallel is drawn between the *original heroism/unoriginal heroism* distinction on one hand, and the *original pessimism/unoriginal pessimism* distinction on the other, as both unoriginal heroism and unoriginal pessimism are considered to be of a higher rank, much more complex in a functional, moral, psychological and existential sense. Seeing as original heroism is linked with the concept of heroic death as a deliberate choice, a significant chunk of Chapter 3 is dedicated to additional clarifications of the roles of passive and active idealism (the latter of which is understood as the practical, embodied type of idealism that leads to heroism in action), in order for us to better understand how death can acquire a higher status through the value of sacrifice. In addition to being incredibly interesting, this analysis is also very helpful with regard to our understanding Zapffe's taxonomy and overall concept of values. Serafimova has managed to show that, although the fixed phrases "higher values" and "lower values" are used frequently, the values

themselves are anything but fixed. Rather than being absolute, their position depends on their relation to objectives (i.e. whether they are of primary or secondary interest regarding a particular goal at a particular point in time). It is also important to note that values are experienced and internalized differently by the various types of interest-bearers.

In Chapter 4, Serafimova deals with the tragic in *elementary catastrophes* and *qualified catastrophes*. The concept of *achievement interest* is explained in great detail in order to show how Zapffe accounts for catastrophes and for the type of event labeled *tragic course*. Achievement interest can lead to a catastrophe if it fails, but it is especially likely to lead to a tragic course if absolutized at the expense of other interests, which are then either subdued or denied. Serafimova refers to this process as “applying a culturally hostile selection regarding the interests in life”, or “asserting homogeneous greatness by underrating ...[the act of] fulfilling the plurality of culturally-relevant interests.” Roughly speaking, greatness can be based on two types of assumptions: a) necessary (*essential moments*, understood as *external necessities* relying on *static fixations*), and b) accidental (*inessential moments*, understood as *internal necessities* relying on *dynamic fixations*). According to Zapffe, the first type can trigger a *relevant catastrophe*, while the second type can trigger an *irrelevant catastrophe*. Clearly, greatness can lead to catastrophe, but there is a difference between *autotelic greatness* and *heterotelic greatness*. The latter is of the objective kind, “based on the plurality of interests of real interest-bearers”; Serafimova has also pointed out that referring to internal necessities as inessential can lead us to question the very concept of heterotelic greatness altogether. Autotelic greatness, in the mean time, is dominated mostly, though not only, by subjective factors, but does not “trigger autotelic catastrophe by default” since interests of achievement can be assigned different values between different interest-bearers. Obviously, any analysis of Zapffe’s taxonomy of catastrophe would necessarily have to draw on his taxonomy of guilt (existential, physiological, functional, psychological, ethical, juridical or metaphysical), and especially on his concept of juridical or tragic guilt regarding punishment. Luckily for us, this classification is presented and analyzed in detail towards the end of Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 deals with Zapffe’s interpretations within the field of religion and religious studies, and includes the double-blind role of Jesus as a Messiah, a comparison between Ibsen’s Brand and Jesus (both understood as bearers of multi-frontal interests), and an analysis of the moral relationship between Judas and Jesus within the framework of Zapffe’s *theory of historic*

personality. The latter analysis is particularly intriguing, as it unpacks Zapffe's arguments as to why it is actually Jesus who betrayed Judas by setting him up as a *means* for fulfilling the *objective* of betrayal, very much like God had done when sacrificing Jesus; both of these relationships are seen as imitations of the "creator-creation" relationship, on a functional level. Another issue discussed in this chapter is God's *cultural neurosis*: its origins (having no one in His image, with whom to share His loneliness), and the resulting *cosmic panic* after He overcomes it by sublimating through the creation of humankind, only to be abandoned by us and replaced with "the God from the cyclotron". Cosmic panic is also a key concept describing the state which dominates the human condition within a framework of *cultural-pathological paradox*, and covers both believers and non-believers (who are otherwise recognized by Zapffe as two distinct types of interest-bearers, who rely on two different conceptions of truth). The cultural-pathological paradox acts as a trigger of culture, and as such possesses a certain normative validity, which is, of course, based on our ability to "provoke and anticipate necessary (multi-frontal) tragic".

In conclusion, Silviya Serafimova's book *In search of the "universe's helpless captive": A glimpse to Peter Wessel Zapffe's philosophical heritage* is not only a very worthy and significant philosophical investigation, but also an exciting read. Serafimova's incredible attention to detail, coupled with her profound knowledge of Zapffe's original work, has produced an insightful and engaging critique of his rich, nuanced philosophy. I consider this monograph a must-have for anyone interested in philosophy, and especially for researchers focusing on ethics, aesthetics, religious studies, existentialism, or Norwegian philosophy.