

OPINION

by Prof. Dimitar Milchev Vatsov, PhD,
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on the scientific works
submitted for participation in a competition
for the academic position of Associate Professor at New Bulgarian University
in Professional Field 2.3 Philosophy,
announced in *State Gazette*, no. 97 of 13 November 2020,
in which the only candidate is
Senior Assistant Hristo Petrov Gyoshev, PhD

The candidate, Senior Assistant Hristo Petrov Gyoshev, PhD, meets all statutory (legal and in-house) requirements for participation in the competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in Professional Field 2.3 Philosophy. He is participating in the competition with one monograph – his habilitation work, *Identity and Normativity. A Study on Derek Parfit's Philosophical Reductionism* (in Bulgarian). Since he defended his PhD dissertation, he has published 12 articles and studies, and has received eight citations. A tenured lecturer at New Bulgarian University since 2006, he has taught and teaches multiple courses in all Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degree programmes of the Department of Philosophy and Sociology, as well as in other programmes. He has held various administrative positions, including Head of the Department since 2017. He is Editor-in-Chief of New Bulgarian University's journal *Language and Publicity* (in Bulgarian) and member of the Editorial Board of the *Critique & Humanism* journal.

I have known Hristo Gyoshev since he was a student at Sofia University, and over the years I have actively supported him in his academic and scientific career. One of the most professional philosophers of his generation in Bulgaria, he is also a

person of great integrity and responsibility, attentive in scientific discussions, conscientious in his administrative duties, and very dedicated to his work with students.

I am not in conflict of interest with the candidate.

Having concluded that the candidate meets all scientometric and other formal requirements for the academic position of Associate Professor, I proceed to offer a substantive evaluation of his works.

To begin with, it must be noted that Hristo Gyoshev is a philosopher with wide-ranging research interests. Starting in his dissertation 16 years ago as a historian of German classical philosophy, he gradually moved towards a more analytical approach and towards more contemporary, problem-oriented areas of research focused most often, but not only, on the wide field of moral and social philosophy (in particular, on contemporary critical theory). I will highlight three areas of his research (actually, that is also how they are highlighted in his contributions).

The first is his habilitation work, *Identity and Normativity. A Study on Derek Parfit's Philosophical Reductionism*. This work is devoted to a really important problem: How should we understand the concept of "person" (or "personal identity"), and what will remain of this concept if it is stripped of the untenable substantialist element (the assumption that there is a "soul" or another type of "self" that is self-identical)? In other words, is a non-substantialist concept of identity possible, and if yes, what would it be? This question is central to moral and political philosophy because the concept of person, and hence the inferred concept of responsibility, are at the basis not only of all moral and juridical norms but also of practically all codifications of our experience.

Gyoshev seeks the answer to this question through a detailed and critical reconstruction of a contemporary concept – that of Derek Parfit – and through its comparison with a classical concept – that of John Locke. Both concepts of person are relationist and reductionist (they reduce the idea of self-identical identity); they are based on the so-called "psychological criterion" (identity is a relation to the "self" constructed as a memory-trace), whereby Parfit attempts to extend and naturalize the understanding of memory beyond psychology in the light of the new experiments and knowledge in neurophysiology and neurosurgery. Gyoshev shows in detail how, through his reductionist concept of person, Parfit criticizes the moral concepts based on self-interest and how he attempts to universalize an ethics of the future that presupposes practical rationality based on extra-personal motives. Gyoshev also aptly shows a number of holes in Parfit's arguments, and hence contests the claim to universality of his moral concept (p. 233).

I cannot but note that the choice of Parfit as a key author meriting a separate study surprised me. Parfit is one of the authors in the analytic tradition for whom argumentation is often a “glass bead game” – playing about with not entirely thought-through philosophical concepts taken directly either from science or from science fiction (Parfit’s love of *Star Trek* is well known), constructing thought experiments and arguments that are similar in formality to the syllogisms of mediaeval scholasticism. And although those experiments may occasionally serve to provoke curiosity or even to critically shake some traditional prejudice, their heuristic power should not be taken too seriously.

The study on Parfit, however, is to some extent a departure from Gyoshev’s research programme, which he himself has declared to be “Critical Theory and Contemporary Social Philosophy”. His studies on the leading figures of the Frankfurt School today – Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst – as well as in the wider field of critically-oriented political and social philosophy after Rawls and Habermas, have both the scope and the depth of a second, still unpublished, monograph. Gyoshev’s interesting critical problematizations, arguments, and discoveries in this field are many in number, but I will point out just one – to my mind, the most important and original one. It is elaborated in a series of articles published in the 2010–2012 period (the result of his participation in the research project on *Challenges to Representative Democracy Today*), and is arguably most evident in his article titled “Emancipation Games in International Relations” (in Bulgarian). According to Gyoshev, “human rights” in themselves are neither a universal, neutral normative notion (as universalists insist) nor a form of unilateral domination by the West (as postcolonial critique often insists); they are a practical mediator (but not an “arbitrator”) which, being a third party, refracts the power game in international relations in a manner that does not allow either of two competing parties to achieve total hegemony – and thereby facilitates the emancipation of the weaker party. In my view, this is a key concrete discovery. If it is expanded further and generalized as a more comprehensive interactionist concept of the role of norms (it definitely has the potential for this!), it will quickly turn into a highly original contribution of Gyoshev to the international philosophical scene.

The third field of research explored in his publications is that of theories of truth – a field in which Gyoshev, one of my most consistent critics over the years, and I have a long-running dispute. But precisely because this is an ongoing dispute in which I am directly involved, here I will abstain from evaluation. The very fact, however, that I am engaged in this dispute suggests how I evaluate its importance.

Finally, I also want to point out a problematic thread that runs through almost all of Gyoshev's publications: the problematization of the relationship between the empirical sciences and philosophy. In his habilitation work, Gyoshev points out that "the scientific language of the natural sciences, which presupposes descriptions in the third-person perspective, represents a model whose validating function transcends the boundaries of the natural sciences themselves" and even "also influences to a large extent our notions of credibility criteria in philosophical interpretations" (p. 238). He also hints that to this day there is no explicit clarity, and hence, consensus – either among scientists or among philosophers – on the issue of what exactly are empirical "facts" or "evidence" because, as he himself says, "there always remains the separate question of the context of interpretation" (p. 17). I very much hope that Gyoshev will not succumb to the ease with which a number of "analytic philosophers" today directly take not only "language" but also "evidence" from the empirical sciences in order to build their castles of arguments. And that he will remember that unless there has been true philosophical problematization, the castles are built on sand.

These critical remarks, however, in no way diminish the merits and contributions of the candidate's habilitation work and other publications. That is why I wholeheartedly **vote FOR** the appointment of Senior Assistant Hristo Petrov Gyoshev, PhD, to the academic position of Associate Professor at New Bulgarian University in Professional Field 2.3 Philosophy.

Sofia,

17 February 2021

Sincerely:



(Dimitar Vatsov)