

Book Reviews

Dune and Philosophy:

Weirding the Way of the Mentat

JEFFERY NICHOLAS, editor. Volume 56 in the *Popular Culture and Philosophy*, edited by George A. Reisch. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2011.

As a seminal work of science fiction, Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga continues to fascinate both popular and scholarly audiences alike. Originating with the publication of *Dune* in 1965, the Duniverse has grown to encompass countless sequels, prequels, short stories, comics, and graphic novels, not only by Herbert and his son Brian, but also by other authors who seek to keep *Dune*'s legacy alive. Likewise, the series has spawned multiple adaptations, including David Lynch's 1984 film and an upcoming version slated for release in 2020 directed by Denis Villeneuve, which is likely to excite a whole new generation of science fiction fans. After all, the Duniverse takes up a wide variety of topics still resonant in society today. Everything from concrete themes such as imperialism, religion, and environmentalism to more abstract ideas like heroism, destiny, free will, and the dynamics of personal power is explored in the series, making it a prime subject of study for philosophers.

Edited by Jeffery Nicholas, this collection features five sections of essays, each with three to four entries a piece, centralized around broad philosophical themes to highlight the importance of philosophy in the saga as a whole rather than focusing on any single novel from the series. All fifteen of the authors included are academic philosophers and teachers from all over the world, who have frequently contributed to other collections like this one, mostly on philosophy in other works of science fiction or film. Without exception, the authors admittedly are diehard fans of the series, which frames their decision to decline using heavy jargon, and renders their essays readable for both fellow lovers of the Duniverse or academics in any given field. While some authors choose to outright state their thesis and form their essay around a central argument, other essays act as a kind of general rumination on one chosen theme, character, or groups of characters. A few of the essays mimic *Dune*'s more epistolary or multi-textual narrative style; this element, as well as the assumption of comprehensive familiarity with the saga's unique vocabulary, can create difficulty for any reader who is new to the series or who has not read each of the novels discussed.

After a brief "Invitation" written by Nicholas in the style of *Dune*'s historiographic excerpts, part one is entitled "Ecology of Muad'Dib." This section largely comprises essays

that loosely contemplate how individuals in the series interact with their social environment. Beginning with Nicholas's essay, the author uses the Bene Gesserit Gom Jabbar test and the Butlerian Jihad to briefly consider how "freedom goes hand-in-hand with the notion of humanity in Herbert's thought" (6). Next, Stephanie Semler's piece discusses how eugenics appear in the Duniverse and ultimately suggests that Herbert's use of it shows "the inherent dangers in adopting absolutes" (26). Louis Melançon then analyzes the role war plays in the saga through the perspective of Clausewitz's trinity, affirming that Herbert is didactically speaking to the audience against war. Sam Gates-Scovelle completes part one, taking up the relationship between oracular prescience and free will by studying epistemology, fatalism, and religious belief in the series, concluding that "Herbert's version of prescience threatens free will" (38).

As one of the more straightforward groupings of essays, section two's "Politics of Muad'Dib" reflects on how political power and systems of government function in the Duniverse. In "The American Fremmen," Shane Ralston compares Fremmen religion to Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of self-reliance, John Dewey's specific brand of democracy, and controversially declares that "the Fremmen (similar to the American Taliban) were shockingly American in their core values" and employed by Herbert to ask moral questions about traditional American beliefs (53). Answering the question of their title "What's Wrong with Politics in the Duniverse?" Eva Erman and Niklas Möller use the theories of Jürgen Habermas on strategic and communicative action to show why they "believe that democracy provides the remedy to Herbert's worries about obsessed rulers and the solution for the *Dune* empires" (68). Matthew A. Butkus closes the section with an essay laying out how Leto II embodies Thomas Hobbes's model of the Leviathan figure.

Section three, "Ethics of Muad'Dib" looks at how numerous characters either succeed or fail to live virtuously. Without drawing on any set philosopher or theorist, Christopher Ciocchetti surveys groups like the Fremmen, Harkonnens, and the Atréideses for a "deeper way of understanding how humans can live meaningfully in this world" (97). By means of a specified lens, Greg Littmann asks "how the Ancient Greek philosophers Socrates and Aristotle would rate the lives of the protagonists and populations of the Duniverse" resolving that neither figure would approve (104). One of the few entries to deal with a different form of media than a novelization or short story, Simon Riches's piece examines the way David Lynch presents good and evil in his aforementioned film adaptation of *Dune*.

The fourth section, "Self of Muad'Dib," deals widely with the concept of humanity. For Sam Gates-Scovelle and Stephanie Semler, John Locke's model of self-sameness, with its attention to unity of consciousness, allows them to evaluate the series in its relationship to Locke himself and other neo-Lockean modern philosophers to argue that "Herbert gives us a multifarious theory of identity" promoting "more open definitions of person[hood]" (146). Kristian Lund, meanwhile, makes the case for *Dune* as a "work of ethical and political philosophy" based on Martin Heidegger's "phenomenological approach to technology," which "insisted that to understand something, we should look, not to its constituent parts

or inherent attributes, but at what it is to us” (151-2). Winding up the section, Adam Ferner’s essay also deploys Lockean thoughts about personhood to interrogate how the memories of Herbert’s characters contribute to their sense of personness.

The fifth and final section, “Heroism of Muad’Dib,” considers how heroism works in the saga. Two out of the three pieces, Roy Jackson’s “Paul Atreides the Nietzschean Hero” and Brook W. R. Pearson’s “Friedrich Nietzsche Goes to Space,” deal specifically with Herbert’s use of Nietzschean concepts. Jackson starts off the section with a breakdown of how Herbert incorporates various aspects of Nietzschean thought about leadership and its place in humanity. Pearson, however, zooms in on how the character of Muad’Dib parallels Nietzsche’s prophet Zarathustra and what this says about Herbert’s view of heroism, conclusively maintaining that “Herbert recognizes that Nietzsche’s modeling of humanity’s potential progress has incredible value for a world that had become increasingly influenced by and afraid of the effects of charismatic leaders” (202). Finishing the section and collection is Sam Gates-Scovelle again posing questions about oracular prescience and free will, this time in regard to heroism; he asks, “can there be heroes in a Duniverse where there are seers who foreknow inevitabilities?”, a problem he reasons is solved by remembering that freedom for Herbert is grounded in “a mixture of knowledge and ignorance,” which allows Paul and Leto to be true heroes (217).

Despite its canonical status in the realm of science fiction, the *Dune* saga has had very little scholarly attention, especially in fields outside of literary studies. This collection by Nicholas offers a valuable and original range of possible philosophical interpretations on Herbert’s world. Herbert’s creation and its continuation in other forms deserves strong reflection from philosophers. *Dune and Philosophy* is, therefore, a step in the right direction. Although at times inaccessible to anyone not fully acquainted with either philosophy or the Duniverse, the collection still proves useful as a starting point for further study and will hopefully inspire others to give *Dune* the philosophical attention it rightfully has earned.

BRITTANY CAROLINE SPELLER

