



## Book Reviews

VINCENT F. HENDRICKS AND JOHN SYMONS (eds.), **Formal Philosophy**, Automatic Press, 2005, vii + pp. 246.

*Formal Philosophy* is an important book. Firstly because it asks an important question: what is the role of formal methods in modern philosophy? Secondly because Vincent Hendricks and John Symons had the good idea of questioning a great number of today's leading philosophers from Europe and North America on the matter and collecting their answers and reflections. The result of this effort is this stimulating and interesting collection of interviews, which, rather than defining strictly formal philosophy, gives a very representative—though not exhaustive—set of problems treated with formal methods, and of people working on them.

All in all, the book would also have been entitled, as accurate as it is, «Five questions for formal philosophers» as one can read in big letters on the back cover of the book. In effect, the editors ask five open questions to twenty-one of today's leading «formal philosophers»:

1. Why were you initially drawn to formal methods?
2. What example(s) from your work illustrates the role formal methods can play in philosophy?
3. What is the proper role of philosophy in relation to other disciplines?
4. What do you consider the most neglected topics and/or contributions in the late 20th century philosophy?
5. What are the most important open problems in philosophy and what are the prospects for progress?



One may reproach the editors the fact that they did not ask the respondent philosophers the central question frankly: “what is the proper role of formal methods in contemporary philosophy?” Of course, one can perceive the philosopher’s opinions through their own experience, exposed in their answers to the two first questions, but a «frontal» question may have been more suitable, and may have better inspired some of the guest-authors.

Concerning the panel of philosophers chosen by the editors, there is little to say. Johan van Bentham, Brian F. Chellas, Anne Fagot-Largeault, Melving Fitting, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Haim Gaifman, Clark Nøren Glymour, Adolf Grünbaum, Susan Haack, Sven Ove Hansson, Jaakko Hintikka, H. Jerome Keisler, Isaac Levi, Ruth Barcan Marcus, Rohit Parikh, Jeff Paris, Gabriel Sandu, Krister Segerberg, Wolfgang Spohn, Patrick Suppes, and Timothy Williamson are all well-known authors with a recognised authority in formal philosophy. In fact, some of the authors are not «properly» philosophers, and at least one of them rejects explicitly the habit of the philosopher and defines himself as a mathematician. Of course, that does not decrease in any way the interest of the book. On the contrary, it shows the interdisciplinary concern of formal methods, and one finds it always interesting to observe the views of mathematicians on formal methods.

Some readers may be perturbed by the disproportional and unequally documented contributions of the guest-authors. In effect, while Adolf Grünbaum needs only one page to answer all the questions, some other authors were clearly much more inspired, and it took Wolfgang Spohn more than twenty-six pages in order to explore the matter. The majority of the contributors’ papers however took from five to ten pages, which is a reasonable average. Scholarship should not be measured on the number of pages of course, but the editors would have avoided the few extremes mentioned above by imposing some (minimum and maximum) limits. Some similar reproaches may be made concerning the content of the contributions themselves. For example, we hardly see the utility of some extensive personal bibliographies annexed to some of the contributions. In addition, not all the contributors answered the five questions. Moreover, the lack of uniformity between the various contributions means that it is not always possible to compare the various opinions of the philosophers. However, one should keep in mind that this great editorial freedom allowed the philosophers to express their opinions in a more free style and with full sincerity. We believe thus that, except for some extreme cases, the editors were right in their choices.

While reviewing this book, Vincent Hendricks and John Symons published a sequel entitled *Masses of formal philosophy* in which they extended

the reflection on formal philosophy by asking further philosophers for their viewpoint. Ken Binmore, Alexandre Costa-Leite, Branden Fitelson, Donald Gillies, Paul Gochet, Valentin Goranko, Alan Hajek, Jeffrey Helzner, Dale Jacquette, Mark Jago, Edwin D. Mares, Greg Restall, John F. Sowa, Alasdair Urquhart, Heinrich Wansing, Dag Westerstahl, Jan Woleński, and John Woods are concerned in this second opus.

In *Formal Philosophy* and its sequel, Vincent Hendricks and John Symons do not defend any particular thesis. They simply open the discussion on the status of formal methods and their use in philosophy. This book is thus a kind of tribune offered for some recognised voices to express their opinions on the matter. It is hoped that this would inspire and stimulate a wider reflection, which would involve every philosopher or mathematician concerned with formal methods.

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