Caring for Indifference


While it would be wrong to think of Charles E. Scott’s latest book, *Living with Indifference*, as the culmination of his thought into a sort of *Hauptwerk*, readers familiar with Scott’s trajectory over the last fifteen to twenty years will notice the persistence of a set of concerns that have for some time motivated his uniquely original voice. The question of ethics, memory, the middle voice, appearing, the occurrence of things, living, materiality, difference, the Greeks (here mainly pre-Socratic and Homeric), tradition, and of course, thinking all figure heavily in Scott’s new work. These concerns are not so much gathered together for systematic presentation as pushed to their limit, however, pushed in the direction of nondetermination, sites that carry or reveal something of what persists in excess of determination, even their own. For this reason, *Living with Indifference* is best understood as submitting Scott’s earlier work and its concerns to a new and difficult challenge, opening it to what persists beneath the surface of its and our care and drive for delimitation.

Although Scott names this dimension of nondetermination indifference, emphasizing its neutrality and utter carelessness, he is attentive to the difficulties of specifying the issue in this way. As he says of indifference in the opening pages, “‘It’ lacks specific determination, and that makes thinking and speaking of indifference awkward” (2). At times awkwardly, but at times with surprising grace and perhaps luck, Scott has caught sight of an oblivious and careless dimension of our encounter with the world and ourselves. Throughout the book, he is attentive to the multiple and often contradictory and even unrelated ways this elusive figure of nondetermination arises, manifests itself, withdraws, and stands apart. And, as it turns out, this lack of unity, this dispersion, this equality of unrelated figurations, is itself an important aspect of indifference. The unity of *Living with Indifference* does not come so much from its continuity with Scott’s previous work, then, nor from its thematic focus, which is evident although difficultly maintained, but from its attentiveness to what remains for our attention when the object of attention either dissolves or persists mutely at the edge of encounter, and what happens to our attention in this relation (if we may call it that). It is a book that itself appears—in Scott’s sense of the word, to which I will turn in a moment—in an alertness to a fading, nonresponsive nondetermination that haunts the edges of the world and our often confused experience.

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In *Living with Indifference*, Scott is concerned with the neutrality, distance, and carelessness of the occurrence of events. He is concerned with the manner in which that indifference operates in the formation of our lineages as well as ahistorical moments of encounter with things (e.g., the heavens). The analyses he sets forth shift throughout the book between these two vectors of indifference, the textual and the experiential, each supplementing the other. In this way, the work attests to an important dimension of our historical existence as it encounters its limits, the point at which the understanding opens onto what does not itself understand and what withholds itself from understanding appropriation. For Charles Scott, our historicality entails our being formed by lineages of value and thought as well as our factical involvement in the world, and this condition is unsurpassable; there is no transcendence here. At the same time, though, our factical lives and lineages constantly find themselves confronted with or suspended in a dimensionality of encounter that cannot be assimilated by our history or historical being but simply stands apart from it (Cf. 157). Indifference is found in our historical being without being circumscribed by it and is also found outside it in detached neutrality.

In addition to the persistence of indifference within and apart from our historical existence, Scott is also concerned with the way such nonintentional and nonpersonal neutrality provides the distance that opens our responses to our own formations and to reflection upon our encounters with things, the way indifference can space our relation to ourselves and our world. In his concern for the indifferent dimension of events, Scott is not himself indifferent to indifference but aims to show how an alertness to its diverse dimensions can itself make a difference—make a difference in the ways we are dominated by the immediacy of unreflective values, in the way we understand public memory and trauma, and in the way we understand the experience of beauty. The title thus indicates two inextricably related issues, which the book sets out to address: the indifference that inhabits the occurrence of things in their being and passing away; and how we comport ourselves in light of and with respect to that dimension of occurrence, how we live with indifference and through it.

The chapter titled “Helen, Truth, and the Wisdom of Nemesis” offers an exemplary image of how Scott carries through his attention to the different registers of textuality and experience, ontological indifference and our comportment in relation to it. While these registers are very different, as Scott emphasizes at the outset, the disciplined orders of traditions that appear in texts nevertheless carry, often in spite of themselves, a sense of indifference as they address phenomena recalcitrant to the conceptuality of fixation and