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## Reviews

*Exhaustion: A History*. By ANNA KATHARINA SCHAFFNER. New York: Columbia University Press. 2016. 291 pp. £22. ISBN 978-0-231-17230-1.

**R05596** In this volume Anna Katharina Schaffner revises the concept of 'exhaustion', understood as a historical, social, and individual condition documented from Greek philosophy, such as that of Plato, through to our present times. The novelty of Schaffner's study resides in the fact that she examines the concept of exhaustion with recourse to philosophical, sociological, medical, and fictional texts ranging from antiquity to the present, offering an itinerary that sheds much light on the current significance of physical and mental exhaustion. Schaffner begins from the premiss that 'major depression, chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), and burnout are now frequently diagnosed ailments' (p. 4). The author explicitly refers to the alarming fact that one in ten people in the Western world will be affected by depression at some point, pointing to an issue of 'epidemic proportions' (p. 4). For Schaffner, the 'mental well-being of the individual' (p. 4) is fundamentally undermined by the questionable sustainability of the current economic system together with growing evidence of the fragility of our ecosystem. This offers an explanation for the exhaustion 'epidemic', set against the fact that exhaustion and its consequences for individuals have been documented on smaller scales since antiquity. The author believes that a thorough revision of the concept of exhaustion in Western culture and society is therefore required as a basis for serious and necessary consideration.

The book is divided into eleven chapters, flanked by an introduction and an epilogue. As the introduction states, the study is arranged chronologically and the individual chapters refer to specific themes and disciplines, among which we can find humoral medicine, theology, astrology, sexology, biology, economy, psychoanalysis, biochemistry, and sociology (p. 14). Both the structure of the book and the titles of each chapter signal the ground-breaking comprehensiveness of the book's understanding of 'exhaustion'. To give some sense of the volume's shape, Chapters 1, 2, 9, and 11, for instance, are entitled 'Humors', 'Sin', 'Depression', and 'Burnout', respectively, and gather insights through surveying the following diverse topics: the balance that Greek philosophers and physicians, such as Hippocrates and Galen of Pergamum (p. 15), established between the 'humours'; the relationship between exhaustion symptoms and proneness to sinful behaviour, as theorized by a community of Christian monks led by Evagrius Ponticus (p. 32); the new concept of 'depression' which appeared after the First World War with physical and mental symptoms that equated those of 'exhaustion' (p. 170); and the more recent idea that avoiding 'exhaustion' and 'burnout' is ultimately the responsibility of the individual, rather than the system or the community. All in all, *Exhaustion: A History* offers an engaging reading of the history, evolution, and multiple connotations of its key term, reaching the conclusion that the individual and the community are closely intertwined not only in detecting exhaustion and seeking plausible and helpful solutions to combat its symptoms, but also in giving meaning to those symptoms

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by attaching them to the cultural and social perceptions dominant at a specific time and place.

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